

RemoteFOCUS, CAN WE MAKE GOVERNMENT WORK FOR THE KIMBERLEY?

On 2 December 2009, the Hon. Fred Chaney, speaking as the Chair of Desert Knowledge Australia, shared his view of government with the Kimberley Society. Desert Knowledge is part of remoteFOCUS, which came into being after a group of Australians—industry, government and non-government representatives—got together in 2008 to look at how governance and administration could be improved for the areas they view as Remote Australia. This overview draws on the evening's talk, which was largely off the cuff, and it includes explanatory material referred to during the talk and later sourced through the remoteFOCUS website.

At the outset Mr Chaney stressed that, despite having served as a politician and a government minister, he is not a political spokesperson for any political interest. Rather, after 50 years' involvement in issues that affect the Aboriginal community, he is calling for change in a structure that dictates failure in many programs that are meant to improve people's lives. The change he seeks is in the delivery of services not just to Aboriginal people but to everyone living in regional, remote and rural Australia.

In defining the geographic location of "this often forgotten backyard of our nation", Mr Chaney fell back on the trusted adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. The first screen in his PowerPoint presentation was mostly blank but it showed a string of smallish blobs towards the bottom right hand corner; another blob a little to the left; and then a lone blob well across to the left. "Does anyone recognise this?", he asked. The silence said it all.

As the screen took on more detail, it became evident that the blobs were the portions of Australia toward which most government services are directed. The map on which they appeared identified the blobs as "Inner Regional" areas (in terms of remoteness) that encompass Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra, Adelaide and Perth. Other cities and towns could be visualised nestling in the biggest blob—a corridor of green that ran southward from the central-northern coast of New South Wales and then swung inland before it embraced the Albury-Wodonga area and fanned out over the central and southern parts of Victoria. Other bands of colour showed Hobart positioned in an "Outer Regional" area, and Darwin in a "Remote" area. The dominant feature on the map was the "Very Remote" area, occupying 85 per cent of the continent but containing only 4.5 per cent of the population. The modified map, which can be seen online (via <http://www.desertknowledge.com.au/>) was based on one identified as *ABS preliminary Estimated Resident Population, based on the 2006 Census of Population and Housing*.

Geographically, much of the "Very Remote" area comprises country that is arid or semi-arid. Desert Australia is described as 70 per cent of the continent with only 2.5 per cent of the population. Approximately half of the Kimberley falls within the semi-arid area.

We heard that the events of the past 30 years have turned Australia into the most urbanised continent in the world, and that more than 90 per cent of our population lives within 100km of the coast. As Mr Chaney put it:

Our view of our country has shrunk. We now have our backs to our land and face the sea, and the globalised world. Our thinking, our democracy and economy has progressively been refined to best serve the vast majority who live in metropolitan Australia.

In travelling outside the urbanised areas, he has picked up an immense sense of discontent. It was not with any particular political party but with government in general; government that comes across as being irrelevant, unhelpful, and committed to a structure that does not work. Not surprisingly, the further he went from the capital cities, the more dissatisfaction he saw. One source of it, he feels, is the lessening of scope outside the capital cities to participate in decision making. For instance, whereas hospitals previously had local boards with a strong say, that approach has largely gone, and regional staff now have less chance to contribute to policy and important decisions.

Mr Chaney sees the remote and very remote parts of Australia as those that unify our country but he notes that, as places, they mean different things to different people. There are mythical elements that make the remoteness “the heart of the Australian Psyche, alongside the Anzacs, the bodyline series and other fading influences”. There is wealth, most noticeable in the form of mines and the thousands of vehicles that carry workers, tourists and other travellers. And then there is what many people think of as Aboriginal dysfunction.

In discussing the high concentration of Indigenous communities in the remote areas, Mr Chaney related some aspects to the findings of a Brookings Institution project . A paper about the project – Susan E. Rice’s *Global Poverty, Weak States and Insecurity* – explains that the weakest states are mostly in Africa, Central Asia and South Asia but, in the listed total of fifty-two, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands are also included. Her paper (see http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2006/08globaleconomics_rice/08globaleconomics_rice.pdf), mentions the four Brookings Institution criteria for “a failed state”:

1. poverty
2. security issues relating to violence and homicide
3. the capacity of governments to provide basic needs for human development
4. [perceived] legitimacy of government

