5 Locality
Locality

This chapter will concentrate upon non-Indigenous country people; but it needs to be remembered that in vast areas of remote Australia Aboriginal people constitute more than half the population.

The image of the tanned, weather beaten grazier clad in dusty moleskins, a two pocket shirt, R.M. Williams riding boots, and wearing a battered Akubra whist rolling his own as he leans against the farm fence is a stereotypical image of Aussie manhood. The bulk of the Australian population lives in urban conglomerates strung out along the coast and for many the closest they get to the country is when they pass through farm land on a day trip to a national park in their air conditioned four wheel drive.

The growing influence of women in senior management in many aspects of agribusiness simultaneously undermines this 'blokey' image of bush life and Henry Lawson's (1974) caricature of the Drover's Wife.

Those who live in the centre of the continent have their own laconic stories about city slickers arriving the station homestead exclaiming 'Geez, you live in a remote region'. To which the rejoinder by the squatter is 'No this is local it's just that the city is so far away'. In rural and remote Australia - apart from the lack of or excess of rain, the bastardry of the banks, poor commodity prices, the uncaring nature of government, and the absence of necessary services - country people tell stories of people who are living in even more remote regions and of how tough those people are finding it. For most of the last two centuries politicians made their reputations taking such stories to the cities and returning occasionally with some concessions (a new bridge, a health centre, or a school) for those who live in the far flung parts of the continent.

In the last half of the 20th. century, conservative Liberal and National Party politicians have held sway in the bush. But this was not always the case. The infamous Queensland gerrymander which favoured country electorates over city ones was begun not by Bjelke Petersen in the 1960s but by Labor in the 1920s when they held the majority of country seats.

There have been times during the last century when people living in the bush were making a decent living from the land they farmed and grazed. During the last two decades of the 19th century and the 1930s depression life in the bush for most farmers was hard. Some families made their fortunes in the bush and some own such vast areas of land that their holdings are larger than some countries. For most of the period since the end of the second world war the majority of non-Indigenous people living in the bush have made enough to get by on or lived on what they could get. Recently the pace of change in rural Australia has quickened and this is having a considerable political impact.

The number of jobs available in rural Australia has been decreasing steadily for at least the last three decades largely in response to agribusiness taking over small farms. The Queensland Department of Primary Industries (2000 p. 3) announced a significant increase in primary industry jobs during the previous five years. Jyothi Gali, a senior research Officer with the Department advised this increase was a result of increased investment in aquaculture and
intensive horticulture, particularly tropical fruits. Since the 1950s for most of the young people who got to high school in rural and regional Australia there has been a consistent pattern of migration to the cities when they finish school.

The substantial increase in agribusiness (Lawrence 1987, Boland 2000 [a] 24th May p.13), improvements in farm equipment meaning less labour is required, improved vehicles and roads making access to larger centres possible, competition policy, bank closures, hospital closures, low commodity prices, deregulation of rural industries, amalgamation, takeovers or closures of rural processing plants, lowered farm subsidies and other impacts of the globalised market economy have contributed to population decline and have adversely affected non-city Australia.

These changes have been observable for a long time (Lawrence 1987) but the bush was seen as expendable. The Federal Labor Party, when in office, considered country voters where unlikely to vote for them and the Coalition considered that country voters had no alternative but to vote for them. The Labor Party, when in office, made a similar error in relation to low paid workers and the unemployed.

None of the parties counted on the working class turning against Federal Labor in 1996, the rise of the One Nation Party, the regional and outer suburban backlash to Kennett in Victoria, the attractiveness of Brack Labor and none anticipated the unpopularity of the Howard Government in the bush. Acknowledging the Coalition had a problem in the bush, Prime Minister Howard claimed 'a red light will go on in ministers offices when the bush is adversely affected' and was regularly seen wearing an Akubra hat.

The Howard Government realised it had a problem but not the depth of the problem. The reality is that when country people talk about the pressing problems experienced by those living in remote parts of Australia they are usually not discussing the lives of others but their own lives as they struggle to cope with the pressures of globalised free trade which finds expression in the bush as competition policy, low commodity prices and decreasing services.

The ideologies which informed the Howard Government's economic liberal and social conservatism policies worked for and against it as it tried to cope with the backlash from the bush. But it is the essential nature of urbanism which will undermine its efforts to restore the Coalition's brand name in the country.

