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The Future of Choice: Australian Indigenous Economic Development Policy Re-Imagined

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Introduction

Since first contact, Australia has struggled with conceptualizing and realizing the ideal future of Indigenous Australians within the context of colonial Australia's western governmental structures and beliefs. The eras of protectionism, assimilation and self-determination were attempts by Indigenous affairs policy to simultaneously govern and provide for Australia's Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizenry in a modernizing world. Recent policy debates of practical reconciliation and mutual obligation have paid considerable attention to Indigenous Australian outstation living practices, defined by remote locations and small mobile populations. The current policy rhetoric makes the claim that outstation living is not economically viable in the modern day world, and recommends that those living in these remote enclaves move to the nearest large town or city where they will be able to access the proper services and opportunities that will support their economic development.

This paper explores the politics and practicalities of this proposal. It shows how this most recent policy prescription is another step in Australia's Indigenous development policy's attempts to overcome the dilemma of marrying economic equality and cultural plurality, the question at the heart of Indigenous development discourse (Altman and Rowse, 2005, p.177). Practical reconciliation focuses its Indigenous development strategy on individual participation in the market economy, an approach similar to that of the assimilation era, with the added modern ability to assess policy success through measurements of statistical economic equality. Outstation living is highly antithetical to this mainstream Australian political ideologies of neo-liberalism and individualism (Altman, 2006, p.12). Thus, the practical reconciliation policy on outstations is an attempt to achieve what the assimilation era did not, and a rejection of what is seen as the failed practices of the self-determination era. Ultimately however, this narrow policy focus and discounting of the ideals behind the self-determination era, weakens the government's ability to identify and support fitting and sustainable Indigenous economic development options. To demonstrate its line of reasoning, this paper first presents an overview of the outstation movement within the context of a developing Australian Indigenous development policy. It then moves into an outline of the practical reconciliation view on outstations, concluding with a discussion of the challenges this presents to the long-term effectiveness of the policy.

Overview of Indigenous Development Policy and Outstation Living

The historical antecedents of outstation living provide a window into the twin propensities of Indigenous policy to pre-determine the expected outcomes of indigenous development initiatives, and to impose geographical placement on Indigenous communities in order to achieve these development outcomes. During the era known as 'protection', beginning in the 1880s, the Indigenous population was considered a dying race with a limited future. Indigenous communities were relegated to rural reserves in order to maintain the cohesion of their traditional lifestyles during the limited time left for their futures, away from the corrupting influences of modern Australian society (Altman and Rowse, 2005, p.160). Indigenous policy in this context was not challenged with the expectation that the Australian state's future would need to incorporate the existence of a culture so distinct from its own.

The development of policies during the assimilation era, around the time of the Second World War, came about with a changed conception of Indigenous futures. It had become clear that Indigenous Australians were not disappearing, indeed their population numbers seemed to be expanding, and policymakers needed to take in hand what that meant for Australia as a nation:

Broom and Jones asserted that, rather than dying out, the Aboriginal population 'will at least double in size within twenty years, and treble within thirty'. They saw urgency in these figures: while 'the cost of advancement is now high', 'it is less than it will be at any time in the next few decades.'
(Altman and Rowse, 2005, p.164)

It was now argued that reserves kept Indigenous people from their true futures of full integration with Australian society. Policymakers 'noticed how quickly and enthusiastically aborigines had changed from hunter-gatherer to useful citizen' (Altman and Rowse, 2005, p.164), which led to the policy that reserve communities be dissolved and Indigenous communities dispersed into urban areas to pursue advancement. The adoption of mainstream ways of living in urban settings were no longer corrupting the Indigenous culture, but indeed, were necessary for a feasible future as citizens of Australia (Altman and Rowse, 2005, pp.160-4).

