

# *Breaching The Wall*

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**T**he effect of 30 years of government policy on remote area indigenous communities has been disastrous. The idealism of the 1970s has produced poor outcomes and has left a large proportion of the Northern Territory's remote communities in a very precarious position. The communities have not prospered—despite a vigorous land rights regime—and the future looks bleak without a serious review of the relationships between the communities themselves and governments. A wall consisting of cultural beliefs and practices, misunderstandings over expectations and an edifice of blame has been erected between the parties. That wall must be breached before any meaningful advances can be made. This will require a form of direct intervention by governments in the important areas of governance, health and education.

Moreover, there are many people who have devoted a large part of their working lives to the field of indigenous affairs, with particular emphasis on remote communities. These people were dedicated to the belief that the sum of their efforts would result in the achievement of particular outcomes which would lead to a greater and more productive involvement of indigenous people in the social and economic life of the nation. Many now despair that this effort may have been largely wasted.

It is a truism that indigenous culture is a huge asset to the Northern Territory and its expression is both unique and valuable—particularly in the arts and tourism fields—and it is acknowledged that there is considerable potential for growth in these areas. There are many aspects of indigenous culture, however, which serve to hinder attempts by governments to press for change. Aboriginal aspirations are different to the mainstream, the values placed on personal relationships are paramount and factors such as

educational achievement have a low priority. These differences, although acknowledged as important, are rarely identified as barriers to change within government thinking. Governments' assumptions (and those of many who advise them) relating to Aboriginal aspirations are never or rarely tested and, one could argue, have been wrongly based for many years.

Governments have been accused of subordinating the rights of indigenous people as Australian citizens in order to ensure the continuance of their traditional beliefs and practices. Although the issue of cultural retention (and its inevitable watering down) versus modernity appears to be a dilemma for both parties, it need not be. Given the universal capacity of cultures to adapt to change, this belief represents little more than confused idealism. Unfortunately, however, as long as policy continues to be directed to communities of people as cultural entities rather than to individuals and their particular aspirations, the full potential of remote area people will not be achieved. It speaks volumes that governments, in a progressive country such as Australia, have allowed themselves to become victims of such a dilemma.

In remote communities, Aboriginal expectations of governments have never been clearly articulated. It is obvious that many bush people don't see any difference between 'giving' and 'helping', and have long held the belief that it is the role of governments to give and continue to give until, somehow, the differences in living standards will be addressed. They need to do little but wait until that day arrives and they are becoming increasingly impatient that things are not changing fast enough. On the other hand, government programmes are invariably based on the assumption that the client group wants to change, will do something about this and will, with a measure of help, drive the change. This

assumption is the cornerstone of most improvement strategies and is most often expressed as a community development approach, where the community identifies its needs, and with some assistance, works towards the satisfaction of those needs.

The community development approach has been used for many years in the Northern Territory and throughout the rest of remote Australia. It would appear that the theory is fine and workable in other parts of the world. However, it has yet to be demonstrated that a workable model exists for remote Indigenous Australia. World Vision, for example, recently withdrew from the much-troubled Papunya community after ten years of effort without finding a way forward. This approach, which remains part of all improvement strategies from inception to implementation, has become little more than an acceptable way of delivering programmes dressed up within a 'consultation' process. Priorities have already been set, the outcomes demanded by government and the broader community have already been established, assumptions embedded and expectations raised.

The inherent differences in priorities and lack of understanding of each party's expectations continue to lead to failure or, at the least, to a massive effort to achieve very little. Government thinking still drives all strategies on the soft bed of a dubious community development methodology rather than on the previous and now 'deeply unfashionable' direct interventionist model. The latter sought and gained outcomes in the context of a captive environment where communities were directly assisted to cope with rapid social change.

If governments wish to achieve the outcomes that they say they want, then they will need to go 'through the wall' to get them.

