

# **Why the ‘new direction’ in Federal Indigenous affairs policy is as likely to ‘fail’ as the old directions**

David F. Martin<sup>1</sup>

Visiting Fellow, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research

## **Introduction**

This paper takes a clear and therefore necessarily political position with regard to current directions in Aboriginal affairs policy formulation and implementation. It is not based on a single piece of research, but rather is drawn from the intertwining of my professional and personal lives involving living and working with Aboriginal people over the past three decades and more. It has been prompted by my deep unease at some of the political and policy discourse on Aboriginal issues, not only within government but also in the new ‘industry’ and political orthodoxy which has sprung up around Aboriginal affairs. My unease does not arise because there is—supposedly—a ‘new’ direction in Aboriginal affairs; I am firmly of the view that maintenance of the status quo in significant parts of the Aboriginal world is indefensible. Just leaving policy settings as they are would be a major driver of transformation in Aboriginal societies, much of it clearly quite devastating.

Rather, my unease is because the debate is conducted with such a vitriolic and unnecessary demonisation of Aboriginal people; of what has gone before, and of those who are held to have been associated with it; with a complete disregard for what I would see as the lessons of history in Aboriginal affairs; and most importantly with an all too common disregard for the diverse views, values, and aspirations of the Aboriginal people at whom the new policy apparatus and its ideological underpinnings are directed. Except when the latest instance of horrific dysfunctionality in the Aboriginal world is brought forward to illustrate the need for profound change, or when the views of the new Aboriginal political elite are given prominence in the legitimating discourse around proposed policy directions, Aboriginal people themselves are conspicuously absent from the discussion, certainly in terms of the diversity of world views, values, and aspirations which they themselves bring to bear on their engagement with the new policy frameworks and the wider society more generally. They are essentially empty vessels, if rather chipped and cracked ones, into which the new array of more economically (and thus socially) functional values is to be poured.

Let me say here that this implicit denial of Aboriginal agency does not cause me unease so much for political or ethical reasons, although I think that the misconstruing of elements of the older policy frameworks (such as outstation development) in terms of a failed socialist experiment is an instance of unpardonable and wilful ignorance. My own initial experience with the Aboriginal world in western Cape York, where I was co-opted through what I now recognise as a distinctively Aboriginal project of recruiting a ‘boss’ to ‘look after’ people wishing to re-establish life on traditional homelands, illustrates that, contrary to the received wisdom of the new orthodoxy, such moves were not part of a plan of a misguided socialist elite but rather responses to deeply held Aboriginal aspirations.

Rather, the avoidance of any meaningful consideration in public and policy debates of the demonstrable fact that many Aboriginal people bring a distinctive repertoire of

values, world views and practices to their engagement with the general Australian society, I suggest, poses a major risk to the necessary processes of sustainable social, economic and cultural transformations in Aboriginal societies—and indeed significant change in the way in which government promotes and supports such transformations. For, unless Aboriginal people themselves are actively involved in and ultimately committed to such changes, history shows us that they will be resisted. The new Aboriginal affairs policy framework will run the risk that like the endeavours of the missionaries at Jigalong in the far Western Desert (Tonkinson 1974), it will end as another failed crusade, but this time conducted by the secular proselytisers of the market economy, and with consequences on a far greater scale.

### **The trip to the regional town**

I want to start with a vignette, based on actual events, which poses some of the questions I aim to address in this paper.

John, his wife Cynthia, her sister Cathy, and one of her sons Andrew had flown out to the regional town (let's call it Tinseltown) in order for John to purchase a four-wheel-drive from the dealer there. Another one of Cathy's sons, Mark, lived and worked in Tinseltown. Cynthia had received a significant sum of money in victim-of-crime compensation, and after four one-way air tickets had been purchased John had around \$10,000 to buy a vehicle. They had not arranged any accommodation, and had come down with only enough money to actually purchase the vehicle John wanted. They put considerable moral pressure on Mark to stay in his flat, which he shared with a non-Aboriginal workmate. However, the flat was small and Mark was unwilling to put up with the ramifications of having four of his family members stay there on what could turn out to be an indefinite visit. Short of cash himself, Mark rang a non-Aboriginal relation who had a credit card and asked if she would book two nights' accommodation and meals at a motel in Tinseltown, arranging to pay the money back when he was paid the following week.

John successfully purchased the four-wheel-drive the next day, but by the time it had been registered and so forth it was late in the afternoon and they elected to leave the following morning for the long drive back to their home community. Next morning however, Cynthia and Cathy wanted to go into Tinseltown and do some shopping. Around midday, Mark received a telephone call from his mother, to say that the others had apparently left Tinseltown to drive back and had abandoned her there, and she had nowhere to stay and no money. Mark duly rang his non-Aboriginal relation again and asked for a further motel booking to be made for his mother to stay another night in the motel, again promising to pay her back the following week. Mark then spent some time on the phone from his workplace ringing the community to arrange for the family members there to collectively organise deductions from their Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) pays in order to purchase a ticket for his mother to return by air, now the only option for her to get back.

