

A Peoples Alternative to Aboriginal Policy

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the owners of this land from which recent immigrants gained great national wealth. The rights of Indigenous peoples are now enshrined in international law through the Australian adoption of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* in 2009. Australia is committed to the recognition of these rights and to avoid protectionism and assimilation. We should see Aboriginal culture as the deep heart of Australia's society and economy.

Recent Shift in Aboriginal Policy

Aboriginal policy has witnessed a significant shift in policy direction over the last decade. Previous aspirations of self-determination and Aboriginal-controlled service delivery have been replaced with mainstream service provision, the removal of community governance structures and the implementation of highly paternalistic, interventionist policies.

The principle of self-determination supports the development of an Aboriginal decision-making process and an Aboriginal economy which will provide broader benefits for all Australians, immediately through tourism and arts investment, but also in the long term respect for human rights and culture.

The Liberal and Labor Governments have targeted and disempowered Aboriginal communities through the Stronger Futures policies, based on the NT Intervention, which further erode self-determination.

Close the Gap

The Close the Gap strategy, implemented in 2008, will fail to meet all of the seven targets unless there is a significant change in the current policy direction. The lack of a justice target fails to consider increasing incarceration rates, while the lack of housing targets, with an average of 9.2 people per house (up to 20 per dwelling) in remote regions and over-crowding a known contributor to violence, has clear implications for inhibiting other targets.

Cuts to Aboriginal Services

Furthermore, the funding of Aboriginal controlled services has been cut:

- Funding for Aboriginal services was cut by more than \$500 million under the Abbott Coalition government in 2014.



- Cuts to the Community Development Employment Program lost 7000 community service and support jobs across Aboriginal communities, where there are few alternative job opportunities.
- In the 2015 Budget, \$13 million was cut from Aboriginal legal services across 3 years, crippling their ability to represent Aboriginal people, when they suffer a high incarceration rate.
- In the same Budget, mining, pastoralists, commercial fishers and councils received \$2.2 million in legal assistance to challenge Native Title claims.
- Cuts of \$34 million to family violence prevention services had serious and deleterious consequences for Aboriginal communities.
- The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples' funding of \$15 million was terminated, threatening the existence of the national representative body.
- Favourable funding was given to those organisations that ascribed to the 'Empowered Communities' model which instils a punitive approach that has been shown to fail.
- The 2016 Budget cuts the legal services further, and retains low funding of community services

Proposed Closure of Aboriginal Communities

More than 150 remote communities in Western Australia are threatened with closure, through the cutting of essential water and power services. The dispossession

of these 10,000 people from their ancestral lands would mark Australia as committing one of the largest contemporary land grabs from Indigenous peoples globally.

The Way Ahead

Treaty and Constitutional Recognition

While Treaties are accepted around the world as a means of reaching a settlement between indigenous peoples and settler nation states, Australia remains the only British colonial state that does not have a treaty with its original inhabitants. While recognition in the constitution is an important first step, the goal for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia is to gain the respect of a Treaty between the Australian Government and the Sovereign First Nations.

Aboriginal Economic Model

The funding of Aboriginal service provision is essential to address crucial social service issues and, as in the broader community, it is an important and legitimate employment area in communities. Remote communities may choose to develop Aboriginal-focused economies that incorporate Aboriginal arts production, environmental maintenance, eco-tourism and bush foods as central to local economies.

Funding of Aboriginal Services

While there are issues in Aboriginal communities, as a result of the trauma of previous dispossession and the violence of invasion, followed by decades of neglect, these can only be addressed by responding to the identified needs of Aboriginal communities. Proper housing, health and education services cannot be argued as too costly when the wealth of the entire mining industry is built on Aboriginal lands.

Employment

The introduction of an Aboriginal community employment program that pays a full wage, as provided for the broader community, would enable the provision of core services. Enabling community decision-making on local economic strategies would respond to local and regional needs and encourage community enterprises that operate on outcomes rather than profit. These would facilitate the building of trade skills such as building, carpentry, plumbing, electrical and motor and truck mechanics

across large regional and remote areas, to service Aboriginal communities.

For Aboriginal people, the economy is a hybrid of the customary, the market and the state. Customary activities can generate direct economic benefit in food harvesting and in the production of art. They can also generate employment and public good through natural resource management and rangers' jobs. These aspects should be part of the economic assessment of these communities.

Justice Reinvestment

Justice re-investment provides an opportunity to move people and communities out of the judicial system and into becoming independent contributors to their communities.

Remote Aboriginal Communities

While some remote communities may wish to establish community housing arms in cities to provide access to higher level education, support the treatment of more complex medical needs and introduce children and community members to coastal and city living, the ongoing connection of Aboriginal communities to their ancestral lands must be assured, as conferred in Australia's signing of the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

Questions for Discussion

- 1. Why has there been no independent review and assessment of need among Aboriginal communities at both State and Federal government levels, specifically considering the differing needs of urban, regional and remote communities, to address the cumulative decades of neglect across all states?**
- 2. Considering international law and Indigenous peoples' rights, as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, what are our obligations and those of the Australian government to our First Peoples?**
- 3. What would be the impact of a Treaty on Australia and on its First Peoples?**

**Send your group or individual ideas and feedback to
contact@commonaction.org.au**

Common Action network: Aboriginal Rights Coalition, Australian Fair Trade & Investment Network, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Community & Public Sector Union - PSU Group, Construction Forestry Mining & Energy Union, Evatt Foundation, Federation of Italian Migrant Workers & Families, f-collective, Greens NSW, Maritime Union of Australia Sydney Branch, Migrant Australia, National Tertiary Education Union, NSW Nurses & Midwives Association, NSW ALP Socialist Left, SEARCH Foundation.
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