

INDIGENOUS ISSUES Jane Robbins

Introduction

It is widely recognized that the dimensions of Indigenous disadvantage are profound right across the range of socio-economic indicators. The situation of the South Australian Indigenous population is no exception to this picture. Under the auspices of the Council of Australian Government (COAG) a national reporting process has been put in place to monitor progress towards improved outcomes and to underpin better policy development. A key plank of this process is a biennial report by the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) which establishes key indicators for this purpose. The SCRGSP indicators have been utilised by the SA government to develop targets for the improvement of Aboriginal wellbeing in SA and these appear in the SA Strategic Plan (SCRGSP 2005, A2.12). Both national and State processes are intended to provide an information base that will form the basis of more effective policy and service delivery.

The SCRGSP released the second Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators in 2005 and a progress report on the SA Strategic Plan was completed in June 2006 (SASPAC 2006). Both these publications indicate that although there has been improvement in a few key indicators of Indigenous disadvantage in SA, overall progress towards increased wellbeing has been limited. This is a matter for concern.

Update of Key trends

The SA Strategic Plan establishes two specific targets for improving Aboriginal wellbeing:

T6.1 Reduce the gap between the outcomes for South Australia's Aboriginal population and those of the rest of South Australia's population, particularly in relation to health, life expectancy, employment, school retention rates and imprisonment.

T6.2 Increase the percentage of the Aboriginal population in the South Australian public sector from 1.2% within 5 years (Government of SA 2004, 8).

The Progress Report on the SA Strategic Plan released in June 2006 indicates that while limited improvement can be detected in some areas, overall progress is 'lagging' (SASPAC 2006, 77). A matter of particular concern is Aboriginal life expectancy, which according to the Audit Committee, has worsened overall in relation to the non-Aboriginal population. The median age at death declined for Aboriginal women from 55 years in 2002 to 53.5 years in 2004. The same indicator for Aboriginal men and the non-Indigenous population improved in the same period (see Table 1), but overall the gap between the two populations is seen as widening (SASPAC 2006, 79).

Table 1: Median Age at death SA Aboriginal & Non-Aboriginal by gender

	Non-Indigenous male	Indigenous male	Non-Indigenous female	Indigenous female
2002	77.3 years	48.9 years	82.8 years	55 years
2004	77.6 years	49.5 years	83.3 years	53.5 years

Source: SASPAC 2006, 79.

Indigenous school retention rates show a modest improvement from 2003 to 2005, increasing from 25.5% to 31.3%.

However, this is still considerably below the 2005 level for non-Indigenous students at 62.8%.

Table 2: Apparent retention rates Year 8 to Year 12 fulltime students in SA Government Schools

	Indigenous students	Non-Indigenous students
2003	25.5%	57.8%
2005	31.3%	62.8%

Source: SASPAC 2006, 79.

Further good news in this area is that the number of Indigenous students completing the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) has increased from 61 in 2003 to 92 in 2004. The improvement is attributed to a greater focus on Indigenous culture in the SACE curriculum (SCRGSP 2005, 3.15).

Indigenous imprisonment rates have been a matter of concern for many years in every Australian jurisdiction. Disproportionate Indigenous imprisonment rates may be skewed by the younger average age profile of the Indigenous population compared to the non-Indigenous population (SCRGSP 2006, 73). In SA the rate of Indigenous imprisonment per 100,000 has increased from 1,638 in 2003 to 1,681 in 2005. In the same period the overall rate for the SA population marginally decreased to 123.2 (SASPAC 2006, 80).

A final indicator reported in the SA Strategic plan is the number of Indigenous people employed in the SA public sector. The target is to achieve 2% by the year 2008. In the reporting period Indigenous employment increased from 0.9% in 2003 to 1.14% in 2005 (SASPAC 2006, 81). The Audit Committee's Progress Report concludes that the target is unlikely to be met in the timeframe, although this may be pessimistic if recruitment strategies are in progress.

Although mixed, these statistics do not give strong hope of a rapid turn around in the circumstances of the SA Indigenous population. The Audit Committee's Progress Report recommends that the SA Strategic Plan should be changed to include additional specific targets for the improvement of Aboriginal wellbeing and that future data should be disaggregated to show Indigenous outcomes across a wider range of indicators than are currently reported (SASPAC 2006, 4; 100).

