

# From the 'Quiet Revolution' to 'Crisis' in Australian Indigenous Affairs

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On 26 March 2005, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) formally came to end, its abolition the capstone of a much longer process initiated by the Howard government when it assumed power in 1996. The process began rhetorically, with government ministers and the Prime Minister, John Howard, incessantly questioning the legacy of self-determination, and of Indigenous corporate, communal and individual capacity. By 2004, this critique had been institutionalised. Indigenous policy development, program and service delivery organised around the goal of 'practical reconciliation' was 'mainstreamed'. Shared responsibility agreements (SRAs) between the federal government and individual Indigenous communities formed the new basis for the distribution of discretionary federal funding. This 'whole of government' approach, together with the idea that Indigenous citizens and communities would be co-responsible for their own welfare, linked philosophical commitments and an underlying moral critique of Indigenous agency to institutional change. In 2005, Senator Amanda Vanstone termed these changes 'a quiet revolution'.

Within a year the 'quiet revolution' had turned into a 'crisis'. The then-new Minister for Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, toured 'town camps' on the outskirts of Alice Springs and the 'long grass' in Darwin in the first half of May 2006—returning a week later to take part in one of the town camp night patrols. He and other government ministers delivered an ongoing commentary for the benefit of the media, decrying the 'dysfunction', 'violence',

'substance abuse', 'alcoholism', 'poverty', 'unemployment' and critically poor health of these Indigenous communities. The public scandal might have dissipated fairly quickly. Most 'revelations' of deprivation in Indigenous communities are short-lived media events that scandalise a public enough to want to read or listen to network coverage for a day or two, but which invariably get overtaken by the next round of current affairs. However, this was not what happened.

In May 2006, the Crown Prosecutor in Alice Springs appeared in an interview on national television to voice her concerns about what she understood to be the widespread, long-term, violent abuse of Indigenous women and children by Indigenous men, and the failure of the law and other institutions to respond appropriately to this criminal behaviour. The Treasurer, Peter Costello, together with Brough, responded by decrying the use of 'tribal' law, declaring that the restoration of law and order in these communities was now the government's priority in Indigenous Affairs. Then, as if to demonstrate the correctness of this new focus, long-running tensions within the Northern Territory community of Wadeye (Thamarrurr) hit the press and airwaves. Stories of 'gang violence' and a community held hostage to these 'gangs' prompted claims by some (including some town residents) that an emergency evacuation of those hostages was imperative.

There was never an evacuation of Wadeye. But the idea that there was a 'crisis' taking place in Indigenous communities across the Australian continent took hold of public discourse. Media attention focused on the 'violence', 'dysfunction', the 'morass', 'emergency', 'social crisis' and 'depravity' in remote Aboriginal communities. The term 'crisis' frequently organised the coverage and commentary, not just of tabloid journalists or shock jocks, but also the federal political leadership itself, as well as many other commentators with backgrounds that range from long-term experience in Indigenous Affairs to those with more recent and superficial engagement.

In this essay, I suggest that claims about 'crisis' in Indigenous communities should not be seen as a straightforward outcome of empirical circumstance, even though this

appears in many ways to be verified by 'objective' statistical data and the 'subjective' testimony of many Indigenous people themselves. The *idea* of crisis does not derive *naturally* from such accounts of Indigenous circumstance. Rather, it is clear that the federal political leadership in fact *orchestrated* events, particularly throughout the month of May 2006, by transforming the government's failure to change the fundamentals of Indigenous welfare — its 'quiet revolution' and commitment to 'practical reconciliation' — into a widespread, general crisis. This 'crisis' became a turning point at which the discourse of government responsibility for citizens was overtaken and replaced by that of citizen responsibility to government, namely, that Indigenous people and communities themselves are now equally responsible for (governmental) failure in Indigenous Affairs.

Crisis, within such an account, needs to be understood as a *process*. And while the idea of crisis has proliferated to the point that it seems to represent a key concept of modernity,<sup>1</sup> crisis situations do not naturally grow from objective conditions of threat. Instead, politicians and citizens *narrate* social problems or shifts of power in ways that project them as critical moments in history that signal disaster. Crises, then, as the political scientist Colin Hay has argued, are constituted in and through particular narratives, they are 'subjectively perceived and hence brought into existence through narrative and discourse ... Crises are representations and hence "constructions" of failure.'<sup>2</sup>

The capacity of the Australian Government to render the present moment in terms of crisis needs to be seen as one point along a discursive continuum. Along this continuum, contradictory forms of thought and practices are made coherent. On the one hand, the social, economic and political issues entangled with Indigenous marginalisation are defined as requiring Indigenous people themselves to take responsibility for their structurally peripheral circumstance — citizen responsibility eclipses citizenship rights. On the other hand, this definition of crisis frames the circumstances of Indigenous experience in ways that provide the non-Indigenous political leadership with the key to defining the appropriate strategies for resolution of 'the crisis' — here, the restoration of law

and order is defined as the fundamental solution. That this particular conjuncture has made possible the narrative construction of crisis is an outcome of the contingent coupling of these discursive positions.