Indigenous people will not hand the outcomes over where the established priorities are not demonstrably their own or where, due to cultural imperatives, they are simply not able to comply, or where they have no interest. This occurs even where communities, or certain members of communities, often express a desire to achieve agreed outcomes in the face of government 'consultation' pressure. It seems that the belief is still

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held that, somehow, governments will eventually do it all anyway and provide the leadership, direction and resources to guide the changes deemed necessary. Governments have not heeded this, preferring 'partnerships' and 'agreements', thereby avoiding any suggestion that an interventionist model of service delivery is necessary. The continual publication of glossy strategy documents, the delivery of statements of intent and the establishment of enquiries and committees is

now serving little purpose other than proving to an increasingly skeptical Australian public that the situation has become quite transparently ludicrous and misguided.

Governments and entrepreneurs who hold fixed and untested assumptions about how people think, or want to live their lives, will flounder. Programmes or advertising strategies directed to unsound assumptions will not achieve the desired results. In remote Australia, no programmes can be safe in such an unknown but assumption-filled environment.

Various community development models hold that cultural beliefs should not become a barrier to change; that if the people are genuine about wanting change and can see its benefits for themselves and future generations, then they will modify their beliefs and practices to fit the circumstances.

In remote Australia, cultural modification is rapidly occurring as a result of considerable out-

side pressures, including the impact of a greater mobility, exposure to popular culture and increased access to alcohol and other drugs. The changes occurring are not generally in response to the sorts of needs identified by government programmes or, for that matter, to those identified by many indigenous people themselves. This raises questions about which priorities may have generated the changes, and why. Is it, for example, simply a matter of 'collectivist' traditional values not matching assumptions underpinning current economic paradigms? Do the current resource allocation patterns on remote communities (royalty payments, for example) actually support the collectivist model or do they in fact validate other assumptions about the entrepreneurship of certain individuals?

In conflict with the assumptions underpinning community development principles is the belief, held by many, that cultural retention is more important than the development of literacy or numeracy skills. All that is necessary, they say, is for remote area people to have sufficient literacy/numeracy to 'get by' in the broader society. This view is at odds with policy as expressed by government and lies at the root of the poor educational achievements of remote area people. Is it being suggested that a modern education is somehow 'assimilationist' and is therefore not necessary for raising the economic and social status of indigenous people so that they might make informed choices about their futures? This 'cultural zoo' mentality that promotes the continuation of poor literacy and numeracy skills, a lack of fluency in the English language, and high truancy rates represents a major barrier to the acceptance of remote area people into mainstream Australian economic life.

It is a demonstrable fact that societies can, and do, retain significant elements of their culture and identity whilst gathering the necessary skills

to operate effectively in a modern world. Charles Rowley, an enlightened man for his time, wrote of the remote Aborigine:

So long as it remains a living tradition, his culture may contribute more to living in this continent than we have ever been ready to accept from it. What might happen, if some of the really great Aboriginal minds, retaining their own awareness of nature, become literate scholars in the Western tradition as well, is surely worth the contemplation of our educators.<sup>1</sup>

It has often been argued that the policy of 'self determination' has failed and that communities have been abandoned by governments to a slow (and terminal) form of self-destruction. The policy shift of the early 1970s certainly did not envisage the decline of many remote communities to little more than the violent rural ghettos that they are today. Although people out bush have, arguably, already achieved a degree of self-determination which seems to suit some of their needs, this has fallen well short of what was envisaged by the policy makers of 30 years ago, with all its expectations. As Peter Sutton has noted, '...the high hopes of that era have generally not been realised, and the seventies paradigm is exhausted. But it is still with us'.<sup>2</sup>

Remote area indigenous people are now doing largely as they wish, bound in remnants of a culture and unrestrained by the assistance programmes established by the institutionalised environments of the Settlement and Mission days. This is what they were told to do at the time of the policy shift, although it was also stressed that they would need to take a new responsibility for their actions. The policy regime would now operate within the legal, constitutional and moral constraints which apply to the general community. Indigenous people are also well aware of the negative changes which have occurred since the

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1970s and many are outspoken about their inability to correct the deteriorating situation.

The struggle has not so much centred on the utopian Western ideals of the '70s, but more on the imperative of an ongoing adjustment to life in a more modern world and the impact that this has visited upon a vulnerable culture. Life simply bumbles along in a disorderly state, where problems are externalised and where people are motivated by pressure to react (albeit, often temporarily) to outside demands while attempting to maintain the security of a shaky cultural status quo. The fragility of this uncontrolled and unassisted adjustment process constantly leads to breakdown, crises and dysfunction.

