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Committee Secretary  
Senate Community Affairs Standing Committee  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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CRICOS Provider No. 00120C

Attention: Dr Ian Holland

**RE: Inquiry into the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory and Social Security  
Amendment Bills**

I would like to make a brief unsolicited submission to this Inquiry and thank you for granting me permission to lodge a day late.

In making the submission I mainly seek to bring to the Committee's attention two opinion pieces already in the public domain that I prepared late last year on the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory proposed laws. These summarise some of my concerns with the proposed laws and are provided at Appendix 1 and 2.

The package of three bills being considered by the Community Affairs Standing Committee indicate just how deeply embedded the NT National Emergency Response laws passed in 2007 have become. By the end of 2011 there has been little evidence available that a raft of measures established by these laws has made a measurable impact on the well-being of Indigenous people in prescribed communities despite significant expenditures. Some might argue that discernible improvement will take generations rather than years.

The three bills being reviewed focus on three areas—school attendance, alcohol management and community store licencing—that are defined as National Emergency Measures that require enhancement or continuation at this juncture. There are many other policy initiatives from the Northern Territory National Emergency Intervention that have now been subsumed within a range of National Partnership Agreements between the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments. And others still, such as the institution of Government Business Managers and compulsorily leased assets, where the Commonwealth government's intentions still remain unclear.

I want to provide brief comment on school attendance, alcohol management and store licencing measures supplement by material in the Appendixes.

- 1 Many educational experts have commented that there is no grounds to believe that the Improving School Enrolment and Attendance (through Welfare Reform) Measures or SEAM will work or has worked at trial sites. Evaluations that have been undertaken are either incomplete or have not been made public (at 1 February 2012) which suggests that the evidence is either not positive or inconclusive. There is a real risk that if these measures were implemented alongside the fines proposed under the NT government's Every Child Every Day strategy they could potentially enhance poverty especially after April 2012 when remote communities are likely to experience a decline in aggregate income with the abolition of the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) as a wages-based scheme. Limited thought appears to have been given to how SEAM will operate in smaller communities without schools where community cohesion might be a higher priority than schooling at a distance. And there seems to be limited understanding of Aboriginal cultural practice where biological parents may not co-reside with their children and might have limited ability to exert authority over their school attendance practices. While it might be argued that Commonwealth and NT laws complement each other in this area, there is also possibility of duplication and inefficient turf wars. My main concern is that SEAM over-emphasises the role of parents in getting children to school and under-emphasises the need for schools to provide relevant curricula and locally relevant and appropriate education. There is also perverse incentive for education authorities to continue the under supply of educational facilities where children are located and to place the burden on parents to shift residence to larger communities to access educational facilities as required by Australian law. The bottom line is that given that there have been trials and there is ongoing collection and hopefully objective of attendance records, these measures should not be introduced for a ten year period unless there is clear evidence that they work.
- 2 All remote Indigenous communities struggle to find local solutions to manage alcohol. The majority were dry communities before the NT Intervention with policing of restrictions being the major problem. This seems to be a structural problem explained by the vast areas to be policed and opportunities to avoid detection. There are some working examples of community-controlled alcohol management that could provide best practice models for negotiated implementation. A major challenge appears to be the availability of alcohol with limited restriction in urban areas and the high mobility of some drinkers especially from dry communities. The proposed deployment of welfare penalties to deal with problem drinkers assumes an unsubstantiated link between problem drinking and welfare; and as with proposed SEAM welfare penalties could see income pressures on families and associated social problems. Again there is no evidence provided that alcohol and drug misuse has been effectively managed by welfare penalties. Community control of alcohol management, backed up by effective policing and appropriate investment in counselling services and detoxification facilities might prove more cost effective and sustainable measures than imposed welfare income reduction and management of problem drinkers on welfare.

- 3 There is no doubt that a combination of store licencing, monopolistic operation of BasicsCard and enhanced investments in store infrastructure and management has improved the quality of retail outlets in many communities. But there has been limited effort to isolate the relative impact of external regulatory oversighting. There has also been little research on the impacts of licencing on the cost of goods at stores and who within communities might be reaping health benefits from better access to fresh produce. Given that the vast majority of adults in remote communities are on some form of income support, family budgets would be very sensitive to prices. The issue of store licencing is closely linked to that of income management (BasicsCard) that provides licenced stores with captive customers. It is paradoxical that while store licencing is justified as a means to enhance food security, options for enhancing self provisioning, an Indigenous form of food security, are increasingly curtailed by an emphasis on residential centralization away from hunting and fishing grounds and reform of CDEP that has historically facilitated customary livelihood activity to enhance self provisioning.

