

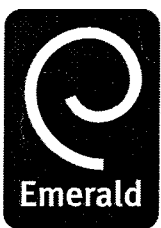
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Reciprocal accountability: assessing the accountability environment in Australian aboriginal affairs policy

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Reciprocal accountability

Assessing the accountability environment in Australian aboriginal affairs policy

Reciprocal
accountability

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper attempts to replace the understanding of public sector accountability as a linear and hierarchical process with one in which accountability occurs within a network of social relationships. It associates the former approach with the introduction of New Public Management principles in Australian public administration. It investigates the effect of this on the ability of Australia's indigenous people both to access democratic accountability as citizens, and to develop their community organisations as service providers.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on field experience with aboriginal community organisations and critical assessment of the literature on this aspect of Australian public administration.

Findings – The paper finds that New Public Management approaches in Australian public administration have not led to greater political accountability but the reverse. As a disadvantaged, culturally distinct minority, aboriginal people are the subject of, rather than partners in, accountability regimes which mire their community service organisations in reporting requirements at the expense of practical activity. In some respects Aborigines are dealt with as individual citizen/clients, at other times as a disadvantaged minority group, and third, as culturally distinct polities. Each of these approaches implies different forms of accountability both by Aborigines to the state and by the state to them.

Research limitations/implications – This analysis is inherently interpretative rather than exclusively empirical. However, greater efficiency as well as culturally appropriate outcomes can be found by instituting regional regimes of reciprocal accountability.

Originality/value – The analysis of developments in public administration is rarely brought to bear on Australian indigenous affairs.

Keywords Australian aboriginals, Public administration, Communities, Australia

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In 2004, the Australian government made radical changes to the administration of Indigenous affairs (Gray and Sanders, 2006; Sullivan, 2008)[1]. The essential elements of these changes were: the abolition of the Indigenous-controlled development grant agency the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the allocation of Indigenous programmes to mainstream Commonwealth departments; the introduction of whole of government service delivery; and a new regime of Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) and Regional Partnership Agreements (RPAs) to effect behavioural change in grant receiving communities. This paper puts these changes in the context of broader changes in public affairs policy which reflected the international trend to NPM (Head, 2005; du Gay, 2007), and discusses the



accountability environment in aboriginal development, in community sector service delivery, and in the wider Australian polity generally. The important changes in public affairs that affect aboriginal policy are the reconstitution of the Australian Public Service (APS) in the 1990s which both introduced NPM principles, with new accounting standards, and gave to the political class, ministers in particular, greater control over the public service. This shifts the balance of public accountability more towards ministers, and therefore requires greater attention to controlling the perception of achievement. This is done by running policy development in two streams in the first of which ministerial staff manage political relationships, including public perceptions, and influence the Indigenous affairs policy developed and implemented by the second stream – the bureaucracy. At the same time, and again in responsiveness to ministerial control, the APS has refined its procedures for line accountability. This accountability extends beyond the public service to the community sector organisations it funds. The result is increasing pressure on indigenous community sector organisations to conform to the remote control of their activities in a field where multiple non-indigenous actors pursue incommensurate interests, often with very short time horizons. An important theme that informs these alignments is accountability: accountability of the minister to the public, accountability of public servants to the minister, and accountability of indigenous people to white Australia in general.

This paper begins with a consideration of the political/administrative system within which indigenous policy is formulated. It follows this with an examination of the new policy in indigenous affairs in the context of developments in the community sector in general and in Commonwealth/state relations. Confusion in policy implementation across these sectoral lines is compounded, the paper argues, by confusion over approaches to aboriginal development which shifts between three distinct modes. These are the delivery of individual and family citizenship entitlements, reliance on community sector organisations or service businesses to address disadvantage, and participatory planning approaches to entire communities and regions using development aid practices.

APS line responsibilities extend beyond the public sector to the performance of community sector organisations. These are captured through SRAs, RPAs, grant conditions and reporting requirements. The paper describes these and suggests that they are more tools for control of this volatile political environment than well-considered development instruments. Finally, the paper suggests that aboriginal development cannot continue to be directed from the centre in Canberra and state capital cities. Planning, implementation and accountability should occur at the local and regional levels, and intrusive financial regulation should give way to processes of continual reciprocal accountability in narrative as well as statistical form.