This idea of citizenship that was hereby brought into the indigenous policy discussion added the dimensions of citizen rights and responsibility to the issues with which policymakers needed to grapple, and still grapple. No longer was Indigenous behavior and cultural practice something that could be objectified as the traditional ways of an unassociated people. Indigenous ways of life needed to be integrated into the understanding of what it meant to be Australian. With the status of citizenship bestowed upon Indigenous people, policymakers were required to take into account the entitlements that were conferred by such a status. This presented a paradox for assimilation theorists: as citizens, Indigenous people had the right to make choices in how to live their lives, yet, as time passed, the choices they were making did not reflect what were deemed appropriate choices of responsible Australian citizens. This citizen responsibility is what Rowse identifies as:

... the 'civic virtue and public spiritedness' presupposed in the social policies of contemporary liberal democracies ... 'consider the many ways' in which 'public policy relies on responsible personal life style decisions.' (Rowse, 1998, p.79)

Indigenous decisions were not mirroring the pre-determined outcomes of assimilation that were considered the only future for Indigenous communities, and indicators of successful policy implementation. An example of this paradox, one that continues to confound contemporary policymakers, came with the era's shifting of Indigenous people's livelihood support system from that of rations to a cash-based system. While this move was seen as 'a marker of citizenship' (Rowse, 1998, p.86), a means of liberation, and an entry into the market economy, Indigenous use of this cash promoted trepidation. Use of cash for the purchase of alcohol rather than underwriting better living standards for instance, was seen as a policy failure. Eventually, the assimilation era's policies, upheld by a vision of Indigenous people merging seamlessly into the mainstream population, guided by the careful introduction of citizen's entitlements, was seen as insufficient to produce its desired outcomes.

The outstation movement itself, which began in the 1970s, is typically viewed as an Indigenous response to the end of the era of assimilation policies. At first unsupported by the state, outstation economy was comprised of customary practices to maintain livelihood, and the effort was 'hailed as Aboriginal people seeking economic independence and self sufficiency' (Altman, 2006, p.5). This interpretation matched well with the new policy environment of 'self-determination' which developed into Australia's key Indigenous development goal in 1972 and continued to mature in tandem with the outstation movement. While the assimilation era held faith in the draw of the modern market economy and mainstream living standards to naturally merge the separate cultural spheres of Indigenous and non-Indigenous, this new policy approach strove to repair what was seen as a lack of negotiation between the mainstream and Indigenous cultures. Instead, self-determination policies aimed to bridge the gap by supporting Indigenous governance structures while incorporating traditional practices and histories into its development procedures. The results, such as the development of an Indigenous Sector, land rights determinations through the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (ALRA), and access to Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) opportunities, supported, and continue to support, the maintenance of outstation living (Altman, 2006, p.5).

The policy predicament of achieving pre-determined outcomes continued to haunt this policy approach, however, it was assisted by a developing ability to obtain statistical data on Indigenous communities. The 1966 Census produced for the first time, data on Indigenous Australian education and employment that could be compared with that of non-Indigenous Australians. A study conducted using 1971 Census data focused on Indigenous inequality, and showed clear differences in living standards, education levels and employment opportunity. Subsequent reports validated these findings and drew pictures of 'deep-rooted economic dependency' (Altman and Rowse, 2005, p.168). In 1987, the Hawke government promoted the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP), which in the spirit of self-determination, acknowledged the right of Indigenous citizens to choose the way of life they wished to pursue, with an understanding that this choice was predicated on historical and current social and cultural basis. However the AEDP's outcomes were still to be measured by quantifiable socioeconomic indicators, confounding a succinct reading of policy success or failure:

This duality of policy aims, 'equality' *and* 'choice', made program outcome indicators difficult to interpret. Indigenous people's continuing poor labor market status could be understood partly as a reflection of their different 'aspirations', 'values' and choices. If the Indigenous rate of employment continued below the non-Indigenous rate, were we to conclude that the AEDP was *failing* to achieve employment equity? Or was it rather that the policy was *succeeding* in allowing Indigenous peoples' choice not to be educated, employed and rewarded in the same ways that non-Indigenous Australians were? (Rowse, 2002, p.8)

Such a dilemma is precisely what is presented to policymakers today in the form of outstation living. Current day outstation compositions are varied, depending on their different histories and the diverse state land tenure and administrative services they are subject to. However, a general definition has been identified by Altman as: 'Communities, or infrastructural nodes, on Aboriginal land inhabited by a usually related, and always highly mobile, Indigenous population' (Altman, 2006, p.1). He further outlines, after noting difficulties with the collection of this data, some general

characteristics of outstations as recorded by the 2001 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey (CHINS): the total outstation population is close to twenty thousand, with each outstation averaging 20 inhabitants. Ninety five percent of outstations are located in very remote or remote regions of Australia, primarily in the Northern Territory (Altman, 2006, p.4). In terms of the market economy, this description is not one of community economic stability.