**Urbanism**

The concept of urbanism derives out of the development / underdevelopment, North / South debate articulated by Andre Gunder Frank (1969, 1971, *contra* Packenham 1992, Ch. 5). The essence of Frank's original thesis is that;

underdevelopment was not an original stage, but rather a created condition; …he pointed to the British deindustrialization of India, the destructive effects of the slave trade on African societies and the destruction of the Indian civilisations in Central and South America (Hettne 1995, p. 63).

The underdevelopment debate grew out of the colonial / anti-colonial analysis of the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Frank (1994) has reworked some of his earlier "Eurocentric" approaches to
development and consequent underdevelopment and now believes countries and areas subjected
to development have a greater capacity to affect the course of their history. This modification of
his position does not alter the basic proposition about the power of urban conglomerates to create
underdevelopment in the surrounding countryside but perhaps goes some way towards
explaining why some country areas cope, with cities attempting to under-compensate their
regions for resources which are extracted, better than other regions. Frank (1994) contends that a
region's capacity to influence outcomes is constrained by the increased power of giant
corporations in a era of increased globalisation (Leys 1996, Chs. 1 & 2).

Third world writers (Fanon 1967, Cabral 1973) have pointed to the exploitative nature of cities
and the role that cities have played in the colonial process of denuding the adjacent countryside
of resources which were then either processed in the cities or simply exported through them to
the colonial country. Hugh Stretton (1978) became fascinated by the attempt in Cuba, during the
1960s, to balance development in both cities and in the areas from which raw materials were
traditionally sourced. The catch cry became " urbanize the countryside and ruralize the cities"
(Stretton 1978, p 126). Pol Pot, in Kampuchea, will undoubtably be seen as the promoter of the
ultimate anti-city ideology.

The city versus country debate in Australia often ignores the need to ensure that cities do not
monopolise all the valuable resources from the surrounding countryside and leave the non-urban
areas with a low standard of living. In Australia urban centres, particularly capital cities, suck
resources and people from the surrounding countryside and are the places where the best
products and greatest range of services are provided with the greatest frequency. As a
consequence the bush is more likely to be without services. When services are available they are
often infrequent and supplied by less qualified staff.

Discrimination on the basis of locality has not been afforded the attention it deserves. One
possible reason for that is that unlike gender, age or race, place of residence can be changed
simply by leaving a particular locality. In mobile societies such as Australia for most people any
discrimination they encounter as a result of living in a particular locality is of a short term nature.
But there are groups of people who spend their whole lives in areas where comparatively few
social services are provided. Anyone living outside a narrow band of land bordering the Pacific
Ocean adjacent to the major cities, or near Adelaide or Perth, receives fewer services than people
living inside that band. The further one resides from major urban centres, the greater the decrease
in services.

Even when government policies are meant to cover an entire population they often act against
the interests of rural people. The Federal Government in the 1998 Budget introduced a $1.7
billion fund to pay a third of the private health insurance costs of citizens. This subsidy halted the
fall in the percentage of people who have private health insurance. The majority of privately
insured are on incomes in the top one third of the population (Leeder 1999, Mc Aulay 1993). In
The Australian's 5th May 2000 lead story John Kerrin wrote "People with health insurance
represent 32 per cent of the population, concentrated in a number of city seats, particularly in
Sydney and Melbourne, which the Government needs to hold to retain office." Had these funds
gone to improve the public health system, people in the bush might have seen waiting lists at
their nearest hospital substantially reduced.
The concentration of goods and services in the major population centres, to the exclusion of services to rural areas, is a major cause of the unequal treatment of poor people in Australia. It affects both white and Aboriginal people in Australia, but because Aborigines suffer more poverty more frequently, have poor employment prospects and because of their low literacy levels, they are particularly disadvantaged by living in remote areas (Drakakis-Smith 1991, p.222-227).

*Australia's Health* (AIHW 1998) demonstrates that locality discrimination occurs within and around cities in much the same way that country people are discriminated against. The neglected parts of the city and outer suburbia are the habitat of what in current political parlance has been termed 'the little Aussie battler'. The main features of such regions are poorer housing, fewer employment prospects, inadequate public transport and insufficient health and welfare services (Stilwell 1993[a] Ch. 6 & p.251, 1999, Dollery & Soul 2000)

The discrimination flowing from urbanisation is most oppressive when regional and remote locations are denied access to basic services. Clearly leading medical specialists and cutting edge teaching hospitals are going to be located in areas of high population and people who need access to such highly specialised services are going to have to travel to cities for treatment. This does not excuse the absence of basic health facilities in areas of Australia where health needs or population strength demand it.

