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A New Deal for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Remote Communities

Helen Hughes and Jenness Warin

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the 1970s Australia has been conducting a socialist experiment in remote communities with the lives of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon provided the blueprint in *A Certain Heritage,* advocating communal land ownership, supported by substantial welfare transfers, to create an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander hunter-gatherer utopia that would culminate in a nation independent from the rest of Australia.

The Mabo and subsequent judgments that transferred large areas of land to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders made a substantial contribution to the implementation of the Coombs experiment. But nowhere in the world has communal land ownership ever led to economic development. Attempting to replicate hunter-gatherer groups in fixed locations created remote, fragmented communities that cannot support jobs and incomes. Education, health, life expectancy, housing, employment and income gaps between the remote community dwellers and other Australians have widened. Alcoholism and other substance abuse and crime, particularly against women, have escalated. Any group, regardless of ethnic origin, subjected to this experiment, with all energies deflected from economic to cultural activities, would have been condemned to the same fate.

Lack of funding is not the problem. Household incomes in remote communities, largely consisting of welfare payments, average $14,000 a year to which must be added expenditure on education, health and housing. But Commonwealth funding alone is some $70,000 per household, and there is additional State and Northern Territory funding. A very considerable share of public expenditure clearly does not reach its targets. Notionally, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities would be better off if they were paid the amounts spent by the Commonwealth, States and Northern Territory in cash and were free to buy their own education, health, housing and other services.

The deprivation resulting from welfare dependence has been hidden by policies that prevented contact between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'living museums' and all other Australians, except for their 'curators', until courageous Aborigines, led by Noel Pearson, began to speak out for an end to welfare dependence.

The deprivation and misery of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can no longer be tolerated. 'Mutual obligation' cannot reduce dependence on welfare while failing education denies Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders jobs. A new deal must replace the utopian experiment with policies that ensure that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have equal opportunities to other Australians. The following areas require urgent reform:

1. An individual property rights land ownership framework must be established to enable Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to develop enterprises and attract investment to create jobs and incomes. Ninety-nine year leases are essential to facilitate individually owned private housing.
2. A volunteer 'literacy corps' campaign in school and university vacations should introduce literacy in English and basic numeracy to all communities that desire it within three years. 'Internet cafes' should stimulate and maintain literacy.
3. The health care bureaucracy should give way to clinical solutions to stem appalling health conditions. A census of children's and young people's health should provide the basis for the immediate improvement of clinical health care.
4. To reduce violence and end the exploitation of remote communities by 'payback', State, Territory and Federal laws must apply to all Australians, regardless of ethnicity.

Emeritus Professor Helen Hughes is a Senior Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies. **Jenness Warin** was a Visiting Fellow at The Centre in October 2004 and January 2005.

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INTRODUCTION

After 30 years, it is clear that the experiment that was to give Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders a socialist utopia, leading to the establishment of a separate nation, has been a miserable failure. Noel Pearson's demand for an end to welfare dependence has encouraged other Aboriginal leaders to call for the same decent living standards that other Australians enjoy. The deprivation and misery in which Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders live in remote communities are beginning to be exposed by the media. A political debate, long suppressed by allegations that any questioning of the experiment in remote Australia is racist, has at last emerged.

The experiment that led to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deprivation has a complex history and many dimensions. Remote communities have close links with urban fringe communities. This paper, however, focuses on the economic misconceptions of the experiment that lie at the core of the miseries of remote communities. The paper first reviews the philosophy that led to the creation of 1,200 uneconomic remote communities and the consequent economic marginalisation of some 120,000 Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.[1] Part two gives an indication of the economic and social conditions prevailing in the remote communities. Part three proposes policies that would enable Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to work with their 'hands and minds'[2] so that in the very near future they may enjoy the living standards of other Australians.

1. THE ECONOMICS OF 'SOCIALISATION FOR ABORIGINES'[3]

The experiment that was to give Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders a socialist utopia has been a miserable failure.

In the 1960s it was becoming evident that the missionary policies which dominated relations with Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders had failed dismally. Missionaries did not treat Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as equals with the same capacity for development and hence the right to the same choices of livelihoods and lifestyles as other Australians. The majority of children educated in missionary schools was destined to become unskilled workers. At a time when secondary education was being developed, only a small proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children stayed at school past primary levels. Very few acquired skilled trade qualifications. Only a tiny proportion of exceptionally able and lucky youngsters went on to tertiary education. The results of missionary education are evident today in the relative absence of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders from the professions—particularly those associated with the hard sciences—and from private and public management.

The economic and social consequences of denying Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders the same opportunities as other Australians became evident in the 1960s. Those Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders not integrated into the mainstream, that is, those living in remote Australia, had a standard of living in all respects inferior to that of other Australians. They had lower labour force participation, higher unemployment, lower incomes, poorer education, worse health and housing, and a higher incidence of alcoholism, other substance abuse and crime, than other Australians. Consequently they had a much lower life expectancy than other Australians.

Faced with this evidence, Australians responded by agitating for the 1967 Referendum, designed to end the long history of economic, social and legal discrimination against Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders by giving them citizenship rights equal to those of other Australians. Commonwealth referendums are not easily passed. But the 1967 Referendum was passed by an overwhelming majority (with every electorate in every State voting positively), indicating that Australian voters wanted to right past wrongs.[4]

Within this desire to correct the mistakes of the past, two approaches to the progress of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were developing. In the first, liberals recognised that in addition to equal opportunities in the workplace and equal treatment in law, equality of opportunity entitled Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to the same education other Australian children enjoyed, the same health services and, when they

were ill, unemployed or elderly, the same welfare payments. It was argued that with the same rights and responsibilities, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders would be able to take advantage of economic and social opportunities to overcome the inequities of the past. Public support was strong for generous taxpayer transfers to smooth the transition from hunter-gatherer to 20th century living standards.

This model of economic and social transition did not suit socialist visions for a separate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economy, society and even nation in remote Australia. Therefore, a second line of thinking developed, strongly influenced by H. C. Coombs, M. Brandl and W. Snowdon, for a separate economy for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. They recommended that the 'Economic strategies for central (and other parts of) Australia should be conceived in regional terms for groupings of small "homeland" settlements around larger centres with which they are related.' The economic base was to be 'hunter-gatherer activities', though there was also to be 'access to money income sufficient for essential stores and mobility'. The Coombs model was also to provide 'government paid positions for teachers, health workers, community and Council clerical workers and store operatives'. Additional cash income was to be provided by an extension of the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) scheme 'using funds equivalent to Unemployment Benefit to pay wages for part-time work at award rates on an hourly basis for community services, self-sufficiency activities, cultural and educational services for children, care of the aged and infirm, construction and the provision of leisure facilities'. Additional funds for infrastructure were envisaged to flow through regional organisations. The model's 'immediate objective should be to use the human, material and social resources of the Aborigines and their habitat to provide the services and goods necessary to their way of life'. [5]

In contrast to the liberal vision that saw Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders working in all occupations and living at the same standard as other Australians, the Coombs model separated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from the rest of Australia. Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon knew that low living standards would be the consequence: 'Aboriginal families especially in isolated communities will be without dwellings for many years' so that 'resources should be devoted to providing more limited means of ensuring particularly (a) water for laundry, personal bathing etc.; (b) receptacles for reasonable care of clothing and other domestic needs; (c) dog and insect proof containers for food and (d) emergency shelter against extreme weather'.[6]

People, and particularly women, in traditional hunter-gatherer societies worldwide led a harsh and limited existence, with low life expectancies. Population density—and hence population numbers—were low. To gain richer and longer lifestyles, hunter-gatherers have developed into agricultural, industrial and now post-industrial societies with ever increasing capital and advancing technology to provide high productivity and incomes. Hunting-gathering, even when guns and modern fishing equipment substitute for traditional hunting implements, does not produce a steady, varied and sufficient supply of food. Consequently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families in remote Australia at best rely heavily, and at worst totally, on packaged food bought in high-cost remote settlement stores.

Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon presumed that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in their remote settlements would be dependent on transfers from working, capitalist Australia. Because there is no productive work in remote communities, welfare payments have become the principal source of household incomes. But despite far more generous welfare entitlements than those of non-Indigenous Australians, standards of living in remote communities are much lower than in the rest of Australia. For most Australians welfare payments are temporary replacements for earnings in times of unemployment, illness or other misfortunes. Old age pensions are received at the end of a working and taxpaying life. Only a small number of non-Indigenous Australians for whom welfare payments are major and long-term sources of income become welfare dependent, with a commensurately high incidence of unemployment, illness, substance abuse and, particularly juvenile, crime.[7] Not surprisingly, welfare dependence has the same destructive effect on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as on other Australians.[8]

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Communal land ownership

The fundamental economic impracticability of the Coombs model was disguised by several added dimensions, most importantly Mabo and subsequent land-right (and more recently sea-right) judgments and Territory, State and Commonwealth legislation. Transferring inalienable land rights to remote (and other) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities was seen in the Coombs model not only as restitution, but also as the base for customary, communal, socialist societies distinct from the rest of capitalist Australia. But the cattle stations acquired by Aboriginal communities have failed and new successful agricultural production has not been established in 30 years. Communal ownership is not only problematic in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote communities. It impedes the productive use of land, employment creation and economic development worldwide.[9] Aboriginal leaders, notably Warren Mundine, National Vice President of the Australian Labor Party, have concluded that 'communal land-holding was retarding Indigenous people'.[10] Yet, following the Coombs model, royalties on mining, fishing and other resources are also paid communally, so that they inevitably lack transparency and encourage corruption with a few 'big men' appropriating the bulk of benefits.

Communal land ownership also discourages environmentally sound practices. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' share of Australia's land is estimated to be 16% to 18% overall, but their share of land in remote Australia is much higher, rising to 43% in the Northern Territory.[11] The Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders' share of Australian land is still growing. Attempts to subsidise Aboriginal communities to improve land and resource management by weed control, reduction of feral animals and fire management have recognised land deterioration.[12] Despite taxpayer transfers through CDEP funds and additional Territory, State and Commonwealth grants, landcare projects are still mainly in the planning stage.[13] Land care is most reliably funded and undertaken as a component of earning profits in agriculture, mining, tourism and other land uses.

Apartheid

The deliberate subjugation of English—in favour of the local language in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools—has become an integral component of the Coombs model, condemning most Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to isolation from other Australians because they cannot communicate in a common language. When Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders travel, they have limited funds and even more limited self-confidence. They tend to restrict themselves to Aboriginal communities when they seek health care, go shopping, visit relatives or attend conferences and training courses. At the same time an Apartheid-like permit policy prevents non-Indigenous Australians from visiting, let alone living, in the remote community 'living museums'. The thousands of permits that are issued largely limit access to remote communities to non-Indigenous 'curators' (including missionaries), who dominate administration, teaching, health, power, water supply, maintenance and other services. Construction is carried out by non-Indigenous contractors. Other permit-holders are anthropologists and social scientists studying the remote communities, dealers marketing Aboriginal art and film makers who have found a lucrative niche in films and television programmes about remote communities.[14]

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are 'voting with their feet' by moving to fringe settlements to escape the remote communities. Why are they moving?

Bolstered by land rights confined to communal land ownership and with a policy of isolating Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the Coombs experiment established a socialist, communal, customary economy and society in remote Australia. Those who support the experiment consider that although spatial fragmentation 'presents a barrier to mainstream participation . . . it is a necessary (and valued) feature of the customary economic sector'.[15]

Recently, Noel Pearson and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders have questioned the Coombs model outcomes. Some journalists have broken through the permit system to write and speak about conditions in the remote communities. Although many of the severe problems of the remote communities are also evident in the fringe settlements on the outskirts of country towns and in capital city enclaves like Sydney's Redfern, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are 'voting with their feet' by moving to fringe settlements to escape the remote communities. Why are they moving?

2. LIVING STANDARDS IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES

The few non-Indigenous Australians who penetrate the permit system while touring remote Australia and the handful of investigative journalists who have at last turned their attention to remote communities have been shocked by the Third World conditions in remote communities.[16] And it is, indeed, shocking that one of the world's leading post-industrial economies, not only admired for its wealth but also for its remarkably egalitarian social organisation, should condemn 120,000 of its citizens to live in squalor. A brief paper cannot do justice to the deprivation that exists in remote Australia, but indications of actual living conditions are given under six headings: education, employment, incomes and income distribution, housing, health and social conditions.

Education

The education system imposed on remote Australia is at the core of low living standards. To preserve Aboriginal and Torres Strait languages, children are initially taught in each community's own language. English is only taught in higher grades. This approach, misnamed 'bilingual education', contrasts sharply with genuine bilingualism that starts as soon as children learn to speak in societies as diverse as Singapore and Scandinavia. False bilingualism is also strongly favoured by remnants of paternalistic missionary beliefs that 'One of the key communication issues for Yolŋu is that English is a difficult language for them to grasp.'[17] Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders deeply resent this attitude because it implies that they are less intelligent than all the other people of the world, including immigrants to Australia, who learn English as a second language. Additionally, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders complain that southerners have learned more local languages during the past 30 years than the remote communities have learned of English.

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The emphasis on local cultures and the absence of English also precludes progression in world history and geography and the natural sciences. Current curriculums condemn Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to lives of ignorance. The generation caught in the Coombs experiment is less literate, numerate and has less general knowledge than their fathers and mothers who were only thought to be capable of becoming labourers and domestic servants. In the missionary days, exceptionally bright children could beat the system, win secondary education and became skilled tradesmen and professionals. There are fewer escape opportunities for the children of the Coombs experiment. The children of non-Indigenous 'curators' attend special classes in the larger remote communities. Where distance permits, these non-Indigenous children are bussed to nearby non-Indigenous mainstream schools or sent south to boarding schools. Strict separation rules in the remote community and fringe settlement schools. Only a handful of privileged or exceptionally bright Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are allowed to attend integrated schools.

The lack of reading materials in local languages severely restricts literacy. The limited material prepared in local languages for school use consists of embarrassingly crude booklets that are a planet away from the cheerful, carefully structured, artistic and well-produced children's books from which other Australian children learn to read. Remote schools have very poor teaching materials. In many of the smaller communities schools lack electricity. Mainstream radio, television, DVDs and computers—commonplace in the rest of Australia—are rarely used in the smaller communities. When funding for a large generator was finally found from regional resources for a remote community in November 2004 (to replace small, unreliable, individual house generators), the school was not connected to the power supply. But four public servants came from Canberra to participate in the turning on of community electricity!

The pre-school and early school years when children throughout the world learn a second language are wasted. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders argue that children learn their mother tongue from their parents and that local culture is passed on in everyday life. Teaching in school what children experience every day is a waste of time and bores the children. It is a fundamental cause of low and irregular school attendance. By the time children are permitted to learn English, they have been bored for so long that they are no longer receptive to education.

