



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

Reference: Indigenous employment

MONDAY, 5 DECEMBER 2005

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

INTERNET

The Proof and Official Hansard transcripts of Senate committee hearings, some House of Representatives committee hearings and some joint committee hearings are available on the Internet. Some House of Representatives committees and some joint committees make available only Official Hansard transcripts.

The Internet address is: **<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>**

To search the parliamentary database, go to:
<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au>

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS
Monday, 5 December 2005

Members: Mr Wakelin (*Chair*), Dr Lawrence (*Deputy Chair*), Ms Annette Ellis, Mr Garrett, Mr Robb, Mr Slipper, Mr Snowdon, Dr Southcott, Mr Tuckey and Mrs Vale

Members in attendance: Mr Garrett, Dr Lawrence, Mr Snowdon, Mrs Vale and Mr Wakelin

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

Positive factors and examples amongst Indigenous communities and individuals, which have improved employment outcomes in both the public and private sectors; and

1. recommend to the government ways this can inform future policy development; and
2. assess what significant factors have contributed to those positive outcomes identified, including what contribution practical reconciliation* has made.

*The committee has defined ‘practical reconciliation’ in this context to include all government services.

WITNESSES

DOCKERY, Dr Alfred Michael, Private capacity 1

Committee met at 11.27 am

DOCKERY, Dr Alfred Michael, Private capacity

CHAIR (Mr Wakelin)—Welcome. As you know, the inquiry is looking at the positive outcomes and best practice around Australia on the issue of Indigenous employment. You, and in partnership with others, have a pretty unique and distinctive focus on this, so we are really looking forward to your comments today. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Dr Dockery—I am a research fellow at Curtin University. Although I represent that institute, I am an academically independent researcher, so my views are not that of the university. I hope some of them are, but they are not necessarily.

CHAIR—You might like to make a few opening comments or add to the submission.

Dr Dockery—I prepared a brief statement of what I would like to be the main message to come out of our submission. The logical starting point is that the disparity between the wellbeing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is quite unacceptable. My particular research interest is in the contribution of labour market programs that are addressing that problem. Over the years, from the National Employment Strategy for Aboriginals to TAP, STEP, CDEP, AEDP and now IEP, we have invested a lot of money in assisting Indigenous people in the labour market. You would like rigorous program evaluation to play a role in that. That is what ensures that resources are put where they offer the best return for the purpose of public accountability so that we learn what works and what does not work in assisting Indigenous people. This is where I think our efforts have fallen down fairly badly. I do not know if you have the submission there.

CHAIR—I do.

Dr Dockery—On page 24 there is a diagram where I have tried to outline some essential elements of what an evaluation framework might look like. To start with, you have some objectives where you have a view of what you hope the program is going to achieve. How is the world going to be different with the program as opposed to without the program? Hopefully you have some clear objectives—I have called it ‘how state of the world 1 with the program differs from state of the world 0 without the program’. Having decided the objectives, you put in place some policy or processes that for some theoretical reason you believe is going to help bring about those outcomes that you want. Then to evaluate whether it is working or not you have some indicators, which you believe measure whether or not you are moving towards those objectives. These things are fundamental to any evaluation that you might conduct.

But if you look at the history of Australian labour market programs for Indigenous people, there is a lack of any theoretical grounding of what we are doing and how that is going to help Indigenous people. Particularly, there is a complete mismatch between the objectives as stated in the policy document and what was actually measured. If you go back, particularly to the Aboriginal employment development policy and community development employment policies, initially their objectives—if you read the policy documents—were all about self-determination, community capacity building, honouring Indigenous aspirations and lots of terms like that. But

when they actually measured outcomes, all they ever measured were employment outcomes. That is now more particularly refined to market employment outcomes.

You think about wanting to respect Indigenous aspirations and then look at the measurable outcomes that were listed in the AEDP after all this talk about respecting aspirations—having the same rate of unemployment, the same rate of employment and the same wage earnings as non-Indigenous people. So to set statistical equality as the measured outcome is a complete anathema to what the statements of the objectives were. I think that the programs have fallen down very badly in this way. The AEDP talked about recognising traditional activities as employment so we changed the way we statistically measure employment, which I thought was a positive thing, but I never saw anything in any of the reviews that actually honoured that idea that we would recognise hunting and gathering as legitimate employment.