The discriminatory effect of urbanisation is not always intentional, sometimes news of innovations in services or products has not reached the bush and demand has not developed.

It is not possible to take seriously the suggestion that the needs of isolated people in rural areas can have totally escaped the attention of the Department of Social Security. Yet it was not until the late 1960s that the Department began to address the problems experienced by people in remote areas and, since then inadequate time, energy and money has been committed to this problem. Much of the publicly available information about benefits sits on display racks in Centrelink offices in major towns is in a written form. This creates added difficulties in rural areas where illiteracy rates are much higher than in cities where social welfare advocacy services exist. The Department has experimented with audio and audio-visual cassettes in a number of languages. In recent years the expansion of call centres has resulted in increased access to information about services. But call centres staffed by people who have only the most basic knowledge of programs and who are unlikely to understand the issues faced by people living in remote locations amount at best to a limited service.

In the late 1970s, the Department of Social Security began to address some of the issues raised by the urbanist nature of its administration by:
- the employment of Aboriginal liaison officers in isolated Aboriginal communities,
- the decentralisation of offices from the cities to major country towns, and
- the use of agents in small country towns to assist rural people to make claims.

There has been some degree of bipartisan political recognition of the neglect of people in rural and remote areas. In 1976 the Fraser Government introduced special Unemployment Benefit conditions for farmers experiencing financial difficulties. And in 1983, partly because of the
recognition of the extra costs of living incurred in remote areas and partly because people in remote areas were seen to receive less value from fringe benefit schemes, the Hawke Labor Government paid an additional Zone Allowance on many benefits and pensions to people living in isolated areas. The areas covered by this provision were based on the Taxation Zonal system which had long recognised that extra costs of living were incurred by employed residents of such areas. Recent Federal budgets have attempted to assist farm owners experiencing income shortages by easing asset test eligibility requirements on a range of social welfare payments.

**Rural people and welfare programs**

Rural people are at a particular disadvantage when serviced by specialised programs. The more specialised the program the less likelihood there is that there will be an office in their region which deals with that program. Even if there is a regional office responsible for administering the program, it will be staffed by a small number of personnel who will also have responsibility for many other specialised programs. The staff will, as a consequence, be poorly informed concerning the detail of any particular benefit compared with officers in a capital city who might deal only with that specialised benefit.

The sheer complexity and diversity of welfare programs which make up the Australian welfare system is of such an order that very few welfare operatives would be able to list more than half the governmental programs operating in their city, let alone to detail all the various eligibility requirements. When specialised programs are offered to the public it is the articulate middle class who are most likely to benefit from them. The poor lack confidence to seek and enforce their rights even when they are literate and reasonably sophisticated in their dealings with welfare bureaucracies. Because of their high rates of illiteracy, Aboriginal people living in isolated areas, are even less likely to know about specialised welfare programs than are rural white Australians.

**The nature of land 'ownership' in the bush**

Farmers, squatters, and their families are defined as part of the owning classes, many may not own much and many of those who own anything own it jointly with the bank. Those who work for the owners of properties derive their income from their relationship with the proprietor of the owned land. Much of what happens in rural and remote Australia centres around property ownership. The existence of the economic downturn in rural Australia was noted earlier. Many non-Indigenous people in rural Australia are seeing the returns arising from their relationship with owning land diminishing.

The more remote the property from centres of 'civilisation' the greater the prospect that the dispossession of the Indigenous inhabitants occurred recently. It is probable that the present 'owners' of the land will be conscious of the dispossession. Just as in earlier frontier society, there is the likelihood of increased intensity of debate about the dispossession (Reynolds1998). Also, as in the earlier period of colonisation, there will be a small number of the non-Indigenous population who will be sympathetic to the Indigenous claim to land and a large number of people who will defend the dispossession ardently (James 1989, Reynolds 1999). It is in such parts of the country that the thesis is most firmly held that 'black fellas did nothing with the land so until
the arrival of white fellas the land was useless. Now that whitefellas have done all the
development (read improvements) the blackfellas want it back.' This type of statement is usually
followed by the suggestion that 'even if you gave the land back to them blackfellas would be too
primitive, lazy, stupid, uneducated, or drunk to do anything with it.' Despite the fervour with
which such views are held, examples abound to disprove this thesis.

