
EDITORIAL

**ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER EMPLOYMENT: ISSUES FOR
POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH****Kirrily Jordan**

In more than 50 years of federal public policy relating to Australia's First Nations peoples, employment has always been prominent among the issues taking centre stage. Recent Coalition governments have positioned it as one of their three major aims in the Indigenous Affairs portfolio: getting 'kids into school,' 'adults into work' and improving community safety. But behind these seemingly simple statements lies an enormous real-world complexity. Getting more people into work moves well beyond the supply and demand models of mainstream economics, with policy approaches hinging on a tangled mix of ideology, contested evidence and competing ideas. As Liddle's introduction to this volume suggests, many of the assumptions that underpin policy decisions remain informed by colonial narratives. These assumptions require serious and sustained critique. Key questions include: What counts as 'work'? Who decides? Are the challenges relating to First Nations employment best understood as structural or individual? How can employment policy move beyond notions of 'carrots' and 'sticks' and take account of the enormous locational, historical and aspirational diversity of First Nations peoples? To what extent should it be self-determined, or cohere with an Indigenous polity? And should notions of 'decent' work come into play?

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This special issue is an attempt to pull together some of the diverse scholarship on these matters. As a first step in this direction it also signals the significant need to extend the evidence base in relation to employment policy as this plays out in Indigenous Affairs. To that extent, it is a callout for a more sustained focus among scholars of political economy on these issues, and for much more inclusion of First Nations peoples and perspectives in research and teaching both in political economy and in cognate areas of other disciplines (with scholars in social work, anthropology, political science and development studies also featuring in this volume). It is also a call for much broader recognition of expertise beyond the academy: while First Nations peoples remain underrepresented in Australian universities, the principle of ‘epistemological equality’ (Bennett *et al.* this volume) maintains that Indigenous knowledges outside the academy should be afforded equal status. There is a wealth of knowledge and lived experience among First Nations peoples both in academia and in communities, industry, government and unions which should feature more prominently in academic debate. To that end this volume is indebted to Liddle’s excellent introduction which draws on her experience at the ‘front line’ of employment policy in both unionism and activism.

The themes in this volume are principally concerned with First Nations employment, and how ideas and evidence in this field influence policy, practice and research. This necessarily includes a range of public policy areas that could otherwise be understood as ‘welfare policy’ or ‘social security policy.’ It also draws in discussion of broader issues related to land rights, self-determination and settler colonialism. These move beyond national public policy to also implicate state and territory governments and employers across the private and public sectors, including universities. Many of the issues raised should be familiar to political economists, but their significance in debates relating to First Nations peoples and policy may be less well understood. The following discussion draws out some of the key themes that intersect the articles in this volume and situates them in their broader policy context.

What counts as ‘work’ and who decides?

In their article in this volume, Fowkes and Li note that successive Australian governments for at least two decades have taken a ‘work first’

approach to the formally unemployed. This has been associated with 'activation' policies that have increased obligations on recipients of unemployment benefits and prioritised movement into paid work. The dominant discourse associated with this policy direction has presented society as divided into either hard-working and honest Australians in paid employment or 'dole bludgers' – famously characterised by former treasurer Joe Hockey as 'lifters' or 'leaners' (Hockey 2014). Although the coarseness of this rhetoric may have receded in recent years, the sentiment remains embedded in popular notions of 'welfare' and what it is to 'work.' Scott Morrison (2018) has recently reiterated his government's commitment to this approach when, at his first press conference as prime minister, he repeated the now-familiar mantra that 'the best form of welfare is a job.'

There is a long tradition in political economy and related disciplines of critiquing the notion that 'work' equates to waged labour. This is perhaps most closely associated with feminist scholarship that has drawn attention to the androcentrism of mainstream economics, with its institutionalised undervaluing of women's productive work outside the labour market (Benería 1992; Bjørnholt and McKay 2013; Boserup 1970; Folbre 1991; Manne 2018; Reid 1934; Waring 1988). This undervaluing of women's work long predates neoliberalism, but now intersects with it (*e.g.* see Abramovitz 2018). For example, the activation policies of the last twenty years have been accompanied by a further stigmatisation of 'dependency.' The wage-earning, 'independent' worker has become even more entrenched as the 'universal social subject' such that 'any adult not perceived as a worker shoulders a heavier burden of justification' (Fraser 2013: 101).