As noted above, these appear to be the three key elements of the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory proposed laws. In highlighting these measures attention is being diverted to some extent from the far more expensive and contentious income management measure that now see over 18 000 individuals on BasicsCard out of 24 000 income support recipients in NTER prescribed communities, It is estimated that income management is delivered at a reported cost of \$4 000 per client per annum or a staggering overall cost of \$72 million per annum for income management alone. One senses that a vast governmental machinery has been established since 2007 and that discontinuity of such 'investments' might raise serious political questions about their effectiveness and public cost.

Some might argue that NT prescribed communities are just a welfare reform Greenfields experiment that will be extended to the rest of the nation, as currently occurring with SEAM and income management trials. If this is so then surely there is an imperative to ensure that proper evaluation is conducted of the efficacy of these measures in the Indigenous and national interests. Others argue that it is Indigenous people that are demanding these reforms. Even if this is the case, it is far from clear if these measures should be voluntary or compulsory. If voluntary such measures would be relatively uncontentious, but where compulsory (as with youth and the long term unemployed) they continue to carry the opprobrium associated with the race-based income management laws passed in 2007 (even though these were amended in 2010).

I would like to end with two broad observations for the Committee's consideration.

First, is there any other area of public policy where such far reaching and expensive reform is proposed for a period of ten years without clear national or international comparative evidence that it works? I believe not and this this raises serious questions about the relative powerlessness of remote living Indigenous people as an interest group in Australian society to negotiate the nature of their relationship with the state. It is quite unclear how 'stronger futures' will be delivered to individuals in these communities while the majority living in them is subject to imposed measures that may not work.

Second, the absence of clear evidence that such proposed measures will actually work makes debate about them highly politicized and ideological, with the public service unfortunately caught up in this politicization as a vested interest managing sophisticated technologies of governmentality. At the same time the important big picture questions like whether the cost of these measures represents good value for tax payer dollars?; or what the opportunity costs of such multi-million dollar expenditures might be—what else might be achieved with more productive and less punitive investments?—are not even asked, let alone answered.

I recommend to the Community Affairs Standing Committee and the Australian government that far more consideration is required, especially about the risk of unintended consequences of these reforms, before they are passed.

I would like to emphasise that the following submission reflects my views alone with some drawn from previously published works; I would be willing to supplement it with verbal evidence to the Inquiry if required.

Yours sincerely

Attached:

**Appendix 1:** Copy of opinion piece 'The Cunning of Recognition' published in *Tracker*, December 2011, p.36.

**Appendix 2:** Copy of 'From Keynesian Nanny State to the Coercive Daddy State in Indigenous Policy', presentation at the National Library of Australia, 18 November 2011.

## Appendix 1

### The cunning of consultation: School attendance and welfare reform

#### Professor Jon Altman

North American anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli coined the term ‘the cunning of recognition’ to expose the multicultural legacy of settler colonialism and how it perpetuates unequal systems of power. The ‘cunning’ of neoliberal multiculturalism is that it acknowledges difference, while simultaneously disciplining, regulating and constraining otherness. And so it is with what is termed ‘consultation’ by the Australian government in its project to expand key elements of the Northern Territory Emergency Response Intervention, especially the disciplining and punishing of welfare recipients for school truancy by their children as a central plank of Intervention Mark 2.

A series of reports in October and November have made it quite clear that the Intervention, currently re-labelled the National Partnership Agreement to Close the Gap in the Northern Territory, is having limited measurable impacts for residents of prescribed communities. Poor outcomes are evident in many areas including very clearly in the area of school attendance that hovers around 60 per cent and that seems to be worse the larger the community.

Keen to reduce the opprobrium of paternalistic Intervention mark 1 and its unprecedented fiscal impost on federal coffers, the Australian government is looking to reshape Intervention Mark 2 now so much more diplomatically relabelled ‘Stronger Futures for the Northern Territory’. At the same time the Gillard government appears hypersensitive to any charge from the media, opposition, focus group research or swinging voters that it is going soft on the need for draconian and paternalistic interventions.

