



Chapter 10: Governance, Indigenous and Non-Indigenous, as a Social Determinant of Aboriginal Health

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Introduction

Governance involves processes, systems, and institutions, both formal and informal, by which social groups constitute themselves, devise values and policies, carry out joint objectives, distribute power and authority and hold their members accountable to one another. The field of governance studies is important for understanding the social determinants of health by reference to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous governance systems. On the Indigenous side, informal governance arrangements among groups and across regions are as important as formal organisations for community administration or health delivery. On the non-Indigenous side, there are impediments to meeting Aboriginal health needs both because of confusion at the interface of Indigenous and non-Indigenous governance, and also because of lack of clarity over governance arrangements within and between health services and related agencies.

Processes of governance affect health outcomes in a number of ways. Community governance can influence perceived health goals in relation to other community purposes, it can affect people's understanding of health determinants and the intentions of health program deliverers, and it can aid or inhibit health education and health programs. Governance is implicated in this whether it is understood as sets of institutional structures or as a series of self-replicating informal processes. In fact, it can be seen as both of these, since stable processes harden over time into institutions, and institutions themselves harbour governance processes that are often unintended and formally unacknowledged but, nevertheless, influential.

The complexity of governance issues in any particular Indigenous situation is an important influence on health outcomes. Most obviously the governance instruments in place affect how Aboriginal groups may be communicated with, how research projects can be managed with consent, and how compliance with good health practice can be encouraged and monitored. Perhaps less obviously, good governance leads to relative community harmony and a sense of wellbeing, and thus both to the conditions for better health and receptiveness to health programs.

The field of Aboriginal health involves cross-cultural mediations where the formal and informal processes of non-Indigenous health delivery institutions meet up with and share a common ground with the formal and informal processes for Indigenous governance. This paper looks at processes and institutions in a number of subject areas: Aboriginal political life and custom; the governance organisations in place for ordering aspects of Aboriginal life; and, on the non-Indigenous side, at the culture of organisations that affects their ability to be effective, and how cultural constraints may limit cooperation in whole-of-government programs. The paper introduces each of these topics with a discussion of the key issues and provides a summary of some of the major writings in the field.

Aboriginal political life and custom

Two important observations about Aboriginal political life are often missed in policy planning. Aboriginal communities are not a social vacuum or *tabula rasa* of governance processes. Non-Indigenous interventions in Aboriginal life will always encounter a pre-existing system of governance. It may be informal and will have been altered by colonisation, but it continues to assert a strong influence on people's lives and their relations with non-Indigenous people and organisations. Secondly, Aboriginal authority, in such areas as decision making or dispute management, is always diffuse. It varies according to the nature of the players in any particular interaction, the social context, and the nature of the issue at hand. There is no 'one stop shop' for governance and authority in an Aboriginal setting.

Aboriginal authority does not operate through a strict hierarchy of people holding particular offices or a particular status. For this reason, Aboriginal politics has been called a state of 'ordered anarchy' (Hiatt 1998). Although there are prominent people in any group, they rarely have the authority to speak for everyone. At best they may be the group's choice for contact with outsiders and liaison with appropriate community members for particular issues. Frequently, also, they will represent powerful factional interests, not least themselves. Aboriginal leaders, in general, do not have the power to bind others to a course

of action. There is a strong ethic of personal autonomy in Aboriginal groups (Myers 1986). However, the principle that puts the 'order' into 'ordered' anarchy is that of 'relatedness' (Myers 1986), and it is this dynamic of autonomy in tension with relatedness that characterises Aboriginal political life. Autonomy has an important corollary—the attenuation of responsibility for the actions of another. Communities may have concern for the actions of individuals—this is part of relatedness—but their members have little available to them in Aboriginal cultural practice to control or regulate the behaviour of another in secular matters. This follows from an individual's autonomy.

Relatedness expresses itself through custom. While this is often called customary law it does not have the same characteristics as Western law. It is rather the customary way that people are supposed to relate to each other and to the space in which they live, informed by mores of kinship and sanctioned by religion and myth. It is also the customary way of dealing with breaches of these expectations. Like political life itself, custom is fluid and negotiable in operation, varying according to the nature of the authorities invoked, the nature of the actors, the circumstances and the context. Of course, there is another significant variable—the impact of colonisation.