This feminist scholarship remains enormously influential in recognising that what counts as work, and how it is valued, lie not within the phenomenon itself but inhere in social relations. Dominant definitions of work therefore function as 'mirrors of power' (Grint 2005: 6). Although less well known than the equivalent body of feminist work, this theme is also taken up in several studies that explore work and value in First Nations communities. These point to the range of productive work undertaken outside the formal labour market, including hunting, fishing and important cultural and spiritual activities as well as the ongoing work of negotiating and maintaining kinship relationships (*e.g.* see Altman 2009a; Altman and Taylor 1989; Taylor 2012; Thomassin 2014; Woods 2014). Case study research in remote communities suggests that

maintaining these relationships is often seen as highly valued work that is 'equally, if not more important, than attendance at a formal workplace' (McRae-Williams and Gerritsen 2010: 18; see also Austin-Broos 2006; Gibson 2010; Jordan 2011a; Kral 2010; Lahn 2006, 2012; Musharbash 2001; Sercombe 2008). Nonetheless, in the dominant economic paradigm, this work is regarded as, at best, economically unimportant and, at worst, a barrier to participation in the mainstream labour market that must be overcome.

This has enormous practical implications. For example, some of the most intense debates and dramatic changes in First Nations employment policy have centred on notions of what constitutes 'real work.' Probably the most significant of these over the last decade is the closure of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, and its replacement by the Community Development Programme (CDP) that was highlighted by Liddle in her introduction. The importance of this change is reflected by its coverage in the remainder of this special issue, with four additional articles reflecting on it from different perspectives (Venn and Biddle; Fowkes and Li; Klein and Razi; and Staines).

As will become clear for readers who engage with each article, CDEP was a unique scheme in that it was able to accommodate diverse forms of work. It paid the equivalent of participants' unemployment benefits as a block grant to First Nations organisations (plus additional funds for capital equipment and on costs), so that those organisations could employ participants on a wide range of 'community development' projects. This could include hunting, fishing and ceremony (see Altman 2009a; Jordan 2011b), as well as caring work and managing a home. It could also facilitate locally-preferred models of work based on flexible rosters and 'labour hire' arrangements so that participants could enjoy flexibility of hours on their own terms (see Jordan 2016a).

Liddle's introduction addresses the fallout from a sustained campaign against CDEP – driven by conservative commentators and politicians as well as a number of First Nations people – that focused on whether it was 'real work.' Critics maintained that CDEP was facilitating 'pretend' jobs and excusing participants 'from seeking normal employment' (Hughes and Hughes 2010: 3, 14; see also Brough 2006; Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership 2007; Langton 2002). Concerns that it was locking people out of the mainstream labour market, and was in fact welfare (used as a pejorative term in this context) rather than work, saw

it phased out by mid-2015. To some extent this can be understood as part of a broader push to ‘mainstream’ Indigenous-specific services and ‘normalise’ Indigenous communities, most famously associated with the Northern Territory Emergency Response in 2007 but predating it by almost a decade.

CDEP was replaced in remote areas first by the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) and, since 2015, the Community Development Programme (CDP). These have been much more explicitly focused on the pursuit of employment outcomes in the mainstream labour market, and packaged by governments as part of a series of measures designed to inculcate ‘the positive social and economic norms that underpin daily life – like going to work and paying the rent’ (Macklin 2010: 11). By getting more people into ‘real’ jobs, they would be central to the government’s efforts to ‘Close the Gap,’ including the target of halving the gap in employment rates by 2018.

Venn and Biddle (this volume) use Census data to show that the employment gap has not closed, and has actually widened over the last decade as CDEP has been phased out. A major factor in this result has been the substantial decline in Indigenous employment in remote areas, where CDEP was most widespread. To some extent this is expected: CDEP participants were classified as employed; CDP participants (the large majority of whom are First Nations peoples) are not. However, any imagined reduction in the number of people outside the mainstream labour market has not eventuated (see Fowkes and Li this volume), and the implications for the livelihoods and wellbeing of many First Nations people have been profound.

CDP has been heavily criticised for taking an especially punitive approach in its apparent attempts to get more people into jobs, with Work for the Dole requirements and income penalties having been substantially ramped up – to well beyond the equivalent levels for welfare recipients in non-remote regions (Fowkes 2016a, b; Jordan and Fowkes 2016). It is this inequality – and its punishing effects on many First Nations people – that informs Liddle’s critique of CDP as a new form of ‘indentured servitude’ akin to the work camps of earlier decades. In her article in this volume, Staines cites examples of CDP participants having financial penalties deducted from their social security payments for attending to cultural and family responsibilities, or when unable to attend Work for the Dole due to their own ill health. Fowkes and Li suggest that

significant numbers of people may have exited the scheme due to voluntary withdrawal from its Work for the Dole arrangements and penalties regime – and hence withdrawn from any form of state income support whatsoever. These are just some of the consequences when governments make self-declared ‘well-intentioned’ mistakes (see Abbott in Aikman 2016) that treat paid work in the mainstream labour market as something of a panacea to the range of challenges faced by First Nations peoples.