In the current era of practical reconciliation, government policy roundly states that such a community has no future economic viability. It argues that the self-determination era, in its attempt to support indigenous choice, prioritized and subsidized this choice through welfare programs, causing entrenched welfare dependency in the Indigenous population and creating barriers for the future development of Indigenous Australians. The next section presents an overview of the course of action that the current government is advocating will take the place of these perceived failures in the self-determination approach. It shows how the current approach explicitly prioritizes mainstream economic development as the economically viable future of Indigenous people and refuses to place importance on Indigenous choice in their economic development, instead depicting counter-policies as emotional and irresponsible pleas to underwrite an Indigenous people not living up to their responsibilities as Australian citizens.

The Progression of Development: Current Policies and Outstations

In her address to the Australia and New Zealand School of Government at the Australian National University in December 2005, then Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs Amanda Vanstone made the case for the Howard Government's Indigenous development policy prescription. Taking the discussion of Indigenous citizen rights, responsibilities and futures that has been developing in the policy discourse, Senator Vanstone outlined a road toward an Indigenous Australian future that does not include outstation living.

The Howard government's approach to Indigenous development is a pragmatic attempt to address the problem that assimilation era policymakers did not expect. That is, Indigenous communities and individuals, when given the opportunity and capability to choose their economic futures, will not always take the expected road of mainstream participation in the market economy. Thus, practical reconciliation policies are now couched in the context of mutual obligation:

As they do with other Australians, all governments have to accept their proper responsibilities for First Australians. Government departments have to deliver ... Equally, Indigenous people have to accept responsibility and play their part. (Vanstone, 2005)

The Howard government is in this way, able to explicitly outline the responsible path that Indigenous people must take, as a requirement in return for the rights and privileges that have been bestowed unto them as citizens of Australia.

Practical reconciliation also builds a view of an Indigenous future that synthesizes the administration's criticisms of the self-determination era. It champions the viable economic futures of Indigenous children in a modernizing world, pointing towards recent self-determination policies' permissiveness towards cultural difference as leading to ineffective development and entrenched corruption:

In the name of self-determination, it seems that ATSIC did little more than set up Indigenous people for failure. The hands-off approach of governments – at all levels – helped institutionalize mismanagement, corruption and exploitation ... For too long we have accepted a different standard for Indigenous people. The understandable abhorrence of the injustices of the past has led in some ways to a reluctance to be critical and to respond firmly when we should have ... By doing so we condemn Indigenous kids to a life with less opportunity than as Australians, as First Australians, they are entitled to. (Vanstone, 2005)

This approach of practical reconciliation positions the Howard administration as a strong, realistic government that does not retreat from hard decisions that will enable tangible Indigenous economic development in the name of past injustices. It acknowledges that Indigenous Australians, as First Australians, are entitled to some form of reconciliation for hardships currently being suffered, partially as a legacy of colonization, hardships evocatively demonstrated by socioeconomic data that is being collected in an ever-refined manner. However, it shows little faith in the need for ‘symbolic’ reconciliation beyond this acknowledgement, shying away from the purported weak and emotional position in which this put the policymakers and government of the self-determination era, weakness that is transferred onto current policymakers that espouse similar sentiments: ‘A reality check is nearly always more effective and much, much fairer than half-baked promises’ (Vanstone, 2005).

Vanstone’s statements are careful to include references to government responsibility towards its citizens in each mention of Indigenous citizen responsibility. This idea of mutual obligation or shared responsibility in tandem with the goals of practical reconciliation creates a neatly articulated plan that identifies a chosen future for the children of its Indigenous citizens, which counts equal economic status of Indigenous Australians as compared with that of non-Indigenous Australians as a key gauge of Indigenous advancement towards equality and fully recognized citizenship. Indigenous citizens are responsible for ensuring that their behavior enables their children to pursue the same futures that non-Indigenous children are pursuing. The government’s responsibility towards its Indigenous citizens in this matter is to provide the appropriate services so that equal economic status can be realized. This includes ensuring the availability of an income source through employment, the opportunity for homeownership, proper education and health services, and the infrastructure to support these services.

