

Good policy needs good relationships: an expanded role for Indigenous public servants and regional offices in the future of Closing the Gap

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Summary:

This submission addresses a central question raised in ‘Closing the Gap: The Next Phase Public Discussion Paper’ (2018:3):

What is needed to change the relationship between government and community?

Three recommendations are made here:

- i. Indigenous public servants are a valuable but underutilised resource in improving relationships with community; government needs to better employ their capability to contribute and lead in this effort.
- ii. Regional offices can play a key role in relationship-building and developing regionally identified priorities among Australia’s diverse Indigenous communities; focus needs to be given to strengthening their existing capacities and in providing their staff with greater opportunities to input into the design and implementation of policy.
- iii. Multi-method approaches to data, evidence and indicators are required (i.e. qualitative as well as quantitative) if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural priorities and values are to be embedded in strength-based and community-led approaches to CTG.

Submission:

The 2018 Special Gathering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians established clear requirements for the continuation of *Closing the Gap* framework:

We demand from government a community led, strength based strategy [...]
The best progress over the last ten years has been in areas where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community has led the design and implementation of programs from the beginning (Special Gathering Statement 2018:2; my emphasis; see also Redfern Statement; Uluru Statement).

The *Refresh* offers an important opportunity to move towards realising these requirements, and would also restore a critical element of the original vision for *Closing the Gap* incorporating: “sufficient flexibility *not to insist on a one-size-fits-all approach*” across hundreds of diverse remote and regional Indigenous communities, by creating “*flexible, tailored, local approaches* to achieve commonly-agreed national objectives” (Rudd 2008:170; my emphasis). This vision held enormous promise for government-community relationships but was largely lost in the implementation.

This submission offers three recommendations to assist in addressing the aspirations of the Special Gathering and contribute to improving relationships between government and Indigenous communities through supporting greater responsiveness and flexibility of approach.

- **Better utilisation of the skills and capabilities of Indigenous public servants**

This submission endorses the comments of PM&C Deputy-Secretary Professor Ian Anderson in arguing development of good policy requires ‘high quality’ relationships between stakeholders and bureaucrats built on a ‘sense of trust and mutual respect’ (2017:406). He notes that increasing the number of Indigenous public servants along with their participation and leadership in policy development is vital in achieving this goal.

Research suggests a high level of motivation among Indigenous public servants to assist in improving policy (see Lahn 2018; Lahn and Ganter manuscript). However, a range of difficulties and hindrances currently operate to limit their ability to effect constructive change or raise significant insights, including largely occupying lower levels in non-leadership roles (Lahn 2018). Greater support aimed at advancing Indigenous employees and supporting the efforts of the Indigenous senior executive to maintain and build their numbers should be a major focus going forward as a direct means to incorporate relevant ‘relationship capacities’ into the operations of *Closing the Gap*.

- **Build on the capability and capacity of the PM&C Regional Network**

My research with Indigenous public servants (see Lahn 2018) suggests those working at regional offices who have established positive relationships with Indigenous communities and organisations frequently feel their local knowledge and experience is underutilised by central offices. On rare occasions where advice is sought it is perceived as largely disregarded.

At the same time, policy directions emanating from the centre can be poorly communicated, undermining local relationships that may have been built carefully over considerable time. As one regionally-based Indigenous public servant described, a lack of information ‘coming down the line’ made her office look ‘cagey... like we’re being misleading... And that’s with relationships we’ve had for 10, 15 years, that you’ve built up with organisations’ (quoted in Lahn 2018:6).

Attention needs to be given to recognising existing capabilities in regional offices and to strengthening their capacity as a means to support locally specific approaches, consultation and relationship-building. This would include measures to reshape the CTG reporting framework in a manner which places new emphasis on regional differences and diversity of priorities among Australia’s numerous and distinctive Indigenous communities.

- **Qualitative findings and community insights, not just numbers**

Established scholarly critiques of *Closing the Gap* have for some time pointed to its inflated emphasis on generalised statistical remedialism (represented by numerical targets and indicators). These can overshadow Indigenous priorities and fail to give due regard to cultural difference, especially in relation to the range of goals and terms of advancement held by Australia’s diverse Indigenous peoples.

If CTG is to adequately address Indigenous calls to incorporate a new focus on strengths and culture, there is a pressing need to move beyond wholly quantitative and statistical forms of data to multi-methods approaches that generate and incorporate qualitative, culturally relevant information and interpretation.

A new stress on community-based multi-methods research would create genuine opportunities for regional offices to build and deepen relationships with Indigenous organisations and communities as well as providing a vehicle for sharing and developing

valuable social research skills with Indigenous peoples which reflect their aspirations for community-led knowledge creation, leadership and self-determination.

References

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