

Budgeting for all Australians, Except the Indigenous Ones

While the Howard Government boasts that it governs for all Australians, it certainly does not budget for all Australians on any equitable needs or evidence bases: here is another opportunity lost. Billions are being spent in the 2007–08 Budget on areas like higher education, on tax cuts, on the elderly, but such expenditures are inherently biased against Indigenous people who are under-represented in universities, in employment and among older age cohorts.

Systemic biases are perpetuated. The Government does not get the simple message that historic backlogs and rapid population growth result in greater and greater unmet need. Neglect now will result in social damage that will get exponentially more costly to repair in the future.

The Budget included 26 initiatives totalling \$816 million over five years focusing on the Howard Government framework of ‘practical’ reconciliation in health, housing, education and employment. The \$163 million per annum extra funding committed will go nowhere in delivering ‘A Better Future for Indigenous Australians’ because the quantum is inadequate, given the enormity of historical backlogs, and that the initiatives are piecemeal and often ideologically rather than practically based.

The headline reform is in housing where \$73 million per annum extra is provided to implement the new Australian Remote Indigenous Accommodation Program. It is estimated that in the Northern Territory alone there is a housing shortfall of over \$2 billion.

This new program, which doesn’t start till 1 July 2008, has three aims: to shift Commonwealth expenditure to focus on remote Australia, where only 25 per cent of the Indigenous population lives; to abolish the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP) that has provided community housing; and to shift or force Indigenous people instead into public housing (thus cost sharing with the States) or into private housing—conditional on traditional owners leasing their lands to the state and meeting negotiated behavioural conditions.

All commentators (except Minister Brough) suggest that this last measure faces a huge affordability hurdle. Having demolished the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), Minister Brough now wants to demonise it: the Indigenous housing backlog is all ATSIC’s fault and the Government of the day since 1996 (that set the CHIP funding level) bears no accountability at all! The Minister does not understand: ATSIC did not deliver CHIP, it just funded it.

On health, the aggregates commitment is \$30 million per annum, about 7 per cent of the \$460 million that the Australian Medical Association (AMA) and Oxfam say is needed to start closing the life expectancy gap between

Indigenous and other Australians. Health can't be ATSI's fault; it is administered by Tony Abbott's department.

On education, another non-ATSI area, there is a focus again on remote regions, moving kids away to school rather than meeting massive education infrastructure shortfalls at home communities—state and policy failure looms large here. And on employment, there are 850 'real' jobs created (with state subsidy) over four years to reduce Community Development Employment Projects program participation by a minuscule 3 per cent of 30,000.

A very positive measure here is 'Working on Country' which will provide payment to Indigenous rangers to provide environmental services on the Indigenous estate: \$12 million per annum extra to manage 1.5 million square kilometres where there has been chronic underinvestment that is counter to national interest.

There is \$10 billion left in surplus, perhaps this will be committed to an Indigenous Futures Fund in the run-up to an election? That is the level of commitment that is needed unless Indigenous Australians are to continue missing out and falling further behind as Australia booms.

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