

## **‘Developing the Aborigines’**

On 20 October with muted fanfare, Jenny Macklin, Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) launched the much-anticipated Indigenous Economic Development Strategy 2011–2018 (IEDS). The IEDS has been four years in the making and was now the responsibility of a triumvirate of Ministers including Mark Arbib, Minister for Indigenous Employment and Economic Development and Chris Evans, Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace Relations. Fittingly perhaps, given its content, the IEDS was released at a function in Sydney symbolically and generously hosted by the Minerals Council of Australia.

At the outset of the IEDS the Ministers state that the Australian Government wants all Australians to share in the opportunities of Australia’s strong economy and to enjoy the financial and social benefits of work:

The Indigenous Economic Development Strategy will help provide a pathway for Indigenous Australians to have the same opportunities as all Australians—to get an education, find a job or start their own business, own their own home and provide for their families. It focuses on five key areas for improving the prosperity of Indigenous Australians: strengthening foundations to create an environment that supports economic development; education; skills development and jobs; supporting business development and entrepreneurship; and helping people achieve financial security and independence.

Note the important location of the semi-colons: the IEDS is partially about creating an environment that supports economic development, but mainly about economic participation to mesh with the Australian Government goal to Close the Gap, as if saying it often enough will make it magically happen. And so the five priorities of the IEDS are about strengthening foundations, investing in education, improving skills and encouraging access to jobs, supporting the growth of Indigenous business and entrepreneurship and assisting individuals and communities to achieve financial security and independence.

These are all fine sentiments and they might even be discursively useful if this was just an economic mainstreaming or normalisation strategy. But it is supposedly an economic development strategy. And herein is the first order—probably terminal—problem with the IEDS: it actually fails to either define ‘economic development’ or engage with the complexity of this politically contested and unstable term. Instead, in high-handed Canberra fashion, this complexity is simplified *ad absurdum* to mean education, jobs and business—economic inclusion into the mainstream. A vast global literature tells us that economic development is far more complicated than this: it is a process for improving wellbeing, living standards and life chances for all. It is also a historical process of commodification, industrialisation, modernisation and globalisation. Development is a notion that is dynamic, except in Canberra where it seems to be stuck in some outdated trope promulgating a new form of Indigenous subjectivity, the hard working, individualistic, nationally mobile

and materially acquisitive neoliberal subject who will with time attain an imagined economic equality, no more gaps.

Even *The Australian*—the champion of any strategy with a whiff of neoliberalism—was critical of the IEDS, with a headline screaming, ‘Welfare to business an unrealistic task say Elders’. It noted: ‘Launching the government’s Indigenous economic development strategy to 2018, Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin yesterday identified business development, education and training and housing as the pillars of its policy to enable Aborigines to share in the nation’s strong economy. Indigenous leaders said while the initiatives were well-intentioned, it was an unrealistic expectation for welfare-dependent people in regional areas to develop commercial businesses’.

Opposition spokesman on Indigenous Affairs Senator Nigel Scullion was more blunt suggesting that ‘Labor is clueless on helping Indigenous people control their future’ and that the IEDS reveals ‘that Julia Gillard and Jenny Macklin still have no idea how to help Aboriginal Australians break the shackles of poverty and disadvantage’. I found myself in fundamental agreement with Scullion, but probably for different reasons.

Over the years I have provided input to economic development strategies, notably the Hawke Government’s Miller Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs in 1985 and the Howard Government’s Indigenous Economic Development Policy Framework prepared for the now defunct Ministerial Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in 2004. I had also responded to an invitation to make a submission on the draft IEDS. So the gross inadequacy of the IEDS got me thinking, a little reflexively, on how the current Government could have got things so wrong and how this particular strategy formulation pathway might be understood and interpreted.

Tracing the genealogy of the IEDS is not difficult because an e-trail can be clearly discerned.

In October 2007 as part of the Kevin07 campaign, an Indigenous economic development statement was released by then Shadow Minister Macklin and Shadow Parliamentary Secretary Snowdon. This brief statement began very differently seeing economic development lying at the heart of a Rudd Government’s efforts to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians. And the instruments to be deployed were different too. Sure there was the usual ‘education is fundamental’ line, but then there was a strong focus on ‘local enterprise, local jobs’; providing better business support; involving Indigenous communities in the design, building and maintenance of their homes; enhancing Indigenous involvement in land and sea management and carbon trading; and in getting the most out of Indigenous assets. This all sounded very progressive and participatory.

