

Why the 'new direction' in Federal Indigenous affairs policy is as likely to 'fail' as the old directions

David F. Martin¹

1. Fellow, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra; e-mail: david.martin@anu.edu.au

This is an edited transcript of a seminar delivered at CAEPR May 10th, 2006, prepared to supplement the streaming audio file available on from the CAEPR web site at <http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/events.php#martin>. While this is a seminar transcript and not a research publication, the key literature referred to in the discussion is listed at the end of these notes.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This is not a conventional CAEPR staff-member seminar, in the sense that today's presentation is consciously constructed in somewhat polemical terms, and is directed as much to a generalist audience as it is to a specialist one. It takes a clear and therefore necessarily political position with regard to current directions in Aboriginal affairs policy formulation and implementation, and I will hasten to add that the views expressed at this seminar are absolutely mine and are not to be associated with either CAEPR as an institution or my colleagues working here. CAEPR I think rightly prides itself on its robust independence, not just vis-a-vis the external world but also internally. Neither is this seminar based on a single piece of research, but rather is drawn from the intertwining of my personal life and interaction with the Aboriginal world over the past 30 years and more, as well as my research both as a consultant and a part-time CAEPR staff member over the past decade.

It has been prompted by my deep unease at some of the political and policy discourse on Aboriginal issues, not only within government but also in the new 'industry' and political orthodoxy which has sprung up around Aboriginal affairs and replaced the old one. My unease does not arise because there is—supposedly—a 'new' direction in Aboriginal affairs; I am firmly of the view that maintenance of the status quo in significant parts of the Aboriginal world is indefensible. Just leaving policy settings as they are would be a major driver of transformation in Aboriginal societies, much of it clearly quite devastating—as shown for example by John Taylor's demographic and socio-economic forecasting studies at the national and a number of regional levels.

Rather, my unease is because the debate is conducted with such a vitriolic and unnecessary demonisation of what has gone before and of those who are held to have been associated with it; with a complete disregard for what I would see as the lessons of history in Aboriginal affairs; and most importantly with an all too common disregard for the diverse views, values, and aspirations of the Aboriginal people at whom the new policy apparatus and its ideological underpinnings are directed.

Except when the latest instance of horrific dysfunctionality in the Aboriginal world is brought forward to illustrate the need for profound change, or when the views of the new Aboriginal political elite are given prominence in the legitimating discourse around proposed policy directions, Aboriginal people themselves are conspicuously absent

from the discussion, certainly in terms of the diversity of world views, values, and aspirations which they themselves bring to bear on their engagement with the new policy frameworks and the wider society more generally. They are essentially empty vessels, if rather chipped and cracked ones, into which the new array of more socially functional values is to be poured.

Let me say here that this implicit denial of Aboriginal agency does not cause me unease so much for political or ethical reasons, although I think that the misconstruing of elements of the older policy frameworks (such as outstation development) in terms of a failed socialist experiment is an instance of unpardonable and wilful ignorance. I had in mind here my own introduction to the Aboriginal world in western Cape York, where as a young mid-twenties man who was a long way from being a socialist, I was actually co-opted into the Aboriginal project—a distinctively Wik project—of re-establishing life on traditional homelands south of Aurukun away from the centralised settlement. In other words, contrary to the received wisdom of the new orthodoxy, moves such as those to settle outstations were not part of a plan of a misguided socialist elite but rather responses to deeply embedded Aboriginal values, and indeed deeply embedded Aboriginal agency. I think this is a really crucial point.

Rather, the avoidance of any meaningful consideration in public and policy debates of the demonstrable fact that many Aboriginal people bring a distinctive repertoire of values, world views and practices to their engagement with the general Australian society, I suggest, poses a major risk to the necessary processes of sustainable social, economic and cultural transformations in Aboriginal societies—and indeed significant change in the way in which government promotes and supports such transformations. For, unless Aboriginal people themselves are actively involved in and ultimately committed to such changes, history shows us that they will be resisted. The new Aboriginal affairs policy framework will run the risk that like the endeavours of the missionaries at Jigalong in the far Western Desert documented by anthropologist Robert Tonkinson: it will end as another failed crusade.

My focus here is not so much on the new policy architecture itself, aspects of which coincidentally and usefully have been examined in the three preceding CAEPR seminars by Jon Altman with regard to outstation policy, an evaluation of the Shepparton COAG trial by Paul Briggs and Tony Cutcliffe, and a critical examination by Patrick Sullivan of accountability in whole-of-government policy frameworks for Indigenous affairs. Rather, the new architecture forms a background against which I look at some of the features of the Aboriginal world at whom the new policies are directed.

My aim in this seminar then is not to present the results of a concluded piece of research, but rather to put out ideas for debate, here and afterwards, hopefully robust and productive.

A note here too; I will use 'Aboriginal' rather than 'Indigenous' in this presentation, because in the Australian context the latter is inclusive of Torres Strait Islanders, and I do not claim that certain widespread features of mainland Aboriginal societies are shared with Torres Strait Islander people.

THE TRIP TO THE REGIONAL TOWN

I want to start with a vignette, based on an actual case, which poses some of the questions I will be addressing during the course of the seminar.

