

Submission for the Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

1. Background

My submission provides views on some of the major findings mentioned in the Draft Report based on my past experience working with remote communities in the Northern Territory. Whilst this experience was during the 1980s to early 2000s, your report suggests that nothing much has changed as far as progress in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. Thus my submission is my generalised comments and not a reflection of contemporary work experiences.

I worked in policy and programme areas in the Australian Public Service (APS), the Northern Territory Public Service (NTPS), non-government organisations, and statutory authorities such as the Northern Land Council and ATSIC. My speciality was Indigenous governance and local government thus much of my activities involved working with traditional owners and Aboriginal elected members. It was the seemingly systemic and long-term neglect by governments that eventually led me to leave Indigenous affairs, vowing I would never again work for the APS nor NTPS, and I chose a completely different career. I have, however, kept up my interest and activities in promoting social justice for Aboriginal people.

The Commission's Draft Report was like a breath of fresh air. Here is a critique that squarely targets governments' repeated failures despite their continuing rhetoric. Whilst I currently do not work in any Closing the Gap initiatives, the point of my submission is to impress to the Commission that many factors of government inaction are deeply entrenched in the political mindset and public service. Overcoming this will, therefore, be difficult to budge.

2. Draft Report findings

My submission focuses on these comments, pp 3-4:

The commitment to shared decision-making is rarely achieved in practice;
Government policy doesn't reflect the value of the community-controlled sector; and
The transformation of government organisations has barely begun.

3. Governments and public servants won't let go

Clearly there is a power imbalance between remote communities and governments. Despite the rhetoric of giving communities more decision-making roles, it is often tokenistic. The 'C' word gets bandied around a lot (Consultation) when it should be Negotiation. The role of the public servant is to serve the government, not the public, hence they try to mould community aspirations to fit government policies and programmes.

There are some public servants who 'get it' and understand the ethics of shared decision-making, handing over control, and letting go. But my experience was that many of them ended up like me - beaten by the system, burnt out, and disgusted with decades of government inaction.

The amount of bureaucratic requirements for funding submissions, monitoring and reporting, then acquitting grants weighs many Aboriginal organisations down. Indeed, it is public monies so there needs to be accountability but it seems that when government departments or Ministerial decisions are found to have squandered taxpayer dollars there is not the same outcry as when the same accusations are levelled at Indigenous organisations. Self-management and self-determination mean that organisations should be given the freedom to be flexible and learn from their mistakes.

There is often a disconnect between what Aboriginal people are saying (and have been saying for decades) and what actions governments take (if any.) Despite government rhetoric, consultation with Aboriginal communities is piecemeal, undertaken in culturally-ignorant methods, or not done at all. I witnessed countless episodes of good-meaning non-Indigenous public servants who misunderstood what they were being told during 'consultations' with the result of yet another failed project.

Here is the mismatch:

Government agencies' characteristics:

- skilled in policy and programme development but not necessarily directed towards what the communities say they need and want;
- high turn-over of staff hence a lack of consistency;
- staff are predominantly from outside the community and have short-stay visits to communities (FIFO for a few hours);
- may have little cross-cultural skills and many do not understand the difference between being 'culturally-safe' and cross-cultural communication;
- often do not have a comprehensive understanding of the implications of constant and long-term ill-health, poverty, intergenerational welfare, social injustice, and the legacy of colonialism (e.g. government staff can look forward to a comfortable retirement at an age where Aboriginal people are nearing death);
- may not be familiar with community dynamics and protocols or the history of the community, including relationships with people placed there from other areas;
- with regard to Aboriginal land in NT, many public servants misunderstand who are traditional owners (those who speak for the land/community) and sometimes traditional owners do not live on country; some communities have hundreds of traditional owners but only a few will be 'consulted'; being an elder does not necessarily mean they are a traditional owner;
- there is often a complex mix of programmes and policies that overlap agencies and with gaps, and are constantly changing; sometimes it is not clear how these programmes and policies actually match community aspirations;
- programmes are mostly submission-driven with community aspirations being moulded to fit into agency or government policy and submission requirements;
- usually designed along the lines of a Western Frame of Reference; and
- most importantly, hold the 'funding purse-strings.'

Aboriginal Community Organisations' characteristics:

- established and run by enthusiastic and motivated local people to pursue improvements to their community within a local framework of reference;
- often have to contend with inflexible rules and procedures that are imposed under governing legislation;

- burdened by a constant stream of outside visitors from agencies 'pushing their own barrows' of programmes or policies (once, in a central desert community, I counted 23 government vehicles all visiting for their own agendas and none of them co-ordinated their visits amongst themselves); and
- constantly battling for more funds and resources.

Communities/Individuals' characteristics:

- despite the onslaught of dispossession many NT Aboriginal cultures remain strong and resolute with traditional customs and law still practised;
- different cultures and societies, from urban to remote settings (thus a 'one size fits all' approach is fraught with difficulties);
- possess many strengths and capacities based on thousands of years and generations within viable social, political, economic systems, e.g. a traditional ceremony requires managers, suppliers, caterers, accommodation organisers, entertainers, accountants (I am using Western terminology) so governments should recognise these skills are transferable, i.e. there is not necessarily a 'traditional' vs 'Western' community system (indeed, that is a strength of Aboriginal communities in that they had been able to adapt to changing circumstances since colonisation);
- tend to remain in their communities throughout their lives yet 'outsiders' come and go;
- predominantly comprise a younger demographic who will be tomorrow's leaders yet they are plagued by lack of education, ill-health, and unemployment;
- raked by disadvantage, poverty, lack of infrastructure, unemployment, ill-health (etc);
- eager to participate in the nation's prosperity as evidenced by business and tourism ventures and establishment of organisations; and
- concerned at the constant barrage of changing policies and programs from 'outside'.

