

An Ambivalent Hospitality:

**Aboriginal Senior Public Servants And
The Representation Of Others
In
Australia's Self-Governing Northern Territory**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian
National University

July 2010

This thesis is an account of research undertaken between February 2006 and July 2010 at the Australian National University in Canberra and Darwin.

Unless otherwise indicated, the work presented herein is my own. To the best of my knowledge, none of the work presented here has ever been submitted for any degree at this or any other institution of learning.

Elizabeth Ganter

July 2010

I dedicate this work to those who consented to be interviewed, to those who did not and to those I did not have the opportunity to ask, who live with the idea that, as the late Stuart Baird put it, they are 'less than'.

I portray you as people with self-knowledge and a marvellous sense of theatre.

Thanks for trusting me with your stories.

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Abstract

How can you make decisions about Aboriginal people when you can't even talk to the people you've got here that are blackfellas? This question was posed by an Aboriginal senior public servant whom I interviewed for this research in 2007. She was imagining a conversation with the Northern Territory Public Service, whose invitation for Aborigines to join its departments provides the backdrop to my study. Counterposing the absent Aboriginal policy subject with the ever-present, idiomatic 'blackfella' public servant, the question aptly reframes the government expectation that an Aboriginal presence within the public service will represent the absent through Aborigines' numeric sufficiency, their location in the corridors of power and their contribution to Aboriginal policies and programs. This interviewee was insisting that she be heard, if her people were to be taken into account.

This thesis begins with a history of Aboriginal employment in the Northern Territory administration which concludes that the unplanned accretion of a substantial number of Aboriginal public servants, in 1978, became the new Northern Territory Government's opportunity to legitimize itself as a representative bureaucracy.

After reviewing empirical studies of representative bureaucracy and theories of political representation, I argue that all public servants discretionarily represent others in their advice to government. I go on to explore the extent to which Aboriginal senior public servants understand themselves to represent other Aborigines in their work. Analyzing data from 76 interviewees, I ask: how compelling to Aboriginal senior officials is the Northern Territory Government's self-account as a representative bureaucracy? I argue that these officials work to a social imaginary in which they are present for those Aborigines whom they regard as absent only by circumstance. Aboriginal senior public servants see themselves as neither the naïve tokens nor misguided advocates that the literature has largely made them out to be. Rather, they see themselves as exemplary representatives of others, for whom they model mindful professionalism, and with whom they share fates as Aboriginal Territorians.

Acknowledgements

Early in my candidature, Tim Rowse, my supervisor and the original chair of my panel, disarmed me with the assurance: 'I'm paid to find you interesting.' For your risky frankness with a self-doubting adult learner and for continuing my supervision from your new post at the University of Western Sydney: from the bottom of my heart, thank you Tim. I will miss our coffees and, believe it or not, I will miss your meticulous attention to my detail.

Thank you to the rest of my panel: Richard Mulgan for sound advice, Diane Austin-Broos for memorable conversations and Dennis Bree for championing my research in the Northern Territory Government. Thank you very much Ann McGrath for chairing my panel in the latter period. And thank you to all the academic staff of the Australian National University's Research School of Social Sciences History Program and to Karen Smith for your warm and constructive support.

The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre funded my generous scholarship for this research. Thank you to those who have mentored my ideas and continue to be part of my life, from Alice and beyond, and good luck to my fellow PhD students Annie Kennedy and Jenine Godwin. I am grateful to the Northern Territory Government History Grants Program for assisting with fieldwork costs and to all in the Northern Territory Government who have supported this project. My student colleagues in the brown corridor in ANU's rambling Coombs Building in Canberra and our tropical resort at ANU's Northern Australia Research Unit in Darwin have been my daily world for the past 4½ years. I will miss these two, not so different, worlds.

Thank you to my colleagues in the Coombs corridor, particularly those who have been my immediate neighbours at various times: Doris Kordes, Georgina Fitzpatrick, Karen Fox, Christine Hansen and Susanmary Withycombe. Mentioning you all will send my acknowledgements over the page!

For life at NARU – thank you Chris O'Brien, Kim Johnstone, Bentley James and Nicole Everett.

Thank you Penelope Marshall, Katie Curchin and Melissa Lovell for my lessons in political theory.

And thank you, dearest Sarah Dunlop and Danielle Spruyt, for other intellectual journeys.

To my sons, William and Frankie Braybon, who had no idea what the thesis would mean for them: thank you for living with the many consequences of this project. Pat and Derrick Ganter's belief in me and my caring friends and family right across Australia have sustained me throughout. Thank you to all who have looked out for me and for my children when I needed you. Thank you Charlie, Daisy and Eliza Sanders for accommodating a post-modern home invasion in your teenage years.

And to Will Sanders: you deserve your very own paragraph for supporting a long awaited personal project that you knew would consume me. For this, Italy and singing to my guitar, thank you.

Abbreviations

APS	Australian Public Service
CLP	Country Liberal Party of the Northern Territory
CPP	Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers
DAA	Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Commonwealth Government)
DCM	Department of Chief Minister (Northern Territory Government)
DONT	Department of the Northern Territory (Commonwealth Government)
EEO	Equal Employment Opportunity
IECDS	Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy
IS	Indigenous sector
NACC	National Aboriginal Consultative Committee
NESA	National Employment Strategy for Aboriginals
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NT	Northern Territory
NT 'a'	Northern Territory administration 1911-1940
NTA	Northern Territory Administration 1941-1972
NTG	Northern Territory Government
NTPS	Northern Territory Public Service
OAL	Office of Aboriginal Liaison, Northern Territory Department of Chief Minister
OCPE	Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, Northern Territory
PSCNT	Public Service Commissioner of the Northern Territory
RCAGA	Royal Commission into Australian Government Administration

Chapter One

The Research Idea

Since the Northern Territory first became a discrete jurisdiction almost one hundred years ago, Aborigines have been present and involved in its administration. At times, Aborigines supervised other Aborigines but on the whole, their jobs were more menial under the policies of Aboriginal protection and assimilation over which the Commonwealth presided during the period 1911 to 1978. Since Northern Territory self-government in 1978, which coincided roughly with what many saw as the new national Aboriginal affairs policy of self-determination, Aborigines have come to occupy many of the practical field-based jobs which play their part in servicing the Northern Territory's growing Indigenous populations. Some of these Aborigines have risen in the hierarchies of Northern Territory Government departments and some have been recruited from outside the public service to occupy the administrative and executive roles in which policies are made, programs are managed and work is directed. In these roles, they write and speak about other Aborigines.¹

This thesis is about Aborigines who have become senior administrators and executives in the Northern Territory Government. My interest in seniority is that seniority, as a public service category, implies professional responsibility and space for discretionary judgement. I refer generally to senior public service administrators and executives when I say 'senior officials'.

All Aboriginal senior officials share some form of racial identity with those other Aborigines who are the subjects of the policies and recipients of the services for which they are responsible. Many Aboriginal senior officials also have history, family and land in common with their policy subjects and service recipients. How do Aboriginal senior officials – with whatever social connection – account for their relationships with other Aborigines?

¹ I use the term Aboriginal, and sometimes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, to describe the racial identities I am discussing in this research. Becoming aware of the magnitude of the Torres Strait Islander connections among some research participants in the north, I changed my terminology to the conventional 'Indigenous' until informants commented negatively on that generic label. Because I am largely speaking of Northern Territory Aborigines, I mostly use that term. I specify Torres Strait Islander connections where informants emphasized these connections and where drawing attention to such connections does not reveal their identities.

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In this thesis I examine the extent to which Aboriginal senior officials see themselves as *representing* other Aborigines in the Northern Territory. I use representation as the structuring idea of the thesis because ‘representation’ draws attention to the presence of some Aborigines in, and the absence of other Aborigines from, the public service. The word is in government parlance, but with what meaning, for whom and to what effect? I seek to elucidate the vernacular meaning of ‘representation’ for Aboriginal senior officials.

The Northern Territory Government’s commitment to one idea of representation was expressed in October 2006 when the Chief Minister, Clare Martin, announced that her Labor Party’s six Aboriginal parliamentarians made the Northern Territory Parliament ‘truly representative’ by matching the one-third proportion of Aborigines in the Northern Territory population (Martin 2006). She was speaking of electoral representation.

My thesis concerns another idea of representation, one to which the Northern Territory Government has also made commitments through policies aimed at attracting Aborigines into departmental administration. That is bureaucratic representation. This kind of representation is the vital ingredient in representative bureaucracy.

1.1 The idea of representative bureaucracy

The idea of representative bureaucracy is that the presence of individuals from particular social groups in sufficient numbers and in the right places will make a bureaucracy representative of those groups, especially when their proportion in the bureaucracy reflects their proportion in the wider population – like a mirror. The aspiration to govern through a representative bureaucracy has been expressed in repeated invitations by the Northern Territory Government for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to contribute to policy and decision-making by their representation at all levels of the Northern Territory Public Service (NTPS) – for example, in the Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategies of 2002-2006 and 2010-2012 (OCPE 2002, 2010).

By its own accounts, the NTPS has been moving slowly towards adequate Aboriginal representation even if its Aboriginal employment statistics do not even approximate, let alone match, the Aboriginal proportion of the Northern Territory population. In December 2005, the Northern Territory Government reported that Aboriginal and Torres Strait

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Islander people comprised around seven per cent of 15,000 total public servants and an even smaller proportion at just over two per cent of 3,000 senior public servants. In a jurisdiction in which 60,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise 31 per cent of the population, the public service is not representative of the Aboriginal population. As well, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants, particularly senior officials, do not resemble the Northern Territory's problematic Aboriginal community in socioeconomic terms. Thus, in the numbers and in the kind of Aboriginal employees, the Northern Territory bureaucracy has not achieved a social mirror. Nevertheless, the Northern Territory Government continues to invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions, through public service employment, to the administration of government.

I ask: how compelling to Aboriginal senior officials is the Northern Territory Government's self-account as a representative bureaucracy? How do Aboriginal senior officials view their contributions and in what sense, if any, do they understand themselves to 'represent' the Northern Territory's 'Indigenous' populations? I take it for granted that Aboriginal senior officials appreciate the material security of their positions. My focus is on how, in addition to that, they make a plausible case to themselves that they are doing something worthwhile.

Sixty-four Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander senior public servants were reported to be at their desks in December 2005 (OCPE 2006: 23-26). It is possible that there were more Northern Territory public servants of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage who had declined to be counted as such; but the 64 who were known to the Commissioner in December 2005 must all have self-identified by ticking a box to indicate if they were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or both. This is the Indigenous identifier, which is the official measure of Aboriginal representativeness in the NTPS and the Commissioner for Public Employment's guide to the success of Indigenous employment policies.

I understand the expression 'representative bureaucracy' to intend that the presence of officials of a particular social category will have an effect on the quality of bureaucracy. But this meaning of representative bureaucracy has unspoken premises. One is that a public servant's performance of his or her duties is influenced by the social identities – the race, gender, class or other characteristics – of the public servant. Another is that public servants have sufficient discretion that their social identities will make a difference to their work.

The discretion in public service

Representative bureaucracy aims to influence what is discretionary, or what is able to be influenced, in the public service by ensuring that those things which are sensitive to discretion or influence are exposed to a diversity of perspectives – in this particular case, to the perspectives typical of those who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Many decisions are sensitive to discretion or influence in the public service. In my view, public service work is largely discretionary and sensitive to influence. The targets of its efforts, the topics of policy, are labile. But they are not randomly chosen. Policies and programs are the products of political cultures. Bureaucrats develop, re-interpret and sway policies and programs through written and spoken considerations and arguments which must persuade *other bureaucrats* before they reach politicians.

I see the public service as a sphere of deliberation which is not as unlike the deliberative arenas in which citizens ‘weigh’ public interests – the public and legislative spheres – as it may seem. I see public service departments as *mandated* to be discretionary and partial under the general conditions of representation which authorize their autonomy (see Richardson 2002). But the public service subscribes to the idea that its discretionary authority can be impartial, merit-based and apolitical.

The exercise of discretion in the public service, its weighing of things, is governed by an ethos which asks bureaucrats to be fair and *impartial* in that weighing. Faith in public service impartiality originated in a view of the public service as non-discretionary and non-deliberative, the Weberian view of a relentlessly rational and technical machine. The discretionary/deliberative and rational/technical faces of the public service are themselves in tension. We need look no further than the dual aims of public service effectiveness and efficiency to see this. Effectiveness looks outward and sees social responsiveness whereas efficiency looks inward and sees rationality and technique. At any moment, one presides at the cost of the other. The public service is much more value-driven than it can possibly acknowledge in the light of its paramount interest: to generate public belief in its efficacy.

Even though the aim of representative bureaucracy is to make the bureaucracy more impartial, fairer as a whole by mirroring society, representative bureaucracy implicitly

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acknowledges that individual public servants are prone to the partialities that come with their social categories: that they are all susceptible to identity-based self-interest. This is how representative bureaucracy's unspoken premise places it in tension with the ethos of public service impartiality, the very ethos it tries to serve.

The *merit* principle supports the 'career' service – the idea of a permanent bureaucracy. How does the merit principle interact with the aim of representativeness? When the bureaucracy believes that it already has or does not need a diversity of internal perspectives to achieve impartiality – the rational/technical view – technical competence is seen as meritorious. When the bureaucracy believes that it cannot be impartial without bringing in a diversity of perspectives – the discretionary/deliberative view – social identity may come to influence the judgement of merit. But who is 'the bureaucracy', apart from the array of officials who differ in their judgements as to the competencies which are relevant to the job at hand?

It is a possible implication of the idea of representative bureaucracy that the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander official is not merely there to be counted as such but that he or she is there to speak as an Aborigine and/or Torres Strait Islander. If this is what 'representative bureaucracy' implies, then that official's merit includes some notion of making his or her voice as an Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander heard. Merit, in a representative bureaucracy, may include the notion that certain officials speak for particular social interests in order for the bureaucracy as a whole to weigh all interests impartially. In theory representativeness may be meritorious, but it may not be meritorious in practice. If an official is important to the bureaucracy by virtue of his or her membership of a social category, is that a license for him or her to speak for that category? Aboriginal employment policies may be able to elide the subtle request that 'representative' officials speak for their social category, but workplaces cannot. How easy is it *in practice* for officials, licensed by their social categories and by the generally accepted idea that the bureaucracy should mirror society, to speak for particular social interests? Public service jobs call on different mixtures of technique, deliberation and social commitment. The extent to which each is seen as meritorious depends on the structural location and the social identities of those who judge merit, even if the 'myth of merit' is that it can be judged impartially (Young 1990: 200).

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Public servants must present themselves as *apolitical*; but they must defer to political direction. Yet, elected democratic leadership is only ever temporary. Any senior public servant would attest that it takes judgement, indeed fancy footwork, to respond to political direction without losing administrative efficacy. The idea that politics is only electoral and that the public service is politically neutral by being competent only in the technical sense is ‘a useful myth, a graphic metaphor’ for what it takes to respond to political masters whilst running departments that must outlast their democratically elected leadership (Mulgan 1998: 13). Somehow, in practice, public servants must transcend politics; but they must also be politically sensitive. To add to this tension, the idea of *representative* bureaucracy infers that a democratically elected government is not representative enough already.

To deepen the complexity of achieving representative bureaucracy: it seeks proportionality at all levels of the public service. How easy is it for *senior* officials, who are closer to the politics, to be seen to speak for particular social interests? This is my topic. Officials who preside over public service hierarchies are expected to embody impartiality by reconciling diverse perspectives in their advice to government. The representative ideal celebrates such officials when they are from historically excluded social categories, but these officials must somehow embody their social categories as well as the impartiality that is expected of them. There will be limits to the extent to which such officials can draw on, or speak for, their social category if they recognize different publics from those better known to their colleagues and political masters.

The ethos of impartiality, the myth of merit and the metaphor of the politics-administration divide, the features by which the public service sets itself apart from other deliberative arenas, are navigated in the internal, discretionary, necessary and mandated deliberations of bureaucrats as they implement the decisions of government. The discretion for political judgement – indeed, the ability of bureaucrats to hold *each other* to account – allows departments to work out the details.

This is my working theory of the bureaucracy. Now that I have established how I see the public service – how, in practice, do bureaucrats from particularized populations ‘contribute’ to it?

The problem

It is my central proposition that the Northern Territory Government's invitation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to contribute to policy and decision-making in its departments is profoundly ambivalent. No democratic government can invite people to contribute to the public service on the basis of their social identity without placing them, potentially, in tension with their professional obligations as public servants. Yet, no liberal democratic government can afford not to make the invitation once it has acknowledged significant plurality among those it governs.

The NTPS does not acknowledge these tensions in its invitation to Aboriginal employees. The Northern Territory Government's message is upbeat: join us, self-identify so we can count you, contribute to policy and decision-making and reap the rewards of long service. If the government's account is self-critical, the criticism concerns inadequate (although always said to be rising) numbers. The government's account does not acknowledge that representative bureaucracy is potentially quite confounding, from the point of view of the Indigenous Australians to whom it is addressed. The invitation to be 'representative' places Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants in positions of ethical ambivalence.

Representative bureaucracy leaves it to the bureaucrats to resolve these tensions. How *do* representative bureaucrats 'do' bureaucratic representation? Once it has enticed them into the public service, how does the invitation to represent other Aborigines make sense to Aboriginal senior officials? The term 'representative' suggests commitments other than those to which public servants prefer to believe they sign up. The idea of *representative* public servants, more particularly representative *Aboriginal* public servants, conjures the possibility of other, less clearly articulated, accountabilities.

1.2 Images of the Aboriginal representative

Aborigines in official roles have tended to be characterized either as politically compromised advocates or as well-meaning but ineffectual 'tokens'. In whichever direction judgements have swung, these images have burdened Aboriginal officials with being too much or too little of the representative rather than somewhere in the spectrum of possibilities that could be seen as right.

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As advocates, Aborigines have been portrayed as acting only for Aborigines, partisan by favouring their communities over the public interest. A benign expression of this view by CD Rowley is that ‘those young men and women who first entered the public service hoping to be received as representatives of their people must have been dismayed to find themselves cogs in the bureaucratic machine’ (Rowley 1978: 207). The outspokenness of Charles Perkins, the first Aborigine to become a senior Commonwealth public servant, provoked more disapproving portrayals of public service advocacy (for example Bennett 1989: 102-3).

As tokens, Aboriginal officials have been portrayed as benefiting from Aboriginality’s symbolism without accountability or commitment to the distinct political or cultural interests of other Aborigines. On this view, Aboriginal officials are sellouts, lost to Aborigines’ cause. Lippman implies this in her depiction of ‘former Aboriginal radicals’ who are ‘in government employ, thus effectively silenced’ (Lippman 1979: 188). The token’s sense of influence is merely ‘false consciousness’, in another depiction by Howard (Howard 1982: 95).²

These images adopt a limited theory of the public service. Burdening Aboriginal officials with representing too much or too little, as these images do, also adopts a limited theory of representation. Assessments of Aboriginal officials either as too politically active for administration or as tokenistically under-contributing miss something important about Aborigines’ contributions: that they have largely been solicited by governments intent on Indigenous empowerment. Historicizing such solicitations, Rowse (2001) traces assumptions about Aborigines’ capacity for democratic participation to ‘narrow’ ideas of representation which were not helped by divergences between social anthropology and political science.

Sawer (2001) calls for ‘thicker’, more descriptive concepts of parliamentary representation in Australia. The theories of representation which I find more explanatory than those I have

² There is no literature for Aboriginal public servants to parallel that which explores such stereotypes for feminist bureaucrats in Australia (Eisenstein 1996; Sawer 1990; Watson 1990; Yeatman 1990). The ‘femocrats’ literature explores the political identities of Australian feminists as they drew on their external relationships to progress agendas in Government in the 1970s and 1980s (Yeatman 1990: 65).

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characterized as, ‘are you representative enough?’ engage with what is subtle, complex and sociopolitical in the nexus between Aboriginal officials, the policies which purport to empower them and the Aborigines they must somehow represent. In the words of a political theorist whose work started important debates about the representation of historically disadvantaged people:

Representation, taken generally, means the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact (Pitkin 1967: 482).

Representative bureaucracy in the Northern Territory Government, through Aboriginal employment policies, has recognized that disadvantaged Aborigines are not present literally or in fact. It has sought to remedy that absence by soliciting the advice of those Aborigines who are more able to fulfill the requirements of merit selection for public service positions.

Its aims fully realized, representative bureaucracy would make a virtue out of connections between Aboriginal officials and Aboriginal communities and accept that these connections can bring complex loyalties which the pressures of seniority may intensify, if they have not been erased by the disciplines of bureaucracy as Rowley (1976) thought they would be. What do we know of the relationship between Aborigines who are present in the public service and those whose absence they are supposed to redeem? In this thesis I do not assume that being Aboriginal and working for the government would either intensify or erase connections to an absent Aboriginal constituency. I hypothesize competent and professional Aboriginal senior officials who have enduring relationships with, even political commitments to, other Aborigines which they exercise responsibly and with due attention to the other ethics of public service besides representation.

I imagine, for argument’s sake, an Aboriginal public servant who is, in his or her own eyes, not too little and not too much but ‘just right’ by being the best representative that it is possible in the circumstances to be. After all, he or she has been invited to represent Aborigines by enlightened ideas about the merits of social identity in a bureaucracy which has acknowledged its need to understand Aboriginal people more fully. This person’s relationship with Aboriginal policy and program subjects has been valued. Believing himself or herself licensed to speak, what happens when this official does not believe he or she has been heard? The official might speak more assertively or abandon the idea that there is merit in his or her social identity and speak less. Is obscurity an option? Could this official

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choose not to represent Aborigines, or can Aborigines only participate in the public service as Aborigines, presumed by their peers to be in some way representative? And if the latter is true, what does it mean for my working hypothesis of ‘just right’ representatives? If Aborigines can only exercise a representative identity by *pleasing* the public service, this suggests something about the invitation for their *Aboriginal* contributions.

My research idea is to explore the extent to which theories of political representation are applicable to the experiences of Aboriginal senior officials in the Northern Territory’s public service. I do this to find a language for depicting Aboriginal officialdom that properly acknowledges them: the work they do, and their relationships with their Aboriginal policy subjects. My quest takes me to some unusual disciplinary places. I by-pass much of social anthropology’s immense scholarship on Aboriginal cultural difference and those instrumentalist approaches in public administration which presume the efficacy and rationality of government. Rather than pre-judge Aboriginal bureaucrats as ‘compromised’ for their entry into government departments, I engage with the inherent complexities of governing and the humanity of those who try it. I use the historical past to understand present narratives, because it seems to me that policy can and should learn from history.

But my thesis is more empirical than theoretical, for it is enlivened and inspired by conversations with the 76 Aboriginal officials who were willing to be interviewed by me on these issues during 2007. To the extent that they brought a sense of history to their present understandings, this work is historical. Essentially, I bring thick description to a literature on the descriptive representation of historically dispossessed groups.

1.3 The field study

This is primarily an interpretive study. My instincts from my earlier training in social anthropology were to create the conditions, through interview-based research, in which my informants’ perspectives could emerge rather than be too constrained by a presumptive set of questions. To the extent that I created such conditions, the study was ethnographic; to the extent that I used standardizing procedures, it was more quantitatively social scientific. In this section, I introduce some of the quantitative findings that inform my interpretations in later chapters.

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I immersed myself in the Northern Territory as my research field, in 2007, through the myriad tasks of operationalizing my research idea – communicating, travelling, interviewing and transcribing. But I had lived in the Northern Territory since 1984, and I had worked for the Territory Government from 1986 to 2005 when I commenced the leave arrangements for this research. So I knew it well. I knew many of my informants, the cultures of their departments and some of the people of whom they spoke. I had travelled to more Aboriginal communities than I had not. Through my earlier work researching tradition-based Aboriginal claims to land, I was familiar with the genealogies and histories of some linguistic regions. I had been a senior public servant. My fieldwork was enhanced by that prior immersion, as it meant I was known in the community and could orient myself in the physical and political geographies of my informants' working lives. However, my new purpose called for new relationships. Some interviews ranged into this kind of territory because I had worked with several interviewees; I had been one of the non-Aboriginal colleagues of whom they spoke. Our shared history deepened these conversations. But I had not known any of the interviewees as I came to know them through the research.

In 2007, I was looking to interview the 64 Aboriginal public servants who had been classified as senior in the Northern Territory Government's 2005 statistics. But what seemed like a closed social field soon opened into something more fluid and relatively unknown, even to its constituents, when I expanded my study to include anyone who had ever been an Aboriginal senior public servant since Northern Territory self-government.

Here is how that happened and how it affected the composition of the interviewee group.

Recruitment of participants

Understanding that my research subjects had busy working lives, I knew that it would take personal invitations to attract them to participate in the study. The recruitment process which had been approved as part of my research ethics protocol by the Australian National University Ethics Committee had been designed with this in mind, at the same time giving

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due attention to participants' informed consent.³ Yet the Northern Territory Government's Aboriginal employment statistics on employees who had self-identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both, reported them only by position levels and departments; and privacy laws prevented the Commissioner for Public Employment from releasing employee names.⁴ Once the Government was satisfied that my research process would protect employees, I was permitted access to departments to locate my informants.⁵ My Research Agreement with the Northern Territory Government is reproduced at Appendix A.⁶

Given that I was already known to many as a colleague and that my research touched on sensitive issues, I was vigilant about presenting myself as an independent researcher. The integrity of the data relied on the appearance and reality of my independence. Hence, I was unwilling to draw on the Northern Territory Government's communication channels to promote the project to prospective participants.⁷ But my commitment to research independence meant substantial legwork in the recruiting stages.

³ The research was conducted under the Australian National University's Human Research Protocol 2006/358 of 20 March 2007.

⁴ Information Privacy Principle 2.1 under the Northern Territory Information Act 'prohibits use and disclosure of information for a purpose other than the purpose it was collected for' unless that purpose is deemed to be in the public interest.

⁵ My research agreement with the NT Government of 19 April 2007 allowed my research independence but from the perspective of my funding body and research institution, the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DK-CRC), my research had to be 'engaged research', that is, research in partnership with the NT Government as it is one of the DK-CRC's core partners. A senior public servant has sat on my ANU supervision panel as an industry adviser. This arrangement satisfied the DK-CRC's expectation that my project was an expression of its partnership with the Government. My industry advisor facilitated my access to departments by championing my project to others within the NT Government as needed. Under the terms of my ethics approval the interview data will not ever be available to the Government except de-identified and synthesized in the form of my final thesis; however, draft chapters (de-identified) were available to my industry adviser as a member of my panel.

⁶ The Research Agreement makes reference to the possibility of interviewing non-Aboriginal officials and Aboriginal parliamentarians which I decided not to pursue when it became apparent that current and former Aboriginal employees of the NTPS were sufficiently encompassing of a social field not to recruit beyond these categories.

⁷ The Commissioner for Public Employment offered me such assistance early in 2007.

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To promote the research and recruit participants, I developed a series of Information Sheets, with slight variations for different audiences; and a Letter of Invitation, a Consent Form and a Guide to the Interview Questions. These research instruments are at Appendices B-E.⁸

I drew on friendships with some Aboriginal officials to make contact with my first interview subjects. One referral led to another. Personal referral was a more direct route to potential participants than official channels, and it had a snowballing effect.⁹ This method gradually allowed the social field to emerge. The final composition of my interviewee group was the result of a process of elimination in which my participants were essentially self-selecting, once I had established my criteria of relevance. That an interviewee had been employed by the Northern Territory Government at some stage was clear enough to become a necessary condition of participation, whereas employment in a senior category was less easily established without an interview. If someone was referred to me as relevant within these criteria, I regarded him or her as relevant and sought an interview.¹⁰

⁸ The Information Sheet originally sought as participants:

- Aboriginal employees at senior and executive levels in the Northern Territory Government;
- Other Aboriginal people in key positions, including those in publicly funded Aboriginal organizations and community councils and former NT Government employees; and
- Non-Aboriginal officials at particular vantage points throughout the bureaucracy.

As noted, current and former Aboriginal employees were sufficiently encompassing of the social field not to recruit all of these categories of participant.

⁹ On a few occasions I worked through departmental human resource managers to send information about my research to workplaces where I knew there to be senior Aboriginal staff whom I had no other way of contacting. Once or twice, such managers drew on their knowledge of Aboriginal employees to approach them on my behalf; but working through these managers, sensitive and helpful as they were, tended to be indirect as it left it up to employees to contact me or to authorize my contact with them. I could not ask managers – and they did not offer – to act on their knowledge of employee self-identification.

¹⁰ By the time they signed up as participants in the research, my interviewees had had several opportunities to withdraw from the process. Between the referral and the interview, some people did withdraw. In the limited instances in which I posted invitations with no prior contact, they were declined. Mostly, my invitees were people with whom I had discussed the research and who were expecting an invitation. What worked best was to give people time to consider information setting out my purpose, the conditions of participation and how I could protect their privacy before we got to the point of invitation. Likewise, once they had accepted, there were preparatory stages to the interview. Interviews were held only with interviewees' prior knowledge of the questions, their informed consent in writing and their choice as to the time, place and the method of recording. Even so, a couple of interviewees did not show up for their interviews; if that happened twice, I assumed they had declined. And participants were free to withdraw after the interview. Nobody exercised that right, although one interviewee, sadly, has died.

Aboriginal officials in ‘orbit’: demography

The process of personal referrals snowballed, during 2007, to reveal a social network of past, present and even future NTPS senior officials. I was led to Aboriginal senior public servants who had worked for the Northern Territory Government in the past as well as to current employees in 2007; and I was led to some who turned out not to have been senior.

Nearly 40 per cent of the personal referrals were to former NTPS employees. Table 1 shows that at some stages of the fieldwork it appeared former employees would form half the interviewee group. It seemed significant that so many Aboriginal officials had left the Government’s employment and that I was referred to them in a search for *current* employees. More than half the former NTPS employees among my interviewees were working in the Indigenous sector (Rowse 2005a) – that is, in organizations which were at arm’s length from government departments and in receipt of public funds to deliver services to Northern Territory Aboriginal communities.¹¹ Had these interviewees sought to resolve the ethical ambivalence of being public servants by moving into more clearly advocacy roles in the Indigenous sector, government’s less politically constrained ‘partner’ in service delivery?

Table 1 compares the Indigenous sector to other sectors as an alternative to NTPS employment. Table 1 suggests that the Indigenous sector was the main employment alternative to the NTPS in 2007, throughout the pool of potential interviewees as well as for the group of 76 interviewees. I have included as ‘Indigenous sector’ those people whose primary role was on the boards and committees of Indigenous sector organizations and those who had established their own businesses for purposes relating primarily to Indigenous people.

The consistency of the ratio of current to former employees during the recruitment process suggests that my informants were committed to drawing my attention to those who had left

¹¹ The Northern Territory’s Indigenous sector organizations include the Land Councils established under Aboriginal land rights legislation and a plethora of Aboriginal health, housing, legal support and community organizations. I include privately-owned Aboriginal businesses in this sector as well as research organizations if they are predominantly Indigenous-focused or Indigenous-owned, even if they have other partners. For six interviewees, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission had been the vehicle for a former representative role; a few others had been in Northern Territory electoral politics or other local leadership positions.

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the NTPS. That is shown in Table 1. But the flow of staff between the NTPS and the Indigenous sector went both ways because 24 out of 46 or more than 50 per cent of the current employees among my interviewees had worked in the Indigenous sector at some time in their careers and had *returned* to the NTPS. Forty-five interviewees, nearly 60 per cent of the whole group, had worked in the Indigenous sector at some stage

Table 1: 2007 Employment Sector and Ratio of Current to Former NTPS Employees in the Pool of Potential Interviewees

		Points of elimination in the interviewee recruitment process (pool of potential interviewees)			
		Referred	Approached	Invited	Interviewed
Employment sector in 2007	In the NTPS in 2007	98	90	69	46
	Ex-NTPS in 2007	64	42	35	30
	Indigenous sector	24	26	22	17
	Other sectors	21	16	14	13
	Commonwealth	4	4	2	2
	State Government	4	3	3	3
	Charles Darwin University	5	4	3	2
	NGO (not IS)	5	4	3	3
	Private sector	2	2	2	2
	Political	1	1	1	1
Unknown	19	0	0	0	
Total	162	132	104	76	

A professionally mobile group was in some kind of ‘orbit’, I could see, between the NTPS and the Indigenous sector. But the interviewee group was mobile into other sectors as well. Interviewees had had past experiences in other NGOs, the Commonwealth (most particularly the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission), other State Governments and the research and private sectors. Only nine interviewees had *only ever* worked for the Northern Territory Government. I wondered if there existed anything resembling the core of longer serving officials that seemed implicit in Public Service Commissioners’ reports of increasing numbers of Aboriginal employees.

Table 2 shows that although the largest proportion of interviewees (42) had worked in the NTPS for ten years or less, significant numbers had worked in the NTPS for up to 20 and 30 years – that is, since Northern Territory self-government in 1978.

Table 2: Interviewees’ Length of Service in the NTPS as at 2007

Current/former employees	No. of years in the NTPS				Total
	20+ years	10-19 years	5-9 years	<5 years	
Current	14	8	11	13	46
<i>(Had only worked for NTPS)</i>	<i>(5)</i>	<i>(1)</i>	<i>(2)</i>	<i>(1)</i>	<i>(9)</i>
Former	4	7	8	11	30
Total	18	15	19	24	76

I wondered if length of service linked was to political periods. From before the time of Northern Territory self-government until 2001 – that is, for much of the self-governing era up to the time of my study – the Northern Territory was governed by a Country Liberal Party majority. The Northern Territory Labor Government, which was still in place in 2007, had only commenced in 2001. Table 3 shows that interviewees had commenced their employment fairly evenly across the Northern Territory’s political periods. A higher number of interviewees had been recruited in recent decades, but 19 out of 46 or more than 40 per cent of the current employees had been recruited before 1990 and six interviewees had had 30 years’ continuous service. That there had not been more attrition over the decades suggests that quite a few careers had endured the political upheaval of the Northern Territory’s only change of government.

Table 3: Date of Interviewees’ Most Recent Entry into the NTPS

NTPS employment	NTPS commencement date				Total
	1978-1979 First years of NT Self- government	1980-1989 First full decade of NT CLP Government	1990-2001 Second decade to the end of NT CLP Gov’t	2001-07 Since NT Labor Government	
Current	8*	11	12	15	46
<i>(Only NTPS)</i>	<i>(2)</i>	<i>(3)</i>	<i>(3)</i>	<i>(1)</i>	<i>(9)</i>
Former	5**	4	12	9	30
Total	13	15	24	24	76

*Four with 30 years’ continuous service **Two just retired after 30 years’ continuous service

If there was a core of longer serving Aboriginal officials in the NTPS, it is difficult to put a precise character or figure on it. If an official was still in the NTPS in 2007 after more than a decade of service, it meant that he or she had stayed in place over different political periods. This could indicate a commitment to stay. In this category there were 31

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interviewees, nearly 30 per cent of the interviewee group; but most of them had worked elsewhere. Taking continuity over political periods and length of service into account: if there was a core of longer serving officials, that core had not been exclusively employed by the NTPS.

I did not find as many successors to those whose long careers were coming to end after 30 years of self-government as might be expected. Whilst this could be partly explained by a trend away from permanent appointments towards contract employment, I noticed another phenomenon: a sense of entitlement to be a public servant. For many interviewees, working for the Northern Territory Government meant participating in the government of their own place as some kind of right, entitlement or even obligation. That the Northern Territory has a relatively small employment base which is largely dominated by the public sector might have contributed to that sense of entitlement. But for many interviewees the Northern Territory Government was the preferred employer and working for this employer was more than just a job.

Profiling the interviewees: age, gender and education

Most interviewees were in their 40s and quite a few were in their 50s, but they were aged between their 20s and 60s. There was a similar age range in the senior group, but there were more women (30) than men (23) in the senior group.

Table 4 compares the schooling completion and educational levels for senior and non-senior interviewees and for executives and senior administrators within the senior group.

Table 4 shows that of 76 interviewees, precisely half (38) had not finished high school. Yet, many interviewees (48) had post-school qualifications which they had achieved in later life. That so many Aboriginal officials had not completed school did not appear to have prevented their entry into the NTPS. My data suggest that while incomplete schooling had affected their promotional opportunities, it had not completely prevented those opportunities. My data also suggest that while the likelihood of an official having completed Year 12 rose with seniority, the achievement of a degree did not have the same correlation because a higher proportion of non-senior than senior interviewees had university degrees.

Table 4:
Comparing Interviewees’ Educational Qualifications and School Completion Levels by Seniority

Interviewees’ school completion levels	Interviewees’ educational qualifications					Total	% of grouping
	Primary School	High School	Cert/ Diploma	Degree			
Senior							
<i>Executives**</i>					35% of executives		
< Year 12	0	1	3	3	7	35%	
Year 12	0	3	4	4	11	55%	
Did not say	0	0	1	1	2		
<i>Senior administrators***</i>					30% of snr admin		
< Year 12	0	3	9	5	17	51%	
Year 12	0	4	2	6	12	36%	
Did not say	0	2	1	1	4		
Total senior	0	13	20	20	53		
Non-senior							
< Year 12	1	3	8	2*	14	61%	
Year 12	0	0	1	7	8	35%	
Did not say	0	1	0	0	1		
Total non-senior	1	4	9	9	23		
TOTAL	1	17	29	29	76		

* One interviewee had never attended school as a child.

** Executive level 1 and above – see page 21.

*** Administrative Officer levels 7 and 8 – see page 21.

These findings suggest that apart from the level of literacy and numeracy which might be expected to result from high school completion, it was not a university education that made the difference for those Aboriginal officials who had achieved public service seniority. What did make the difference? This question was the subject of interviews.

The interviews¹²

Seventy-six interviews took nearly seven months at quite a pace in the light of the labour it took to arrange each one of them. The interviews were as long as our conversation took, once interviewees had consented to the terms of the research and we had established rapport – but they were generally between one and two hours long.

The Northern Territory is Australia's vast northern frontier. The Top End encompasses the northern wetlands and tropical savannas which move gradually southwards into the hot, dry deserts of Central Australia. The Top End and Central Australia depict commonly recognized points of geography and administration; idiomatically, there is no 'south' as Northern Territorians usually reserve that term for the more populous cities and regions of south, southeastern and southwestern Australia. The Northern Territory Government administers five regions: the Top End regions of Darwin, Katherine and East Arnhem and the Central Australian regions of Alice Springs and the Barkly. But departments' main headquarters are in the coastal tropical city of Darwin and the desert town of Alice Springs.¹³

Most interviews were held in Darwin, the Northern Territory capital and the central headquarters of most departments. In the Top End, I held interviews in Katherine, three hours' drive south from Darwin and in Wadeye, a large Aboriginal community which was once the Catholic mission of Port Keats, an hour's flight southwest of Darwin. In Central Australia, I held most interviews in Alice Springs, 1,600 kilometres south of Darwin. I flew there once and drove there again, also interviewing in the small multi-racial town of Tennant Creek on my way to Alice Springs and Ntaria, the old Lutheran mission of Hermannsburg.¹⁴

¹² My interviewees' privacy has been protected in this research. I go to great lengths, at times, to conceal my interviewees' identities without losing the nuance of their stories. Interviewees knew to let me know if there was anything in their stories by which I might unwittingly identify them, and that it was their right to withdraw from the research at any time. I made their transcripts available to interviewees upon request. Twenty interviewees asked to be sent their quotes in context before approving their use.

¹³ The Commonwealth Government and local government use other structures of regional administration. Aborigines sometimes contrast 'saltwater' and 'desert' people but they recognize many linguistic regions.

¹⁴ Often, we met in interviewees' offices or meeting rooms in their work time. Some interviewees preferred to come to my office at the Australian National University's North Australia Research Unit in Darwin or to the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre in Alice Springs. Some nominated coffee shops or their homes; some interstate interviewees agreed to the telephone.

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These were semi-structured interviews. I drew on the questions at Appendix E to guide a wide-ranging conversation in which my main concern was to allow interviewees to reflect candidly on their careers, personal histories and the sources of their identity as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. By the time the interview moved onto questions of representation, we had covered a lot of ground. I often prompted interviewees to contextualize their accounts in the light of events they had described. We discussed their jobs, how influential they felt in their departments and whether and in what circumstances they felt conflicted by their work. At my invitation, interviewees characterized their relationship with the Northern Territory Government. Their answers ranged all the way from the quirky ‘platonic’ to ‘poison cousin’ which in Aboriginal terms is an avoidance relationship among close kin, meaning, an interviewee explained: ‘part of the same things, like they can sit in the car, but they’ve got their backs to each other; there’s no touching’.

That is just a flavour of the intriguing conversations that gave me a substantial body of data – 100 hours of speech and nearly 2,500 pages of transcription in which 76 different lives had encountered thousands of public service projects since Northern Territory self-government. I cannot underestimate – nor fully fathom – the effect of my presence as a non-Aboriginal researcher, a white middle class educated southerner, on the content of the interviews. But these were frank discussions, and my interviewees were open to having them. I kept strictly to the terms of our consent agreements: individual privacy has been paramount in this project. I use pseudonyms in my characterizations. In any respect in which the interviews were identifying of the interviewees or of other people, these remain private conversations.

My interviewees all had in common that they had worked in the administration of the Northern Territory at some point in its self-governing years. Many knew each other and in some cases, they were parts of each others’ stories. But they did not form a group in the sociological sense of a coherent and self-referring entity. These were 39 men and 37 women whose lives converged on a career detail they did not all necessarily realize – that they had worked in the NTPS – however much their stories resonated with each other. I explore these and other commonalities among them. But it is in the nuances of individual self-accounts – how interviewees were different from each other – that my data are richest.

1.4 Introducing seniority

The closer public servants are to the top of departments' hierarchies, the more the community holds them accountable for government decisions and the more accountable they often feel. Public service seniority interests me for this study because it contains the potential for greater tension than might be experienced at lower levels of the hierarchy, between the striving for impartiality and the discretionary 'contributions' that employment policies invite Aborigines to make.