The public sector context of Indigenous affairs

On federation in 1901, the Commonwealth government was expressly prohibited by the constitution from making laws to govern aboriginal people, leaving this power with the states. In the international post Second World War environment of decolonization, universal franchise and civil rights, the treatment of Aborigines as wards of the state in each of the states and territories was an embarrassment and the impediment to Commonwealth government involvement in aboriginal affairs administration was removed by referendum in 1967.

This triggered 30 years of aboriginal development in which, by local agreements with the state and territory governments, the Commonwealth government largely determined and almost entirely funded aboriginal affairs policies. These policies, variously termed “self-determination” or “self-management”, encouraged local aboriginal control of settlements, whether these were historically mission reserves or newly formed on traditional lands. A series of national aboriginal representative organisations were established by legislation. The last of these, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was an amalgamation of the former functions of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the peak representative body the National Aboriginal Conference. In parallel with this increasing Commonwealth involvement in the funding of aboriginal development, a network of aboriginal community controlled service organisations evolved – Aboriginal Medical Services, Aboriginal Legal Services, land councils, multi-purpose “resource agencies”, cultural and media organisations, language centres. The vast majority of these were incorporated under Commonwealth statutes and funded by the Commonwealth government.

In 1996, a Liberal/National Party coalition took office. Its members had become increasingly out of sympathy with these developments. This echoed growing public despair at the appalling conditions that continued to exist in aboriginal areas and the seemingly intractable low level of social and economic indicators among all aboriginal populations, whether remote, rural or urban. Beginning in 2004 and culminating in 2005, the government abolished the ATSIC, reassigned all of its programmes to mainstream government departments and announced a policy of whole of government service delivery across these various departments and agencies. Since there are only a few areas (such as defense) where the Commonwealth government has exclusive responsibility, mainstreaming has inevitably led to greater insistence that the states and territories begin to pull their weight in aboriginal affairs also. This new policy environment, not in existence long enough to be properly established, was inherited by a Labor Party government in November 2007.

The previous major change in indigenous affairs, in 1989/90 when ATSIC was instituted, shielded aboriginal affairs from some of the effects of the renovation of public administration that occurred more widely in Australia. It was introduced at a time of major changes to the structure of the Australian Public Service (APS) with the progressive introduction of commercial accounting standards for public administration (Potter, 2002), new administrative laws, and changes in the internal organisation of the APS itself which culminated in the APS Act 1999 (Woodhouse, 1997; Barker, 2007). ATSIC was predominantly staffed by aboriginal people and under the control of an Aboriginal Board of Commissioners, who were committed to principles of community control of services. While subject to these reforms itself, to a great extent it shielded the aboriginal population from their full impact. The post-2004 revolution in indigenous affairs introduced aboriginal people to a public policy environment that has evolved from the introduction of NPM principles since the early 1980s.

The renovation of the public service was driven by a range of intentions. The need to be more responsive to citizens was certainly one of these, but also, and to some extent as an interpretation of this, the need for public servants to be more responsive to the direct control of ministers was a major concern (Woodhouse, 1997; Barker, 2007).

New processes of accountability were introduced into the public service with the establishment of work level standards and regular formal performance assessment. The end of the accountability line, according to the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) is the responsible minister who, the APSC states, is accountable to the people through the electoral process (APSC, 2006). The open advertising of senior public service positions, better remuneration and greater flexibility for ministers to remove or redeploy heads of departments (Woodhouse, 1997), has led to more volatile public service careerism. Senior public servants are more attuned to direct ministerial control over the formulation and implementation of policy.

Ministerial staffers are not employed under the Public Service Act and are amenable to political direction. As Tiernan points out:

Australia's ministerial staffing system is large, active, interventionist and deeply engaged in achieving responsiveness from the public service. Staff play crucial roles in supporting overburdened ministers, but they do so in a framework within which the scope of their responsibilities is poorly defined, their relationship with the bureaucracy is often fraught, and the capacity of ministers to manage staff conduct and performance is questionable (Tiernan, 2007, p. 150).