Extrapolating from the 2014 Forrest Review of Indigenous employment and training programs (Jordan 2014), the logic of designing a program with such onerous Work for the Dole requirements appears to be that this will occupy ‘idle hands’ and thereby reduce dysfunction (Forrest 2014: 197). An alternative rationale might be that the long hours of CDP Work for the Dole are a form of training so that participants become ‘work ready’ for a full-time job (see McQuire 2014). However, few such jobs exist in remote First Nations communities and patterns of part-time, casual and intermittent paid employment are often much more common (Jordan 2016b).

CDP not only reflects a particular construction of what constitutes ‘real work,’ but also reinforces a dominant model of who decides. While CDEP had given providers significant flexibility to decide what constituted paid employment in line with local aspirations and priorities (Jordan 2011b), CDP is much more subject to top-down bureaucratic management (Fowkes 2016c). There is a significant qualitative difference between working for wages on projects determined locally to be meaningful, and attending Work for the Dole activities (under threat of sanction) over which there is often very little community control (Fowkes 2017). This point often seems lost on Australian government ministers and their offices, with the government characterising CDP as giving ‘a sense of purpose’ to peoples’ lives (in Conifer 2016).

Where there are problems, are they structural or individual?

The policy approach embedded in CDP draws on a particular framing of an ‘employment problem’ that is based on notions of individual deficits rather than either positive differences or structural constraints. This is amplified by the broader policy framework of ‘Closing the Gap on

Indigenous disadvantage' which has been widely criticised on a number of grounds. For example, as a normative paradigm it ignores the diversity of First Nations aspirations (that might lead to different socio-economic outcomes on some measures) and it privileges particular kinds of non-Indigenous knowledges (Altman 2009b; Altman and Fogarty 2010; Jordan *et al.* 2010; Pearson 2018; Pholi *et al.* 2009; Walter and Anderson 2013). These knowledges can be understood as both neoliberal and neo-colonial, reducing the focus of First Nations policy-making to a narrow range of socio-economic indicators defined by the state, and in effect drawing resources away from a more radical, rights-based political agenda that recognises the state as central to 'the problem' (see Altman 2009b; Humpage and Fleras 2001).

In this way the Closing the Gap approach renders a 'deep employment problem technical,' obscuring institutional practice and entrenched structural inequalities (Altman 2009b: 9; see also Coram 2008). As Liddle notes (this volume), these structural factors include institutionalised racism, labour market discrimination and an ongoing history of stolen land, labour and wealth. They also include locational constraints (particularly the limited availability of mainstream employment in remote and regional communities) and historic underinvestment in remote and regional infrastructure. If these factors are recognised, then 'First Nations disadvantage' can be seen as a structural condition related to the injustices of colonisation and associated contemporary inequalities in economic resources and political power.

However, the notion of 'disadvantage' can just as easily obscure these institutional foundations of First Nations' peoples' socioeconomic position (Coram 2008). Disadvantage may instead be seen as indicative of individual dysfunction encouraged not by the denial of rights, but by overly permissive welfare payments and the 'idle hands' that have been of concern to successive governments. In this discourse of disadvantage as dysfunction, 'disadvantaged' comes to be read not as a verb, but as an adjective, describing the characteristics of First Nations people. From this perspective, 'Closing the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage' carries 'an implicit assumption of deficit' that contributes to a public perception of First Nations peoples as underperforming (Fforde *et al.* 2013: 166). At one end of the spectrum, the 'advantaged' group remain uninterrogated. At the other, the 'disadvantaged' become understood by what they are not, locating 'the problem' in this deficiency (see Aboriginal Affairs

NSW 2017; Fogarty, Bulloch *et al.* 2018; Fogarty, Lovell *et al.* 2018). This is enough to convince ‘mainstream Australia’ to ‘disown Aboriginal disadvantage as an outcome of colonisation and to place it as a phenomena that exists within Aboriginal people’ (Murphy 2000: 69; see also Sullivan 2016). As Pearson (2018) has explained ‘Never do we hear that “police are more likely to arrest Aboriginal people,” we only hear that “Aboriginal people are more likely to be arrested.”’