In examining the development of this narrative of crisis, I make two points. First, in the conception of crisis as deriving naturally from inherent features of Indigenous culture, community and individual behaviour, we fail to grasp the crucial, *active* and *material* role that the Commonwealth and other government and non-government agencies have played in the emergence of this crisis. Governmental fiscal neglect needs to be understood as one of the key factors producing the often critical conditions of daily life in communities such as Wadeye (Thamarrurr).

Second, the Howard government's declared solution to the crisis—the restoration of law and order—grossly underestimated the nature of the problem and scope of solutions and public resources required. It is certainly clear that national governments generally are unwilling to deal with increased inequality—it is no longer possible to mount arguments that will have any purchase along the lines that the state has full responsibility for the welfare of disadvantaged citizens. However, in the case of remote Indigenous communities, the opportunity costs of maintaining the status quo have been calculated, and there is no argument, economic or political, that this situation is sustainable. There are, instead, alternative models as well as current practices organised broadly around notions of economic, cultural and social sustainability that make possible the long-term viability of communities such as Wadeye (Thamarrurr).

Although policy and discourse are often thought of as separate spheres of activity, this separation is misleading. They are better understood as effectively one and the same thing, in that they are bound up with each other in constituting a particular field of discursive practice. This essay charts the contours of this field of discursive practice.

### Naturalising crisis

When John Howard came to power, the new political leadership began—slowly at first, and then with increased

vigour—to develop a narrative about the ‘failure’ of national policy and administration in Indigenous Affairs over the previous two decades. As is well known, that policy period, and the administrative and representative structures and processes it spawned, were organised around the principles of ‘self-determination’/‘self-management’ and a bipartisan commitment to the elimination of racial discrimination and the protection of human rights. The former was institutionalised in the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, and the latter in the creation of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). During this twenty-year period, ‘self-determination’ was represented by supporters and critics alike as signifying a clear ‘break’ from the era of ‘assimilation’ which had preceded it.

When the first Minister for Indigenous Affairs in the Howard government, John Herron, was appointed, he also maintained this idea of a rupture. However, he articulated a critical negative account of ‘self-determination’, suggesting that there was much merit in assimilationist ideas and the administrative regimes established during that era. Herron’s apparent support for a ‘return to assimilation’ was coupled with an ongoing critique concerning the ‘failure’ of ‘separate’ Indigenous institutions, programs and services to deliver improvements in the socioeconomic circumstances of Indigenous populations across the country. Remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory who had benefited from Commonwealth land rights legislation and community government, but who were now said to be ‘land rich and dirt poor’, were singled out for particular attention in this critical narrative. However, so as not to confine the critique to the Northern Territory—Indigenous socioeconomic indicators are appalling in all states—the federal government expanded its long-held criticism of ATSIC.

All these criticisms of the legacy of ‘self-determination’, developed in the first three years of the Howard government’s term, are well documented and analysed.<sup>3</sup> Many commentators (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) worried that the government was signalling a ‘return to assimilation’. However, the government framed its ‘new’ approach to policy and administration in terms of ‘practical reconciliation’. This

appeared at least in rhetorical terms to signal continuity as opposed to discontinuity with the previous policy era.<sup>4</sup>

'Practical reconciliation' built upon a direct critique of the Keating government's legacy of 'reconciliation' and, more indirectly, on a critique of the idea of 'self-determination'. Howard and other ministers argued that the Keating decade of 'reconciliation' had been too concerned with 'symbolic' questions;<sup>5</sup> Howard's focus would instead be on 'practical' outcomes in Indigenous health, education, welfare, income and employment. Achieving statistical equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians was seen by Howard to be the eventual goal of 'practical reconciliation'.

All these developments in Indigenous affairs under Howard need to be seen as coextensive with wider and longer-term national, international and global transformations, many of which began during the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>6</sup> In the national context, the reform of social welfare more broadly has been underscored by the McLure report<sup>7</sup> and driven by the notion of 'mutual obligation' and the restructuring of the welfare sector. This has entailed a complex process of 'enterprising' both the state and its citizens, particularly those who are recipients of welfare.<sup>8</sup> Public sector agencies (formerly the primary providers of welfare programs and services), non-government organisations and the private sector now compete with one another to provide at the most competitive rates, programs and services to the recipients of welfare. At the same time, those citizens who are recipients of welfare are also required to conduct themselves in more 'enterprising' ways, actively undertaking designated work projects in exchange for unemployment and other welfare benefits.

Furthermore, all these efforts by policy makers to reconfigure the relationship between society, state, economy and citizen have, at the same time, also reconfigured geography and territory. Localities facing sustained economic hardship are now required to sort out their own problems, especially through the route of 'rebuilding local community', 'building community capacity', 'bridging social capital' — key terms in the contemporary vocabulary of 'welfare reform' in this geographic guise.<sup>9</sup>

At the international level, the transfer and exchange of these reforming ideas and practices in welfare and social policy has been productive and has cross-cut liberal, conservative and neo-conservative ideological commitments. For example, Blair Labour's 'Third Way' in the United Kingdom, the 'compassionate conservatism' of the Bush administration in the United States, and 'mutual obligation' and 'mutual responsibility' of the Howard government, whilst configured in nationally unique ways all stress the obligations of citizens to government as a critical element of welfare reform.<sup>10</sup> The idea that Indigenous Australians needed to assume greater responsibility for themselves and their circumstances is clearly to be located within this wider and longer-term context.

