

Hard Grind—The Making of an Urban Indigenous Population

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We wish to present to you a brief Study of How Some Southern Indigenous People have broken away from Settlements and eventually formed the beginnings of an Open Society Population in the cities, and what lessons this may have for Northern Settlements. We will be focusing on the experiences of Aboriginal people from some of the Aboriginal communities near Adelaide.

Introduction

Most Indigenous people in Australia now live in cities and the vast majority live in urban areas, perhaps 80 % just in the coastal strip from Cairns around to Adelaide. Only a small minority resides at a distance from an urban area, and this population may not be growing at all (ABS, Census 2006). More than twenty thousand Indigenous people have graduated from universities, overwhelmingly in the cities, with another eleven hundred or more each year – an average of three per day.

But at the other end of the spectrum, the three hundred thousand or more people who exist on welfare payments in remote settlements, country towns and outer suburbs, are continuing, perhaps inadvertently, to marginalize themselves and make themselves virtually unemployable – and are raising their children to follow in their footsteps.

Sixty years ago, the great majority of Indigenous people in South Australia were confined by state and local government policy to missions and government settlements. Now, three generations later, the great majority are urban. But that journey from mission to city has been long, often incredibly difficult and certainly not without casualties. And not everybody tried to make it. We are only now seeing the first generations of Indigenous young people coming straight through school and on to university in large numbers, fifty and sixty years after their ancestors left the confines of settlement life. On the other hand, there are still many people living at settlements, in rural towns, and in the outer suburbs in the south who still have no real work experience in their family histories, even going back a hundred years, who have lived off welfare in one form or another for as far back as they can remember, and who have been raising their children to have similar expectations.

But for all that, even with all the difficulties that were experienced by those families who first left the settlements after the War, the conditions for success for those who made the effort **then** were vastly more favorable than **now**, and it is highly unlikely that large numbers of people from northern settlements – or even in the suburbs – can duplicate the long and tortuous journey that those southern generations have made, even **over a similar time-period**. Southern experience can be a rough guide for northern remote populations, but only

if the fundamental differences between the two populations are understood and scenarios and policies proposed accordingly. Prerequisite factors will have to include much more targeted policy instruments: work-skills training and other education leading directly to employment, unskilled and semi-skilled employment, which in turn will require intensive English-language, literacy and basic numeracy classes for young adults. Some people may be able to come on sooner or later to higher education, but on a larger scale, this may take several generations. But only when this has occurred, can we start to talk about the possibilities for genuine self-determination.

In this paper, we are using the term ‘open society’ as a surrogate for civil society, inclusive society, free and democratic society, and assuming that, without the tools to participate socially which education and work provide, Indigenous people, like any other people, limit themselves to a poorer world of experience, and exclude themselves from full involvement in an open society.

Post-War Policies and the Seeds of an Indigenous Open Society Population

Indigenous policies, from 1900 through to the 1960s, tended towards social segregation and limited economic absorption, usually in rural industries only. Post 1937, these policies, with little real change, were called ‘assimilation’. Education followed the ‘culturally adapted’ model right into the fifties, under which children on government settlements – at least in South Australia – could not go further than upper primary school. All ‘assimilation’ meant for some time was employment in remote rural areas, and yet more social restrictions – after 1939, people needed permits to leave SA settlements, or to return to them, if they had been ‘exempted’. Control and exclusion was still the name of the game.

Experiences of southern Aboriginal people at the time were confined to intermittent rural work (shearing, fruit-picking, seasonal work), in the context of many years but poor levels of education, and poverty conditions back on the ‘Mission’. After all, unemployment benefits were unavailable on government settlements until the late sixties.

During the war, almost all able-bodied Indigenous people in the south were fully employed, those who had not enlisted in the armed forces. In the post-war period, life was much harder on settlements but, with their wartime experiences, men found more opportunities for seasonal and permanent work away from missions and settlements, in rural work, on the railways, and on infrastructure projects (dams, roads, and rail networks). So working people spent more frequent, and longer, periods away from settlements, eventually taking their families with them.