Either you can view this as lazy evaluation or more cynically you can think that perhaps policy makers never took those stated objectives seriously. I am not 100 per cent sure which one is right but you could take it either way. Perhaps, more cynically, you could say that policy makers only ever saw assimilation as the long-term solution and that is what was reflected in the measurement of the programs. I think the CDEP was a classic case in point, where the initial objectives were all about alleviating the effects of welfare dependency. It was originally the alternative to ‘sit-down money’, as it was called. Now it is being called ‘sit-down money’ itself. We now actually have a CDEP placement initiative which is specifically designed to get people off CDEP. I wonder if we are the first country that has ever had a labour market program designed to get people off another labour market program. It seems we are. The CDEP was originally only designed for remote areas, where there were no alternative market opportunities. But of course it has extended into quite large populated centres, so the objectives have got a bit confused. That is the main message.

In other parts of the paper I attempt to start to develop what I hope is a theoretical framework for analysing Indigenous disadvantage. This draws on the observation that the experience of Indigenous Australians, although not closely paralleled, can be seen as something that has happened to tribal peoples in countries all around the world. They have followed a very similar view from government as to how tribal peoples needed to be dealt with. I have tried to develop a framework which recognises that this is a generic disadvantage and why that is, and therefore how policies might address that disadvantage. Presumably you would like to know what the source of the disadvantage is before you have a program that is going to address it. That is the main message.

CHAIR—I think there is much in what you have said, particularly given the wonderful comment you made that we might be the first country in the world to actually have another program to get them off the labour market program. That is very close to the mark. In terms of the mismatch of objectives that you referred to, I wonder whether this is not at the core of the issue concerning the cultural objectives and this policy of self-determination versus assimilation. I want to talk a little bit about what are legitimate objectives. It seems to me that they are at the core of this issue. You have mentioned the international situation of the tribal people of the world, and no doubt you would be aware of Harvard research and other works.

Dr Dockery—Yes, some.

CHAIR—Would you talk a little about what are the legitimate objectives? It seems to me that you have defined failure very well. What is the legitimate position on our Indigenous people to try to bring it all closer together? Indeed, you might give an explanation of what you might try and define as legitimate objectives.

Dr Dockery—That is a hard question.

CHAIR—It is a bit tough. We are wrestling with it.

Dr Dockery—If you follow the thinking of that path of self-determination, then it is not for me to say what the legitimate objectives are. Those are supposed to be decided by the Indigenous peoples themselves. I have made a submission and I have done a bit of research but I am not an expert in the area by any stretch of the imagination. Presumably, there are aspects of Indigenous peoples' culture that they value very highly and would hang on to. Ideally, I would like to think the welfare of the Indigenous peoples should be our objective.

CHAIR—Their wellbeing et cetera.

Dr Dockery—Yes. It is if we can tell how it is that their wellbeing falls off as they are taken out of their traditional settings and traditional ways and what are the particular components that cause it to fall off as those are taken away, particularly as the literature says their attachment to land and connection through kinship and things like that are very important, so if they get broken there is a loss of welfare. I do not know what the legitimate objectives are but, presumably, the way to find them out is to try to identify where wellbeing falls when you take away those cultural elements of how the Indigenous peoples live and have traditionally lived. The preservation of those and trying to put in place a way to preserve those would then be legitimate objectives.

CHAIR—Let me put this to you. There are people, Indigenous leaders within Australia, who are now very concerned about welfare dependency—and you would be well aware of this debate—and in a sense are endeavouring to set an agenda which sees employment as a worthy outcome with people moving away from that dependency. Therefore I ask the question: in your view, what legitimacy should we give to those Indigenous leaders that are suggesting that to us? We have got to start somewhere. Governments of all political persuasions, as we are all struggling with this—there is no political agenda here because people just want to get a solution; that is what we are grappling with—have to make a start. This legitimacy of the future is the basis of a very fair question. Some people are right out there saying that we have got to move away from welfare dependency and that employment is a legitimate way of doing it—and there are actually success stories around Australia where that is happening.

Dr Dockery—Yes.

CHAIR—That is surely one legitimate part of it.

Dr Dockery—The question of legitimacy is another complication. Some people fall into the trap of thinking that there is one view which represents Indigenous people; of course there is not.

CHAIR—Yes, it is difficult.

Dr Dockery—They are enormously diverse. There are some people who are now very much assimilated—maybe ‘assimilated’ is not the right word—into Western society and have very similar aspirations to us.

CHAIR—Both views are legitimate.

Dr Dockery—Yes, both views are legitimate. My point is that if you are going to put in programs—and you have to—a critical dimension you have to consider is distinguishing between the aspirations of the different Indigenous people. The aspirations of a remote community must be very different to those of people who have moved into cities and are now living there.

Dr LAWRENCE—That addresses the real problem of designing policies and programs, doesn’t it?

Dr Dockery—Yes.

Dr LAWRENCE—That is what you have looked at.