John, his wife Cynthia, her sister Cathy, and one of her sons Andrew had flown out to the regional town (let's call it Tinseltown) in order for John to purchase a four-wheel-drive from the dealer there. Another one of Cathy's sons, Mark, lived and worked in Tinseltown. Cynthia had received a significant sum of money in victim-of-crime compensation, and after four one-way air tickets had been purchased John had of the order of \$10,000 to buy a vehicle. They had not arranged any accommodation, and had come down with only enough money to actually purchase the vehicle John wanted. They put considerable moral pressure on Mark to stay in

his flat, which he shared with a non-Aboriginal workmate. However, the flat was small and Mark was unwilling to put up with the ramifications of having four of his family members stay there on what could turn out to be an indefinite visit. Short of cash himself, Mark rang a non-Aboriginal relation who had a credit card and asked if she would book two nights' accommodation and meals at a motel in Tinseltown, arranging to pay the money back when he was paid the following week.

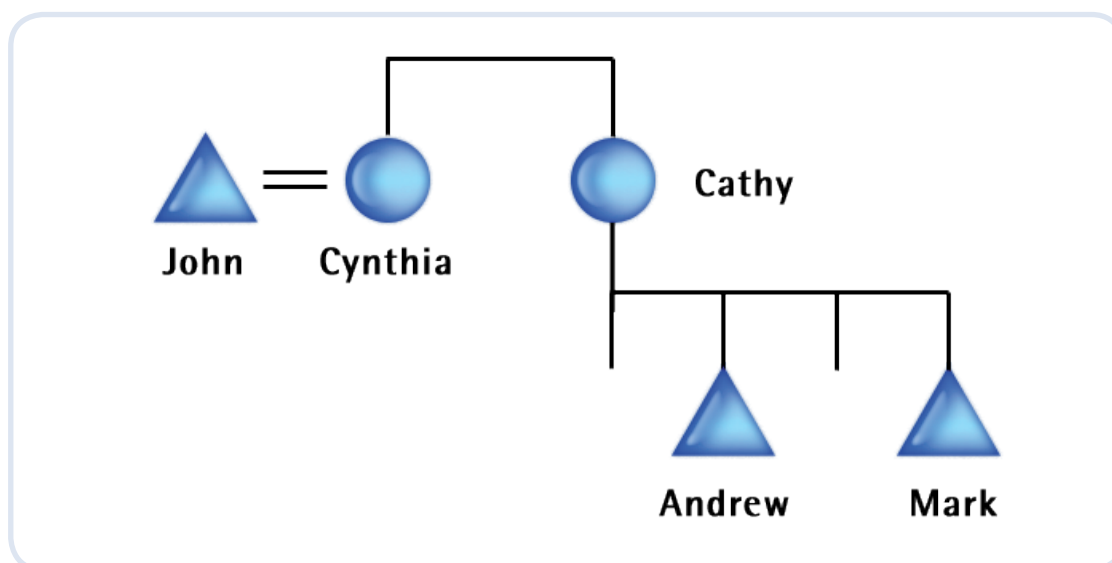
John successfully purchased the four-wheel-drive the next day, but by the time it had been registered and so forth it was late in the afternoon and they elected to leave the following morning for the long drive back to their home community. Next morning however, Cynthia and Cathy wanted to go into Tinseltown and do some shopping. Around midday, Mark received a telephone call from his mother, to say that the others had apparently left Tinseltown to drive back and had abandoned her there, and she had nowhere to stay and no money. Mark duly rang his non-Aboriginal relation again and asked for a further motel booking to be made for his mother to stay another night in the motel, again promising to pay her back the following week. Mark then spent some time on the phone from his workplace ringing the community to arrange for the family members there to collectively organise deductions from their CDEP pays in order to purchase a ticket for his mother to return by air, now the only option for her to get back.

Fig. 1. depicts the family relationships described above.

How are we to explain this event? There are a number of features and questions of relevance to my argument in this paper;

- Does it illustrate an inability to deal with money, or a different way of dealing with it?
- Does it illustrate dysfunctionality, irresponsibility and the 'passive welfare' mentality of which Noel Pearson writes? Or perhaps a particular form of instrumentality? Or both?
- Certainly, it shows a willingness to put up with discomfort and uncertainty; people were perfectly prepared to sleep rough and go without food if they were not successfully able to pressure kin for resources;
- It also demonstrates a high degree of opportunism; and
- It arguably shows a calculated dependency expressed through relations of kinship, actual and fictive.

Fig. 1. Family Relationships in the Tinseltown example.



THE RELEVANCE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS TO THE POLICY DEBATE

Altman and Rowse have noted a move from anthropology to economics as the primary discipline influencing Aboriginal affairs policy development. At the heart of anthropology is the notion of 'culture' which while in some senses elusive and contested as an analytical term foregrounds the meanings which people themselves attribute to social life and practices, and the more or less systematic character of those meanings and practices. The study of culture in what we might call 'classical' anthropological practice is founded on the methodology of participant observation in which the anthropologist immerses him or herself in the day-to-day life of the group or society with whom they are working—whether they be an urban or a remote Aboriginal group, or indeed a university department or a government agency.