Colonisation has had an impact in two ways, firstly by tending towards codifying, simplifying and rigidifying the fluidity and complexity of pre-colonial practice, and secondly, by challenging, modifying and frequently undermining Indigenous systems of authority. These two somewhat contradictory tendencies go hand in hand. Examples of the first would be the broader society condoning spearing in the leg for an offence, such that it may now be seen by a particular community as the only appropriate punishment for a range of serious offences, whereas in the past ostracism or fighting may have been among the responses. This supports those in the group who are in favour of spearing and undermines dissenting voices, and it usually impacts most heavily on young men. Indeed, physical retribution by older men against almost anyone in a community, if couched in terms of custom, usually attracts more favourable outside attention than similar action by women or by youth. This is only one instance in which the values of the coloniser have influenced the practice of the colonised.

Yet non-Indigenous support for certain Aboriginal customs does not depend on it reflecting non-Indigenous practice. Rather, it depends on an idea of how Aboriginal people ought to behave, even if this is radically distinct from non-

Indigenous practice. Similarly, the second tendency, the undermining of Indigenous authority, depends also on the outsider's views of correct behaviour. This is most noticeable when acknowledged authority figures within a group refuse to cooperate with an advised course of action or a project. Their position is fragile in relation to outsiders, and they are often easily circumvented and their views marginalised. While this means a project can often go ahead, at the same time customary authority within the group is undermined and demoralisation of the whole group can be the result. Demoralisation and social malaise often then mean that the project itself meets a dysfunctional community and becomes a waste of effort and resources.

How can these seemingly insoluble tendencies be reconciled with the urgent need for intervention in health practice? On the one hand, attempts to recognise and institutionalise customary practice result in simplification, advantaging one set of interests against others, and perhaps sanctioning abhorrent practices from a non-Indigenous point of view. On the other hand, ignoring customary authority further undermines already vulnerable families and communities, results often in stubborn resistance to apparently beneficial programs, and produces social behaviour that just perpetuates the problems intervention programs are designed to address.

Clearly, one answer, recognised by most social welfare agencies, is to provide the group with the support and the conceptual tools to adapt their practice to contemporary circumstances in ways that they find congenial. Currently, this is called 'capacity building', but there is no consensus about how it should be undertaken and there has been little effort to date in Australia to view these problems within an international comparative framework. Secondly, there must be a willingness to enter a dialogue with Aboriginal groups aimed at doing more than convincing them of a program's worth. There may be inhibitors to the program that the potential participants are well aware of. Or there may be cross-cutting programs that lie in the domain of another agency but have higher priority in the group's own estimation.

Frequently, the need to get 'runs on the board' leads to overriding these concerns since there is apparently nothing to be done about them. Attention to the problems of governance raised above requires the assessment of non-health inputs, those which need to be sourced outside of the health field. An understanding of these problems in any particular case could also provide arguments to support a decision of non-intervention where it could be a wasted or

even harmful effort. A more immediately practical approach to dealing with the constraints of informal community governance is to leave it to community organisations to handle, and to work through these organisations themselves, however imperfect they may be, rather than attempting to go directly to 'the community' itself. This idea of 'community' is often a construct of outsiders and cannot be assumed to exist as a social entity simply because people are co-residents of a settlement (Sullivan 1996:5–42; Holcombe 2004:163–84).

Aboriginal organisations

Many Aboriginal community organisations have been in operation for more than two decades. They perform many functions—health service, art group, women's refuge, outstation support, progress association, land rights application or administration, or communal civic services. The organisational matrix for any given area is often complex. In many instances, service organisations support each other, often acting in coalition and dividing responsibilities. They may share membership and there can be considerable overlap of personnel on the various governing boards. In other instances, organisations may be captured by particular interests such as family groups or hold policy stances with little apparent basis, from an outsider's point of view, that have become historically entrenched. In all cases, the members and significant individuals in community organisations will have much more intimate ties across organisations, a fuller knowledge of their linked histories and longer term commitments to relationships (good or bad) with each other than any outsider can hope to have. This means that outsider interventions need to proceed cautiously and with respect, yet without freezing all activity at the first sign of conflict, dissension or crossed purposes, since this does not do justice to Aboriginal needs and expectations. Community groups need to be carefully studied in order to set a course between the extremes of working only with one apparently powerful organisation, thus marginalising others, and working with none because it is apparent that power is distributed, diffused and contested. Such study should be able to identify where functional power and influence lies, how formal structural authority can be aligned with this and where shared interests allow for the brokering of cross-organisational alliances.

