

# Strife amid plenty:

## Aboriginal policy after land rights

Gary Johns

Standing at 'The Burrup', the island off Dampier, Western Australia, looking out to sea, it is impossible to escape the fact that much of Australia's future is wedded to its resources. Gas is piped in, processed and piped or shipped out, iron ore is dug up and shipped out, salt is scooped up and shipped out. Investment, wages and royalties flood in. The only thing in short supply is skilled labour.

In Karratha, which is the major population centre in the region, a couple of kilometres south of Dampier, the youngest Aboriginal child suffering from a sexually transmitted disease is three years old. Young Aboriginal girls carry babies that suffer from foetal alcohol syndrome. The monies recently paid as settlement to a native title claim in the nearby Roebourne region have been squandered. Men wander from the pub at 10 a.m. on

a Wednesday with a bag full of grog, ready to start another binge session. Aboriginal youths hang around the petrol station.

Sixty per cent of Aboriginal inductees to training courses for a major resource company in the Pilbara fail the drug test. Marijuana is the drug of choice, but it remains in the blood a long time. Of those 60 per cent who reapply, 100 per cent fail again. For some who are employed, Aboriginal managers report that managing people who do not readily accept the work ethic or the material rewards of modern existence is a tough job. Opportunity abounds for Aboriginal people in the Pilbara, so why are they not taking advantage?

### STRIFE AMID PLENTY

The juxtaposition of strife in Aboriginal society among plenty is not new—it has been this way for a long time. Strife in resource towns is common to people of all races, but most can move on. What is new is that resource companies, quite properly, have to deal with the traditional owners of the land who have legal standing and

political support from land councils. Traditional owners also have access to royalties, government benefits, and government and philanthropic support programmes. Do all of these policies and resources help?

The answer appears to lie in two contrary beliefs. Aborigines are unable to take advantage of opportunities, either because they are 'culturally' very different or because they are 'materially' very disadvantaged. If the first belief is true, then Australia has a problem. It has in its midst a people, original inhabitants, who can no longer live here, but who have rights to be supported. If it is the second, then the question is what interventions can overcome material disadvantage. Most frustrating is that Aboriginal policy seems to be guided by both beliefs, and by a confusion in policy goals between preserving culture and delivering equity. For example, it is clearly wrong that Aborigines are so different that they cannot participate in the wider society. After all, 70 per cent marry a non-indigenous partner. On the other hand, the kinship and obligation system in more traditional

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communities is so strong that it is difficult for some to fulfil their obligations to the workforce or to school or to the wider community. When the obligations are unfulfilled, governments try to make up for it by supplying materials and services.

Policies designed to overcome material disadvantage may not address problems of difference. They may work in benign settings, but not in traditional settings. Herein lies the conundrum of Aboriginal policy, the key to strife amidst plenty. Supporting communities in the desert, indeed allowing new ones to establish, not only encourages insurmountable ‘cultural’ differences, and places people further from the opportunities that exist in the region, it wastes the resources designed to overcome material disadvantage. The one aspect of culture that may be overcome by material programmes is that which stems from two or three generations of welfare dependence.

**FAILURE TO ADJUST IS DEADLY**

Those who believe that a land-based solution to Aboriginal strife is appropriate will see all programmes through the ‘difference’ prism. Adjustments will be principally on the part of the dominant society to accommodate the minority culture. Payments and services will be arranged as and where people choose to live, jobs will be sought where none exist or, where they do exist, pressure will be brought to bear on employers to accommodate cultural difference.

The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre, for example, aims to improve desert livelihoods. The partner organization, Desert Knowledge Australia, sells itself as ‘the unique knowledge of living well in the desert’. What is ‘living well’ in the desert? A better question for the CRC to study is what a realistic timeframe is for a community or an individual to adjust

to the fact that unless a major resource company comes to the community, there will probably never be a viable economy. The programme is trying to invent an economic base where none exists. In doing so, it slows the preparation of Aborigines for jobs sitting on their doorstep in the Pilbara.

There are around 1,000 discrete remote Aboriginal communities throughout northern Australia. There are, for example, now 180 excisions in the Kimberley—that is 180 differ-

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ent communities or townships that house just a handful of people, and the number is growing. Governments, or occasionally a land council, fund them. They are the price for buying peace between families and groups that fight over land and royalties and public funds. Interventions that rely on land generally consist of three pay-offs—money, jobs and new settlements. Unless there is a trust established, the money does not last long. Only some gain and retain the few jobs that wait. As for new settlements, the situation is perverse. The settlement involves housing, water reticulation, sewerage, electricity generation, telecommunications and so on. This infrastructure is very expensive to build and maintain. The organizations that know this best are emergency services, police, Telstra, medical services and all of the other organizations that have to provide services.

Where is this renewed in-migra-

tion leading? What is the purpose of the land rights movement when Aborigines cannot live, indeed do not wish to live, off the land? What is the balance of government obligations to provide services and to provide choices? Perversely, providing services to tiny remote communities denies the inhabitants the opportunity to engage in a world that one day they or their children will demand.