The reasons for the expansion of this parallel phalanx of publicly funded officials are particularly important for indigenous affairs, since more than any other area of public policy it is driven by the management of public perception.

Despite new public management rhetoric, ministers are not directly accountable to the public in the same way that a board is to company shareholders (see Rowe, 1999). There is a mediated accountability which requires careful management. Beyond the scope of public servants, it falls to ministerial advisers. A minister is accountable to a range of constituencies, many of them more immediate and powerful than the electorate, which the personal staff must protect the minister from. Increased accountability of the public service to a minister should have increased the accountability and, therefore, vulnerability of ministers which the political staff needs to manage. In practice, recent scandals that would previously have led to the resignation of a minister have shown that advisers and public servants adopt procedures to keep formal knowledge of embarrassing errors or dishonest behaviour from the minister (Barker, 2007; Mulgan, 2006).

This points out another consequence of these realignments that is important for indigenous affairs. While management of ministerial performance is the aim, the proximate activity is the management of the perception of ministerial performance. The Secretary to the Treasury confirmed this with unusual frankness for a senior public servant in a recent address to a conference of APS project managers:

... your performance may be judged, by your political masters, according to how well it plays in the media, or how well it would play if it became a matter of media interest (Henry, 2007, pp. 15-16).

Media management is pivotal in the development and implementation of aboriginal affairs policy. It is driven by, and results in production of aboriginal policies aimed at the non-aboriginal population. Development of indigenous communities in Australia has much in common with development in impoverished countries, the recipients are remote from the donors, and successful policy depends on the representation of policy success rather than its successful implementation (Mosse, 2004). Even prior to the

abolition of ATSIC, indigenous public figures and those who work closely with them had lost control of the process of representation. Indigenous lives, like those of the poor and marginalized elsewhere, become items of exchange in systems of representation which are driven by dynamics completely remote from, indeed alien to, the people represented (Sullivan, 2008).

Diverse accountabilities in the new policy framework

The new indigenous affairs policy was founded in a highly politicised environment in which mainstreaming, whole of government administration and strict accountability are to deliver the outcomes indigenous people are incapable of delivering for themselves. Rejecting past practices of directly funding aboriginal communities and community organisations, the Commonwealth amalgamated aboriginal programmes into existing government departments and directed these to work together within a whole of government framework. The Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) is attached to one of the largest of these agencies (Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs – FACSIA) and brings together officers of diverse Commonwealth agencies in regional Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs). The headline means of programme delivery is through SRAs and RPAs in which aboriginal families, settlements and regions are asked to commit to improved behaviour in return for discretionary development funds (Sullivan, 2005; see also Humpage, 2005). State government agencies may be partners in these arrangements and commercial interests such as mining companies can also be involved. In practice, existing aboriginal community-based organisations continue to be grant funded since there are often no practical alternatives. Community service organisations are threatened by a government policy of individual rather than communal advancement and are increasingly in competition with non-indigenous fee-for-service providers, either entirely commercial or from the non-indigenous community sector. This leads to a highly complex accountability environment. It is based on three contrasting understandings of the nature of aboriginal people as citizens, disadvantaged clients, or self-sustaining groups, which will be elaborated below.

The separate sovereign Australian colonial states federated in 1901 by ceding some powers to the government of the new Commonwealth while retaining others. The states retain power over, for instance, land use, education and health. As outlined above, it was only in 1967, following a national referendum, that the Commonwealth gained power to legislate for aboriginal people. This allows the Commonwealth to intervene in state matters by offering funding contingent on adherence to Commonwealth national policy, but since 1967 the Commonwealth has borne the brunt of responsibility for aboriginal development. Under the current policy of mainstreaming, the states are being called on to share the load, as they do in areas other than aboriginal affairs. Aboriginal community structures are commonly called on to deliver municipal services to settlements. They are funded by the Commonwealth, but in the mainstream these are normally local government functions, administered by the states. The states also normally fund and administer primary health care, housing, education and other citizen services where the Commonwealth has taken on a much greater direct role for aborigines than for other citizens. Bargaining between the states and the Commonwealth over these new arrangements has resulted in bi-lateral agreements at the state level where the states