All Aboriginal organisations, like non-Indigenous organisations, have a formal constitution. They may be incorporated under the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976* or they

may be incorporated under one of the state associations acts. In some cases they are incorporated under corporations law appropriate to large-scale business, but these are rare. In the vast majority of cases an organisation follows standard non-Indigenous governance forms in its administrative structure. There is a membership formed around a set of objectives of the association that establish the community of interest. There is a governing council or board and the rules establish how this is to be constituted, how it is to be appointed or elected, and the criteria for board membership. The membership controls the organisation by election of the board at the annual general meeting and can control the board from time to time by a special general meeting. The appropriateness of the structure and rules, and the conduct of the organisation in meetings and elections, is scrutinised and regulated either by the Commonwealth Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations or the various state offices for the regulation of incorporated associations. Organisations are usually formed to receive grants from government. These grants come with conditions for disbursement and accountability that further limit the sphere in which an organisation can assert autonomy.

Two things are apparent from this brief discussion. Aboriginal organisations are not Indigenous in structure and are not entirely under Indigenous control, yet they have been adapted by Indigenous people to Indigenous purposes and they intersect with unincorporated Indigenous governance processes. Outsiders need to practice a delicate balancing act in their dealings with community organisations. On the one hand, they cannot assume organisations to be inauthentic and illegitimate simply because they follow non-Indigenous governance guidelines. Clearly, they have been both adopted by, and adapted to, Indigenous community processes. However, nor can they be assumed to have unquestionable legitimacy in the eyes of the members, and beyond this the constituents and clients, nor effectiveness in good governance and community service outcomes. Indeed, there tends to be a contradiction between these two elements of organisations, because non-Indigenous processes of good governance have proved to be the most instrumentally efficient but may lack legitimacy in Aboriginal culture. Congenial organisations in the eyes of staff and council members may be lacking in efficiency.

Attempts to address the legitimacy question by importing apparent

Aboriginal cultural forms often results both in a poor reflection of culture (which is too complex to be treated in this way) and resiling from good governance principles.

Many of the structural difficulties encountered by organisations established for community governance and service delivery have been canvassed in the recent review of the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act (ACA) 1976*, under which many Aboriginal organisations are incorporated (Corrs Chambers Westgarth 2002). The ACA Act is the vehicle specifically intended by the Commonwealth for the incorporation of Aboriginal associations. The recent review points out that there are 3000 associations incorporated under the Act, and these organisations have a key role in the delivery of government services at both state and federal levels. The last amendment to the Act took place in 1992. Past reviews of the Act have raised important issues to do with law reform and the current review notes that these concerns have not been dealt with by Parliament. The review identifies current issues that affect the efficiency of the incorporation statute. Since enactment in 1976, Indigenous people have undergone a change in circumstances. Changes in the legal environment have impacted upon corporate regulation and 'the recognition and enforcement of Indigenous legal rights' (Corrs Chambers Westgarth 2002:1). The current Corporations Act is not geared to the needs of Indigenous organisations across the board, but rather is most suitable for organisations operating as commercial enterprises. The enactment of the Native Title Act (NTA) has also affected the legal environment since it requires that Native Title can only be managed by ACA Act corporations (Mantziaris & Martin 2000; Sullivan 1995).

The conclusions of the report can be summarised as follows. The needs of Indigenous people are not being met by current legislation concerned with incorporation. Needs related to incorporation have to be addressed by a change in the legislative environment. It was the purpose of the ACA Act in 1976 to provide a 'general statute of incorporation' for Indigenous people. The report found that as a consequence of amendments since enactment, the ACA Act no longer fulfils its purpose. Indeed, the legislative purpose of 1976 reflects now-outmoded concepts in the regulation of corporations more generally. The report also notes that the understanding of Indigenous culture in the Act is no longer appropriate to the altered circumstances of Indigenous people since 1976. Currently, the Act serves to undermine, rather than assist, Indigenous people in terms of socio-economic benefits. This is not confined to concerns with the legislation itself, but is also reflected in the Act's administration.

Non-Indigenous organisational culture

Most development intervention in Aboriginal communities requires cooperation between government agencies, Aboriginal non-government organisations (NGOs) and the community itself. Clearly this requires an understanding of intercultural interaction. This has been an interdisciplinary study in the humanities for many years. In practical terms, it means managing the interaction of Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems. Conceptualising the interface, however, is a matter for considerable contention in this field and a new approach is slowly emerging.