At the heart of anthropological accounts therefore are such matters as social constructions of values, meanings and emotions, the relationship between individuals and wider groups including the social construction of identity, principles underlying social process, attention to the language or languages people use to describe social process as a powerful investigative tool, processes of socialisation (for example in child rearing), religious beliefs and practices, politics power and status and, social structures and institutions (for example of, those of kinship in many societies), and social and cultural reproduction.

While originating in the study of remote and supposedly distinct societies at the edge of the colonial frontier a century and a half ago, anthropology has increasingly turned its attention to the engagement or articulation between such peoples and the societies which encapsulate them, not least of all in the contemporary context of globalisation. In particular, anthropology enables us to recognise that what we understand as 'the economy' does not lie outside culture, but indeed is an intrinsic aspect of culture. I will come back to this important point later in this seminar. Such matters, I suggest, lie at the absolute heart of how to understand the engagement of Aboriginal people with the dominant Australian society, how we and they might envisage the future of such engagement, and the principles which might inform policies so as to better structure this engagement such that the manifest problems confronting Aboriginal people might possibly be better addressed.

THE 'SUBSTRATE' ON WHICH ABORIGINAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION IS FOCUSED

A seminar such as this one is not the occasion to present a comprehensive analysis of Aboriginal societies. There has been considerable work undertaken on issues relevant to the topic of this seminar by researchers such as Macdonald, Trigger, Sutton, Austin Broos, Peterson and many others. I would particularly recommend to those who have not read it the collection of papers in a recent volume *Culture, Economy and Governance in Aboriginal Australia*, (editors Austin Broos and Macdonald) published by Sydney University Press. In a chapter in this volume, David Trigger summarises the literature in relation to how we are to understand the Aboriginal economy and the relationship between economy and culture in terms of pervasive Aboriginal values such as:

- a strong ethos of egalitarianism, and an associated pressure to conform to norms of equality;
- pursuit of family and local group loyalties against notions of the 'common good';
(which poses the question as to why this might be antithetical to engagement with the market);
- demand sharing as a mechanism working against material accumulation; and
- an underlying ideological commitment to continuity with the past which militates against the acceptance of change.

However, a list as presented here does not capture the true import and embeddedness of such values. For example, just reflecting on this fundamental structure of kinship in so much of Aboriginal Australia, that is of social relations defined through descent and kinship, it plays a fundamentally different role to what it does in 'mainstream' Australian society, where kinship and family tend to be in the private domain. In Aboriginal Australia, typically, kinship provides a fundamental structure not only to private relations but also in economic and social and political relations. 'Families' in much of Aboriginal Australia constitute core political structures. Kinship provides a foundational component of personal identity, and there is an interesting nexus between an individual and their relational identity through kinship which I'll discuss shortly. Kinship also provides a certain structure to ethical frameworks; for example, the common feature of a lack of a notion of the wider common good past local group and family boundaries

Of particular insight here is Nicolas Peterson's discussion of the Aboriginal 'moral economy' in the volume I mentioned earlier. Peterson characterises the activities involved in acquiring a livelihood in the pre-colonial situation as being embedded in kinship and/or group relations. Production was nearly always intimately linked with consumption, even indeed before the activity took place, through obligations and commitments established through the kinship system. This he notes can be conceptualised as the kinship mode of production.

After Aboriginal people in remote Australia and more generally entered the cash economy from the late 1960s, primarily through the welfare system, the cultural structuring of the Aboriginal economy involved an almost exclusive focus, Peterson argues, on circulation and consumption, rather than also on production. He argues that with circulation and consumption as the central features of economic activity, their focus turned to kinship, reciprocity and sharing practices. In this context, he suggests that the notion of 'moral economy' is useful to understand what is going on. By moral economy, he is meaning the allocation of resources to the reproduction of social relations at the cost of profit maximisation and obvious immediate personal benefit. The moral economy is characterised by the centrality and persistence of sharing. It is worth quoting Peterson at length here:

Sharing is inseparable from the division of labour, the minimisation of risk and the managing of uncertainty, it is also at the heart of the production and reproduction of social relations, egalitarianism and the self. There are four elements to the Indigenous domestic moral economy. It is characterised by a universal system of kin classification that requires a flow of goods and services to produce and reproduce social relationships. The circulation of goods takes place within the framework of an ethic of generosity, informed by the social pragmatics of demand sharing, with open refusal rare, since it is seen as a rejection of relatedness. In such social contexts personhood is constituted through relatedness while at the same time it is associated with an egalitarian autonomy.

'DYSFUNCTION' AND 'CULTURE'

Much representation of the situation in Aboriginal society, particularly in remote areas, is couched in deficit terms, with communities being characterised by dysfunction evidenced by such phenomena as:

- poor and sometimes abysmal health;
- large scale alcohol, drug and volatile substance abuse;
- high levels of violence including homicide;
- neglect and even abuse of children; and
- for many young people an aimless existence characterised by bursts of frenetic activity around often socially destructive behaviours.