Dr Dockery—There is one example that springs to mind. I recently heard, at a housing conference, a guy in the state administration of Aboriginal housing in WA talking about the back to country movement. He has a limited budget to spend on housing and the state of some of the housing in remote communities is absolutely diabolical. That is clear but he said, ‘I’ve got a budget and I have to decide how this is best spent.’ There is a strong back to country movement of Indigenous people who want to go back to their roots, particularly people from the stolen generation who feel that they had it taken away from them. He said openly in a meeting with quite a few other Indigenous people: ‘I have to decide how to spend this limited resource. I can’t see this back to the country movement lasting beyond this generation.’ Older people who want to go back to the remote communities want housing built so that they can live there but the younger people now do not generally want that. They want to do more of what the city people do.

CHAIR—I am facing exactly that in my own electorate now. You are right on the money. Sorry, Dr Lawrence.

Dr LAWRENCE—That is all right; I just wanted to underscore that problem of diversity because I think sometimes our programs are not sufficiently flexible. What you are pointing to is the need to identify the source of disadvantage—or ‘the disparity in wellbeing’, as you put it. Do you have any suggestions about how governments might go? There are all sorts of fine words about consulting people regarding their concerns and priorities, and the new federal arrangements are supposed to be very local. Do you have any sense of that working at the moment? Do you have any recommendations to this committee? I know you say that you are not an expert but do you have any commonsense out of theory—if that is not a contradiction in terms?

Dr Dockery—I have to say no, I am afraid. It is a very difficult question and I am not aware how realistic it is now for Indigenous people to go back to more traditional hunting and gathering lifestyles supplemented by a more Western input. I understand there are some communities where that is largely done but, to be honest, I take the view that if you could go

back you would perhaps do things differently but we cannot; so ultimately assimilation is the only way forward. The question is about how to make the best of that transition so that Indigenous people do not suffer too much of a loss of a sense of identify and so on.

Dr LAWRENCE—But all of the evidence is that they do, so that is a bit of a problem. You talked about rigorous program evaluation being absent in labour market programs for Aboriginal people. I would have thought that rigorous program evaluation was pretty much absent everywhere. It is not unique to these programs. There are probably more of them.

Dr Dockery—It is not unique. And it is not unique to say that a lot of work has been done but we are not all that wiser. Indigenous program evaluation suffers a major problem in that the sample sizes are small—being 2½ per cent of the population. In general surveys that you might use the sample sizes are too small to do anything statistically.

On the positive side, I think both the Department of Family and Community Services and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, DEWR, have made some major improvements in that they now use match control groups for trying to work out whether or not the program had an effect. FaCS are making a lot better use of their administrative data and allowing external researchers to access a confidential file, which is a great step. I have been able to do some work using that. Once you have the full Australian sample of welfare recipients you see that Indigenous people are disproportionately represented. There have been some major steps forward, and I think that is positive.

Dr LAWRENCE—I have one last question. You talked about the fact that the objectives are often constructed in terms that are not then reflected in the assessment indicators. Is that inevitable, given the breadth of those objectives, or is it simply poor program design?

Dr Dockery—I do not think it is inevitable. Economists are possessed with positives. If we can measure things, we are much more interested in those things than the stuff that is hard to measure. We get preoccupied with measurable things, but that does not mean that there are not other things—for example, wellbeing. There is a growing literature on subjective wellbeing and economists are now working on that. You could imagine quite a few ways that you could measure Indigenous wellbeing, satisfaction with their cultural attachment and things like that. The two NATSIS, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander surveys that the ABS has done are a move in that direction. I have not yet worked with the data directly. I know there are some limitations with it, but there are certainly some questions in there about wellbeing, cultural activities and so on. I would like to see some studies—and I hope to do some myself in the future—which look at how important cultural attachment, maintenance of kinship networks, an attachment to your land and so on are in determining wellbeing and whether we should really be that worried about it or should we get on and do the alternative, which is just to get their outcomes for employment, education et cetera as close to ours as we can as soon as possible.

Dr LAWRENCE—Which is what we have been trying to do for many years.

Dr Dockery—If you went back and saw that the Indigenous people had very different economies, different preferences and lived differently to us and our economy was going to move in, you would think, ‘Ideally, what we would like to do is give them the choice between the two and allow them a resource base’—which would mean things like royalties, land rights and access

to their lands—‘so that they could carry on their traditional activities.’ So, even if assimilation was seen as inevitable, they would have that resource base to fall back on and, as they felt they were prepared to move into our economy, to be competitive in our economy and to have the same wages and employment outcomes as us, they could choose to move when they thought that would be better for them.

