

Let's do something visionary in Indigenous social policy

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is not a subject I knew much about until I met an academic colleague at ANU whose research and political advocacy was about UBI. As an Indigenous colleague, I set about learning what I could, and found this to be a concept of the most basic use as a foundation to income policy for Indigenous Australians.

Since the Whitlam Labor government and subsequent Fraser governments' welfare safety net reforms of the 1970s, Aboriginal people have benefited from receiving a level of income support, especially to those in rural and remote areas and those in special situations such as sole parents or living with a disability. This has enabled many to support themselves and their families. The advent of this safety net of basic income support was important social policy.

Since the Howard government introduced its notion of welfare reform, and with the disgraceful, manipulative policy agenda of Noel Pearson to control the income of Indigenous people since the early 2000s, we have seen an increase in poverty, violence, abuse of the aged (due to them holding the Basics Cards) and other social policy disasters as a result. I knew many Aboriginal women who could not leave abusive family situations because they had no way to support themselves, let alone a family as a single parent, since this income support has been taken away.

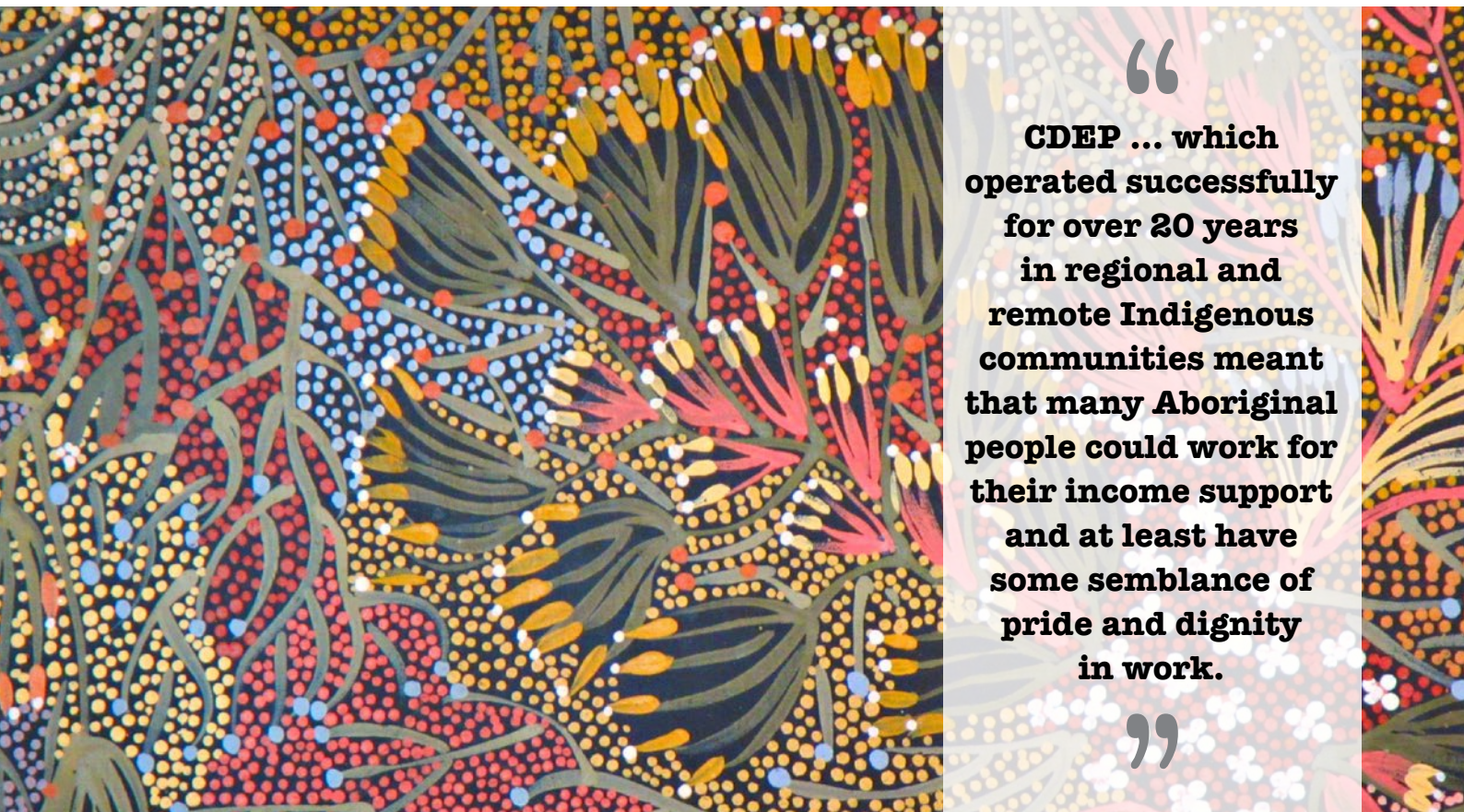
The Howard government was bent on a policy of bringing the budget into surplus, and income support was one of the areas on which it focused to decrease welfare dependency on the State in order to save money for a budget surplus. As a senior policy advisor in social policy at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet at the time, I witnessed and, much to my shame, was involved in seeking budgetary reform measures from some of the most vulnerable welfare recipients.