And so the soft targets of school attendance; surely every Australian child irrespective of ethnicity must attend school to have future choice? And the responsibility of welfare recipients to get their children to school—surely this is the least that unemployed, single or disabled parents can do to pay back society for the generous income support they have received?—have been selected for an escalated and additional layer of punitive measures.

The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance (through Welfare Reform) Measure or SEAM (with the bracketed welfare reform element conveniently left out of the acronym), a voluntary pilot scheme is now to be potentially extended on a mandatory basis to all welfare recipients in the Northern Territory and elsewhere, even though there is no evidence that the trials have worked. The first tranche is made up of 16 specific sites in the Territory.

SEAM sees the neoliberal Daddy State in its most coercive and potentially destructive manifestation of moral behaviourism. A benchmark for attendance will be set and there will be much counselling of families assisted by a truancy ‘support’ worker; if parents do not meet their part of agreed attendance plans their income support payments will be suspended.

It is not clear how families are expected to survive without income. What is inexplicable and unconscionable about such draconian possibilities is that they are being proposed by a

government concerned about food security and children's wellbeing. But kids, even in remote Indigenous Australia, do not live by school attendance alone, they also need food. And families with no income will inevitably become an economic burden for others in their community counter to the aim of other measures like income management.

The tabled Australian government amendments indicate that SEAM will be aligned with the Northern Territory government's *Every Child Every Day* strategy, but it is hard to see how this will occur. The Commonwealth strategy looks to make just welfare recipients responsible using the stick of income suspension; while the NT government looks to make all parents responsible using the sanction of fines. There is a distinct possibility that the two schemes will be at loggerheads and clumsy and wasteful in and in any case there is not a shred of evidence, fiscal might aside, that Canberra is better placed than Darwin in this difficult area of policy. Indeed the NT laws seem more wide ranging and less race-based; and fining is probably more equitable than discretionary withdrawal of income support.

Earlier this month, when the *Northern Territory Emergency Response Evaluation Report 2011* and the *Community Safety and Wellbeing Research Study* were released *The Australian* newspaper reported Minister Macklin was emboldened by evidence proving her agenda would end child suffering. It is hard to reconcile that with the proposed SEAM measures. And to anti-intervention activists the minister said 'Look at the evidence. This has nothing to do with ideology or politics; it is about what people need and what (their) aspirations are for their own lives and their children's lives'.

In the absence of evidence it is hard to see SEAM deriving from anything other than ideology and politics. There is no evidence from SEAM pilots that the measure actually improves attendance. And there is no evidence that the children of welfare recipients in remote Indigenous communities are more likely to be truants than the children of those in employment—this is just a moralistic and moralising conception of truancy as the individual failing of parents in receipt of welfare.

In 2007 the Howard government passed racist income quarantining laws that required the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act. The Rudd opposition and then government that had meekly acquiesced to these laws subsequently copped considerable national and international opprobrium. And so in 2010 it amended the law to include non Indigenous Australians in its income management regime, thus making it non-racist, at least in a technical legal sense.

The Gillard government has cleverly learnt and now seeks to bypass the charge of racism by being cunning in the manner it is implementing these ideological measures.

On one hand, the measures as proposed are neither race-based nor regionally-focused, even though initially they will mainly target a small number of large Aboriginal townships in the NT where school attendance appears especially low, but where development prospects are supposedly greatest.

On the other, according to the government spin, it is Aboriginal people who truly desire these draconian special measures as evident from widespread consultation. And so even if SEAM principally targets Indigenous Australians, the Australian government can argue to the global community that it complies with the Racial Discrimination Act as a beneficial

special measure consented to by the Aboriginal people impacted and thus meeting the minimum benchmark set by the High Court in the celebrated case *Gerhardy v Brown* in 1985.

There are other ways of thinking and talking about Indigenous education and development, but such alternatives are closed off, suppressed and silenced. They mainly come from white and black practitioners at the education coalface, Aboriginal activists, civil society and those parts of the academy that are not subject to state capture.

Take, for example, the very different interpretation and counter-narrative of what happened at consultations reported in *Cuts to Welfare Payments for School Non-Attendance: Requested or Imposed?*, a must read, available on the Concerned Australians website. This analysis from a diverse set of 10 community meetings indicates that 'there was not a single request for welfare cuts or fines to those parents with children who were not attending school'. Concern about education was given a high priority, but what was sought was the re-introduction of bilingual learning, access to full-time education in homelands, support for Aboriginal teachers, acknowledging culture in the curriculum and the need to distribute funds more equitably.