The poor quality of teaching is a second major problem. There is little emphasis on basic numeracy, such as oral multiplication tables. Reading is taught by the whole word rather than by the vastly more effective phonetic methods. Curriculum content has been scrapped for an 'outcomes-based' approach. These post-modern education philosophies have devastated schooling in non-Indigenous Australia. For children without home backgrounds of magazines, books, television and the internet they have proved terminal. As a result of poor missionary education and the worse education of the Coombs experiment, most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and trainee teachers are isolated, have poor spoken English, poor literacy, poor numeracy and little general knowledge. Tables 1A and 1B show attendance and achievement at a typical remote community school.

Table 1A. School attendance, 2001 and 2002

	2001		*2002*	
	Average enrolment	*Average attendance*	*Average enrolment*	*Average attendance*
Preschool	24	10	22	14
Primary	80	*57*	85	*55*
Junior secondary	36	20	19	11
Senior secondary	31	23	24	14

Table 1B. Percentage achieving learning benchmarks, 2001 and 2002

	Year 3 reading benchmark	*Year 5 reading benchmark*	*Year 3 numeracy benchmark*	*Year 5 numeracy benchmark*
2001	0.0	12.5	20.0	14.3
2002	0.0	0.0	44.4	0.4

Source: R. G. Schwab and D. Sutherland, *Literacy for Life: A scoping study for a community literacy empowerment project* (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, 2004), 36, 38; J. Taylor, *Social Indicators for Aboriginal Governance; insights from the Thamarrurr Region, Northern Territory,* Research Monograph, No.24 (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, E Publications, 2004), 77-80, gives similarly low school participation, attendance and achievement results for the Thamarrurr (Port Keats) region.

Post-secondary training has very high drop-out rates. Certificate courses have been dumbed down to make pass rates respectable. Students learn so little that they cannot find jobs.

The few children from remote communities who advance to post-secondary education, mainly to Vocational Education Training, are already so handicapped that they rarely progress in normal courses. By the time they enter training courses they are usually in their 20s and even 30s, often married with children. Accordingly, post-secondary training for Aborigine and Torres Strait Islanders has very high drop-out rates. Certificate courses have been dumbed down to make pass rates respectable. Students learn so little that they cannot find jobs. Participation records are worthless and Vocational Education certificate outcomes are dubious.

Adults in remote communities are overwhelmingly illiterate and innumerate. They do not have enough English to express themselves. They cannot read the instructions for simple do-it-yourself jobs. They cannot read food labels, medicine instructions or cleaning material warnings. People do not know their fortnightly, monthly and annual incomes and expenditures. Digitalisation of CDEP and other welfare payments has exacerbated the difficulties of protecting incomes from communal obligations and 'book-up' (buying on credit)—both typical of traditional and poor communities. Very low literacy and numeracy makes banking a nightmare for many Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Digitalisation has exposed them to credit card and other fraud. Magazines are limited to pictorials. There are no newspapers and no books. Mainstream radio programmes cannot be understood. The only television and DVD programmes that are watched require no English because they substitute violence for a storyline. The demand for adult literacy education is high and considerable public funds are being devoted to it, but literacy efforts have been so inept that the outcomes are poor.[18]

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are dissatisfied with the remote education system. Several reports, starting with *Learning Lessons*, known as the 'Collins Report' (1999) have followed.[19] But the myopia engendered by the authors' commitment to the Coombs experiment and post-modern education philosophies has failed to identify the causes of poor education despite thousands of words devoted to education in remote communities. There is constant fiddling at the edges, but no improvement.

Employment

Productive employment, combining human capital (education and training) with investment and technology, is the principal source of high living standards in Australia and elsewhere in the world. Employment in remote communities has not been studied separately, but data for the Northern Territory, where 72% of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders live on 'Indigenous land',[20] are characteristic of remote and fringe communities throughout Australia. The labour force participation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Northern Territory was a low 42% in 1996 and fell to 36% in 2001. Labour force participation, moreover, was low at all ages. In 2001 it was only just above 50% for those aged 25-49 years; in this age cohort, reflecting booming economic conditions in the Northern Territory, non-Indigenous labour force participation was well over 90%.[21]

64% of the working-age Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Northern Territory were not in the labour force.

Labour force participation includes the employed, the unemployed and CDEP recipients (Table 2). In 2001 only 15% of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of working age were employed and some of these were in public service jobs reserved for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Only 5% considered themselves unemployed, but another 16% received CDEP payments or 'sit-down money', making a total 21%. Over time CDEP payments have come to be made for a range of full-time and part-time jobs that are not competitive—do not require the same qualifications and are not expected to have the same productivity—to similar jobs in the rest of Australia. They include partially trained teachers and health workers, rubbish removers and tractor drivers, but do not cover most of the tradesmen (electricians, plumbers, mechanics) and professional staff (fully trained teachers, clinical medical staff, managers) who are dominantly non-Indigenous in the remote communities. The CDEP system has created a sham labour force, disguising the true extent of unemployment.[22] That is, 64% of the working-age Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Northern Territory were not in the labour force.

Table 2. Indigenous labour force in the Northern Territory, 2001 (percent and total)

	Number	*Percent*
Employed	5,018	15
(CDEP)	(5,157)	(16)
(Unemployed)	(1,594)	(5)
CDEP and unemployed	6,751	21
In labour force	11,769	36
Working age population	32,532	100

Source: Northern Territory, Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Work Force NT: Moving the Territory ahead*, Chapter 5,'Indigenous employment profile' (2003), 197.

Given the young demographic structure of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities and fringe settlements, the shortfall of jobs will increase substantially during the coming decade. If labour force participation and employment are to be maintained at present levels, it is estimated that nearly 20,000 additional jobs will have to be created in the Northern Territory by 2011.[23] If labour force participation is to rise and unemployment is to fall to the levels of the rest of Australia, the rise in paid jobs will have to be many times that number. But unless there is a substantial change in literacy and numeracy, the outlook for unsubsidised productive employment will remain grim.

The most promising numbers of jobs available are in fruit picking. Tourist backpackers have taken advantage of the relatively high incomes to be earned, but farmers, in addition,

have sought labour from East Timor and other developing countries. Fruit picking could provide well-paid employment to young Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. But without the years of schooling that other Australian (and overseas) youngsters have as a matter of course, young Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have no experience of the discipline, the give-and-take of making mistakes, being corrected and progressing through learning levels that enables other youngsters to make the transition from adolescence to working adulthood. Young Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders often find regular hours of work daunting when exposed to real work situations. Fruit pickers are expected to work 10-hour days, six days a week to get harvests in quickly. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders would like to earn the rewarding fruit picking wages, but most do not have the staying power of either the well-educated backpackers or the agricultural labourers from developing countries. Employing even young, mobile men and women from remote communities will require supportive hiring practices as well organised and supervised residential camps in areas where fruit picking is available.

Fruit picking is the only major source of commercial employment that matches the 'human capital' profile of those who want to break out of welfare dependence.

Fruit picking is the only major source of commercial employment that matches the 'human capital' profile of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who want to break out of welfare dependence. Jobs in construction and services will only become possible when separatist policies are abandoned. Commercial fishing has opportunities, but it is skill and capital intensive, highly internationally competitive and would require very competent management to provide significant employment growth. Until substantial land reform takes place, and until investment flows into remote Australia, only minor other employment opportunities will become available. Tourist artefacts and eco-tourism could provide transitional employment opportunities. Pilot projects could be started with the help of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with practical skills. Such NGOs are generously engaged in many practical programmes in developing countries, but they have been kept out of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote communities by separatist policies.[24]

Young Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders must not be blamed for the effects of the remote community experiment. They have proved to be eager recruits for Norforce, the reserve arm of the Australian Defence Forces for which they volunteer in greater numbers than Norforce can absorb. They perform well, but they cannot volunteer for the armed forces because of their miserable education.