But we effectively desecrated their resource base and they started from a position where they had no fallback. For some people we might be able to go back a little bit, but we went from a situation where Indigenous people were pretty well self-sufficient to a situation where they came under the social security system in the 1960s and 1970s and, by 1980, it was estimated that 70 per cent of Indigenous income—including through the traditional methods of hunting and gathering if you imputed a value on that—was from government. So within 30 or 40 years they went from a position of being self-reliant and self-sustaining to totally dependent on us. That is why we cannot go back now. I would like to think that, if we had the time over, we would think about that differently and do things differently.

Dr LAWRENCE—I will leave it there, as I am sure Warren or Peter will pick up on something else.

Dr Dockery—I am sorry that I am not offering solutions.

Dr LAWRENCE—That is okay.

Mr GARRETT—Thank you, Dr Dockery. Your evidence has been very interesting and useful. You are probably aware that there is a growing discussion about setting effective objective goals not only in terms of Indigenous policy generally but overall as well—for example, internationally in the reduction of poverty. If we were to see goal setting as being a necessary process of the evaluation that has not happened to this point in time, how would the interaction or the intersection between goal setting in relation to employment and goal setting in relation to wider social policy—for example, areas of social dysfunction—work? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Underneath that is a much broader question. I did not quite follow the calculations that you made in your paper, but I do know that for the calculations to be done in an exact way it would probably require some form of evaluation of the non-material component of labour. I would be interested in your thoughts about that as well, because if you are going to carry this through, we have to at some point presumably start measuring those things that we have not measured in traditional Western economics before.

Dr Dockery—Yes. Goal setting can hamstring as well as be a benefit. We have clear evidence in the Aboriginal employment development process that the goals set were so unrealistic that the administrators were totally disillusioned with them—not totally, but there was disillusionment from the beginning. Goals are fine but they do not always translate into a willingness to carry through in achievement. Normally at the end of the day it comes down to, ‘We’ve got so far towards the goal, and we’ve put in so much money. Are we willing to put in the extra money to reach the goal?’ Generally not. It is the case of the marginal benefit and marginal return running out and you do not go forward. I do not think goals are that valuable, to be honest, as far as writing down, ‘We will achieve this target’.

Mr GARRETT—You don't?

Dr Dockery—Not really, no. We have seen that with things like the Working Nation program. Goals that were set were very ambitious in that there were to be no long-term unemployed and everybody having a job. When they were evaluated it turns out the positive outcome was costing \$150,000 and the government—a different government, admittedly—said, ‘That is an absolute waste of money.’ The goals were not achieved. Clearly, money could be spent better elsewhere. Goals are meaningless without political and administrative power to enforce them. Trying to achieve a target which you have generally plucked out of the air does not seem to be a wise way to proceed. I would rather see principles in place that we should move towards based on some theory, saying ‘These are the policies we have put in place and the incentives we create will help us move towards them,’ and try to move forward that way. I do not know if that really answers your question.

Mr GARRETT—What do you mean by that—that there would still have embedded targets that you are trying to reach on the way through and that you would have some way of monitoring that afterwards? It is one thing to unrealistically set goals; it is another thing to have things in place.

Dr Dockery—Yes. I can see they have a value. I am not opposed to that, of course. But at the end of the day you do not want to be too hung up about achieving a particular number, which you may end up not achieving because of something completely out of your control like a world downturn. You had the example when the Job Network came in where people were given targets and they were funded according to certain placements. The really successful Job Networks ended up placing their full allotment and had to shut up shop because they were too successful. They had met their targets. If you achieve your targets, does that mean you then stop trying? I have concerns about targets. I think principles are more important. When you talk about poverty, as I am sure you are aware, the economic literature is very much in debate about whether poverty can be measured in relative or absolute terms and what it means. So even that is frightfully complicated. Sorry, I am not giving a very useful answer, am I?

Mr GARRETT—No, that is fine.

Mrs VALE—Further to that observation, you actually say in your paper that there is a growing literature in economics that relates to the measurement and determinants of wellbeing which are challenging the standard assumption of a direct link between income and wellbeing. What would you then say would be an indicator besides rising employment rates, better education levels and increased income for Indigenous communities? What would you say would be other indicators that we could actually detect whether there is improvement?

Dr Dockery—The main indicators that are being used in the economics literature are survey questions—you ask somebody, ‘On a scale of one to 10, how satisfied are you with your life?’ or, ‘How happy are you?’

Dr LAWRENCE—I appreciate that there is a huge literature, nearly 100 years old, in psychology. They will figure it out one day.

Dr Dockery—Yes, there is.

Dr LAWRENCE—It is an infant science.

Mrs VALE—It is interesting to note, isn't it?

Dr LAWRENCE—I have been watching it with fascination, thinking, 'These guys are in grade 1.'