The Northern Territory the Land Right's Act has been in place since 1976 and extensive areas of
land have returned to Aboriginal control. This has resulted in the creation of many economically
viable Indigenous enterprises - particularly in the tourist and cattle industries (Crough 1993). The
Mabo, Wik, and Miriawung Gajerrong court decisions and the various versions of the Federal
Native Title Act are widely discussed in rural Australia. Unfortunately much of the debate is ill
informed. The bulk of the non-Indigenous population of remote regions has been placed in the
situation where the exclusive rights to land, they believed they had, have been found, by the
High Court, not to exist. Simultaneously, the courts have determined many of the rights to land
which pastoralists denied Aborigines have been found to exist and to be enforceable by
Indigenous people.

The sense of shock experienced by many non-Indigenous people living in rural and outback
Australia was palpable. The very people whose fortunes more than any other Australians
depends on the vagaries of the weather, expressed their outrage at the change in legal
understanding of their property rights by demanding that the Government provide them with
'certainty'. (This was code for the removal of the property rights of Indigenous Australians.) The
up roar which followed in the wake of the Mabo and Wik judgements seemed to city people to
be out of all proportion; given that what the High Court found was that Native Title rights were
subordinate to the rights of those who held leasehold or freehold title.

For many non-Indigenous people living in regional and remote Australia their continuing
livelihood is threatened by global free trade outcomes which they feel powerless to effect.
Simultaneously one group of people they have been in the habit of treating dismissively are
gradually making some headway, this leads in turn to increased hostility towards Aborigines.

It is a small step for conservative politicians speaking about the sanctity of property rights (as
understood by settlers since the earliest days) to be speaking against others' property rights
(Indigenous people's property rights) which the highest court in the land has found to exist under
British common law. It is very easy to stir up racial hatred in such situations.

Following the Wik decision, Prime Minister Howard's appearance on national television holding
up a map of Australia (prepared by the pastoral lobby) which purported to show 78 % of the
total land mass was open to claim by Indigenous Australians when the Courts had clearly ruled
that this was not the case was extremely provocative (Gordon 22-23rd November 1997 p.23).

**The ideologies of the Howard Government**

The ideologies of the Government which it believed would assist it being re-elected were those
of conservatism, particularly social conservatism, and racism. The political problems most
frequently identified in the bush are competition policy, service inadequacies, and government
intervention. Competition policy can be portrayed as anything from workers on the shire road gang getting sacked because a private city based provider won the contract, to low commodity prices or processing plant amalgamation. Service inadequacy is played out in Telstra ownership debates or bank and hospital closures. Government intervention, since the Port Arthur shootings, means restricting gun ownership. Government intervention is not something country people associate with disaster relief or farm subsidies.

Formal education levels in rural and remote areas are considerably lower than their city counterparts and this has a conservatising effect upon social attitudes in rural areas. Conservative values are reinforced in the bush because country people are not exposed to the day to day interpersonal contacts frequent in cosmopolitan cities (Antonios 1999). Henry Lawson (1970) in his poem Peter Anderson and Co summed it up this way:

And he drifted to a township where the city failures go,…
In a town of wrecks and failures they appreciated him-
Men who might have been, who had been, but who were not in the swim.

The other conservatising feature of life in country towns is the fact that everyone knows everyone else's business or it is thought that they do. This makes it harder for people living in the bush to take independent stands on social issues. Such uniformity of opinion is reinforced by the mystification of mateship.

Historically rural dwellers were forced by sheer necessity to engage in forms of mutual helping. This necessity arose out of the neglect of country people by authorities in the cities. There has been within Australian welfare circles a very convenient belief that somehow people in rural areas join together and ensure that disadvantaged people are assisted by their neighbours to see to their own immediate welfare crises. This myth is part of the more general myth of Australian mateship, which some city people contend still exists in the bush. Studies by the Poverty Inquiry showed that whatever assistance the more affluent in rural areas are capable of organising, there are many people experiencing poverty who are excluded from local helping arrangements (Nalson, et al, 1974, Musgrave, et al, 1975, Vincent 1975).

The assistance which was provided was a very selective form of communal help - long after indigenes had their land stolen they were excluded from such co-operative efforts. City people may idealise the support systems in the bush perhaps because those helping arrangements which do exist are a far cry from socialism - they amount to a rural version of liberal self-help (Lawrence 1987).

