

Work with What You Have Got

An Independent View of the Forrest Review of Indigenous Employment and Training

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4 August 2014



For those who want to do more than jump on some reactive party political band wagon that leads back to a politics of yesterday, don't just read the recently released and much anticipated Forrest Review [Creating Parity](#), also read the story of Pilbara Aboriginal mining company Ngarda Civil and Mining and the pathbreaking training program which was a catalyst for so-called demand driven training. The report released in 2007 and entitled [Strength through Work, Enterprise and Training](#) identified 22 barriers to Aboriginal employment in secure, well-paying, heavy plant operator jobs in the mining industry. The Yarrie Mining Academy that resulted from the initial training program was also an interesting precursor of the Vocational and Training Centres that have emerged as a result of Andrew Forrest's Generation One.

That Ngarda report provides a much needed alternative background to the Forrest Training and Employment Review and provides a guide to what is relevant, urgent and substantive in the Forrest Review.

[Strength through Work, Enterprise and Training](#) featured the legendary Aboriginal trainer Lew Nannup who had worked in mining when there were only a handful of Aboriginal people working in the industry. It was a very tough twelve week course that aimed at long term unemployed Aboriginal

people, including some recent inmates of Roebourne Jail. The absurdity of the barriers to jobs was heart breaking. They included the impossibility of processing identity records at the local South Hedland post office, driver licences, the need for long term support and coaching. Lew, aided by the legendary Kangushot's son, Barry Taylor, and the great Indigenous mining mentor Willie Jumbo, had a slogan for those trainees - "Go the Extra Mile" - and by god everyone involved did that. Of the twenty trainees all but one got job offers and job starts. At that time the course achieved what almost everyone in the mining industry said was impossible. Some of the trainees, like Marble Bar's well known Whalebone brothers, never looked back. Henry Whalebone sheepishly told the assembled group at the beginning of the experiment that he wanted a little block with a stable and horses. Henry was loading trains with iron ore last time I enquired and I am sure he now has that little block. He and his brothers and their siblings literally transformed their Marble Bar community and the hopes of many around them.

But of the thirty trainees several are back in prison, one is dead and many did not last in long term employment. One of the real tragedies was that there was no long term mentoring program that would help trainees make a long term transition to paid employment.

The report was largely ignored in 2007. It was buried in the primeval sludge of government and industry by a thicket of vested interest groups led by the scandalous job services industry that specialised in entrenching the long term unemployment of Aboriginal people. Many agencies over the next seven years would get hundreds of millions of dollars from the Commonwealth government. It worked like this. Aboriginal applicants would come into the local employment office fill out forms and then be sent on their way. Often they were placed in short term work and simply recycled again and again so that the agency could collect its fees from the Federal government. Similarly the courts, the police and the corrections institutions were literally feeding off the misfortune of the people that the Pilbara course had clearly demonstrated were as good as any other employee, if not better. It was a joke that people who knew the Pilbara like the back of their hand were being overlooked while people from the suburbs of Perth and the major cities were being recruited with barely any skills and no capacity to live in anything other than air conditioned buildings.

In the middle of one of the training projects Henry was asked about his favourite time of the year in the Pilbara. He replied "I like it around this time of year when it is warm". The thermometer on the dash of the Landcruiser at the time read 52 degrees. Henry had ridden across the land, walked across the saltbush flats and in his first week was able to explain to one of his bosses that they could save hours of transport time and millions of dollars a year in fuel costs by simply employing a different route from one mine to another.

The tragedy of neglecting the report was that thousands of Henry Whalebone's never got a chance. The prisons, the courthouses and the police stations just got bigger, then expanded, then expanded, got renovated and renovated again.

Academic reports also hindered the ability of anyone to make any sort of difference with Aboriginal employment. There was and continues to be this culture of suspicion, negativism, distrust that emerges from anthropologists, economists and others when the practical realities and the possibilities of positive action are presented to them. Academics would rather say there needs to be a million dollar report not a million dollar action plan.

This is where the Forrest Review emerges. No matter what its shortcomings, it is a welcome attempt to create action rather than just more words.

Since 2007 some good things have emerged. The Aboriginal companies that have survived have made mistakes and grown stronger as a result. Indigenous Employment Providers (IEPs) have shown job service providers how to really enable Aboriginal people to stick in a long term job. Several IEPs have developed a “whatever it takes”, innovative, entrepreneurial methodology that mobilises all sorts of supports and benefits and of course all sorts of unfunded community, family support and love to make things happen.

As the Ngarda training report recommended there needed to be a “working life” perspective and ongoing support and training for a person that was offered a job. It is just basic to understand that an Aboriginal person who wants to stay in employment for the long term has to juggle the many and manifold inequities of living as a first nations person in this country.

One of the things that is disturbing about Australian politics is that we have this team-like mentality which measures progress by which party is in power. Depending on which party you support, all is doom or gloom or peaches and cream for their term of office. We don't seem to have discussions that focus on particular policies or areas of development that are divorced from party political contexts.