agree to re-assume some of their responsibility for aboriginal development as a citizenship entitlement while the Commonwealth commits increased funds to allow them to do so. While the states often work in collaboration with aboriginal community service organisations, these remain largely funded and regulated by the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth government has redistributed its development activities from a central aboriginal affairs agency to mainstream departments encouraged to work collaboratively, while at the same time vigorously trying to hand back responsibility for many services to the states. Both the Commonwealth and the states rely heavily on community organisations for actual service delivery. This compromises lines of accountability across departments, sectors and jurisdictions. The community sector in general is in a state of flux, influenced also by NPM approaches, with government unsure whether community organisations are representative of a communal will to understand and tackle social problems from the local level, or whether they are simply contracted suppliers of services to government (Hancock, 2006). Within this field of contest and negotiation, aboriginal interests, impoverished in material resources, in education and physical circumstances, are the weaker party. They sign up to agreements forged by government on the basis that government has already met its responsibility and is accountable, while the aboriginal parties need to amend their behaviour to meet their obligations and to become more accountable.

Certainly behavioural change is required in aboriginal communities to address low levels of school attendance, prevalent substance abuse and welfare dependency that is currently the subject of considerable public debate in Australia (CYIPL, 2005; Anthony, 2007). New reciprocal approaches to accountability are required, and these will be addressed in the final section of this paper. Before doing so, it is important to understand that the current confusion over roles, responsibilities and who should be accountable to whom arises from ambiguous understandings of the nature of aboriginal groups as subjects of development and, therefore, their standing in the Australian polity. Government development policy borrows from three distinct mainstream modes of service and applies them to aboriginal needs at the same time. These are: the individual citizen and family group (liberal democratic mode); the disadvantaged minority (community sector mode); and the self-organising society (development aid mode). Individuals and families often cluster in groups of disadvantage, disadvantaged groups can have communal characteristics, and communities within larger polities can be viewed as relatively independent especially where they share ethnicity. Policy vacillates between these approaches, though each has distinct characteristics, including appropriate forms of accountability.

Liberal democratic development mode

Full application of the liberal democratic mode to aboriginal affairs would be quite radical in Australia. Despite progressive enfranchisement through the late 1960s and early 1970s, aboriginal people have always been administered differently, never accessing services in the same way and to the same standard as other citizens. Present government policy is making serious inroads into this, particularly since the abolition of ATSIC. Both the early pronouncements on SRAs (Vanstone, 2005) and the subsequent Blueprint for Aboriginal Action in Indigenous Affairs (Brough, 2006)

stress the social-contractual relationship between government and individuals or families. The minister for indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, recently stated:

For too long, governments of all persuasions have focused on the collective aboriginal community at the expense of considering the needs and aspirations of the individuals and families that make up those same communities (Brough, 2006, p. 4).

The ruling party also had a conviction that economic advancement is the prerequisite for social development and that this is achieved by individual enterprise. Whatever the reasons for the rise of individualism as a theme of aboriginal policy, there are practical and political consequences. Fulfilling basic citizenship rights is normally the responsibility of the states. Primary health care, education, sanitation, roads and transport – these are largely state matters. Individualism, then, may be a dearly held value of the Commonwealth government, but it is also a weapon in the current struggle to hand back much of the responsibility for aboriginal wellbeing to the states, while retaining considerable control over the implementation of their policies by placing performance criteria on the supply of Commonwealth funds. While lines of accountability in this mode ostensibly reach from the citizen/family, through the election process to both state and Commonwealth politicians, in practice a more potent line of accountability operates between the state governments and their Commonwealth counterpart.

The citizen's sanction of electoral power fails aboriginal citizens in another way also. The unacknowledged "client" of aboriginal development services is the non-indigenous voter and the political class that is responsive to them. The wishes of white Australia, the context in which those wishes are formed largely through mass media images and reporting, the ability of government to convince white Australia of adequate funding, appropriate programmes and commensurate performance, are significantly more influential than the voices of aboriginal citizens. One of the greatest inhibitors of aboriginal development is that indigenous policy is formulated for the non-indigenous public.

