

SECURING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS
through appropriate technology

Centre for
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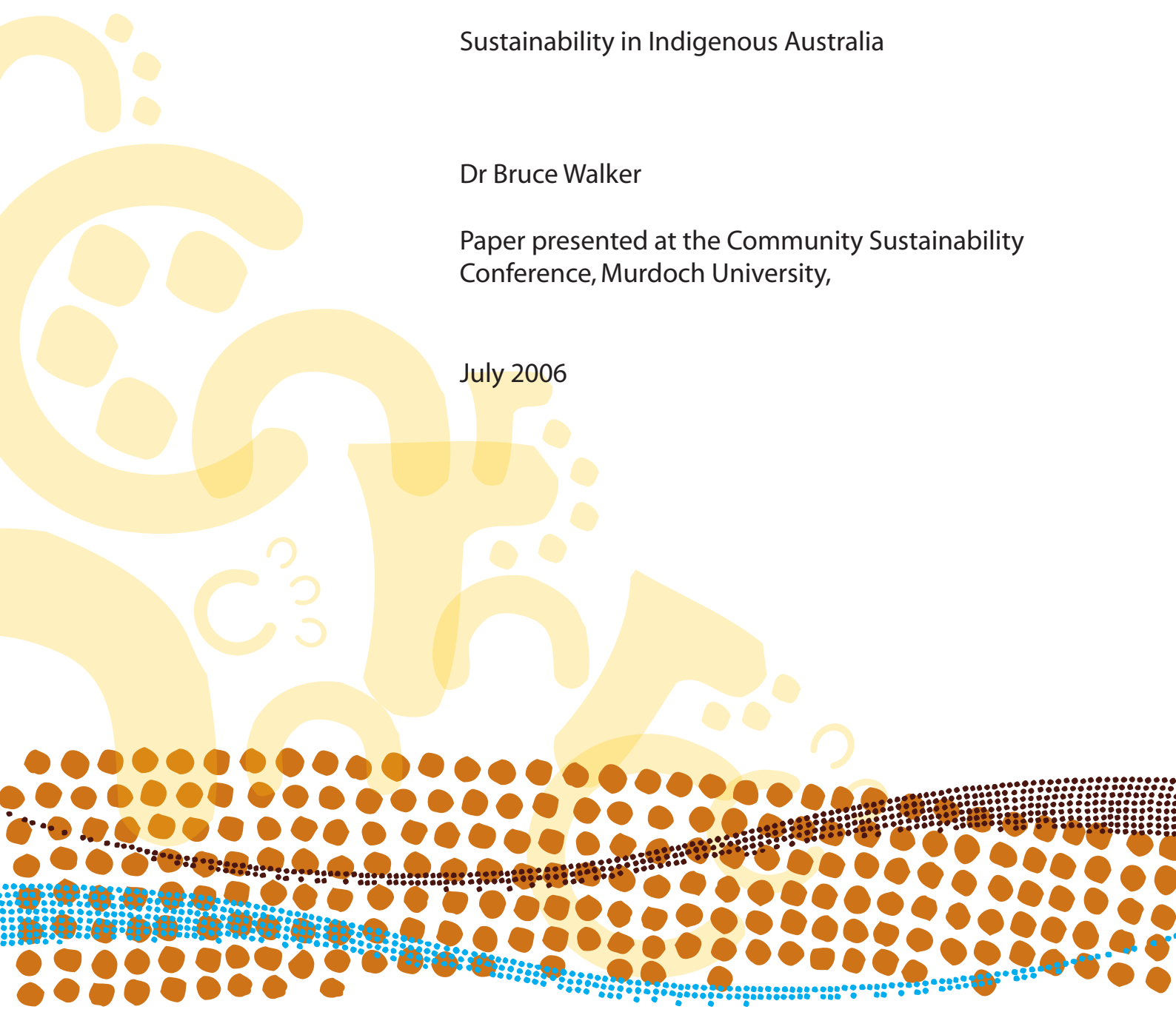
Centre for Appropriate Technology Paper