Having said this, the funding cut backs announced by the Abbott government have been catastrophic in their effects for Aboriginal people. The 2014 budget showed Joe Hockey and others' complete lack of understanding of the importance of the government dollar for Aboriginal communities. It is just basic to know that the Commonwealth dollar employs a substantial majority of Aboriginal people. If you make significant cutbacks you hurt Aboriginal people badly. If you make cutbacks in areas where there are clear and over-whelming human needs then this will cut deep into the bone and will never be forgotten.

After the last budget I doubt whether the Abbott government will ever gain the wholesale confidence from Aboriginal people as a whole. No-one will now forget that the man who said he would immediately, upon being Prime Minister, work for a week in an Aboriginal community upon assuming office but has not done so yet. No-one will forget the real dis-respect in de-funding the National Congress of First Nations. But in particular, as Warren Mundine, the Chair of the Prime Minister's Advisory Council has clearly made known, no-one will forget the way in which Joe Hockey's first budget has devastated Aboriginal health and legal services at a time when they are so badly needed.

Aboriginal communities are used to the massively shifting sands of government. They are used to seeing precious buildings, schools, infrastructure constructed, set up and then fall into dis-repair and lack of use. They are used to broken promises at every level of life.

Warren Mundine was right to call an extraordinary meeting of his Prime Ministers Advisory Council to tell Prime Minister Abbott that he had blown it, almost before he had even begun, with Aboriginal people. However Mundine has also been a voice of clarity for Abbott in telling him that he was just plumb crazy to have devastated communities with budget cutbacks and said nothing of the positive agenda that he hoped to put in place.

Mundine has been a beacon of reason and he has been quite courageous in taking the heat for the Abbott government and his advisors. He created a situation where the government has a small chance to turn around a policy disaster. Who knows what positive effects the advisory council has now had on the Forrest Review. But thankfully now it is out there.

The concept of *creating parity* takes up the *closing the gap* challenge. Indigenous leaders like Pearson, Langton and Mundine know that this is what resonates with the broader community. In this view Aboriginal Australians should not be seen as a special interest group but simply deserving of the same rights and responsibilities as all other Australians. Liberal National politicians favour this position too. Of course this creates an opportunity for other non-conservative politicians, if they are good enough, to counter with some well thought ideas about why in fact Aboriginal Australians are very special, and deserve special consideration and development. But that is another issue.

The creation of the Prime Minister's Advisory Council and the streamlining of the Aboriginal bureaucracy under Alan Tudge in the Prime Minister's Department were strong and positive moves that should have bipartisan support if the closing the gap targets announced some years ago are to be achieved. The Forrest concept of *creating parity* reinvigorates the impetus for the bureaucratic re-shuffle and focus and is welcome. Bill Shorten and his advisors would be out of their minds to argue against this new focus. It is well overdue.

The Forrest review supplements the streamlining of the bureaucracy and it gives us some idea of which directions the wheel house is pointing the ship of state. PMC will work for a whole of life agenda to enable Aboriginal Australians to reach parity in life, society, economy and culture with non-Aboriginal Australians.

The ideas of Marcia Langton are strongly evident in the Forrest Review but so too is the no nonsense approach of Forrest himself. I am glad to see that many of the recommendations that were in the Ngarda Report nearly a decade ago are there replicated with new urgency in the Forrest Report. This includes the review of job service providers and the stronger focus of vocational education and training that leads to a job.

The core chapter for which there should be universal approval is Chapter 5 entitled Building Capability, Dismantling the Cash Barbeque and Eliminating Disincentives. The key recommendations here are:

12. Tax-free status be provided for new and innovative first Australian commercial enterprises

13. Replacement of Job Services Australia services with a demand driven system

15. The creation of provisional 'locked driver's licences' for people who are unable to drive due to unpaid fines or other traffic infringements so that they can get and keep a job by being able to drive

16 Compulsory job skills and training for prisoners with the view that inmates must be able to read, write, drive and have some vocational qualification upon release.

Of equal validity is the recommendation to replace remote job and community programmes with demand driven job centres with local leadership and management and the need to consolidate service delivery through local responsibilities boards.

These are policies that are urgently required and should enjoy universal support.

Other areas of the report are less clear or require further thought and development. These include proposals around early childhood development, school attendance, improving educational outcomes, stopping distractions to education, the so-called health welfare card, the capacity for ideas to be implemented across governments and several other more ideological domains which display no real understanding of Aboriginal life and culture. These are for me debate starters rather than policies that can be accepted out right.

It is the sign of a good report though that there are many chapters and recommendations that will inspire debate. So I hope the academics get their teeth into these areas but understand that the core chapter of this report is important and needs urgent implementation. I go back to the hope of the Ngarda report. It is good to see that the worm has finally turned.