

Submission as a comment on the Productivity Commission's Draft Report of July 2023

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The 'Other Gap' and its Implications for the Commission's Work

The Productivity Commission's work is about Closing the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people over a number of socio-economic target areas; that is to say, the Commission's brief is about change. In several of its reports the Commission notes that this change towards Closing the Gap is more likely to happen in the non-remote than the remote parts of the country, introducing a geographic and spatial element to the Commission's analysis.¹

Although all Indigenous people have been subjected to colonialism, the impact of this has not been uniform across the country. Continuing and developing a spatial analysis, Tim Rowse and Lyndall Ryan have overlaid the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) map of remoteness with Rowley's earlier map of what he termed 'colonial' and 'settled' Australia (Rowley 1971). Rowley had argued that the geographical sequence of occupation had resulted in two quite different colonial regimes: one in the north and west and another in the south and east and that these different forms of colonisation resulted in quite different socio-economic outcomes for Indigenous people. Rowse and Ryan show that Rowley's geographic distinction equates roughly to the present day ABS classification of remote and non-remote; that is to say that the impact of colonialism has varied by remoteness (ABS 2003; Rowse & Ryan 2019: 218).

The results of this geographically variable colonialism have carried over to the present time and can be related to aspects of the Commission's review. Appendix A utilises the results of research that has mapped more recent statistical data, showing that there is a difference between the socio-economic status of Indigenous people living in remote and non-remote regions with respect to ten of the Commission's targets, for example those relating to: education; training; employment; housing; suicide; land; and Indigenous language.² Taken as a whole, these results represent what I term 'The Other Gap', one that exists between Indigenous people both geographically and statistically.

The theory of change proposes that change is more-or-less likely to occur depending on the degree to which appropriate conditions for change exist. As noted above, change towards meeting the targets has varied by remoteness, and it seems appropriate therefore to identify the conditions that might account for this variation. This may also reveal which of the conditions have the greatest impact, and where most effort to close gaps should be applied.

¹ In 2003 the ABS devised a measure of 'remoteness' across Australia based on several indicators and produced a map of gradations from 'Major Cities; Inner Regional; Outer Regional; Remote; to Very Remote (Walter & Peacock 2019: 68). With respect to the ABS map, in this submission I use the term 'remote' to compose the Remote plus the Very Remote, and all the other gradations to compose the 'non-remote'. This reveals that much of the country (some 70%) makes up the 'remote and very remote' – this being largely the impact of Australia's vast deserts.

² The data used in Appendix A are derived from earlier sources such as the ABS 2016 Census; CHINS 2006 and NATSISS 2014-15. However, it is unlikely that the general picture has changed much since then.

Conditions for change in the non-remote?

The non-remote parts of the country include the best quality land and a temperate climate, the land type and climate to which the colonisers were most familiar. The colonial project spread over time from the south-east in 1788 to the west and north (Rowse & Ryan 2019) and so non-remote people have had contact with the colonial system for all of the colonial project. The majority of the national Indigenous population lives in the non-remote parts where they are an extremely small proportion of the total population (Walter & Peacock 2019: 69).

The non-remote is the heartland of the Australian mainstream economy and so provides access to educational and training facilities, mainstream jobs and career pathways. Indigenous people there are subject to standard labour market conditions. In the main, non-remote Indigenous people have engaged with the national non-Indigenous socio-economic model, namely to become educated and to sell their labour (Rowse & Ryan 2018: 218). This is supported by the data in Appendix A. It is important to note however that they have had the opportunity to do this by having access to educational facilities and a developed labour market – they have had access to the conditions for change.

Conditions for change in the remote?

Appendix A shows that people in remote parts are less likely to have reached many of the Gap ‘targets’ than have those in the non-remote - they have changed less than have those in the non-remote.

The climate is much more extreme than in the non-remote with very hot and wet summers and dry winters: the ‘wet’ and the ‘dry’ and this has an impact on economic activities. It is estimated that the extreme climatic conditions will actually increase over much of the remote (Morphy, Arthur & Green 2019: 32-5).

A small proportion (25%) of the national Indigenous population lives in the remote but there they tend to be a large proportion of total regional populations. In some remote parts Indigenous people are almost 91% of the population (Walter & Peacock 2019: 68-9).

Most of the discrete Indigenous communities are found in the remote region to such an extent that we can equate remote living with community life (Walter & Peacock 2019: 70). In much of the remainder of this submission I use community life as a proxy for remote life.³ It is estimated that only 15% of the national Indigenous population live in discrete communities.⁴

People in the remote region are more likely to have some form of control over, or access to, larger areas of land than do those in the non-remote and a significant area of remote land is subject to Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) (Markham, Marshall & Morphy 2019: 146-49), though this land is not always of the most productive quality.