The old, and dominant, view is based on an understanding of intersecting spheres of cultural activity—Indigenous on the one side, non-Indigenous on the other—with intercultural activity occurring in between. Some NGOs, such as Aboriginal medical services, could be characterised as inhabiting this ambiguous and polyvalent intercultural space (Sullivan 1996:73–81).

The emerging view finds these characterisations unhelpful. There is as much diversity within Aboriginal groups and across Aboriginal Australia as there is in non-Indigenous Australia. Pan-Aboriginality is as tenuous a concept as its opposite, the mainstream. On the other hand, non-Indigenous and Indigenous activities are inextricably mixed with each other and mutually dependent. From this point of view health interventions, like others, do not exist in two worlds which need translation one from the other, but occur within the same field and upon the same ground. The 'inter' in intercultural in this sense means not so much 'between' as 'among' (see Merlan 2005). The consequences of this view are challenging, as they require an approach that embraces the idea of culture permeating both Indigenous and non-Indigenous institutions in any given situation.

In the previous section, we addressed the possibility of Aboriginal organisations being constituted like non-Indigenous organisations, but operating in a culturally congenial manner. This means that the board, staff, members and clients respond to cultural values and modes of behaviour that are not reflected in the formal structure. Non-Indigenous organisations do this too, though this is rarely recognised by the organisation itself. Rather like the speculation that we cannot taste water because we are born with it in our mouths, culture is often not apparent to those immersed in it. The anthropology of organisations (see Wright 1994) attempts

to make visible and analyse the dynamics that occur in the interstices of formal organisational structure or apparent due process (see Lea 2002). This approach can be useful in understanding why government service delivery organisations are not more successful at meeting Indigenous disadvantage, and could have much to say about the impediments to whole-of-government cooperation across agencies and sectors.

Government organisations have a formal distribution of authority reflected in the agency flow-chart. They have formal mission statements elaborated into strategic plans and operationalised through business plans. They have agency policies that promote activities directed through these plans and implemented through the structure with, additionally, requirements for reporting, monitoring, assessment and accountability. Routinely, they set themselves the task of improving Indigenous disadvantage in their area of intervention, and routinely they fail to do so, sometimes significantly. Nevertheless, impeccable procedures are followed through standard institutional structures and these allow for reporting that all is well with the organisation and its officers at least, despite its lack of impact in the world. It is common in Indigenous circles to attribute this to a lack of care, bad faith or incompetence, but this is unfair and simplistic. If, however, we accept that motivated, skilled and intelligent people have undertaken Aboriginal development programs for the past forty years in organisations with world 'best practice' standards in terms of administrative arrangements, we clearly must look elsewhere for their lack of success.

There are practical reasons and reasons that derive from organisational cultures. We will argue that the second of these has not received enough attention. Firstly some practical difficulties: Indigenous problems are often multi-factorial so one agency's programs may fail, or not get off the ground, because of uncoordinated activity by another agency. Indigenous interventions are costly not only because of their complexity, but also because they occur off a low base, and usually in areas that are hard to service. Lack of knowledge may also be a factor. High staff turnover and historical ignorance of Aboriginal issues in Australia in general can result in policy formulation and program implementation being put in the hands of people who are fumbling in the dark.

Yet these factors have been around for a long time and many attempts have been made to address them. Inter-agency coordinating committees and ministerial councils have long been a feature of Indigenous affairs planning. Budget

allocations fluctuate, and there is no doubt that more money has often led to improved outcomes, but also much funding is misapplied or swallowed up in unproductive processes. Similarly, lack of knowledge about how to do Aboriginal development is difficult to understand. So much research and subsequent discussion has occurred continuously over this period that it is often hard to justify calling for more. Although these factors are, no doubt, influential, it is likely there are other impediments that have not yet received adequate attention, and that these concern the internal processes of development agencies (investigated in the Australian context by Lea 2002).