These various work experiences gave people a much broader understanding of how the outside economy worked. The overwhelming majority of southern people tended to be literate, with English as their first language, and anxious to escape from the restrictions of settlement life, which was becoming more crowded, squalid and limiting. And, it has to be said, the hard-workers were very likely getting sick of carrying the welfare-seekers.

So many people were more than ready, willing and able to move away from small settlements, to risk what little security they may have provided, and desperate to try their luck in more regular employment outside – and just when the economy needed more unskilled and semi-skilled labour. These push factors probably were far more salient than the pull-factor of any new assimilation policy, and movement away from some settlements during the fifties greatly exceeded the intentions of policy-makers.

At first, work followed a pattern of seasonal orbiting, for shearing and fruit and vegetable picking. For some people, particularly from some settlements more so than others, seasonal work periodically allowed them to work close to cities and spend a lot of their spare time becoming familiar with urban life. This made movement away from settlements to country towns (and later to cities) much easier.

So the most enterprising minority dispersed away to country towns, then often (but over a generation, with many false starts and retreats to the settlements) to the cities. More commonly, it was the second generation, single men and women, who made the move from country town to city. Even so, it often took ten, twenty years to make the move. This certainly was not a smooth, one-way or completely successful process: many people moved from settlements but into declining industries and soon found themselves out of work again (on the railways or infrastructure projects, for example), and either returned to settlements, or moved to country towns (or even outer suburbs) to join the growing welfare-dependent populations. But even for those who persisted, housing was usually abysmal, life was often a hand-to-mouth matter of getting through to the next pay-day.

The first generation of substantial numbers of children growing up away from the ‘Mission’ were born in the late forties and fifties, up to the early sixties, reaching maturity through the sixties and seventies. They tended to grow up in country towns, orbiting back to the settlements on the one hand, but more and more into the cities on the other. A handful found settlement life more secure and returned. But by the late sixties, for many young urban people, settlement life had few attractions and little relevance. They had been raised in the towns and cities, they went to school there, made friends there, and later worked and socialized in the cities, so usually they married people, often non-Indigenous, from the cities who were also working.

The Growth of an Urban Indigenous Working Class – and of an Urban Welfare-Oriented Population

The second generation, born from the late fifties to the early eighties, was much more likely to be born away from settlements and to be raised in country towns or in the city. They were far more likely to marry non-Indigenous partners. Movement away from settlements seems to have dried up after the mid-sixties and people still living at settlements tended to stay there: certainly, neither they nor their children moved into the cities in any numbers after the late sixties.

The Whitlam years coincided with the full extension of welfare rights to Aboriginal people – so the migration away from settlements to towns dried up quickly, in fact there was a small reversal in the flow, a small migration from cities back to towns, and from towns back to settlements. If anything, a pattern developed of much more regular orbiting between settlements and nearby country towns, with declining interaction between metropolitan and rural populations.

There has been very little **permanent** movement between settlements and cities since – even between country towns and the cities (at least in South Australia). Population growth has been endogenous rather than the result of migration. Of course, there has always been a fair bit of orbiting between settlements and rural towns, and between towns and cities. Consequently, a growing social, experiential and biological disconnect has grown between urban people, and rural town and settlement people. As well, there has been a growing separation between work-oriented and welfare-oriented people in the cities: different cultures (preoccupations, preferences, behaviours), different goals and aspirations (and notions of how to attain them), have crystallized into different life-style paradigms.

To re-cap: Post-1975, many second-generation urban Aboriginal people, particularly those from work-oriented families, had gone to school with non-Aboriginal people, worked with and married non-Aboriginal people and maintained a strong work-ethic; and so the urban population rapidly differentiated into those with an career-oriented **opportunity** ethic and those with a welfare-oriented **security** ethic, each strongly influenced by their parents' experiences and implicit guidance, and each with radically different career pathways and philosophies.

