

# THE LEGACY OF HELEN HUGHES AO (1928–2013)

Helen Hughes dedicated the last decade of her life to improving policy for Indigenous Australians, explains **Alan Tudge**

In the last 15 years, there has been a great change in the discussion of Indigenous affairs, from a perspective that mostly emphasised rights and alleviating racism to a broader view. Few people have been more involved in that change than the late Helen Hughes, a former development economist of the World Bank, who dedicated the last decade of her long life to improving policy affecting Indigenous Australians.

Prime Minister Abbott and Indigenous leader Noel Pearson eloquently eulogised Hughes last year, but this year when many new policies are taking shape, it is fitting to revisit her legacy and acknowledge her role in changing Indigenous policy and developing ideas—Hughes is after all one of the sources of inspiration for the government's present and future direction.

Hughes turned her sharp mind from the Pacific to Indigenous Australia in early 2005. By then, Tony Koch of *The Australian* and Pearson were already presenting a new perspective on the fundamental facts of life in remote Indigenous Australia. But where Koch naturally had a journalistic approach and Pearson an essayistic style, Hughes brought a developmental economist's rigour to the debate.

Working with her son Mark, Hughes thoroughly went through each problem area—land tenure, housing, welfare, education, health, violence and so on—presenting a wealth of information and suggesting solutions. She saw her role as an economist 'to clarify public debate and policy options,' and she covered the whole field of Indigenous Australians' social and economic circumstances like no one before or after.

Part of her strength was her ability to capture the flaws in public policy through a simple line or image to sit alongside the drier tables and statistics.

In her seminal work, *Lands of Shame* (2007), she quoted an Aboriginal person from Queensland saying, 'You know, the difference between a black man and a white man is this: When a white man dies, his family gets his house; when a black man dies, the government gets it.' That quote tells so much about the perverse incentives that policy has created and maintained for the people in discrete Indigenous communities, where homeownership and wealth creation for one's children have been almost impossible, and you lose your housing benefit if you move to the mainstream for work.

I also recall Hughes' devastating 'summary' of remote education policy: She simply put a picture of a NT 'homeland learning centre'—a small, decrepit tin shed with no door—on the cover of her Indigenous education policy monograph. In this school, students were reportedly taught by a teacher for less than a day a week, but her detailed analysis was almost unnecessary; the picture of the shed captured the story about government failure to give generations of remote Indigenous students an education for a chance to find a job and share in Australia's prosperity.



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The main target of Hughes' attacks was what she called 'exceptionalist' policies towards Indigenous people. She believed that the ideological, anthropological theory of Indigenous development needed to be replaced by an economic analysis that assumes that Indigenous people have more similar aspirations to non-Indigenous people than is commonly thought.

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Hughes identified the practical measures needed for all Indigenous individuals to have a chance in mainstream society. For example, after having argued that only primary schooling is possible in remote areas, she advocated that most remote secondary students will need to board in towns and cities to get a reasonable education. She maintained this practical stance also in the policy area of Indigenous landownership, where she argued that individual title was necessary for economic development to take place.

Hughes has become associated with the practical reconciliation agenda of the Howard government, and she probably wouldn't object to the label. But a close reading of Hughes' texts shows her thinking also points to a synthesis of practical solutions and an appreciation of Indigenous identity.

Hughes did not suggest a privatising of Indigenous land but reinforcing and maintaining traditional landowners' communal land rights, while introducing individual private property rights in the form of long-term leases to kick-start Indigenous homeownership and business development.

The government is only now beginning to realise policies similar to Hughes' prescriptions. The Commonwealth will negotiate with the state and NT governments to expedite legislation to allow landowners to offer 99-year leases for homeownership and businesses in community centres. Social housing will be built only in places that have land-tenure arrangements for homeownership.

In relation to Indigenous culture, Hughes criticised that failed education policies deprived Indigenous peoples of the ability to maintain their own languages. Far from being an assimilationist, Hughes was a supporter of the right of Indigenous people to choose their own lives and maintain their own culture. But she realised that Indigenous people can only achieve these things from a position of educational and economic strength.

The Abbott government's combination of a focus on the most important levers of Indigenous economic development—school attendance and employment—with an agenda for constitutional recognition is in Hughes' spirit. It is to be regretted that we will not benefit from her characteristic mixture of intellectual support and frank and fearless critique.