The Australian government is keen to focus both its policy attention and the taxpayers' financial resources on punitive measures to punish parents of truants in receipt of welfare. This though takes too much attention away from the role of the state to ensure that school infrastructure is of sufficient physical quality and that remote teachers are sufficiently skilled to attract students with quality, locally relevant, engrossing, perhaps bi-lingual, education that would make staying away from school an unattractive option.

A decent education is unquestionably important for jobs, confidence and political empowerment. But for the bicultural ways of remote living Aboriginal people it needs to be tailored for success in two worlds, not just an imposed one based on mainstream aspirations. Evidently, this is a massive challenge that is beyond current and past Australian governments; and so it is far easier for the powerful to deploy discursive weapons and welfare sticks. Monolithic and imposed solutions to complex problems are high risk, especially for the supposed subjects of the state project of educational improvement. Australian governments need to invest less in cunning consultation and more in canvassing policy alternatives and learnings about educational success from here and overseas.

## Appendix 2

### From Keynesian Nanny State to the Coercive Daddy State in Indigenous Policy

A response to 'How do we design a dignified welfare safety net without becoming a Nanny State? Lessons from Catholic Social Teaching' by Fr Frank Brennan SJ AO

Jon Altman  
National Library of Australia, Canberra  
18 November 2011

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of Canberra, thanking John Falzon, St Vincent de Paul Society for the invitation to respond to the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Gerald Ward Lecture on Social Justice, and of course thanking Father Frank Brennan for his lecture which I found both insightful and moving; I have little disagreement, as respondent, to the lecture, and so just aim to push its boundaries perhaps with a little less diplomacy and religiosity than the lecture giver.

In his book *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* sociologist Loic Wacquant distinguishes what he describes as the Nanny state of the Fordist-Keynesian era from the Daddy state of neoliberalism where the relative contraction of welfare is replaced by a new set of coercive instrumentalities.<sup>1</sup> The new emphasis on duties over rights, sanctions over support, a stress on the obligation of citizenship and new methods for monitoring and dealing firmly and coercively with the poor and the marginalised characterise this new social landscape for Wacquant.

Wacquant is writing about the punitive turn of penal policy in the USA. He examines the state's wedding of restrictive 'workfare' and expansive 'prisonfare' under a philosophy of moral behaviourism that uses a moralistic and moralising conception of poverty as a product of the individual failings of the poor. The results in the USA has been a rapid growth in imprisonment, especially of black males, and associated costs in terms of the social fabric and the ideals of democratic citizenship, given that in most States, prisoners now numbering in their millions, cannot vote.

What has all this got to do with Australia where the welfare state has historically been so benign and where social security has been largely premised on an assumption that structural factors contribute more than individuals to poverty and marginalisation?

Since 2000 and the McClure Report<sup>2</sup> social security policy here has taken a neoliberal turn, but from 2007 with the Northern Territory Intervention it took a far more draconian and race-based shift: the problem of Indigenous poverty was suddenly redefined as a problem of Aboriginality. This shift was aided and abetted (intentionally or not) by some Aboriginal and anthropological writings like Noel Pearson's *Our Right to Take Responsibility*<sup>3</sup> and Peter

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<sup>1</sup> Loic Wacquant (2009) *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, Duke University Press, London and Durham.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick McClure (Chair) (2000) *Participation Support for More Equitable Society: Final Report on the Reference Group on Welfare Reform*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

<sup>3</sup> Noel Pearson (2000) *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, Noel Pearson and Associates, Cairns.



Sutton's *The Politics of Suffering*<sup>4</sup> that were welcomed by political and bureaucratic elites in Australia as defining Aboriginal culture as the problem. And so a sophisticated and experimental state project of moral restructuring was embarked upon to alter the norms of Indigenous Australians to become neoliberal subjects.

The state is deploying a powerful metaphor of 'Closing the Gap' as the development framework for remote Indigenous Australia. Of course such a quest for equality sounds like common sense, Indigenous people should share in the national wealth enjoying the individualism and freedoms of other Australians; it is just that to do so they will need to be a new and different kind of citizen adopting neoliberal norms.

This approach to moral restructuring is very clear in the Council of Australian Governments' National Indigenous Reform Agreement and its National Partnership Agreements in a number of areas. The powerful mobilizing metaphor of 'Closing the Gap' is repeated again and again. And state documents like NIRA and the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy promulgate new forms of subjectivity, the hard working, individualistic, educated, nationally mobile and materially acquisitive neoliberal subject.