The people who established remoteFOCUS extended this idea to include Remote Australia. They see parts of Remote Australia as “a failed state within the nation” and they argue “that there is an escalating crisis that will lead to significant consequences to the nation unless it is addressed”. Their argument reflects their limited faith in the Australian government capacity (at Federal and State levels) to transform policy objectives into positive outcomes. Mr Chaney included this argument in evidence he provided at a Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities hearing in October 2009 (www.desertknowledge.com.au/remotefocus). His stance there was that it is more than just a policy issue because the problems arise from the fact that the policy is being considered on the wrong scale and at the wrong location. He also advocated responding to failure by building the capacity of people to achieve good outcomes rather than, as is often the case now, punishing them for their failures. What is required, he says, is expert help and mentoring that will enable regional or local boards and committees to perform well.

While it might seem a giant step to some to extend the “failed state” idea to parts of Australia, remoteFOCUS believes that a succession of government reports and inquiries lends credence to its thinking. In its *Revitalising Remote Australia* prospectus, it points to items that include:

... successive reports on the parlous state of education in remote regions; and the Western Australian State Coroner's report on the suicide of 22 Indigenous people in the Kimberley region delivered in February [2008], in which Coroner Hope found an appalling lack of governance, little or no coordination between the Federal and Western Australian Governments, and a lack of a system of government accountability to measure outcomes from significant public investment aimed to alleviate Indigenous disadvantage.

In substantiating the belief that Remote Australia is accelerating towards a crisis, the summary of evidence put forward in the prospectus includes:

... the human costs which are being inflicted upon current and future generations (especially given the young age distribution of the Indigenous population). This reality is highlighted by two recent studies of Indigenous labour-force participation in the Pilbara and Kimberley resource boom regions of WA which concluded that for Indigenous people who do reach workforce age, 28 per cent will not reach 50 years of age. Statistically, more than half (58%) of Indigenous males who reach 15 years of age will not survive to retirement age at 65 years. In other words, out of an average cohort of 100 Indigenous males aged 25, only 42 would still be alive by age 65.

A key point is that, while Aboriginal conditions command the greatest attention in Remote Australia, the "failed state" is not just in the Aboriginal domain; it is a whole of community problem. In that regard Mr Chaney cited the Pilbara – an area 80 per cent non-Aboriginal and an area of great wealth production – which reflects government incapacity to service to the satisfaction of the whole population. There, and in Remote Australia as a whole, a huge, obvious gap exists in opportunity and health. To tackle that gap, remoteFOCUS advocates the use of locally based, bottom-up solutions instead of the current top-down solutions.

In his evidence to the Senate Select Committee, Mr Chaney had given some examples of problems and solutions. One example of a functional service arrangement developed at the local level involved a young woman named Kate Smith who has just done a PhD but has also worked out of Derby for five years. Her interest in providing services for disabled, elderly and infirm Aboriginal people led to the creation of a local partnership in which the relevant government agencies and non-government agencies work with the community. Important differences are that the manager is local; the service is locally resourced, managed and controlled; and the people employed there are not reliant on Perth to get things done. Lots of other examples also exist for people working within the status quo to get a decentralised model. And additional models are being developed, with remoteFOCUS planning to workshop them in the community in a bid to help remote Australians gain fair and effective access to services and funding from governments.

In listing the reform proposals advocated by remoteFOCUS, Mr Chaney included:

1. Focussed and flexible funding for Remote Australia
2. Ensuring continuity and effectiveness of public servants servicing Remote Australia
3. Fair funding for Remote Australia: reforming Commonwealth funding to the States/Territories to ensure that the allocation of finance to Remote Australia is consistent with actual disability factors and real cost differentials
4. Engaging local communities in planning, budget development and budget control
5. A Commission for Outback Australia
6. A social and economic strategy for Remote Australia for the national interest
7. Better scrutiny and accountability mechanisms in the Public Service

8. To establish and maintain the institutional capacity of Governments (the 'governance of government') and the governance capacity of local communities/regions to meaningfully and productively engage with each other (and wider civil society), whilst achieving the aspirations of each.

Then, in urging the Kimberley Society members and visitors in his large audience to respond to remoteFOCUS, he suggested the following actions:

- Register interest (www.desertknowledge.com.au/remoteFOCUS)
- Register support of prospectus
- Use networks to promote
- Enlist political support
- Suggest alternative arrangements
- Financial or in-kind support

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