Acknowledgement

I pay respects to the Traditional Owners of Darwin, because of the reality that traditional practices are more strongly retained in the Northern Territory than most other locations. Not to pay respects may be interpreted as conveying disrespect, given the convention that has developed around this protocol, and I would never deliberately do that.

But it would be hypocritical of me not to mention the angst that has built up in some regions about the genuineness of this practice, and admit to the embarrassment I have sometimes felt for the ‘auntie’ or ‘uncle’ conducting the ‘Welcome to Country’, or the non-Aboriginal speakers going through the motions of reciting their set lines of ‘respect for Traditional Owners past and present’ with little comprehension or sincerity.

The Eric Johnston Lecture Series

I am honoured to be invited to deliver this lecture.

The Northern Territory Library’s website reminds us that the ‘series was established to fill a serious gap in Darwin’s cultural calendar, since the city had no lecture series dealing in depth with the Territory’s culture and history in all of its diverse ramifications’. I assume that I have been asked because of my long involvement in Indigenous issues, rather than my broader experience in public administration, so I will focus on Indigenous development. Indigenous issues go to the very heart of the social and economic health of the Northern Territory, and I feel a heavy responsibility.

Given that every second person claims to have some knowledge of Indigenous policy, if not the solutions, it is probably important that I quickly outline why I am rash enough to take up the challenge to speak in this minefield. I remain slightly uncomfortable about talking about the lives of others, but better me than yet another armchair expert from the eastern seaboard who has never spent serious time in the Northern Territory, let alone with Aboriginal people.

In an odd twist of fate, I started work in the Commonwealth Public Service in Canberra 55 years ago this week. I moved to the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1973 – 40 years ago this week. Over the next twenty years I worked in Canberra, Brisbane, Townsville, Thursday Island, Darwin and Alice Springs. In 1994 I accepted a job with the Northern Territory Government, and have been back here in Darwin since. I retired from full-time work in 2001, but have remained
involved in various part-time capacities that regularly take me through the length and breadth of the Northern Territory (NT).

I’m a Territorian with a difference, perhaps a double Territorian. I was raised in the Australian Capital Territory, and did the usual things like cricket and football and joining the public service on leaving school. Back in 1958 it was so easy, there was no merit selection test – they took anybody.

By the early 1960’s I was restless and looking beyond the mountains of the ACT. I was intrigued by the foreboding, mysterious NT, lured by the author Ernestine Hill who created pictures of:

‘Cattle droving over unknown wilderness, tragic encounters with Aborigines, the efforts to establish settlements that were cut off from the rest of the world and inevitably covered by the relentless growth of vegetation, the first crossing of the continent, the building of the Overland Telegraph Line, and the incredible lives of men and women’.

For example I climbed Ayers Rock (as it was then) in 1962, and used to dream about the possibilities of applying to take up a Pastoral Lease over vacant Crown Land in the NT that were regularly advertised in the Commonwealth Gazette (now they sell on the open market for fabulous prices). Instead I eventually came to the NT as a public servant!

The NT is still Australia’s frontier, a real frontier, unlike the romanticised Texas that preoccupied the media and movies when we were kids. The NT is more than twice as big in size, yet has less than 1% of the Texas population. Now that is sparsely populated.

Monica and I have left the NT twice; early in 1979, and again in 1984. That means we have moved here three times. Not many can stake that claim. I wonder sometimes whether Uluru cast its spell back in 1962, and drew me back. I know that I rattled the family around 1987 when I told Monica after another of my work visits ‘I just know that our involvement with the NT isn’t over’. Our lives and the NT have become intertwined, and it looks like we’re here for keeps.

The race relations pressure cooker 60’s and early 70s

In the decade leading up to my move to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs Indigenous protest was on the move in a big way. I mention a few events to remind people:

- Yirrkala bark petitions to the Australian Parliament in 1963
- Charles Perkins led Freedom Rides through Western NSW in 1964 and 1965
- In 1966 Gurindji people walk-off Wave Hill Station in the NT in protest at conditions (the ‘Poor bugger me, Gurindji’ lament is one of the enduring contributions to Australian music)
- 1966 Cattle Industry Case where Aborigines were awarded equal pay (but not applicable for 33 months)
- The 1967 Constitutional Referendum relating to Indigenous Australians
- The Council for Aboriginal Affairs (and the related Office of Aboriginal Affairs) was established by the Australian Government in 1967
- 1968 Gove Land Rights case (Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd)
When the protestors were not appeased by the creation of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, the Australian Government created the Department of the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts in 1971. It fared no better.

Noonkanbah (WA) station workers walk-off 1971

Aboriginal Tent Embassy pitched in front of (Old) Parliament House, Canberra in 1972 demonstrating for land rights

These developments all helped set the scene for the Federal Elections late in 1972. Around Aboriginal Australia there were pent-up resentments, even hostility, over two centuries of injustices. It built to a crescendo cry for the recognition of basic rights, and directly fuelled the major policy responses that soon followed.

‘It’s Time’

Great expectations followed the election of a new government for the first time in 27 years, especially amongst the politically active Aborigines in the main towns and the cities. And they were not disappointed, at least initially, as the new government quickly:

- created a stand-alone portfolio, and Department, of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) in 1972
- announced the new policy of Self-Determination. (The ‘paternalism’ of the replaced Integration/Assimilation policy was bagged, along with everybody who had a hand in it)
- appointed Mr Justice Woodward in 1973 to head a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Land Rights in the NT
- abandoned the Training Allowance Scheme (read training wages) in remote Aboriginal communities in the NT late 1973, and stipulated that award wages were to be introduced
- extended welfare benefits to remote communities for the first time (the advent of sit-down money) when the ‘jobs’ that employed those on Training Allowance disappeared overnight, meaning that few benefitted then from the award wages
- conducted elections for and established a National Aboriginal Consultative Committee in 1974

The list goes on and on. This simply gives you a glimpse of the march on ‘Rights’. ‘Responsibility’ (or mutual obligation) hadn’t yet been added to the new lexicon. I will elaborate on this later.

