Chapter 6
Rethinking Aboriginal Community Governance

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Perhaps more starkly than for any other group in Australia, the situation of Aboriginal people clearly demands innovative policy frameworks. In a context where there has been a long and fraught history of state-instituted discrimination and exclusion, often under legislative provisions, and where Aboriginal people continue to suffer from multiple and interlinked disadvantage as measured by standard socioeconomic indicators, policy frameworks predicated on social inclusion appear attractive. Equally, the promotion of new dispersed governance modes emphasising participation at the local and community levels rather than hierarchical state-instituted policies and program delivery seems essential when these latter have manifestly failed. Furthermore, such forms of dispersed governance would seem to be consistent with Aboriginal calls for self-determination, and to offer an alternative to the current Commonwealth Government policy framework which rejects self-determination, emphasises service delivery through mainstream agencies, and stresses the equality of rights and opportunities for all Australian citizens and their acceptance of mutual responsibilities.

However, challenges are posed for social inclusion policy frameworks by the well-documented maintenance of particular Aboriginal worldviews which may be inimical to certain forms of participation in the wider society, and by evidence that there are many Aboriginal people who, while they seek better access to the goods and services of the wider society, nonetheless have no desire to join it or to share many of its values, lifestyles and locales. This chapter therefore introduces the concept of 'strategic engagement' as a particular dimension of social inclusion which focuses on the agency of Aboriginal people and which encompasses the possibility of diversity and distinctiveness in their worldviews, but which recognises that reducing disadvantage ultimately requires Aboriginal people to negotiate particular forms of engagement with the dominant society.

Since international and Australian research and experience suggests that institutions which have effective and accountable governance are fundamental to addressing Aboriginal disadvantage, and because over the past several decades Aboriginal-controlled organisations have become such an important means by which Aboriginal people themselves advocate their own interests and through which a wide range of services is provided to them, this chapter concentrates on such organisations as a central component of a broader, dispersed Aboriginal community governance, and as a key means through which Aboriginal people engage with the general Australian society.

The chapter first presents an account of Aboriginal organisations as 'intercultural' phenomena, rather than as manifestations of a supposedly autonomous Aboriginal domain. It then situates good governance as a key requirement for addressing Aboriginal disadvantage, and argues that Aboriginal organisations can play important roles in enabling Aboriginal groups and communities to 'strategically engage' with the dominant society. It critically evaluates the notion of 'culturally appropriate' governance before turning to a discussion of accountability as an intercultural construct. In conclusion, it argues that 'social inclusion' as an all-encompassing policy framework is inappropriate if it does not recognise the diversity of worldviews, aspirations and circumstances of Aboriginal people across Australia. It is here that effective, appropriate and accountable Aboriginal organisations play a crucial role, for they can facilitate Aboriginal people's strategic engagement with the institutions and values of the dominant society by providing them with a wider range of options than would be the case if they were dealing directly with government as individuals, and also by providing a vehicle through which their particular position and interests as the Aboriginal people of the nation can be advocated and protected.

Aboriginal people within Australian society

It has become almost a truism that Aboriginal people are overwhelmingly the most socioeconomically disadvantaged group in Australia, characterised by poverty, poor health, low life expectancy, high levels of imprisonment, poor education outcomes and high unemployment, and with relatively high levels of chronic social problems such as alcohol abuse and domestic violence (Altman 2000; Altman & Hunter 2004).

This is particularly (although not solely) the case in rural and remote regions. This significant Aboriginal socioeconomic disadvantage mirrors – and there are many who argue is caused by (see especially RCIADC 1991) – ongoing social and political exclusion which has its origins in the colonial past.

It is of the utmost importance, however, that we do not characterise the situation of Australian Aboriginal people solely in terms of their relative deficits or disadvantages, for to do so ignores not only diversity among Aboriginal people and their circumstances, but also the meanings and values which they themselves give to their lives – including potentially to aspects of them which others might see as aberrant or dysfunctional. Thus, while there can be no doubting the profound impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal societies and the often devastating changes wrought over the past two centuries on people's lives, it must be recognised that through these changes, many Aboriginal groups and individuals have maintained distinctive – albeit transformed – worldviews and practices. And as many who have lived and worked in remote Aboriginal communities could attest, even in conditions of abject poverty and social dislocation, Aboriginal people can demonstrate a tenacious commitment to their way of life, along with extraordinary resilience, humour, zest for life, and artistic and intellectual creativity. The material conditions in which much Aboriginal art is created, to give one instance, would be very confronting to the affluent city dwellers on whose walls it hangs.

