



**Evaluation, Monitoring and Learning to support
First Nations Empowerment, Development,
Productivity and Closing the Gap**

Cape York Institute

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Contents

Introduction	3
Structural reforms are a necessary precursor	3
Evaluation is not the ‘silver bullet’ often suggested	5
In some areas of policy and practice there is a substantial evidence base — yet it is largely ignored	7
Evaluation must become a key enabler of Indigenous empowerment	8
Data must be disaggregated to support regional and local decision-making	11
The Productivity Commission’s functions must support the agency and authority of First Nations	12
References	13

Introduction

The Productivity Commission has played a critical and leading role in monitoring and some limited evaluation to date of the entrenched and intergenerational disadvantage affecting Indigenous people across Australia. The opportunity provided by the Treasurer, the Hon. Josh Frydenberg MP to the Productivity Commission, to develop a whole of government evaluation strategy to improve outcomes for Indigenous people, coincides with a great deal of momentum for broader structural reforms needed to transform a fundamentally broken system.

It is clear from the Productivity Commission's reporting over the past 15 years that deep and urgent reform is required. Despite Australia's wealth, and the substantial resources devoted to Closing the Gap, there continues to be too little progress and further declining trends in many leading indicators of the economic and social wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In Indigenous affairs often there is a lack of evaluation, where evaluations are conducted they are often not very useful in terms of driving change, and evaluations of interventions that show clear and convincing outcomes in Indigenous affairs are few and far between. It is clear the evidence about 'what works', including for whom, under what circumstances, at what cost and why, remains scant.

Over the past 20 years there have been regular calls for more and better evaluation, but we cannot take a simplistic approach. It is not straightforward equation that more and better evaluation, will necessarily lead to better evidence-based policy and results.

Structural reforms are a necessary precursor

Structural reforms that empower Indigenous people at every level, including locally and regionally, are fundamental to improving outcomes. These structural reforms are a necessary precursor to achieving transformative improvements to Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning.

Put bluntly, the current top-down 'system' of governance, funding, policy and service delivery to Close the Gap on Indigenous disparity can be likened to a 'spray and pray' approach — action occurs, and substantial resources are distributed, through a large but disjointed array of centrally controlled administrative silos across all levels of government. The current top-down bureaucratic 'system' cannot Close the Gap, even if a whole-of-government evaluation strategy is put in place.

There is public policy agreement about the need to establish a new partnership with Indigenous people to Close the Gap — one that empowers Indigenous people on the ground to play an active role in solving the problems they face and seizing their opportunities.¹ This

¹ See e.g. the Liberal Party's policy platform ahead of the 18 May 2019 Federal Election, <https://www.liberal.org.au/our-plan-support-indigenous-australians>. See also e.g. COAG (2017), annual

policy consensus in Australia is consistent with assembled knowledge from across the world — development does not occur where there is a lack of active, effective and lasting participation of the intended beneficiaries. On the ground ownership is vital.

It is now well recognised across Australian governments, that structural reforms are needed to put a new partnership in place, including so Indigenous Australians can exercise greater agency at the regional and local level to Close the Gap. Improving the approach to Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning must be seen in this context. Devising and implementing an Indigenous evaluation strategy *must be pursued as a critical component of the broader structural reforms needed to Close the Gap on Indigenous disparity*. Trying to improve Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning efforts in a manner unconnected to the broader structural reforms needed, will result in partial and incremental improvements, at best.

To achieve the transformational change that is required, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning must be embedded at the heart of the broader structural reforms needed to improve outcomes for First Nations. The Cape York Institute has advocated over a number of years:

1. That such reforms enable an empowerment, development and productivity agenda, so local and regional communities can lead their own people and places to Close the Gap.

For example, the 2015 *Empowered Communities: Design Report* set out structural reforms to enable new empowering partnerships at the local and regional levels, so that First Nations people can exercise their own agency and authority together with governments to make decisions, use resources more productively, achieve development outcomes, and Close the Gap.²

In Cape York these details have been further developed, including through extensive and ongoing co-design under *Pama Futures*.³

2. For constitutional recognition and the *Uluru Statement from the Heart's* proposals for an Indigenous Voice, so that First Nations people have a say in the decisions made about them.