As a small, highly networked community, the Northern Territory was fertile ground for this research. But seniority is slippery to study.

Using seniority as an official differentiator

For the purposes of the Aboriginal employee statistics, the Commissioner for Public Employment defines senior public servants as those who are at the 'Administrative Officer level 7 or above or equivalent' in other salary streams. But there is no clear 'equivalence' between the administrative and the professional, technical and physical salary streams under the NTPS award.¹⁵ Without knowing all the bases of judgement for the Aboriginal employment statistics, it was difficult to locate all those who populated the statistics.

Not only this, the Commissioner's cut off point for seniority did not have any direct parallel in practice. Those at the top of the administrative stream are the executives who run departments and policy units ('EO1s' and above); immediately below them are those I am calling senior administrators, the functionaries of policy advice and program development. These 'AO7s' and 'AO8s', as they are called in NTPS departments, are *discretionarily* invited into executive management groups. 'AO7s' and 'AO8s' are on the cusp of managerial seniority. Some interviewees who were at these levels said that they felt that they were included in the category 'senior' only in order to boost Aboriginal employment numbers.

¹⁵ The streams use different salary structures and within each classification there are incremental rises based on individuals' length of service. In the professional stream of social and physical scientists, 'Ps' 2-4 sit as more or less the equivalents of senior administrators and executives within administrative structures. The highest level of the technical stream is equivalent to the lowest of 'senior' in the administrative stream; the physical stream ends before the category 'senior' begins.

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The difference between ‘senior administrator’ and ‘executive’ is a sliding scale, in practice, and not the clear cut distinction the statistics imply. Theoretically, the distinction is that senior administrators are more ‘operational’. They supervise the work units which deliver programs, whereas executives have greater scope for strategic influence; executives supervise the supervisors. Executives, especially the more senior executives, may have discretion over people and issues which can be quite far below and detached from them. Senior executives are responsible not just for public service performance but for the principles of performance. In relation to policy development, senior executives have a greater ability to negotiate the terms of reference with political leaders. The style of senior executive authority is said to be charismatic, persuasive and intuitive.¹⁶

But senior administrators are executives’ under-studies. They are judged on similar criteria. They are a recruitment pool for higher seniority. Senior administrators may work in executive management cultures, even if they do not share in all the largesse of these cultures.

The difference between seniority and non-seniority is perhaps best described as the difference between task design and task execution – between professional and non-professional work (Young 1990: 216-8). At the non-senior levels – that is, below ‘AO7’ – there are front line project officers, field officers and administrative assistants of various kinds. Here are Lipsky’s ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky 1980), who may exercise considerable discretion in their dealings with clients. But I do not see it as the level of public contact which distinguishes the ‘non-senior’ from the ‘senior’ levels, because senior public servants now engage the ‘street’ through mechanisms for ‘stakeholder involvement’ and ‘community engagement’. It is, however, the case that at non-senior levels the public that is

¹⁶ In 2004, the Northern Territory Commissioner for Public Employment described the executive role as ‘stewardship of the Sector, through governance and protecting the public interest in a way that leaves a legacy to the next generation of public sector employees to build upon’ (OCPE 2004a). The ‘high performing executive’ did not dictate but ‘crafts and articulates’. He or she achieved results by ‘recognizing and promoting Indigenous cultures’, building ‘positive and sustainable relationships’ with ‘key internal and external stakeholders’ and ‘leading reforms’. He or she achieved outcomes for the community by reacting to ‘local conditions’, being ‘results and action’ focused and self-aware. Executives, it was said, ‘build shared vision without relying on position or power’ and with a ‘deep appreciation of culture’. They were to practice good governance, to model ethical behaviour, and ‘make effective judgements’ even where the environment was one of ‘ambiguity or insufficient information’.

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served is more discrete and bounded than the disembodied generic publics that more senior roles command through their broader, more ambiguous agendas.

It is embedded in the notion of public service hierarchy that the more senior the officer, the closer to the politics. The closer to the politics, the more balancing of the principles of impartiality, fairness and due process with the obligation to serve the government of the day. In policy work, advice to government takes the form of written words in ministerial advice, cabinet submissions and public documents which are subject to a hierarchical authority structure. That is: more senior the officer, the more likely it is that his or her words will not be changed by someone who is above them in the hierarchy.

Constituting the interviewee group

I interviewed 33 Aboriginal employees who were at senior levels in 13 departments in 2007. Twenty-nine were in the administrative stream, one was in the professional stream and three were paid under the different awards for education and health professionals.

How ‘representative’ of the 64 Aboriginal senior officials who had been reported to be at their desks in 2005 were the 33 interviewees who were current and senior in 2007? The question is important because it establishes the relationship between some of the officials who supplied my research data and their depersonalized statistic. I can only answer for the administration stream. Taking into account movements in and out of the NTPS, those in my interview group who were currently, that is in 2007, employed at senior levels in the NTPS constituted 86 per cent of those who were counted as senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants in 2005.¹⁷

A further 19 interviewees had been senior in the NTPS at some point prior to 2007. Adding in one non-senior current employee who had been in a senior position at some stage in the past, I interviewed a total of 53 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who were at the

¹⁷ Of the 64 Aboriginal senior staff reported in 13 out of 20 possible departments in 2005, 37 were in the administrative stream – 20 AO7s, 10 AO8s and seven executives in 10 departments. Adding back in the 14 interviewees in these categories who had left since 2005 and excluding 8 more recent recruits and three non-identifying interviewees, 32 interviewees confirmed their place among the 37 administrative positions.

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time of their interview or had at some time since Northern Territory self-government been senior officials of the NTPS. Considering the Northern Territory's tight social and professional networks and that self-government began only a generation ago it is quite conceivable these 53 constituted a significant proportion of those who had ever worked for the Northern Territory Government as a senior public servant by 2007 who were willing to participate in the research.

Of the 53 who had been senior in the NTPS at some point in their career, 20 were or had been at executive levels and 33 were or had been senior administrators.

The remaining 23 were not and had never been *senior* NTPS officials. I divide them into two categories: 13 who were in the NTPS (although one was on leave arrangements) at the time of their interview who aspired to seniority; and ten who had left the NTPS and become senior elsewhere. Those still in the NTPS who were non-senior provide important perspectives through their unrequited yearnings (in the case of some) for seniority. The 10 who had risen to positions of seniority elsewhere had developed public profiles, after leaving the NTPS, which enabled them to achieve a voice they had not achieved as public servants. Seven were running Aboriginal organizations or businesses and three had public identities as the members or chairs of boards or community leaders. They were all in the Indigenous sector.

Table 5 organizes the 76 interviewees by their current or former NTPS employment status in 2007 and their seniority in the NTPS at any time in their careers.

Table 5: Interviewees’ Current/Former NTPS Employment Status and Seniority

Senior/non-senior in 2007	NTPS employment status in 2007		Total
	Current NTPS interviewees	Former NTPS interviewees	
Senior in NTPS at some point in career – ‘senior’	34 12 executives* 22 senior administrators	19 8 executives 11 senior administrators	53 20 executives 33 senior administrators
Never senior in NTPS – ‘non-senior’	12 (7 in Central Australia)	11 10 achieved leadership in the Indigenous sector	23
Total	46	30	76

* One ‘current’ interviewee who appears as senior in this table refers to a position held in the past, as this interviewee had left the NTPS and returned to a non-senior position.

Narrowing the field

I refer to the larger group of 76 senior and non-senior interviewees by the term ‘Aboriginal officials’. To focus my discussion in later chapters, I now narrow the field to those who met the basic criterion of seniority.

I limit much of my discussion to the 53 interviewees who had been senior in the NTPS at some point in their careers. Where I refer only to them, I call them ‘Aboriginal senior officials’. I indicate whether they were executives or senior administrators or current or former employees where it enhances my argument and where it will not identify them. I do not single out the few interviewees who were not in the administrative stream. I clarify the historical period when former employees were in the NTPS where that is relevant.

The non-senior officials appear later in the thesis. I interviewed 23 people in this category because they enhanced my understanding of the social field. As well, my reasons for interviewing them were logistic. I had to interview people who had been referred to me to find out their ‘eligibility’ for the research. In some workplaces, to exclude non-senior employees would have meant insufficient participants to maintain the anonymity of others. Finally: I did not want to limit my findings to Darwin. I wanted to understand regional workplaces, where responsibilities were more localized and there were fewer senior positions. Non-senior regional office employees often exercise the discretions of seniority.

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Where I do not mean to distinguish between senior and non-senior interviewees, I use the generic term ‘Aboriginal officials’.

To what extent were the views of Aboriginal senior officials regional in character? While I made sure in my field study to capture something of the experiences of officials in all regions, I took a particular interest in the extent to which Central Australian experiences contrasted with those in the Top End.

The Central Australian interviewees¹⁸

In the process of recruiting my research subjects I was referred to 40 Aboriginal public servants who had worked for the Northern Territory Government in Central Australia, only 10 of whom I understood to have been senior. From 25 invitations, I interviewed 18 Central Australians in my research. These Central Australian interviewees formed 25 per cent of the interviewee group.

Six Central Australians were senior and were still in the NTPS. Seven interviewees were in the NTPS at non-senior levels. In total there were 13 current NTPS employees in five departments among the interviewees in Central Australia. The remaining five had left to work in the Indigenous sector where they had all risen to positions of local seniority and public profile. These formed a relatively large proportion, 50 per cent, of those in the Indigenous sector overall. I distinguish Central Australian and other regionally-based interviewees where their data help elucidate the extent to which my findings were regional in character.

¹⁸ This research was sponsored by the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre in which my PhD was funded within the overarching Core Project, ‘Desert Services That Work: Demand Responsive Approaches to Desert Settlement’ (Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre 2009). This project included among its research priorities to analyze the interplay between the demand for and the supply of services to desert communities. Although my research question was independently conceived and investigated in that overarching project, my study was one of several concerned with the complexity of service supply.

Other studies of the Northern Territory Public Service

In 1989, Loveday and Cummings questioned the ‘stereotypical racist contrast between “real” Aborigines and “burnt potatoes”’ on the basis of interviews with 43 Northern Territory Aboriginal public servants, some of them senior (Loveday and Cummings 1989: 4). Loveday and Cummings located the tension experienced by their Aboriginal public servant interviewees: ‘between what happens to them (at least as they perceive it) and what they expect should happen on the ground of their own qualifications, their duty statements and the rules of the service’ (Loveday and Cummings 1989: 6). My study expands on – perhaps, completes – Loveday and Cummings’ unfinished research, because their findings about ‘role conflict’ for Aboriginal public servants were inconclusive.¹⁹

A more recent study by Wakerman and others (2000) of the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health managers makes different findings from mine, even though our interviewees said some strikingly similar things. Wakerman et al found among managers, some of them NTPS-based, ‘strong, personal motivation’ to assist their communities, ‘wide political and community leadership roles’, ‘high levels of support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff’, ‘high stress levels’ and a tendency to be ‘hands-on’ (Wakerman et al. 2000: vii): a ‘different’ management style (2000: 10-11). Wakerman et al’s research subjects preferred to see themselves as ‘agents of change’ rather than as ‘tokens’, sellouts or Aboriginal ‘experts’ (Wakerman et al. 2000: 25-26; 39-43). Where Wakerman et al and some government programs have seen ‘cultural tensions’, I see the search for political relevance.²⁰

Lea asked how public servants come to believe in what they do, in her more recent ethnography of white NTPS bureaucrats ‘learning to govern’ Indigenous health (Lea 2002). Characterizing as ‘helping whites’ those who anguish over chronic Aboriginal ill-health, she finds that their anguish is replenished by the ‘magic of intervention’, the ‘compulsion *to do*

¹⁹ Loveday and Cummings found ‘some evidence of stress directly related to conflict of roles’ but noted the need for greater understanding of the incidents involved as ‘it was very easy to overlook relevant factors in interpreting the data’ (Loveday and Cummings 1989: 1). In personal communication, Dr Peter Loveday has advised me that his retirement from the Australian National University’s North Australia Research Unit due to illness prevented him from returning to the project.

²⁰ Commonwealth programs have urged ‘sensitivity to the stress placed on individual Aboriginal staff, particularly those in senior positions, stemming from their dual role as Aboriginals and as public servants’ (EEO Bureau 1985).

something to fix the problems of target populations’ in which ‘it becomes impossible to see how what is deemed “need” has been constructed’. Lea finds the ‘state’ in the ‘bleeding heart’ or the ‘perceptual acts of the bureaucratically encultured self’ (Lea 2008: 16-7). Looking for policy in the subjectivities of liberal interventionists who ‘help’ Aborigines, Lea reveals in them ‘a widely shared but rarely spoken distrust of people who powerfully claim Aboriginality ... but seem to lack “authentic” customary knowledge’ (Lea 2008: 182).

In describing her subjects’ ‘hyper-privileging the contributions and presence of Aboriginal colleagues who operate in brokerage positions’, Lea gives the view from one side of a collegiate relationship in which my interviewees were on the other (Lea 2008: 182). But there is another way in which Lea’s study is relevant to mine. That is, my data allow me to consider the extent to which liberal interventionists might be also drawn from the populations they particularize.²¹

Representative bureaucracy’s invitation contains the contradiction: we embrace *you*, but we cannot necessarily embrace what you say. We shall see that by their own accounts, self-identifying Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander public servants were granted some of the privileges of bureaucratic inclusion, but rarely the privilege of serving non-Indigenous populations.

1.5 Thesis structure

The metaphor of hospitality captures the idea that my interviewees’ experiences took place in the structuring event of a welcoming embrace. The two main parts of the thesis reflect the component parts of a civil relationship: an invitation, and an answering reply.

²¹ A later study of liberal interventionist subjectivities was based in a non-government research institution in the Northern Territory. Analyzing the commitments to Aboriginal self-determination of ‘White antiracist’ researcher staff, Kowal found that they had constructed an idea of ‘remediable difference’, or cultural difference that is ‘amenable to normalization’ (Kowal 2006; 2008: 341, 343). Their theory broke down when Aboriginal health problems proved intractable, revealing the ‘internal contradictions of liberal multiculturalism’ (2008: 346): that its Orientalist vision of the cultural other could not tolerate radical difference.

Chapter One – The Research Idea

Part I – History and Theory: An ambivalent invitation 1911-2007

Part I examines the invitation to Aborigines to participate in the administration of the Northern Territory in three dimensions which are the themes of Chapters Two, Three and Four: historically, theoretically and in Aboriginal employment policies since self-government.

Chapter Two begins my history at the first moments of the Northern Territory's administration as a discrete entity under Commonwealth control – in 1911, the time of the first moves to establish an earlier Northern Territory Public Service. Over the next 66 years, many of my interviewees' antecedents were successively 'civilized', 'rehabilitated' and 'assimilated' as policy subjects and employees of the Northern Territory administration. By 1978, an incipient representative bureaucracy, however accidental, had formed the inheritance for Northern Territory self-government.

In Chapter Three, I sketch out my reading of literatures which began emerging in the 1970s that are relevant to understanding an Aboriginal political identity that explicitly emanates from within the 'state'. I argue that political theorists' elegant thinking on the descriptive representation of historically disadvantaged groups is as relevant to the discretionary spaces in bureaucracy as it is to the electoral arena for which the thinking was developed. My data do not neatly support political theory's distinction between who a representative *is* and what a representative *does*, but they do support the idea of representative agents who 'share fates' with the represented. I identify 'trusteeship', 'substitution' and 'role modelling' as relevant themes in public service representation.

In Chapter Four, I show that the policy approaches of Northern Territory self-government amount to both a 'passive' and 'active' program of representative bureaucracy. Drawing on archival records, I trace the Aboriginal employment statistics in a continuing story of numbers; and I justify my portrayal of the invitation to Aborigines to join and contribute to NTPS, throughout its long and winding course, as profoundly ambivalent.

Part II – Answering: Aboriginal senior officials 1978-2007

I structure Part II by the three logical possibilities for an invitation's reply: acceptance, the limits of acceptance and the re-fashioning which might make acceptance sustainable. These

Chapter One – The Research Idea

are the themes of Chapters Five, Six and Seven respectively. In these chapters I elucidate the vernacular meaning of ‘representation’ for Aboriginal senior officials through their interviews.

Chapter Five is concerned with the extent to which the 50 Aboriginal senior officials who self-identified for the purposes of the NTPS statistics accepted the invitation to represent Northern Territory Aborigines in their work as public servants by becoming at least ‘descriptive representatives’. Most make more active drawings on their identity in the service of those Aborigines whom they see as absent, in ways that are consistent with a notion of ‘trusteeship’, to stand up for others. Alternatively, they may find themselves standing in for the absent, in keeping with the notion of representing by ‘substitution’.

Chapter Six explores the limits of acceptance that are expressed in the idea of demurring, rather than necessarily declining, the representative invitation. By these means, many of the 50 self-identifying Aboriginal senior officials could effectively moderate the effects of their presence, subtly deflecting what seemed to them presumptuous in workplace requests that they speak *for*, or even *as*, the absent. But some did decline the invitation outright by leaving the NTPS. I discuss their stories of exit and interviewees’ considerations of the Indigenous sector as an alternative site for their enactment of a representative identity.

Chapter Seven gradually reassembles the entire interviewee group as I explore the meaning of their self-depiction as ‘role models’. I characterize ‘role modelling’ as the form of representation that best sustained their sense of self – by enhancing their self-image and allowing some to enter didactic and disciplinary relationships with other Aborigines. I explore the social imaginary that ‘role modelling’ inspired: of grounded Aboriginal Territorians who respected local Aborigines. I show that their transcendence of the disadvantage which still afflicted their people did not, in their own judgement, compromise them as representatives.

Part III – Conclusion

How compelling is the Northern Territory Government’s self-account as a representative bureaucracy, for Aboriginal senior officials? In Chapter Eight, I assess the extent to which I have answered my research question.

PART I

HISTORY AND THEORY

AN AMBIVALENT INVITATION 1911-2007

Chapter Two

The Inheritance: Aborigines acquire a ‘taste for work’ 1911-1977

Of course the Aboriginal himself has to get a taste for work in government departments and realize that the doors are open to him there (Barrie Dexter to the Joint Committee on the NT 1973: 210).

I am quoting Barrie Dexter’s evidence to the Parliamentary Committee which recommended the Northern Territory’s readiness for the self-government that it eventually achieved in 1978. Dexter, then Secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs, was implying that Aborigines had not already acquired a ‘taste for work’ in the Commonwealth’s administration of the Northern Territory – or that if Aborigines had tasted work, they had not liked it. Assuring the Committee that the doors to government departments were open to Aborigines, he implied something else as well: that the Commonwealth was inviting Aborigines to be bureaucrats.

In this chapter, I ask whether Aborigines had acquired a ‘taste for work’ in government departments before 1978 and if so, how that ‘taste’ prepared them for the invitations of representative bureaucracy. In the first part, I explore the roles Aborigines played in the 66 years of Northern Territory administration during the period of Commonwealth control, 1911-1977. I show that Aborigines had been a constant, if undemanding, presence for the duration. Aborigines had more than tasted administrative work by 1977: they had, under Aboriginal employment policies, been publicly ‘civilized’, ‘protected’ and ‘assimilated’ by it. They had also been consummately counted, as I explain in a parallel story of numbers which intensifies in the moves to Northern Territory self-government.

In the second part of the chapter, I examine the intentions of those who were proposing strategies for Aboriginal empowerment. The architects of Aboriginal self-determination were doubtful of the bureaucracy’s capacity to empower Aborigines. They saw Aboriginal public sector employment as training for a political identity that could only be enacted at arm’s length from government departments. To the extent that they contemplated it, they were especially wary of the capacity of the soon to be re-invigorated Northern Territory

Chapter Two – The Inheritance

Public Service to empower Aborigines under local political leadership. Yet, Aborigines were invited to be bureaucrats. Those who framed Aboriginal employment policy in the opening years of self-determination were prepared to promote the ideals of representative bureaucracy but not to recognize its logical corollary: the public service as a site of Aboriginal representation. They saw representation as outside the possibilities of bureaucracy. Not only this, after 66 years of administrative presence, Aborigines were not seen as culturally suited or as having the competencies for bureaucratic work.

I document the gradual formation of the Northern Territory Government's inheritance. I describe this inheritance as a mix of two things: an Aboriginal workforce which had already been framed as constituting an incipient 'representative bureaucracy' in the years leading up to Northern Territory self-government; and a deep ambivalence among policymakers as to Aborigines' prospects as representative bureaucrats. It reflects the tenor of this history that in this chapter, Aborigines themselves are almost, but not quite, voiceless.

2.1 Aborigines as a constant public service presence

I divide my history of Aborigines' presence in the administration of the Northern Territory into uneven time periods. These are the 60 years 1911-1971, ending with the last year of the Commonwealth's Northern Territory Administration, and the six years 1972-1977, during which the Commonwealth handed over the administration of the Northern Territory to local structures at the same time as instituting national approaches in Aboriginal affairs.

The first 60 years of Commonwealth control: 1911-1971

In 1911, the Commonwealth took over the Northern Territory from a much-relieved South Australia which had found the Northern Territory's Aboriginal populations, vast distances and harsh climate too difficult to govern over the nearly five decades it had held this responsibility. The Commonwealth's Northern Territory (Administration) Act of 1910 established the various structures of local administration which remained in place until Northern Territory self-government in 1978.²² Among the first structures to be created was

²² In 1926 the Commonwealth created the Territories of North and Central Australia for a short period for ease of governing its vast tropical and desert geographies.

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the Northern Territory Public Service (NTPS), which throughout successive expansions and contractions sat in uneasy tension with the Commonwealth Public Service even though they were both Commonwealth instruments.²³

The structure known as the Northern Territory Administration (NTA) was not instituted until 1941, 30 years into the period of Commonwealth control when the Commonwealth drew together many of the functions of the previous, small ‘a’ administration during the Northern Territory’s military management in World War II. From the perspective of Administrator RH Weddell, the problem with the previous arrangements was that ‘permanent officers’ were spending ‘all their best years in the tropics’ (CPP 1936: 7). Operating the two public services side by side had given rise to rivalry over employment conditions. As a local entity, the NTPS could not offer the career mobility and conditions that Commonwealth officers could attract (Heatley 1979: 7; 1990). Thus, one of the reforms enabled by the formation of the NTA was that many NTPS employees were transferred into the Commonwealth Public Service.²⁴

The dismantling of the NTA later made way for the structures of Northern Territory self-government. But from 1915 until self-government in 1978, the Northern Territory and Commonwealth Public Services sat side-by-side, their respective capacities determined by the distribution of administrative functions. Although the early NTPS had different provenance from the entity which later administered Northern Territory self-government and although it remained largely ancillary to the Commonwealth Public Service, this earlier

²³ From 1915, the NTPS operated five departments – Chief Secretary, Lands, Mines, Agriculture and Aborigines – under the Northern Territory Administrator. In 1928 the NTPS became a single department with expanded functions through six branches – Administration, Mines, Health and Aborigines, Education, Police and Prisons – which from 1931 was known as the Department of the Administrator. This was the small ‘a’ Northern Territory administration. Alongside it sat Commonwealth offices over which the Northern Territory Administrator had no jurisdiction, such as those responsible for railways, public works, post and telegraph services (the PMG) and customs (Heatley 1990: 6-7). They formed the Commonwealth Public Service presence during the small ‘a’ administration.

²⁴ The NTA housed a reduced NTPS – now only Police, Prisons and Education – and an expanded Commonwealth Public Service, which was responsible for Native Affairs among many other functions. Other Commonwealth offices – Treasury, Health, Labour, Works, PMG and the scientific, aviation and defense portfolios – continued to report separately from the NTA. Later, the NTPS would lose Education to other arrangements. The NTPS took on the Fire Brigade and Legislative Council in 1965.

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NTPS had some involvement in the formation of the administrative inheritance of Northern Territory self-government.

Both services administered policies of the Commonwealth, both before and after the NTA. The small ‘a’ administration (the first NTPS) and the NTA (NTPS/Commonwealth Public Service) were administered under a single Commonwealth portfolio – External Affairs (with several re-namings including as Home Affairs) from 1911-1932 and the Interior from 1932-1972, with a long period under Territories from 1951-1968. The titles make it clear: both services were intended as vehicles for the domestication of Australia’s wild north.

Whereas both services would joust over retention schemes for ‘permanent officers’, they were as one when it came to the deeper agendas that severed ‘white’ from ‘aboriginal’ problems. The first Administrator, JA Gilruth, immediately set about ‘the white development of the Territory’ (CPP 1913: 1) by increasing the white population through government employment. He referred the ‘difficult problem of the control, utilization, and advancement of the largest proportion of our population – the aborigines’ to another Commonwealth appointee, Chief Protector Professor Baldwin Spencer (CPP 1913: 12).

Taking on the administration of the Northern Territory in 1911 had launched the Commonwealth’s career in Aboriginal affairs. I now trace some aspects of Commonwealth policy in these early years for the glimpses they give into Northern Territory Aborigines’ first tastes of government employment.

Aboriginal employment policies distinguish ‘full bloods’ and ‘half-castes’

Chief Protector Spencer’s first tasks included the administration of a potent distinction: that between ‘Aboriginals’, or ‘full bloods’, and ‘half-castes’.

Under the Northern Territory Aboriginals Act of 1910, ‘half-caste’ was the term for ‘anyone with an Aboriginal parent or grandparent’ who was over 16 years of age; there were also ‘half-caste’ categories for ‘any offspring of an Aboriginal mother and non-Aboriginal father’ or anyone whose mother had an Aboriginal grandparent (Rowley 1972: 231). ‘Aboriginals’ included ‘half-castes’ who had ‘Aboriginal spouses or habitual associates’ or who were under the age of 16 (Rowley 1972: 231). The Chief Protector was the legal guardian of all Aboriginal and ‘half-caste’ children under the age of 18. The Northern Territory Aboriginals

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Act of 1910 required that marriage between Aborigines and non-Aborigines be referred to Ministerial authority. The Act further regulated Aborigines' lives by enabling the declaration of reserves and the leasing of Crown land to missions, where unemployed 'Aboriginals and half-castes' could be sent to live. The Aborigines Ordinance of 1911 additionally empowered the Chief Protector to take any 'Aboriginal or half-caste' into custody or to delegate the power to do so to the police (Rowley 1972: 233-4).²⁵

The 'full blood'/ 'half-caste' distinction framed employment policy from the beginning. The Northern Territory's 'half-caste' population was estimated at a few hundred in 1911 but it grew rapidly and conspicuously, in the eyes of administrators, in proportion to 3,000 non-Aborigines many of whom were not 'white' but Chinese. Unsure of what to make of 'half-castes', Spencer set up the Kahlin Compound in Darwin in 1911 and the Bungalow in Alice Springs in 1914 to contain them and to train 'half-caste' youth for employment. 'Full blood' youth were not similarly trained; it was common practice for pastoralists to issue them with rations of food and clothing in return for their services. The 1910 Act had also given Protectors powers to issue employment licenses to the employers of Aborigines and the obligation to submit six-monthly employment returns to the Chief Protector (Rowley 1972: 219, 230-32). It was a condition of such licenses that a component of Aborigines' wages was paid as rations or otherwise in kind, with the balance deposited into an Aboriginal Trust Fund. Together with the distinction between 'town' and 'country' employment licenses in a new Ordinance obliging town employers to enter employment agreements from 1918, the employment arrangements for 'full blood' Aborigines remained in place for nearly 60 years.

'Half-castes' were the subjects of distinct policies. At first, 'half-caste' males over the age of 21 were deemed to be 'Aboriginal' if they associated with Aborigines; but in 1927, all 'half-caste' males over 21 were made subject to the Chief Protector's control by a further change to the Ordinance. A report by JW Bleakley, the Queensland Chief Protector, recommended in 1928 the continuation of that policy for adult males among the 800 'half-castes' in a population of 21,000 Aborigines (CPP 1929: 5). But Chief Protector Cecil Cook, who took

²⁵ Before 1911, Northern Territory Aboriginal affairs was under South Australian jurisdiction. South Australia, like most other States after Federation, had passed legislation establishing an Aborigines Department which gave South Australia regulatory powers over Aborigines under the Northern Territory Aborigines Act of 1910.

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up office in 1927, wanted the opposite: to absorb ‘half-castes’ into the white population by a program of intermarriage and rehabilitation. Cook was zealous about improving ‘half-caste’ employment conditions. In 1936 he convinced the Commonwealth Government to allow the exemption of selected ‘half-castes’ from the Aboriginals Ordinance altogether. This was a pathway, for some individuals, to employment under the industry awards that applied to non-Aboriginal workers. By improving the lives of ‘half-castes’ through employment, youth apprenticeships and housing programs, he sought to create ‘useful and thrifty citizens’, managers of their own money.

The ‘full blood’/ ‘half-caste’ distinction had far-reaching implications for Aborigines, as my interviewees attested several generations later. Many were the direct descendants of those whose lives had been subject to ‘half-caste’ programs, including the policy changes which successively re-defined them. What other roles had their parents and grandparents played in the early Northern Territory administration?

Before the NTA: the public service as ‘exemplar’

Officials hoped that ‘government’ employment in the NTPS would provide a model for ‘private’ employers. As early as 1915 Administrator Carey anticipated that his success with the ‘payment of wages to natives by various Government Departments’ would mean that ‘the larger stations in the Territory will also adopt the plan of paying a proportion of the wages earned by the Aboriginal to the Protector’ (CPP 1915: 25). He hoped that ‘some idea of thrift may be inculcated’, seeing that the administration could show this to other employers by example. With private employers, Aborigines were at risk of ‘the contamination of evil companions’, whereas the administration saw itself as the ‘reputable employer’ and exemplar to other industries (CPP 1919: 44).

It is important to understand what ‘government employment’ modelled. The very first Chief Protector, Basedow, recommended the employment of ‘Native Attendants’ to act as intermediaries for the administration (Austin 1997: 30). Spencer subsequently suggested that ‘the more intelligent half-castes’ should work as the supervisors of Aboriginal employees and ‘health attendants’ in bush centres (cited in Austin 1997: 45, 46; see also Long 1967). But these early visions of Aborigines managing other Aborigines were not adopted. For a long time, government employment modelled the cruder use of Aborigines as cheap labour.

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‘Natives’ were considered ‘most valuable [Government] servants’ (Chief Protector Stretton, 1913 cited in Austin 1997: 79). Administrator Gilruth saw Aborigines as useful to the administration for ‘assistance in households’ (although that was usually a private arrangement between Aboriginal individuals and public servants) and for ‘the penetration and exploration of this vast empty land’ through the work of police trackers. Gilruth paid Aborigines in government service 25 shillings per week, with a minimum of two shillings and sixpence to be paid into the Trust Fund (Austin 1993: 67; 1997: 80).

By 1939, Administrator CLA Abbott saw ‘the Aborigine... as a tracker, as a Government messenger, as stockman, as handy man and in domestic service and in the patrol service’ (CPP 1939: 14). The annual reports of the first NTPS departmental heads tell us how Abbott came, incrementally, to have this vision of ‘the Aborigine’. The head of Police reported there were 24 Native Constables in 1911, one at every police station (Wilson 1998: 82) and 28 Native Constables by 1920 (CPP 1921: 72). The Botanic Gardens reported a steady stream of Aboriginal ‘farm labourers’ which it recorded in 1922 as ‘three black boys’ with ‘prison gangs of blacks’ (CPP 1915: 43,45; 1919: 34; 1922: 20; 1924: 13). There were workers in mines and fisheries, industries in which employers were typically private; and the Commonwealth Public Service employed Aboriginal labourers for the Overland Telegraph Line and railway (CPP 1929: 7).

The administration – which still comprised the departments of the NTPS – largely sourced its supply of ‘half-caste’ labour from the Kahlin Compound and the Bungalow. The Kahlin Compound provided ‘a staff of messengers for the Government offices’ (CPP 1918: 45) – most likely, administrative couriers. In 1921, Protector Macdonald had expressed the vision that on top of the ‘many spheres of usefulness’ which were already apparent for Aborigines, they could be employed in ‘supplying firewood to Government institutions, sanitary and garbage services, road making, clearing land, fishing, &c.’ (CPP 1922: 20). But the reporting was equivocal, at times, over what constituted ‘employment’. When, for example, the Kahlin Compound reported that ‘*unemployed* aboriginals, who were rationed at the Compound, were *made available* to the Curator of the Botanical Gardens, the Matron of the Darwin Hospital, the Health Inspector and the Administrator’ (CPP 1936: 14, my italics) – did those officials not employ them? The administration was not always faithful to the ‘full blood’/ ‘half-caste’ distinction.

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It is difficult to be precise about the number of Aboriginal – ‘full blood’ or ‘half-caste’ – employees who, by the end of the 1930s, constituted the public service ‘exemplar’. Austin calculates that apart from some 40 domestic servants and 27 pastoral apprentices (who would have been classed as ‘private’), ‘at any one time in Darwin there were as many as... twenty-nine people – mainly women – working in Government institutions’ (Austin 1993: 193). Adding the police trackers doubles this figure to 60, but there were likely more if we count the farm labourers. What was the message? Public sector employment, during the early administration, was civilizing and rehabilitative, and cooperative Aboriginal employees helped moderate any inconsistencies in the achievement of these aims. But it was the missions that first reported supervisory roles for Aborigines. For example, in one of the early reports of the missions which began to proliferate under new ‘grants-in-aid’ in the 1920s, the Methodist Missionary Society advised of ‘two trained Christian aborigines, in charge of companies of blacks engaged in industrial work’ (CPP 1926: 15).²⁶

Under the NTA: the public service as ‘assimilator’

In Cook’s time, it was the Commonwealth Government’s explicit policy to ‘collect half-castes and train them’ (cited in Long 1967: 191). Government employment was an avenue for achieving this which was within the administration’s control. A ‘New Deal’ for Aborigines in 1939 effectively entrenched the segregation from other Aborigines of what was now a population of nearly 1,000 ‘half-castes’. The NTA continued the employment of ‘half-caste’ labour in its programs, and it continued to distinguish ‘half-caste’ and ‘full blood’ employment. But the expanded Commonwealth Public Service put a new face on the administration of Aboriginal affairs as the NTA’s Native Affairs Branch, under the initial direction of EWP Chinnery, slowly increased its capacity to supervise Aboriginal lives.

Patrol Officers, beginning with the appointment of Patrol Officer Strehlow in 1937, ran rationing depots during World War II, inspected employment licenses and removed ‘half-caste’ children to new homes on Melville and Croker Islands. Occasionally, they employed Aboriginal assistants. But World War II created the opportunity for Aboriginal employment

²⁶ It was only in 1936 that we see the first reports of Aborigines in supervisory roles in Government departments as when Cook reported the Bungalow as ‘staffed by female half-castes’ in the management of residents (CPP 1937: 9).

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on an unprecedented scale. There were 3,000 ‘natives in employment’ at ‘stations, Army &c.’ in 1945 – 1,000 in the Army (CPP 1947: 3,5). Many would have been public sector employees, not necessarily of the NTA but of the other Commonwealth public service offices which still sat alongside it. The new public agency of the Armed Forces, a massive employer at this time, was one such department. After the war, 1,000 Aboriginal army employees became redundant. The Armed Forces handed them to the Native Affairs Branch for ‘absorbing and rehabilitating’, and the rationing depots were transformed into government settlements in what the Native Affairs Branch called the ‘transition from Army control to departmental control’.

What did ‘departmental control’ mean? Rowley called the settlements ‘holding points’ (Rowley 1971: 289). In 1946, the Native Affairs Branch envisaged them as ‘industrial enterprises’. Perhaps ‘industrial holding points’, a combination of the two visions, best describes the settlements and missions as they supervised what the NTA was now prepared unambiguously, for the first time, to deem as ‘government employment’. Rowse describes the settlements as ‘schools of citizenship’ (Rowse 1998b: 103). They slowly transformed government rationing programs into regimes which would be cash-based by the end of the NTA in 1972. Through Native Affairs and from 1954-1972 the Welfare Branch, the NTA oversaw an elaborate machinery of settlements, missions, and ‘town’ employment in which Aborigines were engaged and occupied variously, including in many forms of government labour. Government employment provided much of the training in what emerged, under the NTA, as a comprehensive program of Aboriginal assimilation.

After many years of ad hoc reporting, the NTA took stock of government employment of Aborigines for the first time in 1949. Heightened industrial sensitivity following the war had drawn attention to government officials’ use of Aborigines for domestic and even unofficial purposes.²⁷ Some 37 Police Tracker positions and a dozen or so Native Assistants for

²⁷ The Administrator requested information from NTA Branch Heads on the duties and conditions of Police Trackers and Native Assistants who regularly assisted Patrol, Veterinary, Stock Inspectors and Lands Field Officers. He invited Branch Heads to comment on the idea of establishing pools of assistants in Darwin and Alice Springs and to make submissions for permanent staffing establishments for Native Assistants. Wages were settled for permanent and semi-permanent Native Assistants and casual labourers at ‘two-thirds of the basic wage rate’ as a ‘general principle’ (NT Administrator 1951).

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Agricultural, Animal Industry, Survey and Patrol Officer work were approved by the Administrator as part of ‘a permanent establishment of trackers or aboriginal assistants to be continuously employed [by] such branches as may require it’ (NT Administrator 1949; Wilson 1998: 87). The presence of Aboriginal employees in the Municipal Branch, Army and Royal Australian Air Force was noted, but their numbers were not reported. The tally was still around 60 Aboriginal employees, in my estimation. Identifying government departments as a significant category of employer, the Administrator decided to continue with rationing practices on the basis that ‘natives should be encouraged and educated to the point that they fully appreciate the value of money’. Some, particularly the trackers, were not considered ready for financial independence.

This first rationalization of Aboriginal employment in the NTA only just preceded the next policy shift: to intensify the assimilation program through the NTA’s Welfare Branch with an expanded patrol service under the directorship of Harry Giese from 1954.²⁸ The Welfare Ordinance of 1953 created the category ‘ward’ in the place of ‘Aboriginal’. There were no more references to ‘half-castes’ as this Ordinance effectively released ‘half-castes’ from residential, marriage and employment restraints unless they lived as Aborigines/‘wards’ or had been placed in the care of Native Affairs (Long 1967: 195; see also Rowley 1971: 295-6).

Under Hasluck’s ‘training through employment’ program, the Wards’ Employment Ordinance of 1953 established rural settlements as ‘training centres’ for ‘wards-in-training’ over 14 years of age. Four hundred and forty ‘wards’ were employed on 13 government settlements. Seven mission authorities, agents of government which were funded to deliver education, health and economic programs, reported through the NTA on their operation of 14 missions for ‘full-blood aborigines’ and four missions for ‘part-Aboriginal children’ which likewise employed Aboriginal residents (CPP 1958: 36-40) . Training and apprenticeships were offered for ‘certain callings in departmental establishments’ – hygiene, hospital and medical, teaching, domestic, catering, welfare, surveying and patrol officer work. After the Welfare Branch assumed responsibility for Aboriginal education in 1956, there were 12

²⁸ Historians have debated at what point the policy of assimilation replaced protection as a distinct Commonwealth policy. But there is no ambiguity about its dominance in Aboriginal affairs in 1951 (Rowse 1998a; 2005b: 6-7) when the Commonwealth-State Conference on Aboriginal affairs conference commenced new policy under Sir Paul Hasluck, the Minister for Territories from 1951-1963.

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Assistant Teachers on government settlements. There were also many hospital assistants. Within government departments, it is rare to find a precise enumeration of Aboriginal employees. The figure of 78 was given in the NTA report for 1956-7, this time excluding 31 Police trackers (CPP 1959: 89). Adding them together makes the total for government departments 109 Aboriginal employees in 1957. But that figure excludes what quickly became a groundswell of teaching and health assistants in Aboriginal settlements.

The official tally of Aborigines in government employment was now just over 100. The 60 or so Aborigines whom I suggest formed the NTPS exemplar by the late 1930s had nearly doubled during the period in which the NTA's employment practices mirrored the policy of assimilation from 1942 to the 1960s. Aboriginal employee numbers in government were small, but growing.

The public service as 'equalizer'

In the report for 1962-63, the NTA recorded that 3,000 Aborigines were 'employed on Government settlements and mission stations' (CPP 1964: 50), making these the largest category of employment for approximately 20,000 Aborigines (CPP 1965: 55). Additionally, the NTA recorded 2,000 Aborigines in 'private employment' – 1,500 in the pastoral industry and 500 'in town areas as builders' labourers, municipal employees, domestics and with Government departments' (CPP 1965: 63). I take it that this temporary positioning of departments as 'private' was to retain the distinction between working residents on settlements and missions and other Aboriginal employees in the public sector, because when faced with the prospect of paying the 3,000 Aboriginal settlement and mission workers equal wages, the title 'employee', for them, was soon revised.²⁹ Indeed – unwilling to call what Aborigines were doing in government settlements and missions 'employment' now that it had to budget to pay them, the Commonwealth justified 'training' wages by classifying some

²⁹ On the success of applications to the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission by the North Australia Workers' Union for equal wages for Aboriginal pastoral workers, Rowley notes that the Government was 'caught in an awkward situation on the settlements'. The NTA's settlement budgets could not accommodate equal wages for 3000 settlement workers and a rising Aboriginal population (Rowley 1971: 307).