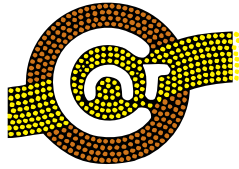
Sustainability in Indigenous Australia

Dr Bruce Walker

Paper presented at the Community Sustainability
Conference, Murdoch University,

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Centre for Appropriate Technology

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32 Priest Street, Alice Springs NT 0870

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www.icat.org.au

CENTRE FOR APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY - OFFICES

ALICE SPRINGS

32 Priest Street, Alice Springs
PO Box 8044, Alice Springs
NT 0871
Tel: (08) 8951 4311
Fax: (08) 8951 4333
info@icat.org.au

KIMBERLEY

3/68 Clarendon Street, Derby
PO Box 1304, Derby
WA 6728
Tel: (08) 9191 2585
Fax: (80) 9191 2598
catderby@icat.org.au

TOP END (BUSHLIGHT)

GPO Box 2875, Darwin
NT 0801
Tel: (08) 8981 7599
Fax: (08) 8981 7233
darwin@icat.org.au

NORTH QUEENSLAND

7/330 Sheridan Street, Cairns
PO Box 6182, Cairns
Qld 4870
Tel: (07) 4031 0505
Fax: (07) 4031 0431
nq@icat.org.au

1 Bauhinia Street, Kununurra

PO Box 604, Kununurra
WA 6743
Tel/Fax: (08) 9169 3970
kununurra@icat.org.au

Sustainability in Indigenous Australia

National Conference

12 – 14 July 2006

Murdoch University

Dr Bruce Walker

Chief Executive Officer, Centre for Appropriate Technology

July 2006

For 25 years CAT has developed products and processes, provided technical services and technical training, and engaged in community planning, and policy initiatives in support of the aspirations of Indigenous Australians. In the past 5 years the organisation has pursued the role of Appropriate Technology in securing sustainable livelihoods that allow people to feel happy and safe in their communities.

Over roughly the same period CAT has had a relationship with the Murdoch Uni team with Mara, Fred, Martin and in particular Kuruvilla Matthew. It is good to be back on Ngungar country and I acknowledge your welcome of the CAT mob..

Before presenting my reflections on the conference I would like to acknowledge the determination and commitment of Kuruvilla and his team over the years. These conferences have brought together people from communities and practitioners from across the country who are dealing with the real politic of remote communities.

Kuruvilla has worked hard to ensure that the conference is well sponsored and has increased his resolve over the years to ensure that indigenous voices are heard and come to the fore. I understand this is the last conference that Kuruvilla will be organising for Indigenous people and I think we should applaud his persistence and commitment.

The Emperor's New Clothes.

The new era of self-improvement, self reliance and economic independence

If you have been involved in Indigenous affairs at some stage over the past 30 years you would have been to many conferences and meetings where all manner of issues were discussed. If you are like me you probably always leave with a sense of frustration at not being able to nail everything down.

We have all heard the cries of 'we are the most researched people', or 'this is more white fella's telling black fella's what to do,' blame the government' or we hide behind the elephants in the lounge room or 'my system is better than your system.'

There is an inference in this title that we individually see different things when it comes to the new Indigenous affairs agenda. I think this is compounded

when we use the word sustainability. Some see hope, some see despair and others laugh and say there is nothing there.

It is not my intention to be cynical and I acknowledge the considerable effort by many over many years to look for constructive and innovative "solutions" to Indigenous concerns. I am pleased that we have heard about some of the positive grass roots initiatives in this conference.

I also trust that I am true to the quiet persistent voices of the many indigenous people who I have worked with who have been saying that they have modest requirements that can be very effectively met.

Despite this, the viability and sustainability of small communities are under increasing attack from outside. This view however says more about people who don't live in communities than those who do.

We are at an unprecedented point where there is a need for reform matched by a desire for change.

In that regard we should be realistic and brave enough to dig beneath the surface of the new rhetoric a little in our search for sustainable livelihoods in remote settlements.

The new era has provided a new wardrobe of clothes. Politely termed neo liberalism, we now have an emphasis on the market and personal security, mainstreamed joined up government and shared responsibility, private sector engagement and economic development. While there was once confusion around whether ATSIC was a development agency or a rights advocate it is now clear that mainstreamed services are part of a service delivery model that has little account for development principles.