These are part of the realities of all too many Aboriginal lives, and those who subscribed to the earlier orthodoxy so derided by advocates of the current one are in my view indeed often guilty as charged of failing to engage appropriately with such realities. However, these features of many Aboriginal communities do not comprise the full extent of social reality, but one (albeit often dominant) component of it. Passion, humour, vitality, knowledge, abilities, creativity, aspirations ... these are not only to be found in mainstream and 'functional' Australia, but also are there within 'dysfunctional' Aboriginal communities. These features coexist, a fact which is not understood or is ignored by both the problem deflaters and those who characterise Aboriginal Australia solely in terms of its inherent dysfunction. And what the current politically correct orthodoxy ignores, crucially, is that it is precisely such attributes as passion, creativity, and knowledge which have to be built on in a process of sustainable change. I will return to this point.

I want to refer briefly here to the relationship between what can in certain circumstances be accurately construed as 'social dysfunction' on the one hand and 'culture' on the other. I suggest that dysfunction and culture (in the anthropological sense of shared systems of meanings and practices of a group or society) are related in complex ways, but that it is important for policy purposes to attempt at least to separate them out. This can be illustrated by considering the questions of alcohol abuse and violence in parts of Aboriginal Australia, and I have in mind here the work by scholars such as Maggie Brady on alcohol and petrol sniffing, Marcia Langton on violence, Gaynor Macdonald, myself in my doctoral thesis and other studies, and very many others. Without going too far into these, what these studies show is that while there may well indeed be what the sociologists term 'unintended consequences'—and indeed highly detrimental consequences—of such practices, nonetheless in that distinctively human way Aboriginal people give meaning to these practices. In order to understand and ultimately address them, those culturally constructed meanings need to be understood by policy makers.

At the same time, there is little doubt that in many communities where there is licit and/or illicit access to alcohol, the extraordinary levels of consumption amongst the proportion of the population who do drink leads to massive social problems. I myself have observed this in Aurukun over the more than 30 years that I have had contact with and lived in that community. It was one of the topics of my doctoral thesis, which was concerned to elucidate the meanings which people themselves gave to drinking, its associated violence, and other such practices. That is, the high levels of alcohol consumption clearly had a whole range of social and economic implications, amongst which were an ongoing spiralling down of community life which became increasingly fractured and fractious—dysfunctional in a word. These phenomena, so I argued, could not be understood without taking into account people's own understandings of them, in the distinctive cultural framework through which Wik people engage with and interpret their world.

The acceptance of dysfunction as a consequence of such practices together with an understanding of the distinctive values which (in this case) Wik people bring to their world including those practices, was factored into policy and legislative development which pioneered the way for the later introduction of Alcohol Management Plans across many communities in Queensland. Briefly, recognising the reality of increasing alcohol-related problems in Aurukun with the opening of a beer canteen run by the Council and the need for these problems to be addressed, but also recognising aspects of Wik cultural values such as those around violence and alcohol consumption, and the autonomy of the individual led to the development of specific legislation which had as its aim the control of the supply and consumption of alcohol in public places—Council area, roads, airport and so forth—but allowed for the distinctively Wik emphasis on individual autonomy, as well as the priority given to the authority of senior people on traditional lands to be recognised in such a way that declarations of restrictions on the consumption of alcohol could not simply be imposed on such areas as outstations or people's homes in Aurukun, but had to be initiated by the relevant person—a householder, or a set of senior people from an outstation for example.

In other words, the recognition of dysfunction, massive alcohol problems, together with the recognition of the connections between culturally-based values and practices was brought together in legislation which sought to reduce alcohol consumption but which nonetheless took account of some of the same values which indeed informed the alcohol related problems.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION?

What does this emphasis on the agency of Aboriginal people mean for the development of Aboriginal affairs policies? The first area I want to look at is the use of market-mechanisms in Aboriginal social policy reform. Of course, this applies to far more than just Aboriginal affairs.

USE OF THE MARKET IN (ABORIGINAL) SOCIAL POLICY REFORM

I am not wanting here to give a comprehensive analysis of the use of market-based mechanisms in social policy, and neither am I equipped to do so, but I do want to draw out some themes relevant to my arguments here.

First, there is a clear morally reformative character to this new order, both from politicians and public commentators who provide the ideological justification for the new policy framework. In no small part, the justification for this new order is established by constructing the current state of Aboriginal Australia (especially but not only in remote regions) in terms of its inherent dysfunctionality.

In parenthesis, as I have stated previously, in no way should the position I am arguing for in this seminar be characterised as maintenance of the status quo, or as one of 'problem deflation'. The need for and indeed inevitability of change, including cultural change, and assisting communities in dealing with widespread social malaise is transparently obvious. However, by characterising the Aboriginal situation largely in terms of its manifest dysfunctional aspects, the *political* case is being established not only for addressing dysfunction, but also for ignoring other aspects of people's lives, values, aspirations, and so forth that we could place under the rubric of 'culture'. The call, that is, involves thoroughgoing economic assimilation.

