

In for a Penny, In for a Pound

Thursday 21 June 2012 was the 5th anniversary of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) Intervention. It was supposed to be ‘liberation’ day for prescribed communities in the Northern Territory, by now supposedly ‘stabilised, normalised and exited’.

Instead it was another day of shame for the nation as many Aboriginal people who are demeaned and humiliated by Intervention measures resent such ‘special’ treatment.

On the eve of this anniversary, the Australian Government strategically released its latest Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory Monitoring Report for the period July to December 2011. Instead of telling us about some appalling outcomes in this Report, particularly in the area of escalating reported self-harm and suicide since the Intervention, the accompanying Ministerial media release told us about more jobs and job opportunities for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory (failing to tell us about thousands of job losses).¹¹¹

Not one mainstream media outlet focused on the anniversary. Instead, probably quite coincidentally, the Australian Bureau of Statistics issued first release data from the 2011 Census.

This revealed an unexpected 20 per cent increase in the Indigenous population since 2006 interpreted by some as reflecting an ‘Apology effect’—Indigenous people are apparently now so relaxed and comfortable in multicultural Australia that they are more willing to identify.¹¹²

Such an increase was not evident in the Northern Territory where the population grew by only 5.8 per cent,¹¹³ an increase of just over 1 per cent per annum that probably does not even capture natural increase.

I have been pointing out for some time now that the National Partnership Agreement to Close the Gap in the Northern Territory signed between the Australian and Northern Territory Governments in July 2009 is just a wicked misnomer for the Intervention.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Jenny Macklin, *Delivering more jobs and job opportunities for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory* (20 June 2012) <http://jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/node/1945>, 5 November 2012.

¹¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Media Fact Sheets’, (2012) <[http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/mediafactsheets?opendocument&n](http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/mediafactsheets?opendocument&navpos=620)avpos=620> 5 November 2012.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Altman, above n 34.

It is a policy framework whose regular six-monthly Monitoring Reports make no attempt to statistically assess whether gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Territorians, which the oft-repeated mantra ‘Closing the Gap’ imply, have been closed.

I must say that I am somewhat sceptical about the notion of ‘closing gaps’, mainly because I see such terminology as privileging western norms, values and social indicators over what might actually matter to Aboriginal people.

Such discourse reflects a particular form of cultural hegemony that is deeply concerning, feeding as it does non-Indigenous notions of cultural superiority that are all too prevalent in Australian society today.

Lest it appear that I lack reflexivity, let me make it quite clear that I have used social indicator comparative measures myself on many occasions in the past, though I prefer the notion of difference according to mainstream social indicators to the potentially offensive ‘gaps’. I have used these measures for two key reasons:

First, social indicators from the Census provide as good a statistical basis for holding the state accountable for its performance—according to its normative criteria—as currently exists. This is particularly the case because official statistics collected by the ABS have a degree of independence from government and so are somewhat better than the Government’s own assessment of its performance.

Second, official Census statistics are a sound basis for assessing certain needs, like housing, and to assist in the calculation of equitable needs-based support. Calculating differences between social groups in Australian society can assist estimation of the quantum of funding required to address need, but is of limited help for assessing sustained outcomes.

In last month’s *Tracker* I noted that a judgment day will come when 2011 Census data are available and some forms of quantitative assessment will be possible of the Government’s approach using its own criteria of success.¹¹⁵

With time, there will be careful and transparent analysis of first release (June 2012) and second release (October 2012) Census data, prescribed community by prescribed community, priority community by priority community, Territory Growth Town by Territory Growth Town.

A sense of the forthcoming analytic deluge can be demonstrated with my early assessment of changes in a handful of available social indicators in the Northern Territory. I do this here with two tables of comparable statistical evidence from the 2006 and 2011 Censuses, with apologies to anyone who might be offended by the reduction of people to numbers and percentages.

¹¹⁵ Jon Altman, ‘NT prescribed communities: not normalised, exited, eliminated’, *Crikey* (online) 12 June 2012 <<http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/06/12/nt-prescribed-communities-not-normalised-exited-eliminated/>>.

The first table looks at absolute change for two income variables (adjusted for inflation), two education, one demographic, three housing and a cultural variable.

Table 1: Indigenous Outcomes in the Northern Territory, 2006 and 2011

	Indigenous outcome 2006	Indigenous outcome 2011
Median personal income	\$248	\$269
Median household income	\$965	\$1098
Completed year 12	10.0 per cent	14.7 per cent
Attending university, other tertiary	1.3 per cent	1.3 per cent
Population 65 years plus	3.2 per cent	3.4 per cent
Home ownership rate	11.2 per cent	12.2 per cent
Average number of people per bedroom	1.8	1.7
Average household size	4.5	4.2
Indigenous language spoken at home	60.3 per cent	65.1 per cent

Information in the table shows us that in absolute terms most things have incrementally improved: median income has inched up, the year 12 completion rate has increased, university attendance has remained stable, the proportion of the population aged over 65 years has grown marginally, and home ownership has increased, while overcrowding and household size have declined.

