

SEEING THROUGH THE SMOKE AND MIRRORS OF A BLACK JOB HUNT

During the 2013 Federal election campaign the Abbott Opposition made a number of announcements on Aboriginal employment.

On 17 August Tony Abbott told us that he would boost employment for Indigenous Australians first by creating up to 5,000 job opportunities for Indigenous Australians with an additional investment of \$45 million to support the GenerationOne employment model.

The statement noted that the Coalition is a strong supporter of GenerationOne and the Australian Employment Covenant and stated that since the inception of the Australian Employment Covenant 60,000 jobs have been pledged by Australian employers for Indigenous Australians.

The Coalition committed to commission a review of Indigenous employment programs within one month of election and announced that Mr Andrew Forrest has agreed to chair the review.

The statement lauded the GenerationOne employment model that unlike many existing employment and training programs apparently only provides practical training for guaranteed jobs.

A specific section on Employment in the Coalition Policy focused on two headline issues.

First the Coalition would ensure adults go to work and would work with all stakeholders to improve employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians, particularly those who live in remote communities.

Second, the Coalition would ensure that training leads to jobs. Again reference was made to the employment review that would ‘properly consider innovative proposals backed by the real commitment of employers to finally end the cycle of entrenched Indigenous employment programmes’.

The review would report to the Prime Minister within six months of a Coalition Government taking office.

A month after winning the election the new Prime Minister formally announces the review with his Parliamentary Secretary, the Hon. Alan Tudge, a former Deputy Director of Noel Pearson’s Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, now to guide and shape the Review process with Mr Forrest.¹⁷

¹⁷ This piece was written before Professor Marcia Langton was appointed to work on the Forrest Review in mid-November 2013.

And a week later the website of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet provided more detail with some concocted Questions and Answers, a range of possible issues to be included, options for stakeholder involvement and commitment to an interim report to be released in December 2013.

Extraordinarily, on October 19 Tudge while purporting not to pre-empt the review's findings published an opinion piece in *The Australian* with the title 'Forrest Plan is Just the Job' and the opening lines 'The Fortescue boss's approach to employment works well'.

Tudge also tells us that a major problem in employment retention for Indigenous people is actually remote housing which apparently ties individuals to a life of passive welfare dependency; Tudge states that if you stay in a place where there are no jobs, you get a free house; if you move to get a job you lose the house.

Really?

Indigenous employment is a pressing social issue that deserves careful policy consideration, especially as governments have proved incapable of making any headway in reducing disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment levels; or in getting the Indigenous unemployment rate down to an acceptable level by wider Australian standards.

Both the five-yearly census and the annual ABS publication Labour Force Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (that was not published in 2013) demonstrate this categorically. The latter in particular shows that irrespective of whether Indigenous people live in major cities, regional areas or remotely, their unemployment rate varies from 13 percent to 19 percent, 2.7 to 5.5 times the non-Indigenous rate.

There are aspects of this review that suggest it might be doomed to fail before it has even begun.

First the Abbott Government seems either oblivious to, or selectively has chosen to ignore an independent Australian National Audit Office report *Indigenous Employment: The Australian Government's Contribution to the Australian Employment Covenant* published in June 2013 at a very transparent cost of \$313,059.58.

This Report queries the apparent success of the Australian Employment Covenant that committed in 2008 to secure 50,000 sustainable jobs for Indigenous Australians.

It notes, for example, contestation between the Department of Employment and the AEC on sustained outcomes with the former quantifying approximately

6,000 26-week outcomes, the latter 62,000 pledges and 15,000 outcomes.

This is quite a difference.

The ANAO also notes that by May 2012 the Australian government has assisted 73 AEC employers with \$132 million in funding; elsewhere this figure is put at \$150 million by March 2013.

These substantial sums are not mentioned in any Coalition documentation; the AEC is an Australian government subsidised employment and training program.