Dr Dockery—There has been a bit of a merging of the economists and the psychologists. They have started to talk.

CHAIR—It is a bit dangerous.

Mrs VALE—Inasmuch as trying to measure contentment or happiness?

Dr Dockery—Yes. Sorry, I have lost track of what you were asking.

Mrs VALE—I was looking at other determinants of improvement and wellbeing.

Dr Dockery—There are things like satisfaction, but of course there are blunter measures. Suicide rates, of course, are about as clear a measure of unhappiness as you can get. There are other measures, but they are the main ones that I know of.

Mrs VALE—Carmen has the benefit of a psychology background, but to me that was an interesting new view of determinants. The other thing you point out in the paper is that the year 12 retention rates have improved. Have there been further improvements in the year 12 retention rates that you could comment on for Indigenous people, and is this a widespread improvement on what you commented on in your paper? I know you mentioned that at Geraldton the rates went from an average of five Indigenous young people reaching year 12 two years ago to 27 Indigenous young men in 2005.

Dr Dockery—I do not think I would have mentioned that.

Mrs VALE—It was in the working paper.

Dr LAWRENCE—I think that was another witness.

Mrs VALE—I am sorry; it was. You are quite right, Carmen—it was from someone else. It was about year 12 retention rates in the Kalgoorlie district. Have you noticed any widespread—

Dr Dockery—No. I am not familiar with the figures. I do know that Indigenous people are still far less likely to finish year 10 at the mandatory level and each other level after that and to go on to university and that, once they get to university, their failure rates are much higher. I know that is still the case. I do not know that there has been a particular change.

Mr SNOWDON—Let me say I am not sure I agree with your assumption about assimilation. In fact, I would argue vigorously against it. I would say that the policy setters have that in their minds; there is no question about that. Just to make an observation, uniform testing for kids in years three, five and seven is an example of the stupidity of it, because clearly the people who

fail these tests are kids who live—certainly where I come from, the Northern Territory—in the bush. They will never pass the tests unless the teachers just teach them to pass them. That does not give them better education outcomes; it allows them to pass the test. I think there are real issues with that.

I noted the discussion you had about the TANF policy in the US, the two views which are expressed and the view which Pickering has in relation to it. It seems to me that there is a germ of how you might analyse CDEP—and I know you have done that in your paper—in terms of examining the outcomes. I wrote a paper on CDEP in 1978, and the issue there was, as you identified, how you actually determine what employment is. The view there was, and this was in the years when there were only two or three communities with CDEP, that people needed to be able to define their own employment objectives. That might include people looking after country. It may not have a direct monetary benefit in terms of income earning capacity, in terms of a value that we would traditionally apply.

I note your observation about the way in which we have had CDEP nationalised to the extent that it operates with a uniform set of rules which do not properly take account of differences in the regions. It seems to me that one of the issues which your paper properly identifies is how you differentiate various policy outcomes depending upon the community you are determining to work with, because they will be different.

Dr Dockery—Yes.

Mr SNOWDON—For example, the assertions by some Indigenous leaders which the chairman spoke about may in fact reflect a view expressed in those communities, but I argue that it is very dangerous to apply them nationally—just as I think it is very arguable that the position paper adopted by the Treasurer is an absolute recipe for disaster for welfare recipients.

I also note that some work has been done on the value of traditional income—that is, hunting and gathering—by CAEPR, particularly Jon Altman. I know that some time ago a person who was a vet by training, Stephen Boyden, did some work at the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies on the allocation of time. I have not read this work, because it was done in the early eighties, but it seems to me that if you start to think about the way you are thinking—that is, how you value these things that are intangibles at the moment—you might actually come up with a policy prescription that (1) allows for difference; (2) accepts that the people who are going to make the decisions about what is done in their communities are the people themselves rather than some outside force; and (3)—and I think this is most important—makes governments accept the responsibility that they have to have a coordinated approach that accepts the same policy parameters across agencies.

Currently, that is not the case. They compete, as you well know. Will your work—and I notice in your letter you say that you are doing a review of the employment policy stuff—look at those differential approaches to how you might apply policy and will it look at the definitions used in the context of the varying aspirations of many communities across Australia, or will it look at the uniform application of a policy directive?

Dr Dockery—It is review work; it is not new work, unfortunately. That is something I hope to do in the future. It reviews the previous evaluations that have gone on. I pointed out the main

thing that I keep finding over and over again. I certainly hope I am wrong about the assimilation, and I support pretty well everything you have said. But time and time again statements have been made about what we would like to see in terms of respecting individual preferences of different communities, being flexible enough and using a whole-of-government approach et cetera, but when you get to the end the only thing they measure is employment outcomes.