Minister Vanstone at one point referred to cultural museums. They are cultural economies but they only become museums if we allow them to be used that way. I hear at this conference and see in the DK CRC agenda a determination to demonstrate the value of indigenous cultural practice in new livelihoods that are in the national interest and reflect local aspiration.

There have been a number of excellent suggestions over the course of the conference that respond to the new era. Peter Newman suggested that local government should play a greater role with Indigenous communities, and John Scougall set out a very practical pathway to sustainability. Others have continued to make suggestions around valuing work that Indigenous people do both in their own and in the national interest.

Inspirational presentations by Mr Collard on Yira Yaakin and Kado Muir's description of the vision for his country.

Sometimes I think we punish ourselves by not acknowledging reality. I heard yesterday about the increasing pressure on councils having to cope with the paperwork burden attached to their own self determination. That burden

arises largely because they have argued for and are receiving their rights as citizens. Unfortunately they are the outcome of a view of equity that sees everybody receive the same inputs. An assessment based on outcomes would indicate that the Council is worse off as a result of the equality of inputs. In small remote communities with small populations, people are buried in administrative paperwork because they receive the same rights and paperwork that applies to people in larger centres. DK CRC is attempting to set out a science of desert living that provides a theoretical base to these distortions that result from small dispersed settlements.

This very point was highlighted at one of these conferences in the mid 90's but we have not acted. We continue to argue for equity without recognition of the differential outcomes.

I have heard rhetoric at this conference that almost denies what we have seen in this country in the last couple of years. The Emperor has new clothes but some of us are still catching up with the parade.

The one question that exercises my conscience consistently is why the calls that have been made consistently over the years, both by Indigenous people and non indigenous people, largely go unanswered (refer to Sue Gordon's speech) yet a fresh Minister can walk in and turn it all on its head.

I would like to turn to another great paradox that we have also not come to terms with.

The Great Paradox

I have a great admiration for cartoonists who can capture a complex point in a single graphic statement.

In the Australian on the 29/9/05 Kudelka summed up the dilemma faced by people who on the one hand want to live in remote Australia but on the other seek standards of living equal to other Australians.



The sooner we face the fact that people who live further from major medical facilities are at greater risk than people who live closer, the sooner we will establish a degree of balance and realism in discussions about development and sustainability across remote Australia. You don't live in the bush to be like a city.

You don't solve problems in the bush by defining them in terms of services available in a city. The benefits that result from living with a large number of people don't exist, or are at least more expensive when the group is small. The levels of specialisation required to maintain the technology alone can not be met or sustained in small populations. To make it work you have to trade off more of what you know and do.

On the other side of the ledger the benefits of peace and quiet and lack of humbug are not available in the city. So why do we carry on about people in remote communities not getting what people get in the city?

There are three things that will assist out thinking on sustainability in Indigenous Communities.

Clarify the Development Agenda

The development of Aboriginal Australia has been driven by the assumption that Indigenous people are disadvantaged. Under the race discrimination act we adopt special measures to catch up this deficit. This approach encourages a view of citizen rights and service equity. (I am not arguing that Indigenous people are not disadvantaged rather that just because there is disadvantage there is not a reason to automatically reduce that disadvantage without some other considerations). It denies the interrelated nature of settlement in Australia.

An alternative view is that it is really a development issue but people mistakenly equate this view with their understanding of third world development rather than 4th world. You can't assume modernisation or linear growth as the objective.

The challenge of development in the 4th world is to strike the right balance of Government intervention, market incentives and community aspirations to harness the opportunities.

We achieve a more positive development outlook when we refocus on investment in opportunities and capacities rather than on problems and needs.

It is important to remember that neither Indigenous Australians nor non-Indigenous people have lived in these types of small remote settlements before. It is a new experience to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and it will require the shared knowledge and collective effort of both to develop sustainable opportunities.

The practicality of the current settlement pattern in remote Australia is that in the next 15 years across the north of Australia, Rio Tinto estimate a need to find 10,000 new jobs for adult Indigenous people living in remote communities near their northern operations.

Similar demographic projections across desert Australia forecast a 34% increase in working age Indigenous population by 2016.