Any bona fide change in aboriginal affairs policy is potentially fruitful, and greater attention on the ability of individuals and families to change their circumstances has its merits. It remains true, however, that many of the most severely impoverished aboriginal people are not able to access development programmes as individuals. As a disadvantaged group, or clusters of disadvantage in the Australian social landscape, aboriginal people come within the ambit of solutions proposed by community sector organisations.

Community sector mode

Until the abolition of ATSIC, the mainstream community sector and the indigenous sector were highly segregated. Even today, it is rare to find more than a passing reference to indigenous issues in the literature on the Australian community sector (see, e.g. Edwards, 2001; Hancock, 2006). This possibly arises from deference to the complexity of indigenous affairs (Head, 2005) and sensitivity to the potential for inappropriate commentary, which itself arises from segregation of expertise in indigenous matters and the more mainstream concerns of the disciplines. The mainstream community sector has been subjected to the pressures for NPM institutional reform of the 1980s and 1990s outlined earlier in this paper. Until then,

community based service organisations had assumed there was an enduring place for them as an essential part of civil society in any democratic polity. Now their performance indicators or contract terms of reference also act to reduce or remove the advocacy role of community sector organisations. At the same time they often put organisations with a history of pastoral care into conflicting roles, since part of the service demanded by government is to regulate and discipline the disadvantaged client group. Advocacy of any kind tends to attract the wrath of government, both its political and administrative wings, as it assumes an alternate base of power with its own grass-roots legitimacy. Community groups now frequently complain that the Australian government uses its funding to silence the voice of dissent in civil society, and freezes dissident organisations out of the policy making process in order to further its political programme. At present many community sector organisations in Australia are embattled and dispirited (Keen, 2006; Hancock, 2006; Hamilton and Maddison, 2007).

Trust is lacking on both sides of the service delivery equation, especially in indigenous affairs. Edwards detects a deep ambivalence on the part of the present Australian government. She says:

... it is unclear whether the government intends to involve community and business more broadly in its policy development processes, or whether it wants to remain firmly in control of those processes (Edwards, 2001, p. 80).

The government's liberal values tell it that social and material well-being are best ensured by small groups of citizens organizing themselves voluntarily at the local level, with government simply as an enabler or facilitator. However, political considerations lead the government to take more direct control. Lack of trust is particularly evident in the present government's relations with the aboriginal community sector. Yet there is very little coordination between aboriginal community sector peak bodies and mainstream community sector organizations, such as the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), to resist their common threats. Indeed, in the new mainstreamed policy environment, there is developing competition.

Indigenous development in Australia depends heavily on government grants to local service delivery organisations and settlement governing bodies. A review of the Office of the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations in 2001 found 2,709 organisations (Corrs Chambers Westgarth, 2002). Some estimates suggest there are at least as many incorporated under other statutes, leading to an estimate of more than 6,000 legally incorporated indigenous organisations for a population of about 450,000 people (Rowse, 2005). The indigenous community sector is large, even accepting that many of these corporations may exist in name only. In contrast to the small-grant schemes that prop up most of Aboriginal Australia through these organisations, mainstream Australia depends on much larger grants transferred between levels of government, the provision of state-controlled services, and indirect subsidy to families and businesses. For aboriginal groups, the predominant source of funding for many daily services and most development infrastructure is specific purpose, limited term grants sourced from mainstream government agencies such as FACSIA.

While aboriginal community sector organisations have much in common with the mainstream, and this encourages common approaches from government, they also have some distinct and quite fundamental differences. Two of these require mention:

community sector organisations are not normally run by the people whose needs they propose to meet. indigenous community sector organisations, on the other hand, are usually directed by a board elected from the client group, and most staff are also usually recruited from this group. Second, community sector organisations do not usually aim to meet the needs of entire polities comprised of both genders, all age groups, the full range of potential competencies, and with pre-colonial norms of governance that are, to a greater or lesser extent, still intact. It could be argued that these norms are often maladapted or dysfunctional (Martin, 2003), but they still produce self-organising communities. Taken together, these two characteristics lead to the third approach to aboriginal development policy.