In developing the model for constitutional recognition and the details of the Voice, there is an opportunity to put in place the structural reforms needed — to enable a comprehensive and cohesive new partnership between governments and Indigenous

Closing the Gap addresses made by various Prime Minister's, and Rudd's National Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples in 2008.

² Note many of the recommendations from Empowered Communities have also been wholly endorsed by the Queensland Productivity Commission (QPC) inquiry into *Service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities* completed in 2017.

³ See e.g. <http://pamafutures.org.au/> and the 2018 *Pama Futures: Empowerment and development agenda to close the gap on Indigenous disparity in Cape York Peninsula*, although note that the details have continued to evolve including through further co-design.

Australians, one that empowers Indigenous Australians at every level, especially at the regional and local levels where the real change to people's lives and futures must occur.

Although the need for structural reforms to enable a new partnership is currently widely acknowledged, the risk is that hard reform will once again be avoided and the status quo will remain. The Commission's important monitoring and evaluation work must continue to measure and report on the failures of the current approach, but it must also be stronger on the fact that the evidence makes a compelling case for deep structural reform. The Productivity Commission's *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy: Issues Paper* does not make it clear whether the Commission will assess the case for structural reform, or if it intends to narrowly focus on developing an evaluation framework for the status quo, including for Closing the Gap (refreshed or otherwise) and the *Indigenous Advancement Strategy*. As noted by Gary Banks, the former long serving Chairman of the Productivity Commission:

...it is said that the greatest tragedy of failure is failing to learn from it. But that seems to be the predominant history of Indigenous policies and programs (Productivity Commission 2013, p.18).

Banks's astute observation was made in 2012. Since then the Commission has produced various excellent compendia, continuing to track a failing system. A new partnership is needed — *structural reforms must put First Nations and their agency and authority at the helm in a proper partnership with governments — including with respect to Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning.*

Evaluation is not the 'silver bullet' often suggested

First Nations want to Close the Gap on inequality. Closing the Gap targets are indicators, but they don't tell us what we need to do. To Close the Gap on critical issues such as child protection, youth suicide, juvenile detention, incarceration, First Nations people must face a wide range of complex, interconnected problems, about which there is little certainty as to the effective solutions. For many First Nations families and communities such problems have become entrenched, cyclical and intergenerational, and there are many signs they are possibly becoming worse.

In general, Australia is faring poorly at breaking the cycle of entrenched disadvantage. The Productivity Commission's 2018 report, *Rising Inequality: a stocktake of the evidence*, highlights that Australia has failed to make any inroads into the problem of inherited poverty — despite 28 years of sustained economic growth. This is precisely the kind of entrenched disadvantage that characterises Indigenous communities in Cape York.

In such policy areas, there is every reason to believe Australia does not know what to do to truly turn the crisis around. That no-one has a compelling or convincing plan to tackle these wicked problems. These are areas of comprehensive policy failure, about which there is a very limited evidence base, much less one that would suggest any success can be simply replicated across the array of different Indigenous contexts.

In terms these complex challenges, the journey on which Indigenous communities must embark to Close the Gap is not a technical exercise. There is no well-established and reliable best-practice map to follow.

There is no single program, or even a perfect suite of programs that can address this entrenched, embedded, interrelated complex of causes. Indeed, the programmatic service delivery focus is part of the problem. For example, it is clear there are links between poor school attendance, substance abuse and violence, yet as Dillion and Westbury (2019) note “the policy and program-development process is invariably undertaken within bureaucratic ‘silos’, which guarantees either partial focus at best, or outright failure at worst. The inability of one policy or program to address problematic behaviours contributes to and reinforces the inability of other programs to address different behaviours. The continuation of one person’s problematic behaviour has ramifications for other individuals in that person’s social network and affects their capacities and capabilities. The impacts are felt by a much wider group than the individuals targeted by government policy and program interventions”.