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settlement workers as ‘slow’ under the Wards Employment Ordinance of 1959.³⁰ In the 1965-66 Annual Report, the NTA carefully described the 3,000 Aboriginal settlement and mission workers as ‘occupied in various forms of training, relief or self-help activity’ (CPP 1968: 62). The NTA displayed two full-page portraits. One is of Canis Xavier, an Aboriginal Fireman employed by the NTPS, and the other is of Zoc Mulda from the Aboriginal settlement of Haasts Bluff, at an oxy-welding class in Darwin (CPP 1968: 60-1). Canis, captioned as a ‘permanent officer’, was about to be paid award wages; Zoc was in ‘training’. In the 1966-67 Annual Report, the NTA confirmed that the Aboriginal employees of government departments were about to be transferred to ‘normal’ wages and conditions (CPP 1969: 51).³¹

Aboriginal employees in both the Northern Territory and Commonwealth public services numbered 300 at this pivotal point in the mid-1960s (CPP 1966: 57). The NTA’s prolific reporting ceased abruptly when the Department of Territories handed the NTA back to the Department of the Interior in 1968. This marked a new reporting style which was glossy and overtly promotional, with none of the textual detail upon which my historical account, up to now, has been based. ‘Most Aborigines’, we are now told, ‘about 13,500 of them, choose to live on remote Government settlements’ or ‘townships’ as they are now depicted. The ‘training allowance’ has been increased.³² Canis Xavier is photographed again – this time, climbing into a fire engine. The caption identifies him as the first ‘permanent officer’ in the Northern Territory (CPP 1971: 41,43). Apart from this brief reference, Aboriginal employment barely rates a mention. But it is surely noteworthy that after nearly 60 years of a

³⁰ As Rowse records the intriguing politics of a debate between the NTA and settlement superintendents over the competencies of Aboriginal settlement workers, the superintendents resisted NTA pressure to categorise a certain proportion of settlement workers as ‘slow’ rather than ‘competent’. In the end, the superintendents’ preferred descriptor of ‘competent’ was limited to their ‘unique workplaces’ (Rowse 1998b: 173-5).

³¹ The NTA’s Municipal section had begun paying Alice Springs sanitary workers award wages in 1961 and the Postmaster General’s Department agreed to pay line labourers along the Overland Telegraph Line at Pine Creek, Larrimah, Elliott and Barrow Creek award wages after a 12 month probationary period.

³² The ‘training allowance’ was replaced with unemployment benefits in 1973, and the Community Development Employment Projects scheme was introduced in 1977 as cash support for the thousands of now unemployed settlement workers.

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continuous labour supply, and an amassed employee population in the vicinity of 300, only one Aborigine had been designated a ‘permanent officer’.

This last NTA report had been produced by the Northern Territory Legislative Council, which from the 1950s mounted vitriolic campaigns to rid the Northern Territory of Canberra-run bureaucracy.³³ After Territory members’ voting powers in the Commonwealth Parliament were extended in 1959, the Commonwealth, anticipating self-government, gradually absorbed the NTA. The NTA was disbanded in 1972.

Tensions in the last six years of Commonwealth control: 1972-1977

Criticisms of assimilation’s persuasive agendas intensified in the 1960s when those advocating equal rights began to celebrate Aboriginal survival and cultural difference (Attwood 2005: 280-1). Aborigines were awarded the full voting entitlements of Australian citizens in 1962.³⁴ Through the 1967 Referendum, the Australian public gave the Commonwealth a clear mandate to make special laws and policies for Aborigines.³⁵ Many thought that there should now be a reconsideration of Aboriginal affairs, as Aborigines were now widely viewed as free agents – free to embrace the discourses of self-determination, and to participate in government on a more equal footing. But for Northern Territory Aborigines, the picture was about to become even more complicated. Perversely, it was just as the Commonwealth was nurturing the first national institutions of Aboriginal self-determination that it began to cede administrative control of Northern Territory affairs to the Northern Territory.

³³ Heatley attributes eventual legislative reform to the NTLC elected members’ ‘insistence, endurance and strategy’ (Heatley 1990: 15) although he acknowledges that Commonwealth Labor’s visions for the north and Sir Paul Hasluck’s dedication as the Minister for Territories were also pivotal.

³⁴ Qualified voting rights earlier granted at the discretion of the colonies had granted Aborigines the ‘political rights of citizenship’ only ‘in theory’ (Peterson and Sanders 1998: 7).

³⁵ Section 127 of the Australian Constitution, which had prohibited the counting of ‘aboriginal natives’ for such purposes as the allocation of federal electorates to each State, was repealed and section 51(26) was amended to remove the clause excluding ‘the aboriginal race in any State’ from the Commonwealth’s law-making powers. The 1967 Referendum was not the first attempt to bring Aboriginal affairs under Commonwealth auspices. When Commonwealth took over responsibility for the Northern Territory in 1911 there had been a view that the Commonwealth should assume full responsibility for Aboriginal affairs. The history of State-Commonwealth politics over this issue is well described elsewhere (see Hanks 1984).

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The NTA was replaced by the foundational department for the new NTPS: the still-Commonwealth Department of the Northern Territory (DONT), in 1973. DONT was staffed mainly by former NTA officials because nearly all the several hundred staff of the Department of the Interior who had also been involved in the Northern Territory's administration had elected not to make the transfer to DONT and the soon-to-be NTPS. Sensitive Territorians saw such career decisions as re-confirmation that Canberra 'knew little and cared less' about its northern frontier (Heatley 1979: 31). In this tense atmosphere, those implementing self-government saw that former NTA functions – potential NTPS resources – could be subsumed by the Commonwealth while they sat in various departments on holding arrangements pending transfer to the NTPS. Even the Police, continuously in the NTPS since 1915, were transferred to the Commonwealth department for a time (Heatley 1990: 33). But most of the wrangling was over Aboriginal affairs. The Commonwealth created the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) in 1973 out of former State Aboriginal departments – all but those who staffed health and education services, as they moved into special State offices. As the NTPS had not yet formed its own departments, the Northern Territory transfers were internal to the Commonwealth. Health and education staff moved to the Commonwealth on holding arrangements and the NTA's Aboriginal and community welfare functions were absorbed by DAA until community welfare was returned to DONT – without the Aboriginal policy function, which remained a Commonwealth responsibility and stayed in DAA.

Taking evidence between 1973 and 1974, the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Northern Territory recommended the transfer of 'state-type' functions to the Northern Territory upon self-government, along with the 2,000 APS and NTPS positions which were to be allocated to these functions on an interim arrangement (Australian Parliament 1974: 63-64). A period of 6 years (two electoral terms of the NT Legislative Assembly) was set for the transfers (Australian Parliament 1974: 45). The NTPS was rebuilt between 1977 and 1980.³⁶

³⁶ The NTPS commenced on 1 January 1977 as a series of local statutory authorities and municipal and correctional services. Some Attorney-General's functions were transferred early in 1978 and public utilities, welfare and community services were transferred across as the Commonwealth Minister for the Northern Territory handed responsibility for the Northern Territory to the Chief Minister on 1 July

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The holding arrangements pending Northern Territory self-government gave the Commonwealth an interesting opportunity. During the final, heady years of Commonwealth devolution, while Northern Territory Aborigines waited to fit out the new NTPS, the Commonwealth treated them as its first evidence of a socially diverse public service.

The Commonwealth's claim to social diversity

In 1973, in the new policy spirit, the Australian Public Service (APS) Board asked departments to contribute to an annual survey of Aboriginal employees. The DAA drew on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-identification in its definition of Aboriginality: 'a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Islander and is accepted as such by the community with which he is associated' (APS Board 1975: 2).

The APS Board adopted self-identification as the 'principal criterion' for the survey, but supplemented that with the 'supervisor-identification approach' by which the US Civil Service measured social representativeness without directly approaching employees (APS Board 1975: 1-2). Apparently, self-identification was not a reliable survey method if Aborigines were diffident about signing up. To 'mitigate' the problem that supervisors would not always know the necessary criteria for DAA's definition – who was of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, whether they identified as such and whether they were accepted as such by the community – the APS Board records that DAA acknowledged 'a good deal of individual judgement' in applying the definition. I read into the awkward expression of this argument, which was repeated in a series of APS Statistical Bulletins from 1973, that those involved did not want to appear over-zealous or disrespectful towards individuals in their interest to capture the best possible numbers.

The Statistical Bulletins began by announcing that 450 Northern Territory-based Aboriginal employees in 1973 had been joined by 1,039 municipal workers, hospital attendants and teaching assistants in the Departments of Aboriginal Affairs, Health and Education to

1978. The transfer of health and education staff was scheduled for 1979 and the transfer of the Supreme Court transfer had yet to be negotiated. There would be bitter argument over Aboriginal essential services and cultural programs, which DAA did not hand over to the NTPS until 1980 (Heatley 1990: 113-4, 121).

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increase the number of Northern Territory-based Aboriginal employees to nearly 1,500 in 1974 (APS Board 1975: 6). Full wages had just been awarded to those on training allowances in Northern Territory settlements (APS Board 1975: 3-4; Rowley 1976: 369). Over successive reports the APS Board repeated its acknowledgement of two sources for its social diversity: the Northern Territory, and the cluster of departments which serviced Aboriginal communities.³⁷ But such was the compulsion to model numerically representative departments that an APS Board representative was willing to promote this figure without contextualizing it in his evidence to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Northern Territory in 1974 (Joint Committee on the NT 1974d: 2559). The APS Board representative was able to call the Commonwealth's Aboriginal employment rate of 10 per cent in the Northern Territory in 1974 by setting the 1,039 'exempt' settlement workers against a base figure of 11,000 APS employees in the Northern Territory. That is, he omitted to point out that for the entire history of their employment, many Aborigines, certainly all of the 1,039 new Aboriginal staff, had been 'exempt' from the full provisions of the Public Service Act which were available to permanent officers.³⁸

Upon being granted their full entitlements as public servants, the formerly 'exempt' Aborigines joined the APS 'Fourth Division' of general workers for whom there were minimal entry requirements. Many were still employed on temporary arrangements. The APS 'Third Division' was for specialist, administrative and clerical staff, generally with secondary educations. Aborigines in the Third Division were about to increase under the 'open doors' for those seeking bureaucratic careers. As Fourth Division staff who were destined for the NTPS Departments of Health and Education were hived off in 1979, halving the APS' Aboriginal employee numbers, the proportion of Aborigines in the APS Third Division rose significantly (APS Board 1980: 7). Eager as the APS Board had been to draw upon the 1,500 Northern Territory Aboriginal staff to demonstrate its numeric representativeness in the mid-1970s, it was equally eager, after they had been reassigned to

³⁷ These were the Departments of Aboriginal Affairs, Health, Education, DONT and in 1976, the Department of Construction and later, Transport (APS Board 1975: 5; 1976: 4; 1977: 5; 1980: 5).

³⁸ As the Australian Public Service Commissioner, Lynelle Briggs, explained the 'exemption' in a presentation to Commonwealth executives decades later: 'Indigenous Australians were lumped together in a group with other such exempt staff as female office cleaners and charwomen, line repairers, horse drivers and cooks' (Australian Public Service Commissioner 2005).

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the NTPS, to promote the permanency and seniority of those who remained. However, there was only one Aborigine in the ‘Second Division’ of officers who exercised executive and professional duties – Charles Perkins, who later entered the ‘First Division’ as the head of DAA. I tell his story soon.

Over time, the APS handed some 1,100 Aboriginal employees back to the NTPS after a few hundred had trickled steadily into Northern Aboriginal councils and associations. The APS was eventually left on self-government in July 1978 with just over 100 Aboriginal staff in the Northern Territory, most of them in DAA (APS Board 1980: 5). The NTPS inherited an incipient representative bureaucracy, it is now clear, largely through being given responsibility for remote community employment (APS Board 1976: 5). I leave the 66 year chronology here.

Table 6 on the following page sets out the story of numbers that I have narrated in this history of the government employment of Aborigines in the Northern Territory from 1911-1977. What is this story, in a nutshell? Table 6 conveys the historical contingency of what was, at any time, seen as worthy of enumerating in Aboriginal public sector employment. But the inexorable gathering of Aborigines in the government’s employment suggests something else that was structural and enduring in this story. Aborigines were both the products and the instruments of Aboriginal employment policies: the living demonstration of a governmental willingness to train Aborigines for citizenship.

I have documented the appearance of a language of encouragement and invitation in the Commonwealth’s diligent enumeration of Aboriginal employees: an implicit racial respect. But I have barely touched on the fallout as the Northern Territory and the Commonwealth split to form distinct policy camps. I shall do this now, as I appraise what a socially diverse bureaucracy may have meant to advocates of this idea in Australia. I need to know what kind of contribution was envisaged for Aboriginal public servants generally, and what kind of contribution was envisaged for Aboriginal public servants in the Northern Territory.

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Table 6: Reported Aboriginal Employees of the Commonwealth in the Administration of the Northern Territory 1911-1977

Approximate number of Aboriginal employees	The first 60 years of Commonwealth control						The last six years of Commonwealth control		
	1911-1938	NT ADMINISTRATION 1939-1971					DEPARTMENT OF NT 1972-1977		
	Early 1930s	1945	1949	1957	1963	1965	1973	1974	1976
	~60~	[1,000]	~60~	100	[3,000]	300	450	1,500	1,200
Source	Estimate (see page 40)	(CPP 1947: 3)	Estimate (see page 42)	(CPP 1959: 89)	(CPP 1964: 50)	(CPP 1966: 57)	(APS Board 1975: 6)		(APS Board 1980: 5)
Notes	Police trackers, domestics and labourers – largely NTPS.	WWII Army employees briefly included.	Police trackers and ‘native assistants’ – NTPS and Commonwealth Public Service departments.		Government settlement and mission workers briefly included – health/education assistants & municipal workers.	Employees of government departments – mainly C’wealth and the NTA – on equal wages.	DAA, Education, Health, Construction, DONI, PMG, Transport	Incl. 1’039 municipal, health & education ass’ts formerly ‘exempt’.	Incl health/education workers pending transfer to NTPS. Excl. PMG/transferees to c’ty councils.
C’wth/ NTPS *	<p>~ Commonwealth Public Service ~</p> <p>~Northern Territory Public Service ~</p>								

* Relative indicative sizes of the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Public Services – not to scale (see page 35, footnotes 23 & 24)

2.2 Was administrative work meant to be empowering?

As those who had historically been excluded from public institutions were invited to engage in relationships with the Australian state, there were new politics of identity not only for Aborigines but also for women, migrants of non-English speaking background, homosexuals and the disabled. For the Australian ‘femocrats’, as I have noted, these engagements were empowering. But, even though Aborigines had started to rise in the clerical and managerial hierarchies of the public service in Australia, welfare colonialism had not prepared them for the opportunities of the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The Commonwealth looked to HC Coombs and other public intellectuals to assist in the framing of Aboriginal political interests in the self-determination era – and some were cautious about the role that Aborigines could and should play in representative bureaucracy. But first, I explore other cautions: about Northern Territory self-government as a vehicle of Aboriginal empowerment.

Cautions about the Northern Territory as a vehicle of Aboriginal empowerment

In 1973, Prime Minister Whitlam’s Labor Government convened the Parliamentary Joint Committee to examine the Northern Territory’s prospects of ‘responsible self-government in relation to local affairs’. One of the Committee’s terms was to consider ‘the size, composition and diversity of interest of the population of the Territory, including the special difficulty of providing for effective participation by the Aboriginal people in a political system which is alien to their traditional culture’ (Joint Committee on the NT 1973: 159). The Australian Parliament was concerned with the capacity of the Northern Territory’s next administration to manage the Northern Territory’s demographic and cultural complexity; not only that, to resolve the ‘cultural’ quandary that it saw in Aboriginal representation.

The Committee sharpened polarities between the Commonwealth reformers and Northern Territorians. Some senior officers in the Welfare Branch felt that some Northern Territory Aborigines were being pressed by the Commonwealth into consultations over policy matters about which they had no knowledge. Where the Commonwealth saw local resistance to the new Aboriginal entitlements, those who were trying to shake off Commonwealth control saw faddish idealism in what Prime Minister Whitlam announced in 1973 was his intention

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to ‘restore to the Aboriginal people of Australia their lost power of self-determination in economic, social and political affairs’. ‘First Australians’ were now entitled to:

...incorporate for the conduct of their own affairs... determining their own decision-making processes, choosing their own leaders and executives, as the primary instruments of Aboriginal authority at the local and community level’ (Whitlam 1973).

What would the fledgling Northern Territory Government do for Aboriginal self-determination? The Commonwealth’s policy architects might have worried. The Northern Territory’s Country Liberal Party (CLP), which had won a majority in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly in 1974, was opposed to many aspects of the Commonwealth’s Labor Party policies, including Commonwealth views of Aboriginal political representation in the new Northern Territory. As Barrie Dexter put it, the DAA aimed to get ‘real authority into the hands of the local Aboriginal communities’ (Joint Committee on the NT 1973: 218). DAA argued in a written submission to the Committee that for Aborigines to have ‘equal access’ to the opportunities of the Northern Territory they needed to participate directly in Northern Territory politics. Not only did Aborigines constitute the majority of permanent residents eligible to vote, DAA argued, but Aborigines were socially and culturally distinct from the rest of the Northern Territory population. In the absence of compulsory voting in the Northern Territory, DAA submitted that Aboriginal representation called for special measures and proposed reserved seats in the Northern Territory (Joint Committee on the NT 1973: 163).

CLP representatives were deeply against the proposal for special measures for Aborigines in the Northern Territory’s new electoral system. This is highlighted in the following exchange which I narrate for its depiction of views which are also relevant to Aborigines’ bureaucratic representation. Contemplating that Aborigines could easily outnumber whites five to one, in the Barkly electorate, Ian Tuxworth, Chair of the Tennant Creek Town Management Board who would later become the Member for Barkly, argued that an Aboriginal person should not sit on the NT Legislative Council if he or she was not competent. The Committee Chair asked Tuxworth to cast aside considerations of Aborigines’ administrative competence to consider the ‘democratic principles we try to practice in the Western world ..[and] the evidence we have had before this Committee that [Aborigines] are the largest proportion of Aboriginal residents here ...at 27 per cent’ (this hearing was in Tennant Creek in the Barkly region). Tuxworth, who later became the Territory’s second Chief Minister, replied:

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Not because of the 27 per cent and not because they are Aborigines. They could not possibly sit in the House knowing that they got in there simply because they were black; ...they do not all believe that only an Aboriginal can represent them (Joint Committee on the NT 1974a: 1571, 1577).

Later, AGW Greatorex, Member for Stuart in Alice Springs and President of the Legislative Council of the NT, expressed greater confidence in those he called ‘part coloured’, ‘fellows who own stations, running their businesses; friends with us; belong to our clubs, play cricket and football with us’. He added: ‘They would not take very kindly to it if we called them Aborigines’ (Joint Committee on the NT 1974b: 1723). Was Greatorex expressing the views of members of the Northern Territory’s vast mixed descent population, was he recalling earlier policy distinctions or was he articulating a complex mix of the two? It is difficult to say, but Tuxworth and Greatorex confidently claimed a broad knowledge of Aborigines based only on their experiences as white Territorians. Their cavalier approach to consultation was not in keeping with the spirit of Aboriginal self-determination.

If the CLP would not ensure Aborigines’ direct electoral representation, it might have sought their representation in the new bureaucracy. The Northern Territory’s capacity to create a skilled public service was at issue. The Northern Territory’s local advocates had not demonstrated to DONT officials that they were competent to sustain a local administration; hence, Dexter sought to retain as many aspects of program delivery to Aborigines as possible under his management in DAA. But the participants in the Committee hearings largely agreed that Aborigines were not ready for administrative responsibilities anyway. Dexter’s basis for doubt over Aboriginal competencies was the ‘tribal attachments still which, from the point of view of us as administrators, makes the problem [of recruiting them into public service] more difficult’ for ‘95 per cent’ of them (Joint Committee on the NT 1973: 210). In Alice Springs several months later, the Committee heard from a university educated local Aborigine, Neville Perkins, who was General Secretary of the Central Australian Aborigines’ Congress. Standing before the Committee, did Neville Perkins remind members that some Northern Territory Aborigines were ready and willing to do administrative work – or did his presence at the hearing serve to remind them of the ‘95 per cent’ of Aborigines whose ‘tribal attachments’ made their recruitment to the public service difficult? Neville Perkins called for Aborigines to be trained in the practicalities of administration:

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...apart from needing an effective political leadership, we need trained and capable Aboriginal administrators...to come to grips with the dominant administrative and political systems of the Northern Territory (Joint Committee on the NT 1974c: 1855).

The Committee members' probing suggests that they thought the new NTPS should be designed with the Northern Territory's social diversity in mind; but that they were resigned to the idea it could not yet be so designed. The APS' performance on Aboriginal employment in the Northern Territory was taken as proof of the difficulty of achieving Aborigines' population-proportionate representation. Nevertheless, the APS representative whom I mentioned earlier cast the Commonwealth's achievements in the best light possible when he drew on the influx of 1,039 'exempt' settlement workers to claim that the Commonwealth had reached 10 per cent Aboriginal employment in the Northern Territory (Joint Committee on the NT 1974d: 2559). When Committee members probed the historical depth of his claim, asking 'what did you do in August 1963... or in August 1961?' the APS official promised to find out; but we hear no more (Joint Committee on the NT 1974d: 2556). Suggesting that the APS' practices towards Aboriginal employment were 'apathetic', Committee members lacked the means to demonstrate that the APS' claims to social diversity had drawn almost entirely on the Northern Territory's prospective inheritance of Aboriginal labourers on government settlements. Their request for a longer term account of Aboriginal public sector employment in the Northern Territory suggests that Committee members were suspicious of the APS' claim to have achieved a socially diverse public service.

The Committee's deliberations support my narrative that any success the APS may have had with Aboriginal employment was more by historical accident than the result of any long term recruitment policy based on an ideal of social diversity. But the more prominent issue for the Joint Committee was whether and how the NTPS could match the capacity of the APS given that the Commonwealth had long been the more attractive employer. The question was never definitively answered by those appearing before the Committee. Against the many reservations which were expressed about Northern Territory administrative and political capabilities over nearly a year of hearings, the Committee recommended Northern Territory self-government and open Northern Territory elections with no special arrangements for Aboriginal representation of any kind apart from the consultative bodies the Commonwealth was nurturing.

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If the tenor of the Joint Committee's deliberations on the Northern Territory is anything to go by, the Commonwealth reformers were indeed cautious about the self-governing Northern Territory's capacity as a vehicle of Aboriginal empowerment. But then, to put their cautions in context: the Commonwealth reformers had reservations about the bureaucracy as a site of Aboriginal representation more generally.

Cautions about Aboriginal representation in the public service

When Coombs commenced as Chair of the Royal Commission into Australian Government Administration (RCAGA) with a brief to adapt the APS 'to the needs of contemporary government' in 1974, he had reason to believe that many APS departments were resistant to Aboriginal recruitment. APS Circular 1973/46, 'Employment of Aboriginals: Further Measures', had asked all APS departments to identify the positions in which services to 'significant numbers of Aboriginals' justified recruiting a person with an 'Aboriginal background'. Dexter's comment that the doors of government departments were open to Aborigines may have been said in hope, because Coombs reported that departments had not 'actively or effectively' carried out the review (Coombs 1977: 187-8).

Was it only in agencies which serviced Aboriginal communities that Aborigines were regarded as useful? As Coombs saw it, the problem with Aborigines' access to the public service lay in the ways in which the merit principle had come to be applied. He reported that elements of the 'career service' – characterizing it as a system of 'recruitment by merit', 'unified service', 'independent, non-political control', 'regulations which discourage the recruitment of strangers' and 'hierarchical structure' – had become 'inflexible dogma' (Coombs 1977: 169). Coombs acknowledged that the merit principle countered the inefficiencies of patronage by ensuring 'objectivity, rationality and equality of opportunity' through 'open competitive entry' to the APS. He observed that the application of 'personal rather than objective tests' to the principle of merit had caused 'effective, if unintentional discrimination against members of particular groups' (Coombs 1977: 171-2).

As he geared the public service for reform, Coombs' vision was of a broad channel of ideas from society to government. Only a certain range of interests was likely to be transmitted if all elements of the career service continued. Affirming the relevance of societal values in the

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public service, Coombs' reasoning was consistent with the idea of representative bureaucracy. But, as he evidently knew and a commentator later observed, if public servants were to 'act as the *de facto* representatives of the least powerful interests of society' (Curnow 1989: 435), that could justify public servants' unfettered representation of more powerful interests. The representation of the 'least powerful interests' needed to be made fair.

Coombs did not want to allow kin-based patronage back into administration. He did not expect Aboriginal bureaucrats to serve Aboriginal constituencies exclusively nor to transmit Aboriginal political messages. His reforms were not intended to encourage group membership or Aboriginal political identity. His more modest aim was to open the APS entry process to diverse social categories. The question was, in relation to Aborigines, how to do it? The APS Board had already accepted 'expertise in knowledge of and ability to communicate with Aborigines' as qualifications to some positions, but this acknowledgement of Aborigines' skill base was not attracting them into many areas of the service. Were Aborigines only welcomed in Aboriginal-specific areas? What was meritorious about Aboriginality? The Commission asked Dexter to consider 'whether there is or is not some particular element of merit, some sensitivity, perhaps some nuance of greater concern, in aboriginality which justifies finding that the possession of that ethnic origin amounts to a contribution towards merit, towards efficiency'. Dexter cautioned against privileging Aboriginality as a public service entry requirement. One Aborigine was not necessarily a good 'explainer' of another, he warned. Yet, he added cryptically in his evidence to the Commission: 'aboriginality is still important' (RCAGA 1976: 647).

CD Rowley, advising the Commission, voiced other arguments when he submitted that Aboriginal public servants should have 'expedited entry into *all* areas of the bureaucracy' and based on Aborigines' one per cent of the Australian population 'they should occupy a little over one per cent of the total public service positions' (Rowley 1976: 363). There was more than one notion of representative bureaucracy among these thinkers.

The 'passive' or 'mirror' view of representative bureaucracy is that the entire public service should reflect the composition of society to make the machinery of administration generally responsive. The 'active' view of representative bureaucracy concerns the content of representation. This means that it pays more attention to agency function and may propose

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that where agencies service Aborigines a high proportion of their staff should be Aboriginal. The APS had long encouraged Aborigines to work in Aboriginal-specific programs. Dexter defended that aim by advocating that there be a high proportion of Aborigines among those delivering Aboriginal-specific programs. In this context, we may see him as promoting the idea of active representation; yet, he was cautious about Aborigines' ability to speak for other Aborigines and he was cautious about moves to make Aboriginality an entry requirement in parts of the Australian public service. Against Dexter's view, or qualifying it, Rowley was warning not to marginalize Aboriginal public servants in separate servicing and staffing enclaves. Rowley was more committed to a notion of passive representation in his insistence on population-proportionate Aboriginal representation throughout the public service.

Coombs did not want the APS to avoid its responsibilities to the service as a whole by concentrating Aboriginal employment in DAA; nor, he argued, did 'Aboriginal descent, unsupported by adequate education, training and experience... equip a person to deal with the complex problems that arise in the administration of Aboriginal Affairs' (Coombs 1977: 188). As Coombs wound his way through the delicacies of merit, he also wound his way through the tensions between 'passive' and 'active' notions of representation – although he did not use these terms. Coombs did not recommend that the public service entry criteria specify race, nor did he advocate setting the one per cent national target. He called for concerted efforts by APS departments in response to APS Circular 1973/46 and a '5-10 year program of special recruitment and training' in DAA, in departments with 'significant Aboriginal to total client ratios' and in the rest of the public service (Coombs 1977: 188-9).

So Coombs sought to develop a more responsive bureaucracy by measured social and cultural inclusion. Why did he not call it 'representative bureaucracy'?

A difficult public servant

Charles Perkins came from Central Australia where, as a resident of the Bungalow with his mixed descent Arrernte mother, he had experienced first hand the policies that controlled Aboriginal lives. He was educated interstate, played soccer in Britain and attended university in Sydney. He campaigned for Aboriginal civil rights. After organizing the 1965 Freedom Ride against racial discrimination, Perkins commenced working with Coombs in the Office of Aboriginal Affairs in 1969 (Read 1990). Mentored by Coombs, Dexter and others, he was

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recruited into the DAA under Dexter as an Assistant Secretary in 1973. Promoted to Deputy Secretary in 1979, Perkins was the APS' Second Division statistic from 1973-1981.³⁹

Heading the Liaison and Consultation Branch between 1973-1975, Perkins helped develop the electoral arrangements for the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC) which was to be his Minister's representative forum to gauge and monitor Indigenous community feeling. In the course of the project Perkins mounted a public challenge to his Minister (and to Dexter as Secretary) over the entitlements of NACC officials and after the first NACC elections accused Dexter of not involving him adequately in departmental matters. Perkins was 'counseled' repeatedly by his supervisors.⁴⁰

In his autobiography, Perkins describes 'shattering, demoralizing' experiences on joining the bureaucracy (Perkins 1975: 109). He laments its power over him: 'I worked through papers and memos which told me what to do...the bureaucracy swallowed me up' (Perkins 1975: 157). Perkins blames complacent public servants for his people's plight; hence, he 'had to work with paper to get even at them,' he writes (1975: 158). Whilst he saw himself seen as 'too emotional', Perkins saw many Canberra-based officers as 'cold, hard statues', much in the Weberian style: 'I could not penetrate their armour. And still have not' (1975: 158-9). He learnt 'how to phrase letters, in other words how to kid people up a tree and deceive them', just like colleagues whom he observed to 'say one thing and do another' (1975: 159).

In 1970, Coombs described 'the Government services' as one among the locations – including 'in business enterprises, in the professions, in the arts and literature' – from which Aboriginal leaders could 'work quietly to build the foundations on which political action will rest'. Aboriginal leaders, he warned, 'need not, indeed should not, all of them be in the forefront of political action' (cited in Rowse 2000: 78). But working 'quietly' had bothered Perkins. Despite his seniority, Perkins felt that he and his Aboriginal colleagues had been 'gazed upon' rather than genuinely involved by Dexter, Coombs and Stanner as these three public intellectuals steered their own course through the old Australian bureaucracies: 'these

³⁹ Perkins later chaired the Aboriginal Development Commission, and he became DAA Secretary from 1984-1988 (Read 1990).

⁴⁰ Perkins was eventually sacked amid (later cleared) allegations of misconduct (Read 1990).

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three men made all the decisions and still do’, he wrote: ‘...we were their black messenger boys’ (1975: 172). Perkins locates the severance in his relationship with Dexter as the moment that Perkins pressured Dexter to consult him as a senior Aboriginal public servant: ‘I was no longer the messenger boy in the office’ (1975: 172).

How did Charles Perkins’s colleagues see him? Perkins’ biographer, Read, observes: ‘It was as if no one knew what to do with him. Coombs he found aloof, Stanner uncommunicative and Dexter very busy... Fellow staff members were puzzled by Perkins. Was he Aboriginal? ...How could Perkins, the product of an institution, speak on behalf of traditional people? Besides, he owned a car...’ (Read 1990: 131). At the same time as he accumulated a senior bureaucrat’s material wealth, Perkins sought special understanding that, in what he termed a ‘voluntary takeaway’ (his interstate schooling had been his mother’s preference and not the direct result of government intervention): ‘my youth was taken away from me by Australia, White Australia’ (cited in Read 1990: 38). Sympathetic understanding was extended by some colleagues and not others. He was clearly characterized as ‘too representative’, in my schema – but how representative was he of other than urban and politicized Aborigines? Does it count, in considering this question, that Perkins saw himself as the product of a history which had estranged him from his home and fostered the corner-fighter in him? Perkins’ career raises the dilemmas of this thesis. He *irritated* the public service.

Peter Wilenski, a public service reformer in the 1980s, might have been imagining Charles Perkins when he wrote of those ‘least powerful interests’ who had been encouraged into the APS through representative bureaucracy: ‘Their role is not to ‘represent’ (in the sense of *argue for*) the case of a particular group but rather *to make a contribution* to decision-making which reflects the values and background of the group from which they are drawn’ (Wilenski 1986: 222, my italics).⁴¹ Perkin’s lasting contribution to the public service *was* his jarring voice. But Perkins must have exemplified the problems of dangers of unrestrained Aboriginal representing in the public service, to Coombs and others, because these architects of Aboriginal self-determination were pinning their hopes for Aboriginal empowerment elsewhere, at arm’s length from government.

⁴¹ Peter Wilenski was Chair of the Australian Public Service Board from 1983-1987.

The ‘black bureaucracy’

Rowley pointed out to Coombs that Weberian values could not tolerate the ‘fundamental re-arrangement of White-Aboriginal roles’ which was needed ‘to break away from the white administrator-Aboriginal client pattern’ (Rowley 1976: 362). The replacement of white with black bureaucrats was too simplistic an aspiration for a bureaucracy ‘trained for the colonial role’, he wrote (Rowley 1976: 363). The APS could only be ‘decolonized’, he argued, through Aboriginal political empowerment. Rowley recommended the establishment of a Commission eventually to replace both the NACC and DAA, which could be representative of Aborigines, knowledgeable about their social conditions, unconstrained by public service hierarchy and thus better placed to develop agendas of ‘rapid social change’ (1976: 361-2). ‘Attempts to use the bureaucracy to proclaim Aboriginal rights have caused considerable confusion,’ he explained later, no doubt referring to Charles Perkins (Rowley 1978: 213).

Coombs did not recommend that the Commonwealth establish Rowley’s Commission, but he sought a ‘bold and imaginative program’ to support Aborigines’ access both into the APS and into incorporated local Aboriginal organizations (Coombs 1977: 188). Along with administrative reforms and the growth of local institutions, there should be more ‘representatively chosen Aborigines’ to work with policymakers and more ‘Aborigines in administration and service delivery’ to deliver the programs, Coombs argued (Coombs 1977: 339). Coombs hoped his reforms would keep the political and administrative spheres permeable enough for training purposes, yet solid enough to protect each from corrupting the other. When Coombs later used the phrase ‘black bureaucracy’, he was referring to publicly funded Aboriginal organizations in the Aboriginal affairs portfolio, such as the NACC, which operated outside departments. The public sector would train Aboriginal functionaries to ‘Aboriginalise’ publicly funded organizations, as he explained the ‘black bureaucracy’ (Coombs 1984: 28).⁴² The ‘black bureaucracy’ would advise the Minister but

⁴² When Rowse refers to the ‘representative black bureaucracy’ he likewise preserves the distinction between the public service and advisory bodies (Rowse 2001: 119). When Beckett reports on the black bureaucracy as a ‘term of opprobrium among my friends in western NSW’, he refers to the regional constituencies of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission which replaced DAA in 1990 (Beckett et al. 2004).

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administer funds with some statutory independence and accountability to Aboriginal constituencies (Coombs 1984: 29-30).

Rowley proposed more radically that the supported growth of Aboriginal representative organizations would help build a ‘legal carapace’ to protect vulnerable Aboriginal populations from the whims of policy (1980: 241). Under this protective carapace, Aborigines could be consulted with due regard for their traditional structures and without the conflicts of identity – he called it ‘de-Aboriginalisation’ – that came with bureaucratization (Rowley 1976: 361). That is, for Rowley: Aborigines could retain their Aboriginality in their own organisations but not as public servants who were bound to serve the government of the day. Rowley’s argument was not that the public service could not be representative, but that Aboriginal public servants could not stay ‘Aboriginal’ enough under the pressures of the public service environment to be good representatives.

Thus, the public service was argued as generally inadequate as a site of Aboriginal representation – both by being too white in outlook and too politically constrained in style; and the ‘black bureaucracy’, which was situated in the public sphere more generally known now as the Indigenous sector, was argued as the more culturally appropriate and politically suitable alternative. Yet, as Rowley acknowledged, Aborigines working for their people in incorporated structures called for bureaucratic skills (Rowley 1978: 216); and as Weaver points out, the political representation that was ‘ascribed’ through government-supported incorporated structures under Aboriginal self-determination politics was not necessarily an ‘achieved representivity’ (Weaver 1983). What justified the argument that representative bureaucracy would compromise Aborigines culturally and politically in ways that other forms of bureaucratic organization, like incorporated structures, would not?

When the Fraser Government commissioned Les Hiatt to review the NACC in 1976, Hiatt questioned the sense of ‘ethnic mystery’ that he found among those who thought that Aboriginal people could not respond to opportunities for democratic representation (Hiatt 1976: 60).⁴³ Coombs, Dexter and Rowley were not speaking of the ways in which Aboriginal

⁴³ Surveying arguments against Aborigines’ ability to participate in popular elections, Hiatt questioned the view ‘that the very concept of representation is alien to traditional Aborigines’ and would result in a

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political culture legitimized elected representatives; they were speaking of how Aborigines could enter and work in the bureaucracy. But given that they sought to preserve Aboriginal representation for the ‘black bureaucracy’ where Aborigines could better retain their Aboriginality, a similar sense of ‘ethnic mystery’ could have played a part in influencing the deliberations which judged Aborigines as not quite ready for the challenges of bureaucracy. We have seen that the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Northern Territory described the Northern Territory political system as ‘alien’ to Aboriginal culture, and we have seen that Rowley warned that public service work would ‘de-Aboriginalise’ Aborigines. I find it plausible that those who underplayed Aborigines’ prospects as public service representatives drew on a limited idea of Aboriginal capacities for cultural and political innovation. After all, as Hiatt pointed out in support of his arguments for Aborigines’ democratic participation, Aborigines had experienced a long history of ‘white management requiring black intermediaries’ (Hiatt 1976: 62).

As they set out their visions for representative bureaucracy in Australia, it seems that the reformers also drew on a limited idea of representation. In his review of the NACC, Hiatt was seeking to steer the debate about Aboriginal democratic participation away from the ‘ethnic mystery’ view and towards a consideration of Aborigines’ capacities to judge and act as the agents of their own political interests. In the realm of bureaucratic representation, my quest is not dissimilar. In considering the public service as a site of Aboriginal representation, I do not pre-judge its ‘cultural’ suitability for Aborigines. Moreover, I am open about what public service representation could mean. I see the public service as a sphere in which Aborigines could legitimately represent their interests – a sphere in which Aborigines *could choose* to enact the democratic opportunities that the idea of representative bureaucracy sets out to facilitate.

‘collection of unlicensed pretenders’ (Hiatt 1976: 59). Conceding that representation was not a high priority in small Aboriginal communities, Hiatt noted that ‘in certain contexts, individuals undoubtedly acted on behalf of others and had their authority to do so’. He argued that it was not the ‘principle’ but the ‘scale’ of representation which might be resisted by Aborigines in small communities because it was in the nature of small groups to delegate their interests to others on trust. This was a problem of local representation, he observed; it was not *peculiar* to Aborigines. Although Aboriginal communities might prefer to select their leaders by consensus, Hiatt argued, Aboriginal communities could aggregate pragmatically and strategically if they needed to do so (Hiatt 1976: 60). Hiatt explained that Aborigines’ egalitarian ethic made it difficult for Aborigines to accept newly emergent leaders – but, he argued, this ethic had not prevented charismatic Aboriginal leaders from emerging nonetheless (Hiatt 1976: 62).

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Concluding remarks

In 1978, the self-governing Northern Territory inherited a public sector Aboriginal workforce which had already been framed by the APS as constituting an incipient representative bureaucracy. However, those developing the institutions of Aboriginal empowerment through self-determination were ambivalent about Aborigines' prospects as representative public servants. As I have explained, reformers such as Coombs and Rowley were more intent on developing the means for Aboriginal political representation in the 'black bureaucracy', the Indigenous sector of Aboriginal organizations. But others were more tempted to regard the proportion of Aborigines in the public service, and their location in Aboriginal-specific programs, as significant. In urging that Aborigines' public service employment should match their proportion in the general population and that Aborigines' presence in the public service could amount to racially based contributions, those who conceived the Northern Territory's new structures did, for better or worse, evoke the principles and techniques of representative bureaucracy in their deliberations.

In Chapter Four I will show how the Territory Government received the 1,100 Aborigines who entered the NTPS and how they fared under Aboriginal employment policies from 1978 to 2007. But first I need to consider how representation has been treated in theory.

Chapter Three

Bringing Forth the Absent: Theories of representation

Although the invitation to Aborigines to participate in the administration of the Northern Territory was deeply ambivalent, there is no doubt that the invitation contained expectations that Aborigines, present in the public service, would do some kind of representing. In this chapter I piece together the key ideas which inform my analyses of policy's invitation for Aboriginal representation in the public service and of Aborigines' ways of answering.

I need theories and methods with which to situate Aborigines both as officials in structures of governance and as the obligated members of communities. Looking first to social anthropology, I find the commitment to the contextual and the human that I seek. But finding the prosaic world of the public service abandoned in many otherwise promising studies of Aboriginal political identity, I turn to other disciplines for more analytic tools.

Looking to understand more about 'representing', I find a fork in the disciplinary road which was well entrenched by the time Australian bureaucracies contemplated Aboriginal representation in the 1970s. Representative bureaucracy research went in one direction, theories of political representation another. I discuss them both, in the second and third parts of the chapter – representative bureaucracy's empiricism, then political representation's normative theory which has added much to my understanding of representation in practice. In the fourth part, I find that the literature of the descriptive representation of historically dispossessed populations is relevant to the experiences and circumstances of my interviewees – intriguingly so, considering that this literature invoked other than public service contexts. I ask: can those present in a bureaucracy 'share fates' with the absent, such that they could reason from this a sense of accountability in the representative relationship?

First, I clarify interviewees' and my own position on the question of 'cultural difference'. Some called their sense of alienation from the public service 'cultural'. But generally, interviewees were uncomfortable with the idea of distinctly 'Aboriginal' contributions which categorized them as 'culturally different'. I follow Phillips (2007: 42-72) by understanding

‘cultural difference’ as not quite explanatory enough, for my purposes. Rather, I see it as a claim. Whether the claim concerns one’s own ‘difference’ or others’, it holds a certain power in contexts in which identity is at stake. And the identity of Aborigines is very much at stake in a public service that claims to be ‘representative’ by employing them. In my commitment to a political approach, I do not suggest that culture is not pervasive or that people do not experience a sense of difference. I recognize that an observer of culture is always positioned.

3.1 Studies of Aboriginal political identity

Social anthropology has tended to place Aboriginal ‘cultural difference’ foremost in its treatment of Aboriginal relations with an alien colonial or postcolonial ‘state’. Where social anthropologists have explored the permeable edges between Aborigines and the ‘state’, they have been reluctant to venture inside state instrumentalities. Many anthropological studies locate Aboriginal encounters with government administration within Aboriginal communities, councils and town camps.⁴⁴ Some ethnographies locate Aboriginal-state relationships in the Indigenous sector of incorporated Aboriginal organizations.⁴⁵

Ethnographies of Aboriginal public servants are rare in this literature, so Howard’s study of the ‘bureaucratic brokerage niche’ in Nyoongah-state relations in southwestern Australia stands out (Howard 1981). Howard argues that the agendas of Aboriginal self-determination created an ‘inter-ethnic field’ and new forms of ‘indirect rule’. In this arena, Howard characterizes Aboriginal bureaucrats as disconnected from their communities, ‘seeking refuge’ from political involvement and creating an ‘isolated elite’ (1981: 116-8). But this characterization required Howard to accept uncritically the judgement of an alienated local community. It is unlikely that Aboriginal bureaucrats would have seen themselves as

⁴⁴ Examples are Beckett (1988), Collman (1981, 1987), Gerritsen (1982), Holcombe (2005) and Myers (2002).