Development aid mode

Since the mid-1970s, development aid programmes have been delivered to identifiable incorporated residential communities, or a cluster of communities, controlled, nominally at least, by an elected community council (see Sullivan, 1996). Programmes for the improvement of infrastructure, education and health, as well as the less obviously instrumental “community development”, have been delivered, usually by non-aboriginal staff, through the medium of community sector organizations, such as umbrella resource agencies and health services, or directly by state government employees. Organisations as diverse as Mambulanjin in the north-west and the Ngaanyatjarra Council in the centre have had Community Planning Units and ATSIC, before it was abolished, required collaborative community plans. Most aid workers do not have any training in development aid projects, but they have learned on-the-job skills in participatory planning, and much development aid theory of the last three decades has filtered through to Australian aboriginal affairs. There are other parallels with overseas development aid. Typically, the programmes are conceived by central policy makers aiming for national or state objectives such as the National Commitment to Improved Outcomes in the Delivery of Programs and Services for Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders (1992) and the National Framework of Principles for Delivering Services to Indigenous Australians (2002). In common with overseas aid programmes, the targets are considered remote, culturally alien and socially cohesive. Aid workers live closely with the community members, travel extensively and typically have higher standards of education and lower standards of remuneration than their public service counterparts.

Yet the similarities with overseas aid delivery are deceptive. Typically, overseas aid programmes deal with a de-colonised sovereign state and proceed from a complex of motivations involving humanitarian principles as well as privileged access to markets and products and the promise of future benefits for both parties. While service agencies in Australia are similar in some respects to international Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs), there is no equivalent to the sovereign administration through which aid is negotiated. Lacking electoral power, except through the manipulation of public opinion, the targets of development are subject to a one-way accountability regime, always upward, always to non-indigenous Australia.

None of these three overlapping and concurrent approaches to aboriginal development are well served by NPM approaches to public administration. First, this is because the means for responsiveness to citizen/clients emphasized by NPM approaches (Rowe, 1999) are very difficult for Aborigines to access. Second,

purchaser/provider models for the delivery of social services through a commercial arrangement with NGOs must be tailored to the unique needs of distinct colonized peoples. Third, NPM fails because it concentrates power in metropolitan centers remote from the subjects of policy, which is most influenced by those least directly associated with the communities affected. Development regimes are embedded in a wider accountability environment concerning the processes of public life in general in Australia, and the development organisations themselves are also embedded in community level accountabilities (Martin and Finlayson, 1996). The appropriate accountability process varies according to the three modes of service and development described here. Yet they are embedded within and cross-cut each other. For these reasons, it is useful to propose mapping the accountability environment around constellations of aboriginal need, rather than tightening ever more restrictively procedures for accounting solely along the lines of the disbursement of public money.

The reduction of accountability to simple counting

To this point, I have described a complex system of reciprocal accountabilities, some of which are statutory and formal, others intrinsic to social and political relations. While in international development circles attention is predominantly paid to the accountability of government to groups at the local level (Newell and Bellour, 2002), in the aboriginal context the reverse form of accountability predominates. This is the rigorous enforcement of strict grant application and reporting requirements from the group to the government. Mulgan defines accountability as “a relationship in which one party, the holder of accountability, has the right to seek information about, to investigate and to scrutinise the actions of another party, the giver of accountability” (Mulgan, 2002, p. 3). In practice, most parties have the right to scrutinise others, as well as being subject to scrutiny, and these rights are not absolute but vary according to context. This leads us from the view of a line of accountability to a more sociological understanding of an accountability environment within which a variety of actors move. So there is a need for an extended definition of accountability. It is that accountability is the activity of rendering an account within a group and between groups so that the actors negotiate their identity, obligations and commitments in relation to each other, producing an environment of reciprocal accountabilities.

