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## **INTRODUCTION**

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### **ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EMPLOYMENT POLICIES AND REPEATING COLONIAL HISTORIES**

**Celeste Liddle**

Since the colonisation of Australia, the question of work and how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are to be engaged in it have led to the formation of what have been some incredibly oppressive legislations and practices. It's thanks to these practices that intergenerational poverty remains a reality for so many in the Indigenous community.

Unfortunately intergenerational poverty is a reality which, for so many, will continue for generations to come. Governmental approaches to Indigenous employment have long been punitive, rather than focused on community capacity-building. In 2018, approximately 30,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across remote and regional parts of this country are engaged in a form of indentured servitude known by the relatively benign government title the 'Community Development Programme,' or CDP.

CDP is no different in its focus on punishment rather than advancement. Participants in the programme are expected to work 25 hours per week just to receive unemployment benefits. They labour in roles which elsewhere in the country would be considered normal local government employment attracting proper wages and employment conditions such as leave and occupational health and safety protections.

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However, many of these communities living under CDP have been systematically neglected by successive governments due to their population composition and remoteness. In order to receive services people elsewhere in the country take for granted, these residents are expected to trade basic human rights. Even as report after report shows that residents in CDP coverage areas are being penalised for programme non-compliance and cut off from their Centrelink payments at significantly higher rates than non-Indigenous welfare recipients; even as these reports show the CDP is an abject failure leading to issues such as further poverty and malnutrition, the programme continues.

This cycle of punishment shows not much has changed from the days of Aboriginal men being sent to work camps such as Rottneest Island for killing the sheep of pastoralists in order to feed their families. Or fair-skinned Aboriginal kids being sent to places such as the Cootamundra Girl's Home to be penalised for their mixed heritage then trained up in domestic skills so they could provide free labour to wealthy white families. Each generation has merely brought a more socially-acceptable approach to forcing unpaid labour in Indigenous communities.

Yet there has been hope over the years. In 1966, a group of Aboriginal stockmen and domestic servants working for Lord Vestey in the Northern Territory walked off the job. Initially, they took action over a pay dispute – Aboriginal workers were being paid significantly less than their non-Indigenous counterparts while being also treated horribly. An earlier case for equal pay for these Aboriginal workers had been knocked back and so, having had enough, they eventually withdrew their labour. Their action became a famous strike known as the Wave Hill Walk-Off, for not only did it last for 9 years, but the cause grew from equal pay to the return of traditional lands to their rightful owners. The iconic photo of then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pouring land into the hand of the walk-off leader Vincent Lingiari holds an important place of pride in the history of this country.

Despite there now being legislation protecting equal pay for Aboriginal workers, though, the battle continues. For generations, when Aboriginal workers were actually paid, many found their wages held in government 'trusts' never to be seen again – later to be referred to as 'stolen wages.' Inherited wealth, which many Australians have been able to take for granted due to the paid work of their forebears, simply has not existed for most Indigenous workers. Additionally, while the gender pay gap was in

2018 reported to be 14.6% – the lowest it has been for twenty years (though still not good enough considering that equal pay for comparable work was legislated in 1972) – Indigenous people are still significantly more likely to be on lower incomes, or to be unemployed, than everyone else. Even when we are being paid, many Aboriginal workers spend a lot of time providing free education to our non-Indigenous colleagues and managers; navigating workspaces which often reflect the racially-divided society we continue to live in.

Indeed, it has only been in recent times – the past decade to be precise – where discussions of a rising Indigenous middle class have been raised. Whilst it's true that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are gaining post-secondary qualifications at higher rates than has been the case previously, it would be wrong to assume that, on the whole, this has led to a broader prosperity in the community. Indeed, the latest census data show only about 6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a university degree or above. Additionally, according to reported governmental data, Indigenous students still only make up 1.3% of the university student population. When we consider that the median age for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 23 (compared to the Australian average of nearly 38), and year 12 attainment rates are growing, it makes little sense that university enrolments are merely a third of what they would need to be to reach parity levels of participation. Even then, as a recent National Tertiary Education Union member survey has shown, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university staff have experienced racism in their workplaces. If learning environments remain hostile environments for Indigenous staff to navigate, the student experience will be similar.

At the end of the day, it's not enough for governments to only speak about 'closing the gap' when it comes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce participation. Indeed, through their continual punitive approaches, their unwillingness to learn from the past and their inability to work with communities in collaborative ways, governments created then reinforced these gaps.

In order for workforce participation rates to improve, society itself would need to improve by finally addressing the structural barriers which have impacted the lives of so many Indigenous people for generations. Education would need to become more diverse and inclusive, stolen wages must be returned and real wages must be paid for real work.

Governments must become brave enough to rectify wrongs and work collaboratively with Indigenous communities. Current paternalistic approaches will only lead to history repeating.

*Celeste Liddle is an Arrernte woman, a unionist an activist, a social commentator/freelance writer, and is the creator of the blog “Rantings of an Aboriginal Feminist”. She’s currently a columnist for Eureka Street  
blackfeministranter@hotmail.com*