'Culture' and disadvantage

Our understandings of the position of Aboriginal people in Australia today, therefore, must not only take account of the legacies of colonisation and dispossession, but also of the consequences of widespread maintenance of characteristic Aboriginal worldviews and practices. Aboriginal people themselves have provided accounts of continuing and distinctive modes of familial life, sociality, mobility and economy, even for many of those living in the interstices of the dominant society (see for example Langford 1988). Ethnographic research too has long demonstrated the existence of Aboriginal values and practices which, while obviously transformations of those of the past, may show strong links to them. For example, Aboriginal 'economic' modes in rural and urban as well as remote settings, while necessarily

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linked to those of the general Australian society and economy, may nonetheless differ from them in such matters as the emphasis on social rather than material forms of capital, a pervasive rejection of and sanctions against individual accumulation (Sansom 1988; Peterson 1993; Schwab 1995; Martin 1995; Macdonald 2000; Sutton 2001), and even an explicit rejection of the economic development ideology of the dominant society (Trigger 1995).

Another instance of continuity within transformation, and one of particular importance when considering the roles, forms and 'culture' of Aboriginal organisations, lies in the continuing dominance of 'localism' in much of Aboriginal political life, particularly in the centrality of kinship as a core structuring principle of social process. Aboriginal localism is characterised by such features as a strong emphasis on individual autonomy, by people according priority to their connections to local or small-scale groupings – especially those such as 'families' defined through kinship (Sutton 1998) – and conversely mistrusting those outside the group. In such systems, there may be only a weak notion of the wider common good, as people's moral and political imperatives lie within far more restricted social groupings. The intensity of connections and shared meanings and values within the group, accentuated by pervasive discrimination and exclusion by the general society, can lead to a form of ethnocentrism in which engagement with the wider society (while objectively an intrinsic fact of everyday life) is devalued and even scorned.

This ethnography suggests that the marginal political, social and economic position of Australian Aboriginal people has arisen not only through the well-documented historical processes of dispossession and exclusion, but also (in part) through the complex interaction between these processes and certain distinctive and persistent Aboriginal values and practices. It has been argued, perhaps most forcefully in recent times by Sutton (2001), that certain widespread Aboriginal values and practices may actually inhibit the kinds of social and economic changes which are arguably required to address disadvantage and exclusion – or at least those forms of it as measured by standard socioeconomic indicators. Sutton focused on such matters as widespread Aboriginal mechanisms for dealing with conflict, including the readiness to use violence, a 'customary externalisation of blame' in which personal responsibility for adverse outcomes is avoided, loyalties to kin taking precedence over a wider sense of

the 'common good', and child-rearing practices demonstrating strong continuities with the past, in which the emphasis on the autonomy of the child sits uneasily with requirements for mandatory school attendance to fit a child for full participation in the general Australian society. While such views have generated considerable controversy, the question is far from a novel one; for example, Elkin (1951), Stanner (1979), Brunton (1993), Martin (1998, 2001), Cowlishaw (1998), Pearson (2000a) and Folds (2001) have all paid attention to similar or related themes, albeit from widely varying perspectives.

If these arguments are accepted, then while Aboriginal socioeconomic disadvantage, widespread social dysfunction, and fragile, conflict-ridden political institutions must be seen as resulting from the legacy of colonisation including ongoing exclusion and discrimination, they may also arise (in part) from the determined maintenance of particular values which may be inimical to the kinds of social and economic outcomes which much government policy aims for. There is always a risk that such arguments will be portrayed as 'blaming the victim', but on the contrary they have the potential to place Aboriginal agency at the forefront of our understandings, to recognise that Aboriginal people continue to bring particular values and practices to bear in attempts to structure their engagement with the dominant society, and to accept that while they are clearly relatively powerless, they are nonetheless far from passive victims.