Mr SNOWDON—And they define what the employment outcomes are, and this is my point.

Dr Dockery—That is right. As I said, the original AEDP document talked about the definition we use for ‘employed’. When you are asked by the Australian Bureau of Statistics if you have worked for pay or in the family business for up to an hour or more in the last two weeks then you consider that as being employed. This document rightly said that that does not apply to Indigenous communities and to people living in traditional ways. So they said: ‘Surely they are employed. We are going to change things so that people in those roles are seen as employed.’ I would imagine that would extend to roles of elders. I am not an anthropologist, so I do not know a lot about the structure. But I did not see any more about it in terms of the evaluation or changing the statistics or the measurement.

Mr SNOWDON—So would there be some potential for having an approach that set broad policy parameters, not specific goals, and that allowed you to negotiate goals on an individual regional community basis?

Dr Dockery—Yes, I would like to see that. But what is the point if, five years down the track, people just say: ‘Where are your employment outcomes? We are going to scrap it all again.’

Mr SNOWDON—I think part of it is how we value what Aboriginal people see as their priorities.

Dr Dockery—Yes. Again, I am not an anthropologist, but obviously there is a major difference between how Aboriginal people see things and how we see things—particularly economists. Our way is to say that work is a bad thing and you suffer this bad thing to purchase goods and leisure. Indigenous and most tribal people do not think like that at all. To them, work is part of what they value and what they do. It is part of their cultural identity—ceremonial things like becoming a man, hunting and so on. They see work as the good that they do, which is quite counterintuitive to how we typically see things.

Mrs VALE—Do you see work as bad?

Dr Dockery—The economists do.

Mrs VALE—Do they?

Dr Dockery—I am being a bit too cut and dried but that is generally the way the—

Mr SNOWDON—It is about leisure.

Mrs VALE—Most people would give their right arm for a job.

Mr SNOWDON—Yes, but to create leisure and time.

Mrs VALE—No, just for a job.

Mr SNOWDON—No, for the income.

Mrs VALE—No. Maybe it is me. I am one of those people who cannot relax. My idea of going on a holiday is to dig in a garden.

Dr Dockery—Economists do not believe that. Economists believe they only want that for the income that it provides.

Mr SNOWDON—That is right.

Dr Dockery—This is where psychologists and economists differ.

Mrs VALE—Maybe this is where we talk about challenging the standard assumption of a direct link between income and wellbeing and talk about other things and immeasurables. To me it is feeling part of the community—you are contributing within your local community. You have a role. It is not so much the job; it is the role you have. That is vital to who you are as a person.

Mr SNOWDON—You do not have to be a bricklayer or a truck driver to do it. You might do as a lot of people in monasteries do—

Mrs VALE—Yes, but they have roles. Sometimes we look at jobs in a very limited way.

Mr SNOWDON—The point that is being made here is that it is not that; it is a question of how you define what a job is. It is a definitional issue.

Mrs VALE—That is what I find fascinating.

Mr SNOWDON—The government defines what work is by saying that work is paid employment, then they classify what they regard as work against the award conditions, blah, blah, blah. Or you could say to someone, ‘What do you want to do today?’ They say, ‘My job is to go out and look after country and have ceremonies.’ I would have thought that that is an entirely reasonable thing to do.

Mrs VALE—Yes, and that is part of the role of who they are, isn’t it?

Mr SNOWDON—That is the point.

Mrs VALE—It is part of the idea of being principle driven. You were talking earlier about how you do not think we should have objectives; we should have principles.

Dr Dockery—I think we should have objectives. I was not clear that having set targets is the best way to achieve them.

Mr SNOWDON—To me it is a question of value. It is how I as a non-Indigenous person interpret the values that the Indigenous persons place on a specific activity or group of activities. The way I perceive the problem we have is that we do not place a value on it. We do not understand it. What we see is what ACCI says is a job, and big business says that you are not employed unless you are out working in a factory. That to me is a crock of crap.

CHAIR—Dr Dockery at the beginning offered us these two views of the world.

Mrs VALE—You can put the same focus on women in the old days. The feminist ethic said that you had to be self-actualised and have a job to be of value. However, you could be at home with a role and make a contribution. That is a value you place on it yourself. I agree with you wholeheartedly but to me work is one thing and a job is another, or maybe a role is another. Work can also be equivalent to slavery. It all depends on how much you get out of it—if you had to work and did not have a choice, then that would be the worse thing.

CHAIR—We should let Dr Dockery respond.

Mr SNOWDON—I am not a mathematician and I am not really great on formulas but I think the arguments you present are very good.