To suggest that there is a social crisis unfolding across Indigenous communities is in many ways not an entirely new strategic intervention by government. This analysis was not confined to government sources or those commentators who identified as supporters of the federal government. Indigenous community leaders and commentators, and many non-Indigenous analysts, have been frank about the critical social conditions in Indigenous communities, as well as the relationship between these circumstances and individual and corporate/communal responsibility. Some of this commentary has indeed lent credibility to the governmental narrative of crisis. However, this does not appear to have been the intention of these analyses. Rather, these critiques have aimed to urge governments to take more seriously a range of cultural, ethnographic and historical factors in policy making, service delivery and institutional arrangements as they are configured for Indigenous communities, *rather* than supporting a simple moral critique of Indigenous 'failure'. I want to look in particular at two examples of this critique, not only for the ways in which they raise crucial issues associated with Indigenous corporate and individual agency, but also for the ways in which these raise crucial issues to do with the active role of government action itself, over many decades, in constructing and sustaining the current circumstances of daily life in many Indigenous communities.

**'Bringing the state back in': Noel Pearson's critique<sup>11</sup>**

The first example of this critique is that developed by the Indigenous activist and policy consultant, Noel Pearson, one of the most prominent critics of the active, historical role that governments have played in developing Indigenous disadvantage and marginalisation. Pearson argues that the extension of welfare payments to Indigenous citizens over the past three decades has produced a debilitating dependency and widespread social dysfunction — specifically among the communities of Cape York.<sup>12</sup> The welfare economy that has developed in the region, Pearson observes, is inimical to traditional Aboriginal culture as much as it is to the economy of the market.<sup>13</sup> As Pearson puts it:

The problem with the welfare economy is that it is not a real economy. It is a completely artificial means of living. Our traditional economy was and is a real economy. Central to the traditional economy was the imperative for able-bodied people to work. If you did not hunt and gather, you starved ... Common to the real economy of traditional society and the real economy of the market is the demand for economic and social reciprocity. This reciprocity is expressed through work, initiative, struggle, enterprise, contribution, effort. The key problem with welfare is that it inherently does not demand reciprocity. I call it a gammon economy.<sup>14</sup>

According to Pearson, if the debilitating effects of the welfare economy are ever going to be overcome, the reinvigoration of reciprocity as the basis of social relations is crucial. For this to be possible, new institutional arrangements must be established. Pearson argues that service delivery to Aboriginal communities has proved extremely problematic on the ground, and that while government certainly has the resources to commit to services and programs, its *modus operandi* lacks coordination, encourages overlap and duplication, and is not based on holistic approaches. Simply attempting to address the manifest problems in Cape York Aboriginal communities through better coordination of programs and other adjustments that generally take place under the rubric of 'whole



of government' approaches to service delivery will be totally inadequate to deal with the scale of the problems and needs in those communities. From Pearson's perspective, the idea of better coordination still assumes that welfare-induced problems can be solved through more effective program delivery under policies that are usually developed by bureaucrats far removed from these communities.

In other words, from Pearson's perspective, *government itself* continues to be an *active* source of the negative welfare mentality. What is required to fully tackle the problems that confront Cape York communities is, according to Pearson, a new interface with government, a statutory authority between Cape York peoples and government to coordinate holistic policy development, planning and the administration and delivery of welfare programs at regional, sub-regional and local levels. This new statutory interface will operate as a 'partnership interface', through which 'the state would negotiate with Aboriginal community representatives ... about the design of programs and the development of cooperative agreements on how the programs will be delivered on the ground'.<sup>15</sup>

Some commentators have seen Pearson's arguments as supporting the Howard government's commitment to welfare policy and payments premised upon the notion of citizen responsibility.<sup>16</sup> However, such accounts are misleading; they ignore, first, Pearson's critique of the *ongoing*, active role of the state in perpetuating welfare dependence — and this includes the Howard government's focus on mutual responsibility and mainstreamed, whole-of-government approaches to policy and service delivery. Second, they overlook his arguments for the creation of new institutional arrangements through which the relationship between the state and Indigenous citizens should be configured. For Pearson, welfare has been debilitating because of the *way* in which it has been directed to Indigenous people. Pearson argues that systemic changes are essential in terms of the way in which welfare is distributed, but he does not see welfare *per se* as debilitating. Rather, welfare provides potentially valuable resources for the development of remote Aboriginal communities if genuine partnerships are established with government, developed under the new institutional arrangements he

proposes replace the current arrangements which are wholly controlled by government. In 2006, six years on from the publication of his monograph *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, it was hardly surprising (although dreadfully depressing) to hear Pearson state that for all the negotiations he has been involved in over the years with federal and state governments to bring about the changes he has argued for, almost no change has been the result.<sup>17</sup>

