

# Indigenous Hunter-Gatherers in the 21st Century: Beyond the Limits of Universalism in Australian Social Policy?

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## 1 Introduction

In the past two decades, Australia's social policy approach to Indigenous people has been based on the overarching goal of striving for equality of outcomes, while also increasingly recognising difference. Such an approach is appropriate and allows for an amalgam of Indigenous citizenship rights, fully recognised since the late 1960s, and an expanding envelope of inherent rights, with the former being wedded to the equality agenda and the latter to difference. A fundamental principle of Australian social policy is universalism: 'the idea that rules, written in general terms, can be equally and fairly applied to all people whatever their social identity or background' (Sanders, 2001: 1). A problem with universalism as highlighted by Sanders is that it has difficulty recognising difference; logically the more different, the greater the difficulty.

This paper sets out to highlight a problematic extreme for social policy making that is committed to the universalism norm: Indigenous people whose cultural and economic circumstances are very different from the dominant society's, those people residing on Aboriginal-owned land in the remotest parts of Australia and engaged in a fundamentally different customary economy. This extreme is problematic, especially in the current context of welfare reform with its emphasis on mutual obligation, because the 'striving for equality of measured outcomes' goal might be unattainable and inappropriate in such circumstances. Historical legacy aside, this unattainability is primarily due to two factors: residence in extremely remote localities 'beyond the market' and the shortage in such geographically-remote locations of 'viable' labour markets; and a concomitant high level of engagement in the customary (non-market) economy facilitated by strong cultural continuities, due in part to relatively late and benign contact histories.

Unlike much social and Indigenous policy debate, this paper explores some of the difficult issues for outstation communities under the session rubric 'New approaches for

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Indigenous social policy'. This exploration is neither dilettantist nor romanticist and is based on the following three observations:

- a combination of land rights and native title and the possibility of enhanced recognition of Indigenous rights could see more, rather than fewer, Indigenous Australians living in such remote circumstances in the future;
- my own research in Arnhem Land over two decades indicates that this mode of living remains robust: people living in such circumstances are very adept at resisting the penetration of the state, the market and globalisation; and
- a great deal of recent social policy debate under the rubric of mutual obligation seeks mechanisms to enhance a degree of social participation support that is already well established at these remote and small Indigenous communities.

The paper ends with a discussion of some innovative new directions that social policy might consider in relation to outstation communities. My motivation in providing these is a firm belief that a greater cross-cultural awareness is required in social policy development for the 21st Century.

## **2 The People and the Places**

The outstations movement was first so labelled nearly 30 years ago in the early 1970s (see for instance Coombs, Dexter and Hiatt, (1980) for a historical account). A combination of a policy shift to self determination, the implementation of land rights law and the failure of assimilation policies in Aboriginal townships resulted in an unusual rural exodus. People went back to live on their remote traditional lands and resuscitated a customary economy based on exploitation of renewable resources. By the mid 1980s there was a recognition that this choice required some policy attention and action (Commonwealth of Australia, 1987) A new hybrid Aboriginal economy was emerging, one that was primarily state-based, with a sliver of the market but with a considerable additional customary component. This customary component was, and remains, unrecognised in policy discussions about Indigenous employment (Altman, 1991) or about income, diet, health and well-being as well as other broader contributions: the dominant market ideology appears to succeed in excluding such unconventional alternatives.

Information about outstation populations is not readily available and is difficult to collect. Standard and even modified Australian Bureau of Statistics practices are poorly structured to collect relevant information about dispersed, mobile, remote and culturally different outstation populations. In 1998, ATSIC estimated that there were about 12 000 people living at 1 000 outstations serviced by 100 Outstation Resource Agencies. These outstations were primarily on Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory, but also in the north of South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia. In a study that I participated in recently, it was estimated that Australia-wide there could be between a minimum of 13 000 and a maximum of 32 000 people, representing between four per cent and nine per cent of the Australian Indigenous population at that time, residing at as many as 1400

outstations (Altman, Gillespie and Palmer, 1999: 83–4).<sup>2</sup> More recently, the 1999 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey estimated that there were 856 outstations with a total population of 12 739, with an outstation defined as a discrete Indigenous community that had a population of less than 50 and that is linked to a resource agency for the provision and maintenance of services such as housing, water, power and sewerage (Roger Jones, personal communication).

The orthodox view is that when outstations evolved in the early 1970s, it was in large measure out of the failure of Aboriginal townships to offer economic development opportunities to Indigenous people, despite concerted effort. With land rights and access to some welfare income, small family groups exercised a choice to return to their traditional lands. A factor that influenced this movement was a desire to escape social problems at polyglot townships located on other Indigenous people's traditional lands. In making this choice, people voted with their feet, there was no concerted effort by either the state, academics or other social scientists to get people back out onto their lands (contra Sandall, 2001). Indeed it was common bureaucratic practice to require groups to demonstrate a degree of commitment prior to providing any financial support: six months unassisted residence was the norm before a \$10 000 establishment grant was provided to allow provision of rudimentary infrastructure (Altman, 1987).