Key Policy Issues

Political and administrative developments

Indigenous Affairs policy has been affected by some momentous changes to political and administrative arrangements in recent times. The national Coalition government concluded the dismantling of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2005 with the closure of the elected Regional Councils. National Indigenous programs are now administered through a range of departments and agencies on the basis of functional expertise. This presents a number of challenges in the delivery of appropriate and effective programs for Indigenous communities. One is co-ordination – without ATSIC's

involvement and oversight there may be the danger of different agendas developing amongst a range of service providers. The second challenge is enabling Indigenous participation in policy formulation, especially in setting appropriate objectives. ATSIC's elected arm provided a forum that could be utilized by both State and Commonwealth agencies as a source of advice on Indigenous priorities. With its demise it is much harder for Indigenous communities to have an input into policy development.

At national level the Coalition government has put in place Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs) to bring together the various Commonwealth agencies now involved in the delivery of Indigenous programs. Working under the direction of the Office for Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) in the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, ICCs are responsible for communicating with local communities and negotiating 'regional and local agreements for effective partnerships and shared responsibilities' (OIPC 2005, 5).

Under the auspices of COAG, a 'whole of government' approach has been adopted on Indigenous policy, and has resulted in an emphasis on joint action between Commonwealth, State and local governments. In June 2004 COAG endorsed a National Framework of Principles for Government Service Delivery to Indigenous Australians which included an agreed set of principles (COAG 2004):

- *Sharing responsibility*
- *Harnessing the mainstream*
- *Streamlining service delivery*
- *Establishing transparency and accountability*
- *Developing a learning framework*
- *Focusing on priority areas.*

The South Australian government negotiated a Bilateral Agreement with the Commonwealth government in November 2005 in which agreed priority areas are identified in relation to Indigenous programs. The Overarching Agreement on Indigenous Affairs also establishes a framework for shared responsibility agreements to be negotiated at local and regional level. A new 'high level' intergovernmental group has been created to oversee the joint approach that includes representatives from both the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the SA Department of the Premier and Cabinet. The COAG 'trial' site on the SA Anangu Pitjantjatjara

Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands has been brought into this arrangement.

The SA government has also made some significant changes to its administrative structures in the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio. In May 2006 Minister Jay Weatherill announced a major reorganization in which the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation was reconstituted as a unit within the Department of Premier and Cabinet. The former CEO of the Department, Peter Buckskin, resigned shortly after, which prompted criticism of the government by some Indigenous leaders. Professor Lowitja O'Donoghue expressed her concern that a senior Aboriginal person no longer led Aboriginal Affairs, describing the move as 'symbolic of the broader silencing of Aboriginal voices in Australian politics' (Sunday Mail 2 July 2006, 25).

APY Lands

The SA government's attempts to find solutions to the problems on the APY lands have not progressed smoothly. Lowitja O'Donoghue and Tim Costello (of World Vision) were asked in 2004 to advise the Premier on appropriate policy directions. They reported in March 2005, identifying a number of strategic objectives including the need for an effective governance model to be put in place (Costello & O'Donoghue 2005). The relationship between Professor O'Donoghue and the government soon deteriorated and she quit, accusing the Rann Government of 'quick fixes' designed to 'neutralise potential criticism', rather than a genuine commitment to constructive reform (The Advertiser, 16th July 2005).

Further controversy arose in September 2005, as the government debated changes to the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act, the legislation that defines the arrangements for ownership and governance of the APY Lands. The amendments changed the Act to give the government the power to remove a 'dysfunctional executive board, to direct the board to hold meetings, and remov[ed] a government requirement to consult with traditional owners on management changes' (The Australian, 21 September 2005). Despite protests from some Anangu groups about a lack of appropriate consultation these amendments were passed.

Policy Directions

The SA government has embraced the 'mainstreaming' and 'whole of government' philosophy adopted by the federal Coalition government and has restructured its administrative arrangements to reflect this principle. It remains to be seen whether this approach will be effective in addressing the serious levels of disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people in the state.

While the identification of key targets for the improvement of Indigenous wellbeing expressed in the SA Strategic plan is a welcome development, initial progress towards these targets has not been impressive. The indications are that far greater resources are required and a more detailed strategy is necessary to address such systemic socio-economic disadvantage. It is difficult not to conclude that this is a policy area that deserves to be given a much higher priority by government as a matter of social justice.

References

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