This is presented in dominant discourse as the only rational possibility dependent on a reconfigured relationship of mutual obligation between Indigenous persons and the state, a structural adjustment program that looks to educate by enforcing and strictly policing school attendance and fining the parents of school absentees; that looks to enforce new forms of consumption via income management of the welfare dependent, while providing freedom to spend for the employed; via proposed new forms of accumulation through private housing options like the now failed Housing on Indigenous Land program; and via a new forms of work, 'proper' jobs (mainly funded by the state and controlled by state agencies) instead of Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) jobs (mainly funded by the state and controlled by community organizations).

Implementation of these reforms has not been unproblematic and there is a plethora of reports, just eight in the last month, almost all tainted by moral hazard as they are state sponsored, that are still far from uncritical—which makes one wonder how bad things really are as they are so constrained and managed. Release of these reports is also carefully stage managed and all stops are pulled out to offset any negativity with political spin and managed media leaks.

What we are seeing in remote Australia is a grand project of structural adjustment that will cause pain, but this is regarded as the necessary price before there is long-term gain. The state is focusing its efforts on just a few places, 29 priority communities, to provide some demonstrations of successful intervention and social engineering. But even in many of the chosen there seems to be higher unemployment, less income, higher costs for goods from licenced stores, more surveillance, less choice, less freedom, less Indigenous authority and autonomy. There is the distinct possibility that the project of improvement is actually creating more poverty owing to the suppression of Indigenous forms of production. There is a dual discourse evident even at these 'priority' places, talk by managers and leaders of

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Sutton (2009) *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the End of the Liberal Consensus*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

growth and development and simultaneously withdrawal and resistance by the subjects of all this improvement, deploying what James Scott refers to as ‘the weapons of the weak’.<sup>5</sup>

Frank Brennan has alerted us in his lecture to the measures in Intervention Mark 2, relabelled ‘Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory’ as if a change of name will signify a change of intent. Most concerning is the Improving School Enrolment and Attendance (though Welfare Reform) Measure or SEAM that conveniently leaves out the bracketed ‘through welfare reform’ from the acronym. This measure could see the parents of truants lose their welfare income and so become truly destitute.

I am deeply concerned about SEAM for a number of reasons.

First, there is no evidence that the children of welfare recipients are more likely to be truants than the children of those in employment.

Second there is no evidence from SEAM trials that the measure actually improves attendance.

Third, taking welfare off some will not just impoverish them but will also punish their relatives (employed and unemployed) who will bear the burden.

Fourth, the NT government has recently introduced new laws under its *Every Child Every Day* policy to fine the parents of any truant. Not only can parents of kids who do not attend school regularly lose their welfare payments, but they can also be fined. This raises important questions about the ongoing contestation about governance authority between the Commonwealth and NT governments and inefficiencies associated with duplication.

Finally, all the focus on the role of parents to enforce school attendance takes too much attention away from the roles of schools and teachers: to attract students with quality, locally relevant, engrossing, maybe bi-lingual, education that would make staying away from school an unattractive option.

Over the last month, the Australian government has released eight reports on the Intervention’s progress and on community consultation on its future. I now realise, listening to Frank Brennan, what this might be all about.

In 2007 the Howard government passed racist Income Management laws that required the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act. The Rudd opposition and then government that had acquiesced to these laws passage copped considerable national and international opprobrium; and so in 2010 it amended the law to include non Indigenous Australians in its income management regime, thus making it non racist, at least in a technical legal sense.

This time around, in 2011, the Gillard government is seeking to consult to show that it is Aboriginal people who truly desire the draconian measures—what might be termed borrowing from Elizabeth Povinelli’s notion of the ‘cunning of recognition’,<sup>6</sup> ‘the cunning of

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<sup>5</sup> James Scott (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*, Duke University Press, Durham.

consultation—so that these new measures can be presented to the world as beneficial special measures under the Racial Discrimination Act consented to by the Aboriginal people impacted. In my view not only is this strategy devious and unconscionable, but it will fail.

