

Bureaucratic ego and Aboriginal unemployment

Tony Cutcliffe

In the 1970s, the Australian band Skyhooks was riding high in the charts and few could forget their classic hit 'Ego Is Not A Dirty Word'. This is not the case in Aboriginal policy in Australia.

Wave after wave of non-Indigenous bureaucrats and politicians have hitched their stars to resolving the intractable problems in the nation's relationship with Aboriginal Australians. Many, anxious to carve out stellar careers, are lulled into a simplistic, policy mirage which assumes that equity equates with assimilation. They launch themselves as political white knights intent on slaying the policy dragon which has been terrorising the neighbourhood for two centuries.

By the time things go pear-shaped, the bureaucrats and their political masters are inextricably bound up in defending the indefensible consequences of policy failure and its tragic and costly human consequences. The usual flurries of action and the inevitable summits follow, before things quietly revert to their natural order and neglect.

Of course, the current alarm about violence, poverty and overcrowding in remote Aboriginal communities follows this time-honoured political formula. But slowly, and inevitably, as the limelight recedes, control will gradually be reclaimed by the dead hand of bureaucracy.

Tony Cutcliffe is a director of the Melbourne-based consultancy and forum, The Eureka Project. He works extensively with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in the Goulburn Valley and has written two reports on the COAG Indigenous trial.

Aboriginal Unemployment in Shepparton

The failure of policy from all shades and levels of government is obvious to any person with even the most superficial appreciation of the dynamics of Aboriginal Australia. It would be a mistake however, to think that the symptoms are restricted to remote communities or to the Indigenous Affairs portfolio. The same symptoms are clearly manifest in the Federal Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) regarding Aboriginal employment initiatives. It is a situation that an overstretched department needs to resolve with urgency.

There is no better example of this problem than in the Goulburn Valley, based around Shepparton, home to Victoria's largest Aboriginal community outside Melbourne. With around 6 per cent unemployment, Shepparton is approaching what is generally accepted as full employment. Why is it, then, that the region's 6,000 Aboriginal people, representing a tenth of the total population, are living with almost 80 per cent unemployment? How is it that these catastrophic unemployment levels, and their endemic costs and consequences, haven't raised an outcry in Cabinet?

Bureaucrats have devised unemployment strategies in total isolation of the on-ground reality in Shepparton, and in increasing denial of the present failure. For public service reputations, careers and promotions to be protected, the bureaucracy must build measurement structures that create the chimera of success by assembling discordant and selective achievements into press release headlines.

DEWR will swear black and blue that Indigenous unemployment in the Shepparton region is only 20 per cent rather than 80 per cent. They justify this statistical mythology in several ways. For example, those Aboriginal people who are hooked on Community Development Employment Programme payments (an Indigenous variation of work-for-the-dole) are regarded by the DEWR as 'employed'. Indigenous

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people who find a job of 15 hours per week are regarded as 'employed', even though it resembles nothing like financial self-sufficiency and it might last only a week.

Furthermore, these job schemes willingly place Aboriginal people into jobs without any regard for their suitability, readiness or long-term sustainability. Therefore, an Aboriginal person might get shunted through half a dozen unsuccessful jobs in a year—say, two weeks at each one—and government

figures will count this as six jobs created. As is the case in Shepparton, those jobs may have been double claimed (one agency found the jobs, but another agency 'owned' the client) and the number goes up as triple-dipping can and does occur. Six failed placements can appear in the government statistics as anything up to 18 'new' jobs.

The system is so heavily geared to mythical figures that a senior DEWR bureaucrat got carried away at a recent Senate Estimates hearing and boasted that the Job Network system was actually finding more jobs for Indigenous people than for mainstream clients in Shepparton. The reality is that for every imaginary job that DEWR talks about, there is a group of bitter and disillusioned work candidates and employers who have been scourged by the system.

The absurdity continues with a training and development structure that allows the job agencies to pool government training allocations for their high-support clients and invest that money in particular clients with the best job prospects. With these people in work, the agency gets a bonus for finding the job, even though it came at the expense of dozens of others who are warehoused in the so-called competitive commercial environment of outsourced job placement activity. This is a commercial reality imposed on the Job Network by the way the system is structured.

These problems in Shepparton were made even worse with the closure, last year, of the highly successful Indigenous employment programme, *Ladders to Success*. The *Ladders* programme was devised and operated by Indigenous people and volunteer, non-Indigenous community leadership from the region. The programme created 125 real jobs for Indigenous unemployed and had a further 100 vacancies on its books when it closed. The success was delivered because of the highly effective partnership between local business identities such as John Corboy and Jim

Andreadis; and influential Indigenous leaders including Paul Briggs, Neville Atkinson and Adrian Appo. Such a powerful team soon encouraged local employers to embrace affirmative action and create jobs which would never have been offered to the government job agencies.

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Why then was the *Ladders* programme allowed to die? The *Ladders* board realised that the supply of work-ready Aboriginal people had been exhausted, and the existing structure would no longer be able to fill vacancies while keeping faith with candidates and employers. In typical fashion, the *Ladders* board found a solution and suggested the establishment of a supervisory board in Shepparton which could ensure local co-ordination of CDEP, Jobs Network, *Ladders* and other educational and training activities related to Indigenous employment. The highly reputable and respected board believed they could make sustainable inroads into Indigenous unemployment for no more, and probably less, than is presently spent by the government.

However, the overture was rejected by the government with the insistence that the government's own activities were already more successful than those which the *Ladders* board had proposed. It was clear from the outset that DEWR had decided to barely tolerate the suc-

cess of the *Ladders* programme rather than celebrate, support and duplicate its achievements. Eventually, after 15 months of trying to bypass departmental and staff obstacles, a meeting was established with the Minister Kevin Andrews who invited a fresh proposal from the *Ladders* organisation.

However, such an invitation is hardly a silver bullet. Community distrust of DEWR has been inflamed by its decision to withdraw from a Council of Australian Governments Indigenous pilot programme in Shepparton without so much as a phone call to the Indigenous leaders with whom it had been working for more than three years.

Few, if any, Indigenous or other leaders who have met with Minister Andrews have any doubt that his personal commitment to improving Indigenous equity is deeply and sincerely held. Yet despite this, there remains a yawning chasm between the prosperity of the mainstream community and the unrelenting marginalisation of Aboriginal people. The gap is universal, whether the community is in Wadeye in the north or Shepparton in the south.

For many of Shepparton's leaders, it appears that despite many public commitments to Shepparton's Indigenous people, DEWR remains unresponsive and stubborn. Bureaucratic indifference no longer has the ability to shock the region, but the personal egos of these most uncivil servants still can.

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