One example of this moral character to policy pronouncements is provided by Noel Pearson with his influential call for the fundamental necessity of Aboriginal engagement with what he terms the 'real' economy, which is not constructed in neoclassical models of rational economic man and so forth, but in quintessentially *moral* terms. A real economy, Pearson tells us, involves a demand for both social and economic reciprocity. Both the traditional subsistence economy and the contemporary market one are in Pearson's view 'real' economies and are thus, we may surmise, 'moral' economies (although not moral economies in the way in which Nicolas Peterson has used the term as discussed previously).

Second, and directly related to the previous point, the morally reformative nature of work itself is stressed; work is not just about production, or indeed about wages, but about making your way in the world as an independent and self-sufficient actor. As I noted in a seminar last year, there are suggestive parallels with policies towards Romany (gypsies) in Hungary in the latter years of the socialist era; the state ideology explicitly stressed the morally beneficial character of work. Wage labour would lead to self-respect, would provide values which would be transferred to other aspects of Roma people's lives, and the engagement in productive labour would educate Roma into the value of work and remove them from their attachment to carefree consumption.

Third, in my view in the developing government policy framework there is an increasingly strong focus on the moral reformation of the individual, abstracted from his or her social and cultural nexus, as opposed to an earlier focus on the Aboriginal group or community. One illustration of this move can be seen in the

rejection of policies framed around self-determination and other such collective rights-based frameworks in place of those which emphasise human capital development and personal change for the individual. This emphasis is consistent with market-based frameworks and markets, based in part on a mobile labour with portable skills, willing to move to where the work is. The epitome of this of course is the fly-in fly-out mining operations in many of the regions where Aboriginal people comprise a substantial proportion of the population.

Finally, the use of terms such as 'choice' and 'incentives' are also related to market-based social policy frameworks. Much of the support for the new policies is predicated on the implicit assumption that Indigenous people will naturally, given the opportunity, choose lifestyles and adopt associated values which correlate with economic integration, or that if they don't, a carrot and stick approach can be used to achieve this. This assumption is well illustrated in a quote from development economist Helen Hughes, in a letter to the editor of *Quadrant Magazine*:

We argued (Hughes and Warin 2005) that because there are no clear and simple individual property rights in land (including long-term, 99 year leases), there are no leafy Aboriginal suburbs and no successful land-based businesses.

However, incentives almost by definition are not culture or value free. The incentives which presumably drive many if not most of us in this room to work in the ways and to the extent that we do—pride in the inherent worth of what we are doing, material comfort, financial security and autonomy as individuals or family units, paying off the family home, supporting our children through education as a valued goal in itself and so forth—cannot be assumed to apply equally across cultures. In particular, it cannot be assumed that such incentives apply amongst at least a substantial proportion of Aboriginal people, including but not limited to those living in remote and perhaps more traditionally orientated communities.

I think I can safely say that for a significant number (although certainly far from all) of the Aboriginal people with whom I have worked and lived over the past three decades, the possibility of living in a leafy suburb would provide little if any incentive to change economic behaviour. In fact, I have observed the contrary; living in such a suburb for just a few months has led to what I interpreted as quite deep psychological distress and alienation in a particular person of whom I am thinking. For many people, moving permanently away from kin and country is an almost impossibly confronting notion, and potentially higher material wealth provides little incentive at all if it involves breaking the connection with kin. Here we see the utility of the notion of the 'moral economy' with its embedding in more than just relations of production, exchange and so forth.

Furthermore, while even in the remotest of communities and outstations Aboriginal people will typically assiduously seek the means to obtain the use of valued consumer items (guns, four-wheel-drive vehicles and so forth), the search for predictability, security and material goods and comfort which drives so many of us in our everyday lives is not a part of those Aboriginal people's psychological and social repertoires. As the vignette with which I started this seminar illustrates, in fact people are typically prepared to tolerate what we might see as a high level of discomfort and unpredictability in order to seek alternative valued ends.

This is not to say that this is the case across Aboriginal Australia, for to do so would be to ignore its great diversity and to essentialise Aboriginal people. There is a very interesting paper in this regard by Nicolas Peterson and John Taylor about some of the processes underway in western New South Wales, they surmise on the basis of data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. There is some evidence of moves by Aboriginal people away from centres such as Walgett and Bourke to centres like Broken Hill and Cobar, to allow connections to kin to be maintained (although in a more attenuated fashion), but away from the omnipresent pressure of demand sharing and so forth—away that is from the force of the moral economy.

THE ROLE OF ABORIGINAL ORGANISATIONS IN SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Until the Howard government came to power, a primary rationale for the existence of, and government support for, Aboriginal organisations had been in terms of their expression of self-determination of Aboriginal people. This continues to be a rationale strongly voiced by many Aboriginal people, but is notably absent from the Howard government's political lexicon. I would argue for another rationale, which recognises both the reality of and the need for Aboriginal sociocultural transformation and the necessity for Aboriginal people to be actively involved in and not simply passively acquiescing to (or resisting) such transformation.

I've suggested earlier that a core focus of the new policy directions in Aboriginal affairs (and in social policy more broadly) has been on the individual, consistent with market-based approaches. In the new framework, as I read it, some account is taken of engagement with Aboriginal organisations. For example, it's envisaged that regionally based organisations will have an active role in negotiating Regional Participation Agreements (RPAs). Here though it is not organisations like the now-abolished ATSIC Regional Councils, regional organisations which have emerged or are capable of taking on a negotiating role. As I understand it though, such organisations will not be government sponsored or created.

