

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

In February this year Prime Minister Tony Abbott made his first report to parliament on progress on Closing the Gap. Indications were that progress was slow and that some gaps, especially employment, were diverging rather than converging, things are getting worse.

And so the government's response in the budget is to do two things. First, it proposes to cut \$500 million from Indigenous specific programs. And second it has re-orientated what it now terms its Indigenous Advancement Strategy, with all its colonial discursive implications, to focus on remote Australia where only 20 per cent of Indigenous Australians reside.

Indigenous policy has suddenly collapsed into a simplistic mantra, get the kids to school, adults into jobs and communities safeguarded by 'the ordinary law of the land'. At the same time the government proposes to support Indigenous Australians to maintain their culture. Even if school attendance improves it is hard to see what jobs there are in the remote Indigenous communities that are referred to again and again; and one fears that the safety objective might see Indigenous imprisonment increase beyond the current 15 times the non Indigenous rate.

Things are obviously bad in remote Australia where Indigenous communities are discrete and highly visible, but the statistics tell us they are bad elsewhere. The Abbott government clings to the utopian hope that equitable access to mainstream services on a needs basis will look after those in non-remote Australia, a central tenet of neoliberalism ideology being that the playing field is level in these jurisdictions and integration will inevitably occur. History tells us this will not just happen.

Indigenous Australians face a triple jeopardy that will see them further marginalized and disadvantaged as a result of this most inequitable of budgets. First, like other poor Australians they will see a rapid decline of family support and welfare incomes and an increase in medical costs. As the section of the community with highest rates of unemployment and in the most parlous health these already draconian 'mainstream' changes will disproportionately impact on Indigenous people. Second, they will see Indigenous specific programs cut, including the miniscule \$5 million to allow the representative National Congress of Australia's First Peoples to continue its operations. Third, those in remote areas will be disproportionately impacted because the cost of goods and services in their communities are extraordinarily high; recent research suggests that basic foods are 50-60 per cent more expensive and yet welfare income remains

unadjusted for cost of living while \$100 million is wasted on income management. And still there is ongoing evidence that Indigenous communities remain relatively neglected in terms of infrastructure and basic service delivery, not just in remote areas but also in regional and urban Australia.

There has been much rhetoric on how the consolidation of programs will generate savings and efficiencies, but little concrete analysis on how. It seems inevitable that the budget measures of 2014-15 will increase rather than decrease gaps between Indigenous and other Australians. One wonders at the conscionability of such cutbacks for the most needy Australians and who will hold the government accountable if, as I anticipate, outcomes decline: the Prime Minister's selected Indigenous Advisory Council? Indigenous Australians face the prospect of a deepening of poverty as the young and the unemployed are deprived of basic income support and are forced to fall back on their already desperately stretched families for basic sustenance.

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