Distinct 'cultures' or an 'intercultural' field?

A point central to the argument here, however, is that while we can meaningfully delineate distinctive characteristics of the contemporary values and practices of particular Aboriginal groups, they have been produced, reproduced and transformed through a complex process of engagement with those of the dominant society which has established what Merlan (1998) terms an 'intercultural' social field. This process has involved not just the subjugation and exclusion of Aboriginal people; it has also involved Aboriginal people themselves appropriating and incorporating many of the dominant society's forms into their own ways of being. Even who and what Aboriginal people consider themselves to be has been affected by the representations of Aboriginality by others, as Merlan shows. Aboriginal societies and cultures are not bounded entities; nowhere in Australia do (or indeed can) Aboriginal people live in

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self-defining and self-reproducing domains of meaning and practices – rather, they live in complex and contested 'intercultural' worlds. However, while the notion of 'intercultural' implies that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are operating within (more or less) shared domains, they may well of course be doing so from quite distinct positions, as Merlan observes (1998: 233).

This is far from an argument that denies difference. It is crucial to recognise the very real and sometimes confronting sense of dissonance that people may experience in moving from one socio-spatial milieu to another; for example, from affluent suburb and air-conditioned office to Aboriginal fringe camp, from Cape York Aboriginal community to Cairns Base Hospital, from Everleigh Street in Sydney's Redfern to government school classroom, or from Arnhem Land outstation to art exhibition in New York. However, it is to argue against essentialising difference, for the acknowledgment of interconnections between Aboriginal people and others, and for the recognition that these interconnections are not just social, political and economic but also involve mutual contributions to the worlds of symbols, values and practices by which people constitute their identities and, indeed, their differences. The following sections discuss the implications of these arguments for Aboriginal organisations in their roles of facilitating social inclusion.

'Governance' and Aboriginal disadvantage

The concept of 'governance' has considerable national and international currency in the development policy arena among others. 'Governance' and 'capacity-building' or 'capacity development' are seen as crucial precursors to addressing entrenched social and economic disadvantage in the developing world, and for so-called 'fourth world' or Aboriginal peoples within developed, first world, nations (see for example United Nations 2002). In the Australian context, there has been a raft of conference papers, government inquiries, research proposals, and both government and Aboriginal policy initiatives in these areas.[1] At the same time, it must be stated that it is not only Aboriginal capacity which needs to be built – that of government and its agencies is often a major limiting factor in addressing disadvantage and indeed may contribute to it (for example Pearson 2000a; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2003; chapter 8 of this volume).

In research frequently quoted in Australia, the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development asserts that its research demonstrates an unequivocal link between the general well-being and economic development of Native American nations and the existence of mature, politically robust and competent Aboriginal organisations which have a 'cultural match' with their constituencies (Begay et al. 1997; Cornell 2002). As discussed later, in the Australian context, 'cultural match' has commonly been misinterpreted in Australia to mean what is here referred to as 'cultural appropriateness'. The Harvard Project places a strong emphasis on Native American economic development, and this focus is mirrored in much, if not most, of the policy debate around how to address Aboriginal disadvantage in Australia.

Aboriginal intellectual and social policy activist Noel Pearson, for example, argues that the move away from a gammon (false) or 'passive welfare' economy to a 'real' economy is fundamental to addressing both social and economic disadvantage (Pearson 2000a,b). There is of course an extensive national and international literature critiquing a narrow focus on economic development on environmental, social and political grounds, and as discussed previously there is much ethnographic evidence for Aboriginal people maintaining distinctive 'economic' values and practices which may be inimical to full participation in the formal economy. This ethnographic evidence arguably supports policy frameworks which incorporate the recognition of non-market, community economies (including the customary economy) as alternative or supplementary development pathways to formal economic development (Altman 2001; chapter 8 of this volume). On the other hand, Pearson's colleague Richard Ah Mat (2003: 3) has argued that 'the cultural traditions of socially dysfunctional people will not last long in this world – they will soon pass away. Cultural survival therefore makes economic development urgent and necessary'.