### **Anthropological critique: David Martin**

Anthropologist David Martin draws on his own ethnographic work in the Cape York region as well as that of other anthropologists to suggest that there are certain widespread Aboriginal values and practices which may be inimical to the kinds of social and attitudinal changes sought by Pearson and the Howard government in advocating an end to welfare dependency. First, as Martin shows, the notion of 'dependency', which lies at the core of both Pearson's and governmental assessments of the effects of welfare, is not necessarily one that would have much meaning for many Indigenous people living in remote communities. 'Dependency' here is understood in terms of a 'culturally established and validated capacity to demand and receive resources and services (symbolic and tangible) from others'.<sup>18</sup> Seen this way, not only is dependency *not* inimical to individual and group autonomy, it is 'a core principle through which Aboriginal agency is realised in the structuring of social relationships'.<sup>19</sup>

What appears as 'objective disparities in wealth and power', both within Aboriginal groups and between Aboriginal people and the wider society, can, as Martin states, 'be transformed by Aboriginal agency through a process of co-opting others, often outsiders (including non-Aboriginal people) to become patrons or "bosses" for Aboriginal people'.<sup>20</sup> This establishes a complex set of relations: from the perspective of those Aboriginal people involved, relationships of so-called 'dependency' are relationships of obligation and responsibility to those same Aboriginal agents. This ethnographically informed understanding of Aboriginal sociality has perplexed proponents of 'self-determination' no less than advocates of mutual and individual responsibility in the sense that both

have sought to develop active Indigenous agents in terms that clearly have little resonance with Aboriginal peoples' expectations or experience.<sup>21</sup>

Martin is also concerned that Pearson's principle of reciprocity and the related notion of mutual responsibility as he uses it, while quite different from that used by the Howard government, will also founder against certain Aboriginal social values and practices. For Pearson, because the state is too remote from Indigenous experience, efforts to strengthen individual responsibility need to be organised around the idea of reciprocity and mutual responsibility between the individual and his or her 'family', local group and 'community'—and not between individuals or communities and the state. However, as Martin shows, neither 'families' nor 'communities' can be assumed to be units of sufficient moral and political authority capable of instituting the kinds of reciprocity and responsibility for which Pearson argues. In the case of 'families', the value of individual autonomy means that 'it is rare even for a senior individual to be able to exercise authority across all members of a family, particularly in relation to the matters about which Pearson is most concerned—expenditure of individual incomes, care of children, consumption of alcohol, and so forth'.<sup>22</sup> In the case of 'communities', there are few if any Indigenous-wide community political institutions which exist apart from the quasi-local community government councils and regional councils (such as land councils). These bodies represent highly complex and internally differentiated populations in terms of factors that continue to inform Aboriginal political, economic and social relations such as affiliations with ancestral lands and language, personal and group histories, ethnicity and, bearing on all of these, kin group and other local affiliations. Consequently, although community government councils have legislative responsibility for the general peace, welfare and health of community residents, they cannot be considered to have the necessary political or moral authority to demand responsibility and reciprocity from residents.

Finally, in relation to Pearson's conception of the relationship between the cash flows into communities through welfare payments and CDEP, and the manifestations of social

pathology, Martin points out that there is a complex interplay between the social processes involved in increasing individuation on the one hand, and of enduring forms of collective action on the other. Where Pearson imagines that the source of the cash provides a moral force which is manifest in the way in which it is used by individuals—‘you value the things you work for’<sup>23</sup>—ethnographic evidence suggests rather that there is ‘a more complex interaction between individuals’ values and practices, and those of their significant social networks as well as those of the community in which they live’.<sup>24</sup> Although cash has only become widely available to Aboriginal people living in remote communities in the last thirty to thirty-five years, it has nonetheless become ‘deeply implicated in the production and reproduction of [the] distinctive Aboriginal values and practices’ that lie at the heart of the issues that concern Pearson, and which are the subject of the highly moralising governmental discourse concerning citizen responsibility.<sup>25</sup> Money, Martin argues, ‘has become central to a particular kind of Aboriginal “performative sociality”, in which social relations (notably those of kinship) are constantly produced and reproduced through the flows of services and material items between individuals’, while, at the same time, money has enabled individuals to abstract themselves from many of those same relationships of kin-relatedness and responsibility. What this means in terms of the uses to which money is put by recipients of welfare is complex. On the one hand, welfare payments enable the deepening of collective actions within Aboriginal groups (through collective saving for consumer items such as vehicles, for example, and the financing of large ceremonial gatherings as well as resourcing drinking and gambling groups). On the other hand, welfare and cash make possible more autonomous action by individuals who want to assert their independence from others within their significant social networks. What all this implies for policy makers and governments, then, is that it is not possible to make clear-cut normative assessments about the effects of welfare payments and socially destructive behaviour. Rather, the availability of cash in the form of welfare payments can facilitate both constructive and destructive activity. In sum, the ‘responsible’ Indigenous citizen constructed by the Howard government,

like the 'self-determining' Indigenous citizen<sup>26</sup> of previous governments, is not only a simplistic rendition of the cultural and social complexity described by anthropologists such as Martin. Government policy in fact actively contributes to the reproduction of those critical circumstances of daily life in remote Aboriginal communities, reproducing programs and policy that fail to engage with those Indigenous values and practices that can prove so problematic for the health, well-being and development of individuals and communities.<sup>27</sup>

### **Governance as a multi-sited activity**

To speak here of the active role of 'government' in reproducing Indigenous disadvantage is to gloss into homogeneity what is in fact an altogether 'heterogeneous ensemble of institutions'.<sup>28</sup> This assemblage of organisations and agencies comprises not only federal, state and local government agencies — as well as non-government organisations — but also, most significantly, thousands of publicly funded Indigenous organisations or, as Tim Rowse refers to them collectively, the 'Indigenous sector'. Furthermore, this very diverse governmental/organisational terrain means that there is no longer any sense (if there ever was) in which policy-making processes and practices can be understood to be coherent projects.