With a Indigenous population growth rate of around 1.9% per annum in the NT (2.2% amongst working age cohorts), it has been estimated that around 2000 new jobs will need to be created each year to bring the Indigenous employment to population ratio to the level recorded for the non Indigenous population. To maintain the current Indigenous employment to population ratio (33%) an extra 2662 jobs will need to be created by 2010.

In this context to simply declare communities are unviable and infer all should move to larger centres of economic opportunity is as much head in the sand as the expectation that people can rely solely on traditional law and culture to see them through the next twenty five years.

Employment opportunities will not be found with all of these people abandoning their communities and moving to town. The social trauma and dysfunction currently faced by people will not be relieved by creating a series of fringe settlements around Darwin, Alice Springs, Cairns, Kalgoorlie, Mt Isa, Broome and Kununurra.

So sustainability will be greatly enhanced if we can get a clearer agenda for development.

Get into the Demand Responsive Space

There is a good reason why the DK CRC is attempting to get into the demand responsive space because it offers significant potential to empower consumers.

So often government and service providers are guilty of trying to find "Solutions when *the* Solution is or becomes the next Problem".

The solution is an approach to service delivery in which universal need is met by a technical (supply) solution and then implemented by an impersonal rules driven provider. That is, *need* as the problem, *supply* as the solution, *civil service* as the instrument.

The civil process has seen centrally planned and executed projects deliver solutions in communities of beneficiaries in order to achieve more equitable outcomes, but it is an externally controlled process. Morally it is difficult to argue against such a rights driven approach. The outcome however could be said to be entrenched dependency and poverty. (case of the CAT workshop)

Internationally we know that “Development is something largely determined by poor countries themselves, and outsiders can play only a limited role.”¹

“Aid is only as good as the ability of a developing country to use it effectively”²

It is this realisation that has prompted the development of demand responsive programs in international development

As Mark Moran indicated the key conceptual shift to have taken place is the substitution of the notion of beneficiaries of services with that of consumers of services.

The market send ‘signals’ through prices that form incentives to buyers and sellers, in our setting it is the government that is linking incentives to services because of the absence of a market. In Australia we remain confined to a welfare economy where giving and taking away a benefit, combined with the rhetoric of rights and responsibilities, are the limits to the tools available to foster change.

In Australia’s new Indigenous affairs agenda supply is maintained through a mechanism of shared responsibility rather than self interest and market forces.

It seems to me that many of the new ‘solutions’ to ‘problems’ do not break away from the temptation to simply reorganise, rationalise and Aboriginalise supply rather than empower informed consumers

Many writers³ have highlighted the issue of passive welfare and proposed a range of remedies including freeing up communal land ownership leading to the ability to, among other things, own your own house.

¹ Foreign Affairs July/August 2005, p136

² Foreign Affairs July/August 2005, p143

³

Gregory Andrews, Economic Passivity and dependency in Mutitjulu: Some suggestions for change, Discussion Paper, March 2005, Mutitjulu Tjungu Waakaripayi Project ‘Working Together’

Helen Hughes and Jenness Warin, A new deal for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Remote Communities, Issue Analysis, number 54, 1 March 2005, Centre for Independent Studies, ISSN: 1440 6306.

Gary Johns, The Gulf between Aboriginal Policies and Aboriginal People in Australia, Institute of Public Affairs, Australia, libertad y Desarrollo Institute, Santiago, Chile 6 June 2003.

In this context applying both supply- and demand-side analysis to community services is still not well understood. The established mode of service delivery in remote areas is determinedly supply-side. In other words, service users are passive recipients of a service that is centrally designed largely without their participation and fixed in its characteristics.

In many respects, recent Government initiatives attempt to break down this model by inviting Indigenous people to negotiate and take responsibility for the outcomes of new service delivery arrangements. In spite of this, demand-responsive services are still in their infancy and so people in remote communities are rarely asked to express a preference or to act like a consumer.

Create a Capacity for Searchers

In a book titled the White Mans Burden, William Easterly looks back on five decades of the West attempting to solve the problems of the Rest.

