

# Failure, Evidence & New Ideas

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At the National Press Club on Wednesday [27 February], the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, like her predecessor, stressed the failure of past policy in Indigenous Affairs.<sup>1</sup> The statistics and accounts from the Kimberley this week certainly suggest that wholesale failure has been the sorry outcome of the last 30 years of Indigenous policy. So Jenny Macklin is looking for 'new ideas' about how to tackle the apparently intractable problems facing Indigenous communities.

As I sat listening to her I wondered how people working their butts off in Indigenous organisations would feel about what she was saying. Was she consigning all their work to the failure bin too? What, exactly, has failed? And more importantly, what has succeeded? There are plenty of examples of really exciting and successful programs out there that can provide the evidence the Minister is looking for—but they are seemingly all consigned to be part of past policy failure.

Yet we know that not all policy has failed; there have been gains and it is important to recognise them. Improvements in home ownership, educational qualifications, and child health are noted by the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report 2007*,<sup>2</sup> even as other indicators stayed the same or even deteriorated. It's a mixed picture.

Some Indigenous achievements are getting attention. Last year Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation published a useful book of success stories in Indigenous health.<sup>3</sup> Reconciliation Australia's Indigenous Governance Awards<sup>4</sup> have brought to light some outstanding Indigenous organisations, whose governance and programs could teach 'mainstream organisations' a thing or two. The Australian Collaboration<sup>5</sup> has documented a series of Indigenous success stories in organisational and business achievement. Indigenous musicians, artists, sportspeople, lawyers, educators and many more can hold their own against the world. But we continue to focus on failure. How debilitating for Indigenous people. This inevitably contributes to the cycle of despair. Whatever their achievements, 'failure' and 'Aboriginal' seem to go together in the political and public minds. The Minister should be honest about the problems, but she should balance that with the solutions Indigenous people are finding for themselves—and then put more resources behind them to do even more.

The Minister says she wants new ideas, but she also wants to proceed only where there is an evidence base. New ideas, by their very nature, have not been tried, so there is no evidence about whether they will work or not. This is a case, one would think, for independently evaluated pilot programs. I am not against new ideas, but to write off the past and what is happening now is to miss the evidence the Minister is looking for. The evidence is already in

that the major failings have been within and among governments. It is there in bucket loads of reports and evaluations gathering dust. What is needed is an urgent attempt to rectify those problems of fragmented funding, red tape, poor coordination, inadequate resources, lack of continuity of programs, and failure to work in a genuinely equal partnership with Indigenous people, viewing them as citizens with basic entitlements like the rest of us.

There was another contradiction in the Minister's speech. She stressed that programs which were imposed on Indigenous people would not work. Quite right. So why is she persisting with the NT Intervention (an untested 'new idea' which the previous government came up with!) which was imposed in a derogatory and coercive way on NT Aboriginal communities? She has inherited the program, I accept that, but its very genesis could tell us that it is likely not to work as effectively as something developed in genuine partnership. If she wanted to view it as a 'pilot' to be tested, why not limit it to the communities which were experiencing its full effects in November 2007, while exploring other approaches elsewhere? Instead it is rolling on, with the exception of the permit changes and, for the moment, closures of Community Development Employment Projects. It is hard to assess its impacts—with totally conflicting accounts coming from the Northern Territory, depending on who you talk to. But its effects seem to be quite significant, so the sooner it is subject to rigorous, independent evaluation, the better. And that must involve people in the communities themselves having a big say in whether it is working for them.

To the extent that many NT Indigenous people feel demeaned by the approach of the Intervention, it is already setting up an unhelpful dynamic if sustainable change is to occur. If community leaders, men and women, feel shamed and denigrated by government policy approaches, how can they lead a transformation in their communities?

We need to tackle the problems in Indigenous communities, but let's build on the achievements out there. There are some 'old ideas' already working—let's not overlook them.

## NOTES

1. Closing the Gap - Building an Indigenous Future, The Hon Jenny Macklin MP, speech presented to the National Press Club, Canberra, 27 February 2008, available at <[http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/jennymacklin.nsf/content/closing\\_the\\_gap\\_27feb08.htm](http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/jennymacklin.nsf/content/closing_the_gap_27feb08.htm)>.
2. Australian Government Productivity Commission, Review of Government Service Provision, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2007*, available at <<http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/indigenous/keyindicators2007>>.
2. Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, *Success Stories in Aboriginal Health*, available at <<http://www.antar.org.au/success/>>.
3. See the Reconciliation Australia Indigenous Governance Awards website at <<http://www.reconciliation.org.au/igawards/pages/about-the-awards.php>>.
4. *Success in Aboriginal Communities: A pilot study Comprehensive social, cultural, environmental and economic reporting* by Julie Finlayson, available at <<http://www.australiancollaboration.com.au/booksreports/index.html>>; *Organising for Success: Policy Report* by Julie Finlayson, *Maps to Success* by Julie Finlayson, *Indigenous Partnerships in Protected Area Management in Australia* by Toni Bauman and Dermot Smyth, all available at <<http://www.australiancollaboration.com.au/research/index.html>>.