Nonetheless, while there are certainly differences between commentators and policy-makers as to the centrality or otherwise of economic development, there would seem to be no doubt that the multiple and inter-related issues confronting Aboriginal people in many areas require multifaceted, interlinked and innovative strategies. Obvious areas for focus include the widespread education deficits, alcohol and substance abuse, and problems of community order including domestic and other forms of

violence. These are clearly not just issues that relate to individuals, but concern the wider contexts within which individual and collective values are produced – and which in turn contribute to those contexts. Furthermore, as argued previously, these contexts can best be understood in 'intercultural' terms, rather than as the engagement between an autonomous Aboriginal domain and the general Australian society.

From this perspective, the notion of governance assumes centrality, for it relates to such matters as collective goal-setting, regulation, decision-making, and social, political and economic ordering. Governance can be seen as encompassing both formal and informal structures and processes through which a group, organisation, community or society conducts and orders its internal affairs as well as its relations with others (Plumptre & Graham 1999). Because governance concerns equally the formal and informal means through which people manage their own affairs and their relations with others, it provides an appropriate and useful tool in the analysis of social and political process and the development of policy in the intercultural contexts of Australian Aboriginal groups. In this chapter, however, I am concerned with a more limited aspect of governance, that concerning Aboriginal organisations in their role of facilitating engagement between Aboriginal people and the wider society, rather than with the ordering within Aboriginal groups and communities themselves.

Pearson, in his proposals for Cape York's Aboriginal communities, has paid particular attention to the deficits of government 'service delivery' paradigms as vehicles for addressing Aboriginal disadvantage, and at a range of levels to issues of Aboriginal governance. In a creative adaptation of 'third-way' political philosophy, he argues for a fundamental reshaping of the structural and political relationships between Aboriginal people and government, in part through a new institutional order, and for power and decision-making to be devolved to both formal and informal institutions (including families) at the regional, community and local levels. Such arrangements should build on existing local and regional organisations and capacities, Pearson (2000a: 65–73) argues, rather than supplanting or competing with them. And it is through these new Aboriginal-controlled institutions that the reciprocity and responsibility necessary to create a 'real' economy are to be implemented. Pearson is thus arguing for a new moral order, not just a new institutional and political framework. He has also called for new forms of Aboriginal leadership, which he

suggests should be a 'pervasive' concept throughout the layers of governance (Pearson 2000a: 51–52, 2001), an instance of what Wolfe (1989) calls 'dispersed governance' (see also Rowse 1992: 88–90).

Pearson has not just focused on reforming institutional and political relationships with the state; a core component of his proposals involve linkages with the private and philanthropic sectors, through Cape York Partnerships. This is the flagship organisation aiming to drive a comprehensive social, political and economic change agenda in Cape York, for example through Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships, whose objective is to be a 'conduit for providing indigenous enterprise bodies with support by "linking up" the necessary resources and expertise' (see <http://www.capeyorkpartnerships.com>). Pearson, who is scathing of much existing academic and bureaucratic thinking and policy prescriptions (Pearson 2003), draws extensively on expertise, creativity and resources from the private and philanthropic sectors as well as on government resources in Cape York Partnerships and its associated policy development and research organisation the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership. The Cape York model shares much with the emerging forms of social governance discussed by Tim Reddel in chapter 10, which are based on local partnerships, networks and collaboration between civil society, the private sector and governments.

The Cape York institutions are also examples of a central point that is often obscured in calls for 'cultural appropriateness' in Aboriginal organisations: if competent Aboriginal institutions are necessary precursors to addressing Aboriginal disadvantage, important questions are nonetheless posed. The well-documented vulnerability of Aboriginal organisations to failure, particularly from destabilising internal politicking, can be exacerbated and reinforced by particular values and practices – such as the intense localism discussed previously – which Aboriginal people bring to bear in their participation in them (Mantziaris & Martin 2000: 271–81). That is, there may be a contradiction between the requirements for effective and accountable organisations on the one hand, and the robustness of informal institutions of the particular Aboriginal group or society (such as loyalty to kin) on the other. The 'capacities' (and thus the values and practices) that may need to be developed or built in order to achieve better governance, accountability, and achieve improved

development and socioeconomic outcomes may potentially derive as much from the cultural repertoire of the dominant society as from that of the disadvantaged Aboriginal groups they serve.