When I joined that new Department in November 1973, 40 years ago, the mood was euphoric, staff were energetic and motivated. Major change was occurring all around them after many years of incremental adjustment at best. Optimism was overflowing. We believed we were on the right path at last. The grand new future couldn’t arrive soon enough. People took great pride in correcting what appeared to be historic wrongs when viewed through the prism of the 1960’s and 70’s.

The move to Aboriginal Affairs invigorated me too. I was in the thick of it, working with people like:

- Charlie Perkins, who approached each day as if it were his last (he was a surviving kidney transplant recipient after-all). He was constantly in the headlines, if not for pushing the envelope on Aboriginal policy, then for calling a State Premier who he believed obstinate a
‘flying peanut’. Nearly 30 years later I attended his State Funeral, which reflected how his stature had grown

- Ted Egan, who in his short time in Canberra fielded a telephone call from his mate Rolf Harris in London, put his feet up on the desk, and sang ‘Two Little Boys’ loudly. Harris made it another hit
- Kevin Martin, who was in the Pitjantjatjara Lands in South Australia at the time of the nuclear testing at Maralinga helping move people out of the path of the fall-out plume, and the Woomera rockets
- Frank Moy, a former Director of Native Welfare in the NT in the 50’s (it took a while to get through his gruff exterior to the substance below)
- Dr Nugget Coombs and Prof. Bill Stanner, who were still on the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, as was the Secretary of the Department, the incredibly hard working Barrie Dexter
- Jeremy Long (he was 6’5” and I thought they were pulling my leg when first introduced) who led reconnaissance into the Gibson Desert in 1957 and 1964 to offer relief to the Pintubi people in times of great drought hardship. (Later, in the early 80’s I took him back into that country to find he was still revered by those people. I think he was their first white man). The Gibson Desert is hardly a ‘land of milk and honey’
- John Moriarty of Balarinji Design, originally from Borroloola (who painted the Qantas planes, and whose CV is too big for this paper)
- Professor, Dr (can one have both?) Briscoe PhD, my argumentative mate who hails from around Alice Springs
- Lowitja O’Donoghue from the far north of South Australia
- And through my work over the years I met other unforgettable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from around the country like Geoff Shaw, Nosepeg Tjupurrula, Yami Lester, Alison Anderson, Wenton Rabuntja, Mussolini Harvey, Tracker Tilmouth, Joe McGinness, Chicka Dixon, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Karmi Dunn, George Mye, Wees Nawia, Naseli Nona, Ted Loban, Frank Yunkaporta, Harry Nelson Jagamara, Motorcar Jimmy No2, Mum Shirl, Robert E Lee, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, Garry Foley, Roy Marika, Michael Mansell, Nandijwarra Amagula, Ken Colbung, Evelyn Scott, Eddie Mabo, Paddy Dodson, Darby Jampijinpa, Cyril Kalippa and the remarkable Rioli family, the many Puruntameris.

Apologies too, to the thousands not named. You are probably the lucky ones – no guilt through association.

**Big issues**

Within a couple of months of joining the DAA I was moved into the Consultation and Liaison Branch headed by Charlie Perkins. As I said, he seemed to create controversy on a daily basis. Through Charlie I met many Aborigines from all over Australia in this job and gained insights that probably wouldn’t have been available without his endorsement and introduction.

I soon moved on to a Special Queensland Branch, and was given the task of taking States Grants money off the Queensland Government and spending it by way of direct grants to incorporated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. Talk about political tensions!

Other issues over the years included:
• Setting up the Queensland State Office
• Senior Private Secretary to the Minister for an extended period, during which the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (ALRA) was passed through the Parliament
• Stationed in Torres Strait at the Prime Minister’s request, during International Border negotiations with the newly independent Papua/New Guinea, to correct negative misinformation being spread about the Australian Government’s intentions (Note to employers – If you want to test the commitment of staff put a family of five, kids ages ranging from 2 to 7, into two rooms of the Federal Hotel on Thursday Island (or any hotel) for six months)
• Resident in Darwin during the transition to Self-Government in 1978, and over the time of the delivery of title deeds to Aboriginal Land following passage of ALRA in 1976
• Managed the legislation and the delivery of land rights for the Aboriginal people of Wreck Bay, in the Jervis Bay Territory of the ACT
• Arranged the Cabinet Submissions, legislation, and the actual Handover Ceremony for Grant of Land Title to the Traditional Owners of Uluru/Katajuta National Park, on condition it was leased back to government (for a while I was the dreaded person who gave away Uluru!)
• Enabled the move by Pintubi people then living in Papunya back to the Outstation Walungurru on their traditional lands (Kintore Hills, near Sandy Blight Junction in Len Beadell’s maps) after a day of drama when they threatened to spear the Council at Papunya. A youthful Alison Anderson was Town Clerk there then, and she and Yami Lester interpreted at various meetings I called
• Walungurru (on the eastern fringe of Pintubi traditional homelands) quickly grew into a community in its own right, creating population pressure. Some people moved further west to Kiwirrkurra in WA (Pollock Hills on Beadell’s maps) – an Outstation on an Outstation some thought
• Returned to Alice Springs to coordinate the world media frenzy, and whole-of-government response, over a group of nine Pintubi people who in 1984 moved from the Gibson Desert, from out beyond the fences, into settled areas for the first time (if one could call Kiwirrkurra ‘settled’)
• Present at the return of Freehold Land Title to the Gurindji people of Daguragu (remember the Wave Hill walk-off back in 1966?)
• Represented Australia at the International Labour Organisation, Geneva 1989
• And I managed to get to the Apology to the Stolen Generations in Parliament House, Canberra in 2008.