It is not realistic to expect Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to get jobs in most occupations with their present levels of schooling, literacy and numeracy. Real 'mutual obligation' in the sense of taking up job offers or else losing CDEP payments is thus not possible. 'Mutual obligation' community contracts are a step in the right direction, but they cannot be expected to have the same effect in reducing welfare dependence as cutting off unemployment payments when recipients refuse job offers.

Income and income distribution

Because such a small proportion of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities are employed, welfare is the principal source of income. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) regional offices allocated CDEP places to subsidise make-work 'jobs' for remote and fringe (and capital city) communities. Their determination of the number of CDEP places and associated capital was highly politicised. The number of CDEP places funded rose from 18,656 in 1996 to 30,474 in 2001.[25] CDEP payments probably account for half the welfare receipts in remote communities; unemployment benefits, single mothers' benefits, disability and old age pensions, together with additional special remote Australia allowances are other welfare sources. Because they are entitled to welfare, most Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities are also entitled to Health Care cards and pharmaceutical benefits in addition to normal Medicare cards. Australian welfare payments are set at levels enabling Australians experiencing unemployment, illness and other traumas to live decent lives.[26] Remote distance supplements are intended to cover the additional costs of goods and services in remote communities. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities even when totally dependent on welfare should not be experiencing the deprivation evident in housing and health.

Remote communities have three additional sources of income. Royalty payments from mining, films, fishing, telecommunication and other infrastructure are substantial, but royalty incomes and their distribution are not published. The allocation of royalties to communities, and within communities among individuals, is determined by local politics. 'Big men' use their hold on royalties to exercise power and develop businesses. Secondly, remote communities have extremely limited business opportunities, generally confined to small shops that recycle welfare payments. Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned enterprises, such as air transport, fuel depots, hotels and motels, originate in towns and their fringe communities. A third source of income in remote communities is art. Altman valued the visual arts industry income at a minimum of $100 million a year. Income from art is also very unequally distributed.[27]

Table 3. Mean equivalised gross household weekly income in remote areas, 2001

	Indigenous	*Non-Indigenous*
Queensland	309	578
South Australia	279	468
Western Australia	271	704
Northern Territory	241	760

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year Book of Australia* (Canberra: 2004), http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@,nsf/94713ad445ff1425ca2568200192af2/98ec13fe4ad24c

Altman valued the visual arts industry income at a minimum of $100 million a year. Income from art is also very unequally distributed.

Total weekly household reported income ranges considerably between $241 in remote communities in the Northern Territory and $309 in Queensland where education is better and there is more competitively priced paid work. In all States and the Northern Territory non-Indigenous weekly household incomes in remote communities are substantially above Indigenous incomes. In the Northern Territory Indigenous incomes are about a third of non-Indigenous incomes. Mean weekly incomes are misleading because the distribution of incomes is highly skewed in remote communities. 'Big men', including Land Council members and other political representatives, and their families, not only appropriate a large share of royalty and visual arts incomes, but also receive public salaries, travel funds and per diem allowances when travelling.

The low living standards of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders cannot be attributed to a failure of public spending. Table 4 shows identifiable Commonwealth expenditure on Indigenous affairs from 1968-69 to 2004-05.

Table 4. Commonwealth expenditure on Indigenous affairs, 1968-69 to 2004-2005

	1968-9	*1978-9*	*1988-9*	*1998-9*	*1999-0*	*2000-1*	*2000-2*	*2002-3*	*2003-4*	*2004-5*
$million	10	152	778	1,888	2,218	2,329	2,365	2,573	2,831	2,918

Source: Parliament of Australia, Department of Parliamentary Services, Parliamentary Library, Research Note (16 November 2004), 18, 2004-5, www.aph.gov.au/library.

Even taking inflation into account, it is evident that Commonwealth spending on Indigenous affairs increased substantially after the 1967 Referendum. It rose from $4,443 per person in 1995-96 to $5,569 per person in 2003-04. Most Commonwealth expenditures have been on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the remote and fringe settlements. These account for less than half the total number of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Census and extrapolated for inter-censual years. Commonwealth expenditure on persons in remote and fringe communities has thus reached well over $10,000 per person, or well over $70,000 for a seven-member household[28] compared to the annual household incomes, largely consisting of welfare payments, of $12,500 to $16,000 suggested by Table 4. Additional State and Territory expenditures would have to be added to these sums to arrive at the total government expenditures on each

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander household. Education, health and housing services in remote communities clearly do not bridge the gap between household welfare income and total government expenditures. A very considerable share of government expenditure evidently does not reach its targets. Notionally, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities would be better off if they were paid the amounts spent by the Commonwealth, States and Northern Territory in cash and were free to buy their own education, health, housing and other services.

Two trends are clear in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and incomes in Australia. J. Taylor concludes that in the Northern Territory: 'Indigenous employment in the mainstream labour market is trending downwards along with the overall level of labour force participation, while the income gap between Indigenous and other Territory residents is widening'.[29] The most accurate remote community data comes from the Northern Territory because there remote community dwellers form the highest proportion of the Indigenous population and have the highest concentration of population in remote communities. For the rest of Australia, in contrast, J. Altman, N. Biddle and B. Hunter write about social indicators for Aborigines: 'Overall, we conclude that there has been steady, although not spectacular improvement in outcomes over time.'[30] This apparent paradox is easily explained. While Aborigines integrating into the mainstream have improved their standards of living markedly, for the victims of the remote communities' experiment, working and living conditions have worsened. These trends would have been even more evident if Taylor, and Altman, Biddle and Hunter, instead of averaging their data, had analysed Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities, fringe communities and mainstream communities separately. It seems likely that the decline in employment and incomes in remote communities would then have been even steeper and the improvement in mainstream Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and incomes even greater.

Housing

A three-bedroom house can thus have 20 or more people living in it. Overcrowding leads to a high incidence of injuries and accidents.

Although housing in the remote communities has improved somewhat since the Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon minimal housing proposals, it is widely agreed that remote communities' housing is totally inadequate in quantity and quality. There is a range of housing standards, but the typical dwelling is a shed with two or three bedrooms opening onto a veranda that is the living area. Many houses have a concrete paved strip in front on which cooking fires can be lit. Kitchens range from reasonable to the majority consisting of a lean-to with a sink and cold water tap. Most houses have lean-to cold showers. In many instances, a single bedroom can house a family of six to eight people. Foam rubber mattresses cover the floor. There is no room for furniture. There are no tables, no chairs, no wardrobes and no cupboards, let alone desks for children's homework. A young girl is lucky to have an airline bag for her clothes and toothbrush. A three-bedroom house can thus have 20 or more people living in it. Overcrowding leads to a high incidence of injuries and accidents. Some communities have septic tanks, but many have drop-pit toilets. Maintenance is inadequate. A 2001 survey by the Indigenous Housing Authority of the Northern Territory, the peak body for Indigenous housing, found that only 54% of remote community houses had showers and or bathroom taps (mostly cold water), 68% had laundry facilities, 55% had functioning toilets and 38% had kitchen cold-water taps, stoves and kitchen benches.[31] A 2003 survey in Central Australia concluded that 25% or less of houses were conducive to 'healthy living practices'.[32] In the Northern Territory in 2001, 50% of Indigenous communities were affected by sewerage overflows or leakages, 35% of the Indigenous population lived in communities affected by water restrictions, 30% of Indigenous housing stock needed major repair or replacement and only 13% of Indigenous communities had access to electricity through the Power and Water Authority.[33] Others used costly house generators that were constantly breaking down.