The need for 'strategic engagement'

In this context, the concept of 'strategic engagement' (Martin 2003) has both analytic and policy utility. Strategic engagement is to be understood here as the processes through which Aboriginal individuals and collectivities interact with, contribute to, draw from, and of course potentially reject, values and practices of the dominant Australian society, in a considered and informed manner that provides them with real choices as to where to go and how to get there. Strategic engagement refers to a process, not an outcome. It recognises that Aboriginal people are positioned within an intercultural domain that is constantly transforming, and that their position (as individuals and collectivities) is not fixed, but is influenced by a range of factors including individual proclivity and choice, as well as broader 'structural' factors (Martin 2003: 8). Strategic engagement can be seen as a particular dimension of 'social inclusion' which focuses on the agency of the excluded themselves, which attempts to encompass the possibility of worldviews and practices that entail a degree of autonomy and distinctiveness from those of the dominant society, but which also recognises that addressing marginalisation of necessity requires negotiating forms of engagement with that society.

By using this notion of 'strategic engagement', I am attempting to circumvent what is often a rather sterile public debate conducted in Australia using such loaded terms as 'assimilation', 'cultural maintenance', 'tradition', 'economic independence', 'self-determination' and so forth. Like all terms, of course, 'strategic engagement' is itself far from value-free. Its advantage is that it recognises, first, that Aboriginal people are not living as part of self-producing and reproducing isolates, and that social, economic and cultural transformations are realities for all groups and societies. Second, it encompasses the important principle that the Aboriginal people involved should, within the limits imposed by the values of a democratic and pluralist society, have a substantial degree of control over the terms of this engagement. In other words, 'strategic engagement' recognises that Aboriginal people are more than just a

disadvantaged ethnic group but occupy a particular and unique position in the nation, having been historically displaced in the processes of colonisation. Third, by being 'strategic' I mean that while there will always be consequences for those concerned arising from the terms of the engagement, some of them unintended or adverse, as far as feasible the engagement should be structured so as to minimise the adverse effects and maximise advantage for the Aboriginal people concerned. There is a set of value judgments here of course, implicit but necessary, for who is to determine what an adverse consequence is, and on what ethical and political bases? However, if it is accepted that there is no such thing as an autonomous Aboriginal arena, but rather a contested intercultural field of transforming and transformed practices and values, then it is simply inadequate to leave the construction and evaluation of such judgments solely to the Aboriginal people concerned and a domain of supposedly uniquely Aboriginal values.

In order for the manifest marginalisation and deprivation of many Aboriginal groups and communities to be reduced, Aboriginal people need to engage strategically with the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions of the wider Australian society; disadvantage cannot meaningfully be addressed within social, economic or policy enclaves. At the same time, it must be recognised that many Aboriginal people will choose lifestyles which accord with their own values and priorities, and which (as argued above) may be inimical to achieving socioeconomic equality with the general Australian population. This capacity for strategic engagement is dependent on many factors, but in particular, mechanisms for effective governance, formal and informal, are central.

Aboriginal organisations and strategic engagement

A number of critical concepts have informed the discussion thus far. One is the importance of understanding Aboriginal organisations as intercultural phenomena, as sites of the engagement and transformation of values and practices drawn from both Aboriginal worlds and the general Australian society rather than as institutions within an autonomous Aboriginal domain. Allied to this, I have argued for the significance of the effective governance of Aboriginal organisations as a crucial means of facilitating the process of 'strategic engagement' by Aboriginal people with the general

Australian society. Together, these concepts speak to different perspectives on organisational design, governance and accountability.

Aboriginal organisations as intercultural institutions

One outcome of the unwillingness of the Australian colonial authorities and their successor national, State and Territory governments to recognise Aboriginal groups as possessing inherent sovereign rights is that the policy rubrics of 'self-determination' and (latterly) the more limited 'self-management' have been introduced as muted, and highly fragmented, responses to Aboriginal advocacy for the recognition of more fundamental rights. Under these policies, successive Commonwealth, State and Territory Australian governments have established or used Aboriginal-controlled corporations of various kinds. These have been set up under diverse Commonwealth, State and Territory statutes for purposes ranging from holding land or other assets, delivery of services such as housing and health, legal advocacy and commercial enterprises, and of course until recent moves to abolish it, national political representation and advocacy through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) itself.