Also, particularly in the health area, perhaps in part because of the role of the States in health service delivery, there is still considerable reliance on Aboriginal-controlled organisations to deliver health services. But, in many areas (e.g. legal aid provision) the market principle of partial or full contestability is being introduced as a mechanism designed, it is stated, to improve service delivery effectiveness and efficiency. There is the very real possibility that much service delivery currently provided through Aboriginal-controlled organisations will end up being undertaken by non-Aboriginal agencies, both private sector and NGOs like Mission Australia.

I think however that what can be read as a fairly systematic program of dismantling of institutional Aboriginal Australia, both directly (as in the case of ATSIC itself) and indirectly (through the failure of many Aboriginal organisations to be competitive in the new policy frameworks) misses an extremely important role of Aboriginal organisations, and that is as key sites of cultural brokerage and transformation in the intercultural field in which they are situated. I have in mind here the work of people like Patrick Sullivan, Julie Finlayson, Tim Rowse and a range of others including myself, on the crucial role of Aboriginal organisations as mediating and transforming institutions. At their best, such organisations are key intermediaries and facilitators in the ongoing processes of cultural change. For example, and a number of these are drawn from work currently being undertaken by Julie Finlayson at AIATSIS under a project supported by Australian Collaborations;

- Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, which has a highly innovative way of integrating Koori culture with the requirements of mainstream funding agencies for accountability;
- Bama Ngappi Ngappi Aboriginal Corporation's CDEP work, based in the Cairns region, which is focused very much on market outcomes which has some highly innovative ways of seeing the opportunities lying within the quite constraining DEWR program guidelines for CDEP funding;
- Bangala CDEP in Port Augusta, which for quite a long time has had a very creative way of running a number of streams for CDEP workers which allow for transitions from community-based work to full on-the-job training and indeed commercial operations.
- Aboriginal Medical Services such as those at Hedland in the Pilbara and Kempsey in northern New South Wales; the latter so successful that it has become a preferred employer for a number of non-Aboriginal health workers and doctors.

My key argument here is that support of effective and creatively managed organisations by government, NGOs and the philanthropic sector is a crucially important component of enabling a process of sociocultural change in which Aboriginal people themselves actively participate. Their support, in my opinion, is a crucial addition to market-based policy frameworks focussed largely on the individual.

TO WHAT EXTENT SHOULD DIVERSITY BE SUPPORTED?

I just want to make a quick observation, and perhaps we can discuss it later that disadvantage in its conventional usage is not to be construed as the same as dysfunction. We all I am sure could think of economically disadvantaged people, and not just Indigenous people, whose lives and communities are far from dysfunctional. But there are arguments (to which I broadly subscribe) that in complex ways culture and disadvantage can be linked. I have in mind here, for example, work by Peter Sutton in which he talks about the cultural underpinnings of disadvantage; the complex manner in which particular and distinctive Aboriginal ways of living and acting in the world can actually reinforce socioeconomic marginality or indeed health status. This is not to deny that there are other—and highly significant—structural features of disadvantage whose locus lies not within Aboriginal societies themselves but within the dominant one. I have in mind here such factors as active discrimination and exclusion, and the lack of provision of adequate services by governments in education, health, housing and other crucial areas of social infrastructure.

The unavoidable question that will continue to confront the nation is the extent to which diversity can and should be supported by the state, not only where it may offend mainstream middle-class sensibilities, but also where it demonstrably results in the perpetuation of certain forms of socioeconomic disadvantage. I suggest that on both pragmatic and ethical grounds, relative socioeconomic disadvantage has to be accepted as an appropriate policy outcome where it reflects choices (explicit or implicit) that Aboriginal people themselves are making about such matters as region of residence and issues of cultural and lifestyle preferences. However, this will require difficult political, analytical and ethical judgments to be made about the relative implication in the reproduction of disadvantage of factors specifically associated with Aboriginal 'culture' on the one hand and on the other those which may be properly understood as being associated with dysfunction or with exclusion and discrimination.

It also involves difficult judgments to be made about the reproduction of disadvantage through the generations. For while adults may be considered to be more or less informed social actors, and in a position to make some kind of choices about the consequences of particular lifestyles, this cannot be said for young children. Who then decides for them? One answer of course is reflected in the processes that led to the stolen generations in years past. Another, the de facto position over the past several decades in much of remote Australia at least, is to leave the children where they are.

Another alternative again is what Noel Pearson calls 'orbits'; that is, not a case of moving young people unidirectionally out of remote communities and into the mainstream, but rather equipping them with the capacity to move with facility between those two worlds. Of course such a transition, founded as it is on Pearson's emphasis on education, necessarily involves "moving the feet"; the construction of the self, the psychological space in which the individual understands themselves, shifts away from what it would have been had he or she grown up entirely within the particular community. In some ways parallel to the anthropologist, the person will become someone who understands and can move between different cultural milieus.