Flows of housing funds to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations from Commonwealth, State and Northern Territory governments have been considerable. From 1995-96 to 1997-98 the ATSIC housing funding was $185 million and from 1998-99 to 1999-2000 $172 million was to be distributed.[34] A high proportion was channelled

through ATSIC to community associations and then to remote communities, again in a politically fraught process. High quality houses have been built for 'big men' so that public housing reflects the skewed distribution of income. The bureaucracy involved in housing consumes a considerable share of housing funds.[35]

The appalling standards and poor maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing are not the result of inadequate finance, but the inevitable consequence of public housing, whether through communal associations, local, regional, state or central governments. Anthropologists claim that in remote communities children play and dogs run among blowing rubbish because when a hunter-gatherer group moved to its next camp, left-over bark and branches of wood were left lying around in the knowledge that this 'rubbish' was biodegradable and would disintegrate. This view presumes that today's Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders do not know the difference between a piece of bark and stick of wood on the one hand and Coke bottles, plastic bags and used nappies on the other! Rubbish blows around public housing everywhere in the world. Public housing has failed to deliver decent housing in developing as well as industrial countries. Even Singapore, with many successful public enterprises, found appalling housing difficulties until its extensive public housing estates were privatised. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders pay rent (deducted automatically from their welfare payments), indicating that there is capacity for mortgage loans for private housing in remote communities. It is becoming evident to Australian political leaders that communal land ownership is the real barrier to decent housing. Northern Territory Chief Minister Clare Martin 'has supported calls for more individual land ownership in remote Aboriginal communities . . . as the basic right of home ownership'.[36]

Health

One of the motives for adopting the Coombs model in the 1960s was the appalling state of Aboriginal health.[37] The life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males born between 1996 and 2001 is 59.4 years and it is 64.8 years for females. For all Australians the figures are 77.8 and 82.8, respectively.[38] This gap of 18 years in life expectancy is an average for all Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and so underestimates the seriousness of ill-health in remote communities.

Health problems in the remote communities start with infant and maternal health.

Health problems in the remote communities start with infant and maternal health. Chronic, debilitating conditions in pregnant mothers result in underweight newborns. The housing environment into which these babies are brought compounds their risks of leading an unhealthy life. By the age of three or four months, when solids should be introduced, infants are given monotonous diets of Weetbix, soggy bread, egg and some bush foods supplemented by baby feeding bottles of Coca-Cola and/or cordial. In small communities storing food is impossible (both because of the lack of refrigerated and other storage facilities and because chronic food shortages mean that stored food is consumed by family and relatives), so that babies do not receive regular supplementary solids of four or five meals a day. Babies are kept at the breast with so little supplementary solid food that they often fail to thrive. The failure to thrive cycle is exacerbated by infections of the chest, skin and urinary tract, requiring lengthy periods of hospitalisation and drug therapy in regional hospitals. Crowded houses; vector-borne, infectious and diarrhoeal diseases (rotavirus, Salmonella, Shigella, Giardia); belligerent fathers; poor levels of education, and inability to manage income often perpetuate childhood illnesses. Diseases such as chronic otitis media (pus discharging from inner ears and noses) resulting in perforated eardrums, trachoma, abscesses, boils and scabies, as well as pneumonia and urinary infections are often not diagnosed at all or merely treated with Panadol. Lack of primary treatment by a general practitioner means that many remote community children are hospitalised at more advanced stages of illness than non-Indigenous children. Dental disease is extremely serious, directly and as a cause of further infection, because of the high sugar content of typical diets and the lack of dental care.

As children grow into adolescents (and sometimes even earlier) substance abuse—petrol sniffing, drinking and smoking tobacco and cannabis—becomes prevalent, following the anomie of lives without schooling that engages children's interest, without interaction

with the wider world and without an outlook for employment and income. Child abuse is evident in the high incidence of sexually transmitted diseases.

In the adult population ill-health is pervasive, encouraged by poor diets with excessive sugar and fat, limited exercise and substance abuse. Tuberculosis continues to be treated when diagnosed. Rates of cardiovascular disease are high and increasing. Rheumatic fever follows untreated strep throats leading to valvular damage to the heart so that open heart surgery becomes essential at young ages. For all Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders rheumatic heart disease is the highest in the world and death rates are 19 times those of non-Indigenous Australians. Diabetes is widespread and increasing, resulting in further cardiovascular disease, renal disease leading to kidney failure and the need for kidney dialysis. Death from diabetes complications are eight times those for non-Indigenous Australians. In marked contrast, deaths from cardiovascular diseases and from the complications of diabetes have declined in the wider Australian population. Respiratory diseases are four times as high as for non-Indigenous Australians.[39] Many of the adults have musculo-skeletal problems resulting in high uses of analgesics such as Panadol. Accidents and injuries (resulting from crowded and sub-standard housing and from domestic and community violence) frequently require hospitalisation. Many adults have scarring, corneal opacities and cataracts and blindness as a result of untreated trachoma, and cataracts and blindness as a result of uncontrolled and/or undiagnosed diabetes. Many adults are profoundly deaf.

Short lives make for deep cynicism. Smokers argue that because smoking only kills slowly, they will be long dead from accidents, injuries and diseases by the time their lungs are affected by smoking. Why should they give up one of their few pleasures, they ask, to improve the statistics?

The outlines of the health situation in the remote communities have been known since the days when missionaries dominated Aboriginal services. It is also well known that the principal determinants of ill-health and a short life expectancy are unpotable water, inadequate sanitation, poor nutrition and crowded housing. The young age of women at marriage is also a factor. Education, particularly for women, is a significant determinant of infant and maternal mortality and morbidity, and hence of life expectancy. Good medical practice can ameliorate but not substantially change the incidence of illness. Australian medical knowledge is advanced and the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments make substantial contributions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. In 1998-99 estimated government health expenditure was $3,065 per Indigenous, compared to $ 2,518 per non-Indigenous, Australian.[40]

A typical 'health centre' in a small community consists of a small, derelict, shed with a cupboard 'equipped' with Panadol liquid and tablets and a few other medicines.

Health direction and provision is dominated by the National Aboriginal Community Control Health Organisation (NACCHO) and its associated community health organisations, although Commonwealth, State and Territory governments are also directly involved in addition to funding the community organisations. The result is a cacophony of services that compete for funding and patients, but lead to gross inefficiencies in the delivery of both preventive and clinical care, including pharmaceutical, diagnostic and pathology services.

The NACCHO system was inspired by the 'barefoot doctors' of Mao Tse Tung's China (that have, of course, been abandoned in China). The NACCHO and community health organisations have a monopoly of services to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. They operate in the larger remote communities and the fringe communities and are, typically of their socialist origins, highly bureaucratised with excessive numbers of non-clinical staff. Standards of health care vary considerably with functioning health centres in some of the larger communities, full-time nurses in medium-sized communities and nurses visiting perhaps once a month or less in small communities. A typical 'health centre' in a small community consists of a small, derelict, shed with a cupboard 'equipped' with Panadol liquid and tablets and a few other medicines. When a mother sees that her baby has a high temperature, she typically has to telephone the visiting nurse who may or may not advise her to 'come in' with the sick baby to a clinic several hundred miles away. She is then supposed to attend a community health organisation, but is likely to opt for the accident and emergency department of a regional hospital where one is available. In any

case, the baby (or adult) will see a different doctor on each visit. Neither patients nor the doctors they intermittently see have the patient's clinical histories. The lateness of the consultations and the lack of information lead to the overuse of such medications as antibiotics. Patients resent not having direct access to doctors. In the NACCHO system they usually first have to be screened by a semi-trained 'health worker' who decides what ails them. A multitude of health care providers typically keeps patients' medical records and Medicare and Health Care cards. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders cannot monitor their own health or that of their children. For example, glucometers (subsidised for needy patients through Diabetes Australia) are only exceptionally available to the many diabetics in remote communities so that their diabetes is not controlled. Patients are frequently unaware of the health services available, do not know how clinical services operate and cannot choose private doctors to develop the long-term relationships on which the health care of other Australians is based.

