

CLOSING DOWN ‘CLOSING THE GAP’?

While the notion of convergence in socioeconomic outcomes for Indigenous and other Australians has been around for decades as a key element of the modernisation paradigm, it was only in 2008 that it was given a very precise technical reporting framework.

This occurred in the aftermath of the much lauded National Apology to the Stolen Generations by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. In the glow of that moment what could be termed the Closing the Gap paradigm was unleashed.

Closing the Gap was quickly picked up as the framework for Council of Australian Governments’ National Indigenous Reform Agreement that was itself an unusual form of cooperative federalism in Indigenous affairs. This in turn locked in billions of dollars of public funding in multi-year funding agreements.

As part of the Apology Prime Minister Rudd also undertook to deliver an annual report to Parliament on progress in Closing the Gap, now referred to as COAG targets. The language of Closing the Gap has become so ubiquitous that sometimes it is overlooked that only one is a genuine target looking for full statistical convergence—and that target, to close the life expectancy gap within a generation, was ‘borrowed’ from the NGO Close the Gap campaign.

Other targets in turn look to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018; ensuring all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education by 2013; halve the gap for Indigenous children in reading, writing and numeracy by 2018; halve the gap for Indigenous people aged 20-24 in Year 12 attainment by 2020; and halve the gap in employment outcomes by 2018.

So we have different targets for full and partial closure; different time frames, from five years to a generation; and different jurisdictions from remote communities to the nation, with no policy logic for these differences.

And yet simultaneously we render the complex problems of Indigenous disadvantage increasingly statistical and abstract or ‘technical in the words of American anthropologist James Ferguson. In the National Indigenous Reform Agreement each target has a straight line trajectory against which precise progress in improving people’s lives in the abstract can be plotted.

The initial aim of annual auditing was to hold all governments to account for their performance. At the national level the annual report to parliament was established as a new institution; and an existing institution the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, and its Productivity Commission secretariat was recalibrated to also report on the

COAG targets as a part of its Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage framework.

The fifth annual Prime Minister's Report 2013 was delivered in Parliament in February but received little media coverage. This is partly because only one 20-page chapter in the 150-page report was devoted to reporting progress against targets, with the other 130 pages focused on programmatic building blocks—the nearly 300 Indigenous-specific programs delivered by the Commonwealth as inputs to the Closing the Gap framework.

This year's report should have been a pivotal. It is the first time that official census data are available to provide some assessment of progress at arms-length from the government's story. And as the long election campaign gets under way it might have generated lively parliamentary debate.

Unfortunately, the census only assists with assessment of two of the six targets, as life expectancy estimates will not be available till late in 2013.

On year 12 attainment the 'halve the gap' sits at a 53.9 Indigenous/non-Indigenous ratio ahead of the 52.8 per cent required. After five years governments are on track to the 69.0 goal by 2020 as is very explicitly documented in a graph.

On the 'halve the gap' in employment outcomes goal, the gap has widened by 2.2 per cent since 2006 with the gap being 25.9 percentage points in 2011 up from 23.7 percentage points in 2006. There is no graph to illustrate this deterioration, but instead a concerted attempt to obfuscate what is being measured, employment as clearly specified in the National Indigenous Reform Agreement or a newly concocted measure of employment—mainstream employment net of Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) employment.

Obfuscation is also evident in reporting on the target of full access to early childhood education, access being a supply rather than demand variable. Here we are told that the target is not 100 per cent but 95 per cent to reflect the fact that early childhood education is not compulsory, a demand side issue. And the measure of success in attaining this goal is enrolment of 91 per cent of Indigenous children in remote areas, again hardly a measure of supply or of attendance for that matter.

A most pleasing reported outcome is that the goal to halve the gap in child mortality rates by 2018 appears to be on track.

But the information on halving the reading, writing and numeracy gap by 2018 is bordering on incomprehensible mainly because the annual National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is conducted for

different school years (3, 5, 7 and 9) and for reading and numeracy, with the writing test having changed in 2011. The results here are mixed, some elements of this target have seen improvement, and others have not.

In truth this latest report like those before from the Prime Minister tells us very little about progress either in Closing the Gap as unilaterally set by governments; or in the overall performance of the Australian state in delivering effective Indigenous policy. Indeed the more indeterminate the outcomes the more glossy the reporting, the louder the associated spin.

This raises many questions for me including the following:

First, the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators 2011* published last year concluded: 'Across virtually all the indicators in this report [of some 830 pages] there are wide gaps in outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians. The report shows that the challenge is not impossible—in a few areas, the gaps are narrowing. However, many indicators show that outcomes are not improving, or are even deteriorating. There is still a considerable way to go to achieve COAG's commitment to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage'. So has anything changed since then?

Second, are there any mechanisms in the burgeoning Closing the Gap measurement apparatus to link outcomes reporting, successful or unsuccessful, to the adaptive management of policies and programs? As part of this new industry a Closing the Gap Clearing House has been established, but how is it empowered to inform policy formulation? Are its hosts, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, well positioned to influence governments?

Third, while the National Indigenous Reform Agreement is based on a notion of cooperative federalism, simultaneously most States and Territories have established their own distinct, arguably competitive, reporting frameworks. Again is there any capacity to learn from different approaches taken at the sub-national level and to adapt national policy accordingly? Interestingly, New South Wales, where over 30 per cent of the Australian Indigenous population resides has just released *Ochre: Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment*, a policy framework that focuses far more on highlighting assets and opportunities over deficits and gaps.

Fourth, what about the growing gaps about which governments are silent?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has just released *Prisoners in Australia* which reports age standardised and crude imprisonment rates for 2002 to 2012. The Indigenous/non-Indigenous ratio for the former measure has increased steadily from 10.2 times in 2002 to 14.8 times in 2012, and for the latter from 14.3 to 18.4 times. Criminologists might debate why this is occurring, but at an estimated cost of over \$70,000 per prisoner per annum the bill for Indigenous prisoners alone is \$0.5 billion of negative funding that could be deployed so much more productively.

Anthropologist Cris Shore tells us in *Policy Worlds* that the political nature of policies is disguised by recourse to neutral sounding legal-rational idioms, like Close the Gap. And so power is disguised by making a particular discourse appear so natural that its ideological content comes to be regarded as common sense and beyond question. Who can argue with the right of Indigenous

Australians to share in the nation's wealth? Or the urgent need to adhere to higher principle like normalisation?

Evidently, Kevin Rudd's initial aim with outcomes reporting was accountability, but in recent years this has shifted to evaluation fetishism which seems to serve no clear purpose besides those of the measurement industry of which I am a part. In *The Audit Society*, Michael Power argues that the explosion in the audit industry at the turn of the 21st century is an institutional means of societal 'comfort production'. The Closing the Gap measurement apparatus underwritten by government can be interpreted in these terms, as a means to comfort the broader electorate that much is being done to address Indigenous disadvantage.

But the explosion of reporting on Closing the Gap that is turning Indigenous people into numbers is such that it almost needs a meta-accounting of the accountability reports.

And the nation has become so inured to such demeaning deficit-focused reporting that there is almost no engagement with it.

One has to wonder at its political and policy worth and whether any incoming Australian government will want to retain the Closing the Gap targets or the associated measurement industry as their intended end date draws closer and closer without any clear indication of success in closing Kevin Rudd's half 'gaps'.

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