CONCLUSIONS: ENABLING SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Much of the support for the new policies is predicated on the implicit assumption that Aboriginal people naturally desire the lifestyle and values which correlate with economic integration, or that if they don't, a carrot and stick approach directed at individuals can be used to achieve it. However, the evidence, not only from anthropologists but more importantly from Aboriginal people themselves, shows that while many Aboriginal people do indeed seek to take advantage of better economic opportunities, and while cultural change is a feature of all societies—Aboriginal and otherwise—there is a widespread resistance amongst Aboriginal people to what they see as attempts to assimilate them into the dominant society, economically or socially. Furthermore, this commitment by many to values and practices which are antithetical to integration, in conjunction with particular demographic and other features of Aboriginal societies and the inevitable lag in even the best of circumstances between policy implementation and resultant social change, mean that the scale of the perceived problems will arguably outrun the capacity—and the willingness—of the state to address them.

I have in mind here the work done by John Taylor which contrasts the demographic profiles of the general Australian population and that of Aboriginal people in remote areas particularly with a relatively far higher proportion of those aged under 15 and a dearth of older people. These features have a profound impact not just on population dynamics but also on the reproduction of cultural values such as those underlying the 'moral economy', the problems of social order and so forth and more broadly how these societies are going to be reproducing into the future.

It is my view that market-based approaches certainly have a very important place in a repertoire of policies directed at an improving the situation of Aboriginal people. I have in mind here an area where I have had a lot of experience, the Century mine in north-western Queensland. There is no doubt in my mind that the proactive employment and training regimes there have had a major impact both on the individual Aboriginal people involved and also on the mine site culture, in which Aboriginal people play a prominent role. So, creative market-based approaches have an important place. I am thinking of a young woman from Normanton I interviewed who worked on the mine site and who said her employment there was the best thing that had happened in her life. But, this is only one of a plurality of views in Aboriginal Australia.

However, let us not underestimate the enormous task that is set by the proponents of market-based solutions or of a particular form of 'economic development' for Aboriginal people as the key driver of social change, for it ultimately requires the profound reconfiguring of Aboriginal people as moral, psychosocial, emotional, cultural and thus economic beings.

It is my view that there is a very real risk of widespread failure unless there is more flexibility and creativity including recognition of the reality of Aboriginal diversity. In thinking of the risks, I had in mind again the example of the Romany in Hungary, who up to the point of the fall of socialism had almost the same employment rate as Magyar, non-Romany Hungarians. But with the fall of communism and the exposure of Romany people to the developing market economy, there was a catastrophic collapse in Romany employment and an enormous increase in social problems and all that goes with extreme socioeconomic disadvantage. I think we need to be very mindful of such risks.

There is another example of the kind of creative thinking which in my view is required to go beyond purely market-based policy development, an example with which many of you here will be familiar with. This is part of a call for diversity, for a repertoire of policy options, as well as for creativity. Very briefly, Jon Altman's notion of the 'hybrid economy', which I think is particularly relevant for parts of tropical Australia although much less so in say desert Australia, proposes that there are different sectors in which gainful and meaningful livelihoods can be created. These aren't just in the formal market economy. They

also involve linkages between aspects of the customary economy and practices and the formal economy, and he talks about such things as the relationship between traditional burning-off practices and reducing the release of carbon dioxide, so that traditional burning off could contribute towards carbon credit trading. Land management—feral animal and weed control—and indeed the monitoring of illicit fishing; such activities illustrate the possibility of customary practices and those of the formal economy. The other dimension of the hybrid economy is that of the state-sponsored economy, but I won't discuss that here. My key point is the requirement for creative thinking, and I am not sure how much there is. There is so much focus on jobs, business, employment in terms of their morally reformative character that I think we are missing other potentially creative strategies.

What is clearly at issue here is not cultural change in Aboriginal society, but within the bureaucracy and policy makers such that more creative solutions to gaining a livelihood which nonetheless have linkages to the market economy can be supported. In this context, I want to briefly mention a keynote address by London School of Economics sociologist Catherine Hakim at the 2003 Institute of Family Studies Conference entitled 'Competing family models and competing social policies'. I read this after I had formulated the ideas for this seminar, and while focused on policies directed at women, it resonated quite strongly with my thinking.

Hakim argued that both policymakers and social scientists concerned with family and social policy in future will have to take much greater account of women's own values, preferences and life goals. Research identified a fundamental diversity of life style preferences amongst British women that went well beyond diversity due to cultural, ethnic or class differences. These were in the form of three broad categories of chosen lifestyles: home-centred, work-centred and adaptive. Adaptive women were those who preferred to combine employment and family work without giving a fixed priority to either. Work-centred women were in a minority and are focused on competitive activities in the public sphere—in careers, sport, politics or the arts. Home-centred women were also a minority, preferring to give priority to private and family life after they married.

Hakim observes that the three lifestyle preference groups are not merely different but that each has a substantively different value system as well as different life goals. Her conclusions were that 'one size fits all' policies will no longer suffice. She argues that

... policymaking must become a more complex enterprise, recognising that competing family models require diversified social policies that offer different types of support to each preference group ... we need to readdress the current bias towards policies supporting working women exclusively, at the expense of policies supporting full-time homemakers and full-time parents.