How are we to understand this event, and its relevance to the current Aboriginal policy debates? Does it illustrate an inability of Aboriginal people from such regions to deal with money—a lack of experience, skills and education—or a different cultural logic in dealing with it? Does it illustrate dysfunctionality, irresponsibility and the 'passive welfare' mentality of which Aboriginal political entrepreneur Noel Pearson (2000a, 2000b) writes? Or does it manifest a particular form of instrumentality, a calculated dependency expressed through relations of kinship, actual and fictive? Or perhaps both? Certainly, the vignette illustrates a high degree of opportunism and a willingness to accommodate significant uncertainty and physical discomfort; people were perfectly

prepared to sleep rough and go without food if they were not able to extract resources from kin.

### **The relevance of anthropological insights to the Aboriginal policy debate**

Altman and Rowse (2005) argue that there has been a move from anthropology to economics as the primary discipline influencing Aboriginal affairs policy development in Australia. This should occasion no surprise, given the reliance of the Australian government (following those in countries such as Britain and the United States) on market-based mechanisms for realising not only economic but social policy objectives as well (George and Miller 1994; Martin 2001). In the event sketched in above, there is a range of quintessentially 'economic' elements—for example, the use of money, purchases of consumer goods and services, and exercise of choice in the allocation of time and financial resources. But such elements in no way exhaust the complexities of social process and the ideational systems underlying them.

At the heart of anthropology is the notion of 'culture' which while in some senses elusive and contested as an analytical term, foregrounds the meanings which people themselves attribute to social life and practices, and the more or less systematic character of those meanings and practices. The study of culture in what we might call 'classical' anthropological practice is founded on the methodology of participant observation in which the anthropologist immerses him or herself in the day-to-day life of the group or society with whom they are working—whether they be an urban or a remote Aboriginal group, or indeed a university department or a government agency. While originating in the study of remote and putatively distinct societies at the edge of the colonial frontier a century and a half or so ago, anthropology has increasingly turned its attention to the engagement or articulation between such peoples and the societies which encapsulate them, not least of all in the contemporary context of globalisation.

Anthropological accounts therefore can provide a focus on such matters as social constructions of values, meanings and emotions, the relationship between individuals and wider groups including the social construction of identity, principles underlying social process, attention to the language or languages people use to describe social process as a powerful investigative tool, processes of socialisation (for example in child rearing), religious beliefs and practices, politics power and status, and social structures and institutions (for example those of kinship in many societies), and social and cultural reproduction. Such matters, I suggest, lie at the absolute heart of how to understand the engagement of Aboriginal people with the dominant Australian society, how they (and we) might envisage the future of such engagement, and the principles which might inform policies so as to more productively structure this engagement for Aboriginal people.

### **Aboriginal 'economic' values: policy's blank slate**

I have suggested that the current policy orthodoxy ignores values and practices which Aboriginal people themselves may bring to bear on their engagement with the wider society. Anthropology has much to offer in illuminating the dynamics of this engagement, not least in relation to those aspects which are conventionally ascribed as being 'economic' in character. In particular, anthropology enables us to recognise that what we understand as 'the economy' does not lie outside culture, but indeed is an intrinsic aspect of it (e.g. in the Australian context, Austin Broos (2003), Macdonald (2000), Martin (1995), Peterson (1993, 2005), Povinelli (1993) and Schwab (1995)).

Trigger (2005) usefully summarises the literature in relation to how we are to understand the Aboriginal economy and the relationship between economy and culture in terms of pervasive Aboriginal values such as a strong ethos of egalitarianism and an associated pressure to conform to norms of equality, the pursuit of family and local group loyalties against notions of the 'common good', demand sharing as a mechanism working against material accumulation, and an underlying ideological commitment to continuity with the past which militates against the acceptance of change. Logically, such values would seem to have significant implications for the ways in which people engage with the general Australian society, its economy, and government policies and programs predicated on economic integration as a primary mechanism for addressing disadvantage.

However, a mere list as presented here does not capture the true import and embeddedness of such values for many Aboriginal people. For example, as has been well documented Australian Aboriginal societies can be aptly described as 'kinship polities', with kinship not only structuring 'private' familial relations, but also 'public' social, economic and political relations. At the same time, relations of kinship provide a foundational dimension of personal identity, and indeed a certain structure to ethical frameworks; for example, the common feature of a lack of a notion of the wider common good extending past local group and family boundaries

Of particular insight here are the discussions by Peterson and Taylor (2003) and Peterson (2005) regarding the Aboriginal 'moral economy', a term adapted in part from the work of E.P. Thompson (1991, 339-340). Peterson characterises the activities involved in acquiring a livelihood in the pre-colonial situation as being embedded in kinship and/or group relations. Production was nearly always intimately linked with consumption, even indeed before the activity took place, through obligations and commitments established through the kinship system. This, he notes following Godelier (1975), can be conceptualised as the kinship mode of production. After Aboriginal people in remote Australia and elsewhere entered the cash economy from the late 1960s, primarily through the welfare system, the cultural structuring of the Aboriginal economy involved an almost exclusive focus, Peterson argues, on circulation and consumption, rather than also on production. He argues that with circulation and consumption as the central features of economic activity, their focus turned to kinship, reciprocity and sharing practices. In this context, he suggests that the notion of 'moral economy' is useful to understand what is going on. By moral economy, he is meaning the allocation of resources to the reproduction of social relations at the cost of profit maximisation and obvious immediate personal benefit. The moral economy is characterised by the centrality and persistence of sharing. As Peterson (2005) explains it:

Sharing is inseparable from the division of labour, the minimisation of risk and the managing of uncertainty, it is also at the heart of the production and reproduction of social relations, egalitarianism and the self. There are four elements to the Indigenous domestic moral economy. It is characterised by a universal system of kin classification that requires a flow of goods and services to produce and reproduce social relationships. The circulation of goods takes place within the framework of an ethic of generosity, informed by the social pragmatics of demand sharing, with open refusal rare, since it is seen as a rejection of relatedness. In such social contexts personhood is constituted through relatedness while at the same time it is associated with an egalitarian autonomy.

These features, while demonstrating ongoing adaptation to the demands and possibilities of the dominant society, have their origins deep in the structures and

mores of the original hunter-gatherer societies. The nexus between these elements, particularly that between personhood and relatedness established through sharing, arguably underlies the extraordinary persistence of distinctive Aboriginal ways of life amongst people who can be many generations away from their hunter-gatherer forebears, and (as I shall argue in following sections) has the potential to be the rock upon which the state's project of assimilation of Aboriginal people through market mechanisms could well founder.

### **'Dysfunction' and 'culture'**

In both the media and in political and policy discourse (increasingly feeding into each other), much representation of the situation amongst Aboriginal people, particularly in remote areas, is couched in deficit terms, with communities being characterised almost solely in terms of dysfunction evidenced by such phenomena as large scale alcohol, drug and volatile substance abuse, poor and sometimes abysmal health, high levels of violence including homicide, neglect and even abuse of children; and for many young people an aimless existence characterised by bursts of frenetic activity around often socially destructive behaviours.

Alcohol and drug abuse are particular issues for many Aboriginal communities, although not all problems can be attributed to them. However, it is beyond reasonable argument that in many of the Aboriginal communities where there is licit and/or illicit access to alcohol, the extraordinary levels of consumption amongst the proportion of the population who do drink leads to major social problems. I observed the escalating impacts of excessive alcohol consumption and associated chaos in Aurukun in Cape York peninsula over the more than three decades that I lived in and worked with that community from the mid-1970s. It was one of the topics of my doctoral thesis (Martin 1993a), which was concerned to elucidate the meanings which people themselves gave to drinking, its associated violence, and other such practices. That is, the high levels of alcohol consumption clearly had a whole range of social and economic consequences for all Aurukun people, whether drinkers or not, for whom everyday life became catastrophically fractured and fractious—dysfunctional in a word. However, these phenomena, so I argued, could not be understood without taking into account people's own understandings of them, in the distinctive cultural framework through which Wik people engage with and interpret the world.

This raises the issue of the relationship between 'social dysfunction' and social problems on the one hand, and 'culture' on the other, a matter which Sutton (2001, 2005) amongst others has addressed in fairly robust terms. I suggest that 'dysfunction' and culture (in an anthropological sense previously outlined, of shared systems of meanings and practices) are related in complex ways, but that it is important for policy purposes to attempt at least to conceptually separate them out.<sup>2</sup> This can be illustrated by considering the questions of alcohol abuse and violence in Aboriginal Australia, and I have in mind here the work by such scholars as Brady (1992) and Martin (1993a, 1998) on alcohol and petrol sniffing, and Langton (1988), Macdonald (1988), Martin (1993a, 1993b) and Sutton (2001), on violence. These studies demonstrate that while there may well indeed be unintended—and indeed highly detrimental—consequences of such practices, nonetheless they are embedded within distinctive sets of meanings and values that Aboriginal people give to them. The practices themselves, and the meanings attributed to them, cannot be properly seen as arising through any direct and causal connections from pre-colonial Aboriginal society, but neither should they be seen as being caused solely by the destructive

impacts of colonisation. Rather, I suggest, their current manifestations have developed over time through complex and ongoing processes of conjunction, engagement, rejection and incorporation by Aboriginal people of meanings and practices within a contested intercultural field (Martin 1998).

It also needs to be said that the characterisation of Aboriginal communities entirely in deficit terms (quite apart from its ethics), logically leaves the policy makers with no realistic avenues for facilitating change apart from compulsion. Violence, poor health, boredom and so forth are indeed part of the realities of all too many Aboriginal lives, and at least some of those who subscribed to the earlier orthodoxy so derided by advocates of the current one are arguably guilty as charged of failing to engage appropriately with such issues. However, these features of many Aboriginal communities do not comprise the full extent of social reality, but one (albeit sometimes dominant) component of it. Passion, humour, vitality, knowledge, skills, creativity, aspirations ... these are not only to be found in mainstream and 'functional' Australia, but also within 'dysfunctional' Aboriginal communities. These features coexist, a fact that is not understood or is ignored by both the 'problem deflaters' so derided by the new policy elites and by those who characterise Aboriginal Australia solely in terms of its inherent dysfunction. And what the current orthodoxy ignores, crucially, is that it is precisely such attributes as passion, creativity, and knowledge which have to be built on in any process of sustainable change.

