

Devolve power to the people

Last Saturday in The Weekend Australian (4-5 July 2009) two important articles appeared. They shared more than a deep despair about the abysmal state of indigenous affairs. **They went, from the heart**, to the mind of Australian governance: how governments and their public services think about themselves.

Galarrwuy Yunupingu vented his frustration at those sent by governments to work in Aboriginal communities who soon end up smothering and dominating the lives of those they seek to help. "A world of red tape has come to control us and block us in our ambition" he bemoaned.

Noel Pearson's angry reaction to the platitudes of COAG communiqué-speak on 'closing the gap' of indigenous disadvantage was even more powerful. Putting aside his condemnation of the perceived incompetence of senior public servants and their political masters, his explosion of righteous indignation reflected the manner in which community innovation on Cape York had been rebranded and presented as an achievement of governments. In truth it was Australian business that first responded positively to the ideas of the Cape York communities and provided support. Governments have been far more cautious.

Pearson's scream of despair echoes far beyond Cape York, through the dark valleys of bureaucratic despond. What has happened to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders is just the most horrifying symptom of structures of governance locked in the past. It reflects a world in which individuals are perceived by the public servants who deliver government policy – generally with commitment, good faith and worthy intentions – as beneficiaries or recipients. Treated as dependents, it is scarcely surprising that many of those '**on welfare**' or '**on the dole**' learn helplessness from the manner of state intervention. They are forced to fit themselves to the services they receive. The undermining of self-reliance is certainly not confined to indigenous Australians.

For more than twenty years, at all tiers, governments and public administrators have sought to increase the efficiency and effectiveness with which they deliver programs. There has been greater emphasis on achieving results and improving service quality. That's the good news. The bad news is that in a foolhardy attempt to privatise the language of public management, those who receive public funds have been rearticulated as 'customers'.

The **truth** is that people rarely decide whether to 'buy' government services and from whom. Rather they are citizens who have an implicit contract with the state to provide security in return for their loyalty. The relationship should be based on a mutuality of interest framed by a balance of shared rights and responsibilities, entitlements and obligations.

Too rarely it is. Too much government is delivered today in ways which create passivity. It need not be so. Already there are important signs of change emerging if only they can be liberated from the institutional forms of the past. New approaches, enhanced by the transformative potential of social media, can create a 'Government 2.0' in which the citizen is placed at the centre of power.

The outsourcing of government services to third party providers over the last two decades represents a revolution only half-fulfilled. Community organisations have increasingly been contracted to deliver health, welfare and education programs. Costs have been lowered and delivery standards improved. Yet what the vibrant diversity of nonprofit organisations and social enterprises has traditionally done best, namely find new and innovative ways to meet the needs of the communities with which they work, has been progressively constrained by a deadening micro-management of their activities.

In a real sense the best thing governments can do is to purchase the community service they require and stand out of the way. Of course there needs to be accountability for public funds and transparency of process. Yet, unconsciously seeking to hoard power, and keen to protect their Ministers from political risk, public servants have too often intervened unnecessarily in the internal management of community employers. It is not only the Yolngu people who have been smothered by the heavy burden of bureaucratic interference and regulatory impost.

There are also opportunities to give individuals far greater control over the government services they receive. Citizens, rather than being treated as powerless dependents, can become collaborators in the design of programs to meet their needs. They can become co-producers. Already some Australian governments are enabling those citizens with disabilities or who have suffered accidents to exert greater control over the support services they choose and even, with assistance, to manage their **own** publicly-funded budgets.

The opportunity to personalise services and individualise programs can be extended to the aged or jobseekers, to parents or students, to social housing tenants or families under pressure. Citizens can become active agents in organising the services they receive. Choice can be given voice. By starting to regard public funds as their own, those who depend upon them will generally spend more wisely. Listening to what people actually want will significantly enhance the diagnostic capacity of government. Recipients, empowered, often turn out to desire very different things from what governments and public services had anticipated. Often they perceive their wants in terms of social relationships rather than money.

The creation of a socially inclusive Australia requires those communities and individuals who receive a government service to be recognised as best placed to help design and deliver it. The **collective** intelligence of service-users can be directed to finding better solutions. The value of social innovation, such as that evident on Cape York, needs to be espoused. Governments should encourage collaboration between the public, private and third sectors. Public servants should become facilitators and intermediaries, providing the means by which people are enabled to do things for themselves. Power needs to move from the centre to the edge, with frontline, street-level public servants and community advocates given greater authority.

The voices of Yunupingu and Pearson are prophetic. Beyond their hard-bitten pessimism, they envision future possibilities in which power shifts from the state to the individual and in which the promise of participatory democracy can be reaffirmed. It's an alluring prospect. All it requires is courage and will.

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