

POLICY BY NUMBERS A DANGEROUS CHARADE

I have never been comfortable with pick-a-number policy making for Indigenous Australia. Such a technical approach at the national level is not just hyper managerialist, but is also disconnected from the diverse lived realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and so is dangerous.

Since 2008 when then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd implemented his Australian version of the Millennium Development Goals, with an *ad hoc* set of close the gap targets, I have looked on sceptically and often commented critically.

I am a great believer in the idea that the government should be held accountable for its performance, even if the goals that have not been negotiated with the subjects of this great new project of improvement lack legitimacy and make limited policy sense.

My thinking is that while the policy framework may be wrong, let's at least see how the government is travelling according to its own criteria.

And so every year for four years now I have awaited the February release of the annual report to Parliament outlining the progress being made, or not, in meeting the targets set for Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage.

My scepticism, unfortunately, had been fuelled each year by the absence of any clear evidence that indicates whether gaps are closing.

On 15 February 2012, the fourth annual report was tabled. One thing was immediately clear, these reports are getting longer; the first report in 2009 was only 33 pages long, the 2012 report was 120 pages long, admittedly with many more pictures. I wondered do bigger reports with more pictures mean more activity, more progress in closing the gap, or just more spin, aiming to divert our attention from the fact that gaps are either not closing or that we simply cannot tell?

In reading the report more carefully, I was intrigued to see that only one short chapter was dedicated to measuring progress, with much discussion of why we cannot, just yet, accurately measure whether gaps are closing.

I finally isolated the eight out of 120 pages devoted to a statistical analysis of the very statistical question: can statistical targets be shown to be statistically closing since 2008? An honest report only needed to be eight pages long.

The answer to what should be a straightforward question remains decidedly unclear.

On closing the life expectancy gap within a generation (by 2031), we are given statistics for 2006–2010 on the gap for specific age groups; and data for three of the smaller state/territory jurisdictions, but no information on whether the current gap is actually closing.

On the mortality rate gap for children under five years of age, to be half closed by 2018, we are informed that rates are within the range of meeting the 50 per cent gap reduction target.

On ensuring that all four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education by 2013, we are first told that ‘all’ actually means 95 per cent, apparently because such education is not compulsory; it is unclear what access has to do with uptake. This target by the way is not a relative gap, it is an absolute, and so no gap closing data are provided.

On the reading, writing and numeracy gap that is to be half closed by 2018, annual National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data suggest that progress is consistent with meeting this target.

On Year 12 attainment to be half closed by 2020, we are told that the gap closed between 1995 and 2010; but we are also told that it might have grown between 2006 and 2008; apparently the gap cannot be measured till 2011 Census data are available.

On employment outcomes where the gap is again to be half closed by 2018, the focus is on changes between 1994 and 2008, not since 2008 and the discussion is confounded by a determination to define CDEP employment as not being employment counter to ILO convention and the reality that most on CDEP are gainfully employed part-time.

Yet again the government refuses to refer to the ABS’s published data on Indigenous employment from the annual Labour Force Survey (that shows the employment gap has stagnated at best, increased at worst), but instead suggests rather provocatively that because employment rates exceed 50 per cent outside remote areas mainstream employment is now the ‘norm’ for indigenous Australians. Really?

The score card suggests that in two areas out of six gaps may be closing.

The inability of the government to tell us unequivocally if the gaps are closing or not is of grave concern, especially as \$46.4 million over four years has been committed to this purpose, with nearly half of this allocated to improve the 2011 Census count.

The response of the usually feisty Opposition Leader Tony Abbott to this mixed performance that would have been derided in any other area of policy,

was bordering on sycophantic: 'The Prime Minister has given us some very encouraging statistics today. There is much to be grateful for. There is much to take satisfaction in. There is much to be proud of in what the Prime Minister has told us today.'

This is further evidence of what I have termed 'the Canberra consensus', tame monopolistic agreement not only on the approach (with its similarities to the now discredited Washington Consensus) but also the conspiratorial acquiescence that closing gaps is a difficult 'wicked' policy problem no matter who may be in government.

With such acquiescence there is no true parliamentary accountability. The critically important question, whether expenditure by the Australian government is delivering the best possible results for Indigenous Australians and the nation, is not even asked.

Instead the government of the day gets state bureaucrats to prepare a report on its performance with almost all of it describing inputs not outcomes and the Opposition gives a wink and a nod: this is a form of government that is morally hazardous and risk displacing: the cosy Canberra consensus takes the public financial (not political) risk and Indigenous people bear the private consequences.

The evident purpose of the Prime Minister's Report 2012 is to showcase all that the government is doing for Indigenous Australians, demonstrating that Closing the Gap as a framework for action 'ends the *ad hoc* arrangements of previous approaches to Indigenous policy which contributed to the unacceptable levels of disadvantage faced by too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.'

This assertion needs to be seriously challenged, especially as the government strives to close six diverse pick-a-number targets and seven previously established 'building blocks' to overcome Indigenous disadvantage.

To meet its target it has established seven very different National Partnership Agreements (mainly focused on remote Australia where only 25 per cent of Indigenous people live, with one targeting just 29 priority communities), 232 Indigenous-specific programs identified by the Department of Finance and Deregulation in *Strategic Review of Indigenous Expenditure February 2010* and a plethora of mainstream programs at federal and state levels that are rarely mentioned.

This program grab-bag, according to the Prime Minister, is not *ad hocery*.

Judgment day will come, perhaps in February 2013 when the fifth Prime Minister's Report will be available, this time with access to 2011 Census data,

and assuming the same government is still in power.

And so for the first time since 2008 comprehensive official statistics should be available to assess progress in Closing the Gap between Indigenous and other Australians.

Evidently, with an additional \$20 million the ABS will be able to achieve the very best coverage of Indigenous Australians to date, with more accurate information on socioeconomic characteristics based on better population counts.

And so it could be a case of fifth time lucky in terms of gaining an accurate perspective on relative statistical progress. How long will the *Prime Minister's Report 2013* be, and what spin will be mobilised, if gaps do not close?

And what institutional mechanisms are available to really hold the government accountable if performance disappoints given the bipartisanship in Canberra that lacks any fallback alternate policy prospects.

If the statistics show that gaps are closing—with all the numerical acrobatics and smoke and mirror glossy reporting geared to ensure this—then there will be much solace for the Canberra consensus and those Australians, black and white, who share the Canberra vision for Indigenous Australians.

But what about those whose aspirations and life projects differ from these targets, what institutional means exist to give them voice in late liberal Australia?

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