As the anthropologist Dianne Smith puts it, policy-making processes and practices are not only multi-sited, they are increasingly complex in their manifestations, values, principles, structure and agency, and do not necessarily cohere in the ways in which many commentators are prone to suggest.<sup>29</sup> Smith has argued that as Indigenous groups have asserted their own cultural values and priorities and inaugurated their own civil and legal structures, we need to understand that the state no longer monopolises policy-making power. Policy 'solutions' to the 'problem' of Indigenous disadvantage now pose difficult dilemmas not only for non-Indigenous bureaucrats and politicians, but for an expanding class of Indigenous policy makers as well.<sup>30</sup> By factoring these institutional transformations into our thinking about policy making, Smith argues that policy is no longer a matter of choosing between competing paradigms organised around the idea of cultural difference — how to eradicate it if you were/

are an assimilationist, and how to preserve it if you were/are committed to 'self-determination'. Rather, as she puts it, 'the [current] dilemma for policy makers is not so much the need to recognize cultural values and diversity, but how to respond to these in the formulation of programs without degenerating into social engineering. This is a dilemma for Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous policy makers.'<sup>31</sup>

While these issues of Indigenous 'welfare dependency' and the 'destructive' uses made of welfare payments by some recipients of those benefits form the basis of much of the debate about the 'crisis' in remote Aboriginal communities, there is, of course, a crucial element missing from this narrative. Government funding and the fiscal responsibility of the state is rarely the focus of attention in these debates, and to the extent that it is, it is usually in terms of government largesse in relation to Aboriginal communities, not governmental fiscal neglect. However, the data that are widely available reveal large and persistent shortfalls in government expenditure on infrastructure and services in Aboriginal communities. Although it is also the case that the federal government is failing to make adequate provision for infrastructure across the country more generally,<sup>32</sup> the research that demonstrates large shortfalls in expenditure on Indigenous communities receives little-to-no media attention. The sustaining fiction that government overspends on Indigenous programs and services is, it would seem, strengthened by public awareness of under-spending on infrastructure across the country more generally. Furthermore, this research also reveals a structural imbalance in funding in expenditure across Indigenous affairs, with proportionally much less being spent on positive aspects of public policy such as education and employment creation, and proportionally more being spent on negative areas such as criminal justice and unemployment benefits. One study focused on Wadeye and its satellite homelands and outstations makes this explicit.<sup>33</sup>

#### **The cost of sustaining the status quo**

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commissioned economists John Taylor and Owen Stanley to produce an account of the costs—both to governments and to the

local community—of sustaining the status quo in the Wadeye region. The 'opportunity costs'—the costs arising from forgone production and from remedial actions necessary to compensate for critical socioeconomic conditions—identified by Taylor and Stanley show just how unsustainable that status quo is. Key findings of their report include the fact that far less is spent on residents of the region, per head, than on the average Territorian; for example 'for every education dollar spent by governments on the average child of compulsory school age in the Northern Territory, at present \$0.47 is spent on the Thamarrurr equivalent'.

One might expect that the remedial costs to government of servicing a growing Australian community that is relatively sick, poorly housed, illiterate, innumerate, disengaged from the education system, on low income, unemployed and with a sub-standard communications network would be substantially higher (not lower) than the Northern Territory average. What emerges instead is something akin to Hart's oft-cited inverse care law in relation to health care needs—'*to those most in need the least is provided*'. Furthermore, there is a structural imbalance in funding at Thamarrurr with proportionally less expenditure on positive aspects of public policy such as education and employment creation that are designed to build capacity and increase output, and proportionally more spending on negative areas such as criminal justice and unemployment benefit. Taylor and Stanley write: 'This begs the very important question as to whether this situation of fiscal imbalance actually serves to perpetuate the very socioeconomic conditions observed at Thamarrurr in the first place.'<sup>34</sup>

Taylor and Stanley's research provides the data upon which irrefutable arguments for increased public spending on positive aspects of public policy in Indigenous affairs can be made. They argue that this spending must be primarily directed at positive public policy initiatives, namely, job creation and human capital formation.

