

Remote jobs proposals are incoherent and inadequate

JON ALTMAN, the author of this article, is an emeritus professor at the Australian National University. He has researched Indigenous development in northern Australia since 1977.

IN early December last year the Abbott government announced its proposed reform of the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) applicable to 30,000 unemployed Indigenous adults living in remote Australia. The proposals to be introduced from 1 July 2015 are the clearest evidence yet that the 'new' government with a 'new' Indigenous Advancement Strategy focused on remote Australia and a Prime Minister with aspirations to make an impact in Indigenous affairs have totally lost their way. Policy making is in a deep muddle.

The reformed RJCP proposes two main 'new' approaches according to a fact sheet released by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

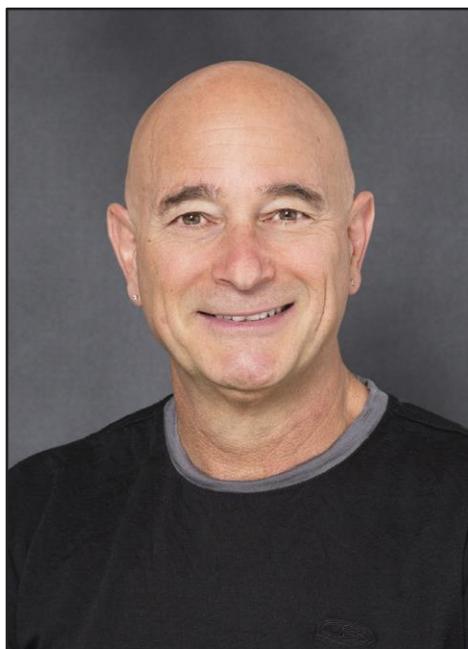
First, job seekers who are formally unemployed and aged 18 to 49 years will be required to continuously engage in Work for the Dole activities five hours a day, five days a week, 52 weeks in the year. The benign terminology deployed is that this will be 'an opportunity' and that such requirements will be 'just like a real job'. Elsewhere and less benignly it is suggested that there will be 'more immediate consequences' for those who fail to meet their compulsory work for the dole obligations -- code for their welfare entitlements as citizens being reduced or even terminated.

Second, it is proposed that the unemployed be trained either for a real job or else for Work for the Dole activities.

The government asserts that there are many job seekers in remote Australia ready and able to take on a job; what is missing is employer demand which will be enhanced with new financial incentives or subsidies.

Where jobs are absent, remote Work for the Dole activities might include ground maintenance, cleaning, community services and market gardens, but apparently not land management; there is no mention of dealing with invasive species wreaking environmental havoc everywhere. Or else grants, totalling up to \$25 million per annum, will be provided to subsidise the establishment of small businesses -- hairdressers, clothes shops, butchers and bakers -- to stimulate labour markets and boost local economies. Such projects will apparently provide on-the-job experience 'within an environment that is more work-like', '100 per cent work-like experiences', than in standard (non remote) Work for the Dole.

Make no mistake: delivering main-



JON ALTMAN

stream employment opportunity to radically reform RJCP.

It is also the case that most of the land that Indigenous Australians own under Land Rights or Native Title laws is in the very same remote regions. Indeed, it is mainly because these regions historically had low commercial value that they were either gazetted as reserves for Aboriginal occupation (later scheduled or claimed as Aboriginal land) or else constituted unalienated Crown land that could be successfully claimed.

While simplistic slogans like Aboriginal people living remotely are 'land rich but dirt poor' might serve a useful purpose in discursively belittling Aboriginal land owners, the challenges of sensibly addressing the development challenges in these remote places require innovative policy making that seems well beyond

nodes of state -- or mission-supported capitalism -- nor were local people migrating for jobs. At the same time the status quo of below-award wages for Aboriginal people became legally unacceptable after the pastoral award decision some 50 years ago.

Indeed as Indigenous people were belatedly recognised as full Australian citizens from the early 1970s, they became increasingly entitled both to award wages and to welfare benefits, even though such social security institutions were poorly tailored to their remote circumstances where there were few mainstream jobs.