He says the tragedy of the worlds poor is that

“the West spent \$2.3 trillion on foreign aid over the last five decades and still had not managed to get twelve cent medicines to children to prevent half of all malaria deaths. The West spent \$2.3 trillion and still had not managed to get four dollar bed nets to poor families.

In a single day, on July 16 2005, the American and British economies delivered nine million copies of the sixth volume of the Harry Potter childrens’ book series to eager fans. Book retailers continually restocked the shelves as customers snatched up the book. Amazon and Barnes & Noble shipped preordered copies directly to consumers homes.

There was no Marshall Plan, no international financing facility for books about underage wizards. It is heartbreaking that global society has evolved a highly efficient way to get entertainment to rich adults and children, while it can’t get twelve cent medicine to dying poor children.

Easterly calls the advocates of the traditional approach the Planners, while the agents of change in the alternative approach are the searchers. The short answer on why dying poor children don’t get twelve cent medicines while healthy rich children do get Harry Potter, is that the twelve cent medicines are supplied by planners while Harry Potter is supplied by searchers.

The mentality of searchers in the market is a guide to a more constructive approach to how the viability of a community may be enhanced. Searchers are empowered through demand responsive policies.

Noel Pearson, Our Right to Take Responsibility, Noel Pearson and Associates Pty Ltd, Cairns, 2000

In other terms Planners announce good intentions but don't motivate anyone to carry them out: Searchers find things that work and get some reward. Planners raise expectations but take no responsibility for meeting them: Searchers accept responsibility for their actions. Planners determine what to supply: searchers find out what is in demand. Planners apply global blue prints and strategies; searchers adapt to local conditions. Planners at the top lack knowledge at the bottom; Searchers find out what the reality is at the bottom.

A planner thinks he already knows the answers; he thinks of poverty as a technical engineering problem that his answers will solve. A Searcher admits he doesn't know the answers in advance and believes that poverty is a complicated tangle of political, social, historical, institutional, and technological factors. A Searcher hopes to find answers to individual problems only by trial and error experimentation. A Planner believes outsiders know enough to impose solutions. A Searcher believes that insiders have enough knowledge to find solutions and that most solutions must be home grown.

Three things could enhance our ability to sustain a development focus in a demand responsive space as searchers.

1. The Role of the Community Sector

Since the demise of ATSIC there has been a progressive demoralisation and dismembering of a number of indigenous organizations. All of the rhetoric is around government programs and public and private investment. Community sector agents appear to be problematic for government.

I acknowledge that many of the community sector organisations require significant reforms both in focus, governance and operational outcomes. Others offer very professional services.

My recommendation is to encourage you to consider how we might reform the community sector to deliver professional and targeted services in communities.

I am suggesting this because I don't believe the government or the private sector can respond in a way that will be unlikely to create livelihoods or impact on the numbers of people we need to employ nor that there are the market opportunities that will develop in the timeframe that has been set.

Should we not be asking ourselves whether there is a pattern of investment that we can explore that builds social capital at the same time as the physical capital. Do we get the best result from separation of these tasks? Can we achieve a situation where training is not just about relative positioning in the labour market but how people are equipped to make choices.

2. Education, Governance and Capacity Building

The apparent decline of desert Indigenous peoples participation in VET in recent years, suggests ongoing issues for the next generation of young Indigenous peoples in terms of educational attainment and life choices. Policy initiatives in relation to VET are focusing explicitly on increasing participation at Certificate 111 level and above. Evidence to date would suggest that this strategy is having minimal impact for people from remote communities.

Recent evidence from the ABS indicates that the labour force participation of remote Indigenous peoples (nationally) has declined from 62.9% in 2002 to 49.2% in 2005. In the NT the decline has been from 56.2% in 2002 to 40.7% in 2005. Given the population projections for remote desert Australia these trends are of concern especially in an era of such pronounced skills shortages in trades and other traditional occupations. These trends also reinforce the existing tenuous link between participation in VET and work outcomes.

Poor literacy and numeracy, poor personal presentation, homelessness, ill health and/or the likelihood of a criminal history are realities that impact on transition to work opportunities.

Despite targeted policies and employer incentives, there has been a declining engagement in mainstream and private sector employment by Indigenous peoples and a steady increase in relative income disparity.