#### Law, order, authority and sustainability

Yet for all the persuasive detail of this COAG report, the Howard government continued to insist that 'the crisis' in

remote Aboriginal communities is not about money. Howard's Minister for Health, Tony Abbott, for example, claimed that 'the basic problem of Aboriginal disadvantage was not a lack of spending but the directionless culture in which Aboriginal people lived'.<sup>35</sup> This view was reinforced almost daily by editorials in the print media throughout May and June 2006. The crisis being narrated led to the conclusion that its solution lies with Aboriginal people themselves, and in the restoration of law, order and security. Aboriginal people, in these terms, must sort out their disorganised lives and take greater responsibility for their circumstances. The problem of violence in communities—and here there is tacit acknowledgement that increased spending is required, albeit negative spending—is to be solved through an increased police presence in those communities.<sup>36</sup>

If this narrative of crisis has been an easy political fiction to sustain, operating effectively to deflect from public attention the very active role of government in perpetuating the critical conditions of life in remote Aboriginal communities, it has also had the effect of making it difficult to conceive how those critical conditions might be transformed into a situation where lives and communities can be made sustainable beyond, of course, the proposals about improving individual and communal responsibility and increased policing. However, once again, there is research which, taken together with consideration of those factors that I have discussed so far—tough-minded, empirically grounded understandings of the specific cultural bases of individual and corporate life in many remote communities, of the heterogeneity of governance and policy-making institutions and practices, and of the critical supporting fiscal and institutional role of the state—that is very suggestive of ways in which those communities and their residents can live socially and economically sustainable lives.

Jon Altman has argued that we need to extend our conception of what constitutes economic activity in remote Aboriginal communities beyond orthodox conceptions of the economy as the market economy, to include the full range of economic activity carried out in remote Aboriginal areas. When we do this, we see that there is a great deal of economic activity currently being carried out in remote areas populated



by Aboriginal people that is not recognised as such, and which produces very significant economic, environmental and social benefits. What is more, these economic, environmental and social benefits do not only devolve to Aboriginal communities but to the public and private sectors more generally.<sup>37</sup> In other words, a broader conception of the economy reveals very broad national benefits generated by Aboriginal people.

Altman's argument is based on the premise that the narrow conception of economic activity contained in the notion of the market economy should be extended to encompass the full range of economic practices and institutions in remote areas. This then includes: (1) the market, conceptualised as productive private sector activity; (2) the state, which is a provider of services and benefits; and (3) all customary economic activities. This last category, the customary, is based on traditional economic activity such as hunting, gathering and fishing, but also includes more recent innovations in these fields of practice such as land and habitat management, species management and the maintenance of biodiversity as well as artistic production. While Aboriginal people carry out all these activities as a matter of custom and tradition, they have also become involved in recent times in commercial and public sector applications of these practices.

In doing so, however, the value of their labour is seldom recognised, nor is the productive benefit of this labour recognised or valued. If, however, the value of Indigenous labour and productive activity in the customary sector were recognised and accounted for, we would have a more accurate understanding not only of current levels of economic activity in remote communities, but also of the development potential of these communities. In addition to this, we would have an accurate account of the value that these communities add both to the market economy, the public sector and the national estate. Such a model of economic activity utterly contradicts the idea that remote Aboriginal communities are too costly and that some should be shut down.<sup>38</sup>

The links between the customary, market and state economies comprise what Altman calls 'the hybrid economy' of remote Aboriginal communities. By extending our concept of what constitutes economic activity in those remote regions

to include all three spheres of economic activity at work in those places—the market, state and customary—Altman argues that we have the (conceptual) framework around which it is possible to build institutions and practices of sustainable development.

**Conclusion: Crisis, what crisis?**

At one level, this has been an essay about the changes in Indigenous Affairs brought about by the Howard government during its decade in power, and about how these changes can be understood as being inextricably linked with a broader project of welfare reform—one which is not unique to Australia. This reforming project has conjured up anew ideas about the responsibility of citizens to the state, their communities and themselves. As a result, in place of the former welfarist conviction that the state was responsible for its disadvantaged citizens, the idea of citizen responsibility to the state now seems secure. In Australian Indigenous Affairs, this conviction has been translated more harshly into the idea that citizens can indeed fail their governments. Those who point to disorganisation, poverty, violence, unemployment, critically poor health conditions and lack of schooling, literacy, skills and viable economic activity in remote Aboriginal communities, are attempting to demonstrate the rightness of this conviction, but can only do so by ignoring the evidence to the contrary.

At another level, however, I have been concerned with the way in which government fails its citizens, specifically Indigenous citizens, not in the ‘symbolic’ terms that Howard rejected anyway, but precisely in the ‘practical’ terms developed by Howard and his leadership team. The failure of the Howard government to make any difference during this time to Indigenous socioeconomic indicators—the ‘practical’ goal identified by the government itself—is an assessment of that government’s legacy that receives little media coverage. The failure of Howard’s ‘quiet revolution’ has been very quiet indeed. The critical circumstances of daily life in many remote Aboriginal communities, instead of providing testimony to this failure, have instead been turned into something of an alibi, making the idea of a ‘crisis’ in those communities seem

utterly feasible. This idea of crisis, as narrated by the Howard government, naturalised a people and their circumstances as the product of moral deficit, deviance and even degeneracy. We have reached the point where 'the crisis has begun to be lived in its terms', not in the sense that we have all been duped, but in the way which this narrative of crisis, as Stuart Hall noted, does in fact 'express real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions'.<sup>39</sup>

### *Reflection*

This essay was written at a time when public and political debate about the fundamental tenets of policy and practice in Indigenous affairs was making headlines, not just for weeks but for some years. I wrote the essay in an attempt to try and clarify the different strands of the debate at the time, to place them in historical context and to calibrate the many arguments and assertions against relevant research, evidence and argument. The notion of 'crisis' as constituted through particular narratives (an analysis developed by the English political scientist, Colin Hay) seemed to me to be an apt way of thinking about the political and public construction of 'failure' in Aboriginal affairs at the time. That this 'failure' was narrated in normative terms and seen to lie almost entirely with Indigenous communities and individuals rather than being anchored in sociological and historical factors tied to profound fiscal neglect by governments signalled to me something deeper to do with the politics of Indigenous affairs in this country.