In May 2008, in delivering the Mabo lecture Minister Macklin recommitted to develop an IEDS in six months, but by now the language of Closing the Gap had crept into the policy lexicon. It took a further two years for Macklin's Department to prepare an IEDS Draft for Consultation with submissions invited by the end of 2010. And in the Ministers' (then Macklin, Gillard and Arbib) foreword, readers were assured that the draft strategy was only for consultation and that stakeholder responses, experience, knowledge and commitment would shape the final strategy. Ominously, the language of the draft IEDS was far more about 'Indigenous participation in the economic life of our nation' than economic development.

Two things happened subsequently:

- First, the draft IEDS received 96 written submissions. And twenty community consultations were conducted by FaHCSIA staff criss-crossing the nation from Blacktown, Sydney to Nhulunbuy, NT; and from Karratha, WA to Cairns, Queensland. Remarkably, all these submissions and a record of consultations undertaken to a tight issues template (education and individual capacity; jobs, business and entrepreneurship; financial security and independence; and strengthening foundations) have all been posted on the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Consequently, anyone can see how highly critical many have been of the draft and how little input from experts, practitioners and communities has actually been included in the final Strategy. I cannot summarise all these responses here, suffice to say that terms like 'unrealistic', 'baseless rhetoric', 'lacking any cultural content' and 'lacking culturally appropriate actions and language' were common. And in the final IEDS the unique assets and culture that had figured so prominently in the 2007 Kevin07 statement were reduced to a mere two paragraphs in a 72-page document.
- Second, primary responsibility for the IEDS shifted from Macklin to Arbib. However, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is an inappropriate locale for an Indigenous economic development strategy because it is about the most Chicago School economic rationalist department in Canberra. Hence, while it may have some expertise in mainstream education and employment, it has none in economic development as might be understood by an agency like AusAID. Significantly, DEEWR has been the department that has overseen the destruction of CDEP, the most effective community-based economic development building block of the past 30 years. It is hard to know what interdepartmental horse trading was at play here, but as the IEDS was transferred to DEEWR, the sorry remnants of a 'reformed' CDEP went back to FaHCSIA.

What is patently clear is that while the Ministers trumpet the IEDS as the result of extensive consultations and all who took part in the consultations that helped to shape it are thanked, this is gratuitous lip service because a comparison between the content of the draft and final IEDS shows no substantive difference and no evidence of any input from stakeholders. This might merely represent strategy-making incompetence or 'tick the consultation box' arrogance. But I suspect that something more creatively destructive, to use the

terminology of David Harvey, is at work here:

... the IEDS is a part of a relentless top down neoliberal project that strives to morally restructure the norms of Aboriginal people, especially those in remote regions, to embrace market individualism.

Yet again we see a government that was elected trumpeting that it would base its policy making processes on evidence, partnership, fresh ideas and long-term commitment resorting to an ideological approach reminiscent of the Washington consensus and widely discredited. And this example from Indigenous affairs is indicative of approaches taken in policy making more broadly.

In ‘W(h)ither Remote Indigenous Economic Development’ (*Arena Magazine* No 110), I pondered the value of a social engineering project masquerading as economic development. The answer to the ‘whither’ of my earlier piece has now emerged as the IEDS.

Rather than expand opportunities, under the IEDS these will wither, unless a fundamentally different approach is taken. So I end with the recommendations from my submission that was ignored alongside the 95 others:

- An economic development strategy needs to define and engage with the notion of economic development as a negotiated process to enhance wellbeing.
- An economic development strategy needs to recognise the diverse forms of contemporary Indigenous economies, including the value of customary activity, and the intercultural mix of norms that informs decision-making.
- To be effective, a strategy needs to be clear on how development assistance will be targeted given the reality of Indigenous demographics and patterns of residence. In remote Australia discrete communities are easy to identify but there are limited mainstream options, while in urban contexts opportunities exist but targeting those residually integrated is a major challenge.
- Any development strategy needs to acknowledge that poverty is a symptom of powerlessness; the politico-economic and structural sources of inequality need to be addressed. Strengthening Indigenous property rights in commercially valuable resources is essential if economic and power imbalances are to be realigned.
- The proper role of the state is to get institutional settings right for economic development in all its diverse forms rather than promoting a preconceived notion of what form (jobs and business) development might take.
- Policy making processes must get beyond token consultation to seriously consider diverse Indigenous views of development and the diversity of Indigenous circumstances and development possibilities.
- The issue of economic development is too important to leave to bureaucratic processes, as has become clearly evident. At the very least a parliamentary inquiry into this issue is needed.

Ultimately, the IEDS promulgates an Australian Government view that Indigenous Australians have a right to economic sameness that it cannot deliver, while ignoring the right of Indigenous people to pursue a range of economic possibilities, something the state could enable. The basic human right

of Indigenous people to choose the form that development might take needs to be guaranteed. Recourse to international human rights instruments and civil society, combined with Indigenous agency and activism, might provide the only means to achieve such a goal.

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