**Governments, and Ministers**

I have worked for more governments and Ministers than even Sir Humphrey Appleby (from the incomparable ‘Yes Minister’ Television series) could comprehend (coincidentally he also worked in the DAA – Department of Administrative Affairs in his case).

1996 to 2007, Labor 2007 to 2013, and a new Liberal/National Party government elected on 7 September 2013. I worked in the Department (and its successor ATSIC) for the following Ministers for Aboriginal Affairs:

- Gordon Bryant, Jim Cavanagh, Les Johnson, Ian Viner, Fred Chaney, Ian Wilson, Peter Baume, Clyde Holding, Gerry Hand, Robert Tickner.

In the NT we had a Country Liberal Government from Self Government in 1978 until 2001, Labor from 2001 until 2012, and Country Liberals since. I worked with the following NT Ministers since coming back to the NT in 1994:

- Steve Hatton, Daryl Manzie, Mick Palmer, Tim Baldwin, Peter Adamson, Lorraine Braham, Richard Lim, Kon Vatskalis, Sid Stirling, Jack Ah Kit (and since retirement in 2001 I have worked with others in my Grants Commission and Coordinator General capacities – Elliot McAdam, Rob Knight, Alison Anderson, Malarndirri McCarthy, Adam Giles, and Dave Tollner).

(Apologies to all for skipping the ‘Hons’, ‘Sen’, ‘AM’ etc. It would have all been too cumbersome and pretentious, and you wouldn’t want that).

Much of the work was very stressful, but there were many light moments. The International Border issue between Australia and Papua/New Guinea was a high wire act, which led to the Queensland Premier publicly calling on the Prime Minister to dismiss the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs over my activities. I was relieved when the Minister laughed it off as a ‘measure of your success’.

On another occasion a colleague and I suggested to the Minister that perhaps he should sound out Cabinet Ministers before we expended a lot of effort on a proposal that we believed doomed before it got to first base. The Minister ranted about the audacity of public servants who had never submitted themselves to the vote trying to tell him something about the numbers. He went on and on, until the crunch line – ‘I know all about the numbers. I ought to. I’m always on the losing end’. And then laughed at how well he had taken us in. Talk about ‘come in spinner’!

To this day Harry Nelson Jagamara, formerly of Yuendumu, thinks I am fluent in Warlpiri after he unwittingly used the untranslatable word ‘key’ in a question in language to an Elder, and I told him the door was unlocked.

Now that I have established my credentials, such as they are, I will turn to making some comments.

**Were the Governments different?**

It is not appropriate that I score Ministers, but I will comment in general terms on governments. With the exception of the big changes following the elections of 1972, and the Northern Territory Emergency Response in 2007, broad policy has remained fairly consistent. Bipartisanship was eagerly sought, and generally granted. The Opposition of the day hesitated from criticising the government for fear of accusations of racism, or blaming the victim. Each government promoted the strength of its commitment by pointing to the increased allocation of funds each financial year. There wasn’t a lot of measurement of outcomes.
The National Aboriginal Consultative Committee of 1973 morphed into the National Aboriginal Conference (NAC). The Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC) subsumed the Land Fund and Loans Commissions (and effectively the NAC). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) subsumed the ADC and DAA in 1990, and itself was abolished in 2005.

Policy shifted from ‘Assimilation/Integration’ to ‘Self Determination’, to ‘Self–Management’. Perhaps the Anindilyakwa people of Umbakumba, or the Arrernte of Atitjere said ‘Wow’, but I think not. I’m sure such matters didn’t rate against the daily grind in the bush. (Digressing for a moment, haven’t the Linguists had open scope though – Arrernte used to be Arunta, Arunda, and Aranda? I knew a bloke with the name Chooki, which became Tjuki in its written form. Gerry Wood MLA recently questioned why the name for the Santa Teresa Community is spelt Ltyentye Apurte when pronounced Ginger Porta – no doubt many of you can think of other examples).

The last Minister of the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts, Peter Howson didn’t miss the policy shift in 1972, and the bagging of all who went before. (He was from the Menzies era!). Howson was offended by the new order, and by the criticism, and he spent the rest of his life until his death in 2009 correcting the record. His contention was simple – social outcomes had deteriorated alarmingly since 1972, especially since the removal of the Training wage in 1973 and its replacement with Welfare Benefits (inter-generational welfare dependency followed).

The late Harry Geise, the senior public servant in the NT through those tumultuous times, watched decades of his hard work being undone as a consequence, and I have often wondered about his private thoughts. He maintained a dignified silence, fitting for a public servant even despite the criticism levelled at him, through to his death in 2000.

Apart from a bit of mudslinging from the sidelines about the virtue of the pre or post 1972 policies, it was all very PC within Parliament. And that was the problem. The dirty linen didn’t get aired; there were no sleeves-up rows – so bad policy drifted on.

What really happened back in the 1970s after the seismic shift in policy?

Most people opted out of work. The small scale enterprises, from orchards to market gardens, chooks, goats, cattle, timber mills, brick making, fishing and bakeries were abandoned. Aborigines reasonably interpreted the changes as meaning the government preferred to pay them to ‘sit down’ than to work.