⁴⁵ Examples are B Smith (2005), Batty (2005), Martin and Finlayson (1996), Martin (2003) and Sullivan (1996).

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Howard depicts them – as witlessly ‘co-opted’, without ‘real power’ (1981: 144) and with ‘false consciousness’ (Howard 1982: 95).⁴⁶

Reviewing Howard’s ethnography for its applicability to Northern Territory Aboriginal politics in the 1980s, Loveday found ‘indirect rule’ too simplistic a model. Loveday viewed the Northern Territory’s ‘zone of black-white interaction’ as ‘a path of transition to autonomous political life’. Noting Howard’s innovative recognition of a single ‘social field’, Loveday encouraged further study of the ‘unofficial, unpublic and officially unorthodox’ ways in which Aborigines were influencing administration because it was more at the local level than nationally, Loveday advised, where ‘autonomous Aboriginal politics is most likely to take shape... and on the evidence of the Northern Territory is taking shape’ (1983: 2-4). Loveday was exploring new terrain when he advised that ‘aboriginalising’ the public service ‘may well mean not that the administrator now has someone ...with a black skin to do white things, but that he has someone who is in a *preferred position*, compared with others in his group’ (Loveday 1982: 111, my italics). Black people may need to do black things, he was saying; a truly representative bureaucracy would accommodate that.

Has any anthropological study explored the political consciousness of Aboriginal bureaucrats? Merlan’s deeply historical ethnography in the town of Katherine, south of Darwin, captures imitative expressions of an unrelenting ‘state’ in Aborigines’ inter-subjective relationships with places of significance to them (Merlan 1998). Cowlshaw portrays a well-intentioned (but misguided) tutelary ‘state’ in her exploration of intimate relationships between the Rembarrnga people and cattle stations near Bulman in the Northern Territory north-eastern corner. Where it should recognize Aboriginal cultural difference, in Cowlshaw’s argument, the ‘state’ serves only its own bland image of the Aboriginal subject (Cowlshaw 1999).⁴⁷ The subjects of these ethnographies were spared the

⁴⁶ Howard’s negative judgement of intermediary Aborigines found fertile ground among social anthropologists. For example, Sackett praises Howard’s characterization of Aboriginal bureaucrats as successors to ‘White go-betweens’, ‘far from typical’ Aborigines who ‘owed their prominence to their being the most assimilated of their people’ (Sackett 1983: 405).

⁴⁷ Further south, Folds portrays a benevolent Government which is so intent on reversing an unacceptable performance deficit that it fails to recognize the agency of its own policy subjects. In Folds’ analysis, the Pintubi people at Wallungurru, in the desert west of Alice Springs, are strategic entrepreneurs with unrecognised competencies (Folds 2001).

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ambiguities of self-initiated administrative participation; they are outside the ‘state’, in not being employed as officials.

In Merlan’s call for understanding of Aboriginal relations to place ‘in terms that take account of history’ (Merlan 1998: 239) and in Cowlshaw’s call for policy’s recognition of ‘ever present possibilities for a creative and productive form of race relations in Australia’ (Cowlshaw 1999: 303) we see from these studies that the Australian ‘state’ has had no shortage of insightful advice to draw on in its relations with Aborigines. We also see that throughout policy’s successive constructions and reconstructions of its subject ‘Aborigines’, Aboriginal people have lived culturally distinct lives in outstations, communities and towns.⁴⁸

In a later work, Cowlshaw’s depiction of ‘black representatives’ implies her dismissive judgement of bureaucrats and her reluctance to research them; for her, they have no agency other than ‘state’ agency, which is always antithetical, in her writing, to Aboriginal political interests. Cowlshaw describes her subjects as ‘insiders to the state’ through their dealings with ‘white emissaries’. She rescues them from the taint she implies by that when she represents them as ‘go-betweens, some of whom occupy their positions temporarily and uncomfortably’ (Cowlshaw 2004: 65-66).

Many of my research subjects were in the same structural locations where Cowlshaw found her ‘white emissaries’. What is more, as career public servants ‘inside the state’, they did not always occupy their positions ‘temporarily and uncomfortably’ unless we take that phrase to include their mobility between the public service and the Indigenous sector.

Australian anthropologists have most recently discussed the culturally permeable arena of Aboriginal-state relations as an ‘intercultural social field’, an osmotic space between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains (see Hinkson and Smith 2005). Clearly, the

⁴⁸ Austin-Broos’ recent historical ethnography of the Western Arrernte people portrays the intricate relationship between administrative policy and lives in violent change as a ‘passage between worlds’ (Austin-Broos 2009). In their interactions with policies and programs around Hermannsburg’s old Lutheran mission and with the central desert town of Alice Springs the Western Arrernte have incrementally navigated the gulf between their own kin-based world and western capitalism’s market economy in Austin-Broos’ depiction. Austin-Broos tells us that ‘continuity is made, not given; that a space of difference within the state must be worked at as the Western Arrernte have done’ (Austin-Broos 2009: 269).

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administrative arena in which my study is based may be seen as a single social field although my theoretical orientation is more inter-political than intercultural. Sullivan calls for ‘alternative ethnographies’ to supplement those in the anthropological corpus by ‘explicit engagement with the formulation of policy itself’ (2005: 193). I see my study in that light – as an alternative ethnography which makes an explicit engagement with policy. I am encouraged by Povinelli’s observation that the ‘field[s] of incommensurability that compose indigenous life-worlds’ in the postcolony present Indigenous people with the option to engage multiple identities. Povinelli does not pre-judge Aborigines’ choices to work within the public service (Povinelli 2006: 147). Nearly 100 years following Aborigines’ first ‘employment’ in the Northern Territory’s administration and 40 years since policy emphasized their democratic ‘inclusion’, perhaps ‘senior public servant’ should take its place amongst Aborigines’ ‘multiple identities’.

To position Aborigines and Aboriginal communities either as dispossessed service recipients or their ‘non-state’ representatives is not to recognize the full range of ways in which Aborigines may choose to define their relationships to the state. When Rowse described the ‘indigenous public servant’ as one component of an ‘ambiguous welfare colonial statecraft’, he carved out a project which, he warned, risked being lost in ‘older critical frameworks’ which, by habitually casting bureaucrats as colonizers, made Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bureaucrats ‘invisible’ (Rowse 1996: 53-4).

My study is of the vernacular meaning of representation for Aboriginal senior officials in a time and a place – the public service of their locality. It is deeply informed by and committed to the methods and insights of social anthropology. But – whereas social anthropology’s treatments of localized Aboriginal identity have tended to stop at the front door of the ‘state’, I walk right in.

Twin analytic dangers

My aim in this thesis is to achieve an empirically informed exposition of what Aborigines in senior positions in the Northern Territory Public Service say about ‘representing’ the Aborigines of the Northern Territory. So I am taking bureaucrats seriously; but I am not just taking them at their word. I identify two dangers in this enterprise.

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The first is the simplicity which comes from positioning the colonial and postcolonial ‘state’ always and necessarily as the ‘problem’ in Australian Aboriginal affairs. In such approaches, the state can never redeem itself. But it is not analyzed. Rather than assume that position myself, I see it as a ‘theory of the state’ which is subject to our assessment. The second is the opposite danger: to allow my sense of the reality of the state to be determined by the perspectives of the actors I have studied. Public servants’ language – of programs and policies and administrative structures – will not be my navigation aids so much as my objects of analysis. Otherwise, this study would adopt public administration’s self-description – it would ‘see like a state’ instead of understanding ‘seeing like a state’ as a human thing to do.⁴⁹

To resolve the first danger, I look to the ‘state effect’. The ‘state effect’ is Mitchell’s term for the idealisation of government which makes it appear the official repository of objectivity, impartiality and independence. This idealization, whether celebratory or critical, contradicts the empirical reality that government and its institutions are deeply and irrevocably socially embedded (Mitchell 1999). Those who cannot forgive the state its subjectivities, partialities and dependencies fall for the ‘state effect’. Even as they criticize it, public servants and other observers ‘create’ the ‘state’. So I will hardly speak of it except in terms of the practices of government. Perhaps, describing its practices will make the ‘state’ materialize.

Resolving the second danger, of adopting public administration’s self-description, is more difficult. In order to ‘explain’ administrative process, public administration falls back on the same rationalizing terminology that cries out for deconstruction (Grey 2005).⁵⁰ Scholars influenced by Foucault have viewed government in Australia as an ‘inventive, strategic, technical and artful set of “assemblages” with “distinctive styles of problematisation” for different policy purposes’ (see also Colebatch 2002; Hindess and Dean 1998: 8-9). Thus, bureaucracies create their authority by naming what they do and the rationales for

⁴⁹ In quoting part of the title of Scott’s insightful book, ‘Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed’, I do not mean to imply that I am uncritical of his anti-state position.

⁵⁰ The state is an ‘ideological project’, Abrams observes: ‘why else all the legitimation-work?’ (Abrams 1988: 75-76). Abrams proposes that we ‘abandon the state as a material object of study while continuing to take the idea of the state extremely seriously. The internal and external relations of political and Governmental institutions (the state-system) can be studied effectively without postulating the reality of the state’ (1988: 75-76).

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government programs are self-fulfilling persuasions about the nature and causes of ‘problems’. I find it more critical and useful to start my analysis from this point of detachment from the state’s discourses than to adopt public administration’s self-description.

Bureaucrats are the primary sources of public administration’s self-account. Even as they resist doing so, bureaucrats reproduce the rationales of government. Being present implicates bureaucrats in the efforts of governing. But they do not work alone. Entering departments, bureaucrats enter relations with other citizens and with politicians whose expectations also, ultimately, serve to legitimize government. Bureaucrats are citizens.⁵¹

By avoiding the two analytic dangers I have identified – that which is terminally unforgiving of the ‘state’ and that which cannot do more than repeat its self-account – I orient my study as both intellectually curious about Aboriginal officials (by taking bureaucrats seriously) and deeply suspicious of public service language (by not just taking them at their word).

Another field of anthropology is relevant here. Organizational anthropology, or the anthropology of policy, treats bureaucracies as social fields in which ‘policy’ may be interrogated to reveal the hidden rationalities of governance (Shore and Wright 1997).⁵² Lea’s ethnography of ‘helping whites’ sits in this genre. Also in this genre, Gupta has published an ethnography of the ‘state effect’ in which he depicts ‘blurred boundaries’ between the ‘state’ and ‘civil society’. Gupta sets his anthropology of ‘the state’ in

⁵¹ Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’ helps explain how bureaucrats are so implicated. ‘Governmentality’ is the wider rationality by which ‘government’ works. ‘Governmentality’ refers not only to the institutions and strategies of Government as we ‘see’ them, but also the preeminence of governing ‘know-how’ and the historical process of bureaucratization (Foucault 1991: 102-3). Foucault did not speak in terms of *the* Government but of historically contingent ‘theories, proposals, strategies and technologies’ for guiding conduct; or the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault 1988; see also Foucault 1991; Rose 1999: 3). As Rose explains Foucault, Government in this generic sense means ‘all endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others’ (Rose 1999: 3). It is a centrally important point for understanding the relationship between ‘bureaucrats’ and ‘citizens’ that Government in this generic sense ‘also embraces the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridle one’s own passions, to control one’s own instincts, to govern oneself’ (Rose 1999: 3).

⁵² In his 2000 review of the ‘anthropology of policy’ from his perspective as a political scientist, Colebatch appreciates social anthropology’s attention to policy’s complex ideological purpose. But despite his later critique of ‘liberal instrumentalism’ in favour of a ‘governmentality’ approach (Colebatch 2002: 417) he is uncomfortable with the tendency he sees in this branch of anthropology to see policy as the product of bad bureaucracy. As he says: ‘while ‘policy’ is a particular presentation of the Governmental process... this does not make it less authentic than an alternative presentation – eg explaining Government in terms of bureaucratic inertia and electoral opportunism’ (Colebatch 2000: 370-1).

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encounters between villagers and low level officials in village India (Gupta 2006 [1995]: 212, 230). Gupta critiques the distinction inside/outside the state because, as he aptly puts it, ‘what is being contested is the terrain of the ideological field’ (Gupta 2006 [1995]: 231). Gupta’s officials create ‘the state’ by naming whatever framing of ‘the public’ applies to their structural situation. Gupta’s ‘disaggregated’ bureaucratic sites encourage me to look for the ‘states’ and ‘publics’ in my interviewees’ self-accounts. But when Gupta criticizes ‘state’ research that focuses on ‘important’ people (he quotes Skocpol 1985: among others) he wantonly generalizes about senior bureaucrats when it would be more fruitful to remain alert to the differences among them. There are structural locations within structural locations, bureaucratic disaggregations which cannot be judged less or more by where they sit in the instruments of hierarchy.

The democratic theorist, Richardson (2002), argues that the public service plays an important role in deliberative democracy through its necessary, mandated administrative discretion and through bureaucratic representation as a corollary of that discretion. Thinking this way, Richardson would not reject the idea that ‘important people’ in a bureaucracy have enough opportunities for political and cultural expression to be analytically interesting.⁵³

‘Representative’ public servants do not have the luxury of calling themselves grass roots. Their role is not to govern ‘at a distance’ (Rose and Miller 1992: 180-1) as it is for non-government organizations and ‘stakeholder’ groups, but to populate bureaucracies which have implementation work to do. How should I find the ‘state’ in representative bureaucrats? It is only policy words that deem Aboriginal employment as Aborigines’ special opportunity to participate in government administration. It is only a self-evident truth within Aboriginal employment policies that Aborigines will, by their presence, ‘contribute’ something ‘Aboriginal’ to government administration. I want to know the extent to which Aboriginal senior officials believe it.

⁵³ Richardson notes that: ‘it is naïve to think that legislatures can complete the work of settling our collective ends and silly to constrain administrative agencies’ resulting discretion by a normative standard that makes no room for the intelligent refashioning of ends’ (Richardson 2002: 130). Bureaucrats have the ‘epistemic authority’ to channel policy to chosen ends, he argues, but because their work is highly context-dependent it is difficult to police. ‘That is why they must work to rules and share perspectives with relevant publics (Richardson 2002: 228-9).

I need to know more about representation. An elegant and insightful literature on political representation emerged in response to Pitkin's intriguing question, in 1967: 'who can capture an instance of representation?' (Pitkin 1967: 1). But there was a fork in representation's disciplinary road, at this point, between those interested in the bureaucracy and those interested in the electoral sphere. Despite their common subject, representative bureaucracy theorists went one way and political theorists another.

3.2 The road to representative bureaucracy

By 1973 when social diversity and equality agendas inspired the Australian Public Service to start counting Aboriginal public servants, representative bureaucracy had come to express the extension of the democratic principle into the public sector by seeking the proportionate representation of marginalized social groups.⁵⁴ The theory of representative bureaucracy is that a socially diverse bureaucracy will be more representative of society because each bureaucrat properly enjoys discretion – sufficient discretion to impart some of his or her 'background' in public service work. But American analysts (Krislov 1974: 2; Meier 1975; Meier and Nigro 1976) were already observing that representative bureaucracy was a poor antidote to social inequality. It was already in their minds that institutional norms could overwhelm the ties of social identity for entrenched careerists (Mosher 1982 [1968]).

Here are some of the arguments from a prolific, empiricist and mainly American literature on 'representative bureaucracy'

The passive/active distinction⁵⁵

The passive/active distinction is a central idea in this literature. 'Passive representation' is the demographic or sociological understanding of representation. In 'passive representation', public servants 'stand for' a group by nothing more than the fact that they

⁵⁴ The first representative bureaucracy theorist, Kingsley (1944), did not ask whether the bureaucracy could represent socially marginalized groups as his aim was to reduce the stranglehold of past political allegiances in the British civil service by creating a microcosm of the ruling elites.

⁵⁵ Although the distinction was first mooted in this way by Mosher in 1968 (Mosher 1982 [1968]: 14-16), it had also been proposed by theorists of political representation. Kim (1994) has provided a useful summary of the evolution of the theory of representative bureaucracy.

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come from that group. ‘Passive representation’ refers to the collective capacity of individuals of common social origins to ‘mirror’ their proportion in the population. In ‘active representation’ public servants persuade others in the public service why *their* recommendation is for the greater public good. ‘Active representation’ is intellectual, discretionary and engaged.⁵⁶

If ‘passive’ did not tend to ‘active’ representation, such mirroring would not be worth trying for. However, not all those who advocate a mirroring of society in the social diversity of a bureaucracy assume that such mirroring (passive representation) entails active representation. According to Mosher, if a bureaucracy is only ‘passively representative’, that demonstrates ‘openness’ and ‘equality of opportunity’ only in a general, symbolic sense (Mosher 1982 [1968]: 17).

In seeking to demonstrate cultural diversity through Aboriginal employee numbers, the APS was doing no more than establishing ‘passive representation’ (though that term was not used by the APS reformers). How significant an achievement was this? ‘Passive representation’ is an undemanding concept of representation for it could apply whatever the social background of public servants, whether or not they strive to be or are invited to be representative of the groups from which they are drawn. The symbolic effect of the passive representation of social diversity is to highlight the presence of particular groups. One theorist articulated some time ago an enduring problem for passive representation: that it did not explain ‘the process by which a representative bureaucracy becomes responsive to sectional *as well as* general interests’ (Subramaniam 1967: 1014).

The connection between passive and active representation has still not been established.

One approach to understanding this connection is to highlight the significance of scale. Quotas were introduced into American bureaucracies with the argument that only *sufficient* members of desired groups could make an impact. Krislov agreed that a societal presence in governing structures assisted government to ‘merchandise a policy’ and thus achieve policy

⁵⁶ As the distinction has recently been explained, a bureaucracy is ‘*passively* representative if it looks like a given segment of the population’ and ‘*actively* representative if it advocates the interests of a given segment of society’ (Meier and Hawes 2009: 270).

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‘penetration’. But he disagreed that quotas helped achieve these aims (Krislov 1974: 4-5). Arguing that bureaucracies were socially representative without that artifice, Krislov warned that ethnicity would only ever be prioritized when technical expertise was expendable – in which case ethnicity would be of no substantive consequence.⁵⁷

Krislov concluded that representative bureaucracy was not realizable in fact. Quotas were meaningless, because employee characteristics would never prevail over the rational/technical purpose of bureaucracy.⁵⁸ The more discretionary and instrumentalist bureaucracy was acknowledged to be, the more trustworthy it was. Krislov’s realism remains a beacon in this literature.

Those who have researched representative bureaucracy have differed on the question of whether it works in fact and how that should be tested.⁵⁹ Thompson (1976: 203) found that ‘minority civil servants’ were more likely than their ‘white counterparts’ to represent the interests of their communities when minorities worked together, when they worked on issues affecting their interests and when they had the opportunity for administrative discretion. Later researchers explored the links between social origins, attitudes and policy outputs, controlling variously for the size of the bureaucracy, the administrative level of

⁵⁷ Krislov’s argument was that even with the demographic skewing from having educated bureaucrats made inevitable, bureaucrats were more likely to be drawn eclectically and randomly from inchoate groupings and ‘elements of society not normally involved in policy-making’ than elective structures which were ‘emphatically the crystallization of articulate, organized, and recognized operative political groups’ (Krislov 1974: 76).

⁵⁸ Krislov notes in the conclusion to his intriguing essay that American bureaucracies had come to terms with that reality by being selective about the kinds of positions they opened to marginalized social groups; by taking the pool of competent people rather than the general population as the base for proportionate representation; and by accepting the symbolic value of passive representation without enforcing quotas (Krislov 1974: 136).

⁵⁹ Meier and Nigro found that representative bureaucracy’s reliance on social demography as an indicator of personal values was unfounded; that the theory seriously underestimated the power of organizational socialization; and that as a wholesale approach to populating the public service, it was misplaced because the more ‘crucial question’ was ‘the responsiveness of bureau elites’, those who had the discretionary power upon which the theory was premised. They concluded: ‘The “theory of representative bureaucracy” is inadequate as a normative theory of political control and as an empirical description of reality’ (Meier 1975; Meier and Nigro 1976: 467; Meier and O’Toole 2006; Meier and Stewart 1992).

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bureaucrats and the kind of characteristic (race or gender, for example) under study (Dolan and Rosenbloom 2003).⁶⁰

Summarizing the research in 2009, Meier and Hawes observe that the relationship between passive and active representation is still correlative, rather than causal. After three decades of studies, Meier explains that active representation is limited by restrictions on bureaucratic discretion, by bureaucratic socialization and lack of fit with the agency mission (Meier and Hawes 2009: 274). He observes that representative bureaucracy still faces accusations that it introduces bias, that it unfairly redistributes valued resources and compromises the merit principle. To establish the causal link between representative bureaucracy and policy outcomes – between passive and active representation, in other words – calls for something rare, these researchers concluded: research into the subjective intentions of bureaucrats (Meier and Hawes 2009: 272).

The research suggests that the case for adding ‘representative’ to ‘bureaucracy’ is weak. In the Australian literature, Wilenski’s (1986) distinction between ‘representing’ and ‘contributing’ clarifies nothing.⁶¹ As I see it, representative bureaucracy theory is still coming to terms with its own premise – that bureaucracies are places in which discretions and partialities are usual and indeed functionally useful.

The represented?

Mine is not the forensic style of representative bureaucracy research that I have been reviewing but the rarer, though desired, subjective analysis. I am not trying to ‘prove’ or ‘disprove’ representative bureaucracy, but to find the analytic tools to help me understand the experiences of Aboriginal public servants.

⁶⁰ Thompson’s findings were replicated in a different study of black teachers and principals in 67 Florida school districts. The more discretionary (by which these researchers meant lowly) the role, the more likely it was that minorities would influence policy on behalf of their groups on the basis of their social origins alone, especially if their bureaucratic socialization had been relatively recent (Meier and Stewart 1992).

⁶¹ Wilenski’s solution for the possibility of silenced voices was to ‘require administrators to be far more explicit about their value premises’ (Wilenski 1986: 63). That solution underestimates the ideological grip of ‘value premises’ and overestimates the capacity of ‘administrators’ to be ‘explicit’ about them.

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I recognize that all bureaucrats have subjectivities which are informed by their social values. Thus, I see that the tension between active representation and the principle of impartiality is inherent to bureaucracies, and not limited to so-called representative ones. If we deem that some public servants are representative, or potentially so, of people who share their ethnicity, gender or some other politically relevant and marked attribute, we assume that other public servants are somehow impartial and not representative of those with whom they share *their unmarked attributes*. As I see it, the ‘state effect’ in representative bureaucracy is in the generation of this assumption of the objectivity of *everyone else except the ‘representative’*. Representative bureaucracy effectively *contains and limits* the active representations of those whom it marks as representative. If those whom it marks as representative argue with its marking of them, representative bureaucracy will also contain and limit those representations as we shall see through the interviews. Thus, representative bureaucracy creates the ‘state’.

Aboriginal senior officials instance the passive/active distinction by their enumeration in the Aboriginal employee statistic and their roles as departmental representatives. Might they be active representatives in any other sense? The theory of representative bureaucracy does not explain how the contributions of enumerated Aboriginal employees differ from the contributions of other public servants. The passive/active binary is an important distinction, but it leaves unexplored the mechanism by which passive representation gives rise to active representation on the basis of identity. That is, it does not tell us how Aboriginal senior officials may ‘contribute’ *as Aborigines* – it only explains how any public servant may contribute.

The problem as I see it is that representative bureaucracy research under-theorises the relationship between ‘representative’ bureaucrats and the ‘represented’. Generally, representative bureaucracy research does not characterize representative bureaucrats as historically, geographically and politically contextualized social actors.⁶²

⁶² I found an exception in an edited collection in which urban minority administrators explore issues of practice which were not unlike those my interviewees described: how they navigated community relationships, collegiate expectations and personal ambitions in minority-specific roles (Karnig and McClain 1988b). The editors do not impose – nor do the contributing urban minority administrators raise – the passive/active distinction. Exploring these representative bureaucrats’ subjectivities as reflecting their *‘trustee relationship* to minority communities’, Karnig and McClain’s findings resonate with

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Where are the represented in the following three studies?

In the first, Selden et al find that the degree to which bureaucrats *adopt the role of representative* influences the extent to which they represent others (Selden, Brudney, and Kellough 1998). Their study observes that the role is not limited to those whose social identity has been marked by others as representative. Any bureaucrat could understand his or her role as representative of any ‘interest’ that he or she deems to be worthy of advocacy. In their study, the represented are nowhere to be seen because representation is all in the contrivance of workplaces – much as I argue that the Northern Territory’s invitation to Aborigines structures their experiences.

In the second study, Thielemann and Stewart observe that the representative bureaucracy research has been skewed to ‘supply’, or the governmental view. Locating their research on the ‘demand-side’, these researchers found that representative bureaucrats were more desired at the points of service delivery than at the more alienated senior levels of the public service (Thielemann and Stewart 2003). The represented have a place in their study, but only as people who feel distant from senior bureaucrats. We shall see that for my interviewees, the ‘represented’ were more internally differentiated and diversely located.

In the third study, Theobald and Haider-Markel explore the symbolism in passive representation. Their study showed that citizens’ attitudes were highly sensitive to police officers’ racial backgrounds. ‘Symbolic representation’, the researchers found, ‘works cognitively on the audience of those who belong to a group that is to be represented’ (Theobald and Haider-Markel 2009: 410). In this study, the represented are the beholders of representation. So I am inspired to ask how my interviewees might *imagine* their symbolic significance in the eyes of their represented.

In my study, the question of who is representing whom is always relevant and the answer is always context-dependent. I see a representative relationship that I cannot easily relegate to the ‘inside’ or the ‘outside’ of departments, not only because bureaucrats have agency as

mine in ways we shall see (1988a: 143-4) – incidentally, as I only found this study in the concluding stages of my project. And an historical study draws on demographic data to argue against representative bureaucracy in Nigeria (Dauda 1990).

citizens but because those deemed to be representative, at senior levels, may straddle the inside/outside divide by their connections to communities and advocacy organizations.⁶³ It seems to me that representative bureaucracy research – with some exceptions – largely forgets the ‘represented’.

Political theorists, particularly those who study the descriptive representation of historically disadvantaged groups, remember the represented. We see this in Pitkin’s famous pronouncement in 1967 that ‘representation, taken generally, means the making present *in some sense* of something which is nevertheless *not* present literally or in fact’ (1967: 8-9).

To follow the political theory, I need to go back to 1967 and take the other road.

3.3 The other road: political representation

Unconstrained by attachment to the ideal of impartiality, political theorists nuance the *political* content of representation through increasingly fine articulations of what they call ‘informal’ as opposed to ‘formal’ representation. I am not proposing that Aboriginal senior officials are the formal representatives of other Aborigines in the sense that they receive from Aborigines an official authorization to act for them or are formally accountable to them in some way, as principal to agent. This is not the purpose of their employment, nor do they claim it.⁶⁴ I am speaking only of informal representation in this thesis: the representation that occurs in the spaces which are left vacant by the vagaries and indeterminacies of administrative discretion.

⁶³ Such connections may be nurtured by those in special policy agencies who benefit from defining themselves ambiguously as they explicitly foster relations ‘between colliding worlds’, as Malloy (2003) depicts this relationship.

⁶⁴ In formal representation, a principal’s authorization binds the principal to an agent and the agent’s accountability binds the agent back to the principal by retrospective sanction. This is like the relationship between an elected representative and a voter or a client and lawyer or appointed spokesperson. This may well be one way in which Aboriginal parliamentarians represent the Aborigines (or indeed anyone) in their electorate. Mansbridge has described as ‘promissory’ representation the classic voter/political representative relationship. Voters can retrospectively sanction their elected representatives by withdrawing their votes when their elected representatives disappoint them (Mansbridge 2003: 516).

The absent

Aboriginal employment policy invites Aboriginal senior officials to be present in departments. By this, Aboriginal senior officials are somehow to conjure the ‘absent’. How they do that, who they conjure and for whose beholding depend on the issue at hand. When they spoke of representing the intended beneficiaries of Aboriginal-specific policies and programs, it seemed that my interviewees were actively representative in the sense of defending their portfolios. When they elucidated their motives and concerns they revealed other audiences, which implied other kinds of representing.

The ‘absent’ were often portrayed as ‘the remotes’, interviewees’ shorthand for the 40,000 Aborigines who live in the differently sized ‘rural-remote’ communities which are scattered throughout the large expanse of the Northern Territory at various degrees of geographic distance from the multi-racial towns usually depicted in Northern Territory Government policy as not remote but ‘urban’.⁶⁵ Did interviewees imply, by ‘the remotes’, the ‘non-compliant with government programs’? Many traditionally-oriented remote community dwellers, largely women but also men, are compliant policy and program subjects who work hard for the benefit of their communities and there are increasing itinerant town populations whose presence challenges government in new ways. Did interviewees mean, by ‘remote’, ‘not us’? Many had come from remote places. And because some interviewees were actively engaged in making Aborigines more present in the public service, the Aborigines that they were ‘representing’ were those Aborigines who could be future employees or who were less senior employees. Others ‘represented’ Aboriginal culture by being the repositories of artistic or environmental knowledge. Pinning down the ‘absent’ in bureaucratic representing called for this research to be fully engaged with the detail of interviewees’ work – its content, its context and interviewees’ orientations towards their work.

⁶⁵ In a recent Northern Territory Government publication, the ‘urban’ area is described as Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Nhulunbuy and ‘rural-remote’ the rest of the Northern Territory (Zhang and Johnstone 2009: 3). In ‘rural-remote’ – I call them remote areas, 20,000 Aboriginal Territorians live in over 50 small discrete Aboriginal communities of 500 people or less, and another 20,000 live in approximately 20 larger remote discrete Aboriginal communities (personal communication with Dr Will Sanders at the Australian National University Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research).

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Could it be that the absent were imagined, just as ‘the state’ is imagined, as an abstraction which is only realized in the various representations of them?⁶⁶ The political theorists develop a normative conceptual scheme for the ways in which the absent are made present through representation, one which explores the criteria by which democratic representatives might be judged. I am elucidating interviewees’ own accounts; my purpose is not normative.

The relevance of the political theory is that in the contextualized analysis of representative styles, it has produced a vocabulary which helps me to describe the notions of representation that were embedded in the words of my interviewees. The political theory shows that one can never only be an employment statistic: one is inevitably, to some extent, an agent of an imagined absent constituency. This idea resonates with my interviewees’ accounts of themselves as the personal agents, in various guises, of those of whose absence they were at any time conscious, for whom they were responsible, professionally or subjectively or both.

In political theory, the passive/active distinction is expressed by contrasting ‘descriptive’ with ‘substantive’ representation, distinguishing what or whom representatives stand for *symbolically*, from the *content* of their representation which is concerned with what they *stand up* for – for what, for whom and how they ‘act’. Even intuitively, though, the distinction between (descriptive) ‘representativeness’ and (substantive) ‘representation’ is difficult to sustain. The descriptive representation of historically disadvantaged groups does not establish its constituencies geographically, as electoral systems do, but on less definitive criteria of membership which might include the memories as well as the implications of historic dispossession. Descriptive representation is a relationship between ethnically-defined representatives and those for whom they act in which there are shared histories, intimacies and contestations. Who descriptive representatives are (their ‘representativeness’) obliges and commits them, in various ways, to others (their ‘representations’).

⁶⁶ Bickford notes that representational practices create ‘the represented’, to argue that political theory should pay more attention to the relationship between institutions and political identity (Bickford 1999).

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Pitkin's inspired teasing of representation's many meanings has been as much a springboard for my conceptualization as for the prolific body of work that continues to be produced by her critics.⁶⁷ I now track the concepts that guide my elucidation of interviewees' accounts.

Acting for others: 'trusteeship'/ argument and 'guardianship'

Different kinds of authority and different senses of accountability make for different kinds of representation. Allowing the possibility that authorities and accountabilities may be subjective by relating to institutionally and community-derived *understandings* of representation, I wondered what kinds of representation were my interviewees invoking when they discussed their relationships with absent constituencies.

Had interviewees spoken of doing exactly what other Aborigines asked them to do, they would have been invoking the 'delegate' style of representative.⁶⁸ The delegate is under the 'control' of the represented. Interviewees did not speak of being under such control, nor did they speak of communities as controlling them. Seeing the 'delegate' style as synonymous with representation, some interviewees rejected the idea that they represented at all. Interviewees did, however, speak of instances in which they relayed messages on behalf of communities, instances in which they spoke of making it known that they were wearing that 'hat'. They also spoke of relaying messages for the Northern Territory Government. Were they invoking the 'delegate' in these instances? In elements, perhaps; but 'controlled' was not how interviewees described themselves even when they spoke of messaging between the Government and communities. It will become clear that the 'delegate' style is most clearly illustrative of how interviewees did *not* see themselves.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ My précis of Pitkin's work owes much to Dovi's practical elucidation of it (Dovi 2006).

⁶⁸ To simplify what he deems Pitkin's over-complication of the concept of representation, Birch proposed a three-tiered schema in which he distinguished only between delegate/formal, characteristic-sharing and symbolic representation (Birch 1972: 14-15). His schema does not help elucidate my interviewees' accounts.

⁶⁹ The 'delegate' style was seen as Aborigines' preferred traditional style of representation by social anthropologists who were seeking to portray a distinct Aboriginal political identity (Rowse 2001: 108-12).

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It was most often the case that interviewees spoke of opportunities for discretion in the content and method of their advice to government. That advice tended to be about what they thought other Aborigines need. In so doing, were they invoking another style of representative: the ‘trustee’? ‘Trustees’ take care of the represented – not quite in the sense of ‘guardianship’ as I discuss shortly, but by acting in some conception of their interests. ‘Trustees’ use discretionary judgement to translate and to implement the expectations and desires of the represented, as they perceive them.

I liken the public service to a ‘trustee’. Unlike the elected arm of government, it is not there to respond to ‘wants’ (the ‘delegate’) but to advise elected politicians what is in the public good, what it perceives the public to ‘need’. Parts of the public service may be more evocative of the ‘trustee’ role than others. ‘Trusteeship’ may be most particularly consonant with the work of Aboriginal affairs. In some of the environments in which my interviewees were working, community ‘need’ was a higher priority than community ‘wants’. My analysis of interview data will show that the institutional encouragements towards building a sense of ‘trusteeship’, in relation to other Aborigines, were strong for my interviewees.

When Aboriginal senior officials spoke of working in policies and programs for the benefit of other Aborigines, it is possible that they were employing the notion, given in theory, of the representative as ‘trustee’. For example, one interviewee said that he ‘carried’ the interests of other Aborigines who could not be present in the bureaucracy.⁷⁰ To understand the extent to which my interviewees were, in aspects of their accounts, invoking a sense of themselves as ‘trustees’ we must know more from my data. Taking how much care of what, in relation to whom, how encouraged and to what avail?

‘Trusteeship’ should be distinguished from two other kinds of discretionary representation: ‘agency’ and ‘guardianship’.

‘Agency’, as Pitkin describes it, also involves discretion but in her schema agents follow instruction by a ‘principal’; they act on his or her behalf. I did not understand my

⁷⁰ In their depiction of trusteeship, Karnig and McClain similarly distinguish administrators from elected officials but note that the contributors to their study ‘personally felt a responsibility to make a difference by their presence’ (1988a: 144).

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interviewees to speak of themselves as ‘agents’ in this sense, as there was no unitary ‘principal’ among their absent constituencies. They were in no sense instructed by other than the supervisors of their work. I did understand interviewees to speak of themselves *literally* as agents – that is as effective actors - in that they saw themselves as potentially affecting real world things, things that public administrators refer to as ‘outcomes’. It was as a corollary of this view of them that I understood interviewees, at times, to speak of arguing with the public service.

Some political theorists depict ‘self-authorized’ or ‘citizen’ agents in the context of the ‘non-electoral domains’ of stakeholder groups and other ‘voice entrepreneurs’ who advise government from positions external to government departments (Stephan 2004; 2008: 388-9,403). Urbinati sees representative ‘agency’ as something akin to advocacy or defence (Urbinati 2000). If I apply this meaning of representation in the public service would I imply that the ethic of impartiality was being compromised? When a policy recommendation is under challenge, it is *expected* of the originating department to defend the recommendation. Taking advocacy in the sense of defending, I do not see it as contrary to the ethics of public service. It is simply ‘active representation’ as the representative bureaucratic theorists mean it – what bureaucrats do to defend their portfolios.

My interviewees were all agents/advocates in the sense in which any senior bureaucrat may be characterized as such by his or her responsibility for distinct, defensible portfolio interests. But in the exercise of such responsibilities, interviewees could move to behaviours which they saw as being interpreted by others as ‘over-passionate’ or ‘going too far’. When this happened, a few interviewees spoke of being unreasonably charged with ‘political advocacy’, the kind that is an anathema to the public service by being singular in the defence of a pressure group interest. Those who faced this imputation, however subtle or indirect, said they felt gravely misjudged.

How should I interpret such encounters? Young tells us that ‘those in structurally superior positions not only take their experiences, preferences and opinions to be general, uncontroversial, ordinary ... but also have the power to represent these as general norms’ (Young 2004: 27). It could be that Aboriginal senior officials, in such encounters, saw themselves as subject to the representational powers of those who judged their

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performances. If so, it is important to understand how they came to see themselves that way. As senior public servants, did they not have their own representational powers?

I characterize such encounters as ‘argument’, rather than as ‘agency’ or ‘advocacy’, because the term ‘argument’ expresses the relational nature of such encounters which could be momentary, elided; or prolonged, foundational and relationship-breaking. In such encounters, interviewees crossed a line. As they recounted such encounters, their argument was not accepted by their colleagues as contributory, or within the acceptable limits of defending an interest; but as problematic, by exceeding these limits. How, as senior public servants, did my interviewees come to see themselves as subject to such judgements rather than as taking their place among the senior bureaucrats who shaped the frames of reference within which such judgements are made?

Like ‘trusteeship’, representation as ‘guardianship’ involves discretion. But ‘guardianship’ is not representation, in Pitkin’s schema, for it implies a parent relationship as in the protection of a child. ‘Guardianship’ is not ‘representation’ for an interesting reason: that even though the represented cannot be ‘really [be] present literally or fully in fact’ (1967: 153), they must be capable of agency in the relationship. This is an important distinction because during 2007, the year in which I conducted the interviewees for this research, the Commonwealth Government declared the Northern Territory a state of emergency, in response to the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (2007) report of the widespread sexual abuse of children; and dramatically resumed control over aspects of the Northern Territory Government’s responsibilities. We could see Aboriginal senior officials as ‘guardians’ when they invoked absent Aborigines they believed incapable of exercising their own agency and as ‘trustees’ when they invoked the absent as competent, if often overlooked. We could see them as moving to ‘argument’ when they judged their ‘trusteeship’ ineffective and to no avail.

It is political representation’s central ‘paradox’, as Pitkin calls it, that what the represented are thought to want may not be what they are thought to need. The ‘are thought to’ part is central to understanding the dynamics that are of interest to me in this thesis. For Pitkin, it did not matter who would do this thinking as long as they were ‘competent’ to come to understandings of citizens’ ‘final-objective-interests’ as opposed to their ‘initial-interest-

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claim’ (1967: 218).⁷¹ Pitkin had faith in the democratic principle. But some interviewees questioned whether other Australians – particularly their public service colleagues – were willing or able to hear their voices, or the voices of Aborigines more generally.

Those who seek the descriptive representation of historically disadvantaged people acknowledge that it may matter very much *who* exercises this discretion.

Depicting/ informing and speaking for others: ‘substitution’

Differentiating representation’s *characterizing* or ‘standing for’ function from its ‘acting for’ function, Pitkin tells us that descriptive representation ‘depicts’ and ‘informs’ (1967: 72, 83-4) but does not ‘act’.

Pitkin claims that depicting may ‘just as well be done by inanimate objects’ (Pitkin 1967: 79, 80-82). It seems true that the official depicter of Aboriginality in the NTPS, the Aboriginal employment statistic, is inanimate. But from the perspective of my interviewees, the statistic had human agents in the form of those who administer the categories of inclusion and define how the personnel records fit them (some were interviewees). It also had human agents in those who anonymously submit their information to this process (most interviewees).

The invitation to tick one of the three boxes Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both in the web-based personnel system gave rise to many considerations for my interviewees: to what extent could or should they portray themselves as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both? It troubled some to participate in a report that they saw as portraying a false picture of their inclusion, whatever box they ticked. Others suggested that the statistics did not do much of

⁷¹ Sapiro argued in 1981 that the substantive representation of the interests of women needed their political presence because their interests were different from those who would otherwise be present (men). She is famous in political theory for her observation that interests become interesting only when they are politically relevant. It is when a group shares problems which are different from those which are otherwise prioritized by institutions that they become politically relevant and thus ‘representable’ (Sapiro 1981: 703). Sapiro noted that women’s presence was necessary but not sufficient; but the thinking about what else was needed for effective representation did not blossom in the literature until the 1990s.

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the depicting of Aboriginality in the workplace anyway; from their accounts, Aboriginality is ‘recognised’ by a social transaction which also involves conventional outward signs.

Even intuitively, an Aboriginal employee who displays the phenotypic characteristics of Aboriginality would add to the general state of representativeness of the public service regardless of whether or not he or she had self-identified. The tick has no name, under privacy laws. Yet, an Aborigine’s presence, if he or she is known as such, has an effect whether or not he or she has self-identified for the statistics, even if he or she is silent and opaque. That mode of presence depicts Aboriginal non-participation in a workplace event. And what does it add to our understanding of the depiction of Aboriginality that the same effect cannot be attributed to the Aboriginal public servant who is not recognized as Aboriginal, even if he or she *has* ticked the box? Nearly one in five senior interviewees struggled to make themselves ‘count’ *other than statistically* because they were not, as they saw it, recognized as Aboriginal due to their ‘non-Indigenous’ appearance.