Outstations vary enormously from region to region owing to differences in ecological zones and pre-contact social formations; but they share the following common features:

- their residents had a relatively late and benign contact history and associated late access to the provisions of the Australian welfare state;
- structurally, outstations are located in remote areas where the market is small or non-existent and where the state (either as a service provider or welfare agency) looms relatively large but is physically distant;
- the demographics of outstations are unusual: for example their populations are highly mobile and there is limited mixed (inter-ethnic) family formation; and
- social capital in these communities is well adapted to customary productive activity where rights in land and resources are well defined, but this social capital is poorly adapted to the market.

As a general rule, the outstations population is poorly represented in social policy debates. Furthermore, there is very little understanding of the complex hybrid economies of outstations, with a customary sector whose economic contribution is generally unrecognised and unquantified; productive market activity such as art production that is state-mediated and usually dependent on inter-cultural brokerage; and residents whose major engagement with the wider economy is only as consumers.

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2 This wide range is partly linked to seasonal fluctuation and partly to the absence of established and standard mechanism to measure these populations. Altman, Gillespie and Palmer (1999: 83) used four population estimates: minimum, maximum, usual and effective with the last attempting to measure person nights spent at outstations.

### **3 The Problems**

There are some contradictions emerging in both social and Indigenous policy that need to be addressed. Some of these problems have wider applicability than only for outstations, but are starkest at these communities that are the most different.

First, at the broadest level, a number of laws and institutional mechanisms have been established in the modern Indigenous policy era (post-1967) to assist Indigenous people gain access to their traditional lands. It is now estimated that up to 18 per cent of the Australian continent is Indigenous owned, with most of this land in remote regions (Pollack, 2001). At the same time, when Indigenous people occupy their land, much of which is of marginal commercial value, they are criticised for living away from viable labour markets (see Reeves, 1998).

Second, there is a very high level of formal Indigenous unemployment in remote areas and this is reflected in official statistics. The extent of formal unemployment is ameliorated to a considerable extent by a high rate of Indigenous participation in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, a form of work-for-the-dole where participants are classified as employed. At the same time there is an official reluctance to either measure or acknowledge the levels of employment in, and contributions of, the customary economy.

Third, there is a tendency to conflate the welfare dependency of outstations and Aboriginal townships, as if they are no different. In reality there is frequently a great deal more productive, even market-oriented, activity at outstations than at townships. And there is also a tendency to ignore the extent of state dependency—in one guise or another—of other sections of the non-Indigenous population in similar remote localities, but that is another issue.

The fundamental policy problem at outstations is that in the relative absence of the market and given the prevalence of the modern consumptive economy, there is a high level of cash dependence on the state. This is generally met in one of two ways: via the payment of CDEP scheme wages, on the assumption that people are working for their dole equivalents; or via access to a range of welfare benefits like pensions and Newstart Allowances (something of a misnomer in the outstations case). Both forms of payment stretch the logic of universalism to its limits: outstation residents need a minimum cash income, but not as a safety net until they find regular employment. Social policy is not comfortable with the idea of paying a guaranteed minimum income to outstation residents in case universalism dictates such minimum income should be paid elsewhere. Access to welfare represents the citizenship rights of outstation residents; their opportunity to live on their traditional lands is, arguably, a special Indigenous right—indeed returning land to people via complex and expensive claims processes has no policy logic if it is not accompanied by a right of residence.

### **4 Some Current Policy Debates**

In the last five years, since the election of the Howard Government in 1996, there have been heightened and generally implicit critiques of outstation communities. Much of this

has been ideological, based on a commitment to incorporate Indigenous people into the mainstream economy. At the level of rhetoric there has perhaps been a greater emphasis on equality of outcomes than on cultural difference, but this developmental perspective has lacked realism, focusing far more on the role of the state, and the need for its reduction, than on the structural absence of the market in remote regions. At times this debate has been couched in terms of practical reconciliation versus symbolic reconciliation, although again such rhetoric has limited meaning in explaining just how development options might be delivered to remote localities.

A concerted critique of outstations was mounted in the review of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* undertaken by John Reeves in 1998. Reeves (1998) acknowledged that the Land Rights Act had been successful in returning vast tracts of unalienated crown land to recognised Aboriginal traditional ownership—today, nearly 50 per cent of the Northern Territory is Aboriginal-owned. But he went on to argue that the provision of this land to Indigenous groups is facilitating the maintenance, rather than amelioration, of Indigenous economic marginality, at least as measured by standard social indicators. Reeves's 'assimilationist' view argues that the longer-term incorporation into the mainstream economy is the preferred option for both future Indigenous generations and Australia more broadly (Reeves, 1998). This position was not supported by rigorous historical, cultural or economic analysis of the lived reality of Indigenous Australians, as was highlighted by a range of researchers (Altman, Morphy and Rowse, 1999) and a committee of federal parliamentarians (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999).