Self determination then became the dominant term of policy and Aboriginal people suddenly had post-colonial choice, including a right to live remotely. The challenge in townships was to deliver capitalist development where the state



SIGN OF THE TIMES: Flagging the demise of CDEP, at Wadeye in the early days of the Howard Government's Intervention.

stream employment opportunity to remote living Indigenous people is an extraordinarily difficult challenge for two very different reasons.

Either Indigenous people are living in places established by colonial policy remote from commercial opportunity; or else, they are living in regional locations that for a diversity of structural reasons are shedding standard jobs.

This means that Indigenous people living remotely are highly dependent on the Australian state for support. This dependence makes the government extremely powerful and capable of impacting disproportionately on people's lives, including through the extreme policy

the capacity of recent governments, their advisers and the bureaucratic apparatus.

To take a slightly longer view, in the 1960s under assimilation policy Indigenous people living remotely were engaged in a range of community enterprises and training programs and paid below award 'training allowances'. The assumption of policy then was that Indigenous people would either establish commercial enterprises in difficult circumstances, or else that they would adopt western norms and skills and migrate elsewhere for employment.

By the early 1970s it became clear that this approach was failing: remote places were neither magically developing into

and missionaries had failed; the challenge at homelands was that pre-colonial production regimes generated inadequate mixed livelihoods for late modernity despite opportunity for non-standard productive activity in market-oriented cultural industries and self provisioning from hunting, fishing, collecting for domestic provisioning.

There was an interesting alternative devised in the 1970s by an exceptional policy innovator, the late H. C. Coombs, in collaboration with progressive bureaucrats and remote Aboriginal leaders -- the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme.

Under this scheme communities

would receive a grant roughly equivalent to their welfare entitlements and the costs of its administration and some funds to underwrite establishment of community enterprises.

Key features of the CDEP scheme were that it was voluntary, it was community-controlled and it cleverly combined in one program income support, employment creation and support for social and commercial enterprise. It also allowed participants to work extra hours beyond the 15 hours all paid at award rates; and to earn more income without any penalty.

The scheme was extremely popular. By 2004 when, at its peak, it was es-

scheme for failing to exit participants into full-time work, even though many worked full-time often in situations where robust labour markets were absent. And when paid opportunities as art workers or community rangers came along, it was CDEP workers who took them.

Others criticised the scheme for allowing governments to cost-shift responsibilities especially in local government, but also education and health services provision, onto CDEP. Again this shortcoming could be overcome by proper and equitable needs-based funding of remote communities.

Most recently, in the Forrest Review

(white) are only required to work up to 20 hours a week for up to six months in the year. And there is no proposed sunset clause on these work requirements, so that those on the proposed remote Work for the Dole could work year-in, year-out in often pointless activities for below award wages of less than \$10 per hour.

The new regime is proposing to replace demeaned 'training for training's sake' with 'work for work's sake'. One of the richest countries in the world is looking to turn remote living Indigenous unemployed into denizens or second-class citizens even as the nation abstractly debates the need for

questioned, something that both the government and a compliant mainstream media are desperate to discourage.

Remote-living Aboriginal people need to ask why is it that a new approach that is so clearly inferior to the earlier CDEP scheme is being imposed by elites with their own neoliberal agendas?

Why is it that ideology committed to utopian free market capitalism for remote Australia is trumping clear evidence that CDEP delivered better livelihood opportunity than what is proposed today?

Surely, if people are to be forced

Working on the CHAIN GANG



Artwork by Darwin artist CHIPS MACKINOLTY, who is on a long sabbatical in Sicily.

estimated that 35,000 Indigenous people participated in the scheme with over 70 per cent in remote Australia.

Official statistics from the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that CDEP met its objectives.

For example, on average people on CDEP earned \$100 a week more than those on welfare and they were far less likely to be arrested. In very remote Australia, 90 per cent of those on CDEP worked more than the minimum 15 hours a week, one in five worked over 35 hours. At the same time, CDEP participants in remote regions were able to participate in more hunting and fishing, in more ceremonial activity and in more recreational or cultural group activity than both the employed and the unemployed. CDEP participants were also far more likely to speak an Indigenous language although it is unclear why this was the case.