Development programmes are necessarily part of social processes as well as a matter of organisations and their management. Accountability in a communal setting is primarily the rendering of reciprocal account between individuals and groups so that the person and the group define themselves, both to themselves and to others, as who they are, why they matter, that they are fundamentally ethical within their cultural norms. Accountability is not only an instance of relations of power. It is constitutive, making the people who they are in their own estimations and in their relations with others. This is no less true of the bureaucrats and politicians who involve themselves in aboriginal lives than it is among aboriginal people themselves (Sullivan, 2008). Where the financial and regulatory aspect is emphasized and other aspects, such as dialogue and respectful attention to narrative statements, are ignored, accountability is reduced to an instrument of colonial control and manipulation. The heavy reliance on the community sector in indigenous development, and the fact that these are politically-charged expenditures, produces rigorous accounting for grant money. By controlling the processes of application and reporting, the Australian state

substantially controls aboriginal life itself, though by non-compliance and selective enrolment in services, aboriginal people often manage to exuberantly escape in practice (see, e.g. Folds, 2001).

Even a single issue community organisation, such as a health service, targets multiple discrete areas – early childhood health, sexually transmitted disease, trachoma, diabetes, renal disease, for example. While the Commonwealth government is introducing a standard grant agreement for all aboriginal programmes, the agreement requires specific schedules for each funding stream and funding department, which impose their own terms of reporting. Community sector programmes require coordination across these areas of work as well as with other community sector organisations and state service providers. Multiple performance reporting in these circumstances clearly affects performance (Sullivan, 1996; Thorburn, 2005; ANAO, 2007).

Australian indigenous people are required continually to give account of themselves to multiple agencies, who represent themselves as standing in for the public at large, even while current whole-of-government policy attempts to streamline the delivery of development programs. The implementation of whole-of-government policy brings to the fore discrepancies in accountability requirements. Cross-departmental, inter-agency, and cross-jurisdictional collaboration inevitably blurs the boundaries of responsibility and makes it difficult to assess performance. Yet, while government agencies loosen the reins to ensure their own ability to cooperate across sectors, aboriginal community sector organisations remain firmly under the gaze of the bureaucracies' audit fetishism. Audit no longer means to hear or to receive an account, it means to require and sanction a justification. Strathern has called it "a culture on the make" which has "broken loose of its moorings in finance and accounting [with] the power of a descriptor seemingly applicable to all kinds of reckonings, evaluations and measurements" (Strathern, 2000, pp. 1-2). Because accountability has so permeated public practice, producing the "audit society" (Power, 1997), its effects as an instrument of control and acculturation in aboriginal development are masked by its apparently unimpeachable rationality.

The financial instruments that make up the armoury of accountability practices are labeled one of the softwares of colonialism by Neu (2003) because they institute regimes of discipline, control and surveillance, while at the same time inducting the colonized into an alien cultural practice. This approach, borrowed from critical development studies outside Australia, can be useful to remind us that indigenous development must happen in a complex intercultural environment. It would be useful, however, to develop this idea further by suggesting that developed colonialism (as distinct from imperialism) is simply one of the instances of modernity, which visits the practices of deep colonialism on all of its subjects. Financial accountability practices, then, are one of the softwares of modernity of which the hardware is the modern state. The firmware, to push this metaphor to its limit, is the bureaucratic administration of indigenous affairs, with techniques of accountability being applied both externally to the bureaucratic subject and internally to the bureaucrats themselves.

It is important, then, to argue against current limited forms of accountability in the same way that Parker argues against management (Parker, 2002). Historically contingent relations of power should not be presented as fulfilling ordinary human requirements for organisation and rendering an account of themselves to others.

Limited formal accountability wastes money, renders practical programmes inefficient and does not deliver the outcomes of equity, transparency and responsibility that it promises. As it is presently practiced in indigenous affairs in Australia, it is incompatible with whole of government coordination of service delivery (Head, 2005; Wilkins, 2002), and it is an impediment to the community sector engagement that good service delivery depends on. It accounts for public money without measuring the delivery of a public good.