So: **the opportunity-oriented second generation** have been much more likely to marry working non-Aboriginal people, since they shared so much of their everyday cultural practices. In this sense, many Aboriginal people have gone far beyond the earlier assimilation policies and have kept going. Assimilation policies have succeeded far beyond the original planners' worst nightmares. **But it has been this population which has planted the seeds of possibility for an open society.**

: on the other hand, the welfare-embedded second generation have been much more likely to remain socially segregated, and to marry other welfare-embedded Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and to orbit between the 'Mission', nearby country towns and the outer suburbs (where they could find cheap rent, with less threat of work). They have developed mechanisms which unintentionally shut them out from involvement with non-Indigenous people, and have barred themselves from fostering, or participating in, an open society.

The Role of Education in Boosting a Potential Open Society Population

Up to the eighties, the education of both **second-generation** populations was still sub-Year 12: Year 12 graduate numbers were barely out of single figures, four or five percent of age-groups. After all, parents had usually not had any secondary schooling at all: in South Australia, not too many Indigenous people were able to go to secondary school before 1960, so parents could not advise their children effectively on educational or career paths. But many young people in the **second generation** were just as desperate to break away from reliance on welfare and find work – for many of them, welfare was not an attractive option – and if unskilled work was scarce (as it became in the eighties), then the only option was to go on to tertiary study and get more reliable employment as professionals, particularly as teachers and bureaucrats.

In the late seventies: a few universities and CAEs around the country set up Indigenous student support programs, to prepare and back up students throughout their studies, from recruitment and preparation, through to graduation (after all, the great majority of Indigenous people had not completed secondary schooling). These programs massively boosted Indigenous tertiary enrolments across the country from fewer than one hundred in the mid-seventies, to a couple of thousand by the end of the eighties (currently enrolment is nine thousand). Some CAEs also set up off-campus Study Centres in country areas. The successful students in these programs tended to be **first-generation** and **opportunity-oriented second generation**, with some **second generation welfare-oriented** students enrolling, but very few eventually graduating.

So, by the mid-eighties, the Indigenous population was quite differentiated: in urban areas, one could discern a small opportunity-oriented population, some in working-class jobs, some in lower-level bureaucratic jobs (mainly in the growing Indigenous industry), some studying and/or working as professionals – but still a much bigger welfare-security-oriented population, mainly in the outer suburbs. The border zone between opportunity- and welfare-oriented populations was still pretty fluid.

In the rural areas, there might have been a small working population, a small population studying at TAFE and tertiary Study Centres, and a large, mobile, welfare-oriented population.

Through the nineties, two populations took advantage of different sets of opportunities:

- On the one hand, the **second generation opportunity-oriented** population tended to marry non-Indigenous people, in similar socio-economic positions, so after about 1981, the number of **third generation** children boomed. These populations were much more economically comfortable, buying or owning their own homes, in relatively secure employment, some in trades, but many in service-oriented professions or in public bureaucracies, with growing numbers confined to Indigenous organizations and units. Since 1998 or so, when these **third generation** children started to reach upper secondary age, the numbers of Indigenous students in Year 12, the final year of schooling in SA, has risen by five times.

- But the **second-generation welfare-embedded** population and their children and grandchildren, now a **third and fourth generation** – and possibly still a majority of the urban population – have entrenched themselves in a welfare-oriented life-style, with little positive involvement with the education system or the world of employment, often with addictions and other health problems, often getting into trouble with the Law, using jail as a rite of passage to the adult world, with a high incidence of single mothers and single-parent families, disabled pensioners and drug- and alcohol-dependence. This population is becoming even more **welfare-dependent** as time passes, each generation inadvertently raising the next to have the same outlook and expectations. Many people in the **welfare-dependent population** have now experienced many generations of marginalization and have built up a broad range of cultural practices to capitalize on their situation. In fact, one could speculate that, in urban Australia, **welfare-embedded** people, with government support, have created and reinforced a **multi-generational marginalization syndrome** which maintains, and yet traps, them and their children in lifelong welfare dependence.

To date, more than twenty thousand Indigenous people have graduated from universities across the country. Another nine thousand are currently studying, and the equivalent of half of the 20-year-old age-group are commencing tertiary study each year. Year 12 graduation rates are rapidly improving, as the third generation of opportunity-seekers' children work their way through school and towards tertiary education and professional employment.