I suggest the approach adopted by Hakim provides useful insights into how we might conceptualise an overall multifaceted policy framework directed at relevant parts of Aboriginal Australia, which does have as its goal both support for fundamental change but nonetheless uses multiple ways of achieving this.

Further, and very importantly, sustainable social change for Aboriginal people cannot in my view be driven solely through market mechanisms. There will be significant numbers who for reasons sketched in this presentation will not be willing or able to take advantage of the kinds of incentives being offered to move them into the mainstream economy, and for whom the force of sanctions will be reduced by the pervasive strength of the moral economy. The only alternative is to start with the fundamental precept of

recognising that transformation in people's lives and circumstances is essential, and that the process must involve working with the strengths, capacities, passions and commitments which people themselves have, even in the most difficult of circumstances, as the basis for sustainable change. This of course entails not only long-term individual and systemic cultural change for Aboriginal societies, but also for bureaucracies, and I am less than confident that this is possible.

Finally, to answer the question I posed in the title: is the new direction as likely to fail as the old ones? My answer is that there is a high risk it will fail because both the new and the old policies construct Aboriginal people in the image of their own ideological underpinnings.

Thank you.

David Martin
May 2006

SEMINAR REFERENCES

- Altman, J.C. 2001. 'Sustainable development options on Aboriginal land: The hybrid economy in the twenty-first century', *CAEPR Discussion Paper 226*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Altman, J.C. and Rowse, T. 2005. 'Indigenous affairs', in Saunders P. and Walter J. (eds), *Ideas and Influence: Social Science and Public Policy in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, pp159–177.
- Austin Broos, D. and Macdonald, G. (eds) 2005, *Culture, Economy and Governance in Aboriginal Australia*, Sydney University Press, Sydney.
- Brady, M. 1992. *Heavy Metal. The social meaning of petrol sniffing in Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.
- Brady, M. and Martin, D. 2004. 'Human rights, drinking rights? Alcohol Policy and Indigenous Australians', *The Lancet* 364, October 2:1282–3.
- Hakim, C. 2003. 'Competing family models and competing social policies', Plenary paper delivered at the Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference Steps forward for families: Research, practice and policy, Melbourne Exhibition Centre, 12–14 February 2003.
- Hakim, C. 2000. *Work-lifestyle choices in the 21st Century: Preference theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hughes, H. 2005. 'Native Title's disasters', Letter to the Editor, *Quadrant Magazine*, July–August 2005.
- Hughes, H. and Warin, J. 2005. 'A New Deal for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Remote Communities', *Issue Analysis 54*, Centre for Independent Studies, St Leonards, NSW, available from <<http://www.cis.org.au>>.
- Langton, M. 1988. 'Medicine square', in Keen I. (ed.), *Being Black*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, pp. 201–225.
- Macdonald, G. 1988. 'A Wiradjuri fight story', in Keen I. (ed.), *Being Black*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, pp. 179–199.
- Martin, D.F. 1993. 'Autonomy and relatedness: an ethnography of Wik people of Aurukun, western Cape York peninsula', PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Martin, D.F. 1993. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal homicide: "Same but different", in Strang H. and Gerull S. (eds), *Homicide: Patterns, Prevention and Control*, AIC Conference Proceedings Series, no. 17, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, pp. 167–76.
- Pearson, N. 2000. *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, Noel Pearson and Associates, Cairns.
- Pearson, N. 2000. 'Passive welfare and the destruction of Indigenous society in Australia', in Saunders P. (ed.), *Reforming the Australian Welfare State*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- Peterson, N. 2005. 'What can the pre-colonial and frontier economies tell us about engagement with the real economy? Indigenous life projects and the conditions for development', in Austin Broos D. and Macdonald G. (eds), *Culture, Economy and Governance in Aboriginal Australia*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, pp 7–18..
- Peterson, N. and Taylor, J. 2003. 'The modernising of the indigenous domestic moral economy', *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, Vol 4, Numbers 1–2, pp.105–122.
- Stewart, M. 1998. *The Time of the Gypsies*, Westview Press, Oxford.
- Sutton, P. 'The politicisation of disease and the disease of politicisation: Causal theories and the Indigenous health differential', Paper presented to the National Rural Health Conference, Alice Springs, 10–13 March 2005, available at <<http://www.ruralhealth.org.au>>.

- Sutton, P. 2001. 'The politics of suffering: Indigenous policy in Australia since the 1970s', *Anthropological Forum* 11:125–173.
- Taylor, J. and Hunter, B. 1998. *The Job Still Ahead: Economic Costs of Continuing Indigenous Employment Disparity*, Office of Public Affairs, ATSIC.
- Taylor, J. and Scambary, B. 2005. *Indigenous people and the Pilbara mining boom: A baseline for regional participation*, Research Monograph 25, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra.
- Tonkinson, R. 1974. *The Jigalong mob : Aboriginal victors of the desert crusade*, Cummings, Menlo Park, California.
- Trigger, D. 2005. 'Mining Projects in Remote Australia: Sites for the Articulation and Contesting of Economic and Cultural Futures', in Austin Broos D. and Macdonald G. (eds), *Culture, Economy and Governance in Aboriginal Australia*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, pp. 7–18.