
Invisible realm

By Nicolas Rothwell
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Politicians may have all but abandoned the remote Aboriginal world, but academic Jon Altman remains committed to his vision for change, writes Nicolas Rothwell

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As insiders in the indigenous -advance-ment business know, and concerned outsiders suspect, and politicians flinch from acknow-ledging, remote Aboriginal Australian communities are caught in a downward spiral and the prospects for the foreseeable -future are bleak. Official statistics on Aboriginal social trends are artfully framed to blur the true picture but on the ground the truth is plain enough to see.

Preventable diseases are present in plague proportions, there is an epidemic of self-harm and suicide among the young, marijuana abuse is everywhere. Initiatives to improve education outcomes and boost school attendance in the bush have proved unavailing; despite vast -investment, there is a grave housing shortage; every brave new economic or social policy blueprint tried in recent years has failed.

Yet there is no longer any well-informed public debate or discussion of this continuing disaster or its long-term implications for Australia. What a contrast with the landscape just a decade ago, in the run-up to the Northern Territory Emergency Response, when fresh -exposes on social chaos and child neglect in -remote communities were broadcast almost weekly and federal ministers spoke in heated terms of a national crisis unfolding in the bush.

Then it was crisis; today it is silence, only -occasionally interrupted by momentary inconvenient cameos emerging from distant outposts, when a young girl takes her life in the Kimberley or fighting breaks out in Aurukun. Several factors underlie this change. The moral panic of the present moment has the threat of terror and refugee numbers as its focus; there is a pervasive sense of compassion fatigue; the mainstream media have largely abandoned their costly commitment to serious coverage of the remote indigenous realm, where no good news dawns and nothing seems to change. What space there is for Aboriginal issues goes on the framing of a recognition referendum, a symbolic national goal that hovers tantalisingly beyond easy reach.

Only one voice can still be heard regularly, scrutinising and explaining the fine detail of -indigenous policies, teasing out the implications of new announcements and schemes advanced by the federal government, seeking to provide some road map to the fresh initiatives and human engineering efforts of the state. That voice belongs to an unusually committed social affairs academic, Jon Altman, the founder, in 1990, of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University in Canberra.

Altman cannot be easily defined: he has a fascination for economics and a fondness for art; he is a writer of voluminous, appendix-laden -papers and a sojourner in the forest scrubs of Arnhem Land; he pores over data sets in -obscure research libraries but also has a distinct penchant for the spotlight, for outspoken opinion articles and detailed testimony before Senate committees. He is, in short, that rare thing in Australian life, a public intellectual of radical stamp. And like many academic chieftains, he has a theory to his name: the "hybrid economy" model he advocates as the best path to sustainable development for the remote indigenous communities of the savanna and the north.

Assessments of this hybrid blueprint stand at the heart of *Engaging Indigenous Economy*, a new collection of essays devoted to Altman's work. But in a strange sense the real-world test of the idea is already under way, for the hybrid schema is both the road not taken in Aboriginal affairs policy and the road secretly travelled.

The schema itself is straightforward enough. It can be simply represented as a Venn diagram of three intersecting circles: the state-funded economy, the market economy and the "customary" economy. Where these realms intersect, so Altman argues, the most productive linkages occur.

The idea grew out of his experiences while observing clan life at Mumeka in the Northern Territory, home of the celebrated Kunwinjku artist John Mawurndjul. At this remote out-station Altman was able to track the continuing importance of customary hunting and food gathering. This led him to the realisation that the traditionally accented life lived on such family settlements was not only healthier than subsistence in a large, welfare-dependent community but it could also provide the basis for a new way of conceiving a bush-based economics.

Much of Australia's most pristine environment and many of its key biodiversity areas were within Aboriginal-owned land estates and needed to be managed. Indigenous people in the bush could thus reframe their social position and develop new streams of income. They could work not just as artists and makers of artefacts but as rangers and fire managers, as custodians, public servants of a new kind, charged with -responsibility for overseeing and safeguarding their own land. Altman married this idea with his enthusiasm for the locally run Community Development Employment Projects scheme: the basis for a new way of structuring the remote economy shimmered into view.

This vision collided with the hard reality of national politics in 2007, when prime minister John Howard and indigenous affairs minister Mal Brough announced their decision to intervene in the Northern Territory. The CDEP undertakings were axed and an era of intensive controls over remote community life began.

Altman was further radicalised by these events. He came to the view that something crucial had broken in the informal compact -between Aboriginal peoples and the state. "On the back of the 'intervention'," he explains, "I felt it was no longer possible to produce -research in good faith that would be genuinely received by government at face value so as to -influence policy-making decisions." He emerged as the most persistent critic of the new paradigm. The programmatic essay he contributed to a 2009 book critiquing the inter-vention bore the uncompromising title: "What future for remote indigenous Australia? Economic hybridity and the neoliberal turn".

Viewed from today's perspective, though, with smoke still clearing from the rubble left in the wake of the initial Emergency Response, six years of Labor's Stronger

Futures policies in the bush and three years of chaotic restructurings by the Coalition government, several striking points become plain.

First, the new dispensation promised for remote communities by the intervention has yielded nothing: there has been no uptick of local private enterprise, no rush to take up home ownership opportunities, no marked increase in investments in the Aboriginal bush. Second, the various pilot reforms and programs associated with the new thinking have proved ineffectual. The costly Cape York reform project has generated no appreciable economic change in its four trial sites; statistical research finds no great behavioural change in the wake of the intervention in the Territory; and the nationwide Empowered Communities scheme now being promoted by Noel Pearson and the publicists of his Cape York Partnership is viewed by many senior bureaucrats as a complex and ill-engineered distraction from the problems of the remote world.