There are very real socio-economic pressures impinging on the bush. Rural people daily confront a lack of services and facilities. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Inquiry into people in regional and remote areas revealed they often feel alone, isolated from peers and other community members and are very conscious of the lack of service provision available to them (Sidoti 1999).

Because the mateship which exists in country Australia takes the form of limited mutual self-help rather than solidarity, mateship can't address many of the interpersonal issues which affect country communities. The increasing suicide levels in non-urban Australia, particularly those of young men, have alarmed people living in the bush. Such deaths surprised city people who had a
stereotyped image of rural living as a place where the pace was less hectic, where stress was lower and where mateship cured all. This nostalgic look at the country forgot to include the fact that bushmen are firstly men - that mateship in rural Australia implies maleness. The second thing which city people failed to take into account in this regard is that Australian men, particularly those who live in the country have a tendency to be taciturn when it come to discussing feelings. The reality is that the bush has not escaped the impact of economic rationalism, globalisation, and industry restructuring, all of which have increased feelings of uncertainty and brought in their wake increased unemployment. Coupled with this is the absence of counselling services and structured opportunities to discuss such turmoil. Given that, it should come as no surprise that the lack of employment opportunities in local regions is a major factor in rural suicide of young people (The National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy 1997-2000, Sidoti 1999, p.4, Hall & Tomlinson 1999). Mutual self-help, as opposed to solidarity, is not of much assistance when the farm is increasingly becoming part of a world market place which is committed to advancing competition and survival of the fittest.

**Greenies, blacks and other irritants**

There are increasing economic pressures emerging in the bush as a result of global free trade. Many farmers and pastoralists are trying to counter such economic pressures by increased production either by adopting more intensive farming practices or expanding the number of hectares in production; either of which can draw the ire of conservationists. Though some country people are ardent conservationists the bulk of support for the major conservation groups is derived from people who live in cities. In the cities a resident can be fined $5,000 for clearing one tree without City Council permission. Urban conservatives were outraged when it was revealed that Queensland farmers cleared 400,000 hectares of bush in 1999. The failure in late 1999 of the Commonwealth Government to reach agreement with the Queensland Government about ways to compensate farmers for preventing further clearing had the effect of ensuring wholesale clearing continues.

Conservationists have an interest in the bush which is far wider than maintaining any particular farmer's operating account in surplus. Their estimate of the worth of Australian plant and animal species is often at variance with that of the majority of farmers. Conservationists have a longer term outlook, that is, they can see beyond this year's harvest. They are interested in preventing salination, deforestation, species disappearance and research into the connection between them. This is why they are pilloried in many parts of the bush and presented as anti-productivity and anti-wealth. They are seen as interferers in the lives of rural people.

The issues which the major conservation groups are addressing might be as general as cutting greenhouse pollution or koala protection but as soon as any protective measure is sought it has an immediate impact on a farming / pastoral family or company. The destruction of the last 50 hectares of mahogany glider habitat in a sugar cane growing district might be prevented by a conservation order which seems unfair to the farmer who has seen his neighbours encroaching on the mahogany glider's habitat for decades. Maintaining 10 per cent of brigalow country could be seen as stupid 'when it only becomes valuable, as pasture, once the trees are knocked down and it's pretty boring country anyway.' The ploughing of 5,000 hectares of the endangered plains
wanderer's range for rice cultivation by one of Australia's largest farming companies would have been resisted by conservationists had they had prior warning.

Most farmers work very hard for little return. The real issue is not conservation but maintaining a secure income. Farmers are unable to influence the controllers of the world's market places to pay a decent return for product. They are unable to convince their government to ensure farmers have an adequate income. But they are able to hurl abuse at conservationists. The time might come when farmers see conservationists as people with ideas for increasing future farm viability. But for this to happen some of the intensity of the struggle just to survive has to be removed, for instance by providing a Basic Income. When Graham Richardson visited the Atherton Tableland to inform timber workers of the end of old growth logging in their rain forest he needed police protection to prevent his being set upon by an angry crowd. Richardson had come to announce substantial Government financial restructuring assistance for the timber getters and millers. Within a few years the returns from increased tourism outweighed the financial loss from timber production.

Farmers unable to confront the controllers of global free trade as well as the Australian politicians who oversee the implementation of the free trade agenda in this country turn their aggression towards those close at hand over whom they have power.