Policy interventions that draw on this deficit framework tend to overlook any responsibility to critically examine the structural causes of inequality, or the practices, beliefs and attitudes that constitute advantage (Gorringer *et al.* 2011: 3; Fforde *et al.* 2013: 163). Moreover, these interventions reject notions of self-determination, favour centralised control (both of First Nations organisations and individual behaviour) and reinforce a saviour mentality in public policy ‘for the good of’ First Nations peoples. It is from this perspective that external interventions such as restricting welfare payments or increasing social security penalties for ‘bad behaviour’ are framed as the tough love necessary to help people incapable of helping themselves. There is a very long history of such approaches that, although they may be ‘guided by the best of motives,’ are taken ‘in the sure knowledge’ that First Nations people ‘needed our superior ideas and skills’ (Johnston in ATSIJ 2001: 10).

Alongside CDP, perhaps the clearest demonstration of this approach in the contemporary Indigenous Affairs portfolio is income management. In their article in this volume, Klein and Razi closely examine one example of income management in the form of the Cashless Debit Card (CDC) trial in the East Kimberly. CDC trials are now running in three locations – the East Kimberly, Ceduna and the Western Australian goldfields – all regions with significant First Nations populations.¹ According to the Australian Government, the CDC trials are concerned with the risk that ‘dependency’ on social security payments contributes to dysfunctional behaviour, and ‘testing whether reducing the amount of cash available in a community will reduce the overall harm caused by welfare fuelled alcohol, gambling and drug misuse’ (DSS 2018). The trials – which emerged from proposals in the Forrest Review – apply to all people receiving a ‘working age’ social security payment (with the exception of

¹ In early 2019, trials will also extend into the Bundaberg and Hervey Bay region in Queensland.

the Veterans' Pension and Age Pension) and 'quarantine' 80 per cent of a person's payments on a debit card that cannot be used to purchase alcohol or gambling products or withdraw cash.²

An independent evaluation of the CDC trials has been cited by the Australian Government as evidence of the program's success (Bickers 2017), and used to justify the extension of the trial. However, it has been widely criticised as being insufficiently rigorous (ANAO 2018; Cox 2017; Hunt 2017). The views of First Nations people about the card are mixed (*e.g.* see Australian Greens 2017; Langton 2017; McGlade 2017; Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee 2017). But Klein and Razi document a range of serious concerns based on fieldwork in the East Kimberley: these include reports that the card makes it harder to manage money on already very limited budgets and, by reducing access to cash, limits the ability to meet basic needs. Media reports have noted significant local opposition to the card in the East Kimberley (Parke 2017) and Ceduna (Davey 2017), including from participants who feel stigmatised as dysfunctional simply because they are unemployed. One prominent resident of Koonibba, near Ceduna, has recounted the sense of shame when 'Everybody that I encounter that sees this card looks you up and down, and their eyes say, "You can't get a job"' (Miller in Davey 2017). Klein and Razi suggest that in this construction of the unemployed as dysfunctional, the CDC trial in the East Kimberley 'individualises and depoliticises unemployment and poverty' and hence 'reconfigures and rearticulates socio-economic and colonial crisis as a crisis of the individual.'

In this sense the comparisons to CDP are striking. Consistent with the methodological individualism of orthodox economics, both programs have largely ignored the broader structural and institutional context of individual action. In addition, where they have come into conflict with Indigenous cultural meanings and practices, the latter have been either overlooked in policy settings or rendered deficient or meaningless. For example, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's (PMC)

² It is worth noting that, although the Forrest Review recommended the closure of CDEP earlier than planned, CDEP itself had facilitated a form of voluntary income management in some locations that, for example, quarantined rental payments from CDEP wages and re-invested them into housing repairs and maintenance – activities which were then undertaken as CDEP employment (E. Woolford, former manager of CDEP on the APY Lands, pers. comm., 12 November 2018).

'program logic' for CDP – released under a freedom of information request – notes that 'remote communities are characterised by a weak or non-existent labour market,' but rather than address this through investment in job creation, it focuses instead on removing 'the option of long-term passive welfare' and strengthening 'job seeker compliance' (PMC 2015). By shifting the emphasis so clearly towards individual behaviour, this suggests a wilful blindness to both structural issues and cultural realities on the part of governments: either they assume that income penalties will ensure supply of labour, and that such supply will generate demand; or they assume that applying enough pressure will encourage remote-living First Nations people to move to areas with more substantial labour markets in order to find paid work.