Some of the organisational drivers that an anthropologist would look for within the formal structure are lines of authority, responsibility, control over resources, flows of information and the means of dominating the organisation's symbols and discourse. Despite formal positions of authority, the power to direct any individual or section is attenuated by subordinates' power to resist. Conflicting aims and needs come into play as well as conflicting assessments of what is required. Resistance may come about by being responsive to other drivers: for instance, directing an individual to take risk without protection for failure produces resistance. Yet the person directing may not be in control of such a guarantee. There are, then, other lines of authority, direction or influence that can lead to a confusion or dilution of clear principles of management. This is a small example of the manner in which similar cross-cutting interplays of power and resistance within an organisation could be described and analysed. A

common means of dealing with multiple pressures is to reinterpret the goal such that it seems to meet all requirements. Thus, a clear intention at one level of the organisation is implemented in an unforeseen manner at another. Often, the least powerful in such an interaction is the client, leaving the service personnel able to sign off on an achievement, variously reinterpreted at all levels, while the client is no better off.

This is only a preliminary attempt to indicate a fruitful area of study, not a developed thesis in itself. It does show how complex such an analysis could quickly become. Complexity is increased when cooperation is required across agencies, as it is with the current government policy of whole-of-government service delivery in Indigenous

affairs (Shergold 2004). Here multiple lines of authority or influence are more clearly tied to control over resources and levels of responsibility. No one in a government agency is likely to be happy redirecting 'their' resources to another's project, still less when they may be required to share responsibility without commensurate control. This is not simply a matter of selfish behaviour. It is commonsense when no protection is provided from sanction over negative outcomes nor reward for positive ones. Consequently, cooperation tends to take place in symbolic behaviour such as meetings and position papers, apparently implementing policy without deeply changing normal practice. These insecurities, which are real not imagined, are greater when cooperation is required across formal boundaries such as state/Commonwealth lines or the government/non-government sectors.

Control of information flows is also an important part of any cultural analysis of organisations. Each person or workgroup at every level of an organisation is subject to their own configuration of information, whether coming from their interaction with a client group, from policy planning forums, or from cruder political drivers such as sensitivity to Aboriginal health indicators in the field of broad public debate. How information is controlled, how meanings are transformed as information passes from one set of interests to another, and how policy is formed as much in response to an agency's internal needs as to external factors, are equally subjects that could bear a good deal of examination.

Factors like those outlined here add up to consistent behaviours and unarticulated values that form the culture of an organisation or agency. Newcomers are inducted into the culture as 'the way we do things here' through both formal and informal means. Advancement depends to a significant extent on absorption and reflection of the culture, and when employees move on or cross to other agencies one of their first tasks of adjustment is to jettison the old culture and absorb a new one. Culture conflicts across agencies and between government agencies and NGOs can be another significant barrier to whole-of-government service delivery.

Approaches to organisational culture

In the remainder of this chapter we discuss some sources for the study of organisational culture and whole of government service delivery in Indigenous affairs.

Wright (1994) offers a useful overview of anthropological approaches to organisational culture. In the introductory chapter of *Anthropology of Organisations* she gives a historical account of the anthropological study of public and private organisations. This account incorporates discussion of the research, its analytical methods and a context for later chapters outlining approaches to culture as a concept. For the study of culture and organisations she shows how anthropological approaches to culture have contributed to organisation studies.

Wright argues that the need for this approach has been generated by changing ways of organising in an environment of structural adjustment both in the West and elsewhere. She suggests that these changes have been brought about by the reordering of capital and the recognition of the shortcomings of the Western model of bureaucracy. She says that changes in ways of organising have been influenced by, and have influenced, Indigenous management, gender inequality and development discourse stressing the 'empowerment' of clients. Wright develops and endorses a notion of culture that emphasises social relations in processes of domination. She suggests that in doing this we can garner an understanding of how it is that people make and contest meaning in an organisational context. Furthermore, Wright sees that in a period characterised by change and reorganisation of capital the 'claim to "culture" is itself ideological' (1994:27), stressing that culture is being perpetually renegotiated and contested. Deployed as an analytical concept, she says, culture allows us to problematise the idea of what an organisation is in a particular set of circumstances.

In his contribution to Wright's collection, Marsden makes a useful contribution to the study of Indigenous management (Marsden 1994:41–55). He looks at the current situation in development studies that emphasises the need for local initiatives to drive project development. In contrast to previous models, which stressed the importance of non-local specialist knowledge to initiate and develop projects, current thinking privileges the 'knowledge' of local communities. The apparently neutral vocabulary of management has, according to Marsden, now taken over from the previous vocabulary of economics. In this chapter, he seeks to look behind this terminology and see what assumptions it rests on and indeed what it stands for.