Declining VET participation by remote Indigenous people particularly across the desert is concerning. The gap between the current educational skills of Indigenous adults and these requirements for studying at Certificate 111 levels and above is expanding. There are no policy initiatives designed to bridge this gap.

In remote areas the terms of acceptable activities for the receipt of ongoing welfare payments are being negotiated on a community by community basis but include participation in formal training and undertaking essential and community service work such as rubbish collection and aged care. Cultural activities, 'soft options' such as music, bands, radio or video production, football, own home maintenance and repairs are not considered acceptable activities.

Challenge the Supply Side Drivers to Create Choices Standards and Regulations

It is clear that each solution brings with it a new set of problems. Consider how well intentioned policy change impacted on the CAT workshop, or the changed grading of cypress pine impacted on Lake Evella. It is salient to ask who are the solutions good for (who is wearing the clothes) and was the cost worth it.

Wealth Accumulation or Reducing Vulnerability

Where is the drive from indigenous people to accumulate assets and grow wealth? This is particularly relevant in the home ownership debate where the use of Indigenous land and the acquisition of a house are symbols of changing asset status and wealth accumulation. Is there an understanding in

the community about what comes with the package when you acquire the package of systems, processes, values and accountabilities that are required to sustain a house.

Home Ownership

The motivation to live 'on country' and the price that people pay to do so is not well understood. People make choices about where they live and carry the cost and benefit of those choices. Some communities pay \$2,000 for a single visit of a tradesperson to service a bore and others truck in bottled water because they are concerned about the taste and the composition of their rainwater or bore water. Living remote is expensive.

For many remote people the cost of services, distance to specialist technical support and finding replacement parts and suppliers who can provide consistent supply leads to high redundancy and the short half life of assets. We need to better understand the full lifecycle analysis of assets in remote areas before we come to conclusions about home ownership.

Equity Principles

It was suggested earlier that a focus on equity of outcomes provides for a more responsive process.

Who's Needs; Who's Values; Who's Life

We also need to create the space and understand what Indigenous people see as viable for their livelihood not what external agents say should be viable.

Whilst the popular view is that home ownership is the solution, the practical implications of this solution are not well understood or developed.

It may take a lifetime for people to accumulate a level of asset wealth around housing, let alone make the cultural adjustments in moving from communal ownership to personal wealth.

There is going to be a shortage of skilled engineers, technologists and technical trades that will be felt most in remote Australia. Without these skills, sustaining the current housing model across remote Australia will be difficult and increasingly expensive.

I would argue that on cost terms alone the single biggest issue in indigenous housing is not construction but the lifecycle cost of the house which is the real point of vulnerability.

Doug Porter indicates that income is the most important single determinant of health and wellbeing outcomes. He mounts an argument for finding every plausible way to reduce household expenditure on basic services: by finding smarter ways to subsidise water and sanitation, housing, transport etc in much the same way that utilities have found it cheaper to send plumbers to fit

free water saving devices on pensioner homes than wait for people to ring a plumber and pay for the repair.

So in the emerging era of self-improvement, self-reliance and economic independence in Indigenous Australia what is your role?

Thoughts for the Future

How do we create the space for demand responsive positioning where capacity building and governance are linked to construction, behaviour, lifecycle costings and repairs and maintenance?

What are the policy drivers on the supply side that we could manipulate and tinker with to open new economic and employment opportunities.

What would happen if we placed an emphasis on equity of outcomes not inputs? If we elected to adopt interim or intermediate standards in relation to buildings would this provide more choices?

How will a private sector approach to economic development tackle the underlying issues raised by some of the earlier examples?

How can we modify the private sector engagement to accommodate a vital and re- formed professional community sector?

What are the policy choices and tradeoffs we can make?

A Final Word from Harry Potter

Lest you all think I hate Harry Potter I would leave you with a memorable quote

I was struck by a great line in one of the Harry Potter movies when Harry asked the wise Dumbledore why he wasn't in Slytherin (the bad side). Dumbledore answered
"it is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

Erwin Schrodinger said:

"The task is not so much to see what no one has yet seen, but to think what no one has yet thought, about that which everybody sees."