OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

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The basis upon which reconciliation can be said to have been achieved, remains a somewhat vexed issue. It is taken as an absolute given, however, that the overcoming of Indigenous disadvantage is fundamental. Reconciliation simply cannot be achieved, or even viewed to be heading in the right direction, unless there is clear evidence that the extent of the disadvantage that Indigenous peoples experience compared with other Australians is being positively addressed.

The need to overcome Indigenous peoples' current socio-economic circumstances is driven by a certain morality that exists in Australian society that justifiably sees as wrong the extent of Indigenous peoples' disadvantage compared with other Australians. It is this morality that must continue to drive the collective desire for outcomes. Achieving meaningful and lasting outcomes for Indigenous Australians will be a significant contribution to the achievement of reconciliation, but equally important is for meaningful and respectful engagement of Indigenous peoples in the process.

While the overcoming of Indigenous disadvantage is a, if not the, core issue for the achievement of reconciliation, it is reasonable to consider that Australians are going to be engaged in the process for many, many years. Can the process be sustained within the length of time that will be required to overcome disadvantage? If so, how best can it be sustained?

This paper argues the need for greater clarity with respect to the relationship between overcoming Indigenous disadvantage and the achievement of reconciliation. By this I mean we need to have a better appreciation of how achievements, or a lack of achievements, inform the reconciliation process. Mindful of the need for a long-term outlook this paper poses the question of how the reconciliation process can add value to strategies for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage, rather than simply being subject to such outcomes.

Recommendation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation

In its final report the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation recommended that:

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agree to implement and monitor a national framework whereby all governments and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) work to overcome Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ disadvantage through setting programme performance benchmarks that are measurable (including timelines), are agreed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, and are publicly reported.

The federal government responded by stating that ‘[t]his

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recommendation was acted on before the Final Report was presented to the Commonwealth Parliament’. In doing so, this response also outlined some of the deliberations of COAG and the ‘new national approach’ that it ‘agreed to’. In its communiqué of November 2000, COAG acknowledged that ‘many actions are necessary to advance reconciliation’. COAG also clearly saw the role of governments as being about making ‘a real difference in the lives of Indigenous people by addressing social and economic disadvantage, including life expectancy, and improving governance and service delivery arrangements’.

To demonstrate how it was going to make ‘a real difference’ COAG went on to state that:

...[t]he Council committed itself to an approach based on partnerships and shared responsibilities with indigenous communities, programme flexibility and coordination between government agencies, with a focus on local communities and outcomes. It agreed to priority actions in three areas:

- Investing in community leadership initiatives;
- Reviewing and re-engineering programmes and services to ensure they deliver practical measures that support families, children and young people. In particular, governments agreed to look at measures for tackling family violence, drug and alcohol dependency and other symptoms of community dysfunction; and
- Forging greater links between the business sector and indigenous communities to help promote economic independence.

In April 2002 COAG agreed:

...to a trial of a whole-of-governments cooperative approach in up to 10 communities or regions ... to improve the way governments interact with each other and with communities to deliver more effective responses to the needs of indigenous Australians.

This communiqué also stated that COAG had agreed:

...to commission the Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision to produce a regular report against key indicators of indigenous disadvantage ... to measure the impact of changes to policy settings and service delivery and provide a concrete way to measure the effect of the Council’s commitment to reconciliation through a jointly agreed set of indicators.

These two initiatives of COAG can be regarded as a genuine attempt on the part of federal, state and territory governments to address some of the most fundamental requirements to support the overcoming of Indigenous disadvantage—effective coordination across agencies and programs and an appropriate framework upon which to evaluate the impact of various policies, initiatives and programs. They are also now a key component of a broader federal government strategy commonly referred to as the ‘new arrangements’.

The ‘New Arrangements’ for Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage

Key aspects of the new arrangements were introduced from 1 July 2004, which involved the transfer programs from ATSIC and Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander Services (ATSIS) to mainstream federal government agencies. Leadership for these new arrangements is provided through a ministerial taskforce on Indigenous affairs. Strategic direction and advice is now provided through a ‘Secretaries’ group and the National Indigenous Council, to which fourteen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been appointed by the federal government.

