

## Yes, No, Maybe... Prime Minister

Evidently there is progress in Northern Territory prescribed communities. The Prime Minister has visited and she says so. The mainstream media report so. Indeed what the Prime Minister says is remarkably similar to what Jenny Macklin has been saying for some time: there is progress.

This song is now being sung by Minister for School Education, Peter Garrett. One could acquiesce, as much of the Australian mainstream media has, and say; Yes Prime Minister. But that is the role of the bureaucrat, not the academic. I choose to critique and question. I will not meekly acquiesce. What does this progress constitute?

The first point to make is that while the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) has been politely renamed the National Partnership Agreement to Close the Gap in the Northern Territory, the media, Ministers and Prime Minister, and the general public invariably still call it the Intervention.

We now refer to Mark I as distinct from a possible Mark II from June 21, 2012, when prescribed communities were, according to Mal Brough and John Howard, to be normalised and exited.

Even in 2007 the Brough/Howard exit option was not sound policy given that absence, rather than presence, has been a big part of the problem of neglect.

Second, taken at face value, Closing the Gap in the NT should be about just that. A fundamental problem that the Prime Minister, Minister Macklin and the plethora of recent evaluative reports being generated to check on progress in Closing the Gap face is that none actually want to address this comparative issue.

So let us spell it out. Closing the Gap means the socioeconomic status of Indigenous Australians in the NT should be incrementally approaching the socioeconomic status of non-Indigenous Australians in the NT.

The same needs to be said about Closing the Gap nationally. It is now the overarching approach in Indigenous affairs, and a term used *ad nauseam* whenever Indigenous Australia is mentioned.

More than 30 years ago I co-authored, with John Nieuwenhuysen, a book titled, *The Economic Status of Australian Aborigines*.

We asked this comparative question using 1971 Census data and discovered a significant gap.

We then moved on to examine how this gap, that we referred to as an economic development problem, might be addressed at different sub-national levels making distinctions by community types and levels of urbanisation, regionalism and remoteness.

Our policy prescriptions, published some 32 years ago, recognised that the diversity of Indigenous circumstances would require a diversity of policy responses.

Today's political leaders and bureaucratic advisers seek to obfuscate the difference between relative wellbeing and absolute wellbeing.

In short, when the Prime Minister talks about progress, is she referring to Closing the Gap or not?

If Closing the Gap is the policy goal then government and commissioned research should report on how we are travelling in meeting this objective.

If, on the other hand, absolute wellbeing is the goal then we need to focus on this and desist from using the inappropriate discourse of Closing the Gap. In the past few months we have seen numerous glossy and expensive reports published on Closing the Gap. The Prime Minister's third Report to the Australian Parliament told us nothing about progress in Closing the Gap at the national level.

The latest Report on Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory, published in two parts in May, told us nothing about whether gaps were closing at the level of either prescribed communities in the NT, or the NT more generally.

Similarly, the voluminous fourth Report of the NT Coordinator General for Remote Services, Bob Beadman, which covers the period December 2010 to May 2011, tells us a great deal, including about dogs, marijuana, gambling and early childhood development (in that order), but nothing about whether gaps are being closed.

The third six-monthly Report of the Coordinator General of Remote Indigenous Communities told us nothing about gaps in the 29 priority communities that have been targeted for special treatment.

Interestingly though, both these reports tell us about progress in the development of Local Implementation Plans that all begin with the pro-forma and now mandatory reference to national Closing the Gap targets.

Similarly, the quarterly reports on the four Cape York Welfare Reform Trial communities, a sub-set of four of the 29 priority communities that get to resource double-dip, tell us nothing about whether gaps are closing.

So let's suspend this notion of Closing the Gap about which no-one dares to report, despite the expenditure of millions of dollars on researching and writing, and focus on progress or absolute change.

I could rehearse the same set of reports and ask whether any tell us anything about absolute change since 2008 when Closing the Gap was invented; or is the situation in the NT any better four years after the Intervention?

Has 'progress' been made? In truth, few of these reports rigorously address even this most basic question. Recently in Parliament the case was made for the extension and ongoing resourcing of the Cape York Welfare Reform Trials with the following statement:

'To date, the Trial has made a real difference in the lives of Indigenous people in the Cape. Since it began in July 2008, the Cape York Welfare Reform communities have seen improved school attendance, care and protection of children and community safety'.

That sounds good, but it is hardly supported by the available evidence. Similarly, in the NT, the main areas where there are comparative data over time are in the areas of school attendance and income support.

These are critically important areas for two reasons:

First, the dominant national narrative promulgated by Prime Minister is 'jobs, jobs, jobs', while the dominant Indigenous policy narrative is 'education, education, education' (leading automatically to jobs, jobs, jobs).

Second, three of the six national Closing the Gap goals focus on education and employment. What does the evidence from the Government's own reports tell us?

- On enrolment, absolute numbers from November 2008 to November 2010 have declined, despite a growing population;
- On attendance, absolute rates have declined from 60.1 per cent in November 2008 to 56.5 per cent in November 2010; and
- On what is termed 'economic participation' we see that the numbers on Newstart (the dole or 'passive' welfare) have increased by 14 per cent between December 2009 and December 2010; and that the total on income support in prescribed communities has increased by 15 per cent.

So in these two key areas, the two that the PM knows best, so-called progress actually means going backwards, according to statistics collected by Australian Government agencies.

Why does the Australian Prime Minister need to promulgate the beautiful lie that we are seeing progress both in the NT on her recent visit or nationally in her annual report to Parliament?

Part of the reason is that this is a narrative that the Australian nation needs to

hear, to feel better about the Aboriginal problem and to be assured that the massive spend is actually delivering either gap closing and/or progress.

This is a classic case of what American political scientist Murray Edelman calls 'words that succeed and policies that fail'. Is progress occurring? In some areas the answer is yes, in others no, and, in others, maybe.

What is crucially important is that the information gathered is of some use to the adaptive management of programs. Progress needs to be both statistically demonstrable and qualitatively verified by the people who are the subjects of this government driven project of improvement.

There is an almost obsessive focus by government on the generation of information, much of it meaningless, at the expense of other more productive ways of thinking about progress.

There is a huge gap, Prime Minister, between asserting there is progress and evidence which clearly show there is.

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