In such circumstances merely appealing to ‘evidence-based’ approaches cannot Close the Gap. Complex disadvantage is not straightforward to change, and it is not straightforward to evaluate. It requires a holistic development approach, rather than more and more social service provision (see Empowered Communities 2015). In such circumstances, it is largely the case that Indigenous people must be supported by government to move step-by-step into the unknown, learning and adapting in a continuous manner, and making the map as we go along. First Nations people must be empowered to genuinely co-design and implement innovations in such areas of policy, informed by the evidence that does exist, but without some false pretence that evidence-based or best practices programs exist, and can be simply replicated or adapted to get us there.

As stated in the 2018 *Pama Futures* submission:

Indigenous communities are not laboratory environments, and the science of evaluation in such complex settings is not as precise as much of the rhetoric may suggest. For example, even the most rigorous impact evaluation of a program that identifies it is working (setting aside all the difficulties of small numbers and attribution in communities crowded with interventions), provides no guarantee that the program can be adapted or scaled up to work elsewhere. Success in these complex settings tends to be highly context specific. Often it is a naïve idea to think that you can evaluate programs ‘here’ and adapt them to solve the problem ‘over there.

In many areas innovation and experimentation must be encouraged through co-design so that new approaches are informed by the existing evidence base. This is likely to hold far more promise than by attempting to identify best practice or what works and then attempting to apply it in a particular community. While we can learn from approaches to development elsewhere, in many ways the change process required in each local context of an individual Indigenous community is unknown and

unpredictable. We need to work together, learn by doing and from collective experience, and iterate our way to holistic solutions (which are often not particularly amenable to meaningful impact evaluation).

It should be noted too, that the timing of evaluations can dramatically affect whether a program is perceived to be ‘successful’ at achieving its anticipated goals or otherwise. In Indigenous affairs, given the level of entrenched disadvantage that many program recipients face, it is critically important that interventions are given the time needed to produce outcomes and longer-term impacts (Banks 2011; Mikhailovich, Morrison and Arabena 2007). For instance, it is generally unlikely that sustained socio-economic change will be observed in a four- or five-year period. Much of the time, program providers are looking for generational change; this may realistically be what is required in terms of showing sustained change in social norms (CYWR evaluation 2013; Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 2007). For example, the Report that led to the NTER identified a minimum 15-year timeframe until substantive outcomes could be measured (Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 2007). However, this does not align with what are usually short funding cycles (at least within government), often of less than five years.⁴

In such circumstances, monitoring and evaluation for adaptive learning is critical. An adaptive approach avoids the assumption that development is a linear process. It aims to be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. Such approaches can be supported by government, but put First Nations at the center — it the First Nations of Cape York who are in it for the long haul, for example — and it is their learning as individuals, leaders and organisations that must be central.

With this understanding, a new partnership that takes an empowerment and development approach and is supported through structural reform, can also deliver a far stronger ability to try new things — resulting in greater innovation for particular local contexts, and learning over time.

In some areas of policy and practice there is a substantial evidence base — yet it is largely ignored

In some areas of policy and practice, there are very substantial evidence bases from which we can draw. Even where such evidence exists, it may be the case that decisions continue to be made on the basis of ideology or politics.

For example, in education there are evidence-based approaches to teaching reading and writing that clearly warrant high priority for trial and implementation in Indigenous contexts.

⁴ Quick funding cycles are particularly characteristic of government and thus, this is particularly problematic when attempting to administer programs that receive government support alone. The story can be different for programs receiving funding from other sources, such as philanthropy or the corporate sector (for example, see Chaney’s (2012, pp. 60-61) account of program funding requirements from the mining sector, which involve 10-20+ year funding agreements).

For example, there is a very large corpus of evidence supporting the effectiveness of direct instruction and explicit instruction teaching methods in many different contexts that extends back more than 50 years. These must be considered well-proven and effective instructional approaches that have been refined over the decades based on student test data and teacher feedback.⁵

There is such a large body of evidence in so many contexts proving the effectiveness of direct instruction and explicit instruction, that it must be said that if these methods fail when they are applied in the context of Indigenous schools, the weight of the evidence backing the methods themselves suggests the failure will be one of implementation rather than the failure of the methods themselves. In such circumstances, understanding where these methods are not producing the excellent results that should be expected would be of critical importance.

