

2.4 Commentary on the Consequences: Abbott's Back To The Future Policy For Aboriginal Advancement - by Jon Altman.⁷⁵

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Professor Jon Altman weighs in on the latest worrying policy development from the Abbott Government.

The 2014–15 Federal Budget is a horror budget for Indigenous Australians because many Indigenous people are especially vulnerable residing in communities that are neglected, still facing many barriers of racial discrimination and exclusion, and living in deep poverty.

There has been much public debate about the likely negative impact on vulnerable Australians of social and welfare policy measures embedded in the Budget that will see increasing inequality.

But there has been little recognition of just how much worse this will be for Indigenous people because of over-representation among the vulnerable.

If proposed measures pass Senate scrutiny and are implemented, many Indigenous people will inevitably be condemned to live in deeper poverty and their children and grandchildren will face bleaker futures as a neglected Indigenous underclass.

Embedded in the Abbott government's first budget are some chilling echoes of the confrontationist approach of John Howard with the 1996 National Commission of Audit (an instrument replicating Margaret Thatcher's UK Audit of 1983) which was followed by unjustified cuts of \$460 million to the ATSIC budget and gave rise to a hostile political relationship that endured until ATSIC was abolished in 2005.

Also buried in the 2014–15 Budget papers are indications of a fundamental shift in policy that has received little public attention in part because it is concealed deep within the Budget Statement for the Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio as Outcome 2: Indigenous and summarised in just two pages (35 and 36).

Some of this change has been foreshadowed in new administrative arrangements announced in September 2013 that saw radically altered departmental responsibility for Indigenous affairs with most Indigenous specific programs centralised in the Prime Minister's Department and overseen by the self-proclaimed Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs. Counter to the rhetoric, however, many programs still remain with mainline agencies including Attorney-General's, Education, Employment, Health, Human

⁷⁵<https://newmatilda.com/2014/06/17/abbotts-back-future-policy-aboriginal-advancement>

Services and Social Services.

Most focus to date has been on the 150 programs transferred to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet as the agency taking primary responsibility for Indigenous affairs.

Following the Budget these have been streamlined into five broad areas that reflect the priorities of the government: ensuring children go to school; adults work; Indigenous business is fostered; the ordinary law of the land is observed; and Indigenous culture is supported.

Note that these are quite explicitly identified as the priorities of the government, not of the intended beneficiaries of programs.

The five areas are Jobs, Land and Economy; Children and Schooling; Safety and Wellbeing; Culture and Capability; and Remote Australia Strategies.

Each area highlights that it will focus ‘particularly on remote communities’, which suggests that the Remote Australia Strategies might be redundant. They are bundled together under the broad rubric Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

The Prime Minister’s Indigenous Advisory Council optimistically anticipates in its Budget 2014–15 Communiqué⁷⁶ that the \$534 million cut in Australian Government Indigenous Expenditure will be absorbed by reducing the costs of administration.

At the level of political rhetoric this all looks quite rational. This is precisely why some critical analysis is required.

To begin, the broad framework of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy appears to replace the ubiquitous COAG Closing the Gap⁷⁷ framework based on cooperative, even collaborative federalism and a series of National Partnership Agreements. The terminology of advancement resonates with post-Enlightenment, evolutionary and colonial implications: advancement to what: Assimilation? Sameness?

As Amerindian scholar Vine Deloria Jnr warned long ago in *Custer Died for our Sins* (1969) equality must not be confused or conflated with sameness; ‘civil rights’, he noted, ‘is a function of man’s desire for self-respect not for equality’.

The discourse around this advancement strategy indicates an ideological and moral crusade by the Abbott government to ‘develop’ and ‘advance’ the

⁷⁶https://www.dpvc.gov.au/indigenous_affairs/indigenous_advisory_council/communique/communiqué_14052014.cfm

⁷⁷ https://www.coag.gov.au/closing_the_gap_in_indigenous_disadvantage

Indigenous people of remote Australia.

This is fundamentally a retrograde shift of policy to the conservative comfort zone, targeting the 20 per cent of the Indigenous population who live in remote communities, highly visible and easy to target, discursively at least.

And these are the people perceived in most need of transformational advancement and norms reshaping on a number of grounds.

So-called discrete Indigenous communities are almost invariably located on or adjacent to Indigenous land, claimed under land rights and native title laws because of proven continuity of custom and connection to country.

These are the people who have norms and values that are most strongly connected to kin, community and country. They are perceived as the last bastion of alterity and cultural difference, that openly challenges the conservative neoliberal vision to transform all Australians into highly individualistic and materially acquisitive neoliberal subjects.