I probably couldn't have responded to this signal in this essay—the politics of the time were complex enough for me to discern. However, I regret that since then I have failed to pursue it. If I had, I imagine being led back to 1788 and beyond, to the long history of Anglo-European thought about the First People of this continent; an intellectual history that we know of today as having informed the development of those bodies of disciplinary knowledge that we as academics continue to work with and which today still shape and inform public discussion and debate in Indigenous affairs.

Just to isolate out one brief quote I cited, let me revisit a claim made in 2006 by our current prime minister, then Minister for Health, Tony Abbott: 'The basic problem of Aboriginal disadvantage', he claimed, 'is not lack of spending but the directionless culture in which Aboriginal people live.' How deeply embedded in

Australian law, politics and history is a statement such as this, and how embedded in the history of Anglo-European thought? This is an intellectual history in which Aboriginal people were said to lack civilised society, culture and religion, no less than they were said to lack politics, government and law, private property, free trade, and lives organised around capitalistic economic activity. On this reading, there's very little that separates the claim of the current prime minister, I believe, from this intellectual history. And underlying it all, are of course, the material facts of dispossession, of sovereignty denied, of the forcible removal of peoples from their lands to missions and reserves, and the subsequent legal reinvention of those same marginal lands since the 1970s as Aboriginal 'communities' held by Aboriginal land trusts.

In mid-2014 the Abbott government handed down its first Budget. We learned that those 'communities' and the Aboriginal organisations, state and Commonwealth departments that service their chronically disadvantaged residents will have to manage (somehow) with budget cuts of \$530 million across the Indigenous Affairs portfolio. Yet another crisis is surely in the making.

## Notes

- 1 Claudio Lomnitz, 'Times of Crisis: Historicity, Sacrifice and the Spectacle of Debacle', *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 127-47; Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, 'Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis', *Public Culture*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1995, pp. 324-46.
- 2 Colin Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1996, pp. 253-72.
- 3 See, for example, Larissa Behrendt, 'ATSIC: Regional Mythologies', *Arena Magazine*, April-May 2004.
- 4 Tim Rowse, 'The Politics of Being Practical: Howard and his Quiet Revolution in Indigenous Affairs', speech to the Brisbane Institute, 13 July 2005, p. 2, <[http://www.brisinst.org.au/resources/rowse\\_tim\\_indigenous.html](http://www.brisinst.org.au/resources/rowse_tim_indigenous.html)>. See also Tim Rowse, *Indigenous Futures: Choice and Development for Aboriginal and Islander Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2002.
- 5 Jon Altman and Boyd Hunter, *Monitoring 'Practical' Reconciliation: Evidence from the Reconciliation Decade, 1991-2001*, CAEPR Discussion Paper, no. 254, CAEPR, ANU Canberra, 2003, p. 1.
- 6 David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001.
- 7 Patrick McLure, *Participation Support for a More Equitable Society*, Final Report of the Group on Welfare Reform, unpublished report to the federal minister for Family and Community Services, 2000.
- 8 Mark Considine, *Enterprising States: The Public Management of Welfare to Work*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2001.
- 9 By contrast, those prosperous localities where capital and labour markets,

- investment and jobs are located are never required to demonstrate their funds of 'social capital' or 'community capacity'. A. Amin, 'Local Community on Trial', *Economy and Society*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2005, pp. 612-13.
- 10 Transformations in the global economy are seen by governments in each of these countries to be the inevitable drivers of these reforms. Many commentators have often glossed this as neoliberalism. The effect of this incorrect gloss is twofold: first, it erases the distinctively national configuration of ideological commitment and institutions in each case; second, it elides the distinctive, and in many ways contradictory, intellectual traditions that inform these ideas associated with contemporary economic, political and cultural transformations—particularly as these concern changes to 'the welfare state'. See: Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays in Knowledge and Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005.
- 11 I have lifted the title of a now seminal work published in 1985 by the historical sociologist Theda Skocpol and colleagues P.B. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and T. Skocpol (eds), *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985. Their work demonstrated the importance of institutional analysis in history, sociology, politics and so forth at a time when many scholars tended to focus on the actions of individuals and groups of individuals in producing social and historical change.
- 12 Noel Pearson, *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, Noel Pearson and Associates, Cairns, 2000.
- 13 Pearson uses the term 'welfare economy' to refer to the full range of welfare benefits payable to Indigenous individuals and communities. This includes the form of 'unemployment' benefit unique to Indigenous communities in which Indigenous people work for the equivalent of welfare payments through the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). CDEP was developed more than twenty years ago and to this extent was probably a world first as a mutual obligation welfare program. Jon Altman, Matthew Gray and Robert Levitus, *Policy Issues for the Community Development Employment Projects Scheme in Rural and Remote Australia*, CAEPR Discussion Paper, no. 271, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 2005.
- 14 Noel Pearson, 'Positive and Negative Welfare and Australia's Indigenous Communities', *Family Matters*, vol. 54, 1999, p. 32.
- 15 Noel Pearson, 'Positive and Negative Welfare', p. 33.
- 16 Helen Hughes, 'New Deal for Communities', *Executive Highlights*, no. 261, 2005; Christopher Pearson, 'Beware of a Relapse, Noel', *Australian*, 1 July 2006, p. 16.
- 17 *The 7.30 Report*, ABC Television, 29 June 2006.
- 18 David F. Martin, *Is Welfare Dependency 'Welfare Poison'? An Assessment of Noel Pearson's Proposals for Aboriginal Welfare Reform*, CAEPR Discussion Paper, no. 213, CAEPR, ANU Canberra, 2001, p. 6.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 21 Richard Sennett has made a similar point in relation to arguments developed in the United States about 'welfare dependency': that the conceptions of dependency that inform these debates derive from liberal political philosophy and Christian theology and are therefore culturally specific. Richard Sennett, *Respect: The Formation of Character in Age of Inequality*, Allen Lane, New York, 2002.
- 22 Martin, p. 15.
- 23 Pearson, *Our Right to Take Responsibility*.
- 24 Martin, p. 9
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 8