The latter perspective perhaps underpinned the comments of then prime minister Tony Abbott when he referred to living in remote First Nations communities as a 'lifestyle choice' that is 'not conducive to the kind of full participation in Australian society that everyone should have' (in Medhora 2015). Of course, this view has been strongly criticised for attempting to reduce deep spiritual, social, cultural and economic relationships with land and Country to a simple choice – 'something thin, superficial, swappable' (Stokes 2015; see also Maree 2015; Medhora *et al.* 2015). This 'thin' understanding of enduring cultures is also reflected in government guidance to CDP providers that they intervene in cultural business, a highly sacred and restricted practice that often occurs over several months. This advice encouraged CDP providers to 'take a proactive role in the scheduling of cultural business when deemed appropriate. For example cultural business could be scheduled to take place during school holidays so that school attendance is not affected' (PMC in Fowkes 2016b: 15).

As examples of 'neoliberalization' (see Peck *et al.* 2017) both CDP and CDC can certainly be criticised for being too technocratic. Extending on Walter's (2010: 122, 123) critique of Howard Government policies, both programs can be understood as experiments in 'attempting to enforce a neoliberal template on the fabric of Indigenous life.' First Nations peoples are required to alter to 'fit the template' but 'rational economic man [is] not open to Indigenization' (Walter 2010: 123). However, as well as being technocratic, both programs can also be criticised on technical grounds: that is, for failing to meet their own standards of success (see Venugopal 2015: 173). Kral (2016) has shown that in Western Australia's remote Ngaanyatjarra Lands, CDP has not reduced

dysfunction because of idle hands, as the authors of the Forrest Review might have hoped. Instead, she suggests it has exacerbated existing problems by reducing food security, dramatically increasing rental debt and increasing the risk of imprisonment through defaults on fines.³ Similarly, data released under a freedom of information request show that domestic violence increased significantly in the East Kimberly following the commencement of the CDC trial (Knaus 2018). Klein and Razi (this volume) suggest further that CDC has exacerbated the structural inequalities embedded in settler colonialism, with more than half of the \$19 million spent on the trial to April 2017 going to Indue, the private company administering the Cashless Debit Card (and an additional \$1.6 million to private research firm ORIMA to conduct the evaluation, see ANAO 2018: 43).

Decent work and the need to recognise the diversity among First Nations peoples

A further problem with the construction of the ‘employment gap’ between First Nations peoples and other Australians is that it universalises a ‘First Nations experience’ and obscures the significant differences in employment rates among First Nations peoples. This diversity (*e.g.* by location, gender and industry) is clearly demonstrated by Venn and Biddle in this issue. While First Nations employment in remote areas has been declining, this is not true in many of the more densely settled regions – with the biggest employment gains in urban and regional New South Wales. Overall, although the ‘employment gap’ widened in remote areas in the last inter-censal period, it narrowed in most major cities and regional areas. That is, the employment rate for the First Nations population in these latter locations grew more rapidly (or declined more slowly) than the equivalent rate for others.

³ CDEP had allowed much more supportive arrangements. For example, the most recent CDEP provider on the APY Lands established a memorandum of understanding with South Australian circuit courts that allowed fines to be ‘worked off’ through participation in CDEP. Magistrate Rosanne McInnis noted a significant reduction in crime in the APY Lands over the period in which this arrangement was in place (E. Woolford, pers. comm., 12 November 2018).

By industry, Venn and Biddle show us that some of the biggest employers of First Nations people are public administration and safety, healthcare and social assistance (particularly among women), and construction (among men). These industry trends are broadly similar in remote and urban areas – with the obvious exception of mining which is a major employer of remote-living First Nations men. While the private sector in general is a significant employer, First Nations employment is still disproportionately overrepresented in the public sector (especially in state and territory governments). More than 20% of employed First Nations people work in the public sector, compared to around 15% for the rest of the population.⁴ This likely reflects, in part, concerted efforts since the 1960s to employ First Nations peoples in the public service through specific programs. There is now also a proliferation of programs to support First Nations employment in the private sector, including several that have received substantial government support (*e.g.* Jordan and Mavec 2010).

However, a number of articles in this special issue point out that, even where First Nations employment rates are relatively high, there are many important considerations beyond just ‘getting a job.’ Not least of these is job quality. Politicians within both major political parties – as well as organisations like the Institute of Public Affairs – tend to make a simplified moral case for the ‘dignity of work’ (see Abbott in ABC 2000; ALP 2010; Bowen 2017; IPA 2018). This ignores the abundant evidence of the need instead for particular kinds of jobs that help us to ‘survive well’ (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013). Notions of job quality have long been explored by political economists and other social scientists, for example by drawing on the International Labour Organization’s concept of ‘decent work’ (Burchell *et al.* 2013; Hill *et al.* 2018) or, more commonly in recent years, notions of ‘precarity at work’ (Neilson and Rossiter 2008: 58). Here, ‘decent work’ delivers a fair income, job security, basic rights, equality of opportunity and some degree of autonomy or influence over decision-making (ILO 2018). Precarious employment is generally understood to be insecure and low income, have limited statutory entitlements and formal protections, offer little opportunity for control of the labour process, and contribute limited meaning to peoples’ lives (*e.g.* Lambert and Herod 2016; Standing 2011; Vosko 2010).