It seems clear now that the resultant idleness has led to soaring substance abuse, and plummeting self-respect. Kid’s education suffered. I said all this in the Foreword to the Office of Aboriginal Development’s Annual Report to the Parliament for the year 1997/98 (which horrified the then Minister). Some may contest this simplistic summation, and a lot of them may argue that seeing Aborigines had the country stolen from them in the first place then the invaders should pay the rent in the form of a lifetime entitlement to the full smorgasbord of welfare entitlements with no strings attached. My response is that is just what we have been doing for the last forty years, with terrible social outcomes.

There is no need for me to recite all of the depressing social measurements.
When he was Employment Minister in 1998 Tony Abbott asked me ‘what single act would achieve the greatest benefits?’ I said ‘remove the Remote Area Exemption’ (from the work test for unemployment benefits). The absence of this test on eligibility for benefits allowed people to opt out of work without affecting their welfare payments. I had already formed the view that welfare dependency, and the resultant idleness, was soul destroying and evil.

Governments have delivered big-time on representative bodies, legislated rights, funded extensive capital infrastructure projects, and the ever growing suite of welfare benefits. But they lost the plot on ‘Mutual Obligation’, ‘Responsibility’. (I said earlier I would return to ‘Responsibility’).

It didn’t escape the notice of Noel Pearson though.

**A seminal work**

Noel Pearson from Hopevale (or Hope Vale) Mission in North Queensland broke all of the rules about Political Correctness in 1999 with his Discussion Paper ‘OUR RIGHT TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY’. He at once double punned the debate that was then gathering traction about the contention that with ‘rights’ one had ‘responsibilities’, and panned the failure of governments to seek out mutual obligation.

It was brilliant analytical work, the more so because he went it alone. He forged a new path, leaving other Aboriginal leaders in his dust. A lonely, brave figure for awhile, but the thinkers quickly caught up. In my view, the weight of that paper, on top of growing commentary from others like Howson, tipped the scales. Increasingly it has become acceptable to talk about such matters without being denigrated. The problems with PC were being recognised.

Pearson used searing scenes to grab attention. And while it doesn’t do his work justice to selectively quote from it, I will do so anyway in the hope that it will encourage others to seek out the complete document.

When talking about the cultural obligation to share food resources with counymen Pearson asks ‘Why are all of the family’s resources going to fulfil so-called obligations to cousins and uncles for drinking, when the children have nothing to eat?’ And ‘Clearly, a cancer has afflicted the obligation to share resources in the old days, which today is manifested in an obligation to share the Family Allowance Support payment to get drunk with one’s relatives – whilst our children go without’.

He talks eloquently about:

- Something for nothing economy
- Assistance without reciprocation
- No able –bodied person should be provided with any assistance or help without some form of reciprocation
- The communalist system of work tends to result in a diminution of personal responsibility and initiative
- From 1970 the communities of Cape York have gone from almost 0% reliance on government welfare to almost 100% reliance on government welfare transfers
- Victim mentality
This paper firmly contends that welfare, as it is presently understood and constituted, is a fundamental poison. It is the cause of the corruption of Aboriginal Society in Cape York.

The impact on the NT

My views have been out there for dissection for 15 years. My Foreword to the Office of Aboriginal Development Annual Report for 1997/98 asked ‘Have Governments failed Aborigines?’ In 2004 the Menzies Research Centre published my report titled ‘Do Indigenous Youth Have a Dream’. The report argued that the well intentioned policy initiatives of the 60s and 70s had unintended perverse effects that have led directly to the current malaise:

- Award wages in the pastoral industry (with the resultant loss of jobs and drift to town)
- Abandonment of the jobs for all approach - Training Allowances (replaced by sit-down money)
- Money to spend (with the drift to towns, and alcohol restrictions abandoned)
- Withdrawal of Government and Mission staff (replaced by cronies or mates or often carpetbaggers. Professional, ethical staff were unfortunately too rare)
- A requirement to incorporate as a cooperative to be eligible for funding (creating a lowest common denominator affect – everybody sits under a tree)
- Land Rights via an Inalienable Freehold Communal Title (personal endeavour discouraged, home ownership stymied, normal business practice of using assets as security for borrowing blocked).

I said that these issues ‘have combined in a most hideous way. They have absolutely destroyed motivation and personal endeavour, and trapped Aborigines in their Aboriginality, their remote communities, and their poverty. Worse still, there is strong evidence in many places of a total breakdown in the social order’. I also asked ‘how the processing of a welfare payment week after week, year after year, with no effort to establish whether the payments are meeting the target intended, constitute a welfare measure? It is the antithesis of welfare!’

This Report was a major elaboration on the comments in the Annual Report six or so years earlier. Both documents can be accessed online if people want to pursue these subjects in greater depth.

The 2004 report ended by pleading ‘We must fix things for the kids.’

But they weren’t fixed. They continued to drift, until 15 June 2007.

Northern Territory National Emergency Response.

The Australian Government mounted its dramatic Northern Territory Emergency Response (or Intervention) on 15 June 2007, headed by 600 Soldiers in uniform. Fundamental change was finally underway, but Soldiers in uniform?

The package of measures was the Australian Government’s response to the Northern Territory Government’s delayed publication of the report Little Children are Sacred. But even after this dramatic arrival it then implemented only two of the report’s ninety-seven recommendations.
The justification for the Intervention was said to be the urgent need to address what was believed to be rampant child sexual abuse and neglect. I am not aware of any charges being laid as a consequence of this work. In fact journalist Paul Toohey said in an article in the Sunday Territorian on 5 May 2013 ‘The problem was not of a culture of rapists on communities: it was and remains, one of mass parental alcohol neglect . . . ‘. Critics have expressed the view that the issue of perceived child abuse was the Trojan Horse for government to mount the politically incorrect measures at which previous governments had baulked.