To underestimate what enlivens ‘depiction’ is to miss vital social content. I cannot divorce ‘depicting’ from its human agents, nor from its function selectively to ‘inform’. But there is more action in the ‘informing’ that bureaucrats do when they *explain* something about absent Aborigines. When an Aboriginal bureaucrat does so, subtly in that characterization of them he or she is speaking *for* absent Aborigines. By speaking for absent Aborigines, this bureaucrat effectively colludes in their absence. All bureaucrats do. But when an Aboriginal bureaucrat speaks, he or she does it in a different relationship to absent Aborigines. His or her own depiction of Aboriginality, if it is recognized, adds a certain weight, or significance, to the information. It adds the possibility, indeed the enticement, for this bureaucrat, of allowing him- or herself to convey that the information is uniquely authentic. To speak for others is more ambiguous, as an act of representation, than to depict them more passively by one’s presence. This is what I mean by ‘substitution’.

‘Behind all the applications of the descriptive view to political life’, writes Pitkin when introducing ‘substitution’, ‘hovers the recurrent ideal of the perfect replica’ (1967: 86). Whereas ‘trustees’ exercise their discretion in relation to the represented, ‘substitutes’ *take the place of* the represented. ‘Substitution’ is neither just ‘acting’ nor just ‘standing for’ others. When there is resemblance, the ‘event of representation’ may assume the identity of, and the

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opinions of, the represented (Spivak 1988: 276-7). In ‘substitution’, those who speak may make the subtle move from ‘standing’ to ‘acting’ for them by ‘standing in’, as *proxy* for others.⁷²

Should I see the Aboriginal bureaucrat who offers information about absent Aborigines as ‘substituting’ for them? The ‘problem of speaking for others’, as Alcoff encapsulates the argument of postcolonial scholars, is that the speaker’s interpretation is always situated somewhere in a social complex. When others are absent by being excluded, the speaker is ‘participating in the construction of their subject positions’ even if he or she is only speaking about them (Alcoff 1995: 100-101). Those who represent others by acts of speech, writing and policy analysis *create* their subaltern policy subjects by doing so.⁷³

Interviewees often told me that whatever they said, in certain workplace circumstances, they were deemed as providing an ‘Aboriginal viewpoint’. Their accounts of how they responded to this presumption differed markedly. Some willingly complied by providing information that could be taken as an ‘Aboriginal viewpoint’, seeing it as their job and their responsibility as Aborigines to explain the behaviours and motives of other Aborigines. Others balked at the expectation that they could, should and would speak for other Aborigines. For some, such invitations may have raised insecurities about their legitimacy in the eyes of other Aborigines. Interviewees spoke of feeling as though they had been taken to supply ‘the Aboriginal viewpoint’ in their workplaces *even by raising the issue*.

⁷² Mansbridge uses the metaphor of the ‘gyroscope’ to distinguish between representation that refers to the internal perspectives and experiences of the representative and that which refers to other bases of evidence. She uses the term ‘surrogacy’ to describe the circumstance in which a representative has other constituents but acts on a sense of connection to the represented; but she acknowledges that these and other forms should not be seen as mutually exclusive (Mansbridge 2003: 526). The ideas of self-referral and of role assumption suggest the sense of ‘substituting’ that I will develop in interpreting my data.

⁷³ The normative theorists tell us that it is legitimate to speak for others is when it would be remiss not to do so – a circumstance which my interviewees spoke of encountering often. But not to recognize the inevitability of one’s own complicity in representations which position subalterns as disadvantaged is, in the language of the postcolonial scholars, to ‘essentialise’ the subaltern experience just as much as one does when one explicitly assumes authority for that experience. To demand the direct subaltern voice as though that gesture of ‘intellectual retreat’ would change the conditions of subaltern exclusion is likewise ‘essentialising’ (Spivak 1988). To speak for others legitimately is to resist the impulse to ‘know’ for them, to interrogate one’s situational advantage and to take into account the representation’s effect.

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Should I treat my interviewees' recounted moments of questioning as their acts of representation? I will explore, through the data, what sense of authorisation, what information, what others, to what end and with what hesitancy my interviewees responded to the subtle discursive pressure that they 'substitute' for absent others.

My abiding impression of the interviews was that Aboriginal senior officials already had a set of terms for the discursive challenges of 'substitution'. Although interviewees differed in the intensity of their resistance to the subtle pressure to speak for or about others in their work, it was clear that, in speaking of this problem to me, they were vocalizing familiar deliberations. The problems of 'substitution' – my term – were well-trodden ground.

Being like, but not too like, others

Descriptive representations are 'renderings of an 'original'', Pitkin tells us, but 'in a medium different from it' (1967: 72-73). The representative is *like*, but is *not*, the represented. The likeness cannot go too far without losing the element that makes it representation. That element need only be a matter of extent, the relationship of part to whole.

Aboriginal senior officials fulfil the basic definition of descriptive representatives by being part of, but not the whole of, the Northern Territory Aboriginal population and by coming from some communities and regions but not all. They are 'like' but 'not' the represented in this sense. But how like, or similar to, other Aborigines are they in other ways? They are not the very problematic policy subjects, the disaffected, program-non-compliant cultural 'others'. The experiences typical of Territory Aborigines of mixed descent had long distinguished them from some others in the Northern Territory Aboriginal population, as had their urban residence and education. My interviewees were not all of mixed descent, urban-residing and educated, but the level of their fitness for public service professionalism soared, relatively speaking, above the rest of the Aboriginal population. Between Aboriginal senior officials and many other Aborigines there is not only a relationship of part to whole, but also of social differentiation through historical circumstance. What implications did *unlikeness*, their dissimilarities, have for them as representatives?

If representativeness is not typicality, the representative might *improve* the 'typical' likeness of the represented by emphasizing those characteristics which are most 'relevant for

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reproduction’ (Pitkin 1967: 87). But Pitkin left unanswered the many important consequences of this idea.

Not all Aboriginal characteristics might be deemed ‘relevant for reproduction’.⁷⁴ They are, after all, the Northern Territory’s problem population. Perhaps bureaucratic representation selects and reproduces the compartments of social compliance – work ethic, sobriety, parental responsibility, even policy acquiescence. This idea is centrally important for the characterization I will come to soon: that of ‘role models’. To prepare that ground, I introduce those among Pitkin’s critics who addressed themselves more wholeheartedly to the descriptive representation of the historically disadvantaged.

3.4 The politics of being there

It’s a start. If they’re [we’re] not there, then you got no basis to do anything.

Thus an interviewee voiced the idea of Phillips’ ‘politics of presence’ (1995: 5). Phillips argued that the substantial presence of descriptive representatives would change the content of politics. Writing of women, she recommended that they be ‘actively present, and in numbers that will make them effective’ with ‘improved access to every sphere’ (Phillips 1991: 72-73). Phillips concluded that *fair* representation lies in a mix of presence and ideas, a combination of descriptive and substantive representation: populate institutions with as many and as diverse articulate women, or members of marginalized groups, as possible and what emerges will eventually reflect their views (Phillips 1995: 25).⁷⁵

Phillips defended ‘presence’ on four grounds. The first was that it raises esteem for members of historically disadvantaged groups to see others in influential positions: her ‘role models’ argument. The second was that it is not fair or just for the historically advantaged to monopolise public institutions; others might make better ‘trustees’. The third ground was that descriptive representation allows excluded groups to put forward ‘overlooked’ perspectives. Fourthly, historically disadvantaged groups have different orientations to the

⁷⁴ Indeed, a widely representative bureaucracy in the Northern Territory could strive to employ members of other ethnic groups – the Chinese, Southeast Asian and recently African migrants who have settled there.

⁷⁵ Representation has similarly been theorised as a ‘mediation’ that takes place in institutions (Williams 1998).

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world which are not apparent, and which cannot serve the purposes of legitimating institutions, if they are absent (Phillips 1995: 167-168).

Generally, interviewees saw these benefits as flowing from their presence – other Aborigines ‘saw’ them in the public service; it was ‘unfair’ for non-Aboriginal views to prevail in the Northern Territory’s public service; their perspectives were not already in evidence in the public service; and as Aborigines, they were ‘different’ from their white counterparts.

But there are problems. These are the problems of ‘group representation’ or ‘self-representation’ as Williams calls it (see also Kymlicka 1993; Williams 1998: 11-14).⁷⁶ In promoting social identity over contribution, the descriptive representation of historically dispossessed groups can encourage other claims to that identity. The assumption that all those who claim a particular identity think the same way, as in the invitation to ‘substitute’, encourages a lack of representative accountability. And to insist on defining a representative by a duty to serve a bounded category can inhibit the search for common ground and a more generic public good (Phillips 1995: 22-24; Williams 1998: 4-8).

Interviewees articulated these problems in their various depictions of the NTPS: self-identification created ambiguous distinctions between public servants; interviewees felt compromised by being invited to speak for others; and interviewees found their contributions inhibited by their portrayal of a social identity.

Where interviewees emphasized their ‘cultural difference’ from other bureaucrats, should I portray them as embracing the problematic politics of group difference (Young 1990)? I could plausibly portray some as rejecting that politics in favour of a more universalist

⁷⁶ The group difference or ‘recognition’ paradigm accepts the partiality and particularity of views. Opposed to it is the ‘distributive’ paradigm which emphasizes policy outcomes about the equal distribution of public resources over the principle of fair decision-making. The distributive paradigm is universalist in its conception of the common public good of a known and homogenous citizenry. As a theorist of ‘group representation’, Young questioned public faith in bureaucratic rationality and in a single ‘civic public’, preferring the partiality of ‘the encounter with other people’ (Young 1990: 106). Young argued that without the presence of different groups with different histories: ‘The situated assumptions and commitments that derive from particular histories, experiences, and affiliations rush to fill the vacuum’ (1990: 115).

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philosophy, where they emphasized their similarity to other bureaucrats (Benhabib 2002). In that interviewees invoked both ideas, at times in seeming contradiction, it is difficult to characterize them as consistently of one perspective or the other. Such inconsistencies make the ‘politics of presence’ an appealing model for bureaucratic representation.

Acknowledging that ‘who the bureaucrats are (their gender or ethnicity or race) can have a decisive impact on what they propose,’ Phillips commented that the ‘politics of presence’ may be extended into the bureaucracy (Phillips 1995: 185). Her argument that presence matters because it promotes the osmotic flow of ideas matches what many interviewees said: it was better to be present than not, because it gave the chance of policy influence.

But Phillips leaves an important issue unresolved: that of elitism and the associated issue of representative accountability.⁷⁷ The problem is that professional elites have transcended their original disadvantage. This was the case for my interviewees. Noting this, how should I interpret their commitments, whether they called themselves representative or not, to Aborigines who remained disadvantaged?

Some distanced themselves from the idea of representation when they called their contributions ‘perspectives’. Those who gave this account of their representation were supporting in vernacular theory Young’s famous solution to the problem of accountability in group representation: to ‘defer’ group representation in preference for softer options such as the contribution of ‘social perspective’, a contribution that cannot be dismissed as illegitimate.⁷⁸ On what terms did interviewees see themselves as sharing perspectives with the represented?

⁷⁷ Phillips acknowledges that her ‘politics of presence’ privileges ‘a certain kind of woman’ (1991: 90): a middle class professional person. Phillips urges that women participate in institutions as professional people, not *as women*. If they participate ‘as women’ they run into the problems of special privileging; if they are not present at all they have to trust their representation to men. She concluded that those descriptive representatives who can, *should* press their ideas, even if that left unresolved the problem that their structural differences from the disadvantaged made them elites (Phillips 1995: 176-8).

⁷⁸ Young introduces the notion of ‘social perspective’, the ‘experience, history and social knowledge derived from social position’, which arises from ‘structured social relations’ (Young 1997: 365-6), as a way of avoiding the problems of group representation. Social perspective cannot be illegitimate. Social perspective is shared by those with common experiences that are ‘socially specific and politically relevant’ (Young 1997: 367) without being prescriptive or essentializing. Young does not abandon the

Symbolic representation: ‘role models’

This research concerns the accounts that Aboriginal senior officials in the Northern Territory Public Service give of their representations; and we shall see, through the data, that the preferred self-styling of many was as ‘role models’. My interviewees often proposed it as the representational effect of their presence in the public service that they were ‘role models’ to other Aborigines – to youth, to their families, to those in remote communities and to bureaucrats junior to them. They invoked various Aboriginal audiences as somehow, vicariously, the beholders of their performances as public servants. The view of representation as ‘symbolic’ emphasizes the ways in which representatives are beheld by others. Whereas the test of descriptive representation is ‘accuracy of resemblance’, as Dovi (2006) points out, the test of ‘symbolic representation’ is ‘the degree of acceptance that the representative has among the represented’. But Phillips described ‘role modelling’ as ‘the least interesting’ of the arguments for descriptive representation because, she says, it ‘has no particular purchase on politics per se’ (Phillips 1995: 63).

Why was ‘symbolic representation’ the least developed kind of representation in Phillips’ account of the ‘politics of presence’? Perhaps there is discomfort, in some political theory, with the relationship between institutional structure and human subjectivity.

Social anthropology excels in such terrain. Not only is image-making integral to public trust in the bureaucracy; it is important to people. The prominence of ‘role models’ in my interviewees’ self-depiction may well be characteristic of bureaucratic representation, but it may also be characteristic of postcolonial Aboriginality in the Northern Territory. Phillips underplays ‘role modelling’ *despite* its empirical relevance even in her own field of international feminism.⁷⁹ Phillips dismisses ‘role modelling’ as an important argument for descriptive representation, I suggest, because her quest is to demonstrate how descriptive representation is *substantively* relevant; her argument is with those who dismiss descriptive representation as substantively lightweight and undemocratic.

idea of group representation, but she ‘defers’ its ‘strong interpretation’ for ‘other, weaker practical options’ for political inclusion (Young 1997: 372).

⁷⁹ For example, Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007) test the extent to which female politicians are role models for younger women.

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Was ‘role modelling’ substantively relevant in the context of my research? Another political theorist, Mansbridge, also leaves ‘role models’ to their ‘usual treatment’ as matters of ‘individual psychology’ (Mansbridge 1999: 651). But her explanation is helpful. Mansbridge prefers not to contrast ‘symbolic’ and ‘substantive’ representation because ‘in political contexts the word “symbol” often bears the unspoken modifier “mere”’ (1999: 652). She seeks to show that descriptive representation does not only mean something to the disadvantaged (‘social meaning’) but that it imposes ‘substantive consequences’ on the advantaged.⁸⁰ To have been excluded from voting at some point in a population’s history, Mansbridge argues, conveys the message: ‘Persons with these characteristics do not rule’ (1999: 649). Descriptive representatives convey the alternative meaning: ‘fitness to rule’ (Mansbridge 1999: 648-50). They bring ‘de facto legitimacy’ to a polity, even if those they represent have occupied that polity painfully (Mansbridge 1999: 650-2).

Aborigines’ presence in government could be understood as conveying ‘social meaning’ and ‘de facto legitimacy’; and by ‘role modelling’ they might seek to convey something substantive to their government and to other Aborigines. What were the self-styled ‘role models’ among my interviewees modelling? Could it have been certain compartments and behaviours, learned from their forebears, and derived – if we go back far enough – from the educational efforts of the Northern Territory administration? Perhaps, Aboriginal senior officials were encouraged in ‘role modelling’ by their reading of the expectations of non-Aboriginal audiences.⁸¹ To relegate ‘role modelling’ to individual psychology is to miss its potential political relevance.

Mansbridge invokes Charles Taylor when she argues that ‘role modelling’ is a matter of psychology. Yet in my interpretation of Taylor’s ‘politics of recognition’, colonized peoples

⁸⁰ As Mansbridge expresses it, she wants to show that descriptive representation’s ‘social meaning exists outside the heads of the members of the descriptive group, and that de facto legitimacy has substantive consequences’ (Mansbridge 1999: 651).

⁸¹ Pitkin described ‘symbolic representation’ as ‘standing for’ others ‘in the mind of the governed’. She noted that the audience for representation in this sense may take in not only the represented but a ‘third party’ (Pitkin 1967: 104-6).

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seek liberation from a ‘demeaning picture of themselves’ by demanding explicit recognition of their cultural difference through claims which are political (Taylor 1992: 36-37; 65).⁸²

What effect did it have that my interviewees were situated in governing structures in which, as some of them pointed out, ‘only the minority or suppressed cultures are being forced to take alien form’ (Taylor 1992: 43)? Their identities were marked, but also suppressed, by the offer of pre-set categories of difference through which ‘the supposedly fair and difference-blind society’ is ‘in a subtle and unconscious way, itself highly discriminatory’ (Taylor 1992: 43). Aboriginal senior officials take ‘alien form’ when they self-identify. And recognition – or its omission – forges identity, Taylor shows us, in the politics of social inclusion (1992: 64, 66). Could we see Aboriginal senior officials as having a ‘social imaginary’ – to draw on Taylor’s term for a different sense of social and political possibility – which was different from that of their non-Aboriginal colleagues (Taylor 2004)?

Interviewees spoke to me as if they, as Aboriginal public servants, possessed a distinct social imaginary. Interviewees often mentioned that offerings they thought fresh and original went unrecognized in their workplaces. Through ‘role modelling’, Aboriginal senior officials might seek to communicate a sense of self-worth to the public service. Not only this – to understand oneself as representative requires some kind of confirmation from others. In this inter-subjective process the views of absent peers may be imagined or assumed, if they are not present to give their own evaluation and cannot, at that moment, be asked.

Those who saw themselves as ‘role models’ could gain self-esteem by imagining that others esteem them. The substantive content of ‘role modelling’ for my interviewees, could be to correct the negative attitudes that Aborigines have suffered throughout their history. I see ‘role modelling’ as potentially a political claim – not only a matter of psychology but, in its context, a substantive proposal for Aborigines which is based on a distinct social imaginary.

⁸² Mansbridge notes as an exemplary study of ‘social meaning’ Cole’s (1976) interview-based study comparing the experiences of black and white elected officials in America. That study found that black officials ‘make a difference’ by influencing policy, increasing black presence, sensitizing white officials to black viewpoints, linking with black citizens, role modelling to black youth, reversing stereotypes of white superiority and demonstrating their fitness to rule (Cole 1976: 221-3). Cole’s study is a rare treatment of black and white political officials, but it does not explore relationships internal to black communities.

Historical contingency: ‘corrective governing’ and ‘shared fates’

Mansbridge suggests that we think of descriptive representation as a contingent policy, one which should be mobilized only under circumstances of historic distrust which call for repairs to communication; and in which disadvantaged groups have ‘uncrystallized interests’ which call for special representations by their descriptive representatives (1999: 638). In such circumstances, she argues, descriptive representatives enable a diversity of views in deliberative contexts (Mansbridge 1999: 636). I see prolonged distrust as a theme in the Northern Territory Government’s relationship with Aborigines. I show in the next chapter how Aboriginal officials facilitated communications between the Government and Aborigines from the first moments of Northern Territory self-government. And the Northern Territory’s remote Aboriginal populations, still the objects of liberal soul-searching, have evidently not ‘crystallized’ their own interests. Hence, under Mansbridge’s criteria, they qualify for the special justice of having descriptive representatives among their policymakers.

Accepting that historical circumstances may either generate or suppress the need for descriptive representatives, what is there to say that descriptive representatives are competent to represent others?

Here I explore Dovi’s sensitive work on the fraught issue of competency to represent. Dovi (2002, 2007) sees the political theorists whose ideas I have been exploring as stuck in the wrong debates, worrying about ‘why’ and ‘when’ instead of ‘how’ descriptive representatives should represent. Dovi (2002) asks, provocatively, of Phillips, Mansbridge and others: ‘Will Just Any Woman, Black, or Latino Do?’ The question may sound superior and exclusionary to those who prefer only to privilege those with claims to such identities. However, interviewees did not hesitate to raise such issues about themselves: that people like them, in positions of responsibility, should be competent to exercise that responsibility and should strive to be as accountable as they could be, as public servants, to those who looked to them for assistance.

Dovi justifies carefully her preference for descriptive representatives with ‘strong mutual relationships with dispossessed subgroups of historically disadvantaged groups’ (Dovi 2002: 729). To what extent was this also a criterion by which interviewees judged themselves,

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albeit or even more so that they were located in a bureaucracy? Dovi depicts the ideal relationship between descriptive, indeed any, representatives and their represented as one of ‘mutual recognition’ (Dovi 2002: 735-8). The question of who participates in this relationship is important, because for Dovi, representatives should be judged by ‘who [among the represented] does and does not interact with them’ (Dovi 2002: 736).⁸³

Dovi specifies that the relationship should contain ‘shared aims’ (Dovi 2002: 738). She bases this idea on the notion of ‘linked fates’, which safeguards that a representative’s self-interest coincides with the interests of the represented. For this idea she draws on Dawson’s study of the interaction of race and class in Afro-American electoral politics, which finds that the more educated the person, the more likely the belief that ‘one’s fate is linked to that of the race’ (Dawson 1994: 81-2).⁸⁴ We could take from this that the represented should be able to judge representatives by more demanding criteria than mere descriptive identity: on the content of their work (Dovi 2002: 738).

Finally, Dovi specifies that ‘dispossessed subgroups’ ought to be parties in this ‘mutual recognition’. Otherwise, some will be excluded again – this time, at the hands of their own people. In this part of her argument, Dovi draws on Cohen’s critique of the ‘ethnic model of inclusion’ or ‘*advanced marginalization*’ as Cohen calls the ‘uses of power and privilege *within* oppressed communities’ (Cohen 1997: 574-5). Cohen is critical of the privilege to ‘police’ others that some group members acquire in the interests of their own inclusion, with the implication that internal policing is structurally, inevitably abusive of the representative relationship.⁸⁵ Dovi’s point is that the quality of the relationship between representatives and ‘dispossessed subgroups’ could help to mitigate the possibility of this kind of abuse.

⁸³ The quality of their interaction is also important. Descriptive representatives and the represented should respect each other’s different relationship to the group. For Dovi, to declare others inauthentic is not inclusive (Dovi 2002: 737). Although, as she later argues, if others are known to be ‘unjust excluders’ themselves, ‘good representatives’ should keep them at a distance (Dovi 2007: 161-2).

⁸⁴ In Dawson’s study, ‘linked fate’ is a construct to test and explain a research finding that economic polarization in the African-American community did not consequently polarize political interests in that community (Dawson 1994: 74, 77).

⁸⁵ Cohen observes: ‘as groups vie for the label as legitimate, normal, and citizen, they confront the requirement that they regulate and control the public behaviour and image of all group members’ (Cohen 1997: 575-6).

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What if the members of a ‘dispossessed subgroup’ are not of one mind but articulate radically divergent perspectives, as did Northern Territory Aboriginal communities in response to the Northern Territory Intervention? While some Aborigines were dismayed at the Intervention’s contravening of anti-discrimination doctrine, others were grateful for its protections. Cohen was not speaking of this circumstance – her empirical field was sexual politics – but the point is important. I prefer – and my data demand – a position of suspended judgement rather than to see it as only ever compromising themselves politically when descriptive representatives align their interests with the interests of government.⁸⁶

I resist the interpretation that it is selling out their people when office-bound Aboriginal senior officials, distanced from their communities, have the last word in policy discussions. My interviewees were not usually working at the local level within communities. Through their involvement in policy discussions, they told me, they had opportunities to endorse and legitimize the work that occurs in departments: to diagnose, name, manage and evaluate the management of Aboriginal problems. They had evidently acquired powers of definition that were not available to those absent, without bureaucratic voice. They articulated inner struggles: should they leave that defining to their colleagues, or might other Aborigines benefit from their efforts at contribution? *They relished interceding.*

I will explore instances in which Aboriginal senior officials, describing themselves as ‘role models’, engaged in the policy development which gave them didactic, corrective roles in relation to other Aborigines: ‘corrective governing’, as I call them. Should I see ‘corrective governing’ as an instance of Cohen’s ‘policing’ or could I see it as my interviewees were inclined to see it, as a means to ensure that policing was not only ‘done to’ their people? My interviewees articulated the costs and benefits of participating in the administration and management of policies affecting their people. There was no ‘false consciousness’ among

⁸⁶ Dryzek’s conditions for ‘group inclusion’ in the state have been influential in political theory: that to be ‘legitimate’, the purpose must be an immediate state imperative for which working for the state will not deplete citizen resources (Dryzek 1996: 479-80). Otherwise working for the state may be dismissed as ‘co-option’ (Saward 1992). Bickford, embracing ‘state politics’ as a source of political identity or citizenship, finds as I do that Dryzek exemplifies ‘an overly unified conceptualization of the state....Dryzek’s analysis requires the assumption that all actors populating all sites in the state act to further imperatives of accumulation and legitimation or that processes...within the state invariably support these imperatives’ (Bickford 1999: 91).

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them, or at least not in my portrayal: rather, they brought sensitivity and inner knowledge to their work. Recounting conversations with members of ‘dispossessed subgroups’ among their relations, my interviewees spoke of negotiating their authorities carefully, not lording it over their people by elitist tactics. Some saw their ability to engage their absentees in conversations about such authorities as an unseen value of their presence.

I see the idea of ‘shared fates’ as a possible authority, for my interviewees, in their ‘corrective governing’ of other Aborigines. Could it be that they strove to be ‘good representatives’ in something like the sense that Dovi (2007) later lays out – that they sought mutual recognition, fulsome interactions, chances to explain themselves and to hear from others to gain the authority for their role as Aborigines’ representatives in the Northern Territory Government? This striving could represent my interviewees’ sense that they ‘shared fates’ with their absentees. As bureaucrats, my interviewees’ absent policy subjects did not know and could not judge them in the way that they could know and judge their absent policy subjects. What accommodations did my interviewees make to achieve a sense of reciprocity in their impossibly non-reciprocal relationship with absent policy subjects; and what theories do I need if I am to attribute a political conscience to that striving?

It helps to think of bureaucratic representation as a ‘differentiated relationship’, Young’s expression for a relationship which is atemporal and dislocated, which ‘moves between moments of authorization and accountability’ in which there may be traces of such moments past and anticipated, but the representation is always ‘deferred’ (Young 2000: 129). Whereas Dovi sees Young’s conception as weakening the argument for politically relevant descriptive representatives (see Dovi 2002: 732), I find the idea of diverse and scattered connections resonant with my interviewees’ accounts that, more often than not, what they did as officials in relation to Aborigines, in the multi-sited disembodiments of policy work, was representation. Young speaks of an objectivity which *acknowledges partiality* by recognizing the ‘situated knowledges’ of participants to debate (Young 2004: 20). The aim of deliberation is to shift ‘self-regarding understanding’ into the ‘comprehensive understanding’ that accounts for diverse interests (Young 2004: 24). Is this not the aim of representative bureaucracy?

Through my interview data, I explore whether my interviewees invoked enduring interactive connections between descriptive representatives and the dispossessed when they used, in

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interviews with me, contemporary expressions such as ‘beneficiary’, ‘client’ and ‘program recipient’. I consider whether ‘role modelling’ was their way of connecting with their policy subjects, and whether through ‘role modelling’ they sought to confirm their worth as Aborigines in a public service which did not convey to them that it recognized them as much other than ‘different’. I consider what moved self-professed ‘role models’ to model particular comportments, as they most clearly did in roles of ‘corrective governing’. Were they trying to create the conditions for mutual relations with the dispossessed? If they judged themselves the poorer when they were not in a relationship of mutual recognition – when their absent represented did not know them – we could see Aboriginal senior public servants as motivated by a sense of ‘shared fates’.

Although it is not my purpose to set out a normative political theory by which to judge my interviewees, it seemed to me as I read, re-read and replayed their words that my interviewees were searching, in their interviews, for the criteria by which they might judge themselves. The political theorists and my vernacular theorists had a normative purpose in common. I work through its components, through their words, in Part II.

Can bureaucrats ‘share fates’ with the absent?

Some theorists would have it that the technical, hierarchical Weberian career service of earlier in the 20th century gave way to the discretionary, responsive and *representative* Australian welfare state in the 1980s, one which was wise to its own hierarchical politics. They would then claim that the welfare state has evolved into the more permeable, economically rationalist, neo-liberal new public management of the 1990s which is still the guiding motif of public administration (Curnow 1989; Hughes 1994; Wilenski 1986). Other theorists would say that bureaucrats have always had discretionary powers (Friedrich 1940); or that the bureaucracy is as technically preoccupied as ever, in coming to terms with the public accountabilities of ‘outsourcing’ and the development of ‘government business enterprises’.

Curnow stated in 1989 that ‘for all the criticisms of bureaucracy it too is proving resilient’ (Curnow 1989: 444). Recalling the analytic need to avoid adopting public administration’s self-description, I see his observation as prescient. As I see it, the sources of public service

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authority are in tension and the solutions contestable.⁸⁷ How can a bureaucrat tell when to respect professionalism, seek community input or defer to centralized performance criteria? At what point will he or she have crossed the flexible line between politics and administration, and when will this crossing provoke the need for employee discipline or be hailed as a triumph of executive risk-taking in the interests of his or her portfolio? When, indeed, does the bureaucrat *not* have one foot in the public sphere, given that policy advisers must now gather their own ‘publics’ through stakeholder engagement? The senior bureaucrat does his or her own public liaison. Not only this, ‘descriptively representative’ senior bureaucrats must judge the best opportunity to contest established wisdoms by carefully timing their interceding.

I have returned to my starting point: that somewhere between too little and too much representing, there must, at least in theory, lie representing that is somehow right. I suggest that this could be found in places where Aboriginal public servants have signalled their openness to new people and new experiences by embracing the opportunity to work with non-Aboriginal bureaucrats. Many interviewees greatly admired mentors who valued their abilities and created opportunities for them.

I infer from my interviewees’ preoccupations with their image, to some, as ‘tokens’, that they must have an identity in mind, if not clearly articulated, which is *not* token and yet, not entirely free of constraint: committed, perhaps, or politically conscientious within the options available. Could the characterization ‘good representative’ apply to the terms that Aboriginal senior officials used when giving approving accounts of their own work? The discrete pressures on bureaucrats notwithstanding, bureaucracy may be as forming of citizen identity as other democratic institutions.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ The so-called shifts in the culture of public administration have been more cumulative – more ideologically driven – than transformative. Public administration reifies networks and collaborations, but hangs onto the hierarchy which preserves ministerial responsibility. It now articulates postcolonial, environmental and gender-oriented arguments, but these arguments do not have any pre-ordained policy priority. Public administration purports to be many things – economically rationalist and customer-driven, community-engaged, equity-conscious and performance-based (Yeatman 1994).

⁸⁸ As Bickford expresses this idea, it is at least an ‘intuitive possibility worth considering’ that ‘citizen identities can be enacted’ in ‘a state’ and be ‘more complex than those of the unitary rights-bearing individual or the member of bounded and distinct groups’ (Bickford 1999: 92; see also Cooper 1995).

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Can those present in a bureaucracy ‘share fates’ with the absent, such that they could reason from this a sense of accountability in their relationship with the absent? I see nothing in the identity of a bureaucrat which would prevent this possibility, at least in theory – but it remains for me to consider this possibility in practice.

History provides the evidence that structures of discrimination have been reproduced over time, as Williams tells us, whereas memory ‘highlights the subjective side of a history of discrimination’ that marginalized groups internalize and/or resist, individually and collectively, as they come to terms with the place of that past in their present (Williams 1998: 177, 181-7). While their sense of past wrongs was profound amongst my interviewees, their main preoccupation – and my research interest – was to explore their commitments, as ‘descriptively representative’ public servants, to redress those wrongs. My interviewees’ combined sense of history suggests a collective identity shared with other Aborigines, but their stories were their own. That my interviewees did not form a conscious collective makes the patterns in their stories, to the extent I can infer patterns, the more profound. Williams has recently described a ‘community of shared fate’. Such a community arises from ‘imagining a set of human beings as socially related to each other in the past and the future... and claiming that the terms of relationship be subject to a standard of a common good’ (2009: 45) that it is ‘ethically significant’ (Williams: 48). If people agree that there is a ‘story to be told about this relationship’, that is a start. The rest is a matter for ‘imaginative judgment’ for which there can be no arbiter (Williams 2009: 51).

But Williams is speaking of global citizenship and I am speaking of a prosaic local circumstance in the far north and desert centre of Australia. Did my interviewees evince theories of identity and action in relation to other Aborigines which suggest that their working model was of ‘shared fates’ in the ‘ethically significant’ sense of feeling part of a collective history in which ‘imaginative judgment’ has a legitimate place?

Concluding remarks

If interviewees did evince such theories, it will be through snippets of their stories and retold conversations that we shall see. I am committed to a study of the contextual, the human and the practical in bureaucratic representing. Indeed, now that I have the language to say this:

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my study embraces the structural and the subjective in my interviewees' accounts of representative bureaucracy. For it is only through their experiences of 'doing' representative bureaucracy, and not through representative bureaucracy's self-description, that we may know how representative bureaucrats create a sense of government.

I have outlined the criteria by which I will analyze my research data. My criteria follow the logic of political representation in all its nuances – a logic which is available to representative bureaucrats. But I do not presume Aboriginal senior officials' political commitments and I do not predict their self-accounts. How *did* my interviewees, in their own terms, accept or otherwise respond to the Northern Territory Government's invitation of their 'contributions' and how did they see themselves bringing forth the absent, if indeed they saw themselves doing so in their work?

In Part II, we shall see whether the political identity 'Aboriginal senior official' was legitimized, for my interviewees, by the sense that as Aborigines who were present in the public service, they shared the fates of Aborigines who were absent.

But first, I will continue my historical account which situates that political identity in a policy narrative and an institutional time and place. What did the Northern Territory Government do with the opportunity to embrace Aborigines in its new public service in 1978? If the claims by the Australian Public Service to be representative of Aborigines in the 1970s were largely based on the presence of Aborigines in Northern Territory departments, the claims the new Northern Territory Government would make were solely based upon the transfer into it of many of the same Aborigines through the deals of self-government – the same Aborigines who had made the Commonwealth bureaucracy appear socially diverse. How the Northern Territory Government depicted and encouraged these Aboriginal employees is the subject of the next chapter. We now have the tools with which to examine the invitation to represent to which many Aborigines had, in one way or another, been exposed by the time I interviewed members of their community in 2007.

Chapter Four

Mirror, Mirror...: The mixed messages of Aboriginal employment policy 1978-2007

In this chapter I show how the Northern Territory Government's Aboriginal employment policies over the decades since self-government constituted a program of representative bureaucracy. It was not called that, indeed the messages were mixed and not always explicit; but the central elements of an invitation for Aboriginal public servants to represent other Aborigines are evident through policy's twists and turns. From time to time, as the sense of priority surfaced, the invitation for Aboriginal representation drew with crystal clarity on the idea of a 'mirror'. The invitation drew more enigmatically on notions of 'agency'.

I resume the policy history from Chapter Two. After 66 years of continuous presence in the administration of the Northern Territory as menial labourers, field hands and occasionally the supervisors of other Aborigines, some Aborigines were starting to join the clerical ranks just as many of them were about to be transferred to the new NTPS upon Northern Territory self-government. In the spirit of Aboriginal self-determination, the APS was treating Aboriginal employees with a new numeric diligence and an implicit racial respect. Those in the Northern Territory effectively constituted the APS' claims to social diversity, in the years leading to self-government, and we have seen that they were bequeathed to the Northern Territory's new public service. What hospitality awaited them?

The main characters in this story are central agency bureaucrats in the Chief Minister's Department, the policy coordinator; and the Public Service Commissioner's office, the central employer. The archives reveal that beneath the swashbuckling of the new politicians, there was contention in the bureaucracy over how the Northern Territory should now engage with, and engage, Aborigines. We shall see that the invitation which structured Aboriginal experiences throughout the 30 years of Northern Territory self-government and right up to the year of my interview in 2007 was partial, fitful, divided and indeed ambivalent about the point and manner of Aboriginal representation.

4.1 The self-governing Territory's original state of mind

Territorians were granted 'responsible self-government' in 1978, in place of statehood, to assuage Commonwealth concerns over the Northern Territory's governing capacity. As the Secretary of DONT (the Commonwealth Department of the Northern Territory) orchestrated his department's exit from the Northern Territory in February 1978, he warned the Chief Minister, Paul Everingham: 'The whole exercise has real meaning only if the region can be administered properly' (Secretary DONT 1978: 1)

From the DONT Secretary's perspective, the NTPS would be a 'career service'. That is, it would be staffed according to the notion of merit that he also made apparent in the exit letter when he urged the Chief Minister to accept the compulsory transfer of some Darwin-based officials: 'I seriously ask you in your own interests to make your independent judgement of those officers who will comprise the bureaucratic elements of your administration and not be influenced solely by people who may be working off old scores...' (Secretary DONT 1978: 3). We may presume that those with old scores to work off were Territory officials who had encountered DONT's resistance to self-government. They preferred to employ the 'local' who had arrived during the Northern Territory administration – the settler white official – over the 'southerner' whom they associated with Commonwealth control. The DONT Secretary's reference to 'the relatively few competent officers available to you' confirms Commonwealth unease over administrative capability in the Northern Territory; but it would not have endeared him to the new officials.

For those taking up the reins of self-government, to be administratively competent was to be locally tuned in. The Public Service Commissioner advised Paul Everingham: 'let us of the N.T.P.S. have a go to develop something different and more dynamic than the tired bureaucratic machines in the States and the A.P.S.' (PSCNT 1978b). The Commissioner was forestalling an 'outsider' review of the NTPS while he initiated some innovations. One was to include in the new NTPS ordinance one of Coombs' recommendations, the amalgamation of the APS Third and Fourth Divisions. Amalgamating the unskilled and the clerical divisions would effectively remove 'artificial qualifications barriers to promotion above the basic recruitment grades', as the *Canberra Times* reported the plan in one of a series of articles on the new NTPS. The article continued: 'there will in theory be no bar to the promotion of

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a clerical assistant all the way to the top of the fledgling Northern Territory Public Service – whether or not he or she ever obtains the Higher School Certificate’ (Juddery 1978b). School completion would mean a higher level of entry to the new NTPS, but it was not deemed essential to an individual’s rise to the top, indeed a Certificate in NT Administration was suggested as a more relevant qualification. The Northern Territory was to be the site of sparkling new bureaucratic machinery: ‘a vision splendid of a bureaucracy based on merit’, as the *Canberra Times* satirized it for the nation’s digestion on the eve of self-government (Juddery 1978a).

We see that the NTPS was intending to be anti-elitist, to trust performance over qualifications – to give a clear run to the top for ‘street level bureaucrats’ with local knowledge, ability and ambition. The NTPS was prepared to be cavalier with established public service traditions of recruitment and promotion in the interest of building a service to which Territorians could relate. But did the posturings of independence announce any particular vision for the employment of other than settler locals? Aborigines were, after all, 25 per cent of the population and on localness criteria they outranked all contenders.

The opening position on Aboriginal public sector employment

The political economy of Northern Territory self-government presented deep challenges. The numeric dominance of Aborigines in remote ‘townships’ and ‘settler’ Territorians in urban areas had given rise to what has been described as a ‘distinctly divided society’ in which Aborigines were the long term population and the settlers the transients (Sanders 2007: 63). Sanders argues that the Northern Territory’s remote–urban divide was not just racial. Even though the CLP (Country Liberal Party) was built primarily on the urban settler vote, the Territory Government relied heavily on Commonwealth funds for remote servicing. Settler opinion was always divided over the priorities of remote and urban development. The dichotomy has had far-reaching effects in the language of service provision, as we have seen in interviewees’ characterization of absent constituencies as ‘the remotes’. What is more, the Commonwealth continued to administer programs aimed at Aboriginal communities through the DAA; so the Northern Territory delivered health, education and policing appropriate to all the urban and remote populations across its vast geography without having all the responsibility for Aboriginal affairs.

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NTPS administrators were very challenged by the delivery of services to a population the responsibility for which they shared with the Commonwealth. And in the negotiations of self-government, the Commonwealth had secured land rights for Northern Territory Aborigines in 1976. In choosing to contest land claims, the Northern Territory Government often presented itself as the adversary of claimants to traditional ownership who were represented by Commonwealth-funded Land Councils. With Aboriginal Territorians learning to look to the agencies of the Commonwealth as their land rights champions, how could the new administration develop competencies in the provision of health, education and security? The intended service recipients were always being enticed into an implicitly more benevolent political relationship with Canberra.

There were two governments where there had been one – a parent and one struggling for autonomy. While a distinct sphere of ‘NT Government’ did eventually emerge, the Commonwealth’s omnipresence was a source of tension. This can be seen in an exchange between the Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and Chief Minister Everingham over Aboriginal public sector employment. Fraser wrote to Everingham and other government leaders regarding the National Employment Strategy for Aboriginals (NESA) in 1978:

I am now seeking your co-operation in promoting the employment of Aboriginals in State and local government employment.... I am asking you to examine the possibility of providing training opportunities over and above departmental requirements, to enable Aboriginals to receive basic skills and work experience in a number of areas (Fraser 1978: 1).

Everingham linked the prospects of Aboriginal employment to Commonwealth generosity:

...when responsibility for the functions of Health and Education are transferred shortly to the N.T. Government, there will be many worthwhile opportunities for employing Aborigines as health and hygiene workers, clerical assistants, teaching assistants, literacy workers, etc.

‘Additional positions’ would be needed for more Aboriginal employment in government departments, the Commonwealth’s supply of which, ‘prior to transfer’, would be taken as ‘concrete evidence’ of the Commonwealth’s commitment to the Northern Territory (Everingham 1978: 1).

But that was only the public posturing. Turning now to the internal deliberations of the new Government, it is apparent that Everingham pushed his bureaucracy long and hard for imaginative proposals in Aboriginal employment and training. Behind the scenes, he wrote and several times reminded officials of a request he had repeatedly discussed with them, he

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noted: for his Policy and Planning Unit to consult with his Office of Aboriginal Liaison ‘to work up a programme... to vastly improve the job training facilities available to Aboriginal people ... and also to attempt to increase the employment possibilities’ – not only in Aboriginal communities, he specified – by July 1979 (Everingham 1979).