The very remote locations and small mobile populations that define outstation living do not allow the Howard government to pursue its outlined Indigenous development strategy. Remoteness makes the establishment of conventional market economies impossible, while small mobile populations complicate infrastructure and service provision, with government considering the concept of homes in more than one location as the doubling up of resource needs, and “the luxury of second houses in other places that (are) occasionally use(d)” (ABC, 2005). Mobility presents added difficulties for statistical tracking programs such as the Census, which has implications for a program that bases its measures of success in statistical measures of equality. The next section examines the way in which the current policy discourse tackles the challenges that outstation living presents to the achievement of its development goals.

The Missing Elements

Current outstation policy is based on a number of faulty assumptions and does not acknowledge Indigenous choice. This is made even more problematic because practical reconciliation's adherence to a belief in the market economy, coupled with a turning away from the approaches of the self-determination era means that it is unable to acknowledge these problems. Furthermore, this means that policymakers are unable to take advantage of existing Indigenous development knowledge, such as research into alternative development policies and lessons learned during the self-determination, to inform the addressing of these issues.

A key assumption underlying this policy is that urban areas are equipped for Indigenous urban migration. If Indigenous outstation communities adopted the prescribed policy of urban migration, settling would most likely occur in townships that are currently accessed as service providers through existing patterns of mobility. Demographic modeling has shown that if outstation communities were to permanently reside in these locations, infrastructure and service provision would quickly become overloaded (Taylor, 2007). Moreover, comparative research has actually shown that the infrastructure and housing provided in small indigenous towns versus larger towns show very little difference in quality or quantity (Altman, 2006, p.9). The policy also ignores the existing debate in growing remote townships that are experiencing an increased disturbance of law and order that should be dispersed back into outstation camps to alleviate social tensions (Altman, 2006, p.14). Ignoring these factors results in misplaced policy that hopes to mold Indigenous lifestyles to a certain vision instead of building upon already established mobility patterns that are regularly utilized to access services, building upon existing outstation infrastructure investments, and listening to the real experiences of Indigenous communities.

The policy's assumption that urban centers will naturally provide employment opportunities for individuals moving from outstations also needs further assessment. A 2001 comparison of townships and outstations in Western Arnhem Land shows that percentage employment appeared superior in the outstation environment (Altman, 2006, p.11). Current advocates for abolishing outstation living choose to discount this employment figure, since much of outstation employment is provided through the CDEP scheme. In their view, the CDEP job should be a bridge for Indigenous individuals to gain the relevant employment skills in preparation for eventual participation in the market economy. In the case of outstations however, CDEP employment is more often than not the only form of income-producing employment, with little hope of participants moving to 'real' jobs if they choose to continue to reside in outstations.

However, this argument misses the existence of the customary economy, which provided survival prospects from the onset of outstation living, and still contributes meaningfully to the livelihoods of Indigenous outstation communities, allowing them to maintain their choice to live on outstations, and filling the need for natural resource management on the land. The fact that this activity is not monetized means that it is not included in income or employment calculations, and unheeded by the current movement for the elimination of outstations (Altman, 2005, p.34). Furthermore, even if Indigenous people were to move to areas with existing market supported jobs, it has been shown that economic opportunities are not as abundant in urban areas as the current policy purports, especially

for indigenous individuals. In fact it has been shown that relative employment probabilities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers are the same when comparing urban and remote regions (Biddle and Hunter, 2006, p.15). A partial reason for this difficulty in accessing employment in all areas of Australia has been found to be labor market discrimination (Hunter, 2001, p.122).