As has been argued elsewhere (see for example Tonkinson 1985; Sullivan 1988, 1996; Rowse 1992; Smith 1995; Martin & Finlayson 1996; Mantziaris & Martin 2000), these bodies cannot be seen simply as impositions by government on Aboriginal people, although many of them have indeed been established in the first instance at the initiative of governments and to serve government purposes. They have also come to serve particular Aboriginal ends, typically operate through and mediate distinctive Aboriginal practices, and more generally have become fundamental elements within local, regional and national Aboriginal polities. Aboriginal organisations, however, not only provide focal points for engagement, appraisal, evaluation, contestation, competition, and appropriation among Aboriginal people themselves, but they are also highly significant sites where these values and practices are contested, adapted and transformed through engagement with those drawn from the dominant society. They are quintessentially intercultural institutions, with a form of 'dual incorporation', whereby they are simultaneously legally incorporated under, or established by, statutes of the general Australian law and 'incorporated' into Aboriginal polities

(Mantziaris & Martin 2000: 274). These organisations, of course, while they 'incorporate' Aboriginal practices and values, by their very nature frame and constrain them, and are thus sites of their transformation. They are thus a form of what Merlan (1998: 235–37) terms 'social technology', whichhas WHICH HAS the potential to transform Aboriginal societies in a manner parallel to the role of technological development in the transformation of Western societies.

'Cultural appropriateness'

Aboriginal organisations have simultaneously carried the burden of policy expectations while serving various practical purposes such as service delivery, advocacy, representation and commercial development. Yet they appear to operate with highly variable success, as indicated, for example, by evaluations that continue to point to problematic aspects of their accountability and effectiveness (see Mantziaris & Martin [2000: 280] and successive reports of investigations into the performance of Queensland's Aboriginal Community Councils such as the Queensland Parliamentary Committee of Public Accounts 1991). For some time the key to addressing this was said to be in developing 'culturally appropriate' organisations. But this concept has been largely unexamined and under-theorised, in the Australian context at least. For example, while the final report of the 1996 review of the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act under which some 3000 Indigenous associations are incorporated proposes that cultural appropriateness should be central to organisational accountability and to self-determination (and should be facilitated by a statute reformed around this policy objective), nowhere does the report provide a clear statement of what it actually is (Fingleton 1996).

It should be noted in this regard that the assertion in the Harvard Project, discussed earlier in this chapter, that the 'cultural match' between Aboriginal organisations and their constituencies is one of the key factors underlying successful development in Native American nations (Cornell 2002), has been interpreted in Australia as being equivalent to support for 'cultural appropriateness' as commonly understood here. But it is clear that this is not the case; rather, what is being argued for, on the basis of the project's case studies, is that organisational structures and processes should take account of, and indeed if necessary challenge, the political values of the relevant

Aboriginal group, and not necessarily be established solely in accordance with those values (see Dodson & Smith 2003: 19).

The term has currency in Australia, it would appear, because it resonates with an unexamined view that there is an autonomous (and impenetrable) domain of Aboriginal values and practices and an arena of operations of these organisations which are independent of the legal, political, and economic fields in which they are necessarily situated. Here, it is important to make a distinction between governance of the Aboriginal corporation itself, and that of the services it provides. It is clear that the delivery of services to Aboriginal people, particularly in areas such as health, must take account of their particular beliefs, understandings and priorities. However, if effective governance of the organisation itself is a core component of engaging strategically with the dominant society, then arguably it must draw not only from the values and practices of the Aboriginal people concerned, but also from those of the general Australian society.

