

behalf of Indigenous people who have shared similar experiences. As a result, this book not only shares Grant's story, but also allows other Indigenous people to have their voices heard.

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Serious Whitefella Stuff: When Solutions Became the Problem in Indigenous Affairs

Mark Moran with Alyson Wright and Paul Memmott
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Reviewed by Sara Hudson

This book has an interesting premise: 'how does Indigenous policy signed off in Canberra actually work on the ground?' To answer this question, the book is divided into chapters that provide case studies of particular policy initiatives: for example, alcohol prohibitions, revitalising cultural practices, Shared Responsibility Agreements, and homeownership. However, while the idea of the book is good, potential solutions to improve the 'dysfunctional beast' that is Indigenous policy are buried at the back. Nor are these solutions particularly novel. Recommendations include looking back at past practices as well as forward to the future when designing policy, studying the local context, not coming in with pre-conceived notions, and working with Indigenous communities and leaders. The most original suggestions are for frontline workers to have more training in development strategies and for remote Indigenous

communities to become 'radical learning centres' where networks are developed and knowledge-sharing occurs amongst practitioners (p. 196).

The absence of specific solutions is perhaps a key point the authors are trying to make—for many of the 'wicked problems' bedevilling Indigenous communities, there are no simple solutions. In fact, as Moran points out 'attempts to solve one aspect of a problem typically reveal or create others' (p. 189). Yet while it may be true that 'solutions themselves become problems' (p. 181), it makes the book quite a depressing read.

What is particularly disheartening about some of the chapter case studies is the purging that goes on in Indigenous policy. Policy reforms, Moran explains, 'typically discredit anything that precedes them' (p. 178). Thus, a chapter by Alyson Wright relates the sad example of Ali Curang community leaders working hard to implement the actions in their Shared Responsibility Agreement (SRA) only to have all this work overturned by the Northern Territory intervention and the creation of Super Shires. Although there were many shortcomings in how the SRA was implemented and how the 'shared responsibility' component was articulated to community members, the funds that accompanied the SRA led to the creation of an art centre, Internet café, newly grassed ovals and a market garden. At the time of the SRA, Ali Curang was a relatively orderly community with neat and tidy yards and twice-weekly collections of rubbish. Today the only surviving legacy of the SRA is the arts centre. As Wright describes: 'The once reasonably tidy settlement is . . . crowded with litter and car bodies and the green grass in parks and ovals is dying and overgrown' (p. 129).

Another point the book makes is about the importance of being there for the long haul. Unfortunately, the political cycle is such that the only thing consistent in Indigenous affairs is the constant state of change, from policy and legislative reform to the overhauling of government departments. Funding cycles are also notoriously short, impacting on the ability of organisations to attract, train and retain staff as well as to show evidence of outcomes. According to Moran, internationally, the average time for NGOs to engage with communities is eight to ten years

(p. 186). Indigenous communities have not experienced such stable and long periods of engagement since the missionary times.

The failure of so many government and NGO programs also comes down to the sheer number of them, all with competing aims and objectives. For instance, at a time when the Commonwealth government was arguing for more employment among Indigenous people, the Northern Territory was reportedly busy preventing elected councillors from being employed in local government. Such contradictory objectives abound in Indigenous affairs, as multiple service providers—including government agencies, Indigenous organisations, not-for-profit NGOs and for-profit contractors—all compete in the same space. In some communities of less than a 1000 people, more than 80 different programs are being delivered.

While there is common agreement on what needs to change in terms of improving Indigenous social and economic outcomes, there is widespread disagreement on the steps needed to get there. Indigenous policy has always been characterised by polarisation, with opposing and competing principles between those on the political left and right. Some common dichotomies include ‘top down’ versus ‘bottom-up’, rights versus responsibilities, evidence versus ideology, and economic versus community notions of development (p. 187). Moran cites Indigenous leader Noel Pearson, who has attempted to get around this polarisation through his notion of the ‘radical centre’ whereby competing principles are balanced out and the two different sides are seen as complementary to one another rather than competing. According to Moran, something of this ‘radical centre’ is occurring at the coalface of Indigenous affairs: ‘Seemingly against the odds, those engaged in the daily business of community development negotiate its ambiguities, indeterminacies and dilemmas’ (p. 188).

What is heartening to read is the remarkable strength and resilience of Indigenous leaders tasked with the responsibility of implementing policies

that they themselves may not have much say in developing. Their adaptability and persistence in the face of numerous odds is extraordinary. For example, at Mapoon, an Indigenous community in Far North Queensland, community leaders found their own solution to town planning and preserved their mission history as owner-builders: ‘Against the odds, Polly and Tony ended up building their own place. Their house is a hybrid of shipping containers, prefabricated dongas and bushcraft construction’ (p. 175). While the house does not meet the Building Code of Australia and is unlikely to be insured, Polly and Tony ‘have made it [home] to Mapoon’ (*ibid*). In this chapter and later in the book, Moran makes a persuasive case for private homeownership on Indigenous land, echoing the argument made by the late Helen Hughes, Mark Hughes and myself that the lack of private homeownership on communal land has nothing to do with Indigenous people’s ‘capability to pay or their motivation: it is simply the function of a dysfunctional land administration system’ (p. 193). (See Helen Hughes, Mark Hughes and Sara Hudson, *Private Housing on Indigenous Lands*, Policy Monograph 113, Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2010.)

Overall, although the book consists mostly of a series of case studies without much analysis until the end, it succeeds in providing an eye-opening account of the ‘busyness’ or ‘whitefella stuff’ that characterises the ‘practice’ of Indigenous affairs. The authors have all spent many years working in Indigenous communities across Australia and their stories ring true. For readers who have never visited a remote Indigenous community, this book will provide a valuable insight into the complex challenges and rewards involved in implementing Indigenous policy.

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