Accident and emergency departments of hospitals in regional centres are crowded with patients from remote communities. However user unfriendly (because these facilities are not funded as health clinics), the patients prefer them to the segregated facilities they are supposed to use.

Health data for remote Australia have become less available as the many barriers created by separatism and bureaucracy (masquerading behind so called 'ethical' considerations) have driven out mainstream medical researchers and clinicians. Tragically, the limited data available suggest that the Coombs experiment has resulted in much worse health, and hence lower life expectancy, for remote than for other Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, let alone than for non-Indigenous Australians.

The social consequences of the Coombs model

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote communities have access to their land and culture, but they are frustrated, resentful and angry. The communities are violent. Between 1997 and 2000, 61 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and 56 women were murdered in South Australia, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland. This was 7.5 times the murder rate for non-Indigenous men and 11.7 times the murder rate for non-Indigenous women.[41] Murders are only the tip of an iceberg of violence.[42]

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are frustrated because they cannot express themselves in English in speech or writing. They feel that life is slipping through their fingers because they do not have the job opportunities, incomes and living standards of other Australians. They resent their separation from the wider Australian community. They do not want to interact with other Australians and the rest of the world merely as 'cultural exhibits' in 'living museums', but also through mainstream work and recreation. They understand that a significant proportion of the taxpayer transfers from other Australians intended for the remote communities has been appropriated by the 'curators'—the many non-Indigenous (and a few Indigenous) administrators, tradesmen, medical and educational staff—that service the remote communities. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders daily see that these 'curators' have higher salaries, better houses and send their children to boarding schools in the south. They see the many academics, film makers and other cultural entrepreneurs adding to their already substantial salaries by studying remote communities and recording their cultural life. They know they fly back to their comfortable life in the south and present their 'findings' at conferences abroad, leaving behind the squalor that they have researched.

Traditional hunter-gatherer societies were violent. Conflict over limited resources was inevitably a part of everyday life. Women frequently died in childbirth, leading to gender imbalance and conflicts over women. With the necessity to move on, and in the absence of written laws, violence was the only way to settle serious differences.[43] With economic development, conflict over resources lessened. Market prices replaced the uncertainties of barter. Settled societies developed sets of laws and policed them to reduce violence. But the bureaucratisation of remote community services by communal associations has substituted political manoeuvres—a form of barter—for market prices in the allocation of CDEP,

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders do not want to interact with other Australians and the rest of the world merely as 'cultural exhibits' in 'living museums', but also through mainstream work and recreation.

health, education places and houses. Because royalty distribution is not transparent, it involves endless negotiating and bargaining. 'Pay-back' has become central to bargaining. Those injured are often children. 'Pay-back' can lead to suicide and murder. It bears a prime responsibility for the high rates of violent death. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are 12 times more likely to die from assaults than the non-Indigenous population.[44] In the absence of the rule of law, 'big men' can compensate victims' families with goods ranging from four-wheel drive vehicles and motorboats to coffins. In yet another intolerable facet of inequality, the rule of law does not apply.[45] Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities, particularly women and children, live in fear.

Women's business

Some girls under the legal age of consent are still being promised and married to older men, often in polygamous marriages.

Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon ignored the disadvantages of women in traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and devoted almost no attention to the role of women in their utopian prescriptions.[46] The costs of the Coombs experiment are, however, disproportionately borne by women. Following traditional practices that have been abandoned in the rest Australia (except by extreme religious communities), some girls under the legal age of consent are still being promised and married to older men, often in polygamous marriages. Children, without education or any experience of childhood and youth, are bearing children. It is well established throughout the world that when girls without education become mothers, the cycle of deprivation is exacerbated. More girls are now marrying at a later age and following their own choice of partners, but the concept of gaining an education and work skills before childbearing is yet to be accepted in remote communities. Women work hard to nurture children in crowded, unsanitary conditions, with primitive cooking facilities that harbour bacteria and in houses that lack functional bathrooms and other washing facilities. Apart from managing households and looking after older relatives, women also work outside the home wherever opportunities as health aides, teachers or office workers are available. Many of their children are perpetually ill. They cannot prevent child abuse and child substance abuse. They themselves are the principal victims of domestic violence, which is on the rise.[47] In fact, Indigenous women living in remote areas are at extreme risk of fatal assault.

Alcohol, tobacco and cannabis abuse becomes inevitable. Middle age comes early. Many women have to look after grandchildren. Even after raising their children, few women can take advantage of being free of child care duties because they are worn out, illiterate, innumerate and unskilled.

Women strive to better their children's lives and expectations, and would like to see their own lives improved, but as in most traditional societies, can only exert their influence indirectly. They are poorly represented in positions of influence and leadership. Only in post-industrial societies, with their own careers and incomes, can women expect to enjoy equal rights with men. In a 'double bind' of deprivation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in remote communities are the most disadvantaged women in Australia.

Men's business

Although the Coombs socialist experiment was designed to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, they too have received short shrift. As young men grow into adolescents in schools that lack discipline and educational content, they become bored, frustrated and resentful of their lack of employment and income opportunities. Traditional hunting and fishing cannot replace the time non-Indigenous youngsters spend learning trades and professions, starting careers in retail trade, real estate and travel, or working in banking or insurance. Only small numbers in any community can be gifted artists, dancers or musicians. For most people, cultural participation is a way of enjoying leisure; they rely on work and a wealth of recreation opportunities to make life meaningful. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders resent that they cannot compete in jobs that require real qualifications and the pace and intensity of work normal in the Australian workplace. Deprived of these opportunities, young men are restless and take every opportunity to travel, generally to the fringe communities where, unemployed, they drift into crime.

Often deprived of the company of girls of their own age, they engage in casual sex so that the introduction of HIV/AIDS into the remote communities is a grave threat. Given the social conditions, particularly the health situation, HIV/AIDS in remote communities would, indeed, be disastrous.

The ills of welfare dependence and public housing dominate the lives of adult men with the same results as in other welfare-dependent communities throughout the world. Domestic and other forms of violence, alcoholism, and smoking (particularly cannabis), are escapes. The missionary solution was not to change the fundamental economic and social structures, but to introduce kava because it did not lead to violence. In East Arnhem Land excessive kava consumption has become yet another health problem. Communal land ownership and inadequate water supplies have stalled the development of fruit and vegetable gardens. As empty day follows empty day, it is not surprising that men often cannot summon the energy even to clean up and remove rubbish.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The failure of the Coombs socialist experiment can no longer be denied. The resulting education, employment, income, health and housing conditions shame Australia.

Every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman and man, like every other Australian, is entitled to choose how she or he wants to live. The fragmentation of remote communities denies the employment choices that are every Australian's right to a decent life. The Coombs model has resulted in mind- and energy-sapping welfare dependence for the majority of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities. Dismantling it to pave the way for economic activities that will lead to employment and higher incomes is essential. CDEP 'sit down money' is a barrier to the creation of real employment opportunities and its review is a major step toward a decent life for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. The sooner a start is made on other reforms, the sooner will Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders be able to leave welfare dependence behind them. More scoping studies and research reviews are not needed. Remote communities are tired of being deprived, and weary of academics and consultants and their reports. Action is needed in five additional key areas.

English should be taught from 'head start' pre-school programmes when children are most receptive to foreign languages to enable them to be truly bilingual.