### **Implications for Aboriginal affairs policy**

Anthropology tells us that Aboriginal people are not empty vessels into which new values can unproblematically be poured. Like any other group of people, they bring sets of dispositions and practices to bear on their engagement with the world around them, including on attempts by government and others to change them and their ways of life. Inevitably, such engagement entails transformations of those dispositions and practices—but the crucial reality all too frequently ignored by policy makers and those generating the ideological justification for their work is the agency of Aboriginal people themselves in such transformations. What would its recognition mean for the development of Aboriginal affairs policies?

### **Use of market mechanisms in (Aboriginal) social policy reform**

I will first discuss certain aspects of the use of market mechanisms as a primary driver in addressing Aboriginal disadvantage, noting as above that this is neither confined to Aboriginal affairs, nor to Australia. First, there is a clear morally reformative character to the discourse around market-based policy frameworks. In no small part, the justification for this new order is established by defining the current state of much of Aboriginal Australia in terms of its inherent dysfunctionality, thereby legitimating a focus on transforming Aboriginal communities and lives in particular directions. A particularly clear example of this moral cast is provided by Pearson (2000a, 2000b), with his influential call for the fundamental necessity of Aboriginal engagement with what he terms the 'real' economy, which is constructed in quintessentially *moral* rather than formal economic terms (Martin 2001). A real economy, Pearson tells us, involves a demand for both social and economic reciprocity. The traditional Aboriginal subsistence economy and the contemporary market one are in Pearson's view 'real' economies, entailing as they do both rights and responsibilities and are thus, we may surmise, 'moral' economies (although not in the sense in which Peterson has used the term as discussed previously).

Second, and directly related to the previous point, the morally reformative nature of work itself is stressed; work is not just about production, or indeed about wages, but about making ones way in the world as an independent and self-sufficient actor, thereby discharging obligations to society in general but abstracted from commitments to particular networks and communities and to particular locales (Martin 2001). There are suggestive parallels in regard to the moral worth of work with policies towards Romany (gypsies) in eastern European countries such as Hungary before and after the fall of socialism and the opening up of economies in the region to market forces. While Aboriginal people have been forced to engage with the colonists and their successors for a little over two centuries now, Roma have been migrating into Europe since perhaps the 9<sup>th</sup> century. This provides a significantly longer timescale against which to assess the impacts of historical processes of incorporation, discrimination, exclusion, accommodation, and ethnic differentiation. Romany comprise much the same proportion of the total European population (around 2%) as do Aboriginal people in Australia. As is the case with Aboriginal people too, while there is great diversity amongst and within the Romany populations across Europe, they are characterized by deeply entrenched socioeconomic disadvantage in comparison with the non-Roma populations around them.

Of particular interest in relation to the themes of my discussion here is a comparison between the current focus in Australia on getting Aboriginal people to engage with the 'real' economy as the primary means to address social malaise and dysfunction, and the economic assimilation and integration policies in the latter decades of the Hungarian socialist state (where, of course, Marxist ideology had it that the economic was the 'real' and the social the 'superstructure'). Hungarian state ideology explicitly stressed the morally beneficial character of work; wage labour would lead to self-respect, would provide values which would be transferred to other aspects of Roma people's lives, and the engagement in productive labour would educate Roma into the value of work and remove them from their attachment to carefree consumption (Stewart 1998). In many ways, these policies were very successful in incorporating Hungarian Roma into the general economy, according to Stewart. It is perhaps unsurprising given common Judeo-Christian roots, to find parallels between the moral and reformative value placed on productive labour in socialist Hungary, and that evident in the ideological underpinnings of the current welfare-to-work policy reforms in contemporary Australia. However, significantly in terms of the arguments of this paper, the relative socioeconomic status of many eastern European Roma would appear to have quite catastrophically deteriorated following the fall of socialism and exposure of regional economies to the market. It would seem that the apparent 'success' in the earlier economic integration of Roma in Hungary was enabled in no small part by the inefficient and redistributive nature of the socialist economy. No such protection is to be afforded Aboriginal people.

Third, and related to the preceding, in the developing government policy frameworks there is an increasingly strong focus on the moral reformation of the individual, abstracted from his or her social and cultural nexus, as opposed to an earlier focus on Aboriginal groups and communities (Martin 2001). One illustration of this move can be seen in the rejection of policies framed around self-determination and other such collective rights-based frameworks in place of those which emphasise human capital development and the responsibility to adapt and change of the individual. This emphasis is consistent with the requirements of today's free market economies, based (at the ideological level if not in practice) on the essentially unrestricted flows of goods

and services, including a mobile labour force with portable skills, willing and able to move to wherever the work is. The epitome of this of course is the fly-in fly-out mining operations in remote regions of Australia where Aboriginal people often comprise a substantial proportion of the population, but where with some notable exceptions in recent years they have had little involvement in minesite employment.