Despite the exposed difficulties of urban employment and living for Indigenous people, and an existing base on which to build an innovative Indigenous economy, current policymakers continue in their narrow adherence to achieving Indigenous economic development through urban migration. As Rowse has noted, in this view of indigenous development: '... the differences between Indigenous and other Australians (are) to fade away; the nation's unity ... predicated on the elimination of 'difference'. (Rowse, 2002, p.2)

However, how does such a view deal with Indigenous choice to pursue a livelihood that highlights the differences that are supposed to fade away? CDEP jobs were originally conceived of as a means to add choice into poverty-stricken Indigenous communities: local employment through CDEP could be chosen as an alternative to receiving unemployment payments. In this sense, CDEP work in outstations is 'the institutional framework that allows individuals a choice about the kind of social experience that a job makes possible', and thus is a successful component of facilitating indigenous choice (Rowse, 2002, p.13). In its attempt to achieve mainstreaming of the Indigenous workforce, the practical reconciliation policy model leaves no room for these employment choices, instead inviting outstation communities into an urban environment that has been shown to contain similar infrastructural and employment difficulties.

Failure to account for and understand Indigenous choice means that policymakers are basing their recommendations on a faulty understanding of what will lead to successful Indigenous economic development. Achieving such an understanding is a difficult policy task, an impossible if beginning from such a narrow focus as practical reconciliation, because the lived Indigenous reality shows such an enormous diversity in its choices. Just as there are vocal advocates, such as Noel Pearson, within the Indigenous community supporting a mainstreaming push, there are outstation communities and other Indigenous individuals that have shown through their lifestyles that they choose to live in a way that does not follow government expectation.

At the very basic level, Indigenous people have proved to be less responsive to economic factors that normally promote migration (Biddle and Hunter, 2006, p.i). It has been maintained by Peterson that locational disadvantage cannot provide adequate reason for Indigenous employment choices. Members of the community of Mutijulu, which is largely Indigenous and located close to unskilled jobs in the hotel industry, do not readily choose these employment opportunities, but instead look for work on the land as rangers, or other means of livelihood. Peterson states:

The lack of engagement with the mainstream labor market has to be understood in terms of motivation, incentives or the lack of them, and the social location of Aboriginal people within the Indigenous domestic moral economy. (Peterson, 2006, p.13)

Not attempting to gain an understanding of this domestic moral economy and the motivations and incentives of Indigenous outstation communities, in an attempt to hold

tight to a development prescription, will not work. Yet without bending and shaping policy to Indigenous choices, the Australian government is meeting what it sees as its responsibilities by only providing infrastructure and services to the dominant culture; and is shown to be less able to recognize the needs of its Indigenous citizenry and adapt its policies. This does not go unrecognized by Indigenous communities:

The frustrations inherent in a relationship based on this control of the discourse of progress are well publicized. They are the statistics that refuse to budge, the grass-roots community spirit that will not kindle, the elusive self-management forever out of reach. Yet these indicators fail to account for both the integrity of indigenous cultures and the complexity of the relationship with the West. However, in all the debates that rage in western society about the plight of indigenous people, there is rarely an acknowledgement that they might have aspirations in the relationship other than those formulated for them by outsiders, the failure of which also cause them disappointment and frustration. (Folds, 2002, p.158)

Folds shows the ability of Indigenous communities, when presented with a single economic development option, to adapt their stated needs to obtain what support they can within the limited context allowed by the government. Support, once received, however, can be used to achieve Indigenous-determined outcomes, but this constant negotiation results in disappointment on both sides of the arrangement. Unfortunately, insights such as Folds' are seen as placating Indigenous desires and not used to inform the search for solutions to the dilemma of Indigenous economic development, resulting in narrow and ineffective development prescriptions.

Conclusion

The practical reconciliation policy approach to Indigenous economic development has grown out of and as a response to a policy history of struggle against the impasse of merging Indigenous lived realities and a western government's definition of economic success. Today, this policy attempts to prescribe one road to Indigenous economic development, relying on a wholesale belief in the market economy and the need for Indigenous futures to articulate fully within this economy. The Indigenous outstation community's choice to live in the remotest areas of Australia and participate in patterns of mobility to access the necessary services for wellbeing and livelihood negate any possibility of the future choice outlined for them by practical reconciliation. However, because of the policy's narrow prescription, and rejection of alternative policy recommendations and lessons learned, it is unable to appropriately mitigate the existence of Indigenous community aspirations to adopt outstation living practices. By taking a wider view of Indigenous futures and taking into account Indigenous aspirations, the current policy would be able to take advantage of existing practices and research to inform a more relevant Indigenous economic development policy that would be applicable to outstation living.

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