1. Communal ownership reform

Communal ownership of land, royalties and other resources is the principal cause of the lack of economic development in remote areas. Commonwealth, State and Territory legislative and regulatory frameworks have to make it possible for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who choose to do so to become individual land owners and entrepreneurs. Royalties from mining, fishing, telecommunications and other sources must become transparent and flow to individuals. An end to communal ownership and asset management would cut into the power of councils, associations and their 'big men', making income distribution more equitable and greatly reducing the need for bargaining and political power plays that make life miserable and lead to incessant violence. Investment in land and other assets has to become viable. With individual property rights, land could be used for collateral to borrow for business, allowing the application of capital and technology to create productive enterprises with employment capacity. Private property rights in land are essential to attracting outside investment that is a pre-requisite to a major expansion in employment opportunities.

2. Education

Literacy in English, numeracy and education more broadly, at least up to the end of secondary school, is essential if Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are to be able to make the same work and lifestyle choices as other Australians.

English should be taught from 'head start' pre-school programmes when children are most receptive to foreign languages to enable Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to be truly bilingual. A 'head start' pre-school system requires educational toys, such as lettered and numbered building blocks and Lego sets, which would enable children to

acquire principles of mechanics. For English literacy, numeracy and an adequate level of general knowledge in the humanities, social and natural sciences, the present primary school curriculums have to be replaced with best practices from leading Australian schools. Radio, television, DVDs, computers and other educational aids used regularly in other Australian schools are especially needed in remote communities to bring children in touch with Australia and the rest of the world. Gym, track sports and other non-contact sports need to be added, particularly for girls. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youngsters should proceed to high schools that continue basic education and have technical and academic streams for those who want to enter trades as well as for those who want to pursue clerical jobs and further education. To provide the same academic standards, teaching aids, laboratories and sports equipment that other Australian youngsters enjoy requires integrated secondary schools in regional centres, with hostel weekly or term boarding facilities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Following Noel Pearson's lead, the best performing students should be eligible for scholarships to attend boarding schools in the south. As employment and incomes develop, other parents may also wish to send their children to boarding school.

Transforming the education system will take time. Three immediate measures are therefore proposed to make remote communities literate within three years:

- A volunteer corps of high school and University students should bring literacy and numeracy to remote communities that choose this literacy option during school vacations. Such literacy corps proved to be effective in societies as different as Cuba and Iran. Only students who perform well in class and examinations would qualify. Working one-to-one or with small groups would allow for a quick start, eliminating the need for teacher training. Literacy and numeracy would focus on everyday life issues such as form filling and household accounts. Immediate use of computers for communication and accessing information on the internet greatly facilitates literacy and numeracy. Student volunteers would have to commit themselves to norms of behaviour including dress codes and bans on smoking, drugs, alcohol and sex. Given the present housing conditions in the remote communities, the volunteers would have to camp and the requesting communities would have to ensure adequate water and sanitation. Camps would have supervisors. A literacy corps would require minimal bureaucratic structures. A central register of volunteer teams organised by schools and Universities could be accessed by remote communities. Fares, tents and other camping equipment and supervisors could be organised on a volunteer basis. To be successful, literacy corps volunteers would have to work long hours–eight-hour days six days a week, with Sundays for chores and limited tourism—to get the job done. Volunteers would not expect–as they do in volunteering for developing countries–primarily to entertain themselves by learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Remote communities are deeply resentful of being researched, investigated and of teaching their languages and customs to southerners.

Immediate use of computers for communication and accessing information on the internet greatly facilitates literacy and numeracy.

- As English and literacy permeate the remote communities, the demand for mainstream radio and television programmes and printed material will increase. Internet cafes would be the surest way to maintain English, literacy and numeracy. Young Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders could join other young people worldwide in chat rooms, find email pen friends and have access to information for homework, sporting events and music, complementing and by-passing the shortcomings of the education system.

- A 'twinning' system of mainstream Australian with remote community primary schools and regional high schools could make substantial inputs into the education of remote community children. Families in the south could invite children from remote schools to visit for school holidays to experience mainstream life in cities and country towns. Schemes could be worked out to enable children from the remote communities to spend school time in mainstream schools. This would make much greater demands on mainstream families than sponsoring an underprivileged child in a distant country and it would not provide the long-term satisfaction of adoption, but for many good-

hearted Australian families, this would be a practical way of showing that they care about Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. In the longer run, as housing and health improve, exchange visits could be returned from the south to the north.

3. Housing

The state of housing is one of the corrosive aspects of remote community deprivation, but one of the easiest to fix. Land surveys, with reservations of land for public use, could immediately introduce 99-year land leases for privately owned houses and gardens following the Canberra lease and land sale system. This would give Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders individual property rights to their houses. Existing houses could be converted from public to private ownership at realistic values, with rents becoming mortgage payments. The construction of new private houses would follow.

While some houses in remote communities could be made habitable at a decent standard with better maintenance and less crowding, many need to be demolished. For a growing population of 120,000 to achieve a reasonable household density of seven per dwelling, there is a shortfall of some 20,000 houses. Given individual land tenure and limiting bureaucratic intervention to minimal safety regulations, private construction could start with basic kit structures that could be extended and improved as house owners wish.

4. Health

The gap between remote communities' and non-Indigenous Australians' health and longevity is the worst indictment of the Coombs model. Remote communities' health cannot be improved without greatly improved employment and income prospects, education (particularly for women), mature age of women at marriage, adequate water supply and sanitation, and decent housing. Without rapid improvement in these fundamentals, the long procession of proclamations and proposals for health improvements will remain a dead letter.

Clinical health services can be improved immediately. Egregious bureaucratic waste and entanglements can be cut by privatising the health care system.

But clinical health services can be improved immediately. Egregious bureaucratic waste and entanglements can be cut by privatising the health care system. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities want to take responsibility for their own and their families' health. This requires developing the same direct relationships with general practitioners, specialist physicians, chemists, pathology labs and other health care providers that other Australians enjoy. Patients want to hold their own Medicare and Health Care cards and have access to information about the state of their own health. With modern technology, Medicare cards should mediate access to an individual or family's health care information, either directly or in clinical practice. Funding should be shifted to subsidise private health providers such as group practice clinics with adequate equipment in regional centres to provide competition for health associations so that the latter improve their services.

Children's health cannot be allowed to fester. As a first step, a census of the health status of children and adolescents in remote communities should be taken by the Commonwealth Government with the results communicated to parents and clinical health providers of the parents' choosing. Public health intervention as part of CDEP 'mutual obligation' should follow, but parents will also need to seek clinical services to improve their children's health. The Commonwealth Government should co-operate with the States and Territories in using the benchmark data to monitor outcomes to ensure rapid health improvement.

5. The rule of law

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities are entitled to the same protection under the law as other Australians. Individual property rights are necessary to reduce the violence generated by community land and resource ownership with its resort to 'pay back'. Employment is essential to more meaningful lives, lower alcoholism and hence a reduction of violence, particularly against women. So is the education of men and women, raising women's age at marriage, ending polygamy and overall, equal

rights for women. English literacy is essential to give victims of crimes recourse to the law. Policing can reduce the murder rate by full investigations of all suspicious deaths to put murderers on notice that they will be found out.

None of these recommendations involves major increases in State, Territory or Commonwealth government funding, even in the short run. In the long run, by enabling Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to live fulfilling lives, tax revenues would rise, welfare expenditures would fall and the potential costs of ill-health and policing would be greatly reduced. Land care would be improved and remote Australia would be protected from possible international predators. But these are not the reasons for the urgency of reform. The situation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities is intolerable. The policies that led to their deprivation must be changed to give Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders the same rights and responsibilities other Australians enjoy.