Third, and most intriguing, there is in fact an emerging, de facto new model already in place in several communities and outstations, both in the desert inland and the remote north. It is a ragged system, inelegant, underfunded and unco-ordinated - and that model is a vague, distorted cousin of Altman's initial blueprint for a hybrid economy. There is a system of community-based work, mostly ill run by distant job service network providers; there is a fair amount of indigenous "customary" hunting and foodstuff gathering to supplement the high-cost supplies available in the stores; there are art centres in place that pay locals to create emblems of their traditional culture; there are publicly funded activities and extensive ranger programs; there are training and municipal employment schemes aplenty: indeed there is a vast archipelago of overlapping interventions and social remediation projects under way, though these often have the air of being deployed more for the benefit of their employees than for the Aboriginal men, women and children they are notionally designed to assist.

This does not mean the hybrid economy model has been put into practice in any conventional sense of the word or that it should serve as the natural blueprint for community development, Aboriginal advancement or sustainable management of the remote environment - merely that something like it has emerged as a stopgap and filled a vacuum. A strange state of affairs, given the ferocity of Altman's critics. Several of them are in full voice in the essay-chapters of *Engaging Indigenous Economy*, itemising and assailing the flaws and limitations in the hybrid schema, both as description and prescription. The approach has an element of utopianism, it is a model that can apply only in the remote bush, its dream of securing rent-like land income may lead to increased dependency.

The charge-list is long, the scornful questions sharp. Do indigenous marine rangers know their seas and coastline? Is traditional knowledge any real use in managing a savanna forest? Are the conservation projects in operation today much more than white fantasies employing token Aboriginal frontmen? The best known and most lavishly funded of the hybrid economy eco-projects is the much-praised carbon abatement scheme in place in west Arnhem Land, a particular favourite of former environment minister Peter Garrett. Here is the sceptical case against it, summed up in one brutal sentence: "Is the trope of customary knowledge meaningful or informative in describing the early dry season drops of incendiary devices from helicopters to create firebreaks on pastoral properties in return for carbon emission reduction funds?" The bar indigenous environmental engagement ventures must

surmount is, then, twofold for such sceptics: the scientific and economic worth of the projects must be proven and their indigenous content as well.

Altman's response to his various critics is tactful and tentative. He makes little use of the key argument that managing the remote reaches of the Australian continent requires a modest degree of occupation and human presence, and the only population now available to fulfil this role is the indigenous population -already in place. It is clear that his engaged perspective and his personal commitment to - Aboriginal remote communities stem not merely from an intellectual or political analysis but from a primordial, emotional loyalty.

As he relates in his brief "self-reflection" in this book, his fieldwork began in mid-1979, in memorable fashion. He drove from Canberra to Mumeka outstation in a well-equipped, -capacious trayback four-wheel-drive, which he immediately succeeded in bogging in the Mann River, close by his destination. Mumeka was deserted - all its residents were at an impor-tant ceremony elsewhere in the plateau country of Arnhem Land.

A few months later, though, the indigenous domain had begun to work its magic, and his apprenticeship was well under way. He learned about the links between his Kuninjku hosts and their environment by living with them and -"engaging in their very human economy", by sharing their world and seeking to understand its precepts. "I have never abandoned Mumeka and have been back there over 50 times," he writes. "I try to repay people there for my training and their hospitality by advocating for them and their very different way of living." This is the perspective of the modern anthropologist; it also has something in common with the methodology of certain imaginative writers and artists. It is a perspective that seeks to know, rather than to reshape, the world it studies. It is the opposite of normative - it seeks means of building constructive co-existence between worlds. Hence Altman's eventful life in the arena of public policy debate. In times when the ruling paradigm has become one of surveillance and constraint, the apostle of multiplicity walks a troubled path. In the years since the intervention, much has changed. He describes the shift in dark terms: Policy and its production has become more deeply confused and riddled with contradiction, relying less and less on evidence and increasingly on anecdote and ideology - a political consequence of history and culture wars.

Independent-minded experts are no longer of value in such an environment: "There has also been a rapid increase in the number of -research organisations and consulting firms willing and able to undertake research work to government-dictated agendas, as policy development has been commoditised, and, in the name of competitive tendering, governments pick and choose." This new governmental world has several striking features, and there has also been a crucial change in the institutional architecture - for it has been possible to impose broadbrush coercive policies with such bold abandon only since the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission's demise and the silencing of representative indigenous voices from the bush.

In the wake of the intervention, backed as it is by both major political parties and by prominent Aboriginal opinion-makers, there is scarcely any scope for reasoned debate or argument about the design and implementation of policies for the communities of the bush: the enthusiasm for Aboriginal art, dance, film and music serves as a strange counterpoint to the pervasive ignorance and neglect of conditions on the ground in the surviving heartland of the indigenous world.

Meanwhile, systematic governmental failure has bred official subterfuge. The pattern of deception and misinformation about the state of remote Aboriginal communities and the impact of official policies has now reached an Orwellian extreme: day is night and night is day. One would have to look back more than a decade to find the last halfway accurate media release issued by a minister for indigenous affairs.

In such a sombre landscape, are there any grounds for hope? Altman likes to highlight the messy, haphazard nature of the modern frontier, where the points of contact and engagement between the mainstream and indigenous realms are so various and fast-changing that simple plans and blueprints inevitably fail. "It is important," he says, "that the complexity and diversity often evident in such situations should be properly complicated rather than -absurdly simplified into false binaries, like modern or primitive, metropolitan or remote, white or black, market or customary, individual or group." Above all else, it is important that Altman's ideal for the engaged scholar endures and there is still room for "the power of critical and independent academic research to persuade"

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