In areas such as this, where there is a great deal of evidence across a range of contexts, an approach to Indigenous evaluation could support a 'Race to the Top' program that offers a choice of school improvement interventions that are pre-selected on minimum criteria of (a) evidence of effectiveness, and (b) implementation capability. There could be a process for choosing interventions that involves parent communities and school administrators which allows for comprehensive information on the various interventions to be provided to enable the choice to be made. For example, interventions for inclusion in such a Race to the Top program could include John Fleming's Explicit Instruction Program, Chris Sarra's Stronger Smarter program, Good to Great Schools Australia program and Kevin Wheldall's MULTILIT program. The program could be made available to 200 Indigenous schools, and school parent communities, school leaders and system owners be allowed to shift or make adjustments of interventions after periodic evaluation. Running such a program for 10 years with a rigorous monitoring, evaluation and learning framework in place, has the potential to greatly accelerate progress.

Evaluation must become a key enabler of Indigenous empowerment

To Close the Gap there must be clear and direct connection between the national Closing the Gap targets, and on the ground plans and actions across Australia's regional and local Indigenous communities. There is currently no such connection to ground the national targets in day to day local and regional agency and actions — this is a fundamental flaw in the current approach.

A new partnership to Close the Gap must allow governments and Indigenous Australians at every level, especially on the ground in local and regional communities, to take responsibility together for Closing the Gap. The leadership that is required must in large part

⁵ See e.g. Hattie 2008; Hollingsworth & Ybarra 2009; Marzano 1998, 2003; Productivity Commission 2016; Rosenshine 1986, 2012; Sousa 2005. See also US National Reading Panel and Australian Rowe National Inquiry into Reading in 2005, and Wilson's 2014 review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory.

only come from the people whose lives and futures are at stake, those who are in it for the long haul. Local context varies across Australia, and the approach taken to Close the Gap in each region should vary according to the circumstances of each community and the action plans developed by them.

As noted in *Empowered Communities*, the current top-down system of government and bureaucratic control ensures key decision makers are not in it for the long haul. They are averse to taking risks and genuine innovations, and are rarely in it long enough to learn from their decision-making over time and to be able to use the sum of that experience to drive better outcomes. Fresh-faced ministerial enthusiasms at the state and national level ensure that decision-making in Indigenous policy feels much like a merry-go-round — replete with the same old traps and reinvented wheels.

Indigenous Australians on the ground must identify their own priorities when it comes to *how* to Close the Gap. There must be a big ‘downward’ shift from the current highly centralised approach, not only in terms of authority to act, but also in terms of accountability for results.

Foundational structural reforms are needed to establish new partnerships between governments and Indigenous people that agree action at the local and regional levels. At new local and regional partnership ‘interfaces’, Indigenous people, the Commonwealth, and state/territory governments would come together to negotiate, exercise their shared responsibilities and authority, and jointly agree priorities, plans and investment to Close the Gap.

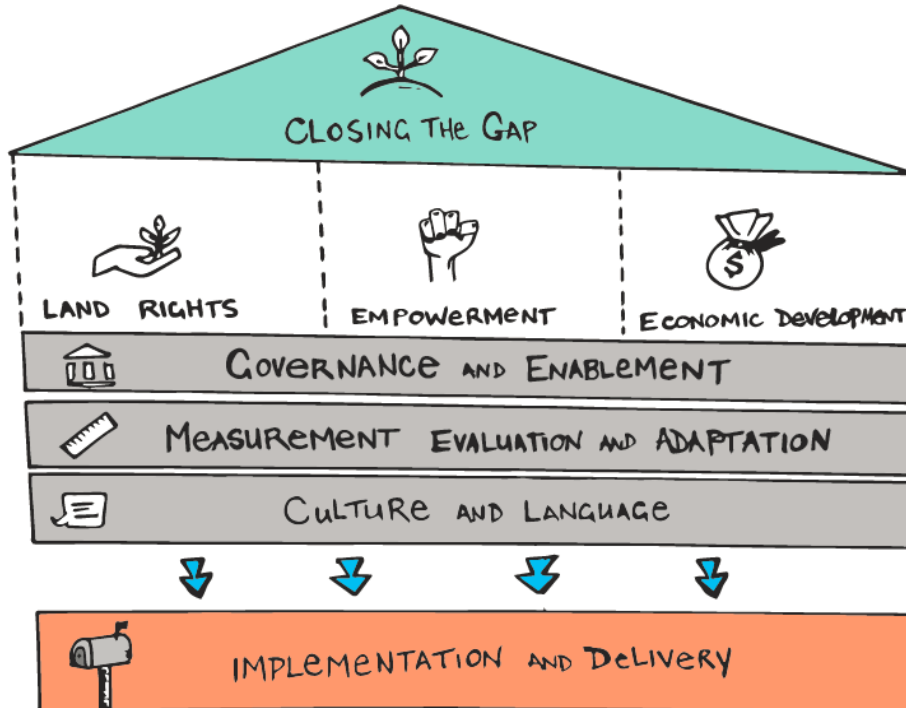
Clearly the shift required means too that Indigenous communities (whether urban, regional or remote) must be centrally involved in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, including in the design indicators of progress that are important to them, and establishing trajectories and timelines for achieving local Closing the Gap targets in their places.