Finally, the use of terms such as 'choice' and 'incentives' are also related to market-based social policy frameworks. Much of the support for the new policies is predicated on the implicit assumption that Aboriginal people will naturally, given the opportunity, choose lifestyles and adopt associated values which correlate with economic integration, or that if they don't, a carrot and stick approach can be used to achieve this. This assumption is well illustrated in a quote from development economist Helen Hughes, in a letter to the editor of *Quadrant Magazine*:

We argued (Hughes and Warin 2005) that because there are no clear and simple individual property rights in land (including long-term, 99 year leases), there are no leafy Aboriginal suburbs and no successful land-based businesses (Hughes 2005).

However, incentives by definition are not culture or value free. The incentives which presumably drive many if not most Australians to work in the ways and to the extent that we do—pride in the inherent worth of what we are doing, material comfort, financial security and autonomy as individuals or family units, paying off the family home, supporting our children through education as a valued goal in itself and so forth—cannot be assumed to apply equally across cultures. In particular, it cannot be assumed that such inducements apply amongst at least a substantial proportion of Aboriginal people, including but not limited to those living in remote and perhaps more traditionally orientated communities. I can say with certainty, based on my experience with many Aboriginal people over the past three decades, that the possibility of living in a leafy suburb would provide little if any inducement to change economic behaviour. In fact, I have observed the contrary in the case of a person from a remote community, for whom living for only a few months in just such an environment as Hughes extols led to deep psychological distress and what we would term psychosomatic illness. For many Aboriginal people, moving permanently away from kin and country is an almost impossibly confronting notion, and potentially higher material wealth provides little incentive at all if it involves breaking the connection with kin so intrinsic to notions of personhood. Here we see the utility of the analytic concept of the 'moral economy' discussed earlier, with its embeddedness in more than just relations of production, consumption and exchange.

Furthermore, while even in the remotest of communities and outstations Aboriginal people will typically assiduously seek the means to access valued consumer goods (guns, four-wheel-drive vehicles and so forth), the search for predictability, security and material comfort which drives so many Australians in their everyday lives cannot be assumed to form a part of those Aboriginal people's psychological and social repertoires. As the vignette with which this paper illustrates, people are typically prepared to tolerate high levels of discomfort and unpredictability in order to seek alternative valued ends. It is important in this context however to recognise the considerable diversity across Aboriginal Australia, and in particular the diversity of means through which Aboriginal people are engaging with and participating in the wider society and its economy. Work by Peterson and Taylor (2003) is suggestive in this regard. They argue that movement away from the immediate vicinity of kin was a key factor in improving socioeconomic status for Aboriginal people in the 1940s, and continues to be a significant factor in this regard. On the basis of census data from the



Australian Bureau of Statistics, they find some evidence of moves by mixed-race couples from centres such as Walgett and Bourke in western New South Wales to places like Broken Hill and Cobar, and surmise that this allows connections to Aboriginal kin to be maintained (although in a more attenuated fashion), but away from the omnipresent force of the moral economy when living amongst close kin.

### **The role of Aboriginal organisations in socio-cultural transformation**

Until the Howard government came to power, a primary rationale for the existence of, and government support for, Aboriginal organisations was in terms of their expression of self-determination (later self-management) for Aboriginal people. This continues to be a justification strongly voiced by Aboriginal people themselves, but is notably absent from the Howard government's political lexicon and practice. I would argue that another rationale can be advanced for continuing support for Aboriginal-controlled organisations, which recognises both the reality of and the need for Aboriginal sociocultural transformation and the necessity for Aboriginal people to be actively involved in and not simply passively acquiescing to (or resisting) such transformation.

I've suggested earlier that a core focus of the new policy directions in Aboriginal affairs (and in social policy more broadly) has been on the individual, consistent with market-based approaches. In the new framework, as I understand it, some account is taken of engagement with Aboriginal organisations; for example, it is envisaged that regionally based organisations can play an active role in negotiating Regional Participation Agreements (RPAs). They will not however be statutory or government sponsored entities, like the now-abolished ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) Regional Councils. Instead, illustrating another facet of government's reliance on voluntarism, they are envisaged as regional entities which have emerged and are capable of taking on a negotiating role. Interestingly, there is still considerable reliance on Aboriginal-controlled organisations to deliver health services, perhaps in part because of the role of the States in health service delivery. But, in other areas where Aboriginal organisations have played a major role over several decades (e.g. legal aid provision and Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) scheme delivery) the market principle of partial or full contestability is being introduced as a mechanism designed, it is stated, to improve service delivery effectiveness and efficiency. There is the very real possibility that much service delivery currently provided through Aboriginal-controlled organisations will end up being undertaken by non-Aboriginal agencies, both private sector and non-government organisations such as Mission Australia.