On that note: ten years ago, the bulk of Indigenous tertiary students were enrolled in either Indigenous-focussed courses or helper-role courses; over the past five years, enrolment in Indigenous-focussed courses has evaporated, at least in South Australia, and enrolments in helper-role courses are stabilizing, while there is an ever greater diversity of course enrolments. By 2020, it is quite possible that fifty thousand Indigenous people will have graduated across the country, a third with post-graduate qualifications. They may make up fifteen percent of all adults and, with their families, a quarter of the entire Indigenous population. Almost no Indigenous graduates are invited back to settlements, so they find work in urban settings, often in Indigenous organizations and units.

Obstacles to Indigenous Involvement in an Open Society

But at least two major obstacles stand in the way of the development of an **Open Society** in relation to Indigenous Australians and severely compromise it:

- Internally, Indigenous organizations have evolved from an inclusive and mass base, as service providers which mediated between federal government (especially its Treasury function) and Indigenous populations, - into patron-client systems - and over time into exclusivist forms of **neo-patrimonialism**, in which 'big men' distribute public funds for the private benefit of themselves, their relations, friends and loyal supporters, in

which the purpose of the organization becomes no more than the maintenance of the organization, and in which loyalty supplants performance and competence:

- In fact, to the extent that services funded for delivery by Indigenous neo-patrimonial systems have not been provided, one could say that the policy of ‘self-determination’ [read: indirect or delegated rule] has become bankrupt – and this is precisely why there has been such a dire need for the NT Intervention, and for the development of new paradigms of local service delivery, a task that has not even been begun;
- But, in the external economy, the mainstream economy, newer forms of excluding racism – often from the Left, it has to be said – drive Indigenous professionals and tradespeople gradually and subtly out of the mainstream economy, particularly the public economy, into the Indigenous system (cf. Wieviorka, 2000, 2003), on the pretext that Indigenous graduates and tradespeople should ‘work for their people’:
 - And to the extent that this is not working for skilled Indigenous people, to the extent that they are shut out of both the mainstream and Indigenous systems, then this culturalist paradigm has also reached a critical point, a point of exhaustion and bankruptcy.

What both of these factors are trending towards – the inadequacies and inequities of both the Indigenous patrimonial system and the mainstream exclusionary system – is that neither is satisfactory for Indigenous graduates – for those who do want to ‘work with their people’, and for those who seek to work in the mainstream, as is their right. It is time for entirely new paradigms, particularly at a time when new policies have to be initiated and implemented in relation to remote settlements.

So Indigenous graduates and tradespeople are caught between the bankruptcy of Indigenous patrimonial systems, and the inhospitable environments of the mainstream workplace. Most Indigenous graduates are skilled in socially-oriented rather than technical or business fields of study, so employment tends to be in areas which are under the domination of non-Indigenous people who see themselves as being socially aware, progressive, on the Left, and as having some expertise in Indigenous affairs: as such, they tend to act on beliefs that Indigenous graduates and other employees should devote their careers to Indigenous people – they should ‘serve their people’, and confine themselves to Indigenous units and organizations; and in any case, they should be living in rural areas, the ‘natural habitat’ of Indigenous people (as the Left believes): according to this very powerful myth, most Indigenous people should not really be living in urban areas or seeking ‘to be assimilated’. This attitude would have to be called **left-wing Apartheid because it seeks to limit what Indigenous people can properly do, to dictate the parameters of Indigenous possibilities, how they may live their lives, and to confine Indigenous people to rural and remote locations.** It is paired with the implicit notion that only white people have the right to a Western education, since – another myth – Indigenous people have their hunting and gathering, and a Western education might destroy their culture. So professionals find themselves either driven back into the arms of corrupt Indigenous organizations and units; or having to pass as non-Indigenous and find

work in the mainstream; or risk being unemployed, between the Scylla of corruption and the Charybdis of exclusion.

The Indigenous Urban Population in the Twenty-First Century

Summarising: clearly, there are now (at least) two distinct Indigenous socio-economic, or class, populations: a potentially Open Society, work- and opportunity-oriented population; and a Welfare-Embedded, work-averse, security-oriented population. This differentiation is a result of a process which has taken the best part of sixty years, three generations, and has been more or less confined to the closely settled areas of southern and eastern Australia.