Delving into the specifics of the new approach raises a number of important questions about its coherence and consistency of which the policy architects may not even be aware. So let me raise a few.

On jobs, land and economy, what exactly are the jobs and commercially viable businesses anticipated? And why is it that Indigenous people should be able to garner economic benefit from land that was only available for claim because of its limited commercial value? Where is the focus on local competitive advantage and alternate forms of economy?

On school attendance, will attendance particularly in remote communities, improve education outcomes and provide a pathway to jobs and the good life where people live? The emphasis on attendance begs too many questions on appropriate curricula, forms of pedagogy, bilingual education and learning on country for a future on country.

On applying 'the ordinary law of the land', particularly in remote communities, what room is there for applying competing customary laws with local legitimacy? What are the risks that enhanced policing will merely enhance interaction with the criminal justice system or unproductive policing practices like the ordinary law of vehicle registration?

On supporting Indigenous Australians to maintain their culture, is this limited to the high culture or is it inclusive of everyday culture, including participation in religious and mortuary ceremonies?

And while strategic investments focused on flexible local solutions under

remote Australia strategies sounds admirable, what happens if there is a mismatch between Government and community priorities?

Some early answers to these difficult questions have been provided by Nyunggai Warren Mundine, the Abbott government's principal adviser, a black spokesman recruited to help formulate and then justify the government's crude campaign of advancement. He gets numerous 'exclusives' in the mainstream media and more air-time to promote the government's approach than the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs.

In a headland speech 'Improving employment outcomes in remote Australia' delivered in Darwin a week after the budget, Mundine inadvertently illustrated some of the flaws and conflicts in the new approach. One assumes that the government concurred with his views as their anointed and remunerated Chair of the Indigenous Advisory Council.

Mundine suggests that remoteness is not a barrier to employment in remote Indigenous communities. He wants to see communities opened up to the free market and land tenure privatised and yet simultaneously wants to see local jobs reserved for local people who after following realistic plans and pathways he imagines will eventually replace all outsiders, turning communities into Indigenous-only places.

Such pathways will need Indigenous people to modify their unacceptable contemporary cultural practices such as participating in prolonged mourning rituals for the numerous deceased so as to better meet competitive labour market requirements. And local customary practices of sharing with kin will need to be curtailed.

So much for supporting the maintenance of culture.

Finally, Mundine suggests the aims of all organisations will need to be redefined to ensure delivery of outcomes in jobs, education and making communities safer as prioritised by government, or else be defunded. This makes a mockery of community priority setting and seriously risks destroying many successful Indigenous organisations.

Such hyperbole and inconsistency in Mundine's views could be readily dismissed except that they match the new framework.

At the national level the Abbott Government approach signals a return to the bygone notion of practical reconciliation: advancement focuses on absolute rather than relative wellbeing.

One suspects that the difficult policy of Closing the Gap is being abandoned and replaced by a focus on absolute improvement, a task that is tolerant of

growing inequality even if it succeeds.

However, as the just-released COAG Reform Council's report on Indigenous reform and performance⁷⁸ shows Indigenous people everywhere are deeply disadvantaged and massive gaps in socioeconomic outcomes remain.

There is no evidence whatsoever that Indigenous people living in non-remote Australia - 80 per cent of the Indigenous population - gain equitable access to mainstream services.

Ultimately the 'new' crusade promoted by the Abbott government seeks to promote the advancement of Indigenous peoples to assimilation or disappearance. It is as blunt and brutal an approach as the 1960s policy of assimilation.

What is especially insidious about this new crusade is that the government is dismantling institutions like the COAG Reform Council⁷⁹ and defunding the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples⁸⁰ that might respectively provide independent assessment of its performance or assess its political legitimacy according to global human rights standards.

Instead the diabolical mess of current policy will be monitored and evaluated from within government.

The German philosopher GWF Hegel is the attributed source of the adage 'History shows that we never learn from history'.

Evidently, this applies to the newest Australian government experimental project of improvement that replicates past failures based on assimilationist imposition rather than self-determining negotiation.

Jon Altman is a professor in economics/anthropology at the Australian National University, Canberra. A version of this article appeared in the June 2014 final print edition of Tracker magazine.

⁷⁸[https://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/Indigenous Reform 2012-13 Five years of performance 30 April 2014.pdf](https://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/Indigenous%20Reform%202012-13%20Five%20years%20of%20performance%2030%20April%202014.pdf)

⁷⁹ <https://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/media/releases/2014-05-13>

⁸⁰ <http://nationalcongress.com.au/taking-the-foot-off-the-pedal-will-endanger-efforts-to-close-the-gap/>