This is partly because there is already a counter-interpretation and counter-narrative of what happened at these consultations and I commend this alternative reading to you all, it is called *Cuts to Welfare Payments for School Non-Attendance: Requested or Imposed?* published by Concerned Australians.<sup>7</sup> Their analysis from a diverse set of 10 community meetings indicates that ‘there was not a single request for welfare cuts or fines to those parents with children who were not attending school’. Concern about education was given a high priority but what was sought was the re-introduction of bilingual learning, access to full-time education in homelands, support for Aboriginal teachers, acknowledging culture in the curriculum and the need to distribute funds more equitably.

There are of course other ways of thinking and talking about Indigenous education and development, but these alternatives such as the reporting from Concerned Australians and others at the coalface are closed off, suppressed and silenced. They mainly come from so called Aboriginal ‘activists’, NGOs, civil society and parts of the academy that are not subject to state capture.

So to conclude let me make a few suggestions.

First, we need to give Indigenous people voice; state policies have at once extinguished the institutional means to hear Indigenous aspirations in all their diversity except through state controlled ‘consultations’. Australia needs to learn from global structural adjustment errors not to replicate them: development approaches need to be bottom-up and participatory. There is much rhetoric about bridge building and partnership but almost all community-based political organizations that have operated effectively as mouth pieces in the past, be they community councils or homeland resource agencies or ATSIC have, or are, being demolished.

Second, we need to debunk the Indigenous socio-economic equality myth; this is not a logical development framework for remote and very remote Australia. And we need to debunk the myth that under-development is mainly the product of new institutions, like individual access to welfare, and of old institutions, like too much custom and tradition. There is a state reluctance to accept that tradition is not amenable to hegemonic externally imposed change, that many have learnt ‘the art of not being governed’ very effectively to again paraphrase James Scott.<sup>8</sup>

Third, we need to debunk the myth that the state is investing enough when clearly this is not the case. And clearly Indigenous-specific expenditure, much imposed by western laws or in the national rather than discrete Indigenous interest, is being deployed inefficiently and ineffectively.

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<sup>7</sup> Michele Harris and Rosa McKenna (2011) *Cuts to Welfare Payments for School Non-Attendance: Requested or Imposed*, ‘concerned Australians’ Melbourne, October 2011 (available at <http://www.concernedaustralians.com.au/media/Welfare-Cuts-Requested-or-Imposed.pdf>).

<sup>8</sup> James Scott (2009) *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South East Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Fourth, and more practically, there is a need to work for development plurality, to assess what is possible, what is productive, where there is comparative advantage (the theoretical foundation of capitalism) and where the market and custom mesh productively this needs to be enabled by the state, the sort of underwriting not called welfare that others in rural Australia seem to enjoy as Judith Brett has recently reminded us in her Quarterly Essay *Fair Share*.<sup>9</sup>

Australia just seems to be so bad at canvassing policy alternatives, but monolithic imposed approaches are high risk, at least for the supposed subjects of the state project of improvement.

To conclude, one would think that late capitalist uncertainty might provide some space to consider and debate alternative forms of development, giving remote Indigenous communities a say in shaping their futures. Instead they are merely consulted to ensure that policies are not interpreted as selectively targeting the Indigenous poor only rather than all the poor. This one would think is especially the case at a time when there is growing national dependence on the Indigenous estate for minerals, biodiversity, carbon farming and potential clean energy production. We need to start treating Indigenous Australians with dignity and equality, rather than as a population ripe for new 'daddy state' social experiments. The welfare safety net can be deployed to enhance development opportunity, livelihood and well-being—there are just too many risks for us as a nation in 'punishing the poor' and the different to contemplate, let alone implement, such an approach; and too many likely benefits from constructive alternatives.

As the anthropologist James Ferguson noted in the *Anti Politics Machine* in 1990 complex development problems cannot just be rendered 'technical' to be solved with technical solutions. Ferguson sounds very much like Pope John Paul II who as Frank Brennan reminds us stated in 1987 in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* '... whatever affects the dignity of individuals and peoples, such as authentic development, cannot be reduced to a 'technical' problem.'<sup>10</sup> Authentic development requires authentic not imposed solutions; at the very least we as a nation owe Indigenous Australians that.

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<sup>9</sup> Judith Brett (2011) *Fair Share: Country and City in Australia*, Quarterly Essay 42, Black Inc Books, Melbourne.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II (1987) *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (available at [http://www.catholic-pages.com/documents/sollicitudo\\_rei\\_socialis.pdf](http://www.catholic-pages.com/documents/sollicitudo_rei_socialis.pdf))