A high proportion of Indigenous people who are now employed are university graduates, and a handful are qualified tradespeople as well. Currently there are around nine thousand Indigenous students at universities, and more than twenty thousand graduates across Australia, two thirds of whom are women. These graduates will tend to marry either each other or the non-Indigenous professionals with whom they work and socialise.

Education has been a major influence in moving people from a welfare-orientation to a work- and opportunity-orientation. It has certainly worked for the opportunity-oriented generations who now constitute a potentially **Open Society Population**.

But this influence may be declining amongst the **Welfare-Oriented Population** as the gulf between the two populations widens. While there seems to be little back-flow from a work-ethic to a welfare-ethic (perhaps more so in rural areas), there still seems to be barely a trickle of people trying to make the move from a welfare to a work orientation. The great majority of young, work-oriented people are the children of earlier work-oriented populations, their parents, and grand-parents, rather than through any change of heart and mind by people in the welfare-oriented population.

In fact, this can be very roughly tested:

- Firstly, amongst Indigenous students at universities: the number of Special Entry students commencing tertiary studies, a rough measure of the current interest of the welfare-oriented population in higher education, has declined drastically in the last five years;
- Secondly, when CDEP participants who were also ABSTUDY recipients were required a few years ago to choose one or the other source of transfer payment, the no-work CDEP option was chosen in preference to the light-work TAFE option, so Indigenous numbers in TAFE plummeted, especially in lower-level courses. Now that CDEP participants are being pressured more to work, TAFE Indigenous numbers have risen again.

So the **Welfare-Oriented Population** may be shunning opportunity more than ever and turning to other, perhaps more pathological, pathways to maintain their lifestyles. The gulf

between the two populations is growing rapidly, with each population moving in very different directions, and certainly away from each other.

But if we turn our attention to the opportunity-oriented population, the potentially **Open Society Population**: the rapid rise in Year 12 numbers in SA (and presumably other states) have coincided with the coming-of-age of the demographic boom of the early eighties. These numbers are now flowing on to tertiary study and graduation: across Australia, tertiary graduate numbers, first-time graduates, suddenly rose in 2006 by 12 % to 1100, out of an equivalent age-group size (say 24-year-olds) across Australia of about six thousand – and from now on, at least 20 % of each age-group will be graduating from universities.

Now in their teens and twenties, this **third** generation of work-oriented Indigenous people are much more likely to go straight through school (perhaps 70 % enrolling in Year 12), and on to tertiary study, and to work with and marry non-Aboriginal partners. Inter-marriage rates will exceed ninety five per cent and the great majority of their children will be raised as Indigenous. This is what **Integration** means, to socialize and work with non-Indigenous people without losing a sense of difference and a pride in one's Indigenous background: their ancestors will forever be Indigenous, and their ancestral places will always be Indigenous.

So, in the South, we are now at the beginning of a **fourth generation** of Aboriginal people whose ancestors moved away from settlements to seek opportunity and security, and better lives for their children, fifty and sixty years ago - this is almost an entirely urban and metropolitan generation, with little knowledge of or feeling for their 'home' communities.

Of course, many older Indigenous people (especially people of the first and second generations) are still in close touch with relations across the two populations, even if some are work-oriented and their relations are welfare-oriented, and sometimes the boundary is very indeterminate, with many people securely employed in welfare-oriented organizations, while other people have worked steadily for decades without substantially changing their attitudes or frameworks or ways of thinking (so their heads or hands are in one ethos, while their hearts are in another). As well, welfare-oriented people tend to turn work-oriented positions (e.g. in education, health and family support, and especially in Aboriginal organisations) into welfare-oriented functions, due to the perceptions that many people still may have of the 'passive, helpless Blackfella' and the demands of families and cliques to turn organizations into patrimonies. It sometimes happens that people follow a welfare-oriented lifestyle, while holding opportunity-oriented or Open Society aspirations.

But it is clear that, with the appropriate supports and programs, long-term employment is a major mover of people from one population to the other. And training and education is a prerequisite to long-term employment.

The question is whether or not this can work for able-bodied and intelligent people in the remote settlements.