It is my view however that what can be read as a fairly systematic program of dismantling of institutional Aboriginal Australia, both directly (as in the case of ATSIC itself) and indirectly (through the failure of many Aboriginal organisations to be competitive in the new policy frameworks) misses an extremely important role of Aboriginal organisations, and that is as key sites of cultural brokerage and transformation in the intercultural field in which they are situated. The work of Sullivan (e.g. 1988), Finlayson (2004), Rowse (1992), Martin (2005) and others illustrates the crucial role of Aboriginal organisations as mediating and transforming institutions. At their best, such organisations are key intermediaries and facilitators in the ongoing processes of engagement and cultural change. My key argument here is that support of effective and creatively managed organisations by government, NGOs and the philanthropic sector is a crucially important component of enabling a process of sociocultural change in which Aboriginal people themselves actively participate. Their

support, in my opinion, is one of the crucial additions to market-based policy frameworks focussed largely on the individual.

### **To what extent should diversity be supported by the state?**

I earlier argued that while 'dysfunction' and culture may be related in complex ways, it is important for policy purposes to separate them out conceptually. The same argument, in my view, can be applied to the relationship between disadvantage and culture—although it is very important not to conflate disadvantage (in the sense of standard measures of socioeconomic status) with dysfunction. Groups or communities can be socioeconomically disadvantaged without necessarily exhibiting social dysfunction, and the reverse is also the case. But there are arguments (to which I broadly subscribe; see Martin 1993a, 2005) that in complex ways culture and disadvantage can be interrelated. I have in mind here, for example, work by Sutton (2001, 2005) which while controversial (see Cowlshaw 2003) argues for the cultural underpinnings of certain aspects of disadvantage—the complex manner in which particular and distinctive Aboriginal ways of living and acting in the world can actually reinforce socioeconomic marginality, health status, and so forth.

A comparison with European Romany is instructive in this regard too, given their presence in Europe for centuries. At the very least, their continuing socioeconomic disadvantage across a range of countries with different histories and policy settings would seem to suggest that certain of the current Australian policy rhetoric around addressing Aboriginal marginalisation and socioeconomic disadvantage is naive in the extreme, in claiming that the past few decades of Aboriginal affairs policy have demonstrably failed, and proposing that the new policy settings will achieve results in a generation or so. Such arguments fail to accept in any meaningful way the possibility of particular forms of agency and choice that may, in whole or in part, be antithetical to such aims. Ethnic minorities are not necessarily amenable to the projects of the state or of the populations amongst which they live. Roma, like Aboriginal people, demonstrate that, in diverse ways and in widely varying circumstances, it is still possible to carve out distinctive regimes of practices and values which involve complex admixtures of incorporation and rejection, integration and differentiation, transformation and continuity.

In this context, the heyday of Aboriginal engagement in the Australian economy could be seen to have been in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps up to the 1960s, with their involvement in the pastoral and agricultural industries. As with the European socialist economies, but in a very different way, this involved a domain of economic and social practices shielded from the full force of the market; arguably, in the case of Hungarian Roma advantaging them, but in the case of Australian Aboriginal pastoral workers significantly advantaging their employers. As with Hungarian and other European Roma (Stewart 1998), and English and Irish Travelers (Okely 1983), there would appear to be little doubt that Aboriginal people, including those in particularly disadvantaged remote communities, have a strong interest in improving the material circumstances of their lives. But an important issue that I draw from the case of the Romany is that the desire for economic improvement cannot be read as necessarily equating to a willingness or capacity for social and cultural assimilation. On the contrary, while the diversity of Roma and their situations within and relationships to the encompassing societies must be recognised, many continue to maintain distinctive domains of beliefs and practices, particularly those surrounding the domestic and

social economies, from which they draw on to strategically engage with the dominant societies in whose interstices they carve out their lives.

That there are costs to Roma and Aboriginal people to such lifestyles cannot be denied; significantly lower life expectancy and poorer health, real and sometimes abject poverty for many, reduced opportunities particularly for women given heavily gendered role divisions amongst some Roma and Aboriginal groups, political and social marginality, and so forth. These are rightly concerns of policymakers—but that is not the be-all and end-all in terms of factors to consider in relation to policy frameworks, whether they be directed at Roma or at Aboriginal people. Human beings not only live where it is comfortable, but where it is possible, and as an intrinsic part of that, living create systems of meaning and value in highly diverse—and sometimes incommensurate—ways.

This is not to deny that there are other—and highly significant—structural features of disadvantage whose locus lies not within Aboriginal or Roma societies themselves but within the dominant society and its institutions. I have in mind here in the Australian context such factors as the realities of active discrimination and exclusion, and the manifest failure of governments to fund or provide adequate services for Aboriginal people in education, health, housing and other crucial areas of social and physical infrastructure (e.g. Taylor and Stanley 2005).