Dr Dockery—The bottom line of the squiggles and so on is that it is a way to move forward—it basically expresses a simple thing.

Mrs VALE—You refer to the ability of policy makers to remain unaccountable for the lack of progress in Indigenous wellbeing or affairs.

Dr Dockery—Yes, that sounds like something I wrote.

Mrs VALE—The Secretaries' Group on Indigenous Affairs is supposed to coordinate government agencies and give advice to support the ministerial taskforce. Do you have any ideas on how we can make accountability very much part of the policy makers' job? It is of concern to all of us. That is why we are here on this committee. We are trying to make some contribution towards helping people in Indigenous affairs and improving their wellbeing.

Dr Dockery—The first thing to do would be to set out objectives in line with what you spoke about the motivation of the policy being. There were objectives of, for example, trying to measure wellbeing, cultural preservation, community capacity building and things like that. It seems to me the biggest problem with trying to enforce it is that it is not a vote winner, is it? Indigenous people are 2.4 per cent of the population. A lot of Australians see them as basically lazy and—

Mr SNOWDON—Bludgers.

Dr Dockery—Yes, as bludgers. If you have not met your target for community capacity building, there is not going to be any uproar about it politically. That is where I think the problem lies.

Mrs VALE—Thank you.

CHAIR—Positive employment outcomes are mentioned in the research. Are there any examples you would like to mention of positive employment outcomes that you have noticed or observed in your work?

Dr Dockery—No. As I was saying, I would like to have funding so that I could go off to communities and observe some of this. From the literature that I have read, there are some in Cape York and in South Australia.

CHAIR—Put to one side the debate about the definition of work and about wellbeing not necessarily being related to employment or income level. In both areas there is, if you like, the radical view of what work is and the traditional economist's view. I will offer you an example. This is an example of the traditional, economic view. In the mining industry at Weipa 17½ per cent of the work force is Indigenous, and I think they want to go to 35 per cent. They are quite confident they will get there. Would you regard that as a positive outcome?

Dr Dockery—That would depend on the impact on the communities where those people are drawn from. As I say, if we could measure their wellbeing we could know that. It is something I will try to show through the theoretical framework I have developed. One good way of approaching this is where Indigenous people do traditional things like art and tourism—which unlike most of what they produce we actually value quite highly—where there are many success stories. They are things for which we are willing to pay quite a bit of money and they can be competitive as far as earning income goes.

CHAIR—Yes, and that assists development.

Dr Dockery—And it allows them to maintain an attachment to cultural ways.

CHAIR—I have given the economic picture of certain parts of Australia. Let me go to another view, the untraditional view which is not the economic one. There is this very great difficulty. Where there might be good art outcomes, good tourism guides and involvement with country or whatever, there is also a very intrusive external society impact—that is, substance abuse and distraction from what many would regard as going to the wellbeing of particularly young people. There seems to me to be a real challenge to us accepting the traditional economic view. There is a huge challenge for us in either category.

Dr Dockery—I completely agree. It is an enormous problem, and again I do not have answers.

CHAIR—If you did, we would abandon this place and you could come and run it!

Dr Dockery—Ideally, if we had the data and the proper evaluation processes in place, we could look at Indigenous people and ask, ‘Are the outcomes for people who have been thrown out of their traditional way and their relationships with the land and kin’—and we all agree that those outcomes are negative—‘and who have moved into the city to achieve this income and employment worse than the outcomes for people who have maintained their cultural links?’ Is a program of trying to develop that side of their traditional wellbeing—

CHAIR—The benchmarks by which we define that sort of wellbeing approach are something we should do more about and understand better.

Dr Dockery—Yes, and we need to understand the linkage between those things we all agree are—

CHAIR—I have just two more quick questions. The first goes to the private sector. You mentioned lack of opportunities. Can you think of one area in the private sector where they might be able to create more opportunities? For example, if you are thinking of Cape York you may be thinking that the philanthropic approach could work. What would be a sensible thing for the private sector to do better?

Dr Dockery—Again, the only thing that really springs to mind is being able to tap into things that help preserve Indigenous people's cultural attachment. I think of things like tourism. As I understand it, the exit surveys of tourists leaving Australia all say that what they had hoped to have seen more of was Indigenous culture. So there is obviously enormous scope to expand that side.

CHAIR—Thank you for that. I agree with you. The last issue is about the ICCs, the Indigenous coordination. Mr Snowdon touched on this issue. There are competing forces in the economy—the hardnosed outcome based stuff and the perhaps more altruistic approach, if you like. Do you have view about the current structure? There is this theoretical coordination which is really not working anywhere near the way that you would recommend.

Dr Dockery—I do not, to be honest.