Practicalities for Remote Northern Communities

So can the southern experience, confined as it actually has been to a minority, provide a model for remote northern communities ? As a sort of laissez-faire model, not in the short- or medium-term, (strongly directive policies may be a different matter) because in the remote areas, it appears that:

- People have minimal genuine work experience, even if their parents and grandparents had long experience in the pastoral and/or mining industries;
- People in remote communities have poorer English than their own parents – or grandparents;
- Able-bodied people – on both northern and southern settlements – seem to be very much work-averse;
- There seems to be very little desperation to get away from settlements, very few pull-factors;
- Unskilled and semi-skilled jobs are very much less likely to be available in the outside economy than they were for southern people back in the fifties and sixties;
- What employment there might be is likely to be at a great distance, with few services and no housing provided; but
- On the other hand, there is a very wide range of welfare-funded alternatives to work;
- And most importantly, there appears to be no appreciation that people themselves may have to do anything for themselves or for others – self-determination seems to have come to mean that the government will – and should –provide ever-more services into the future through the medium of Aboriginal neo-patrimonial organisations.

In northern settlements, idle adults do not provide useful role models for children: so why should children bother going to school to learn anything if they will never have to work – except, of course, if it's the only way to get into the pool or the shop? The hunter-gatherer life is a distant memory, replaced now by shops, and regular trips to town, except for hunting excursions via the Toyota dreaming.

This is not just a northern, or remote area, crisis – it is a crisis which reaches into all parts of Australia.

If one had to quantify the successes of southern people in moving into the mainstream economy, one would have to conclude that only a minority have 'made it', perhaps 30 %, perhaps 40 %. The other sixty or seventy per cent have remained in, or fallen back into, a welfare-oriented culture, welfare-oriented patterns regarding education, relations with the 'law', health, employment, housing, and lifestyle, and are in the process of passing those patterns onto their children.

Currently, even isolated southern rural settlements are facing extinction, with enterprises being wound down or 'out-sourced', and populations moving to local towns. And these are English-speaking, literate people who have a rich familiarity with urban life, who have seen real people doing real work.

One may think that this Population, numbering perhaps three hundred thousand people, may be much more amenable to taking up genuine training and employment

opportunities in the short- and medium-term future. But perhaps not so, not without strongly-directed intervention measures: inducements to study and work have been available for this population for more than a generation, yet there has been a **decline** in their participation in tertiary education, judging by the rapid drop in the numbers of Special Entry students at universities.

What might work ? Apart from a drastic improvement in public education, generous scholarships for secondary students taking the ‘hard’ options and for young people taking short, intensive work-skills programs, and subsidies and bonuses for people who take up employment, with attractive housing packages for working people who wish to buy their own homes where they wish to work – these initiatives might work more effectively with ‘southern’ **welfare-oriented** people. It may be that the NT Intervention will begin to focus some attention on this other population, the welfare-oriented populations in ‘settled’ Australia, who are still the majority of Australia’s Indigenous people, after all.

The Southern Experience and Lessons for Northern Settlements

What has worked for some southern Indigenous people certainly has shown a way that others could follow – in fact, they probably have done over the last fifty and sixty years, but in very small numbers. Those who might make up an Open society population now would be the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those first pioneers. Letting social and economic forces take their course worked for some, but it did not work for the bulk of southern people, even with the advantages of English-language, literacy and work experience, and there is still an enormous job to be done in the south, so without appropriate interventions over a very long time, there may not be much success in the north.

Of course, where these conditions apply in the remote northern settlements, where people are able to communicate effectively in the common language in the mainstream economy, where people are willing to put in the sustained effort and to provide educational guidance for their children, and if people are prepared to travel to workplaces where their skills are sufficient and can be utilized, then certainly there would be pathways, and public agencies should be available to provide the back-up supports that would be required to help people move and settle, to integrate their children into local schools and the non-working adults into social and/or educational networks. But it is very likely that the ‘best and the brightest’ have already done precisely this, and some time ago.