Once established, the new local and regional partnership interfaces with government should have a key role when it comes to Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning. These partnership structures should track inputs and spending, and the productivity of outcomes being achieved. In this way learning over time would occur on the ground, and can also be articulated ‘upwards’ to the state/territory and national levels to inform progress throughout the system as relevant.

The universal regarding Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning for all Indigenous people in Australia is that it must enable First Nations to both understand the impacts of government support and investment in their region and communities, and to become a tool of local decision-making, adaptation and continuous improvement. Without this type of framework, the productivity problem for spending on Indigenous affairs will remain and Indigenous people themselves will continue to be cast as victims of fate or passive recipients of government services.

Pama Futures sets out a ‘bottom-up’ development and empowerment framework for Cape York, with measurement, evaluation and adaptation as a key foundational element (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Pama Futures: Three reform streams supported by strong foundations



Source: Pama Futures submission 2018, p. 44.

Building on broad based participation and community planning, under *Pama Futures* new partnership interfaces are to be established at the local and regional level throughout Cape York (see Figure 2). These partnership interfaces would not be new organisations as such, but would bring the parties together at a table to negotiate and exercise their responsibilities and authority jointly to agree priorities, plans and investment to Close the Gap. Through these partnership interfaces, decision-making and accountability for local service delivery and investment will shift to the community and regional level — improving coordination, reducing duplication and overlap, and ensuring clear lines of accountability.

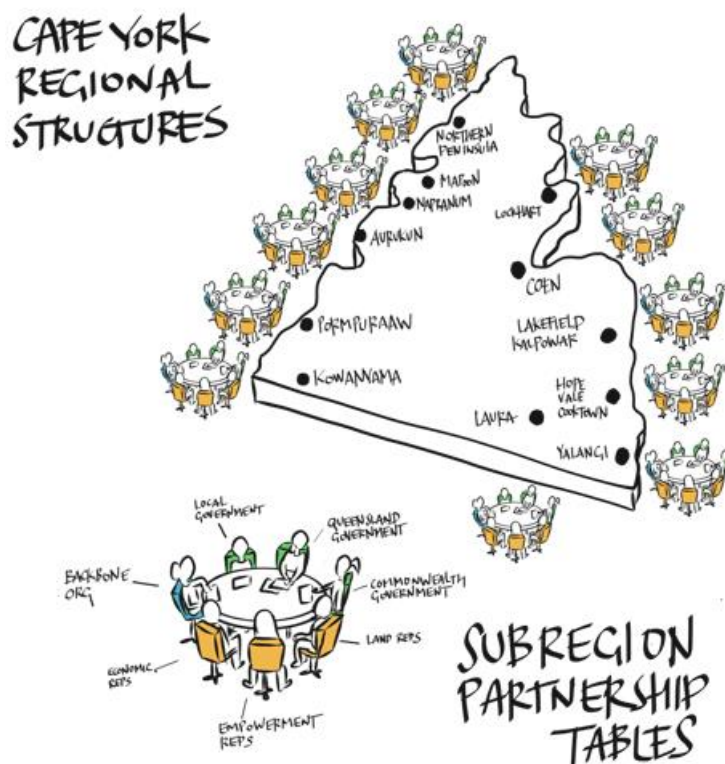
These partnership interfaces will enable partners on the ground to play a much more active role in monitoring and evaluation, learning and adaptation, including through monitoring expenditures and outcomes under community and regional agreements. It is through these partnership interfaces that local and regional Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning frameworks will be established and implemented. Under *Pama Futures* a monitoring and evaluation framework is proposed to provides the capacity to track and adapt as we seek to build 15 essential capabilities, which explicitly link to Closing the Gap indicators, including the ultimate indicator of Life Expectancy, and Cape York’s own indicators to be established through co-design. To be useful, the monitoring and evaluation framework must enable us to:

- assess whether programs/activities are having the desired outcomes and impacts over time
- inform decisions about program design, adaptation and re-design

- monitor and evaluate change at the highest levels (e.g. against *Pama Futures*) and at those levels closest to the ground (e.g. against a program's theory of change).

The framework would ensure there is a learning loop, and inform the regular iterative adaptation of policies, programs and service delivery that must occur so progress to build capabilities on the ground accelerates over time to Close the Gap.

Figure 2 Pama Futures: Community and Regional Partnership Structures, including to implement a new approach to Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning



Although the *Pama Futures* proposal has been developed by and for the remote and very remote context of the First Nations of Cape York, this structure could be adapted for other regions. For example, the Queensland Productivity Commission endorsed the same grassroots partnership structures in its 2017 inquiry Queensland-wide reform for discrete Indigenous communities.

Data must be disaggregated to support regional and local decision-making

The range and volume of administrative data used to compare Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians has grown substantially in recent decades, and such data now

regularly inform high-level assessments of improvement or lack thereof.⁶ Of course, such overarching, high level assessments of the data, on their own do not allow for the adequacy, effectiveness and efficiency of government expenditure on services for Indigenous Australians to be made. Further, it is at a place-based level that information should be most critical to informing changes — yet at the community or regional level it remains difficult to ascertain how many local, state and territory, and federal programs there are, how much money is spent on these programs, let alone how effective these programs are. Programs in a particular place must be satisfactorily assessed — it is precisely this kind of information that is needed to help inform decision-making about changes that need to be made in that particular community or region.

The Commission has improved the disaggregation of its data reporting in recent years by State and Territory to include urban, regional, remote, and very remote. However, this data disaggregation must go further to a regional and local level if it is to enable Indigenous agency and authority to take charge with governments. The Australian Government has announced it will make changes to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are involved in local and regional decision-making, and is now embarking on a co-design process.⁷ It will be important that Commission's current disaggregation of data changes as required to reflect and support the decision-making that is to devolve to First Nations regions and local sub-regions from these reforms.

The Productivity Commission's functions must support the agency and authority of First Nations

Given that the total spend on Indigenous Affairs in Australia is nearing \$35 billion annually it seems perverse and a measure of the problems, that under the current 'system' monitoring and evaluation does not improve results. In many instances, external 'independent' evaluators have for many years been appointed by government departments to evaluate their own failing or chronically underperforming programs. The perverse incentives embedded in these evaluation relationships helps to explain how little changes year-on-year in the current service provision model.

The Productivity Commission, alongside the ACCC, plays a critical role as an independent umpire of the performance of the institutional and regulatory system across Australia. In Indigenous affairs, this power has been hobbled on a number of fronts including by the limited resources that the Commission has to carry out its functions; the lack of references from the Treasurer to inquire into the performance of the current system; and the complete dominance of the inter-jurisdictional service delivery relationships, including through COAG.

⁶ E.g. Closing the Gap reporting, Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) reports, and Indigenous Expenditure Reports (IER).

⁷ See e.g. the Liberal Party's policy platform ahead of the 18 May 2019 Federal Election, <https://www.liberal.org.au/our-plan-support-indigenous-australians>.

A clear recognition of the deep problems in the current approach to Indigenous affairs in Australia is critical. Important public policy institutions like the Productivity Commission have been sidelined for far too long in the area of Indigenous affairs. All reform of the current system will only be as effective as far the problems at the heart of the current system are addressed, so that the very substantial public policy spending can become a far more cohesive attempt at addressing entrenched disadvantage, one that includes Indigenous people whose lives and futures are at stake at the very centre.

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