Everingham’s requests for an Aboriginal employment and training program were made in the context of a wider brief that the Office of Aboriginal Liaison work with the DAA and Aboriginal representative bodies to ‘facilitate a close contact’ between the NTPS and Aboriginal communities (DCM 1979: 2). The Office was research-oriented, close to the politics and ‘non-functional’ by being influential over, but not responsible for, the delivery of services. The Office was ‘trouble shooting’ and ‘fire fighting’ (Acting Director Policy and Planning 1979b: 4) – a ‘small advisory group ...for handling some of the transitional issues which accompanied self-government’ (Deputy Director-General and Director OAL 1981: 4). But with limited powers of persuasion over other parts of the bureaucracy, Office of Aboriginal Liaison officials struggled to deliver on Everingham’s request. The question of what to do in Aboriginal employment and training became tangled in weightier agendas.

The opening gambit of a multiply re-drafted paper on Aboriginal training and employment reminded the Chief Minister how difficult it was to plan ‘a long term policy for training Aboriginals for employment’ when the Government did not yet have ‘a fully developed policy for Aboriginals per se’ (Acting Director Policy and Planning 1979a: 1). The Office of Aboriginal Liaison sought the Chief Minister’s direction on a policy dilemma:

Is emphasis to be placed on employment within the Aboriginal community and for the Aboriginal community, with an aim to achieve the objectives of self-sufficiency and self-management, or alternatively, is the emphasis to be placed on providing skills for the employment of individuals in the labour market? (Acting Director Policy and Planning 1979a: 1)

It seems there was never a definitive answer to what this paper posed as the difference between Aboriginal ‘special provisions’ and ‘equality for all’. Community self-management was suggested as the first priority for Aboriginal training and labour market programs (in which sat public sector employment) the second. But Aboriginal public sector employment was reasoned both ways: ‘so as to provide training and employment opportunities for Aboriginals within the Public Service in Northern Territory towns, and where applicable in Aboriginal communities’. A draft containing this equivocation along with the idea of

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investigating ‘the ways and means of accelerating and coordinating the recruitment and training of Aboriginals for positions within the public service’ was circulated around departments (Policy and Planning Unit and the OAL 1979: folio 91).

Different parts of the public service argued differently. Office of Aboriginal Liaison officials favoured policies of Aboriginal recognition, but they had to navigate other bureaucrats. They would have found the Public Service Commissioner insensitive to cultural difference when he opposed a proposal for the introduction of paid ceremonial leave and the recognition of National Aboriginal Day for employees of the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress.⁸⁹ Perhaps it was to muster more support for policies explicitly geared to Aboriginal needs that the Office of Aboriginal Liaison recommended the involvement of DAA in a committee on Aboriginal employment. But these officials were stymied when the Health Secretary replied that it would be the ‘kiss of death’ to a good Aboriginal employment policy to allow DAA to influence its formation, admonishing them:

we need to take unfailing steps to draw our Aboriginal population into the economic fabric of the Territory ...[with] slimline and highly coordinated administration with a considerable input from Aboriginals themselves (Secretary for Health 1979a: 1).

Nobody could quarrel with this objective, but how was it going to be achieved? The Health Secretary accused the Office of Aboriginal Liaison of having given no credit to Aboriginal health, dental and hygiene worker training in a scan of government activity. Not only this, the Office of Aboriginal Liaison was seen as captive to Commonwealth agendas in Aboriginal policy in which the DAA was cast by the Health Secretary as ‘implacably opposed to the development of Aboriginal people as an integral part of the general community of a State or Territory’ (Secretary for Health 1979b). Such were anti-Commonwealth and pro-Territory feelings that they undermined the Aboriginal employment and training agenda. Frustrated with the prevarication and political compromises of the Chief Minister’s central policy agency and with health services to run, the Health Secretary referenced support from

⁸⁹ The proposal was from the Federated Miscellaneous Workers’ Union. In reporting his action to the Chief Minister, the Commissioner declared that he had no wish to deny Aboriginal cultural observances but to assert that existing public sector employment conditions already allowed these freedoms through the leave provisions available to all public servants (PSCNT 1978a). The Commissioner was expressing his commitment to a vision of equality in which there was no need for special provisions for Aboriginal cultural difference.

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the Departments of Education and Community Development in a task force which was recommending an exclusive focus on the development of Aboriginal rural towns and not Aboriginal public sector employment.

Memo by memo, those trying to deliver to the Chief Minister's request for an Aboriginal employment and training program met with stalemate. At the end of 1979, Everingham had been presented no vision for Aboriginal employment within the NTPS or in Aboriginal communities. In the public statement he eventually made, he could only re-run the old agendas of the Northern Territory administration by re-asserting the government's role as an exemplar to the private sector. 'It behoves the Government to ensure that the public sector sets an example in this regard', officials wrote (Policy and Planning Unit and the OAL 1979: folio 90). Everingham endorsed an old practice when he announced the 'Northern Territory Electricity Commission's [NTEC] scheme to train Aboriginal linesmen' (Controller OAL 1979). The Postmaster-General had been employing Aboriginal linesmen for years. The only new announcement was that the Northern Territory Government would participate in the Commonwealth's National Employment and Training incentive scheme to employers, vocational training through temporary positions for unemployed Aborigines.

My point in recounting these events is to show that it is not for want of trying that the initial posturings of Northern Territory self-government did not announce any succinct policy vision for Aboriginal public sector employment. That the Chief Minister asked for one and did not get it suggests that his bureaucracy could not reconcile itself to a single perspective.

Nonetheless, the Government was forming a team of Aboriginal Liaison Officers who were to be its 'eyes and ears'. Through these officers, hired by the Office of Aboriginal Liaison for their easy movement between the public service and communities, the Government sought to establish relations of trust with Northern Territory Aborigines. There was no policy vision akin to the 'mirror' of passive representation; but Aboriginal Liaison Officers were encouraged into roles of representative 'agency' to assist the Office to 'actively encourage an understanding by Aborigines of their responsibilities within the Northern Territory community' (DCM 1979: 2).

Agents of trust

The Government had a new incentive to capture the hearts and minds of its Aboriginal population when voting enrolment became compulsory for Northern Territory Aborigines in 1979. Reviewing the communication capacities of the ‘network of field workers and other inter-personal change agents’ who either lived in or regularly visited communities from various NTPS departments, a consultant warned the Chief Minister that being unattached to service delivery programs could make it difficult for Aboriginal Liaison Officers to establish trust with Aboriginal communities. ‘Whereas a nursing sister or tradesman may develop trust by virtue of their skills, the Aboriginal Liaison Officers may find this task more difficult in their roles of provider and receiver of information, perhaps on controversial subjects,’ he wrote (Cross Cultural Communication Consultant 1980: 4). The consultant noted that there were ‘a number of factors related to personality, appearance, cultural affiliation, etc., that will determine the level of trust that an officer can achieve as an individual’ including that information ‘is as accurate as possible and ... presented in a way that the people can understand’ (Cross Cultural Communication Consultant 1980: 4-5).

Non-Aboriginal officials of the Office of Aboriginal Liaison, some of them former patrol officers in the Commonwealth administration, were sympathetic to the Liaison Officers as they navigated the implicit public service norms against which others judged them. They understood only too well that Aborigines’ trust needed a fair exchange between communities and government. What should be the nature of this exchange? The Office found out as it went along, we see from the colourful file record of its travails in relation to one protégé, a local Aboriginal man I have named Gypsy.

In August 1979, an official raised an issue on Gypsy’s behalf: Gypsy’s inadequate temporary government accommodation in Darwin. He had already been allocated a house on a nearby island. Were he allocated a Housing Commission house in Darwin, it would continue an undesirable precedent which had been created by a previous housing allocation. We can assume that Gypsy was housed, in the end, because a memorandum from Gypsy in April 1980 asked the Office of Aboriginal Liaison for some furniture. The matter of Gypsy’s furniture was followed up with funding bodies – to no avail, but there is a file note that Gypsy would himself take up the matter with the Director. The furniture was provided. In

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May 1980, Gypsy asked for a motorcycle for his fieldwork. The next month Gypsy asked to attend a motorcycle training course: 'I have been riding a motor bike for the last few days and seem that I really (*sic*) want more training'. This was approved. In early July, Gypsy applied for a carrier for his motor cycle to 'carry papers or other important things that might be of great help'. We cannot tell if Gypsy attended the training course, but a later file note makes reference to '[Gypsy's] accident' (OAL 1980a).

There must have been great symbolic value in Gypsy's accompaniment of no less than three dignitaries on separate official visits to his region during Gypsy's rehabilitation on his homeland: the British High Commissioner, the Northern Territory Administrator and the United States Ambassador to Australia. Senior colleagues rose to protect Gypsy when a lower ranking officer, less inclined to accede to him, asked Gypsy for 'a report explaining your consistent failure to report for duty on time and your frequent failure to return to duty after lunch or going on an assignment'. Gypsy replied tersely at first, on the file – apparently inadequately because his second reply was more fulsome and in a style resembling that of his mentors. Gypsy supplied the low ranking officer with a field report in the form of six questions the councillors of his community had asked the Chief Minister on a recent visit to his island – 'why wasn't ...[a land title] registered?' and 'Why Aboriginal people from the N.T. aren't allowed to catch Barramundi during the season closed for barra [barramundi fishing]?' Gypsy finished with a flourish:

Would like to put these questions so that I can have it in writing [from the Chief Minister] on the behalf of the [...] people (OAL 1980a).

From the repeated concessions to his material needs and the mentoring to lay out his people's needs in internal memorandum format, there is no question that Gypsy, a public servant, was encouraged to represent his people. What can we draw from the consultant's advice on trust-building and the Office's efforts to arrange a fair exchange for the Territory Government's expectations of Aboriginal Liaison Officers? As the Aboriginal Liaison Officers moved between the public service and their communities of origin, the factor of 'appearance' that the consultant had noted as important did not seem so important after all. They were assessed by superiors according to whether their work was assisted by their authentic affiliations to Northern Territory places. On the criteria set out in the political theory, their invitation to participate in the NTPS was as active/substantive representatives.

Another Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Matthew, was an interviewee. He spoke of having been asked when he applied for the job in 1978: ‘Are you a radical black?’ Retrospectively, Matthew attributed his getting the job to his assuring the panel: ‘No, I’m just a simple family man.’ Elsewhere in the files, Aboriginal elected members of the National Aboriginal Conference, the body that replaced the NACC in 1977, were depicted as ‘radical elements’ for their strident opposition, at times, to government policies. The invitation for active representation did not include radicalism, clearly. But implicitly, the interview panel’s seeking reassurance about Matthew’s personal politics acknowledges his discretion to be, to some extent, his own agent. He could not be radical, but he could be discretionarily representative. Officials knew Matthew’s personal background because one of Matthew’s supervisors had been involved in the removal of his baby sister to a ‘half-caste’ home many years before. Matthew received a private apology for this incident, he pointed out. The job suited him; he felt understood and mentored. He had found the question about his personal politics revealing and amusing, rather than offensive, as he summed it up to me: ‘That’s the best job I ever had. They utilized each and everyone’s talents.’ He called the time of the Office of Aboriginal Liaison the ‘golden years for Aboriginal people’.

These early days set a tone. Independently of any generic policy vision about Aboriginal public sector employment, Aborigines were embraced, indeed highly prized, early on, as the much needed colleagues of Northern Territory self-government.

4.2 Naming representative bureaucracy

Over the 30 years or so since Northern Territory self-government, I have discerned three visions of Aboriginal representation through public sector employment. The first was to ‘involve Aboriginals as far as possible in the delivery of a range of services to Aboriginal communities’ by ‘Aboriginalisation’ (OAL 1983: 257). The second was to groom individuals for professionalization as senior managers as the Northern Territory embraced the shift from welfare- to public management-oriented bureaucracy. In the third approach, the need for data integrity preoccupied policy officers as the first Labor Government began a program explicitly encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recognition when it came into power in 2001. No approach was ever fully realized; consequently, none has completely disappeared. These were winding trails, not clear and straight pathways. Along

them, we see invitations issued, never withdrawn after expiry, just periodically renewed as those trying to animate the NTPS met and re-met the reality of task-focused workplaces.

‘Aboriginalisation’

Early in the 1980s the fully composed Northern Territory Government made sweeping, but ultimately disingenuous, promises to reflect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population throughout its departments.

Target practice

Chief Minister Everingham had an opportunity to deliver his vision for Aboriginal public sector employment in April 1980. He included this vision in an agreement with the Commonwealth over the ‘Five Year Program’ to improve remote Aboriginal communities:

I take the opportunity to inform honourable members that the Northern Territory Government will aim to raise the level of employment of Aboriginal people in the public service and statutory bodies by improving programs to enable Aboriginal people to be eligible for such employment. (Everingham 1980: 3075).

Promoting the ‘Aboriginalisation’ of government works programs in Aboriginal towns, Everingham had decided that Aboriginal employment and training needed to support both ‘community self-management’ and ‘labour market’ objectives. He committed to the 95 per cent ‘aboriginalisation’ of ‘government works programs and activities with an Aboriginal content’ in general administration, health, housing, construction and maintenance and education (Everingham 1980: 3076). For the NTPS, he set targets of ‘10 per cent by 1982, 15 per cent by 1985, and 20 per cent by 1990’ (see also OAL 1983: folio 262; PSCNT 1983: 24).

The ‘aboriginalisation’ target of 10 per cent seemed safe for an 11,000-strong NTPS which was anticipating the influx of 1,100 Aboriginal APS staff ear-marked to move into the NTPS with the transfers of self-government.⁹⁰ But Everingham’s 15 per cent target was ambitious,

⁹⁰ By 1980, not only Aboriginal essential services but education, health and capital works had been transferred to the Territory. The transfer of funding and staff for municipal services and culture, sport and recreation was still under negotiation but set to finalize in 1981 (DAA NT Division 1980).

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as a survey of NTPS Aboriginal employees revealed. In 1983, the NTPS Commissioner drew on the ‘Australian Public Service criterion of supervisor-identification’ along with the DAA’s definition of Aboriginality, ‘a person of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aborigine or Islander and is accepted as such by the community with which he/she is associated’ (PSCNT 1983: 24), just as the APS had done 10 years previously.

The survey found 1,137 Aboriginal employees and said that they comprised 10.5 per cent of the NTPS (OAL 1983: folio 262). But this percentage was based on ‘establishment’ figures, which in 1983 excluded Government authorities like the NT Teaching Service, Electricity Commission and uniformed police even though other records say that some of the 1,137 Aboriginal public servants were employed there (OAL 1983: folio 256). The 10.5 per cent inflated Aboriginal employee numbers by setting them against a smaller whole than the records suggest applied in reality. What is more, ‘establishment’ does not take into account staff turnover, leave arrangements and the other variables that determine who is actually there. ‘Actual’ workforce is always greater than ‘establishment’.

A more realistic comparison against the ‘actual’ workforce suggests that 1,137 Aboriginal employees constituted only 7.8 per cent of the NTPS, including authorities, in 1983.⁹¹ This is relevant because the convention for calculating the size of the NTPS changed from ‘establishment’ to ‘actual’ employees from 1985. Everingham’s targets were doomed for these definitional reasons, but with public service growth they had even less chance being achieved. On whatever calculus for Aboriginal employment in 1983 – the inflated 10.5 per cent of the NTPS ‘establishment’ or the more realistic 7.8 per cent of the ‘actual’ workforce – there was no apparent justification for Everingham to tell the Commonwealth in 1983 that his Government was ‘ahead of its targeted percentage’ in Aboriginal employment (Everingham 1983). Aboriginal staff numbers never exceeded 10 per cent, so the targets proved elusive.

⁹¹ The 10.5 per cent was based on the 1983 staffing ‘establishment’ of 10,879 legislated positions (OAL 1983: folio 262). The ‘actual’ workforce in 1983 was 14,552 (PSCNT 1983: Appendix A). It may be assumed that the Aboriginal employee enumeration was based on their ‘actual’ numbers, as there were no Aboriginal-identified positions in the ‘establishment’.

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The timing of the 1983 survey suggests that all the Northern Territory-based APS Aboriginal staff had transferred to the NTPS.⁹² Located ‘in virtually all departments and most Statutory Authorities’, Aborigines formed a workforce for the servicing of other Aborigines as Teachers and Teaching Assistants, Health Workers, Police Aides, Rangers, Community Workers, Essential Services Operators and Liaison Officers (OAL 1983: folio 256). Regardless that targets were not achieved, the Government’s willingness to set targets and measure itself against them confirms that there were conscious efforts to build the NTPS as a social ‘mirror’ from 1980.

‘You can’t make an omelette without cracking eggs’: a sacrificial upgrading

In a review of the Office of Aboriginal Liaison in 1981, the ‘cadre’ of six Aboriginal Liaison Officers in Darwin, Alice Springs and other locations, in an Office of some 20 staff, was seen to have ‘suffered from growing pains’ by having been ‘thrust into the field without sufficient training’. ‘Many years of training and experience were required to have Aboriginal teaching assistants move to Aboriginal teachers’, the reviewers explained: ‘the same...will be required to have the Liaison Officers move into higher managerial and/or executive positions’ (Deputy Director-General and Director OAL 1981: 11). As the reviewers put the views of those seeking to ‘re-organise’ the Office: ‘some critics in Government’ felt that the Aboriginal Liaison Officers ‘do not communicate effectively’ and ‘do not play a sufficient role in some issues’. Through other activities, the Office had acquired a propagandist reputation in some sectors – particularly amongst the Aboriginal Land Councils against whom the Territory Government had waged ideological battles over Aboriginal land and other rights-based claims. Had the Aboriginal Liaison Officers balked at tasks which they did not see as being in the interests of their communities, or for which their communities would see them as personally responsible? Arguing that the government was benefiting from a service which made the Chief Minister ‘indirectly accessible’ to Aboriginal

⁹² In a presentation at the North Australian Research Unit in Darwin in 1983, an official confirmed that 1,137 Aboriginal employees were scattered throughout 19 out of 21 departments. They were concentrated still, as before self-government, in the Departments of Education (429), Health (249) and Transport and Works (140). Sixty-eight Aborigines had joined the Department of Transport and Works, 67 had joined Education, 30 had joined the Fire Brigade and 20 had joined the Conservation Commission since 1981 (Scott 1985: 196).

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communities ‘through individual Liaison Officers’, the reviewers recommended against a re-organization (Deputy Director-General and Director OAL 1981: 13).

The review made explicit an argument which had only been implicit until this time and which is crucial to understanding representative bureaucracy’s invitation. This is that seniority would mitigate Aborigines’ under-representation by setting up a consultative mechanism within the public service:

...Aboriginal people remain under-represented in the labour force. As an important step in improving consultation and communication, the government will need to take concerted action to ensure that Aboriginal people are encouraged, and equipped to move into positions of influence within government (Deputy Director-General and Director OAL 1981: 18).

The Aboriginal Liaison Officers did not survive a second review in 1983, despite the retiring Director’s parting recommendation of ‘particular patience and encouragement to overcome disadvantages which characteristically often inhibit the rapid or spectacular progress of Aboriginal officers’ (Director OAL 1983). This Director also warned that the Government’s public opposition to the traditional ownership of land had compromised the Office as a whole. Nevertheless, others decided to relinquish the positions of officers such as Gypsy and Matthew and to replace them with positions intended for more senior Aboriginal staff.

What was the Aboriginal Liaison Officers’ ‘upgrading’ supposed to achieve? In a memorandum to the Director-General of the Department of Chief Minister reporting on the proposed changes in 1983, the Acting Director of the Office of Aboriginal Liaison wrote: ‘Direct Aboriginal input into the formulation of Northern Territory Government policies is minimal. Practically all of the advice... is from white officers’. As he reported the rationale for the upgrading: ‘We need an organization ...which introduces Aboriginal content at more senior levels’. The Acting Director made his commitment clear: ‘As an administrative objective, I am determined to do all I can to bring Aboriginal staff into the Office at progressively higher levels’ (Acting Director OAL 1983: 6). A handwritten note to the Chief Minister from someone in the Office of Aboriginal Liaison put the case for influential Aboriginal officials this way:

You can’t make an omelette without cracking eggs. We have a real dilemma with staffing for Ab Liaison [sic] – we need the new positions to get better Aboriginal input into policy making and implementation...(OAL 1980b: [1983]).

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The ‘dilemma’, as I interpret it, was that ‘better Aboriginal input into policy making’ had somehow come to mean the sacrifice of the field officers. But the intention was clear: Aborigines were about to be courted for their policy contribution.

Were Aboriginal public servants still to be representatives? The word ‘representation’ was used in two different ways, in the 1983 review of the Office of Aboriginal Liaison. Both implied active representation. The first meaning appears in the search for a Northern Territory-specific Aboriginal representative mechanism. The review criticized the Commonwealth body, the NAC for failing to represent all Aboriginal communities. The Land Councils’ charter was ‘too narrow’. The Office had convened Aboriginal Council Presidents’ Conferences to bring Aboriginal council members regularly together with government ministers and public servants, events which were seen as ‘a voice for the interests of the NT’s Aboriginal population within government administration’ (Sanders 1985: 222). But they were painted in the review as ‘ad hoc’ and as promoting ‘localized or parochial issues’. ‘Aboriginal Advisory Bodies’ were proposed – new bodies which would ‘of their own volition advise Government of Aboriginal concerns’. In this meaning, representation was ‘delegate’ style, the direct representative voice of a defined constituency. And through it, Aboriginal issues would ‘be restricted to matters of wide significance’ – ‘avoiding localised issues i.e. real policy matters’ (Acting Director OAL 1984: 3).

I distil the second meaning of ‘representation’ as it was used in the 1983 review of the Office of Aboriginal Liaison from internal correspondence in which bureaucrats argued for ‘the upgrading of a genuine policy capacity’ of the Office of Aboriginal Liaison. The rationale for ‘dismantling’ the Aboriginal Liaison Officer role was that it was ‘unreasonable to take very junior level and totally inexperienced Aboriginals and place them in the field, without clear duties, and then expect them to be effective officers’. Abandoning the Aboriginal Liaison Officer program ‘will have the appearance of reducing Aboriginal representation,’ it was explained – which ‘will not be true if we are able to attract Aboriginal impact at a higher level in policy formulation’ (Deputy Director-General 1983: 3). In this meaning, representation was in the sense of influencing the public service from the inside – the point that was also made explicit in the first review.

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Influential senior public servants were supposed to have access to Aboriginal voices through the Advisory Bodies. That the Bodies were never established confirms that there was an expectation that senior Aboriginal public servants would act as their ‘substitutes’. But how would these public servants be seen by their communities, now that ‘localised issues’ were a thing of the past and not only that, how would their presence in the public service be valued? There was no ready market of educated Aborigines to take up the senior positions. The advertisement that was mulled over and eventually approved in November 1983 was lukewarm, hardly inspiring of the envisaged ‘omelette’ of Aboriginal involvement in high level policy formulation: ‘Aboriginal people are encouraged to apply’ (Deputy PSCNT 1983).⁹³

The problem with agency

In 1984, Aborigines were still low in the administrative ranks. Promotions were slow. The Public Service Commissioner invited the ‘twelve most senior Aboriginal employees’ in the NTPS to join a Working Party with the aim to develop workplace cross-cultural programs to assist Aborigines ‘to apply with equality with other Public Servants for promotion’ and to prepare the public service ‘culturally’ for more Aboriginal employees (Scott 1985: 198).

The Public Service Commission employed two Aboriginal training officers in an ‘Aboriginal Development Program’ (PSCNT 1984: 20). The trainers organized and delivered courses in letter and report writing, ‘interviewing results’, time management, motivation, job applications and assertiveness (PSCNT 1981). By 1986 they formed an all-Aboriginal, locally recruited Division to encourage ‘upward mobility’ for Aborigines in the public service (Aboriginal Development Division 1986). Their services expanded to include personnel grievance counselling and ‘interview panel membership’. The courses were prolific and

⁹³ Most of the Aboriginal Liaison Officers went to other field programs. Within two years, the Office of Aboriginal Liaison was subsumed into the Aboriginal Development Division of the Department of Community Development where its field force was rebuilt (as the Office of Local Government, eventually) to implement the Northern Territory’s new community Government legislation in 1986. In 1992 the Office of Aboriginal Development was established as another central agency, with broad policy and coordination responsibilities in Aboriginal affairs, but it was located in a functional department in accordance with Chief Minister Hatton’s mainstreaming approach.

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specific: telephone techniques, ‘practical public speaking and ‘graphs in the work place’ were among them (PSCNT 1987: 27). An interviewee who developed and delivered many of these courses explains here how she saw her responsibilities to the trainees:

If they didn't ring in by a certain time like 8.30 or 9, we had a car, once we'd know we'd go out and we'd wake 'em up ...we just were hard on them... if we believed they were slack, we'd say, 'You're treating us as Aboriginal people in here, what the hell are you going to do when you're out there? ...We're not going to let you give Aboriginal people a bad name.' ... if any of the staff said they need to call me in to give that spiel and that sort of speech, I'd do it.

An ‘Advisory Committee to the Public Service Commissioner on Matters Pertaining to Aboriginals in the NTPS’ drew some of its membership from the Program. The Committee evinces the first expression – on file, at least – of an Aboriginal political voice within the NTPS when members recorded their objection to not being allowed to use the colours of the Aboriginal flag in promotional material for the courses for Aboriginal trainees (Advisory Committee to the PSCNT 1985). A later incident tells us of a crescendo of Aboriginal political voices. The Aboriginal Development Division had been ‘downgraded’ to a Branch again, after its 1987 transfer to the Department of Labour and Administrative Services under Chief Minister Steve Hatton’s policy of ‘mainstreaming’ Aboriginal service provision.⁹⁴ In 1988, when another restructure was set to transfer the training course delivery to the Education Department, staff objected. As staff saw it, according to interviewees, the restructure would diminish the quality of policy advice by cutting away what had made their advice so widely applicable – the practical knowledge that underpinned it, which staff had accumulated as they met the operational challenges of running the training programs. Staff attended a workshop in which, as one of them remembered, they examined, individually and as a group, the questions:

What do you think your role is? What do you think the Government... [and] the community thinks your role is?

The staff came to a consensus, according to interviewees’ accounts, that they would support each other to find alternative employment – outside the NTPS, for most – as quickly as possible. New jobs were arranged for around 10 staff members. The Director was the last to tender her resignation, at which point the ‘staged departure’, as one interviewee called it,

⁹⁴ The ‘mainstreaming’ policy ‘holds that those most expert in the delivery of particular services should provide them to all Territorians, taking into account the special needs of different communities and people’ (Hatton 1992: 7).

went public. By the time of the anticipated restructure, there was virtually no team left. As one of the staff recounted the event:

We were getting so successful they wanted to split it into policy and operational. And we fought nicely. You know what? The reason we were successful is because we actually do know... exactly what's needed.... We made a pretty political statement.

I relate these words now for the note of advocacy and sense of a shared political interest that is conveyed by this interviewee's reference to an understood 'we' that is both past and present. I return to the story later. I note for now that in seeking a 'mirror', the NTPS encountered Aboriginal agency in a public dressing down by its own protégés.⁹⁵

Grooming for management: professionalization

Aboriginal public sector employment policy vanished for awhile. Under new public sector management legislation in 1993, the Commission became the consultant to a newly consolidated NTPS. The NTPS subsumed all the satellite authorities under a single legal entity. The Commissioner set the principles; the Chief Executives applied them as it suited the needs of their sectors.

The quest for a representative 'mirror' and for Aboriginal training and career development continued in the selective efforts of diligent departments. The Aboriginal Development Branch, now in the Department of Education, funded community-based training and employment programs with the aim to stimulate local economies. This 'Aboriginal Employment and Economic Development Strategy' sought to create 'actual employment opportunities' by 'economic development' (PSCNT 1992: 16). Another Strategy in 1995 asked departments to develop sector plans for Aboriginal employment and career development. The Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment (OCPE), as it was now known, monitored Equal Opportunity (EEO) Management Plans, rather than employee numbers, over these years. Sector-wide Aboriginal employee surveys were twice attempted, but resulted each time in a 'low response' which 'illustrated the complexities involved in self-

⁹⁵ The 'downgrading' was discussed in the Northern Territory Parliament on 22 September and 28 October 1987 (Loveday and Cummings 1989: 5). In an interview in the Northern Territory News on 8 September 1988, the outgoing Director described Branch staff as having been 'dedicated to the task of finding paths of independence for urban and remote Aborigines' (Loveday and Cummings 1989: 5-6). According to Loveday and Cummings, the actions of staff should be understood in the light of their observation that 'early directives had outlined an activist and reforming role for the Branch'.

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identification’ and led to the promise of ‘additional emphasis over the next year’ (OCPE 1997: 33). After Commonwealth funding was withdrawn, the Commission picked up the costs of an Aboriginal officer.

An interviewee called this a period of ‘huge opportunities but no commitment’. There were certainly opportunities through public service growth. The NTPS was only 14,000-strong in 1993 after staffing cutbacks, but by 1999 it was again nearing 15,000 ‘actual’ employees. Aborigines were not, or at least not measurably, sharing in this employee growth even though they were by now more than 25 per cent of the population. But some NTPS agencies created visionary programs. Between 1995-2000 there were local and regional Aboriginal employment initiatives, work exchanges between the government and the Indigenous sector, Indigenous cadetships, new apprenticeships and community partnerships.⁹⁶ Several interviewees, having worked on these programs, spoke of feeling that a baton had been passed to them by Aboriginal colleagues which they would pass on, committed to their cause. ‘Relay teams’ of Aboriginal public servants cut their teeth on Aboriginal employment policy, moving between the Commissioner’s office and departments.

What did the interviewee mean by ‘no commitment’? Professional development programs, heavily invested in during the 1990s, contained no explicit encouragements towards Aborigines. This interviewee lamented that she seemed to represent this policy gap to her public service peers and community, observing that some Aboriginal employees had moved into the Indigenous sector to find more comfortable, meaningful work:

A lot of them tended to step into community organizations and have time out or go ... and have time out and work in an environment where you sort of like the frameworks around you.

That one NTPS department saw its achievements during this period as ‘directly related to there being no distinction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous programs, thereby minimizing the “them” and “us” attitude’ (OCPE 2001: 22) confirms a continuing explicit wariness, in some parts of the bureaucracy, towards programs of Aboriginal recognition.

⁹⁶ For example, 51 Aboriginal Community Police Officers were employed in a partnership with communities. The Department of Health and Community Services had developed the Kigaruk leadership program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. The Public Prosecutions Office had achieved a high Indigenous employment rate in qualified legal positions (OCPE 2001: 25) and the Office of Aboriginal Development at one stage boasted 36 per cent Aboriginal staff (NT Office of Aboriginal Development 1996: 39).

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In other parts of the bureaucracy, there was enthusiasm for the Kigaruk leadership program for Aboriginal men, which took the opposite line by recognizing and encouraging Aboriginal identity and difference. ‘The Kigaruk’, as it is familiarly known, was an outstanding success in the views of many interviewees. An interviewee who influenced the strategy ‘for Aboriginal men to get through their glass ceiling’ noted that the NTPS used to have ‘all these little Indians...we hadn’t sort of moved past the concentration of entry level trainees’. The Kigaruk was supplemented by a program for Aboriginal women, the Lookrukin.

Some interviewees were able to exploit these irregularities to build executive careers. One interviewee who emerged from the 1990s as a senior executive summed up the secret of his success as ‘patience, pragmatism, practicality’. The logic of executive success for a committed Aborigine was ‘to lose a few battles to eventually win the war,’ he said. Public service seniority is ‘where the real power is,’ he added – the power to work for this ideal:

...the ideal of seeing some equity in our population, seeing Indigenous people with the same life expectancy or seeing Indigenous children with the same opportunities that other kids have. ... I think I'd give the game away if I lost sight of those goals. What would be the point?

The 1990s had produced a professional Aboriginal strategist who was articulate and committed to Indigenous development. But there were precious few of him.

In 2001 the Northern Territory’s first Labor Government’s review of the Country Liberal Party’s achievements in Aboriginal employment was gracious, for an assessment by an incoming government. Or perhaps new officials saw the wisdom of honoring the past, for Labor had taken on a public service which had learned its trade under a single political party.

Recognition: senior Aborigines emerge under the IECDS 2002-2006

Arriving to a statistical vacuum, the newly formed Territory Government had a free hand to set its own Aboriginal employment baseline. The new Commissioner for Public Employment calculated his endowment as 725 Indigenous employees of 4.6 per cent of the NTPS (OCPE 2005: 9). The Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy (IECDS) of 2002-2006 saw this as an undercount to be corrected by encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to self-identify (OCPE 2008: 27).

Sid Sterling, the Minister for Employment, Education and Training, said that the Strategy would improve ‘business outcomes’ and meet ‘the challenges we face in terms of the

economic and social costs associated with low levels of employment amongst Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people’ (OCPE 2002: 3). The Strategy’s ‘principles’ were:

- 1. Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people play the major role in developing policies and decisions affecting Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people;*
- 2. The aspirations of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people are an integral component of the development of government policies and programs affecting [them]; and*
- 3. Government programs and services should, wherever possible, be delivered by Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people and reflect the needs and aspirations of the Indigenous community* (OCPE 2002: 4)

‘Skilled and knowledgeable Indigenous people’ were required ‘in appropriate numbers at all levels’ of the NTPS. The Strategy aimed ‘to address the critical under representation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people within the Northern Territory Public Sector workforce by providing a range of appropriate recruitment, career development and retention initiatives’.

Emboldened by the change to a Labor Government and by the enthusiasm of a new Commissioner, the Strategy eschewed past governments’ diffidence towards Aboriginal employment. The Strategy listed place foremost among its ‘intended outcomes’:

- (1) increased numbers of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander men and women recruited into the public sector; and*
- (2) adequate representation of Indigenous people at all levels within the Northern Territory Public Sector to enable effective contribution to policy and decision making affecting Indigenous people’ (OCPE 2002: 7).⁹⁷*

Explicitly, the Northern Territory Government now encouraged both ‘passive’ and ‘active’ representation – ‘passive’ through ‘increased numbers and ‘active’ through the calling for these numbers to be so distributed through the public service hierarchy as to enable ‘effective contribution’.

⁹⁷ The third intended outcome was ‘effective evaluation and reporting systems developed to assist in the implementation of the Strategy’ and the fourth, ‘increased cultural diversity’ (OCPE 2002: 7). The Strategy produced an ‘Indigenous Employment Tool Kit’ which the Commissioner distributed through ‘Indigenous Employment Forums’ as a ‘model for community engagement’ (Ah Chin 2006: 21, 25). The ‘Cooee’ newsletter advertised professional development opportunities to Indigenous staff.

Biennial reports enumerated Aboriginal employees by agency, level and gender. The IECDS 2002-2006 claimed steadily increasing numbers of Aboriginal employees. From the putative 4.6 per cent baseline in 2002, the final IECDS report shows 7.6 per cent Aboriginal employment in the NTPS at the end of 2006 (OCPE 2007: 7).

An interviewee questioned the Strategy's achievement of 'increased numbers', describing 2002-2006 as a period of 'more people identifying'. 'To be as honest as I can', this person said, 'I think the increase in the numbers overall is a mixture of actual increase and just better data integrity...'. On the other hand, focus groups orchestrated by Dr S. Ram Vemuri in a Government-sponsored evaluation of the IECDS assessed it highest on 'increased numbers' and lowest on 'adequate representation' in 2007. Vemuri concedes that increased self-identification and parallel efforts under other programs may have contributed to the appearance of increase (Vemuri 2007: 7), but he judges the Strategy an unequivocal success in pushing agencies to develop sector-specific employment programs (Vemuri 2007: 8).⁹⁸

I did not set out to conduct an evaluation of the IECDS 2002-2006, its post hoc assessments or any other Aboriginal employment policy. But in the course of my research, I incidentally collected data which is relevant to these reviews.

Testing 'adequacy' and 'contribution'

My longitudinal data do not support a finding of 'increased numbers' of Aboriginal employees. I set these out in Table 7. Taking OCPE's 2007/08 Aboriginal employment figure of 7.8 per cent as the endpoint, Table 7 shows that the number of Aboriginal employees increased from 1,137 to 1,250 – by just over 100, in the 25 years from 1983-2008. Table 7 also shows that by 2008, the NTPS had only returned to the 1983 rate of Aboriginal employment, when measured against the 'actual' workforce, which came about incidentally to any efforts of the NTPS.

⁹⁸ Vemuri sees the Strategy as responsible for a shift in the public service from 'an EEO focus to an economic one' (2007: 11). By various implicit references to this theme, I understand Vemuri to mean that the Strategy worked by persuading agencies of the economic benefits of reducing Aboriginal unemployment rather than by expecting agencies to employ Aborigines as a corrective to Indigenous disadvantage (Vemuri 2007: 25). Vemuri sees this sense of economic benefit as responsible for the Strategy's greatest achievement: to show the NTPS that 'the context in which Indigenous persons operate' is most important in attracting and retaining Aboriginal employees (Vemuri 2007: 12).

Table 7:

**Reported Rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment In The NTPS
Since Northern Territory Self-government**

1983 survey		Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy (IECDS) 2002-2006					2007/08 Annual Report
Year of report	1983	2002 <i>retrospective estimates</i>	2003 Sept	2004 Dec	2005 Dec	2006 Dec	2008 July
Source		(OCPE 2005: 9; 2008: 27)	(OCPE 2003: 4,8,16)	(OCPE 2004b: 22,25)	(OCPE 2006: 7,9,18)	(OCPE 2007: 7)	(OCPE 2008: 27)
Indigenous employees	1,137 (OAL 1983)	~725	788	1,006	1,119	1,170	~1,250*
'Undercount'		55%			38%		
'Actual' NTPS	14,552 (PSCNT 1983)	14,600	15,492	16,236	15,387	15,378	16,000
% Indigenous employees	7.8%**	~5%	5.1%	6.2%	7.3%	7.6%	7.8%
Administrative (% of Indigenous employees)	170 (15%)	?	?	381 (38%)	467 (42%)	490 (42%)	?
No. Indigenous senior employees	11***	6	12	52	64	?	?
% of all NTPS senior employees	?	?	1.2%	1.8%	2.2%		
% of all Indigenous employees	1%	0.8%	1.5%	5.2%	5.8%		

* I arrive at this figure by calculating 7.8 per cent of an NTPS workforce of approximately 16,000. OCPE (2008) records 1,380 Aboriginal employees in the 2007/08 financial year, an increase of nearly 200 employees from 2006 which does not reconcile with the percentage. It is not explained.

** Or 10.5 per cent of the NTPS 'establishment' of 10,879 (OAL 1983) – see page 116, footnote 91.

*** Under the classification system in place in 1093, the cut off point was 'A5' which is approximately equivalent to the Administrative Officer level 7 in the current classifications. Most – more than 66 per cent – were still manual workers, assistant teachers or health workers.

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I am not suggesting that the original Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce is all still present throughout NTPS agencies; to account for all of the community-based employees would be a different project. Nor am I suggesting that the OCPE claims to have increased Aboriginal employment over this prolonged period, as its figures only date back to 2002. And the OCPE is often careful to attribute any Aboriginal employment increases since 2002 to its encouragements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-identification. Nevertheless, to stay the same after 25 years, in the face of all the efforts to increase Aboriginal public sector employment, suggests a very obstinate, if not an inadequate, ratio.

If the overall rate of Aboriginal employment has not changed, has anything else changed?

It is apparent that the vast majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees was still, during the period of the IECDS, in lower ranking jobs outside the administrative stream – Aboriginal Health Workers, Community Police Officers, Assistant Teachers and Interpreters in positions for which ‘Indigenous cultural knowledge and skills’ were essential criteria (OCPE 2004b: 18). But Table 7 shows that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in the administrative stream had nearly tripled between 1983-2006 from 15 to 42 per cent.⁹⁹ This could be partly explained by the trend towards generic job classification. But it could also be attributable to a growing attraction to the promotional opportunities of clerical work, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.

It appears from the figures in Table 7 that the number of senior Aboriginal employees really did increase from 11 to 64 between 1983-2005, albeit that the 64 took several years to self-identify.¹⁰⁰ This rise cannot be attributed entirely to recruitment or promotion during the period of the Strategy. Yet, research participants’ first reaction when I explained my desire to interview Aboriginal senior officials was to be taken aback. Some joked: ‘That won’t take you long.’ They often expressed surprise to hear that they had been reported to number 64 and that there were 10 executives among them. How should I view their surprise?

⁹⁹ Next populous was the ‘physical’ stream, followed by health, police, education, technical, professional and nursing. The ‘physical’ stream possibly incorporated 238 Aboriginal Assistant Teachers then funded under the Community Development Employment Program, as an interviewee observed (see also OCPE 2005: 16-17).

¹⁰⁰ The final IECDS report, under a different Commissioner, does not separately report seniority (OCPE 2007). The reports for 2003-2005 are no longer available on the OCPE website.

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Considering the extent of mobility that I have noted – that Aboriginal senior officials may be regarded as in some degree of orbit between public service departments and the Indigenous sector of publicly funded organizations – what do the senior statistics actually reflect? An interviewee who had long watched the Government’s relationship with Aboriginal organizations in Central Australia, spoke of the Aboriginal employment statistics as a ‘turnstile ticker’ which kept Aboriginal employee numbers high through frequent entries and exits. Were some who populated the seniority statistics in a closed circuit, once they had risen through the junior ranks to seniority – the same people, moving around departments and in and out of the public service? Half of those recruited between 1990 and 2001 had left, by 2007. OCPE notes high staff turnover rate of the public service but gives no reports on Indigenous staff mobility despite acknowledging the ‘churn’ factor (OCPE 2009b: 78-80).