If it is accepted that culture and disadvantage may be interrelated, the unavoidable question that arises is the extent to which cultural diversity can and should be supported by the state, not only where it may offend mainstream middle-class sensibilities (the aesthetics of household order, for example), but also where it demonstrably results in the perpetuation of certain forms of socioeconomic disadvantage. I suggest that on both pragmatic and ethical grounds, relative socioeconomic disadvantage has to be accepted as an appropriate policy outcome where it reflects choices (explicit and informed, or implicit) that Aboriginal people themselves are making about such matters as region of residence and issues of cultural and lifestyle preferences. However, this will require difficult political, analytical and ethical judgments to be made about such matters as the level and nature of acceptable disadvantage of particular Aboriginal groups or communities, and the relative implication in the reproduction of disadvantage of factors which may be specifically associated with Aboriginal culture on the one hand (say, child rearing practices), and on the other those which may be more properly understood as being categorised as dysfunction on the other (say, excessive alcohol consumption). The crucial caveat here, of course, is the likelihood that whatever the particular nexus between disadvantage, dysfunction and culture, disadvantage will certainly be linked with wider structural factors such as exclusion and discrimination, and the incapacity of the state to properly support and resource appropriate development strategies.

The connections between disadvantage and culture also require difficult judgments to be made about the reproduction of disadvantage through the generations—of particular import when, especially in remote Aboriginal Australia, life expectancy is low and there is such a high proportion of young people. For while adults may be argued to be more or less informed social actors, and in a position to make some kind of choices about the consequences of particular lifestyles, this cannot be said for young children. Who then decides for them, with regard to possible unintended consequences of particular values or practices? An example here lies in the inconsistency between the well-documented value placed amongst most Aboriginal groups on the autonomy and

self-direction of children, and the requirement for long-term consistent school attendance in order to achieve basic educational competencies. One answer of course to such contradictions is reflected in the processes that led to the stolen generations in years past. Another, the *de facto* position over the past several decades in much of remote Australia at least, is to leave the children where they are, often ill-educated and in poor health. A further alternative again is what Noel Pearson (2005) terms 'orbits'; that is, not the state mandating the unidirectional movement of young people out of their home communities and into the mainstream, but rather assisting to equip them with the capacity to move with facility between those two worlds. Such a transition, founded as it is on Pearson's emphasis on the primacy of education to effect change, challenges any easy categorisation as just another variant of the old policy of assimilation, but necessarily involves a person 'moving their feet'—changing position away from being deeply grounded in the axiomatic principles and practices of the Aboriginal moral economy, to a potentially more critical and reflexive biculturalism.

### **Conclusions: enabling sustainable change**

Much of the support for the new Aboriginal affairs policies is predicated on the implicit assumption that Aboriginal people naturally desire the lifestyle and values which correlate with economic integration, or that if they don't, a carrot and stick approach directed at individuals can be used to achieve it. However, the evidence, not only from anthropologists but more importantly from Aboriginal people themselves, shows that while many Aboriginal people do indeed seek to take advantage of better economic opportunities, and while cultural change is a feature of all societies—Aboriginal and otherwise—there is a widespread resistance amongst Aboriginal people to what they see as attempts to assimilate them into the dominant society, economically or socially. Furthermore, this commitment by many to values and practices which are antithetical to integration, in conjunction with particular demographic and other features of Aboriginal societies and the inevitable lag in even the best of circumstances between policy implementation and resultant social change, mean that the scale of the perceived problems will arguably outrun the capacity—and the willingness—of the state to address them.

Of particular importance here is the pioneering research undertaken by Taylor and colleagues (e.g. Taylor and Hunter 1998, Taylor 2003, Taylor and Stanley 2005) which on the basis of demographic projections nationally and in a number of regional case studies, examines the implications of the expanding Aboriginal population for continuing and in some regions potentially deteriorating socioeconomic disadvantage, in the absence of significantly increased state subvention. The distinctive features of Aboriginal demography—significantly shorter life spans, and relatively youthful populations in comparison with the general Australian population, for example—have a profound impact not just on Aboriginal demographic futures, but also in my view on the nature of social production and reproduction. This is because the typical Aboriginal remote area age-sex pyramid can be seen not only as a measure of demographic characteristics, but also as a marker of socialisation and enculturation dynamics. With relatively large numbers of young people, and relatively few senior members of the group, socialisation primarily takes place not so much vertically and inter-generationally as it was in the past, with knowledge passed from senior to junior generations, but horizontally, within intra-generational peer groups. In such situations young people, often disengaged from both the world of their own older generations

and from that of the general Australian society, carve out their own systems of meanings and values, often in ways which both construe as aberrant (Martin 1993a).

In these circumstances, when considering together with Aboriginal people what appropriate and sustainable futures might entail, and what an Aboriginal affairs policy framework to realise such goals might look like, maintenance of the status quo is clearly indefensible. Merely leaving things as they were through recent decades, or as they are now, inevitably entails profound transformation, much of it that will arguably be of an increasingly socially unsustainable and even dysfunctional nature. That is, from this perspective the fundamental issue confronting all of us, Aboriginal people included, is not about preservation of Aboriginal cultures as such, as if they exist as self-defining and self-reproducing isolates, but rather about how Aboriginal people might better be supported and equipped to control to the maximum extent feasible the direction, nature and pace of transformation, through a process of 'strategic engagement'. By strategic engagement, I am referring to processes through which Aboriginal individuals, groups and communities are able to interact with, contribute to, draw from—and of course potentially reject—the formal and informal institutions of the dominant Australian society, in a considered and informed manner that provides them with real choices as to where to go, and how to get there. It refers to a process, not an outcome. It recognises that indigenous people are positioned within an intercultural domain which is constantly transforming, but also recognises that this position (as individuals and collectivities) is not fixed, but is influenced by a range of factors including individual proclivity and choice, as well as broader structural factors (Martin 2003, 8).