To help support the management and coordination of the new arrangements the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination has been established within the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. Within this office thirty Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs) have also been established to replace the ATSIC-ATSIS offices with the role of developing and coordinating ‘innovative responses to local Indigenous needs’. The ICCs also have responsibility for working ‘with local Indigenous communities and negotiate regional and local agreements’.

These new arrangements are based on five principles, which includes:

- Collaboration;
- Regional Need;
- Flexibility;
- Accountability; and
- Leadership.

In addition to these principles the Council of Australian Governments has also ‘agreed to a national framework of principles for delivering services to Indigenous Australians’, which involves:

- Sharing responsibility;
- Harnessing the mainstream;
- Streamlining service delivery;
- Establishing transparency and accountability;
- Developing a learning framework; and
- Focusing on priority areas.

**Monitoring the Effectiveness of the New Arrangements**

At the request of COAG the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision of the Productivity Commission has developed a ‘reporting framework’ incorporating ‘key indicators of indigenous disadvantage’. Key elements of this framework include:

- *Priority Outcomes*, which provide the vision ‘for how life should be like for Indigenous people’;
- *Headline Indicators* to provide ‘an overview of the state of Indigenous disadvantage’;
- *Strategic areas for action* incorporate seven areas for action that have
been chosen ‘for their potential to have a significant and lasting impact in reducing Indigenous disadvantage’. While having a longer-term focus this set of indicators also ‘serve as intermediate measures of progress’; and

- *Strategic change indicators* have been developed for ‘their potential to be affected by government policies and programs’, but they ‘are linked to actual outcomes for Indigenous people, not the operations of specific policy programs.

In developing this framework the Productivity Commission has substantially added value to the range of strategies designed to relieve Indigenous disadvantage. The ‘strategic change indicators’ in particular represent an innovative approach to assessing and understanding Indigenous peoples’ aspirations. For example, measuring the ‘[proportion of indigenous people with access to their traditional lands’] may seem to many of little relevance in determining whether Indigenous disadvantage is being overcome. For Indigenous peoples having access to traditional lands it is not only critical for the maintenance of cultural traditions it is also a fundamental source of personal and collective pride and identity.

**Implications of the New Arrangements for the Strategy to Overcome Indigenous Disadvantage**

The COAG framework and the ‘new arrangements’ have pretty much overshadowed the Strategy to Overcome Indigenous Disadvantage, which has impacted on its implementation. That is not to say that aspects of this strategy have not been implemented. What it highlights, however, is the authority of government in setting the strategic direction for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

Key stakeholders, such as Reconciliation Australia and supporters from the private sector, have played critical roles in supporting the overcoming of Indigenous disadvantage. This is particularly demonstrated through their support for the development of Indigenous leaders, engagement in and assistance with partnerships and encouragement of good governance.

Good practice and timing suggest that it would be appropriate to begin evaluating the effectiveness of the National Strategy to Overcome Indigenous Disadvantage. Any evaluation should take into context the environment in which this strategy has been attempted and the authority of government in setting the direction for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. It will also naturally identify strategies to build on what has been learned from what has, and has not, worked and consider how any evolving strategy can complement the new arrangements encompassed in the COAG framework.

**Challenges Affecting the Overcoming of Indigenous Disadvantage**

The sheer scale of Indigenous peoples’ disadvantage presents one the
most fundamental of challenges to any strategies designed to overcome this situation. The nature of Australia’s political cycles makes it difficult for governments to commit and allocate the necessary funding over the longer timeframes that is required to adequately plan for and accommodate this challenge. Consequently, the capacity of the new arrangements to deliver suitable outcomes for Indigenous Australians over the longer-term are likely to suffer the same fate as previous attempts if this is not resolved.

**Combating Violence**

One of the ways in which Indigenous disadvantage has manifested itself is through various forms of violence, particularly against women and children. Combating violence is absolutely fundamental to overcoming disadvantage and while there is some understanding about the cause and effects, much more needs to be understood. The idea of a wide-ranging enquiry—preferably with the powers of a Royal Commission therefore has merit. As a nation we need to better understand and appreciate the range of factors that lead to current levels of violence, as well as the challenges communities face in breaking the cycle of violence.