Psychoanalysts might explain such phenomena as a form of displacement where the object/person who causes the aggression is too remote, unattainable, powerful or threatening and so the person who is upset by their boss comes home and kicks the cat or gets grumpy with the children. But there is a different order of objectification at play between the non-Indigenous and Indigenous country dwellers. It requires an intense level of reification to convert people with whom one went to school into land rights claimants, black bastards, etc. The mechanisms inherent in maintaining this closed circle of violence was explained by Fanon (1967, pp. 246-250).

Feminists have done some interesting work on the way those who inflict aggression / violence on others tend to hate the victim rather than feel sorrow for the aggrieved party or guilt about their violent behaviour (Laing 1999, Shaw, Bouris & Pye.1999, pp.242-253, Brekenridge 1999).

**Winners and losers in the bush**

In April 2000 Prime Minister Howard visited the holocaust museum where he wrote his apology as to the Jewish people for the holocaust. This stands in stark contrast to his consistent refusal to apologise to Indigenous Australians for the stolen generations, reluctantly agreeing instead to an expression of 'deep and sincere regret'.

Howard’s constant refusal to apologise to Indigenous Australians despite calls from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and a multitude of progressive community groups may or may not be because he personally believes that the present generation of Australians should not be forced to apologise for the wrongs of earlier generations. But it is

The failure of the citizens of this country to accept the great wrongs perpetuated against the Indigenous peoples from the invasion to recent dispossessions structures race relations in this nation. Other ethnic minorities encounter flow on effects when they move to rural areas (Antonios 1999). Past injustices inexorably lead to current inequalities. Even where there is some recognition that the breaking of Indigenous communities relationship with their traditional land creates religious and cultural difficulties there is a refusal to see the economic consequences for Indigenous people which flow from the seizure of their economic and spiritual base.

There is even less acknowledgment that the disparity of wealth between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations is a direct result of the fact that non-Indigenous people have a virtual monopoly on land, animals, plant products and minerals- in brief - the economy. The view is widespread in country Australia that 'western civilisation', capitalist production, and economic 'development' is the only form of economy. There is almost no recognition in the bush that the modern Australian economy was built upon the destruction of the Indigenous economy.

**Affirmative action**

The intention of affirmative action programs is to reverse the impact of hegemonic discrimination. No one who has seriously considered the socio-economic, health and educational statistics of Indigenous Australians could doubt that when compared with the non-Indigenous population Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as a group are financially worse off, have less schooling and experience greater morbidity and mortality rates than Australians generally (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Health Clearing House web site, ABS Cat. No 4704.0, 1999, ABS & AIHW 1999).

But there are some whites, mostly in the rural and remote regions, who experience similar educational, health and economic difficulties as do Indigenous people. Groups like Katherine's Rights for Whites in the 1970s and the One Nation Party in the late 1990s locate such individuals and use them to push for the ending of affirmative action programs for Indigenous people by claiming they want 'equal rights' for all, not 'special rights' for 'privileged' minorities.

Anecdotal 'evidence' of many whites missing out becomes very hard to refute because some whites particularly in country Australia do fall through the social welfare / education / health safety nets. They feel justifiably let down. One response to this feeling of disappointment is to propagate the myth that 'Aborigines get paid hundreds of dollars a week by Government to sit on their arse and drink piss.' None of the people who have told me this can provide the name of the Department, the name of the allowance, or provide any further details yet adamantly claim such payments are a fortnightly occurrence.

Programs such as the affirmative action program called the Aboriginal Benefit Study Scheme (Abstudy) was set up in the 1970s with the aim of retaining Indigenous children in high schools and encouraging them to go on to university. By 1998 there was still some financial advantages being on Abstudy compared with Austudy, the general student financial assistance scheme.
Furthermore the existence of Abstudy was widely known in both the white and Aboriginal communities. The visibility of some affirmative action programs makes them an easy target. The Howard Government amalgamated these benefits. Not surprisingly, those components of Abstudy which provided advantage to Indigenous students have been abolished. The comparative educational disadvantage of Indigenous students had not been abolished but the sense of ownership which Indigenous people had of this scheme was gone and with it the clear connection between Indigenous students and education (Bullimore & Green 2000 24th May, p.15). If equity of educational opportunity was the pressing issue the 'special' advantages applying to Austudy could have been extended to all students.