- 26 Here I am not mounting a critique of self-determination so much as pointing out—as many others have done previously—that is that it was never clearly defined.
- 27 See Peter Sutton, 'The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Policy in Australia since the 1970s', *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2001, pp. 125–73.
- 28 Rowse, Indigenous Futures.
- 29 Diane Smith, 'When Starship Pintupi Meets the Klingons of Policy', *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2003, p. 262.
- 30 Over the last decade a great deal of bureaucratic and political attention has focused on 'governance,' and what makes for 'good governance' in particular, in Aboriginal communities. Yet, as Diane Austin-Broos points out, 'If in fact government transfers are not enough, if life-long welfare is inherently disabling even on the margins of the nation-state, improving governance can only have minimal impact'. Diane Austin-Broos, 'Introduction,' in Diane Austin-Broos and Gaynor Macdonald (eds), *Culture, Economy and Governance in Aboriginal Australia*, University of Sydney Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 2.
- 31 Smith, p. 262.
- 32 CEDA, Infrastructure: Getting On With The Job, CEDA, Melbourne, 2005.
- 33 John Taylor and Owen Stanley, *The Opportunity Costs of the Status Quo in the Thamurrurr Region*, CAEPR Working Paper, no. 28, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 2005.
- 34 Taylor and Stanley, pp. 63–4.
- 35 Roger Maynard, 'Death Rate is Three Times Higher among Aboriginal Children,' *Guardian Weekly*, 30 June – 6 July 2006, p. 7.
- 36 There is an underlying assumption in these arguments that much of the violence in Aboriginal communities is incomprehensible to the wider community, that this violence is senseless, wanton and utterly destructive. Without in any way apologising for this violence or trying to downplay the extent of the suffering caused by violence, it is crucial, however, to recognise as Anton Blok argues, that we cannot understand violence (and therefore can do little to inhibit its unauthorised and unacceptable uses) unless we understand that far from being 'senseless' all acts of violence are meaningful (A. Blok, *Honour and Violence*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 103–4). That is, violent acts are forms of meaningful action in that they all 'say' or express something—for example, 'I can humiliate you/am humiliated, subject you/am subjected, vindicate you/vindicate myself, and so forth'. At Wadeye, Bill Ivory has explained how the symbolism of heavy metal as a transgressive genre of music organises 'gang' formation and activity (William Ivory, *Nemarluk to Heavy Metal: Cultural Change and the Development of Contemporary Youth Sub-Culture at Port Keats, Northern Territory*, BA Honours thesis, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, 2003). Other anthropologists have similarly provided 'thick' descriptions of the meanings and uses of violence elsewhere, on how violence is learned and how and why it is practiced (Annette Hamilton, *Nature and Nurture: Aboriginal Child-Rearing in Northern Arnhem Land*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1981; David F. Martin, 'Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Homicide: "Same but Different"', in Heather Strang and Sally-Anne Gerull (eds), *Homicide: Patterns, Prevention and Control*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1993, pp. 167–76; Colin Tatz, 'Aboriginal Violence: A Return to Pessimism', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 25, 1990, pp. 245–60). It is to this data that non-Indigenous policy-makers must turn, and not to simplistic, moralising claims about the need for victims and perpetrators of violence to simply reform their ways or face jail.
- 37 Jon Altman, Sustainable Development Options on Aboriginal Land: The Hybrid Economy in the C21st, CAEPR Discussion Paper, no. 226, CAEPR, ANU,

- Canberra, 2001; Jon Altman, Craig Linkhorn, Jennifer Clark, *Land Rights and Development Reform in Remote Australia*, CAEPR Discussion Paper, no. 276, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 2005.
- 38 Nicolas Rothwell, 'Frontier too Far', *The Australian*, 4-5 February 2006, p. 17.
- 39 Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding' in Stuart Hall et al. (eds), *Culture, Media, Language*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1989, p. 83.