One assumption is the belief that flexible management approaches which involve people in their design and implementation will be more successful than top-down approaches (Marsden 1994:42). In building capacity in

development projects, techniques like participatory appraisal and evaluation have become commonplace. The aim of such projects is to focus not just on end results (products) but also processes. This, according to Marsden, is where the appeal of 'Indigenous management' lies. If local people are going to drive local schemes in a bid for self-reliance, then the terminology of 'Indigenous management' is seductive.

But Marsden problematises the notion of 'Indigenous management' suggesting that, in development discourse, it is deployed in three particular ways. These are: reference to 'Indigenous peoples', the process of indigenisation, and 'insider knowledge' and its use (Marsden 1994:42). Marsden expands each of these uses, with a particular focus on the problematic 'insider knowledge', and stresses that the political dimension of knowledge cannot be ignored, particularly in its use.

In pulling together the various threads of his argument, Marsden considers issues such as oral and written tradition and the related issues of the relegation of Indigenous knowledge systems to an inferior position based on modes of communication. He attributes various other techniques for relegating Indigenous 'traditions' to functionalist accounts of cultural situations progressed in the early part of the last century. In questioning the rhetoric of development discourse, Marsden draws out the current emphasis on sustainable development and capacity building through the strengthening of local institutions. He suggests that in so doing there is a tendency to ignore or misjudge the cultural and historical contexts that have produced such rhetoric. He has pointed out some of the dangers of relying on concepts of 'insider knowledge' and particularly emphasised the political nature of such knowledge.

Herzfeld (1992) is another significant contributor to the anthropology of organisations. He is concerned with the impulse of Western thinkers to assume that Western societies are more 'rational' than other societies. He argues that it is impossible to ignore local understandings of social relationships, responsibility, personal character and chance in assessing national bureaucracies. Formal systems and informal activities rely on both symbolic practices and idiomatic language to establish boundaries that then allow the distinction to be drawn between insiders and outsiders. The delineation of such boundaries facilitates the expression of prejudice and the justification of social disregard. This then allows the most generous of societies to produce at a structural or national level legitimised indifference.

Herzfeld asks:

how and why can political entities that celebrate the rights of individuals and small groups so often seem cruelly selective in applying those rights? Indifference to the plight of individuals and groups often coexists with democratic and egalitarian rights (1992:1).

The book uses examples from modern Greece as well as European social forms to explore this idea, following the development of modern bureaucracy and of looking at relationships—often mediated through social form—between individuals and the state over time. Herzfeld uses historical and cultural information to examine what he sees as binding humans together, while simultaneously setting them against each other through time. He also looks at the ways that laws and formalised systems are altered through the forces of social process, changing their original meanings.

Whole-of-government coordination of service delivery

Herzfeld's perspective can be usefully applied to whole-of-government administrative policy. This field itself has a developed literature. The integration of national administrative systems has been referred to variously as 'joined up' government in the United Kingdom (UK), in Canada as horizontalism, in Australia as whole-of-government, and elsewhere as holistic governance. While there are some differences in emphasis in the literature, these terms refer to the allocation of resources, and to the coordination of thinking and action within government. These approaches supposedly bring together stakeholders in various areas of government to lead ultimately to the provision of more streamlined services for citizens, consumers or clients. There is a developing international experience of whole-of-government policy approaches (Ling 2002:19–21). The literature from the UK is particularly useful for analysing the Australian example (e.g., Pollitt 2003; Ling 2002). In literature from both countries there is a good deal of attention paid to the idea that a joined-up approach is not new, rather that it has been present in UK and Australian government policy development for many years.

In Australia, whole-of-government has gained a key position in recent public administration reform. The secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (effectively the head of the public service), Peter Shergold, introduced the Australian Government's commitment to a whole-of-government approach in Indigenous affairs in 2004. He suggested that the provision of 'Indigenous-specific programs and services' in a whole-of-government way would be 'the biggest test of whether the rhetoric of connectivity can be marshalled into effective action' (Shergold 2004:10). He stressed that 'no new edifice is to be built to administer Aboriginal affairs ... [that this whole-of-government approach] is "the antithesis of the old departmentalism"' (Shergold 2004:10). Shergold goes on to detail the five characteristics of the whole-of-government approach to Indigenous affairs—collaboration, regional need, flexibility, accountability and leadership. Noting that 'knowledge is the key to cultural change' and that whole-of-government is 'the public administration of the future' (2004:15) Shergold is optimistic about the capacity of whole-of-government to resolve social issues in a 'new era' of public administration.

