The Politics of ‘Real Jobs’:
Producing Exclusionary and Assimilatory Discourses in Aboriginal Affairs Governance

Dr. Melissa E. Lovell
National Centre for Indigenous Studies

Twitter: @melovell
Email: Melissa.Lovell@anu.edu.au
The rhetoric of “real jobs” pervades debates on remote Aboriginal community development.

E.g. Discussions of CDEP, NTER, Close the Gap, Forrest Review

There are 17 mentions of “real jobs” in the Forrest Review on Indigenous Jobs and Training (2014):

- “…the VET system must do more to link training to real jobs” (p38)
- “Only 35% of first Australians in remote areas are employed in real jobs, compared to 83% of other Australians in the same areas” (p51)
- “CDEP activities are not real jobs and individuals should be encouraged to aspire to something more than a welfare activity” (p134)

The term “real jobs” is more than a simple synonym for employment.

It is used because it plays a broader symbolic role in debates about Aboriginal development.

It helps to define problems in Aboriginal communities.

It draws on neoliberal conceptions of responsible citizenship and good government.
Figure 1: Analysis one focuses on the binary between “real” and “furphy” jobs

**“Real Jobs”**
- Mining jobs
- Running small businesses
- Some public sector jobs (e.g. Teacher)

**“Furphy jobs”**
- CDEP and community development work
- Community governance
- Some public sector jobs, especially where no equivalent in non-Indigenous communities
Figure 2: Analysis two shows the term located in its broader social field. “Real jobs” are defined in contrast to other logics that are seen as undesirable and problematic.
THE “NEOLIBERAL” CITIZEN
• Is responsible for maintenance of dependents
• Manages risk by purchasing insurance against ill health, unemployment, etc.
• Is entrepreneurial, creates jobs
• Actively develops their human capital to become competitive in the labour market

THE REMOTE ABORIGINAL
• Neglects welfare of his/her children and is violent towards other Aboriginal people
• Is vulnerable to poor health, unemployment and misuse of drugs, alcohol and pornography
• Has poor money skills
• Is welfare dependent and has no skills for employment, unreliable if employed

Figure 3: The features of the neoliberal citizen in the broader scholarly literature versus depictions of remote Aboriginal people in recent political speeches, Hansard and reports.
The concept of “real jobs” is a useful shorthand for a pervasive, neoliberal critique of remote Aboriginal communities.

This critique focuses on:
- The failures of individuals and culture
- The failures of Aboriginal communities and collectives
- The failures of government and past “welfare” policy paradigms

In helping to define what is problematic about Aboriginal communities, the rhetoric surrounding “real jobs” also constructs a conception of an ideal market economy that is often referred to as “mainstream”.

The “real economy” to which “real jobs” belongs, is actually a highly stylized and utopian concept. It does not exist anywhere in Australia, and is an unrealistic expectation to impose on remote Indigenous communities.

By holding Indigenous development up to such unrealistic expectations, the philosophy of “real jobs” reproduces both exclusion of Aboriginal people (because they are depicted as failing to reach mainstream standards) and assimilation of Aboriginal people (because alternative conceptions of economy are seen as invalid and insufficient).
References