The IECDS 2002-2006 gives no sense of what would constitute ‘adequate’ representation in these circumstances. But my data suggest that OCPE’s own ability to attract and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been patchy, with periodic flourishes under sympathetic Commissioners. Multiple interviewees pointed out that OCPE had no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in 2007, within a year of the Strategy’s conclusion; and I observed that of all agencies, OCPE had the highest exit rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. It could attract but it could not keep its own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. Listening to Aborigines’ accounts of their experiences in OCPE and in the public service more generally, it seemed to me that their low numbers related to their low sense of contribution. As well as this, I had the impression that the low numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff had something to do with their sense of how Aboriginal employment policy represented them.

Part II is dedicated to understanding what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants believe their contributions have been over the period of Northern Territory self-government from 1978-2007. As a foretaste, I capture here a few comments on their involvement in committees and consultations on the IECDS 2002-2006. In different departments, some had directly assisted OCPE to achieve the public acknowledgment, through Aboriginal self-identification, of what had previously been for many employees a more private ethnic identity. That process relied on Aborigines knowing others, because

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privacy laws inhibited direct inquiries. A Central Australian interviewee, who evidently did not know everybody, mocked the privacy restriction:

We weren't allowed to target Indigenous employees - you can't get any direct answers, so virtually I had to sit in a hospital foyer saying, 'Did you go to NAIDOC [the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee]? Can I talk to you?'

Another interviewee took it more seriously, explaining the delicacies of the process for her:

*I was really acutely aware that I was often seen as a government employee and what that meant, so we had a really big job of trying to be as clear and as honest and as up front as we *could* be when we were talking to them about why we were asking that question..... that if we knew where Indigenous people were, we could really develop strategies around that. the older people, they were saying - hang on, hang on, last time you asked that, my sisters and brothers were taken away from me...*

What *did* it mean for an Aborigine to be seen as a government employee – and what did it mean for a government employee to be seen as an Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander? The interviewee who spoke these words sounds confident of the benefits of self-identification, but she later spoke of doubts. Aboriginal public sector employment policy's own enthusiastic agents had diverse encounters with the practicalities of its implementation.

Once it has recognized the plurality of its population, no liberal democratic government can afford not to make the invitation to a 'representative bureaucracy'. The Northern Territory Government's 'representative 'bureaucracy' policy has drawn on the notions of 'mirror' and 'agency'. By the Government's own statistical measures of a representative public service, there have been too few Indigenous public servants despite a more or less continuous program of recruiting a representative bureaucracy through the policies of 'Aboriginalisation', professionalization and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recognition.

These programs have survived and perhaps been spurred on by repeated, self-produced evidence of statistical inadequacy. That the NTPS had come to see itself as unrepresentative of the Northern Territory's Aboriginal constituencies can be in no doubt from this self-account posted on the OCPE's website in October 2007:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent more than 30% of the population but comprise only 7.3% of the Northern Territory Public Sector workforce (NT Government 2007b).

But the ratio hardly matters. What is missing is an understanding of – even, any noticeable policy curiosity about – the people who constitute the statistic and the representing that they find it possible to do.

The fieldwork year: 2007

The IECDS of 2002-2006 had introduced a new note of Aboriginal recognition into the NTPS. But like the policies before it, the Strategy trailed off to an uncertain close as a new Commissioner replaced its champion and wondered what to do. That was the situation during the year in which I conducted the interviews for this research.

In July 2007 the Northern Territory Government bureaucracy was announced to have presided over a massive national failure following a report on child abuse in Aboriginal communities (Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007). The message of failure was the explicit rationale of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, known as the Northern Territory Intervention.¹⁰¹

So the Northern Territory Government and its relationship with the Commonwealth were under intense scrutiny, as I went about my fieldwork. This scrutiny gave some in the Northern Territory Government the opportunity to produce a Generational Plan of Action in 2007 – for the first time, a 20 year vision for Northern Territory Government policies in Aboriginal affairs. In the Plan, we see a new set of Aboriginal employment targets and the expression of a new normative agenda: 10 per cent in five years along with ‘effective pathways to input into government policy, planning and service delivery’, 20 per cent in 10 years. The Plan envisions – or perhaps re-invents – local responsiveness when it offers that within 20 years Aboriginal employment rates will reflect ‘the population demographics of the local region’. The targets are called ‘A Better Way of Doing Business’. That better way is defined as:

Indigenous Territorians informing the Northern Territory Government of their aspirations and needs, the Northern Territory Government listening and Territorians and the Northern Territory Government taking action together (NT Government 2007a: 21).

As in 1983, the Generational Plan commits the Government to setting up an Aboriginal advisory body – an Indigenous Affairs Advisory Council – to advise the Chief Minister.

¹⁰¹ Two former senior executives of the Northern Territory Government released a book depicting services to Northern Territory communities as part of a ‘failed state in remote Australia’ (Dillon and Westbury 2007: 30).

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And so the Northern Territory Government continued to invite Aborigines into its confidence and its ranks, just as the policy that had framed Aboriginal public servants' expectations since 2002 was being overhauled again, for a new set of reasons. After a long and winding history which I have shown is deeper than self-government, the Northern Territory Government's invitation to Aborigines to join the public service was still ambivalent in 2007. There was a breathless glibness to its upbeat tone; as always, the fine-tuning was left to the discretion of workplace managers.

My question remains: how is it possible, in practice, for Aborigines to contribute to the public service *as Aborigines*?

What happens when they speak?

Concluding remarks

This chapter completes Part I, my analysis of historical, theoretical and policy issues in the long, winding and profoundly ambivalent invitation to Aborigines to participate in the administration of the Northern Territory. Against this context, the official respondents to the invitation to take part in the Northern Territory's administration, Aboriginal senior officials, must now speak. All of my interviewees had been engaged by some expression of the invitation at a point in the course of Northern Territory self-government – all the way from 1978 to 2007, the year of the research interviews and coincidentally, the year of the Northern Territory Intervention. Traces of this policy history were etched into their memories. They had all participated in the development and delivery of programs designed to encourage Aborigines into the embrace of democratic liberalism, even if only by their employment as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people under those policies. They voiced many observations about what they did and why they did it. What compelled them to participate in the representative program?

Part II produces their voices – largely absent in my account so far – by exploring how Aboriginal senior officials have answered their invitation to represent other Aborigines in the Northern Territory Public Service.

PART II

ANSWERING

ABORIGINAL SENIOR OFFICIALS 1978-2007

Chapter Five

The Course of Acceptance

Aboriginal public servants stand out when they are in senior positions in government departments. Being brown-skinned is enough to raise the questions, 'Where are you from?' and 'Do you identify?' as a public servant of Indian origin cheerily informed me when I was mistakenly led to him as a potential interviewee for this research. If you are Aboriginal and you have the phenotypic characteristics of Aboriginality and you choose *not* to identify, you will find yourself re-asserting your position of non-identification as colleagues seek clarification of your standing. As it is not publicly available information precisely *who* in the public service has contributed to the Aboriginal statistic, it might be you. Mostly, it *will* be you who contributed to the statistic if as interviewees led me to understand, most Aboriginal public servants self-identify.

If an Aboriginal person looks like and is perceived to 'stand for' a group, he or she cannot help but be the passive, or descriptive, representative of that group. If he or she self-identifies, even though that act is private, he or she has participated in a descriptive representation of that group. But there is more to know about how Aboriginal senior officials might accept their invitation to join the Northern Territory Government's program of representative bureaucracy. If they *draw* on that description as an authority to speak for others to whom they are linked in a relationship which makes that relationship one of even loose accountability, they become more active representatives by the definitions of political theory. If their authority and accountability fall into the realm of the 'informal', as political theorists characterize non-electoral representative arenas, they are no less accountable in a social sense and they are no less actively representing. I have argued that the representing that the public service invites and encourages is no less representing for the informality of its context. The deep ambivalence of bureaucracy's invitation to Aborigines to draw on identity in their work makes the public service all the richer as the site for a study of representation.

Chapter Five – The Course of Acceptance

Representative bureaucracy needs Aborigines' participation. But how do Aborigines – how does anyone – accept an ambivalent invitation? This is the major theme of Part II. I see acceptance as a process of enactment which builds identity but which is never fully resolved; it is conditional, circumstantial and momentary.¹⁰² Recalling Pitkin's first condition of representation that a representative must be like, but not too like, those they represent: for us to see them as representing, Aboriginal senior officials must first depict themselves to be *like* other Aborigines. That is to self-identify. Although self-identification is not entirely passive, it is a weak form of representation on its own – a toe in the water, a gesture towards and not the full realization of a representative role. To realize the representative role is to draw on one's identity with purpose and intention. In this drawing on identity, we find two things: connection and distance. Connection validates the relationship. But some kind of distance is also needed, if this is to be a representative relationship.

Interviewees gave me no reason to distinguish between passive and active representation. So I organize this chapter not by that distinction but by the step-by-step construction of the identity which Aboriginal employment policy invites Aboriginal public servants to enact. I liken acceptance to taking a swim in the sea. The procedure is unremarkable; but by the end, you are changed. First, the invitee tests the water by self-identifying – isn't it just a tick in the box? If the invitee then *drams* on that identity, he or she plunges in. The experience may be bracing or lukewarm but as quickly as the body finds out, it adjusts to new knowledge. The next step, immersion, is not for everybody. But those who stroke buoyantly into the depths will be choosing from a repertoire of styles which will merge so easily with practice that those who enact them will in effect have accepted the invitation to represent others.

5.1 A toe in the water: depicting likeness

If I was talking to another Aboriginal person I would say my grandfather is [a language name], he was born on [a particular] mission and my grandmother was born in [another location] and taken to [a different] mission. ... But if I was talking to somebody that wasn't of Aboriginal descent, I'd say I was born in [a capital city] but raised in [another state] and then spent from high school onwards in the Northern Territory.

¹⁰² Hendriks looks to the enactments of representation, rather than how representation was claimed, by the participants in her study of political representation in governance networks (Hendriks 2009: 690, 709).

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This was Rose, speaking of the way in which she habitually adjusted her identity to suit her audience. The web-based personnel management system, 'MyHR', was one such audience within the NTPS. Upon entry to the public service, the first opportunity that interviewees had to reveal their presence as the member of a particular social category was to tick the non-compulsory box in MyHR then and subsequently in annual reviews. Public servants may opt to indicate if they are Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or 'non-Indigenous'. Ticking one of the first three options generates inclusion in the Indigenous employment statistics.

Of the 53 interviewees in my study who had been Aboriginal senior officials in the NTPS at some point since Northern Territory self-government, 50 had self-identified as a matter of personal policy for the duration of their time as public servants. The three non-identifiers will re-surface later. This chapter concerns only the 50 who, even if they were not in the NTPS in 2007, had identified and had stayed identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander public servants when they were in the NTPS. Forty-seven had identified as Aboriginal, two as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and one as Torres Strait Islander.

Why self-identify? Interviewees explained that it was primarily to acknowledge their race. 'Because it's who I am' was their common reply: 'I am Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander/both'. Many described a secondary motive to build the recognized quantity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the NTPS. I turn first to racial acknowledgement. If Rose habitually adjusted her self-description to match her assessment of the questioner, did others?

The racial acknowledgement

To claim an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity is to name the place and language from which you are descended, if you know it. It is also to speak of your family history because it is the movements in that history which will have framed your identity. Interviewees traced their families' movements from their places of origin with great clarity: they put names, times and historical contexts to the movements of their ancestors and the policy events, intermarriages and employment opportunities which had built their identities.

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All but two of the 50 interviewees knew their place and language of origin. Table 8 distinguishes interviewees on the basis of the two criteria they presented as most important: whether they had come from the Northern Territory or elsewhere, and whether or not either they or their antecedents had been removed from their families or had been fostered in some other way as children. The urban/remote distinction is mine. Interviewees tended not to apply the categories urban/remote to themselves. But they often applied it to their policy and program subjects. I apply the remote/urban distinction here to highlight an important finding: although most interviewees were now the residents of large urban centres, many of them – more than twice as many, taking only the Territorians – had originated in the kinds of places where many of their policy and program subjects were now residing.

Table 8:

Places of origin for 50 identifying Aboriginal senior officials, comparing remoteness and Northern Territory/other jurisdiction with incidence of fostering

Experiences of fostering and/or child removal	Place of origin				TOTAL
	Northern Territory		Outside the NT		
	Urban centre	Regional/remote c'ty	Urban centre	Regional/remote c'ty	
Not fostered	8	10	4	6	28
Fostered – self	0	5	0	0	5
Fostered – family	2	7	3	3	15
Origins not known	0	0	2	0	2
TOTAL	10	22	9	9	50

Thirty-two interviewees were local to the Northern Territory in the sense that they could name a place or linguistic association by ancestry which fell within the Northern Territory's boundaries. This is a working definition of 'local' which I acknowledge is contestable; I discuss other possibilities in Chapter Seven. The largest single cluster was formed by the 22 descendents of linguistic groups from the Northern Territory's remote communities and regional towns.¹⁰³ A smaller group of 10 were the descendents of language groups who were the original inhabitants of the urban centres of Darwin and Alice Springs.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ These interviewees were descended from the Dogaman and Jawoyn people of the Katherine area, the Tiwi, Gurindji, Mudbura, Malak Malak, Wadjygin, Kungarakany and other language groups to the north,

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Eighteen interviewees were from outside the Territory: seven from Queensland, six from New South Wales and five from Western Australia. Unlike the Territorians, those who came from elsewhere were evenly split across the urban/remote divides of their jurisdictions. None of the 18 interviewees from interstate had personally been fostered out of their families, but five had weathered the dislocations of such fostering through the experiences of earlier generations. Only two of the 18 felt that they had none of the ‘cultural aspects’ of Indigeneity as one named what he thought he lacked. The other 16 had a strong sense of attachment to their places of origin. Whether interviewees came from the Northern Territory or not, most called on current experience of the connection with a place of origin that is characteristic of an Aboriginal identity.

Table 8 shows that across the group, 20 interviewees spoke of growing up somewhere other than their place of origin because of the dislocations of fostering arrangements – their own or their antecedents’ – usually, the result of policies of child removal. The terminology they used was ‘Stolen Gen’ in reference to the Commonwealth Government’s ‘Stolen Generations’ inquiry into the extent and effects of the policies of child removal (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). Five had been fostered or adopted under these policies, two of them into missions in the 1950s. But for 15 of the 20 ‘Stolen Gen’ interviewees, their parents’ or grandparents’ experiences of being ‘fostered’ meant they had acquired ‘Stolen Gen’ as a family identity; that is, they saw themselves as having inherited a

south, east and west of Darwin, and the Anmatjere, Luritja, Western Arrernte, Warlipi and Warumungu language groups from the desert. Those from the Gulf region to the east had longstanding connections with Torres Strait Islanders; others had connections across the west all the way to that coast, now Broome in Western Australia. Darwin’s Kahlín Compound and Retta Dixon Home, Alice Springs. The Bungalow and the Croker Island Methodist Mission featured prominently in their family histories because many of my interviewees’ parents and grandparents had been removed from remote communities and regional towns and were fostered in such institutions in the Northern Territory’s north and centre.

¹⁰⁴ Nine were descendants of Darwin’s ‘coloured mob’ as the practice of polyethnic intermarriage had led Darwin’s local language group, the Larrakia, and its extended families to call themselves in the 1950s and 1960s. These were part of strong urban-based networks. One interviewee, of the 50 senior officials under discussion, belonged to the Arrernte language group of the town of Alice Springs. Wells writes of how Darwin’s mixed descent families came to articulate an identity which was separate from that of the ‘Indigenous Other’ – the Welfare Ordinance’s ‘wards’ – by being subjected to the ‘immigrant/multicultural gaze’ (Wells 2005: 129).

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condition of dislocation from ancestral country. ‘Mixed up culture’ was a generational effect of these policies, or at least this was how Bruce described his connections in Darwin and Alice Springs through the mixed geography of his parents’ marriage:

My grandmother is stolen gen but her sisters were a lot older when they were taken and we still maintain some of our practices. I don't speak the language but I know words and that, but they did; they could speak fluent language and my aunt gave a lot of evidence for [a land claim]. They're all gone now.

Interviewees’ stories of origin highlighted their multiple identities. Nobody spoke of being *just* Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both. Personal histories, ancestries and places were the all-important details in their accounts to me and, as they spoke of it, in the ways that they presented themselves to their Aboriginal colleagues. Most interviewees wished for the opportunity to communicate their origins more precisely than MyHR allowed: ‘I usually say Aboriginal and South Sea Islander, but they don’t have the space,’ said Peggy. ‘We’re a mixture of Indigenous and European and the Asian side with their pearl divers and the fishermen,’ said Edith of how family members described their identity.¹⁰⁵

What of the mixed identities which generations of intermarriage had spawned? Wanda had ticked the box for ‘Aboriginality’ despite wishing to qualify that identity for herself:

If it says: 'Are you Aboriginal?' I tend to go 'no' but if it says, 'Are you of descent?' I tick the box.

Julia commented wryly that the form’s identifier question did not allow her to refer both to her Indigenous descent and to her ‘white side’. The identifier focused only on what was Aboriginal about her and not what was white in her ancestry:

*Why can't you say I'm half white? Or I'm white? ... My father is a white Australian. Yeah but what makes you that *other* part of you?*

‘On the other hand’, Julia said to me in a later conversation, ‘we’re never black enough’.

¹⁰⁵ Regina Ganter et al have documented stories which show that ‘the north is full of people who still remember its polyethnic past, for whom being coloured is the fabric of identity’ (Ganter, Martinez, and Lee 2006: 244) and who come to ‘private, intimate’ solutions for self-identification which are ‘not sanctioned by any policies or definitions’ (2006: 241). I found the same among many Top End interviewees, particularly those of the Larrakia and other mixed heritages who had endless stories about their coloured families in old Darwin.

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Not only did the process of self-identification collapse multiple origins into the identity categories Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, it then processed these three options into the generic identifier of ‘Indigeneity’. The statistical reporting was interested in Indigeneity alone, and did not disaggregate that category into Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Some interviewees objected, when speaking to me, that the category ‘Indigenous’ glossed truer depictions of their identity.

In accepting the invitation to self-identify, to what extent did interviewees accept the idea that they could represent other Northern Territory Aboriginal people? I turn to the second set of motives they gave for self-identifying.

Building quantity

When Deborah told me that she self-identified so ‘we’re counted’, she was presenting an antidote to the wiping out effects that colonial history had imposed on all Aborigines. ‘To show we’re still here,’ she added. Another interviewee argued that ticking the box marked out Aborigines’ good intentions towards the government. To identify, for this person, was to confirm the presence of Aboriginal public servants and to insist that Aboriginal problems not be ignored. Other interviewees spoke of identifying to create a stronger voice for Aborigines and Aboriginal policy problems.¹⁰⁶

When Carol explained that she had added herself to the NTPS statistic because ‘it translates into money,’ she was referring to the relevance of this data to the distribution of resources within the NTPS. Likewise, Graeme explained: ‘I’m in an area where I’m relying on that data. I mean, if anything’s going to change or shift, we need baseline data to do it with.’ These interviewees relied on Indigenous employee statistics in their work. Others in the field of Indigenous recruitment and workforce development identified for similar reasons. To self-identify bolstered arguments for resource distribution within the NTPS which, as senior public servants, they were in a position to make.

¹⁰⁶ Judy, who was not senior, spoke of ticking the box as her personal ‘contribution to Indigenous issues’ by facilitating ‘a strong Indigenous collective voice in Government’.

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Sophie would have been referring to the Commonwealth Grants Commission formula for allocating public money to the States and Territories when she said: ‘Blackfellas are worth more money in revenue to the Territory than non-Aboriginal people.’ Indigenous people draw a greater per capita income into the Northern Territory than non-Indigenous people. But given that this calculation draws on information in the Australian Census, Sophie was referring to self-identification as a personal practice when she said that she ‘never had a second doubt that you fill that in. You say something.’ Sophie’s role in social policy would have given her firsthand understanding of the potency of the Northern Territory’s Indigenous statistic as a fiscal argument.

In these accounts, to self-identify was to enlarge the Indigenous statistic rather than necessarily to represent other Northern Territory Aborigines. But as these interviewees were in jobs in which they needed such statistics themselves, to enlarge the Indigenous statistic enhanced *their own arguments* for improved social and economic programs for Aborigines. This purpose seemed to eclipse any objections they may have had to the generic Indigenous identifier. These interviewees were already drawing on their identities to represent Northern Territory Aborigines by participating in the portrayal of Aborigines in policies and programs.

5.2 Taking the plunge: drawing on identity

Testing the water usually initiates a forward plunge, once acclimatizing has begun. In this section I identify the settings and opportunities, the kinds of contributing and notions of the absent that I see as progressively enacting substantive representation by Aboriginal officials.

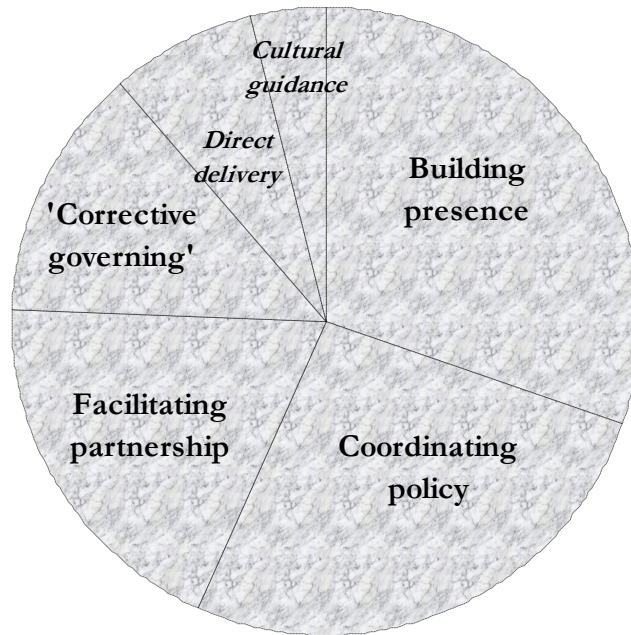
Although many interviewees worried that the particularizing of their client base would limit their public service careers, all who self-identified serviced the Northern Territory Aboriginal population. Of the 50 interviewees under discussion in this chapter, 40 were working in jobs specifically targeting Aboriginal policies and programs in 2007. Ten interviewees were not – but nine of these had worked in Aboriginal-specific jobs in the past and now had managerial or executive responsibilities which included Aborigines among other social categories. So these nine were still involved in Aboriginal policies and programs, if less exclusively. The only interviewee among the 50 who had not worked in such areas aspired to do so.

These jobs were potent settings in which to draw on identity.

Potent settings

Whether the 50 interviewees who are the subject of this chapter targeted Aborigines in their work or considered Aborigines as one of many client groups, whether their work sent them into the field or made them desk-bound and whether they were coordinating or developing specific policies, their jobs required these 50 interviewees to act upon Aborigines in some way. Interviewees described hundreds of present and past public service jobs. Sifting through their talk about themselves and their intentions, I found only a few distinct themes. Chart 1 shows the distribution of these themes throughout the group.

Chart 1: Themes in the servicing of Aborigines
(50 interviewees)



The largest proportion at 16 interviewees, 30 per cent of the group, had been occupied in some sense or another with the work I describe as building the bureaucracy's Indigenous presence by working on Aboriginal employment policy or workforce development. Some advised on Aboriginal recruitment, others supported Aborigines' professional development in health, education or other areas of service delivery. Few interviewees had *not* become involved at some stage of their careers in supporting Aboriginal employment in some way. But for these 16 interviewees, this purpose had been the mainstay of their career.

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Fourteen interviewees had largely formed their careers advising on Aboriginal policies for servicing the Territory Aboriginal population: coordinating social and economic policy within the NTPS and with the Commonwealth Government. They thus had expertise in the combative, inter-governmental politics of Aboriginal affairs policy and program funding. Generally, these were coordinating roles at very senior levels. Many of these interviewees spoke of having personally ‘driven’ policy initiatives. A third significant grouping of 10 interviewees had mediated relations between the Territory Government and Aboriginal citizens through various partnership arrangements, service governance and communicative strategies. Their expertise was in negotiations between the Government and community; these roles tended to call on field skills, although they were also managerial positions.

These three numerically large fields of work for Aboriginal senior officials – to assist in the employment of, to develop policies about and to facilitate the governance of Aborigines – were part of the Government’s longstanding project to secure acceptable Aboriginal participation in productive social and economic life. But there was another, slightly less populated, field of work which explicitly facilitated that project by seeking to secure Aborigines’ compliance with education, health, itinerancy, rehabilitation, economic development and other social programs. I call it ‘corrective governing’; it is the fourth of the four significant fields of work for Aborigines in the NTPS. In ‘corrective governing’, field operatives work with Aboriginal organizations to develop and deliver rehabilitative and other programs to bring Aborigines to the point of receiving services of various kinds – health, education, drug and alcohol, prison and financial services. As I am defining this field, it includes encouraging program compliance by both organizations and individuals. At senior levels, the work is oriented towards persuading others in government of the need for such services and to oversee their delivery. Although only seven of the 50 interviewees worked *exclusively* in this field, two of those senior interviewees who did not identify as Indigenous in the MyHR survey did also. ‘Corrective governing’ drew in the largest group of non-senior interviewees (who re-surface in Chapter Seven) and among those interviewees working in Central Australia, ‘corrective governing’ was the most numerous category of responsibilities.

My interest in seniority meant that I interviewed few of the many Aboriginal public servants who had built their careers in direct service delivery in Aboriginal communities – those who had formed the bulk of the Northern Territory’s self-governing inheritance of Aboriginal

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employees. Of the 50, I interviewed only four in this category. To interview the many Aboriginal Teachers, Health Workers and Council employees in government service outlets in remote communities was beyond my scope, even if some had achieved local seniority. Four interviewees – two senior and two non-senior – were explicitly representing Aboriginal culture by being rangers, guides or other cultural interpreters. In this field too, the NTPS had significant numbers of lower paid employees whom I did not seek to interview.

The identifier ‘Indigenous’ applied only to 2.2 per cent of the ‘senior and executive’ public service at the end of 2005 (see Table 7 in Chapter Four, page 127). Most of the Northern Territory public servants who work in Aboriginal-specific policies and programs are non-Indigenous. The 31 interviewees who were ‘current employees’ at the time of their interview were spread across 13 departments. A few worked together, but many worked singly, mere specks on a vast horizon in which many more non-Indigenous people were likewise representing their departments, divisions and branches as public servants do, marking out and targeting the unemployed, the disadvantaged, the remote-dwelling, the disengaged and/or unhealthy and/or uneducated through their policies and programs.

The scarcity of Aborigines for their many non-Aboriginal colleagues to turn to intensified the opportunity, indeed the compulsion, for those present to do some kind of representing. Did they take it? Often. For evidence, I cast my spotlight on everyday workplaces.

Moments of representation

In the following passage, Lucy, whose NTPS career was nearly as long as self-government, described the difference that ‘being Aboriginal’ made in her job of encouraging Aborigines to comply with programs for economic productivity. Lucy began by observing that:

People are restricted by their mandate for what they sort of *do*. Everything outside that might not be within scope.

Later on in her interview, Lucy recalled occasions when she had advised non-Aboriginal colleagues on the conduct of dialogue with other Aborigines:

...when I've sort of had to sort of speak up and say well look, as an Aboriginal person you know this is what you need ...to approach a certain group. So it's knowing protocols and all of that sort of stuff that we've had, well you know, to be representative of.

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If you were employed to do a job on the basis of your knowledge and connections as an Aborigine, it would not be considered unreasonable in the public service to draw on those credentials to offer unsolicited advice on a matter pertaining to Aborigines. That is especially so when the recipient, your department, has portrayed an interest in Aborigines and has perhaps mentored you. But you would not *have* to ‘speak up as an Aboriginal person.’ Here is a moment of administrative discretion – Lucy’s discretion. To speak, in these circumstances, ‘might not be within scope’ because public servants get their ‘mandate’ from the programs under which they are employed. Programs rarely spell out how to conduct dialogue with Aborigines and if they do, they could not cover all circumstances. Lucy was there, present and available. How should she respond? ‘Sort of’ suggests her hesitancy to speak up, ‘had to’ her sense of feeling duty-bound to do so. ‘Had to sort of speak up’ expresses well the kind of representation with which I am concerned – not the official representation which is prescribed by a job description but the unofficial, discretionary, partial, subjective kind.

Behind Lucy’s sense of duty was all the weight of her kin-based, place-oriented and historically specific Aboriginality (she was working in her home town) and her identified presence in the public service. Perhaps she hesitated out of consideration of the ethics of public service. She may have asked herself if she was crossing a line by initiating this advice. Most likely, as I understand Lucy, she hesitated over what ‘speaking up’ was committing her to. She spoke; but as I understood her she wished herself free of the implicit *expectation*, brought on by her Aboriginal identity, that she do so. I suggest that it was her consciousness of an opportunity for some form of agency in the larger historic politics of Aboriginal affairs that lay behind her decision to speak *in spite of* her diffidence.

Of the 50 self-identifying senior interviewees, only Harry told me that he did not actively seek to represent Northern Territory Aboriginal interests. As Harry presented himself to me, his responsibility was to convey Aboriginal cultural information, and it was an asset that ‘our family can’t establish any real ties’ to the Northern Territory region from which they came. He could usefully ‘distance’ himself from his program clients in a way that ‘real ties’ would prevent. Harry had made an intriguing asset of his lack of ‘real ties’. He self-identified ‘to do my bit’. Although it worried him that a ‘white bureaucracy’ was in charge of his program, his sense of the need for propriety compelled him to be reticent. As he did not

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speak of any instances in which he would or could make substantive representations in his job, he has the status of being the only purely ‘descriptive representative’ in this study.

Each of the other 49 interviewees spoke of contributing in ways which drew substantively on their identity and thus placed them beyond the descriptive representative of political theory. To the extent that they actively drew on their identity, I take it they had moved towards accepting the invitation to contribute ‘as Aborigines’. What they had accepted, it seems to me, was that their Aboriginality was inescapable when the subject matter was Aborigines. And we have seen that their subject matter was nearly always Aborigines.

Three kinds of contribution

I interpreted interviewees to be saying that it was difficult *not* to draw on their experiences as Aborigines in the performance of tasks that affected Aborigines. To practise as professional people mobilized their Aboriginality in some way which was endemic to the possession of that identity; it seemed as though having other Aborigines as the subjects of their work gave expression to their own capacities by shaping and forming their actions. I hope to convey a sense of this by exploring how three experienced senior public servants, Sarah, Sophie and Marcia, drew respectively on empathy for, knowledge of and connections to Aborigines in their work. Empathy, knowledge and connections characterized many other interviewees’ accounts; but Sarah, Sophie and Marcia exemplify my meaning of acceptance through these kinds of contribution. Sarah, Sophie and Marcia were each tolerant of the bureaucracy, but not uncritical of it. Their incisive observations of the public service did not prevent their substantial acquiescence with the idea of contributing to the public service *as Aborigines*.

Empathy

As a child, Sarah had experienced the profound loss of her family and identity. Born ‘out bush’ and ‘sent, taken, I don’t know’ to a school just outside a regional town, she explained the dilemmas of her legacy:

Yes, I’ve got an education; yes, I have travelled; yes, I’ve been able to get employment but the flip side of that is I have lost my language, I have lost my culture, I have lost my family, I have lost my mother...my own identity.

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In middle age, Sarah was still ‘learning the different ifs and whats’ of her second language, English. But in her lifetime of acculturation, she had made contact with her family and country and was confident of locating bush ‘tucker’ in her birthplace and mother’s country.

Sarah’s job was to communicate issues of importance to Aboriginal people which were part of a Northern Territory governance agenda. Her responsibility was:

To make sure that people in bush areas really understand, so when they do get a choice to decide ... they've been well informed and they really understand the consequences.

Sarah evoked empathy as the basis of her contribution to government when she said:

Put yourself for five minutes in their shoes and experience what they experience on a daily basis - *then* you can understand, *then* you can argue.

Was it to ameliorate the toughness in her life that Sarah had made it her mission to ‘make sure’ that bush-dwelling Aborigines were more visible and included in processes of government? In our conversation on the smokers’ balcony of the plush building in which her humble desk was bordered by poster-filled partitioning, Sarah called herself a messenger:

I suppose I'm a bit of a messenger between both worlds to try and get people to understand which way, what Aboriginal people are *really* thinking.

Sarah’s self-characterization is reminiscent of earlier days when local Aborigines were the ‘eyes and ears’ of self-government. Confident of her benefit to her workplace, she was prepared to be direct in her advice, to lock horns with colleagues – the ‘people’ in the quotation below – over their assumptions about Aborigines. Here, Sarah outlines her position on Aboriginal communication:

Too often people think because there's a group of Aboriginal people sittin' there nodding their head, they understand. That's not what they say. 'We hear you,' that's what they say. At the initial meeting, it's always, 'Yuwa. Yeah, we hear.' They need time to be able to discuss what they heard. Too often people take the nodding of their heads on their first meeting as if they fully understand it. *Which it isn't.*

We see here that Sarah was doing more than relaying messages. She was instructing colleagues on the conduct of dialogue. To do this, Sarah drew constantly on her empathy for those whom she perceived as left out in the cold, as she had been, from decisions which affected their lives. As I see it, she was putting the case that bush-dwelling Aborigines,

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people whose rationality she knew by empathic imagination, were entitled to full information.¹⁰⁷

Knowledge

Sophie, a social policy executive, was born in a Top End regional town to a local Aboriginal mother and non-Aboriginal father. With her parents in low-paid jobs, Sophie had accepted a church scholarship to boarding school. Like some other interviewees, Sophie had risen to greater professional heights than her many siblings. She described herself as having come from a ‘family of workers’, and as was the case for other interviewees whose families still resided in remoter places, relatives from out of town frequently stayed at her house ‘like a bus load maybe sometimes’, as she good-humouredly explained.

Sophie negotiated with external organizations, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, from the social policy ‘backroom’ role in which she described herself as having:

...a good feel for what goes on, on the ground. I have enough networks on the ground, so that the advice I give is balanced with a view - several views, as well as the government's objective.

Sophie saw herself as bringing the views of Aborigines – her own views as an Aborigine, and the views of other Aborigines – into policy. She suggested that she was able to be phlegmatic, though, when her advice did not prevail over other priorities:

When you don't see that being implemented or taken up by government you think, 'Oh, I didn't achieve much there,' but I think [my main achievement is] pursuing the line. I have a view that I'm achieving something by doing that, because you're constantly giving the line on something, even if it's rejected; you still give it because you think that it's a better line to give.

Understanding that other interests can prevail in the opinion-laden world of bureaucratic argument, Sophie judged herself on her own consistency and the extent to which she felt she had drawn on the views of other Aborigines. Here she speaks of her burden as a bureaucrat:

Am I thinking adequately and laterally enough in order to improve the living standards, improve the social and economic outcomes for Indigenous Territorians? That is what really worries me.

For Sophie, the benefit of her presence was: ‘to influence by way of conversation, by way of knowledge’. Saying this, she was, in effect, espousing Phillips’ theory that to populate

¹⁰⁷ Nancy Sherman concludes an intriguing essay on the empathic imagination with the suggestion that ‘it may just be that it is only when we concretely imagine [...] others as rational agents alongside ourselves that we are really disposed to take seriously their claim’ (Sherman 1998: 114).

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institutions with people from certain groups would influence those institutions, eventually, by osmosis. In telling of choosing her moments wisely, Sophie's interview allows us a richer, more personalized understanding of individual agency in that so-called osmosis.

Sophie saw herself as a vessel for social improvement:

It's a bit about being used and I don't mind being used in that way, if it's the right way to use it.

'It' was the colour of her skin. Sophie pinched the skin on her arm as she spoke these words in her corporate office, her secretary fielding visitors outside her semi-glass walls. Executive colleagues were waiting. I took Sophie to mean that she allowed them to gain credit from the success story of her presence, and allowed her presence to convey the government's authenticity to other Aborigines. Sophie was committed to a representative role on the condition that she was taken seriously and that her Aboriginality was used in the 'right way'.

When we met again in a private setting at Sophie's invitation, she remarked:

It's a choice thing that the NTPS is not culturally intolerable for me.

This was in the context of a discussion in which I understood Sophie as seeking to ensure that I had not misunderstood her downplaying, in her interview, any tensions her Aboriginality brought to her work as a public servant. It was not that she found the public service adequately embracing of cultural difference, she was saying, but that she did not allow that realization to hinder her work.

Connections

Marcia 'looked after' the Aboriginal cadets and apprentices and 'cross-cultural awareness', building Aborigines' presence in her large service-oriented department:

I've always worked in employment and training in all my career right through, to make sure people have an opportunity for their career in the government...make sure people have the information so they can make an informed decision about what situations they get sitting in their workplace, especially when strife hits.

Thus Marcia explained her specialism as an advocate for more junior Aboriginal recruits. She said that she had good networks within Aboriginal organizations as well as in the public service. Although her role was not unusual in an NTPS department, she described it in terms which suggested she may have seen it that way when she said that her job involved 'a fair few calls from managers just asking for advice outside of the normal':

They'll ask advice about issues they are having with Aboriginal staff, 'Is this what's happening?' 'What do you think we should be doing?' or 'Am I on the right track?'...

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What view of normalcy made the stream of ordinary enquiries that she depicted seem ‘outside of the normal’? Who saw her advice as beyond normalcy: she or the other managers? Aboriginal public servants who spoke of good connections with the community often interceded on behalf of other Aboriginal employees who had problems meeting the expectations of their supervisors. We will see that many felt marginalized by this role, even as they actively fulfilled workplace expectations that they interceded for others in this way.

Observe Marcia’s tolerance of the phenomenon she now describes, that ‘anything to do with Aboriginal’ comes her way:

Our area is the first point of contact for a lot of people outside... I don't know why, but they see Aboriginal against our name, our section, and anything to do with Aboriginal... they'll come to us as the first point of contact and then we'll disseminate who they should be contacting.

Although other interviewees were more critical of departmental practices that constantly referred Aboriginal issues to them, Marcia’s comment opens a theme to which I return.

Marcia opened another theme of the interviews when she said:

Working in any department, it's your Aboriginality comes forward.

Marcia volunteered ‘Indigenosity’ as a word to describe the black-skinned physical presence that ensured her Aboriginality was always noticed. Describing the public service in terms that suggest she was conscious of the process of internal persuasion that made presence at meetings important, Marcia saw value in ‘having an Aboriginal point of view, an understanding, being available’. In making this point, she too was espousing, in effect, the political theorists’ ‘politics of presence’. But gradually throughout her interview, Marcia revealed that her presence, however well it supplemented ‘mirror’ representation for her department and the NTPS, was purposeful.

Like many other interviewees, Marcia had much to say about the public service managers, largely non-Aboriginal, with whom she worked. She described some as ‘really good people in terms of showing you the ropes about office politics’ and others:

You can pick 'em straight away, those ones that don't want to shift from where they sit.

How did Marcia pick the managers she found immovable? When I asked this, Marcia replied, ‘when they don’t make things happen’. She expanded:

...when they don't ask for certain advice or genuinely wanna do something. You can tell straight away, you know. There are some managers... - they will say things with all the right words, but they don't follow up and you can see the lack of action behind it all.

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Marcia had no intention of allowing those managers to dissuade her from her NTPS career:

There's times when I think, 'Oh, yeah, there's lot of words and rhetoric and there's no real meaning or intent behind some of these [managers'] words,' and you can walk out like that. But it doesn't achieve anything because they come and go.

She planned to outlast the intransigent:

That's been my plan, is you focus on the ones that actually genuinely want to do things.

How should I interpret Marcia's quiet mission? Marcia had been adopted young, having been neglected, she said, by alcohol-affected family members in a 'Top End remote community. She described herself as 'very lucky they [her adoptive family] came along'. Otherwise, Marcia said, 'my life might've been totally different':

I'm not a traditional Aboriginal person, although I've got family who do that, they live traditional or live out bush.

Marcia had transcended the socio-economic disadvantage of her family of birth. 'I choose to live this way,' she said of her urban lifestyle, 'I like where I live. It's less stressful.' Marcia equated the contrasting social landscapes of the Northern Territory's remote/urban communities as traditional/non-traditional. A gaping social division cut across her family. In her life, Marcia – and some other interviewees – had embraced a huge divide.

Aborigines are needed in departments, Marcia told me:

...for policy to kind of work right through... to be getting feedback from those guys on the ground level working it, to those guys who are managing and making the changes to strategies and policies...to the executive who is supposed to be pushing it right across.

'Does it work just to be there, for Aboriginal people just to be there?' I asked. 'It's a start', Marcia said: 'If you're not there, then you got no basis to do anything'. So Marcia commended Aboriginal public servants as the non-transient population of the Northern Territory. By shoring up their presence in the public service and by supporting them to sit out managers who did not support the 'Aboriginalisation' agenda, Marcia had found a channel for the local connections and relationships which formed her identity.

Service

Political representation may be viewed, minimally, as 'a kind of political assistance' (Dovi 2006: 1). Concerning Aborigines, public service representing may be described in similar terms: as a kind of assistance with their bureaucratic encounter. Interviewees often inferred

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that they worked for or on behalf of Aborigines; that their work was not ‘about’ them, as an interviewee put it, but about serving those whom I characterize as circumstantially absent.

When I put the question to interviewees directly – ‘do you feel that you represent other Aboriginal people in your job?’ – I did not try to define ‘represent’. More than half (28 of 50) responded in the positive, but a very significant minority (22 of 50) responded in the negative. When I invited interviewees to explain their answers, it became clear that the negative replies were usually addressing the inference that an Aboriginal public servant may be inappropriately under Aborigines’ control – acting as ‘delegates’, as that term is defined in political theory. To deny that they were ‘delegates’ was an expression, as I see it, of their commitment to public service culture. To understand their ‘instances of representation’ I needed to conduct more careful, contextual inquiry. One way to elicit interviewees’ sense of representing was to explore the extent to which they saw themselves acting for or upon a specific set of absentees. Asking interviewees to nominate the intended beneficiaries of their work helped to draw out this information. Their answers ranged over the broad and overlapping categories of other Aboriginal employees, proximate/distant communities, Aboriginal Territorians and Territorians generally. Under these headings – mostly, my aggregations of interviewees’ more nuanced characterizations – I discuss some of the orientations towards service which each of these interviewees equated with representation.