Market-based approaches clearly have an important—but not exclusive—place in the repertoire of policies directed at enabling this process of transformation through strategic engagement. For example, work I have undertaken around the Century zinc mine in north-western Queensland demonstrated that the proactive employment and training regimes there have had major impacts, much of it positive, both on individual Aboriginal people involved and also on the mine site culture, in which Aboriginal people play a prominent role. I recall a young woman from Normanton I interviewed who worked on the mine site and who said her employment there was the best thing that had happened in her life. But, this is only one of a plurality of views in this region, and across Aboriginal Australia more broadly. Furthermore, the enormity of the task set by the proponents (such as Hughes, see Hughes and Warin 2005) of market-based solutions and of particular forms of Aboriginal economic development as the key driver of social change cannot be underestimated, for it ultimately requires the profound reconfiguring of Aboriginal people as moral, psychosocial, emotional, ethical, cultural and thus economic beings.

It is important to note that what is clearly at issue also is not just social, economic and cultural change in Aboriginal society, but within bureaucracies themselves, such that more creative solutions to gaining a livelihood which nonetheless have linkages to the market economy can be supported. In this context, it is useful to refer to work by sociologist Catherine Hakim (2000, 2003), which while directed at women's policy, is in my view relevant to the arguments in this paper. In her keynote address to the 2003 Institute of Family Studies Conference *Competing family models and competing social policies*, Hakim (2003) argued that both policymakers and social scientists concerned with family and social policy in future will have to take much greater account of women's own values, preferences and life goals. Research identified a fundamental diversity of life style preferences amongst British women that went well beyond

diversity due to cultural, ethnic or class differences. These were in the form of three broad categories of chosen lifestyles: home-centred, work-centred and adaptive. Adaptive women were those who preferred to combine employment and family work without giving a fixed priority to either. Work-centred women were in a minority and are focused on competitive activities in the public sphere—in careers, sport, politics or the arts. Home-centred women were also a minority, preferring to give priority to private and family life after they married.

Hakim observes that the three lifestyle preference groups are not merely different, but that each has a substantively different value system as well as different life goals. Her conclusions were that 'one size fits all' policies will no longer suffice. She argues that:

... policymaking must become a more complex enterprise, recognising that competing family models require diversified social policies that offer different types of support to each preference group ... we need to readdress the current bias towards policies supporting working women exclusively, at the expense of policies supporting full-time homemakers and full-time parents (Hakim 2003).

I suggest the approach adopted by Hakim provides useful insights into how we might conceptualise an overall multifaceted policy framework directed at relevant sectors of Aboriginal Australia, which does have as its goal both support for necessary change but nonetheless uses multiple ways of achieving this.

Further, and very importantly, sustainable social change for Aboriginal people cannot in my view be driven solely through market mechanisms. There will be significant numbers of Aboriginal people who will not be willing or able to take advantage of the kinds of incentives being offered to move them into the mainstream economy, and for whom the force of sanctions will be reduced by the pervasive strength of the moral economy. The only alternative is to begin with the fundamental precept of recognising that transformation in people's lives and circumstances is intrinsic, but that the process must involve working with the values, strengths, capacities, passions and commitments which people themselves have, even in the most difficult of circumstances, as the basis for sustainable change. This of course entails not only long-term individual and systemic cultural change for Aboriginal societies, but also for bureaucracies, and I am less than confident that this is possible.

It is my view that there is a very real risk of widespread failure unless there is more flexibility and creativity including recognition of the reality of Aboriginal diversity. In thinking of the risks, it is worth considering again the example of the Hungarian Romany, who up to the point of the fall of socialism had almost the same employment rate as Magyar, non-Romany Hungarians (Stewart 1998). But with the fall of communism and the exposure of Roma to the developing market economy, there was a catastrophic collapse in employment and an enormous increase in social problems and all that goes with extreme socioeconomic disadvantage. Australia needs to be very mindful of such risks.

Finally, to answer the question I posed in the title: is the new direction in Aboriginal affairs as likely to fail as the old ones? My answer is that there is a high risk it will fail, because it constructs Aboriginal people in the image of its own ideological assumptions, and history demonstrates Aboriginal people's enormous capacity to resist imposed change.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a seminar delivered at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research on May 10th, 2006. I am grateful to participants for their comments on the original draft.

<sup>2</sup> While my focus in this paper is on the 'Aboriginal domain', one could equally argue for a link between the incapacity of bureaucracies to develop coordinated 'whole of government' responses to major social problems (on occasion amounting to dysfunction), arises in part through particular elements of bureaucratic culture.