Interestingly, even a cultural variable ‘Indigenous language spoken at home’ has increased.

Some difference, like in home ownership, can be partly explained by the nature of land tenure, while others like overcrowding reflect insufficient provision of community, now public, housing.

Other differences in median individual and household income (with the latter understated owing to very different household size) reflect lack of economic opportunity, poverty and non-recognition of non-monetary income in the Census.

This all looks like good news for current policy settings—at least nothing appears to be going backwards in absolute terms.

The second table looks at ratios, or differences, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The story here, recalling that the policy during most of this five-year comparative period was called Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory, is

very different.

Table 2: Indigenous/Non Indigenous Relative Outcomes in the Northern Territory, 2006 and 2011

	Indigenous/non Indigenous ratio 2006	Indigenous/non Indigenous ratio 2011
Median personal income	0.30	0.29
Median household income	0.63	0.61
Completed year 12	0.21	0.27
Attending university, other tertiary	0.25	0.23
Population 65 years plus	0.58	0.51
Home ownership	0.28	0.33
Average number of people per bedroom	1.6	1.5
Average household size	1.8	1.6
Indigenous language spoken at home	424.2	422.8

First, let's look at the ratios in both 2006 and 2011. For socioeconomic differences to be eliminated the Indigenous to non-Indigenous ratios should all be 1.0.

What is very clear is that everywhere, so-called gaps are significant and non-Indigenous people are far better off than Indigenous people on average.

The one area where Indigenous people clearly outperform non-Indigenous people is in Indigenous language use at home, by a factor of over 400.

This variable is included here to demonstrate how culturally relative social indicators can be: what might be a high priority for one group in a diverse society may not be a priority for another, even the vast majority.

In August 2011 (Census day), the socioeconomic differences that were supposed to be closed by June 2012 at least in the Howard Government 'stabilise, normalise, exit' iteration of the Intervention, remain a wide open chasm; unless 'normalise' referred cynically to the maintenance or naturalisation of statistical difference.

The Rudd and Gillard Governments' Intervention was less ambiguous: it was a National Partnership Agreement to Close the Gap in the Northern Territory. This terminology might not be intended to be taken at face value, especially as the Agreement ended on 30 June 2012 without any closures. Perhaps it too is a metaphor for normalisation. But it does raise two important issues.

First, is the extent of the statistical differences identified in Table 2 after four

years of paternalistic intervention and additional expenditure of between \$1–2 billion dollars acceptable?

Second, when one compares ratios for 2006 and 2011 it is clear that while some differences are inching closer (year 12 completion, home ownership, household size and overcrowding) others are inching apart (individual and household income, university attendance and longevity).

Even where differences are inching closer it will take centuries rather than decades for gaps to be eliminated.

The cultural gulf in Indigenous language use at home is also inching closer, but this reflects the fact that some non-Indigenous people are claiming Indigenous language use at home, with the absolute rate of use for Indigenous people (in Table 1) actually increasing from 60 per cent to 65 per cent.

My aim in referring to some of these statistics is not to render the Indigenous development challenge in the Northern Territory technical in a state-like manner. Nor is it to suggest that the goal of Closing the Gap according to imposed mainstream norms is a legitimate policy approach.

Rather I aim to show that the suite of neoliberal governance measures deployed by the state is not, and likely never will, eliminate socioeconomic difference.

And if this is clear to me from preliminary analysis of Census evidence it is also clear to the Australian Government that has likely marshalled a cohort of eager Canberra-based bureaucrats to scrutinise these very same statistics—and if they told a good news story be sure that they would be plastered all over the Murdoch media by now.

In the dead of night in the early hours of 29 June 2012, the Australian Senate passed the inhumane Stronger Futures Bills that will continue the Intervention for another 10 years.¹¹⁶ Yet already available evidence from the 2011 Census shows that socioeconomic differences are not vanishing and it is extraordinarily worrying that Censuses in 2016 and 2021 might reveal similar outcomes.

If the current approach is not Closing the Gap according to the state's own normative criteria, why is there such a dogmatic commitment to its expensive continuation?

Three possibilities come to mind. First, the Government is too locked into, and has invested too many taxpayer dollars, in one particular approach to admit that it is destined to fail.

¹¹⁶ Parliament of Australia, 'Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill', (2012) <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id:legislation_per cent2Fbillhome_per cent2Fr4736> 5 November 2012.

Second, opinion polling indicates to both major parties that there are votes in continuing punitive ‘tough love’ measures directed at Indigenous Australians irrespective of whether or not they work.

And third, there is a strong ideological commitment to ‘discipline and punish’ Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, again irrespective of whether there is evidence that such a brutal approach is actually improving outcomes.

Evidently, an approach to policy making that is not evidence-based is acceptable in liberal democratic Australia at least when dealing with its most marginalised citizens.

Evidently too the strict accountability criteria applied by the state apparatus to Aboriginal community effort, now all deemed failure, do not apply to the state. A grand and expensive social engineering experiment has been underway for five years, with no clear evidence of success.

It is now to continue as the relabelled ‘Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory’ laws to 2022, irrespective of performance or of outcomes.

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