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For Indigenous Australians, Indigenous social policy has been a disaster in most recent times because of Noel Pearson's welfare reform agenda and because of the implementation of the Northern Territory Emergency Response which introduced draconian measures into remote communities already mired in poverty, unemployment and low educational aspirations. To then introduce welfare reform in the form of basics cards to reduce the consumption of alcohol, gambling and pornography is even further evidence of the right wing conservative agenda of a government concerned with bringing the budget into surplus on the back of the people already most vulnerable.

The Commonwealth Development Employment Program (CDEP) which operated successfully for over 20 years in regional and remote Indigenous communities meant that many Aboriginal people could work for their income support and at least have some semblance of pride and dignity in work even if it wasn't full time salaried employment. It meant working in and for your community for its improvement and gave many activities which they could engage in rather than doing nothing, or engaging in illegal activity or non-useful social activities which involved crime or which did not support the local economy. CDEP



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worked well and was supported and popular with Aboriginal communities because of its many benefits and its accessibility. It was a highly successful program dumped by the Howard government – essentially another social policy disaster.

Universal Basic Income would provide something quite different, something socially supportive and economically viable to Indigenous communities where paid work, entrepreneurship, business and strategic investment are non-existent. It would enable individuals and families to support themselves and each other and provide for the necessities of living which welfare dependency does not. Not only that but it would take away the shame and lack of dignity that comes with having to live on a Basics Card. What kind of society are we creating where we shame people for not being able to gain employment in areas where there is virtually no available employment, or for not having the educational qualifications to work in the only jobs available?

UBI can provide a socially responsible system of income which allows Indigenous Australians, particularly those in areas with little or no prospects of paid employment, a way to have accessible income with incentive to do other things. Many Indigenous people in remote communities have access to utilising their cultural traditions and knowledge in business development. With the right support, they have the capacity to employ community members and engage a wider section of the hospitality, tourism and business sectors in their communities, their environmental knowledge, and the development of scientific research around plants and medicines and a myriad of other industries. Providing a Basic Income which is not government controlled or shaming in its application will enable a population riven by discrimination, racism and prejudice a platform on which they can stand and build social, civic and environmental foundations to better not only individuals but families and entire communities and regions.

CDEP provides the evidence that UBI can deliver as a social investment. As a basic income for work system, it became in some areas very entrepreneurial, with communities utilising their skill base and workforce to undertake all types of clever adapted employment/work programs which led to successful business developments. The same could occur with a UBI system. The current welfare system is punitive and paternalistic and gives no incentives to anyone to involve themselves in development, either as individuals or as groups. The current welfare to work system is socially destructive and impoverishes people, families and communities even more than they already were. Why we would as a country continue such disastrous social policy is beyond understanding. If it is to shame and blame people for not being educated or employed, then it works. If it is to drive incentives to engage in work and employment or education, then it is a complete failure.

Another point that requires consideration is that many Indigenous people are suffering generational trauma. This impacts on their emotional and mental capacities to engage in work or the education system. This is a social crisis and needs to be addressed, not in a punitive way, but in a compassionate, empathic and socially just and socially conscious way. Providing a UBI could do this in addition to supportive social

programs to enable recovery, to enable a person to work towards working and community engagement and development. It gives breathing space to enable an individual to do what is necessary, to get well, to deal with the myriad of social issues that impact their families, so that they can return to health and wellness and become useful members of society.

It is obvious from the statistics reported annually in the Closing the Gap Reports and Productivity Commission data that the current systems and social policy in Indigenous Affairs are not working and are making no difference to this generation of Indigenous peoples. We need a new road and a new vision. Perhaps UBI can begin that process.