**Limitations of the Data**

While the Productivity Commission has developed a comprehensive framework to assist with determining the effectiveness of initiatives to overcome Indigenous disadvantage, by its own admission there are also limitations. ‘Particular limitations arise from variability in the identification of people being of Indigenous origin, both across collections and over time’. This is perhaps one area where stakeholders in the reconciliation process can consider ways in which such limitations can be addressed to give confidence in the reliability of the information being used to measure outcomes.

**The Pace of Change**

Concern expressed about these arrangements is not only centred around elements of the strategic approach being taken, but more about the manner and speed with which the new arrangements are being implemented. The haste with the implementation of the new arrangements has restricted the opportunity for Indigenous peoples to be adequately consulted about them. Without effective consultation Indigenous peoples’ capacity and willingness to engage in the new arrangements is impaired and will exacerbate their ability to achieve the desired outcomes.

**Encouraging Ownership of Responsibilities**

While the sharing of responsibility is a cornerstone of the new arrangements the implications for both Indigenous peoples and governments
and their agencies should those responsibilities not be met is still unclear. The effective removal of Indigenous people at the community level from any role in shaping the design of the new arrangements can impair the quality of the agreements that will be made between government agencies and communities. This would likely result in a lack of faith Indigenous peoples will have in the negotiation processes. This in turn can impact on Indigenous people’s willingness to comply with any agreements made.

Effective Representation of Indigenous Peoples Interests

While ATSIC had many weaknesses, many of which were not of its own making, it did have one key strength, ie. legitimacy with Indigenous peoples on the basis that those who represented their interests through ATSIC were elected by them. Through its regional planning processes, ATSIC could have been well placed to enhance the negotiation of agreements and ultimately their capacity as a framework for delivering improved outcomes to communities. The demise of ATSIC now requires governments to agree to and adequately support new local and regional representative structures specifically for the purpose of negotiating agreements. The concern is that the establishment of new representative structures will be undertaken in an ad hoc fashion that will cause delays and uncertainty with regard to the implementation of the new arrangements.

At an administrative level the demise of ATSIC has also impacted on many Indigenous people’s capacity and desire to work within the federal public sector. The abolition of ATSIC has already resulted in a loss of corporate knowledge, particularly at the senior management level within the federal public service.

Role the Reconciliation Process can Play in Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage

There is consistent agreement among all sections of Australian society regarding the urgency of the need to overcome Indigenous disadvantage, not only for its benefit to the reconciliation process. There is even tacit endorsement among people who are entitled to be skeptical about the potential of aspects of the new arrangements to achieve better outcomes for Indigenous Australians. But what roles can reconciliation and its key stakeholders undertake to add the best value to the range of strategies and initiatives being implemented to overcome Indigenous disadvantage?

Building on lessons learned to date, the reconciliation process is in a good position to continue to support initiatives to overcome Indigenous disadvantage, but it does have limitations. Most notable of these limitations is the ultimate power and authority of government in determining and setting the strategic direction for overcoming disadvantage. This situation gives rise to the need for careful consideration about the basis upon which reconciliation can enhance the current strategic direction. The National Reconciliation Workshop
provides a valuable starting point for such consideration.

Key stakeholders in the reconciliation process have already made significant contributions in areas such as Indigenous leadership, governance and the development of partnerships. Further opportunities exist for the process and its stakeholders to add value, such as helping to bring about improvements with the collection data that will help to inform the achievement of outcomes.

The national desire to overcome Indigenous disadvantage is rightly based on a sense of collective morality— it is an affront that a nation like Australia that provides so much opportunity for its residents, its Indigenous peoples should find themselves in such dire circumstances. It is a similar sense of morality that motivates people to the ongoing calls for action through reconciliation.

The extent of Indigenous peoples’ disadvantage and the length of the timeframes that will be necessary to deliver substantive outcomes gives rise to the need for further consideration about the relationship between reconciliation and combating disadvantage. Substantive improvements in Indigenous peoples’ socio economic circumstances are required before any claims about the achievement of reconciliation can be made. The capacity of the nation to deliver such outcomes is enhanced if stakeholders in reconciliation are actively engaged in driving them, rather than simply relying on those outcomes being achieved for the sake of reconciliation.