³ The former Department of Aboriginal Affairs collected comprehensive data at the community level. None of the present agencies do this and it is likely this hinders meaningful planning and program design. Dr John Taylor collects community and regional level data in some locations.

⁴ Despite this it is common for many commentators to conflate statements about Indigenous social and economic life with the word ‘community’. Because of this it is likely that most non-Indigenous Australians believe that most Indigenous people live in communities.

Historically, remote and community people have had limited access to secondary education facilities and this is still very much the case as is evidenced by their present attendance at non-remote boarding-schools (Schwab & Sutherland 2019: 199).⁵

Remote discrete communities are a recent type of settlement. They derive largely from the missions and reserves of the early 1900s with many being created in the 1960s (Walter & Peacock 2019:170; Morphy & Crawford 2019: 98; Horton 1994: 1326-29). Therefore, their residents have been exposed to mainstream systems for less time than have their non-remote counterparts.⁶

Communities, in their present form, represent a way of life that did not exist before colonisation; at that time people had access to all of the land and resources necessary for life. With dispossession from their lands and the creation of communities, their access to the means of survival and procreation was broken. Communities are government constructs which have little relationship to theories of place in which the location of places across the globe (towns, cities etc.) has some economic rationale. As a result people in communities have very little access to mainstream industries and jobs. Evidence for this is the prevalence in the remote region and community-sector of special labour market programs, for example the former Community Development Employment Program, the present Community Development Program and the Ranger Program (Hunter, Foley & Arthur 2019:185; Morphy, Arthur & Green 2019: 31). These programs are special to the remote region and have been put in place to compensate for the low level of mainstream economic activity and poor labour market.⁷ These programs do not appear to have provided the conditions for the degree of change necessary to meet the Commission's targets.

People in communities are more likely to speak an Indigenous language and to have an income of less than \$400 (Hunter, Foley & Arthur 2019: 191; Simpson 2019: 81). They are less likely to own their homes, but are more likely to live in over-crowded houses (Sanders 2019: 182). Although good data are not readily available, suicide rates appear generally higher in the more remote parts of the country (Hunter, Radoll & Arthur 2019: 242).

Conclusions and recommendations

Summary

As shown in in Appendix A, non-remote people have moved closer to achieving the Commission's targets than have those in the remote. It is likely that this is because the conditions in the non-remote are more conducive to change than are those in the remote.

If the aim is to close or even reduce the 'Other Gap' then it is reasonable to propose that the prevailing conditions in the remote need to be changed so as to be the same as, or at least similar to, those in the non-remote.⁸ Assuming that communities will remain, and as the remote is synonymous with community life, this form of change would also apply, at least to some degree, at the community level.

It is probably unrealistic to suggest that remote and community life can be exactly the same as life in the non-remote, for example the extreme climate and the quality of the land cannot be changed.

⁵ In 2005, 76% of communities were more than 50 kms from a secondary school (Schwab and Sutherland 2005: 196).

⁶ It took almost two centuries from first contact for the colonial administration to fully reach the more remote parts of the continent (Rowse & Rayan 2019: 218).

⁷ To the best of my knowledge the standard requirements of the social security system relating to employment and unemployment have never been applied fully over the remote region.

⁸ This would also apply to closing gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

However, it is possible to suggest which conditions should be changed so as to make the greatest impact on the remote. Until some 200 years ago religion and superstition were often major forces of change. Since then change has been driven largely by scientific knowledge and economic forces and this is where most effort should be placed.⁹

However, there is no requirement or law saying that the remote people have to change or adopt new practices. However, what is fairly certain is that without some major changes of conditions in the remote, the Commission's present task is at the best an uphill battle and at worst impossible.

The Targets

The current 'Review' presents an opportunity to reassess the targets: do all parties agree to the present targets; do all parties understand and agree to the changes necessary to meet the targets? There should be a survey to address these questions. The survey process should inform people of the present remote/non-remote gap in the socio-economic statistics. People of early working-age and across gender should have significant input to the survey.

Not all of the targets have the same value with respect to affecting change overall. The reassessed targets should be ranked by their potential to create overall change. The changes necessary to meet each target should be clarified.

