

## **W(h)ither Remote Indigenous Economic Development?**

As 2011 unfolded, some reflexive summer copy appeared in *The Australian* on disappointingly slow progress in Indigenous development in remote Australia. For several years now *The Australian* has taken a lead role in advocating for intervention, championing the decisive actions taken in 2007 in the Northern Territory under the policy umbrella of a ‘National Emergency’, and strongly editorialising and commentating on the need for forms of individual responsibility, private home ownership, education, employment and business development that are regarded as the cornerstones of Australian economic progress.

The issue of Aboriginal economic development in remote Australia is hideously complex; it will require careful policy thinking and the delicate right mix of market and state interventions and community initiative. I use the word ‘delicate’ quite intentionally because delicacy will be needed in negotiating development pathways that will vary enormously place by place, region by region; and delicacy will be needed both in assessing development needs and communicating possibilities cross-culturally.

What is not needed is the simplistic reduction of the Aboriginal development problem, which has arguably been occurring since Anglo colonisation, to a series of false binaries: enable or enforce; state or market; reality-based or utopian; public or private sector led; progressive or conservative.

*The Australian* promotes the line that the NT Intervention has stalled and that both major parties have lost the reform zeal required to address this almost intractable, certainly very difficult, issue. This to my mind can be readily explained. First, in developing the ethically unchallengeable, but highly utopian, policy goal to Close the Gap, both sides realise that this is unattainable unless we see some momentous increase in the level of financial commitment and fundamental shifts in regimes of property rights in commercially valuable resources, which would be politically suicidal strategies. Second, the Rudd and now Gillard Governments (and the Howard Government before them) have demonstrated an inability to address many hard issues facing Australia today like climate change, tax reform, water allocation, environmental degradation, so why should Indigenous affairs be any different?

What we have seen in remote Australia, perhaps most clearly in the Northern Territory, which is the most Indigenous and most wholly remote jurisdiction, is an inability to actually deliver despite considerable commitments and good intentions: there are real limits to the reach of the state out there as well as many ‘rent seekers’. So we see the emergence of petty quibbling. For example, in the flagship Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP), are appallingly inadequate housing targets being met or not? How should a house be defined (one, two, three or four bedroom)? Does a house

constitute completion if it is not occupied? And given the extent of overcrowding and associated costly health implications, does the nature of ownership (community, public or private) actually matter?

In such pedantic debates, mainly played out in the mainstream media, we are losing sight of the fact that thousands, not hundreds, of houses are needed. Why is it that other far poorer countries, such as South Africa, can address such challenges and we cannot? The same debates occur in other areas: when we know that inactivity is a key problem, why does it matter if a job is part-time or full-time; or if it is funded by the CDEP program or a public sector agency; or if it is in extractive mining or in conservation work or in the arts? And in education, why is it that in the name of improved English literacy and numeracy we promulgate schooling models that have historically failed, as if ramping up effort will generate improvement rather than more failure? Why is it that bilingual education and homelands teaching is identified as the problem when there is no evidence that this is the case? And there is no evidence that mainstream western education outcomes are a sufficient condition for mainstream employment, if desired, to occur; unless people migrate for jobs, which few do.

The answer to many of these questions is provided by an inability to openly acknowledge that the two key concepts that dominate Indigenous policy, normalisation and Closing the Gap, are ideological and divorced from reality. The dominant policy and popular narrative is that self-determination, a term with much currency but little practice during a short period between 1972 and 1975, has failed and so now the state must paternalistically enforce discipline and development on Indigenous subjects. It is imagined that this will happen via a 21st century version of the much maligned modernisation paradigm: the institutions and development pathway of mainstream, predominantly urban, mainly white Australia are going to be replicated in non-mainstream, predominantly remote, mainly black regions—another dichotomy that overlooks the intercultural reality. Why is such fantasy, which has been shown to entrench inequality rather than close gaps in many Third World contexts, revered as unproblematic dogma in Australia, even as the evidence indicates that progress is either too slow or non-existent? And even in promoting such an approach there is a fundamental inconsistency: if more exposure to the market is truly needed, why is this being mediated by more and more layers of expensive bureaucracy, much of it Canberra-based and far removed from the development challenges?

There is an alternative—asset-based community development. The role of government is to enable, not enforce, development. The means to enable is to recognise Indigenous people and their lands and their customs and cultures as assets in remote Australia that can contribute to Aboriginal wellbeing and Australia's public benefit. An assets-based approach will counter-balance the demeaning deficit-based statistical modeling that currently dominates policy

thinking. Development, though, must be reality-based, which means that lofty utopian ideals of economic equality will need to be shelved; the real Indigenous economy in the foreseeable future will be very different from the real mainstream one. Economic development will only occur through a combination of market, state and Indigenous community partnerships that will vary considerably from place to place depending on opportunity, capability, speciality and environment, as well as negotiation leverage.

The challenge that policy makers face is to enable Indigenous Australians to actively participate in tackling the complex development problems that a top-down technical approach has failed to address. Paradoxically, this will require the very community-based organisations that are being rapidly disbanded by state managerialism. The risks associated with the current monolithic approach, and the comfortable Canberra consensus of our political leadership, are significant because it is wrong and it is failing. Something very different needs to be tried before too much more damage is done, too much is needlessly wasted and before the ‘new’ normalisation approach becomes a part of yet another future narrative of failure. A more asset-based participatory approach must be a crucial part of any solution.

*February–March 2011*