Programs and services widely accessed in major urban centres but rarely if ever available in rural areas are rendered 'invisible' through an interesting process. In the cities they are regarded as unremarkable because of their ease of access and in the country they are either not known about or not expected. There is some anger directed at spoilt, pampered city folk but it never reaches the level of frenzy which can attach to affirmative action programs designed to promote Indigenous people's interests.

When the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (Einfeld 1988) revealed the deplorable neglect of services provided in Toomelah (the Aboriginal community) compared with service provision in the rural townships of Boggabilla and Cunnamulla 20 odd kilometres away) there was not universal outrage expressed in the bush about a small community being discriminated against by state, local and federal governments. The prime topic which occupied the local non-Indigenous community was maintaining continuous access to a lagoon where they waterskied; access which Aboriginal people wanted curtailed because of its spiritual significance. Local Indigenous leaders also claimed speed boats had caused environmental damage. It took nearly a decade for this issue to be conciliated and a ban on water sports was to come into effect on the 1st July 2000. In May the Federal Minister for the Environment postponed the ban for another year (Meade 2000 24th May, p.7). The ban on powerboats was postponed to May 2002 by the Environment Minister Robert Hill (Buchhorn 2001).

Although World Trade Agreements Australia has signed have led to a reduction in the generosity of farm subsidies (forms of affirmative action directed towards improving the lot of rural producers) there remains considerable preferential tax, rural assistance, and land ownership legislation which is specifically designed to help rural producers.

**Equal rights / special rights / equivalent rights**

Affirmative action programs so easily become in some peoples' minds converted from ending discrimination to providing advantages to minorities. Programs which set out to provide equivalent rights are challenged by alleged advocates of equal rights who accuse the programs of providing special rights. From Oregon to Alice, from Ernabella to Alabama this process keeps repeating itself (Ballot No. 9, Rioux 1999, Gustavsson 1999, Boland 2000[b]).

In political circles there is an accepted wisdom that removing privilege (increasing one group's share of the pie at the expense of another) is more likely to evoke unrest than setting out to
increase the size of the pie to be shared. But the mechanisms involved in the current cutbacks in welfare provision demonstrate the issue is more complicated than that:

- the amalgamation of Abstudy and Austudy removed some 'privilege' (advantage) from Indigenous students,
- the introduction of the Common Youth Allowance (which abolished or diminished payments to 46,000 young Australians),
- the imposition of stringent 'mutual obligation' requirements on to increasing numbers of low income Australians, and
- the massive reductions in award conditions of low paid workers

all demonstrate that advantage which poorer people experience can be abolished. The last 20 years have seen a considerable shift of income / wealth from the working to the owning classes (Stilwell 1993 [b], 1999, Saunders 1994, Boreman, Dow & Leet 1999). Perhaps it is only removing the prerogatives of more wealthy or more powerful people which constitute a political problem.

Howard, throughout his political career, has denounced the politics of envy, always relating it to the class struggle between worker and owner or rich and poor. But in relation to Indigenous land issues, educational provision, health services and welfare programs he has no difficulty promoting the perception that Indigenous Australians, unemployed people, single parents and those with disabilities are making an inadequate effort to assist themselves whilst also failing to make their mutual contribution to the community (Howard 1999, 2000).

The reality is that in Australia the provision of health, education and welfare is inadequate and this is particularly so in the bush. If the famed mateship of this wide brown land approached anything like solidarity such politics of division would be ridiculed. People up and down the country would unite not to complain about affirmative programs designed to create parity between ethnic groups but to push for an expansion of health, education and welfare services to the point where all in the community were adequately assisted to maximise their potential. Then the vision in Oodgeroo's poem to her son Dennis might be fulfilled.

*My son, your troubled eyes search mine,*
*Puzzled and hurt by colour line.*
*Your black skin soft as velvet shine;*
*What can I tell you, son of mine?*

*I could tell of heartbreak, hatred blind,*
*I could tell of crimes that shame mankind,*
*Of brutal wrong and deeds malign,*
*Of rape and murder, son of mine;*

*But I'll tell instead of brave and fine*
*When lives of black and white entwine,*
*And men in brotherhood combine-*
*This would I tell you, son of mine.*

**Bibliography**


National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Clearinghouse:
Oodgeroo (Kath Walker) (1964) We are Going. Jacaranda, Brisbane.
National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy (1997-2000)