So on the whole, if they were to develop more positive attitudes towards skills learning and sustained work-effort, and if the appropriate programs were put in place to support a learning and work ethic, could people from remote settlements be easily integrated into the present human resource needs of the mining and pastoral industries, even at the lowest levels ? Yes indeed, but not without carefully-thought-out preparation and support: even at the lowest levels, people would require English and training in basic work-skills that most people do not have.

But who, from the northern communities, might want to seek work outside ? Who is most desperate to either escape from the idiocy and horrors of settlement life OR gain the skills to initiate and operate enterprises in northern settlements ? The young men seem to be uninterested in genuine work, unless driving around all day in a Toyota constitutes work. Is it possible that some of the younger people are more likely to seek to move, not in a flood but in dribs and drabs, over time, to local towns ? Why would they move ? To seek work opportunities ? Or has settlement life degraded and de-sensitised even young people too ?

Then is the only option to focus on the education of young children ? And will it take what may seem hardship for the older generations, genuine work requirements in return for public services, for example, or standard rental charges and occupier-funded repair costs in exchange for public housing, to make the need for education and employment more relevant to the youngest generation ?

From the outside and to southerners, there seem to be so many Gordian knots in northern Indigenous life: for example, people cannot find work, even if they were looking for it, because their education levels are so abysmal – and children are not interested in education of any sort while they see their older brothers and sisters comfortably idle. Everybody is preoccupied with other things, sickness, money, the next funeral, grieving over the last one, the next cheque, how to get to town today, where to get a feed, where to sleep – too many issues to worry about irrelevancies like education and employment. So people may well stay completely uneducated, and unemployed. But what will intelligent, able-bodied people do in remote settlements when the grog is controlled, money is short and opportunities for personal advancement there are almost non-existent, apart from humbugging ?

The Southern Pathway

In a very general sense, one section of the southern population showed the way to the rest: to the balance of the southern population and to the remote population. The vital prerequisites seem to have been: English language, literacy, numeracy, work experience, and a realization that opportunities could only be found away from the settlements. With hindsight, what was also required were one or two generations of Indigenous people who were prepared to work very hard to get their children and grandchildren in the position where, through rigorous English-language education, they could take advantage of much higher-level employment opportunities.

The successful southern experience took generations of hard work. For migrants to Australia, similarly, it has taken one or two generations of people prepared to work very hard in order to set their children and grandchildren up to seize opportunities. These were people desperate to succeed, knowing what the alternatives might be. The people in northern settlements do not seem to have that sense of desperation, so they are not going to have it any easier, and there are, if anything, fewer short-cuts now than in the decades after the War. The bar is now much higher and the journey is much longer. How to prepare them, or some of them, for the long haul – really a much longer haul, to jobs which demand much higher skill levels from

the outset than the farm and factory jobs of the fifties and sixties – this is going to be where the rubbery aims of policy meet the hard surface of implementation, and for many decades to come. Certainly, education, with a focus on English-language, literacy and numeracy education, must play a primary role in northern settings:

- in the near future, to prepare young people for employment in unskilled positions,
- in the medium term, to prepare many of the next generation for unskilled and semi-skilled employment,
- and in the longer term to enable the children of today to gain access to semi-skilled, trades and professional employment.

Of course, for some, it may be much quicker. But, we fear that for many, it will never happen. On the one hand, this is an urgent issue – but on the other, it will take very many, very specialized staff, aware of the backgrounds people are coming from, able to keep learners moving forward, prepared to tolerate violent outbursts of frustration and impatience, and sympathetic to the difficulties that people are going through –

- cognitively in struggling with the mountains of knowledge that they have been denied – and which they have denied themselves through their lifestyle choices – but which they will need, in order to operate in the mainstream economy and society,
- physically, in having to move from settlements with no employment prospects, to locations where they can find employment; and
- ideologically, in coming to terms with the realization that Cargo is no longer on the agenda and that self-determination means – has always meant – sheer hard work.

The option of genuine self-determination – economic development on Aboriginal land – has always been available, and with skills learnt in the mainstream, people may be more willing and able to return to settlements and initiate appropriate enterprises on land leased from councils to – ideally – private Indigenous-operated companies. Many of us would welcome this option, but currently it appears to be a long way off: there are mountains to climb before we can contemplate that vista.