⁴ Note that these data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics include not-for-profit employing organisations in the private sector.

Venn and Biddle note that while recent census data show the most rapid growth in First Nations employment is among women in major cities and regions, this growth is concentrated in industries and occupations with low wages and high levels of job insecurity. For this reason, they suggest that the employment gains may not result in corresponding improvements in wellbeing. There is an interesting parallel here with the recent work of Baird and colleagues who found that, in a survey of Australian working women aged under 40, First Nations women noted higher rates of job insecurity – that is, they were twice as likely as other women to say they felt ‘very concerned’ about being replaced by lower cost workers⁵ (Baird *et al.* 2018: 53). In addition, as Liddle has argued in the introduction to this volume, while a significant proportion of employed First Nations peoples now work in professional occupations (see also Venn and Biddle 2018; Lahn 2013), the unproblematised notion of a growing ‘Indigenous middle class’ may inappropriately gloss over continued challenges in the experience of work among First Nations peoples, including ongoing racism in the workplace (see also Bond 2017).

Several of the articles in this volume can be seen as contributing further to notions of meaningful and decent work for First Nations peoples. This necessarily includes basic features such as minimum wages and working conditions, as well as environments that are free from racism and discrimination. These conditions are impossible to achieve under CDP, which has itself been labelled racist (ACTU 2018) and denies Work for the Dole participants basic entitlements like superannuation and protections like workers’ compensation (Watson in Pearson 2017). In their discussion of the alternative to CDP that has been proposed by the Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APO NT), Fowkes and Li identify the need to create paid work for the otherwise-unemployed in remote regions. The APO NT proposal would offer minimum wages and a full suite of employment entitlements to 10,500 people as well as much more local and First Nations autonomy over the scheme.

⁵ Though Baird and colleagues note that the sample of First Nations women is ‘skewed towards women working in the public sector’ and so ‘should be treated as indicative only’ (Baird *et al.* 2018: 11).

Lahn and Ganter's research suggests that First Nations' staff in the public service may share this need for greater influence in the employing institution. They note that both the Commonwealth and Northern Territory bureaucracies have 'invited' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to take up paid employment in their ranks, and represented this as an opportunity to improve public service delivery to First Nations communities. However, the authors found substantial evidence that, once employed, First Nations staff in these institutions have experienced a range of frustrations. These include, for example, disappointment that they were afforded little influence in improving policy design and delivery to assist First Nations peoples, being asked to 'stand in for' consultation with broader First Nations communities, and other institutional constraints limiting their ability to make a difference in peoples' lives.

Lahn and Ganter suggest that workplaces need to open up ongoing and reflexive conversations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bureaucrats and their employers. One inference is that this would create opportunities for diverse forms of representation beyond employment targets, with First Nations staff afforded more opportunity to influence institutional practices, and employers getting better at listening, learning, and adapting to 'working alongside First Peoples' (Savage in Lahn and Ganter, this volume). In their reflections on employment within and beyond academic institutions, Bennett and her colleagues also point to the need for institutional transformation to better accommodate First Nations staff and better serve the broader community – whether students, clients or other stakeholders. This requires employers and colleagues of First Nations peoples to acquire cultural competence and, within the academy, take appropriate steps to transform existing curricula and embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and content.

From these standpoints it is clear that claiming that paid employment, or even Work for the Dole, will bring purpose and meaning to peoples' lives (*e.g.* ALP 2010; Courier Mail 2014) is not only based firmly in deficit thinking that assumes First Nations peoples are otherwise purposeless, but it also ignores this range of complex issues faced by First Nations peoples in employment. Too often, this means that employment policies overlook the need for self-reflection among non-Indigenous peoples and institutions, and the requirement that employers and colleagues educate themselves, engage openly with First Nations staff, and take appropriate action towards institutional transformation in response.