Nevertheless, I had long been advocating dramatic policy change, and I suppose in time I got over the shock of the uniforms. The overdue and desperately needed welfare reform, land tenure reform, and the injection of $ Billions quite beyond the capacity of the NT Government, needed to be considered in balance, in context. At long last there would be obstacles to converting the family’s welfare payment (and Family Allowance) to alcohol, and there would be a capacity to address the backlog of need the NT largely inherited from the Australian Government back at the time of Self Government in 1978.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) then agreed on a comprehensive range of National Partnership Agreements aimed at Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage. The National Agreement on Remote Service Delivery (RSD) grew out of this crisis. This isn’t the place to chronicle all of the measures implemented, though a quick overview is necessary (this is copied from Wikipedia):

- Deployment of additional police to affected communities.
- New restrictions on alcohol and kava
- Pornography filters on publicly funded computers
- Compulsory acquisition of townships currently held under the title provisions of the Native Title Act 1993 (this is a mistake; it should be the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976) - through five year leases with compensation on a basis other than just terms. (It was intended that during this five year period, consent agreements for much longer terms would be negotiated - only three such leases were concluded, two of those on Groote Eylandt, before governments abandoned the approach in the face of Land Council hostility)
- Commonwealth funding for provision of community services
- Removal of customary law and cultural practice considerations from bail applications and sentencing within criminal proceedings
- Suspension of the permit system
- Quarantining of a proportion of welfare benefits to all recipients in the designated communities and of all benefits of those who neglect their children
- The abolition of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP)

Despite all of the critical rhetoric at the time, it is instructive that there was a change of the Australian Government later in 2007, and the incoming government maintained the measures (and continued to do so after a later change of Prime Minister). Some incremental adjustments have been made along the way since, which probably would have happened irrespective (bipartisanship again).

The suite of policies appealed because it had the potential to address most of my concerns:

- Land reform, leading to home ownership and business migration
• Adults into work, through the increased opportunities afforded by land reform
• Kids into school, with parents as role models, arresting the appalling attendance and attainment statistics
• The consequent surge in self-esteem through providing for one’s family would positively impact on offending rates, substance abuse, and those other lifestyle problems that seem to follow idleness, and free money

For those interested in the detail, I had a role in this work from May 2009 to May 2011, and produced four reports. They can be found on the website of the Department of Regional Development and Women’s Policy.

**Stronger Futures**

The Emergency Response had a life of five years. In August 2012 most of the measures were maintained in a replacement suite of programs now titled Stronger Futures, totalling $3.4 Billion over ten years. The Australian Government described this investment as responding directly to what Aboriginal people told the government was important to them.

An Australian Government website describes the aims of the commitment:

• Create more local jobs
• Encourage children to go to school everyday
• Tackle alcohol abuse
• Improve services

So there we are again. On the face of it everyone is in agreement. Results are, however, elusive. The Australian Government has been slow to enforce its own rules about school attendance and the payment of Family Allowance, or the work test (remember my remarks to Tony Abbott about the Remote Area Exemption?) and the payment of Newstart Allowance (Unemployment Benefit, Jobsearch Allowance, whatever). And I am unaware of anybody being prosecuted by the Northern Territory Government for failing to send their kids to school, despite it being compulsory.

The big issue of land reform quietly dropped off the agenda, both governments presumably having no stomach to push the issue in the face of hostility from the big land councils. The hopes for home ownership, private sector investment, training and jobs were extinguished. (The new Australian Government Minister, the Territory’s Senator Scullion, has very recently made moves to revive the land tenure issue).

In relation to welfare dependency, for many years there seemed to be a disconnect between the repeated speeches by a previous Prime Minister about the value of education and work, and the lack of action by her own government agencies to apply the rules about taking up training and employment opportunities or risk losing your welfare benefits.

I’m sure the public servants who slithered around the rules genuinely believed that they were being compassionate. But they probably came to this work relatively recently, and in their naivety could not have a picture available to them taken over a forty year exposure. They could not have witnessed the consequences of a loss of self-esteem like domestic violence, or child neglect.
'There are no jobs' I hear the cynics say. Please just check who is doing the jobs in remote communities today. More particularly, have a look back at the range of activities by local people that were in full production at the time of introduction of welfare benefits, and which quickly fell away. Locally produced food and building materials have been replaced by high cost imports.

And why do we have Fly-in Fly-out workers, and 457 Permit Foreign Workers, in mines with large populations of unemployed Aborigines living nearby?

‘We live in Third World Conditions’ I have heard people say. As I understand it people in Third World countries do not have a generous welfare scheme in place, with free education, free health etc. etc. I think perhaps some well-intentioned do-gooders have encouraged people to think of themselves as victims, and that it is the responsibility of governments to get them out of this mess. The term ‘learned helplessness’ has been used. I’ll concede that it was the over-generosity of government, with no mutual obligation requirement, that got people into the mess. But government alone can’t fix everything that is wrong now. It will take both the government, and the people pulling in unison in a concerted effort over years, to fix things now.

Repeat. The huge expenditure programs really attacked a massive backlog of infrastructure needs, inherited by the new Northern Territory Government in 1978, which was quite beyond the financial means of this small jurisdiction. This part of the intrusion was welcome.

Even so, the social situation has worsened in relation to many categories since the Intervention in 2007:

- Reported sexual assaults in Alice Springs have almost doubled*
- The number of robbery offences in Alice Springs have almost trebled*
- The number of offences against the person (assault, murder, sexual assault and robbery) have increased by more than 30%*

*Source: Northern Territory Crime Statistics, December Quarter 2012, and Northern Territory Annual Crime Statistics Issue 1: 2011-12. (I’m certain the determined researcher will find much more in the documents themselves. These figures leapt out at me from a newspaper article).

I particularly worry that while we are seriously addressing the capital infrastructure needs of remote communities, we haven’t paid equal attention to addressing the Social Fabric needs.