Surely the ultimate aim of Closing the Gap is sustainable and capable communities for present and future generations. Government agencies need to move from service providers to partner facilitators in responding to community needs. Community organisations then engage as an equal partner and actively direct and participate in the planning and policy development process. Finally, individuals can determine their futures and make life choices equivalent to other Australians. However, it would appear this transition is not happening, given the Commission's findings that 'the transformation of government organisations has barely begun.'

4. Short-term programmes and funding cycles

One can never forget a comment made to the *Little Children Are Sacred* report (2007: Wild and Anderson) from a resident in a remote community: "We have a 20-year history of six-month programmes". Although that report is 16 years old a re-read of the background descriptions show not much has changed although some grants are longer term but most reflect election cycles.

5. Governance a low priority

Naturally I am biased because most of my career in Aboriginal communities focused on leadership and governance. However, no one could argue that having strong community leadership (whether

that be through traditional authority or elected members of land councils or local government councils) coupled with appropriate governance structures allowing for transparency and community control is vital for a community's independence and progress. So often I see parliamentary inquiries into various aspects of remote community services or functions where 'governance' is the last term of reference, if it is there at all.

Amalgamations of NT local government councils some years ago took away a strong focus on local decision-making. Large shire councils mean greater demands on elected members due to a wider range of services (caused, in part, by NT and federal government cost-shifting to local councils). As well, most of the executive are non-Aboriginal, a far cry from my days in local government where our aim was for local residents to be employed as senior staff. So where is the aim for local control at the executive level in local government councils?

It is good to see the Coalition of Peaks formed as a strong group to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and hopefully governments will utilise their expertise.

6. Need for urgency to act

There should be no need to detail the appalling lack of government support to remote communities which has occurred for many decades. People living in these areas number among the highest rates in the world for renal disease, Rheumatic Heart Disease, respiratory and cardio-vascular disease, ear and eye ailments, skin disease, suicide, family violence, malnutrition, and etc. These conditions are caused by lack of housing, poor educational facilities, unhealthy water supplies (if water supply exists at all), and etc. Many communities in the NT have a funeral every week - imagine the stress all this has on individuals and families, they are in constant sorry-business mode! The poverty and misery is ignored by politicians except when some issue becomes what I call an "Overnighter" when media attention causes politicians to lament the "national shame" but then they move on to some other issue and all is forgotten until the next time it is raised.

The media deserve criticism in this regard. Whenever there is a horrific murder of a white woman in a southern city there are nation-wide street protests and rallies receiving media attention for several days. But when an Aboriginal woman is murdered (which happens often, sadly) in the NT there is little or no coverage in southern media, no street rallies, no protests. When a southern town runs out of water, governments are quick to cart in supplies with much media interest. But what media coverage has there been for the many NT remote communities with decades of poor quality water supplies that have unsafe levels of arsenic and uranium? The housing crisis is the latest issue in Australia with commentary almost every day in the media. But many remote communities in the NT have been in crisis for decades with overcrowding, so where was the media attention then? More than 20 years ago the Indigenous Housing Authority of the NT revealed that \$1 billion was needed just to get through the backlog of housing need but only a fraction of that amount has been made available in successive government budgets. Yet the Prime Minister was able to suddenly find \$200 million for women's sports in response to the unprecedented media attention on an international soccer game. Imagine what would be the response if the media gave the same amount of concentration on the plight of remote communities?

In past years many international organisations, such as Medecins Sans Frontieres, the World Council of Churches, and Amnesty International, visited remote communities and objected to this situation. Apart from the 'Overnighter' media reports at the time, not much has been ongoing in the media. Surely Australians should question their governments when such famous organisations point the finger at a supposedly rich, first-world country?

Many years ago the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner was in tears as he released his report at a media conference, such was his distress at the dire statistics. He could barely control his anger at the media pack, reproving them for not regularly reporting on the issues. The media personnel present had no response but despite the condemnation, nothing changed nor has it to modern times where Closing the Gap reports receive 'Overnighter' responses. There are exceptions as some press publications do provide ongoing coverage but sometimes the reports are highly subjective.

Coupled with the need for urgent action is the realisation that some initiatives may take decades for positive outcomes to arise. The opposite is also true. In the 1990s the federal government slashed the Indigenous affairs budget by a third with the result that, almost overnight, important programmes were scrapped or massively under-funded such as night patrols, family violence, women's resource centres (used as shelters), youth centres, arts and culture, language, and so on. Those of us working in these areas said to each other "This will come back to bite us in 20 years." And so it has. Many observers say the current crime wave issue in the NT is rooted in intergenerational problems. So we have to look to the past to see its genesis. If preventative and support programs are cut, be prepared for the issue to escalate well into the future.

Let us not forget that behind the sorry statistics and woeful disadvantage are human beings. As I write now, and as this submission is being read, people in remote communities are dying. We should all be ashamed.

7. The Voice

I will end on a comment about the proposed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to parliament. The only reason why this is being requested is because for years and years and years, public servants and politicians have failed to act on what Indigenous people have been telling them to do. I think it was Bill Stanner who said "Aboriginal people keep not wanting what we keep wanting them to have". Too true. So Australia has to take the extraordinary step of spending millions of dollars in a climate of fiscal restraint, for a referendum to change our founding document to establish a body that will politely suggest those public servants and politicians do their job - listen and act.

I am not advocating a return to an ATSIC-type organisation. I am merely repeating what many respected commentators keep saying - having Indigenous direction often leads to better outcomes because the programmes are structured according to the needs of the recipients. Better outcomes mean healthier people, more productive people, and less burden on health systems. Healthier, happier people with jobs means more revenue and income for the government. A win-win situation.