Continual reciprocal accountability

Alternative methods of accountability, which are simultaneously instruments of planning and community engagement, could usefully be applied to aboriginal development. Strict adherence to financial accountability is one of the characteristics of NPM, yet its limits as a tool of good administration are increasingly recognised (Potter, 2002). The Service Efforts and Accomplishments Framework in New South Wales, for example, builds into its assessments qualitative accounts of improvements at the receiving end of government services. As one of its architects points out:

... in the private sector it is recognised that the presentation of financial indicators (such as earnings per share or "dividend coverage") are useful ways of communicating key information to readers of annual reports about financial performance. In the public sector, the financial performance of *general government* agencies may be of less interest than information about the quality and quantity and target of services provided within the community, and the efficiency with which services have been delivered (Walker, 2001, p. 5, emphasis in the original).

The Western Australian trial of citizen juries for rationing choices in health care (Mooney and Blackwell, 2004) offers an example of how policy can be formulated in concert with citizens themselves. Similarly, Meredith Edwards, drawing on Canadian and British experiences, proposes the adoption of the Canadian Auditor General's Accountability Framework for community sector/public sector partnerships (Edwards, 2001). Financial accountability is only one aspect of this Framework. Edwards goes on to suggest it could be more productive simply to ask people in surveys whether aspects of their lives are getting better; whether the government or the community organisation is doing a good job. Such a dialogue with the client citizens has other benefits than more accurately reflecting performance. It can be used as an instrument of policy development, of planning, and monitoring of implementation. In the international development arena, Mosse has argued for planning development as process rather than a "blueprint". He identifies three ways in which process approaches differ. First, they incorporate ongoing learning and adjustment of the programme. Second, they concentrate as much on building relationships as on programme delivery. Third, and most challenging for NPM approaches to development, he says that "process" "refers to the dynamic, unpredictable and idiosyncratic elements in development programmes; those things which are not easily amenable to planning and management control but which are nonetheless central to success or failure" (Mosse, 1998, pp. 2-3).

Funded and regulated by government, and carried out by community organisations, client appraisals, surveys and community juries can be used to develop trust between the parties – trust for government that the organisation has a relationship with the community it serves; trust for the community that government is concerned with this

class of citizens (Edwards, 2001) – and as a means of appraisal of both community sector and governmental performance. Properly instituted, such arrangements can become instances of co-governance (Ackerman, 2004), which would be particularly appropriate to the culturally and geographically distinct areas of highest aboriginal need.

Conclusion

This paper has pointed out some of the unintended and unproductive effects of the introduction of NPM to aboriginal affairs over two decades. In particular, it has argued against narrow fiscal forms of accountability which currently stifle aboriginal development. This development occurs, unevenly and inadequately, within an environment of cross-cutting accountabilities from the community level to the national level, both formal and informal. The paper has argued that there is currently a deficit in democratic accountability to aboriginal people. Instead, they are subjected to remote control of their lives by politicians and administrators who, responsive to other forces in Australian society, demand rigorous fiscal responsibility from the bottom up without commensurate heed being given to the aboriginal voice in development. Rigorous hierarchical accountability is inefficient as information passes only slowly up the chain of command and provides little basis for pragmatic decision making. Both because it is inefficient and because it is not responsive to local needs, vertical accountability needs to be truncated, with a “cut-out” at the local or regional level. If robust and trustworthy regimes of accountability can be instituted across a region, then long and costly chains of hierarchical accountability are not necessary. Identifying an accountability environment, in which responsibilities are mapped reciprocally across a region, would result in more efficient planning, implementation and evaluation. In a robust accountability environment, properly negotiated and instituted, it should be only necessary for the region to warrant through agreed processes that development is occurring, that it is fair and equitable, and that it is an efficient use of resources. The means to evaluate this are the same as the means to plan and implement it.

Note

1. It is a convention in Australia to capitalise “indigenous” when referring to aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders since it does the work of a proper noun. Many Indigenous people are sensitive to the difference, since otherwise they are relegated to a category, rather than a people. This paper is not concerned with Torres Strait Islanders, whose institutional arrangements are unique, although their status in Australian society is similar to aborigines. Consequently, I mainly refer to aboriginal issues, sometimes to broader constellations such as Indigenous affairs, but may also revert to discussion of indigenous matters when these are more general than the Australian case.

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