Second, as noted last year by my colleague Kirrily Jordan it is far from clear if the 10,500 job placements claimed by Forrest in an address to the National Press Club 'A Call to Arms: We have the Weapons we Need the Leadership to End the Disparity' correspond to 10,500 people moving off welfare into work or moving to work for an AEC employer from other paid work. There are no independent metrics to verify the sustainability of jobs

The ANAO was scathing of the absence of formal or regular monitoring mechanisms established by the Australian government to assess performance. What this suggests quite clearly is that the AEC itself needs to be reviewed.

But instead of doing this, the new government has made a pre-emptive commitment of \$45 million to GenerationOne/AEC; and appointed its founder to head the review. Surely the deep structural perceived and potential conflicts of interest are apparent to all?

This fiasco made me recall with some nostalgia other more considered ways of reviewing and thinking about Indigenous employment and training from the 'self-determination' days.

In October 1984 the Hawke Government appointed a Committee chaired by Aboriginal leader Mick Miller to review Aboriginal employment and training programs. The Committee included HC 'Nugget' Coombs and the Aboriginal educationalist Mary Ann Bin-Sallik; it was supported by a departmental secretariat, actively engaged with communities, sought public submissions and invited expert input. Here I declare my involvement: I made a submission to the review and was one of the academics it consulted. A serious 450-page published report was produced in a year with 164 recommendations.

The Miller Committee differentiated settled from remote Australia and documented the diversity of circumstances within both. In the remote areas, that are undeniably most challenging, it focused on community development rather than on statistics about individuals and it critiqued earlier approaches for being over-focused on commercial rather than developmental priorities.

The Miller Committee noted, with realism and honesty, that ‘for a number of economic, geographic, political and social reasons for the longer-term future, a substantial proportion that may well be over 50 percent of the Aboriginal working age population will not be centrally concerned with the regular labour market’. The review focused on a livelihoods approach rather than just on labour market outcomes.

The Committee predicted that in remote areas the majority of Aboriginal people will continue to live in areas where they have ‘tribal and cultural bonds to the land’ even if economic development for material betterment was absent and that remote-living people are generally unwilling to migrate for jobs.

It argued for more opportunity to enable Aboriginal people to develop a greater degree of self-sufficiency; this was to occur through government support to build an economic base and the facilitation of diverse productive activities wherever people had access to resources and comparative advantage.

More recently such strength-based approaches are termed Asset-Based Community Development.

Subsequently a series of strategies were included in the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy for appropriate productive activity where Aboriginal people lived.

Unfortunately the AEDP’s statistical goals, devised post-Miller by bureaucrats for political purposes, were over-ambitious and destined to fail, a little like the current Closing the Gap employment goal: then and now there is insufficient investment in establishing local economies and little divesting of property rights over valuable resources on the expanding Indigenous land base.

In *Anthropology of Policy* (2007), Cris Shore and Susan Wright remind us, policies are instruments of governance; they operate as ideological vehicles and as agents for constructing subjectivities and organizing people within existing systems of power and authority.

This is precisely what we see with Abbott’s Indigenous employment review. The issues identified to date focus on conventional labour market approaches for unconventional Indigenous circumstances.

Powerful like-minded people have been recruited to head the review with little prospect of innovation or acknowledgement of difference—normalisation pays lip service to the importance of difference then presses on remorselessly to promulgate and support imagined future labour market mainstreaming.

The hard issues have not been explicitly raised to date: Has the abolition of programs such as the Community Development Employment Program done

more harm than good in increasing 'passive' welfare?

Do outcomes on Cape York under the Cape York Welfare Reform trials or in jobs with AEC employers represent good value for significant public money? Why did the differential between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment outcomes increase between 2006 and 2011?

Why are annual ABS data on Indigenous labour market outcomes not available this year, and possibly in the future?

Evidently, such questions do not matter.

The way this review was established lacks sufficient legitimacy, appropriate conceptualisation and sound governance.

Whatever the new government's fine intentions, it is an early disappointment.

November 2013