

The New ‘Quiet Revolution’ in Indigenous Affairs

There is much good news for Indigenous Australians embedded in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) communiqué released on Saturday 29 November.⁶³

For a start, nearly \$2 billion, 13 per cent of the \$15 billion committed by the Australian Government over the next five years, is earmarked specifically to four new (out of 15) Indigenous-specific National Partnership Agreement (NPA) payments in the areas of remote service delivery, health, remote housing and economic participation.

Overall, it is hard to know to what extent this is the fiscal response to the COAG-agreed ambitious targets for Closing the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians across the continent; or whether it is an attempt by the Rudd Government to equitably include Indigenous Australians in the pump priming of the Australian economy that has followed the global financial meltdown.

It certainly indicates an increased awareness of relative Indigenous disadvantage that was absent during the Howard years as massive budget surpluses were distributed more on the basis of voter loyalty than absolute or relative need. Deciphering just what is actually going on though is far from straightforward as we enter a new policy approach with a new lexicon, new acronyms and much lack of clarity about what is actually being committed by the Australian Government versus the States and Territories.

The funding committed to the five NPAs under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA), is documented in the communiqué (in \$ millions) as follows:

	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	Total
Indigenous economic development	15.0	39.8	39.8	38.9	39.2	172.7
Indigenous family and community safety	-	-	-	-	-	-
Indigenous health	-	82.7	157.2	247.6	318.0	805.5
Indigenous remote service delivery	24.5	31.2	32.4	33.4	32.5	154.0
Indigenous housing	400.0	60.0	15.8	174.2	184.5	834.6
Total Indigenous reform NPAs	439.5	213.7	245.2	494.1	574.2	1,966.8

This table, though, only refers to Australian Government commitments which seems a little at odds with NIRA’s aim to ensure the proper commitment of all governments to new instruments to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage.

Looking at each NPA in turn reveals even more funding and more

⁶³ Council of Australian Governments (COAG), *Communique* (29 November 2008) <<http://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/2008-29-11.pdf>>.

complications.

Indigenous economic development is actually about economic participation, defined as a target to create 13,000 jobs over five years. The Australian Government commitment is augmented by \$56 million provided by the States and Territories. One wonders how this is linked to the Australian Employment Covenant's far more ambitious target of 50,000 jobs initially to be provided over two years?⁶⁴

Indigenous family and community safety refers to the \$564 million previously committed by the Australian Government over 6 years to address the needs of Indigenous children in early years outlined in COAG's first NPA agreed in October 2008.⁶⁵

Indigenous health is made up of Australian Government commitments of \$806 million and \$772 million from the States, a significant \$1.6 billion over four years.

Indigenous remote service delivery is made up of \$291 million over six years, \$154 million over five years from the Australian Government with 26 remote Indigenous communities, some not even identified yet, targeted and spread across the NT (15 communities), north Queensland (4), northern Western Australia (3), northern South Australia (2), and western New South Wales (2).

Remote Indigenous housing is allocated \$835 million over five years from the Australian Government as part of a \$2 billion commitment over 10 years, an Indigenous specific NP that is part of the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA). This will provide resources to build 4,200 new houses and upgrade 4,800 others in remote Indigenous communities, but there is no reference here to State and Territory commitments.

One has to give credit where it is due. The Rudd Government has quickly woken up to the fact that 'Closing the Gap' will not magically happen with business as usual. It is particularly pleasing to see major investments in capital catch-up based on a realisation that normal fiscal federalism does not work for Indigenous Australians and never has. So the Commonwealth is looking to lock the States and Territories into partnerships that could be intergovernmental in a way never ever seen before. While incentive payments to the States and Territories are mooted to be used to reward performance, it is interesting that no provision for such payments is made in the forward estimates outlined

⁶⁴ Jon Altman, 'The Forrest plan: have they thought this through?', *Crikey* (online) 5 August 2008

<<http://www.crikey.com.au/2008/08/05/the-forrest-plan-have-they-thought-this-through/>>.

⁶⁵ Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 'Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage' (2008)

<http://www.coag.gov.au/closing_the_gap_in_Indigenous_disadvantage>.

above.

The new approach though also seems to have potential problems.

In particular, the focus of NPAs remains on remote contexts on the assumption that Special Purpose Payments will equitably include Indigenous people living in non-remote contexts, an assumption that many Indigenous people in urban and metropolitan Australia will not be comfortable with at all.

And even in remote Australia, the service delivery NPA is only targeted at 26 communities with no transparent system outlined for how the lucky 26 will be chosen and the unlucky nearly 1,000 will not. It seems likely that yet again the smallest and most vulnerable, especially outstations, are likely to miss out because they are dispersed and different. Some serious policy thought is needed to consider if this is a sensible approach.

Ultimately, this new 'quiet revolution' in Indigenous affairs has the appearance of an inclusive approach, going beyond John Howard's 'ruling for all Australians' to 'funding all Australians' paradoxically during an economic downturn rather than during massive budget surplus boom times. But as before there is still the rider that having historical shortfalls and citizenship entitlements equitably met will be conditional on joining the mainstream, in making a statistical contribution to 'Closing the Gap'.

This is a pact between governments that is not based on thorough consultation or any negotiation with Indigenous Australia. A national Indigenous representative body would have been very handy for this task.

The global economic meltdown suggests that economic diversification and diverse approaches based on cultural plurality might be strategies to be encouraged, both to meet the aspirations of remote-living Indigenous Australians and in the national interest. The approach pursued here may not be business as usual in one sense, but it certainly is in another: join the mainstream, or continue to be marginalised and neglected.

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