The naïve view that the standard route to economic integration is available to all has been taken up by other commentators, who argue that the lifestyle typified by outstation people and their engagement with the customary economy is either 'separatist' (Johns, 2001) or a form of 'romanticisation of the primitive' (Sandall, 2001). Interestingly, none of these neo-assimilationists offer any constructive strategy for Indigenous economic development beyond the orthodox doses of state-provided health, education, training, employment and housing, a risky strategy that was attempted without much success or Indigenous acceptance in the 1960s and 1970s. Paradoxically, such a strategy would require a great deal more state intervention and subsidisation than the market-oriented ideology of its proponents might allow. Interestingly too, none of these views attempts to engage with Indigenous perspectives or priorities beyond, when convenient, the position put by Noel Pearson (2000). A markedly different recent polemic of cultural relativism, which is realistic and informed, is provided by Folds (2001) in his analysis of the divergence between Pintupi and wider Australian expectations of Indigenous policy in a remote community. While Folds is able to capture well the divergent aspirations and expectations of Aborigines and policy makers, he has difficulty articulating a more productive policy prescription beyond the status quo.

Specifically in the social policy arena, Patrick McClure's Reference Group on Welfare Reform (2000) did not deal with the outstations case, or any similar community type. Statistics on outstations might suggest intergenerational poverty and unemployment and associated social exclusion, but such a view would not be accurate given the social capital-intensive nature of such communities with kin-based relations of production (see Altman (1987) for a case study). Similarly, Pearson's depiction of 'welfare as poison'

(Pearson, 2000) while arguably of relevance to townships where current policy thinking regards inactivity as excessive and a problem, is of limited relevance to outstation communities. Indeed, one plank in Pearson's development proposal for Cape York Peninsula (rejuvenation of the customary economy) has been practised at outstations elsewhere and especially in Arnhem Land for some 30 years (Meehan, 1982; Altman, 1987). It is likely however that the productivity of the customary economy is lower in arid regions, although little recent evidence is available (see Cane and Stanley, 1985) and lower productivity may be compensated by lower population density.

Both McClure and Pearson advocate a form of mutual obligation whereby the state provides benefits and individual recipients reciprocate with community work, the rationale being in part that state expenditure should be, if possible, partially offset and that activity of benefit to the community should be generated by income support. However, the McClure/Pearson prescription does not take into account situations where people are actively engaged in productive activity and where community-oriented activity would merely divert work effort from such activity. Nor is the issue of supervision of reciprocal work and appropriate sanctions well considered: in small family-based groups it is exceedingly difficult, if not undesirable, to allocate supervisory responsibility to any one individual; such a role would reduce community social capital. On the other hand, to get an outsider to undertake the supervisory task is not just expensive, but also counter to the physical distancing from the state and wider society that many outstation communities pursue (see Levitus, 2001).

## **5 Australians Working Together: The Government's Response**

The broad principles enunciated by McClure and also by Pearson have been largely accepted by government and even championed by some members of parliament. In the May 2001 Budget there were measures, most prominent in the package *Australians Working Together: Helping People to Move Forward* that call for 'A fair deal for Indigenous Australians' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001). These measures however represent only partial and cautious moves to implement the McClure recommendations. As the title suggests they are also developmental, wanting people to 'move forward', to help Indigenous people into work and to contribute to their communities. Interestingly, the former goal seeks to move up to 10000 CDEP participants from what is now termed 'CDEP work experience' into paid jobs where job opportunities are available. This is an ambitious target without a stated timeframe. The latter goal seeks to deliver Community Participation Agreements and capacity building to up to 100 remote communities, presumably townships.

From the outstations perspective (lumping for the moment outstations with remote communities) much policy initiative is summarised in *Fact Sheet 23 'Community Participation Agreements and Capacity Building'* which combines elements of reality with some ominous implications (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001). Let me quote and then comment on and deconstruct two key statements:

There are few opportunities in some remote Indigenous communities for people on income support to meet activity test

requirements. In others, people have been exempt from activity testing. We want all Australians to be active and involved in their communities, to be using their skills and potential and to be looking for work when they can.

and

Remote Indigenous communities will be given more support to develop their own practical solutions to the challenges they face...Indigenous Australians will be able to contribute in a practical way to their communities in return for their income support payments.

First, if there are few existing opportunities, how will the new policy assist to create additional opportunities for those looking for work? To do so would require massive subvention beyond that allocated to proposed community participation and capacity building options.