Arguments for 'cultural appropriateness' therefore should not displace the overriding need for organisational structures and management processes to facilitate strategic engagement with the general society. Equally, arguments for Aboriginal 'self-determination' should not displace the necessity for competent management. The presence of skilled 'outsiders' along with local Aboriginal people in Aboriginal organisations, whether they be relatively better educated Queensland 'Murris' in Northern Territory organisations or non-Aboriginal people in Native Title Representative Bodies, or health and legal services, is necessary precisely because they can ensure that there is a diversity of perspectives and values brought to bear on an organisation's operations. Effective organisations are robust enough to encompass and engage diversity, competition and even conflict in values. As case studies of two exemplary Aboriginal organisations demonstrate (Finlayson 2004), supporting diversity is not just good general management practice; it is essential to strategic engagement.

These were two very different organisations, the Wangka Maya Pilbara Language Centre in Western Australia, and the Durri Aboriginal Medical Service in Kempsey, New South Wales. Yet there were a number of factors common to both organisations

which underlay their ongoing success. Both organisations were outward looking, and many of their achievements could be attributed to factors which they shared with successful non-Aboriginal organisations. They both paid careful attention to their stakeholders, customers and clients, and ensured that they provided accountable and transparent services to all. Both organisations had strong and effective leadership and management, and ensured that diversity among their clientele and their staff was valued; while each of the organisations was clearly and unambiguously Aboriginal-controlled and focused, they were marked by productive and supportive working relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff, and Durri even provided medical services to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients in its region.

Accountability as an intercultural construct

The accountability of Aboriginal organisations, particularly ATSIC itself, has had considerable attention over recent years. Questions of the effectiveness, legitimacy, representativeness and accountability of Aboriginal organisations are often contested in terms of the differing values which Aboriginal and other people may bring to bear in their assessments of how organisations should function. In the case of accountability, there are often quite incompatible demands on personnel in such organisations to discharge their obligations to the wider system (usually framed in terms of financial accountability, or equity of access to resources and services), and those within Aboriginal groups and communities (such as the system of relationships and obligations operating through kinship).

The focus in the media and in much public and policy-related debate has been on external accountability, defined primarily in terms of its financial dimensions. Broadly speaking, the argument is that where Aboriginal organisations are publicly funded, the resources should be used for the purposes for which they were intended, and outcomes should be demonstrated. Expectations of external financial accountability are arguably entirely legitimate, and a focus on outcomes is an imperative given the demonstrated socioeconomic disadvantage suffered by so many Aboriginal people. There has been less public focus, however, on the two dimensions of internal accountability: the accountability of organisations to their memberships and that to their constituencies or clients.

A point of some generality and one that has been made by others (Queensland Parliamentary Committee of Public Accounts 1991: 31–35; Martin and Finlayson 1996) is that internal and external accountability are not two incommensurate forms, but in fact are necessarily linked. This was borne out by case studies undertaken for the first review of the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act (Fingleton 1996), which indicated that organisations that were accountable to their memberships and constituencies were more likely to also be accountable to funding bodies and other external stakeholders. This and other research (for example Martin & Finlayson 1996; Finlayson 2004) suggests that those Aboriginal organisations which encompass diversity (including, where appropriate, in their representative structures), have instituted procedures for maximising participation of and reporting back to their constituencies, and work to maximise equity in their service delivery, are more likely to result in both effective outcomes and the accountable use of funds. Conversely, those which have deficient or virtually non-existent mechanisms to ensure such principles are more likely to demonstrate poor financial accountability.

But there is often a tension between principles drawn from the wider sociopolitical sphere, such as broadly based equity and access to services and resources, and imperatives typically operating within Aboriginal groups and communities. Aboriginal organisational politics is frequently characterised by a high degree of factionalism or localism, in which the political, social and economic imperatives lie within various forms of local group rather than some broader aggregate or 'community'; by a focus on negotiating internal relationships rather than necessarily on demonstrable outcomes; by particular styles of political process and decision-making which emphasise the autonomy of the participants and their resistance to domination by others; and by notions of 'representativeness' which are not based on equal rights to participate in the political process but on having or asserting particular culturally constructed interests and rights to speak on specific issues. As outlined earlier, a concept of the 'common good', which underpins notions such as equity of access to resources and services, may not operate effectively past the limits of particular family and other such local groupings. In such circumstances, the delivery of equitable and accountable services may be rendered problematic, unless organisational structures and processes can take account of and incorporate the

realities of localism, while still enabling effective and accountable services to the broader Aboriginal constituency.