CHAIR—That is fine. I just wanted a comment, if you had one, on the ICCs.

Dr Dockery—I have not really kept up as well as I could have as to what is left behind in ATSIC's absence.

CHAIR—There is only 12 months or so involved.

Dr Dockery—An initial perception, if I could say it, is that lots of those things are really dependent on individual people. Whatever the structure, there are examples where you have exceptional people who have created great success stories.

CHAIR—I was just absolutely fascinated when Mr Snowdon—I had not quite thought of it in these terms—said that there is no coordination in terms of measurement of these things in the department.

Mr SNOWDON—Just exploring that a bit further, the Labor government had reciprocal obligation. We now have a similar sort of exercise. It seems to me that it would be possible, if you expanded your discussion, to look at a regional arrangement where you could negotiate terms—a bit like the TANF thing and the contrary argument put about how you might negotiate what the outcomes will be with the community and perhaps say to them, 'Here's the money you would be entitled to were you to receive your individual entitlements. If you were able to get that

money as a block, understanding that you would then no longer have an individual entitlement, how would you use that money?’

Dr Dockery—This was the reasoning behind the CDEP originally.

Mr SNOWDON—I know. I can recall vividly the discussions that people had at the time. They said: ‘We do not want to see our money.’ In fact, what they did initially was, without CDEP, people were bulk paid. Communities were bulk given their unemployment benefit, without any CDEP, because they did not want to get sent the money.

One of the issues is schooling. With regard to the debate which has been generated over the last week—and I have not read all of the paper written by Costello but I have seen reports of it and I have heard the statements made by Pearson—it would seem to me possible. Relationships are very difficult things. How you interpret relationships depends on who you are. If you are in Arnhem Land, for example, the way in which you define your relationships to one another are prescribed very differently from how they are prescribed in the Central Desert. So if you make an assumption about Cape York and think it is going to apply in the Central Desert or anywhere else in Australia, you have got rocks in your head.

It seems to me that there is a potential for us to say, ‘School’s an issue.’ We know that each child carries with them, effectively, a voucher, because it appears in the form of a payment to the parents, the guardians or the carers. But what do we get for that? Some would argue that what you get is sustenance for the kids, and that is what is most important because these people live in poverty. Others would say, ‘We don’t get an outcome in terms of school attendance. Therefore, what we ought to do is cut the payment to force them to go to school.’ It seems to me that that is a fairly radical approach to getting an outcome. But it ought to be possible to sit down, I would have thought, with a group, including those families, and talk about how you might overcome those problems at the same time as addressing how they might want to alternatively utilise the incomes they are currently receiving.

Dr Dockery—I agree. I would like to think that could be done. I would love to see some success stories. I also completely agree with your point about welfare dependency, even within our own economy and community. There are intergenerational effects of welfare. We know this from studies. If your parents had lots of time out of work, if you came from a lone parent background or if your parents had low educational attainment, that has a significant effect on what you are probably going to achieve. Even amongst us there are strong links between welfare, your parents’ situation and your outcomes. You cannot expect that not to exist in an Indigenous community where the economic base has been completely transformed and where the parents do not have this idea of the importance of education, employment and regular attendance. You have to expect it to translate in the same way for Indigenous kids growing up, just like when I went to a nice state school. It is, of course, completely unrealistic. I agree: it seems totally draconian to think, ‘We’ll take your welfare payments away if you do not attend.’ There is an enormous lot of work to go into bridging that gap so that you can expect the same behaviour as we have. As I said, even with our own people you can see differences in behaviour according to your background.

Mr SNOWDON—For an interesting example I will go to the chair’s point about the private sector. Maningrida is a good example. CDEP at Maningrida have a ranger program. The rangers

look after the country and the sea. They have been responsible for locating a number of foreign fishing vessels. They do not get paid for it. Of course, you would not think it would be hard to work out an arrangement where that CDEP organisation would be paid and the workers trained to do some of the intervention work which is currently not been done but ought to be done, if they had the capacity, by Fisheries and Customs.

Dr Dockery—Although that would not necessarily be private.

Mr SNOWDON—No. I did not want to go to private. I was just saying there are ways.

Dr Dockery—I certainly like park management and areas like that where Indigenous people could be employed very effectively. A lot of it by necessity is government, and it is now viewed badly if Indigenous people are disproportionately in government.

CHAIR—We appreciate you appearing very much. You have adopted a very scientific, objective approach to this, which is not always taken in this debate. We thank you for that.

Dr Dockery—I hope it is of some use. Thank you.

CHAIR—Is it the wish of the committee that the transcript of the evidence taken at the public hearing be authorised for publication? There being no objection, it is so ordered.

Committee adjourned at 12.23 pm