**The Social Fabric**

What do I mean?

1. Land reform has dropped off the agenda, and neither home ownership nor business migration has progressed as envisaged in 2007. The Iron Curtain remains.

NT Minister for Indigenous Advancement Alison Anderson said in a published article in January 2013:

‘It is one of the peculiarities of the NT that government is expected to build not just public housing on its own land, as happens around the world, but houses on private land as well.'
This is a reference to half of the Territory owned by the Aboriginal Land Trusts and managed by the Land Councils, where it is almost impossible for individuals to build their own home.

This is a truly bizarre situation.

Families can now own homes in (formerly communist) Russia and China. Families can own homes on Native American and Canadian Inuit reservations.

Australia’s indigenous lands are the last remaining area of any significance on the earth’s surface where this can’t be done.

. . . . Property rights are now considered by experts to be crucial to prosperity, to lifting people around the world out of poverty and despair. Why should indigenous people across the Territory be denied this opportunity? . . .

The stifling of personal endeavour, and the start to family wealth accumulation, are the issues here. This is unfinished business.

2. School Attendance is still at low levels, and so are attainment levels guaranteeing that these kids will be second class citizens for life. They will never be competitive for the well remunerated jobs, or perhaps any job.

The NT Minister for Education’s Media Release of 25 January 2013 is repeated in full:

‘The importance of ensuring Territory children attend school will be reinforced by the Every Child, Every Day campaign.

Every Child, Every Day includes radio, television and print advertising and will feature across the Northern Territory from today.

It is part of a comprehensive approach to school enrolment, attendance and participation which includes an attendance and truancy officer program, frequent attenders programs and a variety of initiatives aimed at keeping students engaged in learning.

Minister for Education, John Elferink said it is everyone’s responsibility to ensure students get to school.

‘The first factor in learning is simply getting our kids to school. If they are not at school, how can they be expected to learn?’ Mr Elferink said.

‘This is something we expect from parents and guardians. Schools and teachers have a role, unions have a role and government has a role – but ultimately it is up to parents and guardians to make sure children go to school.

‘The importance of education needs to be instilled in each child in the Territory and to achieve that our community needs to value learning,’ Mr Elferink said.

The reality is that if Aboriginal kids are not equipped to compete for the better paid jobs they will remain on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder.
3. Jobs have not materialised despite the large numbers employed by Shire Councils. The Australian Government continues to seriously gloss over the true level of unemployment in the NT (my Coordinator General reports demonstrated that only about 10% on the numbers in receipt of Newstart Allowance were considered to be unemployed).

In another contribution earlier this year the then NT Indigenous Advancement Minister told the Territory’s Legislative Assembly that she ‘despaired at the reluctance’ of some of her brethren to take available jobs.

‘I look at the men of Yirrkala and ask why they will not drive the 20km to Nhulunbuy to earn excellent money in the mine and the processing plant there’, she said in her first ministerial statement on the status of Aboriginal communities in the Territory since taking the cabinet role. ‘It is the kind of question the rest of Australia has been asking for years, as it tries to connect the dots, tries to understand why a long-running mining boom can exist literally next door to a culture of entitlement and welfare dependency.’

She criticised those who expected the government to ‘do everything for them’, saying the world was looking on and ‘wondering if we are children’. Ms Anderson said that in her travels to remote communities she would be arguing ‘with adults who refuse to grow up’.

‘In the rest of Australia, people pick up the rubbish in their yards. They fix their own blocked toilets,’ Ms Anderson said.

‘When they turn on their TVs and see remote communities covered in litter, and able-bodied men complaining about lack of maintenance of the houses they live in, they wonder why. They wonder why indigenous people in these communities won’t do these things themselves.’

To reinforce my earlier remarks about the Australian Government not applying its own rules despite the Prime Minister’s commitment to education and employment, I draw attention to the remarks of NT Government Minister Adam Giles in January 2013 ‘The stick needs to be added to the carrot to enforce parental responsibility, reduce youth crime, and get able-bodied people off the dole.’

On his elevation as Chief Minister in March 2013, Adam Giles went further and had this to say to the Weekend Australian on 16-17 March in an article titled ‘We need jobs, not socialism’:

‘The thinking about Aboriginal affairs needs to be about economics, not about socialism. Until you get that philosophical change, there’s no point in asking for anything because all you are doing is barking at a person who has turned away’. And ‘I will be talking about the need to develop accessible land for commercial, economic, industrial development. I will be talking about trade barriers such as permits on access to roads, rail’.

These three issues, Land, School Education, and Employment are the keys. They directly address a person’s self-respect, their sense of worth, by eliminating idleness, and providing for one’s family.

Given that I have been banging on about these things for many years, it was very heartening to hear the new Australian Government Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Nigel Scullion, hit on the same issues in the days leading to his appointment. He talked about the inappropriateness of paying Newstart Allowance to people who are not looking for or declining jobs, and about the passive
racism of public servants who hold lower expectations for Aboriginal children attending school. (At
an earlier date, and in another setting, Noel Pearson spoke of ‘the tyranny of low expectations’).

This year has produced some interesting and ostensibly divergent approaches to Indigenous
Advancement. The Northern Territory Government abolished the Ministry and the Department on
the rationale that such work is mainstream business for all Territory Government agencies. Yet the
new Australian Government has created a Cabinet Minister for Indigenous Affairs (not outer
ministry), and located the administration in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The
new Prime Minister pledged to be a ‘Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs’.

It is uncontested wisdom these days that the greatest welfare measure we can offer anybody is a
job.