Second, it is unclear from the perspective of outstations how this initiative is different from what is currently occurring - Newstart is exempt from activity testing and CDEP payments are provided as income support to outstation residents. The major problem at present is the inconsistency in income testing between the two regimes, with Centrelink Newstart payments income tested and subject to a taper and ATSIC's CDEP payments having a far more generous income test and no taper (Altman and Johnson, 2000).

Third, if individual work effort in the customary economy for family or household consumption (and benefit) is occurring, why is there any need for a re-orientation to community contribution? There is also a danger that such re-orientation will facilitate the substitution of the state provision of citizenship rights in remote communities with the contributions of individual welfare recipients.

Some Australians Working Together strategies might result in decreased state subvention in those situations where people actually move to paid employment, in situations where there are viable labour markets; but the proposed community participation and capacity building options for remote communities appear to be predicated on continuing state support.

## **6 Sustainable Options for a Real Way Forward: A New Approach?**

A major problem for Indigenous people and policy formulation is that much Indigenous productive activity in remote Australia remains unrecognised and unvalued. While both contemporary and historical case studies document the value of such contributions to domestic economies, there is an urgent need to expand some of this research to more widespread regional and national perspectives. Some such research is being undertaken by scientists at the Northern Territory University's Key Centre for Tropical Wildlife Management and Tropical Savannas. Preliminary findings indicate that Indigenous participation in the customary economy is generating local, regional and national benefits

in land management and maintenance of species biodiversity.<sup>3</sup> The potentialities to convert sustainable harvesting from the customary to the commercial sector are being investigated and trialed in joint ventures (Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, 2000; Vardon, 2001).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the sustainability of the Indigenous production of material culture for the market needs to be rigorously assessed and the extent of market demand needs evaluation.

The value of Indigenous land management needs to be properly quantified. It would be interesting, for example, to benchmark expenditure on land management in national parks with the unrecognised value of land management undertaken on adjacent Aboriginal land. Ecologically, in contiguous zones, land management outcomes in both are inter-dependent. Similarly, the potential national value of Indigenous land management, especially in relation to the emerging global issues of greenhouse gas emission and carbon sinks and credits, needs assessment. And also nationally, there are the more mundane potential benefits of Indigenous infrastructure (roads, airstrips, etc) in remote regions, most constructed with an again unquantified Indigenous labour input.<sup>5</sup>

How does a call for such speculative and properly quantified economic futures correlate with social policy? This paper takes at face value stated government aims of improving the socio-economic status of Indigenous Australians, including those living in the remotest circumstances. While it is acknowledged that there is limited information about the Indigenous customary economy and its wider spin-off benefits, indications are that it is robust and ecologically sustainable at least in some parts of the country. Yet little thought has been given to the relative, strategic and unrecognised contributions of outstation people, nor how to ensure these are measured. Consequently, it is not surprising that income support continues to be structured as a temporary measure to be tolerated until a 'proper job' is secured. Despite decades of historical evidence to the contrary, policy makers continue to maintain the rhetoric of such fiction, most recently in the 2001 Budget. What is needed is some guaranteed minimum income scheme that will provide signals for outstation residents to maximise their participation in the customary economy and their prospects for reduced dependency. The formal recognition of such work and income would alleviate the negative 'welfare dependent' public perception accorded to those whose productive work is in the customary economy. But such recognition is double-edged and potentially contentious, because it will ameliorate the extent of recorded Indigenous disadvantage in remote regions and much Indigenous political argument for additional resourcing is based on emphasising disadvantage rather than successful adaptation. Such recognition though is an important element in structuring social policy and income support to reflect lived reality.

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3 Land management activities include burning of country, weed eradication, erosion control and preservation of scarce breeding habitats for wildlife species.

4 Examples here range from harvesting of species like crocodile eggs and turtles to joint venture safari hunting and recreational catch and release fishing ventures.

5 Again though it must be emphasised that too much of the emerging data base is focused on the tropical savannas and wetlands, too little on arid regions.



## 7 Conclusion

Contemporary welfare reform embodied in the Australians Working Together package is based on the universalist notion that welfare support for the able-bodied is only a temporary measure prior to paid employment being secured. Such universalism needs to be challenged if creative solutions to the economic development problems faced by Indigenous people residing at outstations in remote locations are to be addressed.

This paper has argued that in such situations improvement can occur via the customary and market sectors of the economy, but that this will require that state support is held constant into the foreseeable future. An initial step in policy discourse might be to describe and document the unique contemporary form of Indigenous hybrid economy more accurately; to quantify the 'unrecognised' economic contributions of the customary sector; and to seek to link this sector creatively with new income-generating market activity. It is perhaps to these ends that discretionary additional resources for capacity building can be targeted, to enable the development of regional solutions to some very complex social and economic issues.

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