The picture is very confusing. How can the broader community's parity and equity objectives take place in such a complex environment? People are, in effect, making choices which serve to leave them on the fringes of Australian economic and social life, and governments attract all the blame for allowing this to happen.

The relationship between community advancement and government initiatives can be viewed in the context of a wall that has been built up and maintained as a result of inadequate policy support concerning outcomes, and a failure to respond to the reality of lives grappling with change in remote indigenous communities. That relationship has been poorly managed and is in need of radical reassessment.

At this point, it is necessary to determine what remote area people's expectations of governments are, so that long-held assumptions can be tested and issues relating to choice explored. In the meantime, it will be necessary to stabilise local administrations and provide a model of governance where rotting and maladministration are curbed, and where basic services are de-

livered in accordance with international standards and, in the case of education, with regard to the law. A regionalised model involving a dedicated oversight role for government might provide an answer in the short term.

The metaphorical wall is insidious. It is built up out of cultural beliefs and practices, false assumptions and misunderstandings over expectations and an edifice of blame. The larger structure is underpinned by an access permit system which severely restricts scrutiny by the general community.

Blaming won't help, but it seems to allow various players to salve their consciences whilst attempting to turn the focus to others. Governments are not blameless, we are told, because they are insensitive, have essentially abandoned

remote communities to a death by 'self determination', are always ready with a quick-fix, band-aid solution to problems, don't provide enough money, ignore the bigger disaster picture and cannot produce the necessary or desirable outcomes. Others say that it is indigenous people themselves who should be blamed because they have allowed themselves to sink into a victimhood role, have not taken advantage of opportunities offered, misuse royalty payments, eschew modern education, externalise all problems and have become massively dependent on government largesse.

Indigenous organisations accept no blame, but have happily taken considerable amounts of public monies for years, while taking little responsibility for its use, particularly when outcomes are poor. Their usual reaction to crises is a demand for more money and the claim that the organisation/community/council is 'under-resourced' and therefore cannot deliver results. Those well-intentioned but clumsy social reformers, the do-gooders, are certainly not blameless. The usual criticism directed here is

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that they see nothing but victims, are in denial of problems, claim that cultural retention is more important than education and argue 'rights' and 'racism' whilst watching women and children being bashed and abused. They provide no solutions, but continue to blame governments—and so the cycle continues.

All of the players mentioned above are as culpable as each other. The situation is reaching the stage where it cannot be bureaucratically managed under the existing policy framework. All parties must acknowledge that a severe crisis is inevitable. They must stop the blaming and at least agree on where government, community and individual responsibilities start and finish and what sanctions might apply when responsibilities are not met.

Breaching the wall won't be easy. It will require a degree of dedication, commitment and leadership from governments not evident for some time. It should lead to the development of a modified interventionist service delivery model

where the notions of 'help' and 'give' are clearly understood, and where agreed ongoing support arrangements can be put in place to arrest a rapidly deteriorating situation.

Governments must be prepared to intervene directly in the important areas of governance, health and education in order to stabilise the situation. This would allow for some breathing space where remote area people can regain lost dignity and establish a coherent and agreed understanding over the future of their communities and the resident populations. A Port Keats (Wadeye) leader Matthias Nemarluk said recently: 'At the end of the day we just want to be treated like ordinary Australians. We want our people to have the same living conditions and opportunities as normal Australians. We want our kids to have a chance'.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps all that is required is for all parties to be convinced that one can remain, say, a Pitjanjatjara man and be a professor at Harvard as well.

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## References

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## About the Author



Ray Hempel has lived in the Northern Territory for 42 years, spending almost all of that time working in the indigenous affairs field, starting as a Patrol-Officer-in-Training in the 1960s. After attending the Australian School of Pacific Administration, Ray worked in various field capacities with the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory Administration and the newly formed Department of Aboriginal Affairs. He transferred to the Northern Territory Public Service in 1981 and remained in indigenous affairs in various regional management, co-ordination and policy roles. He retired in late 2004. Ray has three children now scattered about the world and lives in Darwin's rural area with his wife, Robin, and quite a few dogs.