The myriad of other interconnecting issues like:

- The drift to the big townships
- Substance abuse
- Anti-social behaviour
- Domestic violence
- Homicide
- Health
- Incarceration
- Road trauma
- Housing
- Homelands/Outstations
- Child neglect

will start to improve if we get the structural foundations right. Anyway, these are my strongly held
views, and I would be happy to vigorously argue the point with dissenters.

Some may want to accuse me of ‘blaming the victims’. I’m prepared to cop that in order to keep the
focus on the issues that must be addressed. To shine a light on them.

The future of the Northern Territory is in the balance

What follows are some remarks I made to the Alice Springs News in January 2013 in the context of a
debate about how long people can expect to be paid the dole:

‘Thanks for again raising the unmentionables. The things that discomfort people, the politically
incorrect issues, but the matters that will ultimately destroy the Northern Territory unless they are
corrected.

And they won’t be corrected until they are out in the open, examined, dissected, debated, and dealt
with. Essentially they are all about Indigenous peoples taking up participatory roles in the economy.

Social indicators make that an imperative. Economic reasons leave no alternative. Fewer and fewer
workers nationwide simply cannot continue to keep a growing proportion of dependents. The baby
boomer bulge in the nation’s demographics underlines this point.
In the Northern Territory’s case, the increasing proportion of Indigenous people makes it blindingly obvious.’

Some national figures appeared in the Northern Territory News on 12 March 2013:

- More than 4 million Australians out of a population of 22 million are living on welfare (almost another 2 million are public servants)
- How can 530,000 Australians be on the dole, yet we allow nearly 400,000 overseas workers on 457 Permit visas enter our workforce?
- How can even more – 823,000 – be deemed too sick or disabled to work, and in need of a pension? Are we that feeble? This number has grown enormously in recent years.*
- Then there are 2.2 million Australians who couldn’t/didn’t save enough for their retirement and are on age pensions.
- Add another 350,000 students we pay to study full-time at universities
- There are only 8 million of us in full-time work, and one in four are public servants.

*The University of Melbourne’s Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research has predicted a ‘disability blowout’, and reported that the Disability Support Pension (DSP) has risen faster than the wages of low skilled workers over the last twenty years, particularly from 2008 onwards. The Institute has also identified that:

‘Changes to the eligibility criteria of other welfare payments such as Newstart Allowance and Parenting Payment, and the fact that DSP has become more generous relative to other payments, are significant factors in this disability increase’.

Surely all of these figures point to a welfare/employment policy gone mad.

Are you beginning to believe that the country cannot afford this?

(I want to eliminate any possible confusion – the recently announced National Disability Insurance Scheme is an entirely separate matter).

On the social ledger, the Northern Territory already unenviably holds too many world records in relation to social indicators, and unless decisive action is taken to intervene in a paradigm changing way, the figures will only get worse. That is not some prophecy of doom, but simple mathematical projection. Ageing population leaving the workforce, higher Indigenous birthrate. . .

And as they get worse, so will the quality of life in the NT, not only for Aboriginal peoples, but the rest of society too. So will race relations worsen. Already we regularly see destructive behaviour by Indigenous youth no doubt driven by their resentment about what they see in the main towns. The houses, and clothes, motor cars and white people sitting in restaurants. The trappings of the good life. Things that they would like to have, but don’t know how to get.

We have even seen a clergyman leave town suffering from ‘compassion fatigue’:

‘It’s heartbreaking to see people so low that the only way they can get through the day is to drink themselves silly and then sleep in their own excrement’. He became angry when he arrived at the cathedral to find wine casks and food bits at the church doors. (NTN 22 March 2013.)

And we have seen the emergence of vigilante groups – I know the term is confronting/shattering, but more spin is of no help at all.
Given that all their peers are in the same predicament, Indigenous youth probably do not even realize that they were doomed by the time they started school. By then they were likely to be behind national standards, and the experts tell us you can never in a lifetime catch up on those things you missed out on in early childhood development. Like parents reading to you, good nutrition, a nurturing harmonious home, one or both parents working providing a role model(s).

These deficits will not be overcome by some vocational training course, but that is no excuse for not making a concerted effort now. Kids into child-care, pre-schools, fix the absenteeism at primary and secondary schools, youth into training, parents into training and jobs as role models, with a ruthless application of the work test. You mightn’t entirely overcome the deficits from childhood, but you can certainly make life for the adults a whole lot more satisfying, and in so doing provide the missing role models for kids. The alternative is another stolen generation, and that is unthinkable.

If the knockers want to say ‘That is assimilation’, I say we have seen the alternative. And doesn’t the objective of every program of assistance talk about ‘equality with the wider society’? So isn’t that assimilation? It seems to me that the knockers prefer to philosophize about semantics than worry about getting adults into work, and kids into school

Enough of carrots, use the stick. A fair dinkum stick, not like those emu feathers used by the plethora of job service providers eating each other’s dust in the bush in the chase to sign up the next client. Or the stick that used to be used by Centrelink (if one was in an overcrowded house they were considered in ‘hardship’ and not breached). It was no doubt hard to breach a needy person, but show me an Aborigine in a remote community that isn’t in an overcrowded house. No wonder breaching rarely happened.

Enough of the argument that we can’t afford these reform programs. What is starkly clear is that we certainly won’t be able to afford to keep doing what we are doing. How could we, with fewer workers, afford to pay welfare to an ever lengthening list of people, or the extra police, or health services, or sobering up shelters, or women’s refuges, or social workers? Nationally, the welfare expenditure grows year after year, while the population is ageing (the post WW2 birthrate boom) and moving into retirement. In the NT, in some recent years the Aboriginal birthrate has exceeded interstate migration.

I repeat. Fewer workers. More dependants. The social problems stemming from idleness. If the social imperatives do not sway the need for change, the economic imperatives will.