All this information was published in 2005 in a Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research discussion paper, Policy issues for the Community Development Employment Projects scheme in rural and remote Australia, that I co-authored. Its aim was to inform the government of that day and today.

The scheme was not without its problems and detractors.

Some community organisations, like the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation in Maningrida, flourished with CDEP becoming multi-million dollar businesses. Others struggled to maintain 'no work, no pay' rules especially when welfare was available without work testing. Others lacked the scale or capacity to equitably provide meaningful training and work activities to all participants. Such shortcomings were surmountable.

Some detractors criticised the

of Indigenous Employment and Training Programs, CDEP was criticised for being inequitable: those 'grandfathered' on CDEP wages got a better deal than those on Newstart, which they did. But was this a justification for destroying CDEP or an argument for improving the appalling prospects for those subsisting on Newstart?

In short, while CDEP was not perfect, it was voluntary, productive, had legitimacy, resulted in far better outcomes than welfare, and empowered community organisations and their constituents.

From 2004 the CDEP scheme was

'The imagined outcome of the proposed reforms is the harsh disciplining of Indigenous people for forms of labour that are unavailable'

demonised and demolished by successive governments, first in urban Australia, then in regional Australia and finally with the establishment of RJCP in remote Australia. The most coherent logic espoused for this 'reform' was that the intermediate position between unemployment and full-time employment that CDEP participants occupied was unacceptable; and that CDEP was so successful that it constituted a barrier to exit.

And so, in the name of an imagined utopian vision of employment parity and free market capitalism for all in remote Australia, we have the current alternative reformed RJCP. Let's look at what is on offer.

First and foremost the unemployed will be required to work 25 hours a week, 52 weeks a year in remote Work for the Dole for their Newstart entitlements. This amount of work will be higher than for those in non-remote regions where the unemployed (black or

constitutional recognition of the first Australians and guarantees that they will not experience discrimination.

Paradoxically, while the Forrest Review thrice recommended the abolition of CDEP on equity grounds, the Abbott government -- citing the same Forrest -- is quite comfortable establishing a deeply inequitable Work for the Dole scheme for remote Australia. Paradoxically too, these reforms are being implemented at a time when reputable research using census data is questioning the efficacy of welfare to work programs for all Australians.

Why is the Abbott government tar-

getting the poorest and most vulnerable Australians in this way?

It appears mainly that Indigenous people are to be punished for living differently and remotely on their ancestral lands where there are few mainstream opportunities. These remote-living Aboriginal people are portrayed again and again by politicians and black and white neoliberal commentators as being members of the undeserving and deprived poor entirely responsible for their own marginal circumstances.

And so a draconian regime for disciplining labour is proposed by the powerful state to be implemented by local providers. But disciplining the unemployed with below award 'work-like' activity will not magically generate livelihood opportunities. What is proposed is not a pathway to parity, but a pathway to increased poverty and deeper anomie.

This approach needs to be critically

into 'work-like' activity in the 21st century they should be paid award wages rather than long-discredited 'training allowances'?

What is on offer is a remote jobs program devised by disconnected officials that requires only accountability to Canberra rather than to disenfranchised remote communities. The imagined outcome of the proposed reforms is the harsh disciplining of Indigenous people for forms of labour that are unavailable.

Hopefully, the draconian and unproductive reforms mooted to start on 1 July this year will never be implemented; they should attract opprobrium both domestically and internationally. The dismantling of the CDEP scheme by the Howard government from 2004 was a damaging policy mistake that requires urgent reversal.

Rather than flex its unquestionable fiscal muscle unproductively, the Australian government should encourage economic plurality in remote Australia. And in accord with neoliberal principles it espouses, both resources and authority should be devolved to those best positioned to deliver, local communities and their community-based organisations.

There are some in remote Australia who aspire to mainstream full-time work and they should be assisted to meet such aspirations. There are many others who prefer the benefits of CDEP participation and this option too should be on the table, a mid-point between welfare and full-time employment, a third way that suits those who want flexible part-time work that allows the productive fulfilment of diverse economic, environmental and cultural prerogatives so important to so many Aboriginal people who live in remote Australia.

Such economic plurality should be a basic human right in today's deeply uncertain late capitalist world.