The report that Shergold introduced in April 2004, 'Connecting Government' (MAC 2004), had been commissioned by the Australian Public Service Management Advisory Committee and is a management policy document. In comparison with the international literature it shows that within public administration in Australia, an understanding of the implications of a whole-of-government way of doing business is underdeveloped. It is clear from the report that the authors are ambivalent about how the principles of effective 'joined up' government might be applied to the Australian Public Service (APS). The authors of this report define 'whole-of-government' in the APS as follows:

Whole-of-government denotes public service agencies working across portfolio boundaries to achieve a shared goal and an integrated government response to particular issues. Approaches can be formal or informal. They can focus on policy development, program management and service delivery (2004:1).

In broad terms, the findings of the report are that a whole-of-government approach presents a serious challenge to public administration in Australia. The authors contend that dealing with this challenge can best be done through an emphasis on structures and processes that support whole-of-government work, culture and capability, information management,

infrastructure and budget, and accountability and making connections outside the APS. These general areas are the headings of chapters in the report.

In the chapter concerned with structures and processes, the authors of 'Connecting Government' draw attention to existing management practices at a senior level of government, adding that they are efficient and provide leadership. The need to create suitable structures for the implementation of whole-of-government work is seen as critical. Some suggestions are made in this chapter for improving current structures—like taskforces, interdepartmental committees and agencies that contribute to decision-making and implementation—and discusses them in the context of a whole-of-government approach.

Culture and capability are seen as key factors in this report, even to the point that they 'shape the success of whole-of-government activities' (MAC 2004:43). Recommending a 'horizontal overlay' for issues that 'transcend traditional boundaries' the authors point to a collaborative approach, and commitment to policy and decision-making, which takes account of divergent perspectives. There are some suggestions about how this might occur through existing structures. It is characteristic of this chapter, and of the report as a whole, to be somewhat vague and lacking innovative suggestions for structural reform. For example, in relation to resolving cultural differences, the report observes that 'Australian Government field employees involved in the Wadeye project hold barbecues once a month as a networking mechanism to exchange information' (MAC 2004:51). How or why this works is not made clear. This kind of statement is common in the report, suggesting perhaps a lack of engagement between the establishment of whole-of-government policy and a working understanding of implementing that policy.

The next chapter, which looks at information management and infrastructure, rests on the comment that, 'as whole-of-government approaches become more common in the way agencies conduct their business, information sharing plays a critical role in generating better decisions' (MAC 2004:60). Undoubtedly, there is truth to this, but the report does very little to detail this process. There are some examples of agencies that are involved in information sharing. There is, however, little or no analysis of how information sharing works or why. The rest of the report, which addresses budget and accountability, relationships outside the APS and managing crises, continues with much the same ambivalence between commitment to innovation and endorsement of

current practice. The report is a taxonomy of issues rather than a 'how to do it' manual for whole-of-government policy implementation. However, Appendix 2 in the report does have a table setting out issues and responses and a column devoted to lessons learned, which might provide a useful checklist of achievements to date or, perhaps, provide some guide for practitioners as to how to address particular circumstances.

Conclusion

This paper began by pointing out that Aboriginal groups and communities are not governance-free zones to which good governance instruments need to be brought. By this point, it will be evident that Aboriginal people live in a highly complex governance environment in which their own un-incorporated processes intermingle with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal institutions and organisational cultures. Cultural processes permeate this governance environment influencing it at all levels. It is a difficult and often frustrating area to work within, particularly when interventions are focused on clear practical goals and outcomes.

Yet the governance environment is a significant social determinant of Aboriginal health. It demands attention if practical programs are to be productive and sustainable. Studies of good governance for Aboriginal communities are needed to increase both Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge in this area. Such studies should not be confined to local or community governance. Intersecting spheres of Aboriginal political and administrative organisation exist at regional and national levels also. The relationship of the local to the regional and national, the assertion of rights and the need for effective administration, are integrated concerns for future research. This paper has shown that attention to the cultural aspects of governance is necessary both within and outside of organisational structures. They are neither obstacles to be beaten down, nor impediments to be circumvented. Rather, it is the sea in which we swim, and we need to be attentive to its currents, rips and tides as well as to our own momentum and direction.

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