The Data

Socio-economic data for remote and communities is extremely poor. It is virtually impossible to plan and make any change without good data.¹⁰

The system of community-level data collection prepared by the former DAA and described earlier should be re-introduced on a national scale. As an act of empowerment, community members of working age should be involved in building the data-base.

Communities and Industries

Presently there are few industries that can create a job market in communities. The mainstream economic system is that people move to where jobs are. However given that land has been repossessed under various forms of land rights and that much of that land is in the remote, it is likely that people will continue to live in remote communities into the foreseeable future. Therefore, to meet the Commission's targets with respect to employment, new industries will need to be introduced.

There should be an audit of the remote regions (including each community) to clarify the opportunities that exist for new industries. This task should be carried out by entrepreneurs and industrialists, not bureaucrats.¹¹ Given the significant area of land in the remote over which Indigenous people have some control, the audit should explore the potential for new land-based industries, and for the use of Indigenous Land Use Agreements.

⁹ This is similar to the emphasis on 'economic empowerment' for Indigenous people proposed by Professor Peter Yu on the ABC's 'Saturday Extra', 18 August, 2023.

¹⁰ It is unclear if the concept of development planning was ever introduced at the community level.

¹¹ As proposed by Professor Peter Yu on the ABC's 'Saturday Extra', 18 August, 2023.

Education

Education goes hand in hand with economic development and employment. There should be an audit, by region, of access to education and training facilities.

It is common for Indigenous commentators to say that for many Indigenous people, English is their second or third language. I suggest that this is said as part of the rationale for more Indigenous language programs (see Target 16, Appendix A). However, Indigenous languages were never written, there are few Indigenous language dictionaries (Simpson 2019: 84), and few industries or job opportunities that might stipulate an Indigenous language as a requirement. While it is more than likely that speaking an Indigenous language has a very strong cultural value it is less clear how this relates to meeting many of the targets, other than Target 16.

On the other hand, English is a very powerful language - some would say the most powerful in the world.¹² It is without doubt the language of science, industry, employment, government, and power in Australia; those who are proficient in it have more power than those who are not. If we take at face value the statement that for many Indigenous people English is only their second or third language, then it would seem logical to adopt a method of teaching English that has that focus, for example TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language).

Some consideration should be given to emphasising the TESOL method in remote Indigenous schools.¹³

A Master Plan

A master plan, with the potential to make the changes suggested above, should be developed and costed.

Appendix A, Degree to which non-remote and remote people meet ten of the Commission's Targets www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets

(Research findings and references)

Target 3) By 2025, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Fulltime Schooling (YBFS) early childhood education to 95 per cent. *Non-remote is a higher % than remote (Schwab & Sutherland 2019: 198)*

Target 4) By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55 per cent. *Non-remote is a higher % than remote (Schwab & Sutherland 2019: 198)*

Target 5) By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20-24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96 per cent. *Non-remote is a higher % than remote (Schwab & Sutherland 2019: 201)*

Target 6) By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70 per cent. *Non-remote is a higher % than remote (Schwab & Sutherland 2019: 206).*

¹² People in developing countries invariably want to develop their English skills, not least because those organisations from which they seek aid invariably use English.

¹³ Intensive four-week TESOL courses for teachers are available.

Target 7) By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15-24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 per cent. *Non-remote is a higher % than remote (Schwab & Sutherland 2019: 199).*

Target 8) By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 who are employed to 62 per cent. *Non-remote is a higher % than remote (Hunter, Foley & Arthur 2019: 185).*

Target 9a) By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent. *Non-remote housing has a lower number of persons per bedroom; and a lower % of multi-family households than remote (Sanders 2019: 182).*

Target 9b) By 2031,
All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households within discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities receive essential services that meet or exceed the relevant jurisdictional standard; and
All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households in or near to a town receive essential services that meet or exceed the same standard as applies generally within the town (including if the household might be classified for other purposes as a part of a discrete settlement such as a “town camp” or “town based reserve”). *Non-remote has a lower % of temporary dwellings than remote and non-remote services power and water are more likely to be mains supply (Sanders 2019: 178-9 and 181).*

Target 14) Significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero. *Non-remote has a lower rate of suicide than remote (Hunter, Radoll & Arthur 2019: 242).*

Target 15a) By 2030, a 15 per cent increase in Australia’s landmass subject to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s legal rights or interests. *Non-remote is less likely to have rights to larger areas of land than remote (Markham, Marshall & Morphy 2019: 146).*

Target 16) By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken. *Non-remote has a lower % of people speaking a language than remote; and a lower % of those 0-14 years speaking a language than remote (Simpson 2019: 81)*

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