The re-possession of land or, in some cases, the *de jure* recognition of *de facto* possession, does not provide a solution to Aboriginal despair. It is more likely that the strife derives from the inability to bridge an overwhelming gap between two worlds, the closed and heavily kinship-obligated Aboriginal world and the open and transaction-based modern world. Solutions that ignore this fundamental problem are doomed to fail. Indeed, land rights and equal service provision may make adjustment more difficult. Mutual obligations may help, but may raise the price of adjustment. As Aborigines seek to re-establish a connection with their country by living on their country, sometimes abandoning existing digs for new ones, sometimes moving from regional centres where the experience has not been good, the cost can be huge. Not just in financial terms, but in the complete disjunction between the requirements of surviving in the dominant society and the regeneration of the old society. The cost is an even more alienated culture built on welfare dependence.

It is important in this regard to distinguish between isolation and insularity. Insularity, which can arise from the desire for solidarity, can of course be experienced in the middle of the city—Redfern, for example. Isolation may create problems of service provision, but providing services to someone or some group, which is integrated into the society, is not overly difficult. The combination of insularity and isolation is deadly.

Despair stems from an inability to settle on a future. Aboriginal children see aspects of the modern world all around them: petrol stations and cars, television, videos and computers, clothes and soft drinks. The essential missing element is to understand how these things came to be. The problem is the cargo cult—goods, which the ‘white man’ supplies endlessly, become expected. They become incorporated into the kinship relationship between Aborigine and non-Aborigine (wonderfully described by Ralph Folds in *Crossed Purposes*). When the whites stop the supply, the recipients are grossly insulted. This difficulty is at the heart of the new mutual obligation and shared responsibility agreements. These are meant to change the behaviour of Aboriginal recipients and communities. Whether shared agreements will be a sufficiently powerful tool to break the cargo cult is uncertain. They could be just another endless round of gifts.

**ADJUSTMENT IS INEVITABLE**

On the other hand, those who believe that Aboriginal people are already adjusting to the dominant culture, albeit in some cases poorly, realize that it is impossible to deny adjustment. What follows from this view is that payments and services should be delivered on the same basis as other citizens. Unemployment benefits should be delivered to people who look for work, children must attend school until the leaving age, illegal activities should be punished and so on. Programmes based on adjustment have a chance of succeeding. For example, of the 100 Aboriginal children at Karratha high school, 30 are chosen to enter an after-school programme. In essence, this programme supports their study each day at a safe and quiet place, away from home. State and federal government, and local resource companies support it. The programme is meeting

with some success. Boarding schools, where Aboriginal children can escape their ruinous home lives, also provide a chance of adjustment.

***What is the purpose of the land rights movement when Aborigines cannot live, indeed do not wish to live, off the land?***

Adjustment (or integration) means the use of state power to protect women and children without fear or favour. It means educating children in a way that makes them competitive for jobs in the real economy. It means being autonomous, free of dependence on political leaders for handouts. It means the freedom to leave one’s country and see the rest of the world, and free to return. In August, the Minister for Multicultural Affairs signed the first Regional Partnership Agreement in Australia, with the Ngaanyatjarra communities around Warburton in WA. He argued that ‘this is much more about people doing things for themselves’. It is to be hoped that this is so but, in the end, it is still government funding, and it begets dependency. Coincidentally, Shared Responsibility Agreements were also signed to improve essential and municipal services ‘in exchange for commitments from residents to pay power bills, settle outstanding debts and reduce power wastage’. The second element is more hopeful, but it will need to be strongly buttressed with welfare payment intervention and school intervention if it is to change behaviour. The fear is that, if this year the price of cutting school absenteeism is a swimming pool, what

will it be next year? CDEP is being reformed to ensure that people work for their money. The difficulty is that no government department can hope to enforce rules of mutual obligation or breach people for lack of proof of job-search in the desert. These places are a long way from a CentreLink office.

**A MODEL FOR PROGRESS?**

The adjustment path, criticized as assimilation, is for the present generation of young Aborigines in rural and remote Australia made more costly because of the flight to remote locations and the provision of services to such locations, and the cargo cult which places a net under non-viable communities.

Yet, previous ways brought reconciliation between adjustment to the modern world and a chance to walk in the other world. For example, take the 55-year-old WA Aboriginal teacher who has had a successful career. He was taken from his mother, his father was alleged to be alcoholic, and lived at a mission boarding school north of Perth. This form of intervention is not now favoured, even when a child is in danger, but it gave this man a life he would not have had. After 25 years in a successful career, he has left the employ of the Education Department. He has chosen to return to his country and to make money by explaining Aboriginal culture to resource companies, and to assist these companies in managing their indigenous workforce.

If government has led people down a path that suggested to them that it was possible to escape adjusting to the rules of a modern economy, a modern legal system, and a modern welfare state, they have consigned them to the dustbin of history. It creates strife amid plenty.

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