This tension then poses a fundamental challenge, both to Aboriginal organisations and indeed to policy-makers. It may not be capable of 'resolution' in any easy sense, but incorporating mechanisms to enhance the internal accountability of Aboriginal organisations may allow localism to be more productively dealt with. The most effective organisations appear to be those that have made creative use of principles drawn from both domains in establishing structures and processes that seek to maximise internal accountability: that is, accountability must be understood and implemented as an essentially intercultural construct.

Conclusions

This chapter has argued that Aboriginal people's social exclusion has not arisen solely through dispossession and exclusion, but also (at least in part) through a complex interaction between these historical processes and particular persisting Aboriginal values and practices. The maintenance of distinctive worldviews poses challenges for social inclusion policy frameworks, if there is an implicit assumption that inclusion is a goal shared by those hitherto excluded groups or communities. It is important to recognise the diversity of Aboriginal Australians, but the evidence indicates that there are many who, while seeking better access to goods and services provided by the wider society, nonetheless have no desire to join it, or to share aspects of its values, lifestyles and locales. That is, social exclusion is a complex process to which the excluded may, unwittingly or not, contribute.

Furthermore, for understandable reasons Aboriginal people are very alert to policy changes which might be construed as a return to the period of 'assimilation' under which they were expected to merge with, and ultimately become indistinguishable from, the general Australian population. From this perspective, a policy framework of social inclusion may run the risk of being interpreted as neo-assimilation. The philosophical (and political) underpinnings of the new policy frameworks discussed in this book of course are entirely antithetical to those underlying the state-instituted assimilation policies, but nonetheless the challenge is to ensure that social inclusion

also encompasses the recognition of diversity. Ultimately, however, there is always the possibility that health, educational, income and other socioeconomic indicators for particular Aboriginal groups or communities may suggest continuing discrimination and exclusion by the dominant society, whereas in fact they may be also be (in part) the entailments of preferred lifestyles. A difficult philosophical, ethical and political question here is to what extent diversity can be accepted or even encouraged in a pluralist society when it involves very significant disparities in socioeconomic status.

Discussion in this chapter has been framed around a particular form of social inclusion, 'strategic engagement', which recognises the diversity within and among Aboriginal groups and communities, and in particular recognises that people may be deeply committed to ways of life which are inimical to inclusion in the dominant society, and indeed may have no wish to join it. It is in this context that effective, appropriate and accountable Aboriginal organisations have a crucial role to play, for it is such organisations that can assist Aboriginal people to engage more strategically with the dominant society using a wider range of options over which they can exercise a degree of control than if they were dealing directly as individuals with government, and to achieve ends which are in keeping with their own aspirations. Effective and accountable Aboriginal organisations can also provide a vehicle through which the particular position of their members and constituents as the Aboriginal people of the nation can be advocated and protected. The argument here therefore resonates with that of Susan Goodwin in chapter 5, who notes that mainstream formulations of social inclusion have failed to recognise the particular experiences and interests of disadvantaged groups, and argues for a 'politics of presence' of the disadvantaged and disenfranchised in decision-making institutions.

A challenge then is to develop distinctively Aboriginal organisations that facilitate effective engagement with the dominant society rather than limiting it, as a vehicle to address Aboriginal disadvantage, including political disadvantage. From this perspective, appropriate and effective organisations will not draw their structures, operating principles, and goals solely from a supposedly autonomous Aboriginal domain, but also from that of the general Australian system. While they must necessarily take account of specific values and practices of the Aboriginal people who participate in them or whom they serve, to be truly 'culturally appropriate' and

accountable they may also have to directly engage, and even on occasion challenge and circumvent, these values and practices.

Note

[1] See for example proceedings of the Aboriginal governance conference organised by Reconciliation Australia and held in Canberra, 3–4 April 2002, at <http://www.reconciliation.org/graphics/info/publications>, and the 2003inquiry into capacity building in Aboriginal communities conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, see <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia/Aboriginalcommuniities/inquinde.htm >.

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