Endnotes

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12 B. R. Smith and D. Claudie, 'Developing a Land and Resource Management Framework for Kaanju Homelands, Central Cape York Peninsula,' No. 256 (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, 2003).

13 National Land Council *Annual Report, 2002/3, Aboriginals Benefit Account Report*, Output Group 1.2: 18-27, indicates the creation of a considerable landcare bureaucracy with linkages to other bureaucracies, funding sources and job creation, but is not strong on outcomes.

[14] The Northern Land Council issued 16,374 permits for visitors 'for work, transit or recreational purposes' in 2002-03 (Northern Land Council, *Annual Report* (2002-03),27; www.nlc.org.au/html/abt_menu.html).

[15] J. Taylor, 'Indigenous Economic Futures in the Northern Territory: The demographic and socioeconomic background', No. 246 (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Research, Australian National University, 2003), 4.

[16] A. Wilson, 'The Third World Housing That Shames Our Nation', *The Australia* (19 November 2004).

[17] R. Trudgen, *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* (Darwin: Aboriginal Resources and Development Inc., 2000), 84.

[18] J. Warin, 'A Note on Adult Literacy and English Education in the Laynhapuy Homelands', mimeo, 2004.

[19] B. Collins, *Learning Lessons: An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*, (Darwin: Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999); Commonwealth of Australia, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *'Education Access: National inquiry into rural and remote education'* (2000), is an anecdotal compilation innocent of any quantitative information.

[20] J. Taylor, 'Indigenous Economic Futures in the Northern Territory', 4.

[21] As above, 9. Labour force participation figures for non-Indigenous Australians are dampened down by increasing tertiary education and training participation.

[22] A socialist view of work supports old missionary attitudes that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are incapable of competing in the Australian workplace and have to be protected to work less competitively than non-Indigenous Australians. R. Trudgen, *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* (Darwin: Aboriginal Resources and Development Inc., 2000), 84.

[23] J. Taylor, 'Indigenous Economic Futures in the Northern Territory', 16.

[24] Missionary organisations sympathetic to the Coombs model have been the NGOs overwhelmingly active in remote Australia. They run shops, transportation and services on a commercial basis. R. G. Schwab and D. Sutherland, 'Philanthropy, Non Government Organisations and Indigenous Development', No. 242 (Darwin: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, 2002), argue for the involvement of NGOs that specialise in 'capacity building', 'empowerment' (particularly of women) and other aid practices that would fit the Coombs model but have unfortunately wasted billions of aid dollars without any effect except to fund large numbers of aid staff and consultants. Only economic reform and education in English will enable Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to express what they want and do it.

[25] B. H. Hunter, Y. Kinfu and J. Taylor, 'The Future of Indigenous Work: Forecasts of labour force status to 2011', No 251 (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, 2003), 6,7 says CDEP participation figures are elastic with considerable differences between ATSIC and Australian Bureau of Statistics data. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey,* 4714.0 (2002), based on 9,4000 respondents aged 15 or over, while strong on information such as 'participation in cultural events' and 'types of personal stressors' is weak on economic data. The few tables classified by 'remote and 'non-remote' fail to distinguish between remote, fringe and mainstream communities. The averages derived are therefore worthless.

[26] Saunders, *Australia's Welfare Habit*.

[27] J. Altman, 'Economic Development and Participation for Remote Indigenous Communities', 3; J. C. Altman, B. H. Hunter and S. Ward and F, Wright,, 'Some Competition and Consumer Issues in the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry', No. 235 (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, 2002). They concluded that because of 'the poor track record and performance of many private dealers, with much of the anecdotal evidence indicating conduct that might border on the unconscionable', the present trend toward the establishment of a network of community controlled art centres as subsidised intercultural mediating institutions' was welcome because 'it could be argued that competition per se may not assist the industry, at least as it is currently structured': 33. But 'subsidized multicultural mediating institutions' appear to be behaving as monopolies inevitably do. If artists were literate and numerate they would benefit by marketing their paintings as they choose.

[28] B. H. Hunter, S. Kennedy and D. Smith, 'Household Consumption, Equivalence Scales and the Reliability of Income Distributions: Some evidence for Indigenous and other Australians', *The Economic Record*, 79: 244 (2003), 70-83 argue that Indigenous households are larger than non-Indigenous households but do not come to any meaningful conclusions because they average all Indigenous households; also B. H. Hunter, S. Kennedy and N. Biddle, 2004,

'Indigenous and Other Australian Poverty: Revisiting the importance of equivalence scales', *The Economic Record,* 80:251 (2004), 411-422, argue on the same lines, increasing the 'poverty count' for Aborigines by increasing the size of the household, but again, in spite of their access to the information, do not distinguish between remote and fringe communities on the one hand, and 'other' Aborigines on the other.

29 J. Taylor, 'Indigenous Economic Futures in the Northern Territory', vi.

30 J. C. Altman, N. Biddle, and B. Hunter, 'Indigenous Socio-economic Change 1971-2001: A historical perspective', Discussion Paper No. 266 (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, 2004), vi.

31 R. S. Baillie and M. J. Runcie, 'Household Infrastructure in Aboriginal Communities and the Implications for Health Improvement', *Medical Journal of Australia* 175 (2001), 363-366.

32 D. P. Ewald, G. V. Hall and C. C. Franks, 'An Evaluation of a SAFE–style Trachoma Control Program in Central Australia', *Medical Journal of Australia* 178 (2003), 65-68.

33 Northern Territory Indigenous Housing Authority, Agreements Database Organization, http://www.atns.net.au/biogs/A001/201b.htm.

34 Commonwealth of Australia, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander Commission, *National Aboriginal Health Strategy: Delivery of Housing and Infrastructure to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities*, Canberra, 1999, Appendix 1.

35 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, Australia*, Cat 4710.0, 2002 reports that in 2001 there were 349 discrete (remote) Indigenous housing organizations, with 16,402 dwellings for a population of 108,085 people. This data does not reflect the overcrowding in remote communities.

36 A. Wilson, 'Let Blacks Buy Homes Like We Do: NT chief', *The Australian* (23 December 2004).

37 Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon, *A Certain Heritage*, 278.

38 Australian Bureau of Statistics data quoted in *The Australian* editorial (16 December 2004).

39 I. T. Ring and N. Brown, 'Indigenous Health: Chronically inadequate responses to damning statistics', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 177 (December 2002), 629-631. Ring and Brown cover all Indigenous Australians.

40 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, *Expenditures on Health Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Canberra, 1998), 18.

41 P. Karvelas, 'Murder Rate High for Black Women', *The Australian* (1 December 2004).

42 J. Kimm, *A Fatal Conjunction: Two laws two cultures* (Sydney: The Federation Press, 2004), provides a litany of evidence of the culture of violence in remote and fringe communities.

43 L. Keeley, *War Before Civilization: The myth of the peaceful savage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); S. A. Le Blanc, *Constant Battles: The myth of the peaceful, noble savage* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2003) and G. Blainey, *Triumph of the Nomads*, Revised Edition (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1997), 105-12.

44 Ewald, Hall and Franks, 'An Evaluation of a SAFE–style Trachoma Control Program in Central Australia', 65-68.

45 J. Albrechtsen, 'Stop Tolerating Tribal Punishment', *The Australian* (1 December 2004).

46 Although Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon, *A Certain Heritage* claim that 'our study spells out clearly the distinctive role of women in socialization processes', this is one of the few references to women in their book:144.

47 P. Karvelas, 'Violence Against Black Women, Children on Rise', *The Australian* (8-9 January 2005).

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