Beyond carrots and sticks: self-determination, strengths and an Indigenous polity

The articles in this special issue illustrate that many of the problems in First Nations employment are structural – stemming from an unresolved and unequal relationship between First Nations peoples and the institutions of neoliberal capitalism, settler colonialism and Australia’s current representative democracy. As Liddle reminds us in her aptly-titled introduction, where Australian governments have failed to collaborate with First Nations communities and maintained colonial attitudes, they themselves have created and reinforced the employment gaps. Federal politicians have repeatedly stated a commitment to ‘doing things “with” not “to” Indigenous people’ (Turnbull 2018) and ‘resetting’ relationships based on ‘trust and respect’ (Macklin 2009: 29). Nonetheless, both ALP and Coalition governments have pressed ahead with deeply unpopular measures such as the closure of CDEP, and the current federal government has dismissed sustained calls for a First Nations voice to parliament – perhaps the most important contribution they could have made to a ‘refreshed’ relationship – as ‘not desirable’ (see Davis in Davidson 2018; Turnbull in Wahlquist 2017). Similarly, the government’s response to the 2016 Redfern Statement – which had called for a restoration of funding to the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples and the creation of a specific National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative body for employment – has been wholly inadequate (McQuire 2017; National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples 2016).

Walter (2010: 121) has characterised the status quo as a pairing of ‘market ideology with concerted efforts to de-power Indigenous groups and people.’ But while the system remains ‘fundamentally broken,’ the dominant discourse continues to lay ‘sole responsibility on the “choices” of Aboriginal people’ and does ‘nothing to address these systemic problems’ (Pearson 2018). In this context, policy debates around First Nations employment too often degenerate into notions of ‘good’ (employed) and ‘bad’ (unemployed) First Nations peoples, and the paternalistic notions of ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks.’ This binary logic suggests that either you support coercive measures to get more First Nations peoples working, or you’re a purveyor of ‘low expectations’ that will condemn future generations to poverty and a lifetime outside the labour market. Such a simplistic approach does little to either expand the range

of policy evidence and advice on the table, or consider alternative ideas about how outcomes could be improved on the ground.

The Redfern Statement – supported by more than 40 First Nations and social services organisations – has attempted to move beyond this impasse, proposing a First Nations representative body for employment that could provide an expert voice on many of the issues raised in this volume. Its role would include: working with First Nations communities to ‘develop their own strategies for economic development and promote community participation and management’; promoting strategies ‘to create Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-friendly workplaces’; and working with government ‘to design welfare policy that encourages, rather than coerces, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into employment’ (National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples 2016).

Several articles in this volume also put forward innovative proposals for a way ahead. Collins and Norman take a unique approach to the question of First Nations enterprise. While business development is perhaps the central focus of the Australian Government’s economic development plan for First Nations peoples – supported by the Indigenous Procurement Policy and Indigenous Business Sector Strategy – Collins and Norman note the current disconnect between these programs and the economic development and employment potential of the Indigenous land estate. That estate now comprises some 40% of the Australian land mass in which First Nations peoples have recognised rights and interests under a range of titles. But while governments have noted the potential to leverage employment and enterprise from these ‘assets,’ their enterprise support programs have emphasised ‘individual entrepreneurs who are Indigenous’ rather than community-owned enterprises and the opportunities for First Nations peoples ‘as a polity...who engage in the economy through their land estate’ (Collins and Norman, this volume).

Recognising and supporting this aspect of the ‘Indigenous economy’ would not only foster employment and enterprise based on the unique strengths of First Nations peoples, but also strengthen existing First Nations organisations – such as the network of Local Aboriginal Land Councils in NSW – that have potential as institutions of self-determination and currently run on ‘shoe-string’ budgets (made tighter, as Collins and Norman note, since the demise of CDEP). Some similar themes emerge in Fowkes and Li’s discussion of the APO NT proposal for an alternative to CDP in remote regions. Under the current program,

support for First Nations enterprise development has been limited. While the block grants and ongoing wages that had been available under CDEP supported a multitude of small and large enterprises (*e.g.* Altman 2016; Jordan 2011b, 2016a; Misko 2004; Smith 1996), CDP offers a limited 'Indigenous Entrepreneurs Fund' for 24 months – beyond which businesses are expected to 'transition...into independently running enterprises' (PMC n.d.). The realities of many remote First Nations communities will make such transitions unlikely for many enterprises. These will often require ongoing public support in exchange for their contributions to local employment and community development (Jordan 2018), including cultural and spiritual practice (*e.g.* see Taylor 2012).

In contrast to CDP, the APO NT proposal would much more closely reflect Liddle's notion of 'community capacity-building' (this volume). It would support 'place-based social enterprise organisations as the main drivers' of community economies (APO NT 2017). It would re-orient the Indigenous Entrepreneurs Fund to encourage social enterprise, including micro-enterprises employing small family groups, and it would fund ongoing wages for new part-time jobs (Fowkes and Li this volume). Like Collins and Norman's proposals, the APO NT model would build from individual and community strengths and lock in features of self-determination, in this case including: 'Remote Job Centres' contracted to First Nations organisations; a role for local communities in determining and monitoring specific program objectives to fit local circumstances; and the establishment of 'a national, Indigenous-led body to govern the scheme' (Fowkes and Li, this volume).