We have encouraged a mind-set over forty years that ‘the government will keep me for life’. Free money! No strings attached. So entrenched now is that view around the bush that it will take a generation or longer to correct it. It will take nerve and bipartisanship, and the support of Aboriginal Leadership. Tough love.

The economists have had much to say about ‘The Two Speed Economy’ in recent years. The topic features as an agenda item on many of the conferences/workshops I have attended. Those who coined the phrase did not have the NT in mind, but that is all I can see. Until Aborigines take their rightful place in the REAL economy of the NT, we will continue with our own version of a Two Speed Economy with all of the tragic social fall-out.

Earlier this year the Australian Government announced the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (to replace Job Services Australia, Disability Employment Services, Indigenous Employment Program, and the Community Development Employment Program). The very late announcement (three weeks before the start of the new arrangements on 1 July 2013) has got the reforms off on an unfortunate
footing. In some cases the new contractors were surprised and couldn’t gear up in time. Insult was added to injury when the previous contractor (like Shires) was asked to provide an interim agency arrangement for the new body. Meanwhile Indigenous employees are back on the unemployment books, and are more confused than ever.

The new Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs in The Australian newspaper on 18 October 2013 described the $1.5 billion program as a ‘disaster’, and ‘you couldn’t think of a worse possible outcome’. Presumably some serious repair work is currently underway.

Let’s hope that when these new arrangements finally settle down some rigor will at last be applied, and the notion that ‘the Government will keep me for life’ is eliminated. Parents into a meaningful activity, kids into school, and the social dysfunction will have an opportunity to correct.

(The issue again demonstrates the problem with management and decision making from afar, out of touch with local dynamics. More particularly it seems to demonstrate an ongoing hostility by the Australian Government to local government shires in the Northern Territory, who in many cases previously managed the employment program but had that responsibility removed under these new arrangements).

Conclusion

I want to highlight my belief in the need for a much stronger focus on what I call The Social Fabric, by quoting from a Coordinator General Report:

‘Picture a Growth Town as a ledger, having two sides. One side represents the physical infrastructure, the capital assets of the built environment; things like water, power, sewerage, housing, shops, houses, offices, schools, health clinics, service stations.

On the other side of the ledger are the social infrastructure; the human assets; and the elusive elements like self-esteem, educational attainment, substance abuse, caring for children, shared responsibility, work participation rates, governance and leadership, domestic violence, pride.’

I went on to say that the building of houses and roads and sewerage systems is the easy part of this development effort; the social reconstruction, the rebuilding of people, the restoration of their pride and self-worth is the more difficult, and far more important.

The social side of the ledger is simply not getting the same level of attention. Education outcomes will not be achieved unless kids get to school. Health outcomes are directly dependent on the lifestyle choices people make. We need to open up the discussion about the personal space of individuals.

Where are the volunteer organisations? Like bush fire brigades, Rotary, Meals on Wheels? Their emergence could signal that finally the end of stressful daily hardscrabble survival, of just coping; and that hearts and minds can progress from a focus on self and immediate family, to thinking about the wider community good.

Unless we turn now to engaging people in a shared responsibility for improving their own circumstances, the current massive investments of governments in the physical infrastructure will depreciate very rapidly indeed.
I argued for another **National Partnership Agreement** under COAG. Only one more, when dozens had already been concluded didn’t seem like a big ask at the time, especially when its’ aims would be focussed on the well-being of people, and engaging them in a shared responsibility.

Noel Pearson put it this way in the Weekend Australian on 1/2 May 2010:

*The focus of Australian governments on service delivery will not produce development. Man needs services but he cannot live by the hand of government alone….it is hard to capture the intangible engines of human motivation in a service plan or a program plan*

Even with the benefit of hindsight, the suggestions I made in those Reports about communal land tenure and passive welfare, with the negative impacts on pre-schooling, schooling, training and employment, and the social fabric still seem sensible. The deteriorating social outcomes confirm that the existing policy focus is not complete.

There is still room to toughen up on all of these issues: still time to go back to COAG with proposals for a National Partnership Agreement on the Social Fabric (or Community Development, if that term is preferred). The almost daily clamour we have heard over the last few years about child neglect, public drunkenness, anti-social behaviour, Aboriginal on Aboriginal violence can all be traced to a common cause. Addressing the backlog in capital infrastructure is great, but it won’t fix these problems. Aren’t we taught from an early age to treat the cause, not the symptoms? Why don’t we apply those lessons to social issues?

**A prosperous future?**

The Territory continues to live up to the picture I formed in the 60’s. A foreboding, threatening, place. Raw and challenging. A violent land of extreme climates, and a cosmopolitan population mix that is unique. A land rich in promise, with its destiny still that generation away, always beckoning. Rich in natural resources, and horticultural opportunities, with the voracious Asian markets at our door. A place where one can contribute usefully to the future, and help decentralize the Australian population away from its huddling on the eastern seaboard. The Territory has us in its thrall.

But the original Australians are struggling to adjust to what the Territory has become, its pace, and where it is heading. Governments are struggling too, to get the right mix of policies. The reality is that the Territory will not reach its potential until Aboriginal peoples are sharing equally in its fruits.

The thoughts in this paper are built on generalizations, the big picture. Fortunately there are always exceptions. Regularly enough to encourage me I come across a person, or an approach to a problem, that inspires me, and rekindles hope for the future. The solutions are there, if only we could spread these successes everywhere.

As I said earlier in this paper, ‘The future of the Northern Territory is in the balance’. I share Xavier Herbert’s concern for *My Country*, but I remain optimistic.

**Thanks**

Countless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been very patient with me, and led me to a deeper understanding of the issues, and I understand the privilege extended.
Thank you all.

Bob Beadman