While the Australian government's approach to First Nations employment has been to individualise both the 'problem' and the proposed 'solutions,' these authors point to the potential for alternatives that reject paternalism – and its associated saviour mentality – in favour of programs that are designed, debated and led within an informed First Nations polity. Their proposals sit much more comfortably alongside the well-established international literature which recognises life projects and 'alternate' economies that often incorporate productive initiatives outside the capitalist mainstream (*e.g.* Altman 2009b; Blaser *et al.* 2004; Gibson-Graham 2008; Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013). Moreover, they speak to the desire of many First Nations peoples to resist both 'the re-confining and redefining pressures of neoliberalism' (Walter 2010: 122) and the repeating colonial histories Liddle identifies (see also Watson 2016).

The need for First Nations perspectives in political economy

Political economists, perhaps more than many other scholars in the social sciences, are often acutely aware of the damages that can be wrought by the more negative influences of economic orthodoxy. Their insights and expertise are sorely needed in Indigenous Affairs portfolios in which policies, particularly at the Australian government level, have been so strongly shaped by ontological individualism and normative notions of responsible economic behaviour.

One potential way forward is a review of academic curricula in political economy (PE) to ensure a new generation of scholars has the skills and cultural competencies to take on this task, and to encourage the emergence of a cohort of First Nations scholars in the discipline. In their article in this volume, Bennett, Coghlan, Evans and Morse carefully detail some of the processes and policies for ‘incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum frameworks into practice’ (part of what is sometimes called ‘Indigenisation’ of curricula, *e.g.* Rigney 2017). While Bennett and colleagues focus on social work and allied health degrees, many of the lessons will have equal resonance in other disciplines. It is certainly time that economics – including political economy – takes these on board.

There is little published literature on the need to ‘Indigenise’ economics teaching in particular (though see Gainsford and Evans 2017 on Indigenising business education at Charles Sturt University; and Bassier 2016 and Chelwa 2016 for a discussion on ‘decolonising’ the economics curriculum in South Africa). However, Bennett and colleagues point to the many positive effects that Indigenising the curricula – alongside cultural competency training – might have. These include the need to employ First Nations staff to lead these processes, as well as the potential to attract and retain more First Nations staff and students as institutional change progresses. The conclusion that Bennett and colleagues arrive at – that embedding First Nations curriculum frameworks into teaching will ‘produce benefits across society by improving the development of culturally competent’ and First Nations social workers – should also be of great interest.

If the necessity of this change in the economics profession was not already clear, it is highlighted by recent work pointing to the practical

need for diversity among economists. A survey of economists in the United States, for example, found that their gender had a substantial impact on the policy advice they would provide (May *et al.* 2014). Relative to male economists, women economists were 32 percentage points more likely to agree that income distribution should be made more equal; 21 percentage points more likely to disagree that the US government regulated economic activity excessively; and 42 percentage points more likely to disagree that labour market opportunities were equal for women and men. In short, the 'prevailing range of views among economists is likely to be biased' by the relative lack of women among their ranks (Bayer and Rouse 2016: 232).

With very few First Nations peoples in the economics profession – including in academia – it is reasonable to assume that the dominant economic policy advice is similarly biased to particular views. As Bennett and colleagues note for social work, 'This indicates a need for students to be educated' in First Nations content and perspectives 'before entering the workforce.' For example, the goal that third year students in social work degrees 'should be able to fully understand and discuss the definition of transgenerational trauma and why this affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today' should equally be required of economics students. This is particularly true for those who go on to work in policy-relevant fields where they must have capacity to critically evaluate the paternalistic approaches that so dominate the contemporary policy landscape. Similarly, notions of First Nations economies – as well as a range of ideas about what constitutes 'work' and 'enterprise' from First Nations perspectives, and the ongoing racism and structural inequalities embedded in settler colonialism – should be core curricula in economics education. They comfortably sit within PE.

Ultimately, improving employment outcomes among First Nations peoples, and more broadly including First Nations peoples and perspectives in economics education, may well be closely intertwined. Both require deliberate efforts to challenge existing power structures, dismantle preconceived biases and listen to First Nations scholars, experts and organisations about the way ahead. The papers in this volume all lend weight to the need for increased First Nations influence in these important policy areas if we are to overcome 'repeating colonial histories.' Together, they contribute compelling evidence and a range of voices to this expanding conversation.

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