Aboriginal employees

Other Aboriginal employees, where interviewees named them as the beneficiaries of their work, were often non-senior, generally interviewees’ staff or remote community workforces for whom they were responsible, for example Aboriginal health workers, Aboriginal language interpreters and Aboriginal teaching assistants. As the manager of a field service which supported a widely scattered community-based workforce, at different points in her interview Deborah depicted those she represented as her field staff, the community-based workforce and ‘Indigenous Territorians’ more generally. In the following quotation, Deborah discusses how she represented the viewpoints of her community-based workforce:

Because I take their viewpoints up... I certainly do [represent] and when I'm arguing and fighting for something for the service, it is on behalf of Aboriginal people in that role.

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Deborah noted that as a ‘front line person’ she had been counseled from time to time for being too protective of the viewpoints of her community-based workforce at the expense of other ‘clients’. In the case she was discussing, these other clients were agencies who contracted her services; but as she had been entrusted with a position of managerial responsibility it can be assumed that she was known, in public service terms, to be good at her job. She presented herself to me as an experienced and able defender of her service and its workers. She said she felt that both she and her service were undervalued by her superiors but that she kept working at her job because of her identity:

Because I’m Aboriginal. It’s the only thing; I can see the good that the service is doing.

Deborah told me that her superiors saw her as lacking objective commitment to the service and its employees; this perception had jeopardized an opportunity for the upgrading of her position, she said. As Deborah saw it, the government did not understand the extent and complexity of the operations that made the service work. In this respect, Deborah was like Lipsky’s client-defending ‘street level bureaucrat’; but as a manager she was not solely ‘front line’. She also needed to advocate policy and she saw herself as limited, in policy debates, by not having advanced beyond a primary school education:

*A lot of times we can’t articulate what we want to say. And *writing*: I prefer to sit down and talk to a group of people than try and write a letter to them.... That thing, I think holds us back in our careers.... The other thing is it’s like a lack of trust of Indigenous staff, that if we’re going somewhere... It didn’t matter if we were working our butts off, it’s a ‘jaunt’.*

I can well believe that Deborah possessed skills in dealing with her remote community workforce, whatever her supervisors might have made of them. But she felt that she lacked writing skills, despite mature age study. (Other interviewees attested to similar imbalance in their suite of skills.) Deborah had evidently embraced the role of representing her staff, but felt she could not back up her arguments about their needs and entitlements well enough in writing. Could we attribute Deborah’s ‘arguing and fighting’ style of representation to her sense that knowledge she knew to be relevant to the continuation of her program was undervalued and that without ‘arguing and fighting’ she may not be heard?

Carol said that she represented other Aboriginal employees by mentoring them, even though she did not directly manage Aboriginal staff. She likened her informal mode of mentoring to ‘running a job agency’ in that she informed Aboriginal staff of internal opportunities and, like many other interviewees, she worked to build Aborigines’ presence by recruiting them to

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her department. Wanda, on the other hand, carefully delimited her sense of representing to the ‘interests’ of Aboriginal employees, rather than to Aboriginal employees themselves:

I probably represent their [Aborigines'] interests. I wouldn't go so far as to say that I represent *them*, but I'm sort of mindful of any evolving issues and I tend to let those people [Aboriginal field-based staff] know.

Even though Wanda told me in her interview that she had just resigned from the NTPS over her sense of structural inadequacy to advocate Aboriginal interests, I see her as basically acquiescent in the NTPS' representative invitation to the extent that she had been committed to the public service during her career.

Proximate and distant Aboriginal communities

Kel was a public servant in the town in which he had been born and raised. He had been educated in a southern city – his choice, he said. He had worked in the Indigenous sector in his town until ‘blackfella politics’ pushed him out. Kel managed an all-Aboriginal team in a government project aimed at securing the compliance of organizations and individuals in a service. Kel was one of few Aboriginal senior public servants from his region. He said that his aim was ‘to try and create pathways to get others through the system’, to achieve ‘a voice in [his work] at the higher level’. He identified the beneficiaries of his work as:

local Aboriginal people which is mainly my family and friends, and then the remote community population who see me when I go out there, an Indigenous person with connections, kinships and strong connections to country and also to families in remote. It gives them a voice and a level of understanding now. When I speak to them... I sit out there and talk their language, I don't use the old government jargon.

Kel described himself as ‘a link between the community and the agency’ but ‘even more so like a voice for them’. Kel described himself as representing Aboriginal men in particular:

I represent the Indigenous men, the elders in the community - I'll just give you an example - in their decision making. I can go and sit down with them in the community. I can say, '*This* is what the government's policy is.' ... I talk through it, and then they tell me what they think of it but they tell me how *they'd* tell me; and I feed that back to my department. So I am representing my senior men, which are fathers and grandfathers, but also I'm representing young men who haven't got education.

‘By being one of them?’ I asked.

Yes. By being part of that group and male, to be there for them to question me, but also to give them information about policies

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Kel was unusual among the interviewees for saying that he represented a specific sub-group.¹⁰⁸

Mostly, interviewees depicted their represented in ways that conformed more closely to public service norms; but Kel spoke of encouragement for his entire team, by a manager he described as unusually supportive, to have their ‘fingers on the pulse’ of the local community. ‘We’re not only seen as statespersons for government,’ he said: ‘We’re also seen as statespersons for our people.’

Leila, too, had spent her long public service career communicating with the residents of remote Aboriginal communities, particularly women. She had worked in many departments to build a solid reputation, over decades, in the NTPS and with communities. Leila had stood out, a couple of decades earlier, for her preparedness to self-identify publicly.

I used to get a lot of criticism from the Aboriginal community because they said - whatever the government did and you were there, they felt that you should have changed the government's mind. I said, 'Yeah, but we're developing policies to change their mind in how to deal with it.'

When I asked Leila what difference it had made that she self-identified in the early 1980s, she said that ‘they all knew,’ in government, and ‘outside they knew,’ too, as she had been asked to promote the benefits of a public service career to other Aborigines. Here is how Leila described having answered Aboriginal students when they asked her how hard it was for her to self-identify as a senior public servant:

It's hard, but if you *always know in your own mind that everything* you do is to benefit your own group and your own people, [this] is the thing that's always pushing you: to make sure you're part of that process. Because if nobody is there, who is going to be part of that process?

Leila told me that her career had been driven by her desire to benefit Northern Territory Aborigines by benefitting those to whom she had a particular sense of responsibility:

¹⁰⁸ Agnes was also comfortable with representing and working exclusively with her local community on a cultural project in a Top End town. She had been employed by a cultural institution specifically to develop a local project. She was not senior, but her sense of working for and with her ‘family’ is worth noting for its explicitness: ‘my aunts, they’ve known us since we were small. They had no problem with me and if there are problems, like “Get Agnes, get Agnes”, I [would say] “Come on Aunt, I had enough of that!” [laughing]... I think my knowledge and my experience and that gave me a better look-in for the project they’ve got here.... I meet with the [local language group] people next week. I don’t do anything without consultation with my family.’

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So no matter what we do and no matter what the government did, we'll be always there pushing. You mightn't see the changes but later on down the track you might.....If nobody is there, it will never change. We'll still be the under, downtrodden people you know, but you have to be part of this process to be able to get *above* it - that's what I always told them.

Kel and Leila experienced different tensions in the representation of their communities. For Kel, these were the tensions of proximity to his place of origin:

People like us, we get sort of like put out of place. ...- we're not owned by this mob [his department], we're not owned by that mob [the Aboriginal community], we get disowned.

What did Kel mean by 'disowned'? He explained that he was the 'odd one out' in his senior management team by being the 'only Indigenous one'. He would not draw on his identity as a 'pass to get to the next level', he said. But the community did not reward his restraint:

You're always called 'half-caste'.... What I'm saying is, if things don't happen quickly on the ground... we'll get blamed by the community, for our Aboriginality.

He gave an example:

People think that we in this department ... are driving [a particular decision]. Firstly they'll see you as a public servant and then... - I mean we get rubbished by our own families.

Kel was referring to a view that he and his Aboriginal colleagues in the NTPS were responsible for Commonwealth initiatives to make the continuation of Aboriginal welfare payments dependent on local Aborigines' participation in an NTPS program. He had facilitated a workshop between local Aborigines and government personnel seeking greater community access in his region. I had the impression that he was speaking of deep experience, when he spoke of being blamed by local Aborigines for government decisions.¹⁰⁹

Leila experienced different tensions, tensions which I see as related to greater distance from her place of origin. But she was always explicit in her interview that as a long term Northern Territory public servant it was her continuing relationship with her community of origin which gave her the authority to speak about other communities. She instanced this view as she recounted advising a colleague against the incautious amalgamation of Aboriginal local governing bodies into regional councils:

This is wrong. You haven't really given the communities an opportunity to look at this properly.

¹⁰⁹ When Holcombe speaks of Aboriginal community members 'scapegoating' non-Aboriginal bureaucrats to avoid blaming local leaders for 'unsatisfactory outcomes' she is speaking of something similar. Although she acknowledges the existence of Aboriginal bureaucrats, she does not specifically consider the dynamics of their 'scapegoating' (Holcombe 2005: 224, 228).

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She sourced her authority to speak generally to her knowledge of a place in her ‘country’:

It's part of my country and so... you could see the highs and lows, you could see the problems... They'd ring me up: 'Leila, can you come and see us while you're there?'

Likewise, Leila drew on government knowledge to support her community to come to terms with government decisions. In this case, she said she had advised her community:

'Government has done this now so you can't get out of it, but let's try and work out a best way...'

Leila said that she represented other Aboriginal people in her job in the sense that:

I suppose I always maintained that I was a community person first and foremost.

When I asked her if she represented a particular community, Leila answered:

No, most of the Territory I think because, I suppose, of the network and the way I've worked over 30 odd years, with communities. I feel part of those communities.

The limits on ‘most’ were communities that she had never visited. Leila had had a long career in which she had represented ‘those communities she had visited’ by ‘being Aboriginal and part of a group’. She had straddled her responsibilities comfortably by being transparent and diplomatic with non-Aboriginal colleagues, she said:

They'd say, 'Well, Leila, is that your view?' ...If it was my view, I'd state it but if it was the view of a group you know, a community or a group of people, I'd say, 'Well, this is what's come out of the community' ... So that's the way I've always worked.

Distance had spared Leila the kind of conflict that Kel was experiencing in 2007 amid his community. But that should not be seen to lessen the tensions of Leila’s role, as her location in central policy offices meant her proximity to advisers with whom she sometimes disagreed. Here she describes how she worked through those tensions:

*There were times when I didn't agree with them.... Sometimes I'd get really angry and I'd just stay in my office and I'd think ... I'm putting in too much energy into anger. Let's look at the best way I can deal with this I talked myself through it and then worked out the best approach I could take. Instead of arguing with them, with the government... I went back and thought about how I was going to do this without making it obvious to them that I was *really in disagreement* with them and even if the community said, 'Well, we don't like that Leila,' I'd say, 'Why didn't you like it?' and we'd talk about *that*.*

Distance from or proximity to their communities notwithstanding, both Leila and Kel always, in the fulfillment of their duties and without any contravention of public service ethics, acted on behalf of and with a sense of accountability towards their communities. I characterize these interviewees as thoughtfully acquiescent in the invitation to be representative: acquiescent to the extent that they were able to negotiate the extent of their representations, both within the public service and within their communities.

Aboriginal Territorians

When Simon self-identified in the NTPS, he must have been referring to an older paper-based system when he said:

I just put a square in and I ticked it and I said I'm an Aboriginal Territorian.

Simon's assertion of a pan-Territorian Aboriginal identity was based on a specific entitlement. He expressed this legalistically: 'I've got traditional entitlements to parcels of land in the Northern Territory.' The parcels were situated in the two linguistic regions of his paternal grandparents. Simon objected to being associated with a generic Indigeneity: 'Don't refer to me as being indigenous. Unless you know where I'm from.'

In 2007, Simon's job was to communicate with many Aboriginal communities on behalf of the Northern Territory Government. When I asked him how he managed that breadth of responsibility even though he claimed only very specific connections, he explained:

I'll take something, read it out, tell them where you're working, what you're doing, you need to talk to these people....Yeah, go and talk to them. But what they tell me, I relay back

In other words, he continued, he would not interpret – 'put my own spin' on – what Aborigines told him, or compare communities by doing as he said he had observed others to do by claiming, 'Oh, this person's similar to that person or this community's similar to that community.' As I see it, Simon's generic expression of his identity, 'I'm an Aboriginal Territorian,' was made possible by his personal policy of not speaking on behalf of any other category of 'Aboriginal Territorian'.

Spike was equally unwilling to be drawn by the government to speak for other groups, but by other logic. His Northern Territory connections were extensive, but diffuse; he had been brought up in a 'western type world', he said, having been born in Darwin. Saying that 'I believe I speak on behalf of Aboriginal people, Indigenous people,' Spike reasoned:

When I'm asked a question... the person who asked that question is asking me my opinion which gives him a broad opinion of what Aboriginal people think.

When I asked if he felt he was expected to represent other people in his work, Spike replied:

There is an expectation, but I can only speak for me.... I can't speak for [my] mob.... I wouldn't speak for Larrakia [as the local language group], I'll speak for me.

In Spike's logic, he could speak on behalf of Aborigines generally (as himself) but not for a specific group. In contrast, Simon was unwilling to give even his own opinion, preferring

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only to relay local views as an emissary than to be drawn into interpreting, generalizing or comparing. But *neither would speak for their own 'mob'*; both preferred the authority of being 'Aboriginal' or 'Aboriginal Territorian'. Some other interviewees spoke as if they were authorized to be representative merely by their membership of the category 'Indigenous'. As I see it, these generic identities allowed them to distance themselves from demands by individuals – demands made in the name of kinship or local associations – while preserving accounts of themselves as 'representative'.

All Territorians

'I'll be honest and straight up,' said one interviewee:

I would like to think my relationship with the Territory Government at the moment is ...building bridges in regards to better education, better health for *all* Territorians.

From this person's account of what he meant by this statement, I understand that he was hoping to commend policy approaches that resolved emergent contradictions in Aboriginal lives. He illustrated his point by describing himself as 'more of a refugee' in the urban town where he worked. Because he owned property in the town, his community of origin would not allocate him a house; yet, the town was not his 'country or language'. That is, his career in Aboriginal affairs, which spanned various representative roles, had dislocated him; yet, he thought it important that senior officials like him were able to return to their communities.

A number of interviewees added 'all Territorians' to what were often listings of various kinds of beneficiaries ranging across the categories I have identified. One interviewee specified 'all Territorians', she said, because it was in the interest of all Territorians that Aborigines like her ensure that Aboriginal communities were better represented in government policy.

Acknowledging their responsibilities to the wider Northern Territory public did not hinder interviewees' insistent depiction of Aborigines – Aboriginal employees, Aboriginal communities or Aboriginal Territorians – as the objects of their representation. Their nominated beneficiaries *were* the Northern Territory public, or at least their sense of a chronically under-represented Northern Territory public; their interests were relevant to all Territorians' interests. Aboriginal constituencies were in deficit. Aboriginal constituencies were the ever-absent objects of Aboriginal senior officials' policies and programs; and Aboriginal constituencies were made present by their representations.

5.3 Immersion

Many stories told by interviewees illustrate the notion of representation that, in political theory, is known as ‘trusteeship’. That is, they exercised their discretion in relation to the represented, making autonomous judgements in accordance with their own views of the best interests of the absent. I also heard notes of the kind of representation that political theory calls ‘guardianship’. Recall that ‘trusteeship’ evokes competent absentees, people who have the capacity to evaluate their representatives. ‘Guardianship’ evokes absentees who cannot exercise their own agency, who are not capable of judging their representatives.

Sarah saw herself as representing Aborigines by ensuring that they had access to the same information as the ‘wider community’:

...through my ensuring that what we ever get out or develop [for bush communities] is the same information that the wider community gets, so by me being here.

She saw her presence as making a difference to the information that was released to Aborigines. Recall also that for Sarah, if you can empathize ‘you can argue’. Here we see that Sarah spoke as though she was, in the notions of political theory, at once ‘trustee’ and defender, perhaps at times the self-appointed ‘guardian’, of those who were so disadvantaged as to be always absent.

Marcia, who drew on her local connections with the express purpose of seeing Aborigines’ permanent presence in the Northern Territory properly reflected in the public service, was adamant that she did not represent:

I can't say that, that's just not right. There's too many of us, it's too diverse, you know, and our good people out there that represent different groups of Aboriginal mob, different staff or professional areas of Indigenous people that know, experts, then they should be saying things on behalf of their mob.

Marcia drew a sharp line between the representational capacities of the Indigenous sector and the public service. She did not represent her people because that role was for those in the Indigenous sector who had the localized and specific mandates; yet in the public service, she saw her beneficiaries as ‘Indigenous people first off’. Nominating herself to make available ‘an Aboriginal point of view, an understanding’, Marcia both stood for and *stood up for* Aborigines, and so she satisfies political theory’s definition of a representative who is both passive/descriptive and active/substantive. In spite of her unwillingness to call it representing, it is possible, drawing on the notions in political theory, to characterize her

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quiet yet sustained defence of Aborigines as a highly diligent form of self-authorized ‘trusteeship’.

Sophie did not refer to herself as ‘representing’, but she spoke of portraying and relaying views she knew other Aborigines to share or were founded on ‘evidence’. As she explained:

*I don't profess to represent other Aboriginal people, I profess to be able to portray and relay views and desires and needs that other Aboriginal people have, either through my knowledge and experience or my personal networks, all based on pure evidence that is so startling and stark in front of you, you can't *not* portray that.*

Sophie distinguished carefully between speaking on behalf of other Aborigines and expressing views that she holds herself and knows other Aborigines to share:

I don't speak on behalf of any Aboriginal person or group but I'm more than happy to be able to express the views that I know other Aboriginal people share.

As I see it, Sophie was doing something different from Sarah and Marcia. She could be seen as ‘self-representing’, in the terms of political theory, by characterizing herself as putting forward her own perspective: she was merely present, being herself. But she could be seen as representing in the classic sense of bringing forth the absent when she put forward views that she knew other Aboriginal people to share. When she stated her reliance on ‘pure evidence’, Sophie attributed her actions to the indicators of Aboriginal disadvantage and minimized the influence of her identity; when she drew on ‘knowledge and experience or my personal networks’, she edged closer to a more active kind of representation in my schema. All executives, of course, have knowledge and experience and personal networks; but Sophie’s qualities took on a particular potency in the representational politics of Aboriginal affairs. That is how I come to see her as acquiescent in representative bureaucracy’s targeted invitation. Carefully, discerningly, Sophie spoke for others as she saw fit.

Recall Alcoff’s argument that in speaking for or about others who are not present to speak for themselves on the grounds of some form of social exclusion, the speaker is ‘participating in the construction of their subject positions’ and thereby representing them (Alcoff 1995). Taking the political theorists’ normative viewpoint, it could be construed as remiss of any Aboriginal public servant *not* to take their opportunities to speak for the absent. For Alcoff, to speak for others is remiss only when those present have not paused to interrogate their situational advantage and the important issue of whether their absent ‘subalterns’ could, by some means they as public servants have the capacity to arrange, be allowed to speak for

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themselves. If after such consideration the representative deems that the absent cannot be present and may be advantaged by being spoken for, Alcoff finds it justified.

Even though Marcia and Sophie expressed reservations about calling themselves representatives, in my view all three whose contributions I have characterized as empathy, knowledge and connections respectively – Sarah, Marcia and Sophie – were prepared to step in for the absent when circumstances made that seem necessary. I see each as making careful judgements between three options: when to create the space for absent Aborigines by insisting that absent Aborigines be consulted; when to speak for absent Aborigines such that this preserved their rightful place in policy conversations; and when to assume the identity of absent Aborigines by speaking *as* them. In making such judgements, interviewees would enact the role of ‘trustee’ because they could not consult the absent.

To make the point more generally, those who were accepting the invitation to represent were judging when it would be better to abandon one kind of representing for another kind of representing: by their insistence on bringing the absent into their workplace.

Speaking *for* and speaking *as* the absent: judging capacity

In this brief excerpt from Hanna’s interview, we may see that Hanna was explicit about her decision to reserve Aborigines’ place at the table without presuming to speak as the absent. Hanna recalled of her former NTPS employment:

I certainly wasn’t there in the sense of ever presuming that what I had to say was being said for and on behalf of other people. That’s not my role or place and I’m very clear about this too: it’s very much about *creating the space* for those other voices to be heard.

In this excerpt from Sally’s interview, Sally exemplifies the alternative. For her, it was a sign of moral courage to step up to her responsibility to explain Aborigines, to speak both for and as them, as public servant and as citizen:

I find myself as an ambassador for Aboriginal people, whether I’m at work or out in the street. I feel that I have to explain. If someone takes a *bland* view or a view that’s one-sided or something, I feel it necessary that I explain to them, well hang on a minute, this is why we’re *like* this. I do, I see myself as an ambassador, personally and professionally for Aboriginal people to promote their interests and also to develop an understanding.

Sally’s story presents a fitting contrast to the diffidence of some others about their role in government. Indeed, her embrace of the role of Aboriginal official was so whole-hearted as

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to be atypical. Sally mediated social justice issues between Aborigines and government, a role in which she saw her Aboriginality as a vital asset:

I mean that's part of the reason that they employed me here...and that's what I played on at the interview, the fact that I am Indigenous, I have extensive networks in [this area of] services and they don't have any Indigenous staff here and ...the majority of the service users are Aboriginal people ... We've got a little joke here...when we have a meeting they'll say, 'Oh we'll ask Sally to come in and tell us about this.' I say, 'Oh, you want the token black do you?'

Sally's mother was a politically active Aboriginal woman from a local region and her father was a white man with whom she had maintained ties. But she had not acceded to her father's request to call herself 'part-Aboriginal':

It was my uncles and aunties that looked after me. It was my grandfathers that took me out doing things, hunting and all sorts of things, and that's why I identify with that.

I quote this statement of Sally's to observe that the atypicality of her views cannot be attributed to relinquishment of her local Aboriginal identity. Nor can the atypicality of her views be dismissed as unquestioning acquiescence with the agendas of government: for example, she felt that in the NTPS 'we're being forced to say "Indigenous" and we shouldn't have to'. I see Sally as reacting to the orthodoxy of Aboriginal victimhood in order to bid for Aboriginal autonomy and choice. Describing herself as 'grounded in her culture', she asserted Aborigines' ability to be 'flashy too if we want'.

Sally's motive in being what she called 'hard on her people' was, she said, in the interests of taking Aborigines seriously. She found herself in disagreement with Aboriginal colleagues:

As an Aboriginal person working with Indigenous issues, working with government, ... I feel like I have to follow everyone else and if I don't, I become unpopular or I'm a traitor ... I've been viewed like that. Even in this department, I've heard them whispering, 'I don't think you should speak to Sally, she doesn't actually agree with that sort of stuff.' ... I just want to see our people and our kids happy and healthy, going to school and doing the cultural stuff but also being able to cope over here because ultimately, that's where we're going to have to be.

Critical when departments 'do everything for' Aborigines, Sally's view was that:

They [departments] don't give any value to what Aboriginal people's own skills are, what their knowledge is or what they're capable of thinking about.

Many interviewees saw Aboriginal skills as under-recognized in the public service. But Sally's assumption to know the motives of others who apparently did not share her views was uncommon. To assume the authority to speak for people risks the ire, not only of those being spoken for, but of their rival representatives who do not make the same assumptions.

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The trustee *speaks for* the absent, drawing on external evidence to evaluate what Aborigines need in their absence and on their behalf. The ‘substitute’ refers to inner convictions, stepping into the space that is supposed to belong to absent Aborigines by *speaking as*, in place of, them. In my characterizations of them here, I see Hanna as the autonomously judging ‘trustee’ of political theory and Sally as the self-referring ‘substitute’. I see Sally’s ‘ambassadorial’ mode as akin to political theory’s ‘gyroscopic’ representation because her references were internal. Once she had established her credentials as an Aborigine, she sought no other permission to speak.

Concluding remarks

The entire 50 interviewees who are the subject of this chapter ‘stood for’ Aborigines in the descriptive sense by self-identifying; 49 took representing further by drawing on their identity in their work. Their representations of, for and on behalf of absent Aborigines were invited not only by the general calls of representative bureaucracy but by the very conditions of their work. In the settings of Aboriginal service delivery, interviewees delivered on the empathy, knowledge and connections which it took to be good at their work, navigating skilfully between the representative invitation and the relationships this invitation presumed.

I do not intend to ascribe a single representative character to any individual but to highlight the dispositions with which Aboriginal public servants may, without contravening any cultural or ethical bounds of public service, in practice enact forms of political representation in relation to Northern Territory Aborigines. In other contexts, any interviewee might have deployed other strategies. But I also observed a basic disposition of service: interviewees usually depicted themselves as working for others. They voiced political and moral commitments to Aborigines by which, their accounts suggest to me, they felt bound. To be Aborigines’ ‘trustees’, I argue, was the most *acceptable* way for Aboriginal public servants to see the representational invitation, however they conceived of their beneficiaries. To be more specific about what I mean by the most *acceptable* kind of representation: from my analysis of the interviews, the kind of representation that Aboriginal public servants could most easily accept was the opportunity to make autonomous judgements about other Aborigines’ capacities to represent themselves. I see this kind of representation as fulfilling political theory’s notion of ‘trusteeship’.

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I have begun to explore a distinction by asking whether, to what extent and in what circumstances these interviewees *stood up for* (enacting ‘trusteeship’) or *stood in for* (enacting ‘substitution’) the perceived interests of Aborigines. Those acquiescing to the government’s ambivalent invitation to be representative public servants navigated this distinction by judging the capacity of those absent to be present themselves. But here is the problem. ‘Trusteeship’ can be felt to fail if there is no evidence that it has protected your beneficiaries from harm. There is a burden in discretion: what if you exercise the wrong discretion and feel that you have failed the absent? And speaking for absent others by ‘substituting’ yourself, *where but for fortune you would be*, can enhance the sense of inauthenticity with which your peers will only too happily brand you.

Swimming the currents, an Aboriginal senior official can be swept into murky depths.

Chapter Six

The Limits of Acceptance

Those who self-identify and cannot resist the subsequent drawings on their Aboriginality will have swum, stroke by stroke, well out into the depths of a bureaucracy which has invited them to be representative. They will have found strategies to keep their heads above water as they negotiate the currents in which they will now find themselves. It's not quite what they expected, but they have the skills to survive.... until the tide turns. Who pulled out the plug? The water has become shallow, salty. Some swimmers are high and dry, shocked. Some of those still in the depths are being pulled, tired, out to sea.

Some interviewees would enjoy this metaphor for the changes of fortune they experienced in the bureaucracy – from the buoyancy of success to feeling dumped or lost, isolated and misunderstood. Some would distance themselves from the sense of victimhood which the metaphor indulges: they would prefer to regard themselves wary and wise, deft at the bureaucratic game and with cards yet to play. Most would fall somewhere in between, knowing that while they may have misread the politics of their environment or underperformed as any bureaucrat might, they could not rule out the possibility they had been singled out by being recognizably Aboriginal in a workplace in which Aborigines were most familiarly a policy problem. The signs were often opaque, to my interviewees. Some interviews elicited deep existential uncertainty over their personal worth in workplaces that were portrayed to them, in public service terms, as enlightened.

In this chapter, I continue to explore the inner experience of coming to terms with one's corner of the public service. But now, I am characterizing the other face of representative acquiescence. An ambivalent invitation is not easy to accept or decline. Anyway, 'decline' is too categorical a term to describe the response of all but a few exceptional cases among those 50 interviewees who were pre-disposed to acceptance by having self-identified as NTPS employees. I can nonetheless explore the moments of moral anxiety, identity consciousness, wry humour, cool observation and bittersweet retreat with which I saw interviewees – the same 50 interviewees – as voicing the *limits of acceptance*.

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In the first part of the chapter I discuss the many and varied instances in my data in which interviewees demurred, rather than declined, the representative invitation. To demur is to enact or give voice to objections or scruples. It is more polite, more oblique, than decline; a symptom, I suggest, of reluctant representation.

To understand the etiquette involved, we need to know that the NTPS prides itself on its informality, egalitarianism and ‘can do’ style. In this ‘matey’ environment, the laughter is contagious. Many workplaces exude the infectiously warm, casual inclusiveness that is often supposed to be the Northern Territory’s own. Busy executives may emerge from their offices, or on their way to meetings change course, to converge on the sound of uproarious laughter or to wish someone low-ranking a happy birthday over a morning tea of sausage rolls. The ubiquitous Australian tomato sauce seems to reaffirm the ideology that anyone can rise to the top. Formality is lampooned. The NTPS means to welcome Aborigines with wide open arms, sensitive to the possible objection that it symbolizes a largely white bureaucracy which is full of north-migrating southerners. They welcome into departments the original inhabitants of a vast expanse who have long been the subjects of past departments’ administration. Aboriginal senior officials are, after all, being invited to improve Aborigines’ odds by joining the main game in town.

I discuss in the second part of the chapter those few cases in which I see interviewees as declining the representative invitation outright. On these occasions, as I define decline, embryonic argument escalated to fully realized argument and exit from the NTPS.

How do demurrals and declines map onto the discretionary representational forms of ‘trusteeship’ and ‘substitution’? Recall that ‘trustee’ characterizes the bureaucrat who stands up for Aborigines whilst preserving space for them by acknowledging their absence; ‘substitute’ characterizes the bureaucrat who positions himself or herself as the voice of absent Aborigines, who steps into their place. The stances are distinct, although we shall see that they may be rapidly interchanged. And neither is invulnerable: ‘trusteeship’ can feel futile and ‘substitution’ ethically uncomfortable. What did interviewees do in these circumstances? Blaming the ‘state’ and/or embarrassing colleagues by drawing the ‘race card’ were tempting for some, but not for experienced practitioners of the arts of bureaucratic discretion.

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Experienced senior public servants preferred to engage the strategies of intellectual defending through carefully timed speaking and constructively aimed argument. But as they ran the gauntlet of office politics whilst trying to make something worthwhile of their opportunity to contribute, some were forced to confront the haunting prospects of policy inefficacy and/or illegitimacy. Until this point, I see Aboriginal senior officials as largely acquiescing in the representational game, deflecting their reluctance by practical management. This characterization holds true for many interviewees. But at the point where events conspired to leave them feeling inefficacious or illegitimate in ways they could attribute to their Aboriginality, some interviewees felt so cornered that they declined the representative invitation by deciding that it was better to leave the NTPS.

In the third part of the chapter, I explore interviewees' considerations of the Indigenous sector alternative, including the non-senior people. But first, I discuss instances of demurral.

6.1 Accepting reluctantly: demurring

Some interviewees told me they had had reservations about ticking the box. Thirty-five of the 50 identifying senior officials could give reasons why a person might choose not to identify their Aboriginality. Their descriptive representation came with conditions: a 'tag', as some called it. Self-identified Aboriginal employees could be taken by others to have won their positions on the basis of their Indigenous status rather than merit. We have seen that they were motivated to risk that humiliating inference by competing desires – to acknowledge their identity and to build the quantity of Aborigines' presence in the NTPS.

Nineteen of the senior interviewees (and one-third of the entire interviewee group of 76) observed that they were seen as the reference point, in their workplaces, for all things Aboriginal. Some attributed this observation to self-identifying; but whether or not they saw self-identification as the reason, all of the 19 had self-identified. But all questioned the obligation to take on the burdens of other Aborigines. They did not necessarily reject it, but they spoke of noticing that they felt obliged and wondered whether they should take on the burdens of other Aborigines as an implicit requirement of their Aboriginality. Through the multiplicity of their passing observations in my data, I became aware of a deep wariness of the tacit agendas of those who called upon them to speak as Aborigines.

Resisting the obligatory: ‘trusteeship’

I have distilled three ways in which these tacit agendas obliged ‘trustees’. First, many felt *ushered* into Aboriginal-specific programs, gently but firmly guided there as though they were inadequate to represent the interests of other citizens. Second, experienced policy managers felt that by populating such programs they may inadvertently perpetuate Aborigines’ under-treatment in policy. They saw their presence as potentially exacerbating the shelving of problems starting with ‘A’, as someone put it, by providing a repository for such problems. Third, interviewees resented having discretionary roles imposed which required them to produce the ‘Indigenous spin’. Many took these agendas as undervaluing them personally.

Ushered into Aboriginal-specific careers

To be ushered into Aboriginal-specific roles signaled to some interviewees that they were not seen as competent for the wider-ranging responsibilities of non-Aboriginal public servants. After all, as one interviewee described what most made her want to leave the NTPS: ‘You see some new person come in from down south and all of a sudden they’re an AO8 and they’re flying high’. This interviewee was describing the phenomenon that inexperienced non-Aborigines could be given responsibilities for Aboriginal programs early in their careers; for her, she said, ‘everything is like a fight’.

Jay’s efforts to resist an Aboriginal-specific career dominated his interview. Here is Jay’s caustic self-portrayal as he imagined his department would introduce him:

‘This is Jay. He does all the Aboriginal stuff.’

Jay had mounted a prolonged assault on the expectation that he would always manage the Aboriginal issues in his department. He told me:

I’d love to be in a job that isn’t Indigenous-specific but the big problem with that is people know how well you can do your job with the Indigenous stuff. So you’re always going to be looked at and labelled as that’s what you’ll be doing. I’ve got [two diplomas] and did the public sector management program and yet when I rang up about a job to do with a policy thing, the director for that nearly fell out of his chair saying, ‘I didn’t think you’d be interested in that, I thought you just liked doing the on the ground stuff.’

‘*Perceptions* is probably the worst thing’, Jay said. He did not see himself as representing, yet he felt that ‘anything I do will be perceived as being an Aboriginal action’. He added:

You’re more or less just doing it to cover yourself in saying, ‘I don’t represent, my views don’t represent the views of Aboriginal Territorians or Aboriginal Australia.’ Now regardless

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whether you say that right up front, everybody listening to you as a black person talking about Aboriginal issues, they are going to see you and think, 'Is *that* what Aboriginal people think?'

It seemed to me that Jay – and other interviewees spoke of a similar phenomenon – was haunted by the circularity of answering that question. He described himself as 'analyzing too much'. Jay said that he did not feel he could move without wondering 'how it might look' to an imagined reference group whom I took to be the non-Aboriginal colleagues who largely populated his workplace; he may also have been conscious of Aboriginal views. His adoption of the subject 'we', when he reasoned that 'we're putting too much on ourselves', reflects his collegiate relationship with other Aboriginal public servants. His department had sponsored his attendance at the 'Kigaruk' course in Aboriginal men's leadership which was acclaimed for its support of men like him – still essentially field-oriented, at the lower rungs of the ladder of seniority and finding it difficult to win promotion. Whilst Jay said he had gained from the camaraderie from attending the course, it had not assisted his career.

Only two senior interviewees who objected to the limitations of an Aboriginal-specific career had extricated themselves from this kind of career. Jean was one. By working in a role in which Aborigines were not the primary or sole client, Jean presented herself as making a stand in defence of Aboriginal competency. She had led a high profile program in the past in which she had worked actively to encourage Aborigines' compliance with a major service in which her responsibilities were Territory-wide. Now, her work was directed towards Aborigines as one among the population sectors she served. Her reason?

In the government if you're an Aboriginal person who works on Aboriginal things, other people see you in a particular way...it's about *sending messages*.

Jean was sending messages to Aborigines' detractors about their competency:

Sometimes it pops out of their mouth, you know, that they're *surprised* you write so well.

Such was the compulsion for her department to see Aborigines as service providers to other Aborigines that Jean had had to 'fly low under the radar' to ensure that her move into a generalist job did not *trigger its reframing* on the basis of her Aboriginality:

If you just want to step back and do something that you can do quite easily and comfortably ... - I've actually fought hard to actually have that role seen as not based on anything to do with being Indigenous, it is just a role and that speaks volumes to other people.

Jean had to work hard to maintain her career autonomy – so much so, it seems, that she was moved to portray her stance on this generally intractable issue as representing:

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I do represent them [other Aborigines] by having made an unspoken comment about operating in a job that ...doesn't deal with Aboriginal programs as such.

But neither Jean nor the only other interviewee to have arranged a non-Aboriginal-specific career self-identified. We shall see later that while not self-identifying did not diminish a sense of 'trusteeship' towards other Aborigines, it did moderate what seemed *obligatory* to my interviewees. Jay did self-identify, without hesitation he said, both for the racial acknowledgement and to build the Aboriginal employee statistics. If he perceived a link between self-identifying and the problems he was experiencing, he did not mention it.

The implications of the 'A' word

Some interviewees noticed that their presence seemed to make them the reference point for all things Aboriginal; that they, or perhaps their program, were expected to take on issues for which another government program had responsibility for the rest of the population.

Interviewees who raised this point were referring to a problem that is well known in Aboriginal affairs administration: Aboriginal-specific programming can have the effect of absolving other areas of government of their responsibilities toward Aborigines. This Aboriginal policy phenomenon attributes only to Aborigines and/or Aboriginal cultural difference, problems that could have other causes: for example, small remote communities might suffer more from their size and their dispersal than from their 'Aboriginal' character. And is 'Aboriginal dementia' anything other than dementia which is experienced by an Aboriginal person? Treatments and support services need to be community and culturally sensitive, but when Aborigines experience dementia does it require a different medical science? The dementia example was given by an interviewee who had been born in the bush. She leveled her criticism not at the idea of culturally sensitive program delivery but at oversimplifications that cast *all* Aborigines as needy of cultural interpretation in all respects.

Some interviewees made the point that segregating Aboriginal services and programs can have the effect of diagnosing as solely racial or cultural in nature, problems that could more profitably be diagnosed as symptoms of social disadvantage. Were they objecting to the terms of the representation invitation itself – that the need to adduce cultural difference or to legitimize any particularity in Aboriginal policy problems by calling them cultural also reflected on Aboriginal employment policy's *particularization of them?*

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I saw Sophie as thinking this way. Here, Sophie comments that her presence and recognition as an Aboriginal woman in a senior role should not overwhelm due consideration of ‘need’ in motivating her management board to attend to Aboriginal issues:

Anyone who sits at the management board of this agency and doesn't have Aboriginal issues as their key and core problem and concern to do, shouldn't be sitting in the job because I have to put 'A' in front of it for them to do it; they should be doing that based on the need.

Now she implies that her presence had had that effect, at times, making her the repository for issues starting with ‘A’ for Aboriginal:

It's about taking the word 'A' out of the front...anything that has got an A or an I in front of it comes your way all the time because nobody knows what to do with it.

Sophie’s throwaway line, ‘nobody knows what to do with it’, is suggestive of the reputation for daunting complexity that is widely associated with Aboriginal policies and programs. The issue for interviewees was that in an effort to reduce policy’s immense uncertainty they were asked for answers whose truth they could not guarantee. It was as though they were a salve for the struggle with uncertainty. Their presence could distract the public service from Aborigines in need, fill gaps in programs and comfort those who wondered if they were getting Aboriginal policy right.

As I interpret the interviewees who protested that too much was asked of them, many would have preferred to hear their colleagues’ frank admissions of uncertainty than to encounter misinformed or disingenuous policy confidence.

Daniel spoke eloquently of how being considered fit only for ‘anything Aboriginal’ made him feel. I was referred to Daniel in a regional office where he was responsible for managing a team of field staff to develop an Aboriginal community workforce. Daniel was one of a rising generation of younger professionals – several interviewees fit this description – who had been raised in remote communities because their parents worked there. Their parents were returning to communities to which they had traditional attachments. For example, Daniel’s mother was originally from the region, was educated elsewhere and had returned to advocate politically for the region. There, Daniel had attended community schools. Here is Daniel on his sense of contribution:

A lot of them [his managers] don't know that I've had a fair bit of remote experience; I've been out bush all my life. I speak three languagesI'm told I'm part of an exec [an 'executive' team], but I feel I'm shut out from a lot of things as well, you know that I could give valid input in terms of operations out bush....I do a lot of reading plus I've got the main clientele. I mean I grew up all my life around them, I mean I feel I've got things I can share there too, that could

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help with our operational aspects of service delivery, but I feel that I'm just 'anything Aboriginal'. Anything with 'Aboriginal' on it, I mean I *get the hint*.

What 'hint' did Daniel get? In his perspective, in return for his willingness to share workplace responsibilities ('our' operations) he received race-privileging responses which left him feeling that the bundle of skills and experience with which he assessed his self-worth were of no relevance to this workplace. Daniel went on to speak as though his sense of tokenism was enforced by this circumstance which was external to him, not of his doing:

You at times you feel like you're a token. You know you bring along validation and not always is your opinion respected.

Daniel found himself validating Aborigines' acquiescence in an already decided program of activity. He attributed this outcome to self-identification. In that he saw no choice, as self-identifying in turn validated his identity:

I'm proud of my heritage. ... I'm proud of my mother, she's my role model - a very strong woman. She's done a lot of great things for Aboriginal people over the years.

Working for the Northern Territory Government was Daniel's continuation of a family history of political commitment. Although he saw his self-identification as working against the realization of his potential, he continued to self-identify. But to limit his acceptance of the invitation to be representative, he would not be fooled into believing that self-identifying in the public service helped achieve his potential.

The requirement for 'spin'

Many interviewees had responded to calls to Aboriginal employees to participate voluntarily in activities to build Aborigines' public service presence. Daryl, a policy advisor in a large service delivery department, had established and chaired an Aboriginal employment reference group following the abolition of a position for an Aboriginal employment specialist in the human resources division. If the position was needed, why had it been abolished, he asked, or why had a human resources specialist not been allocated these duties? When Daryl dropped the extra responsibility for the sake of time with his family, he was disappointed that it had not been picked up in another part of his department. He commented on the lack of a 'driving force' for the delivery of Aboriginal servicing needs.

In the context of this concern, Daryl noticed that he was often expected to give an 'Indigenous spin'. He gave the example of requests for his presence on interview panels.

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He spoke of the potential for ‘conflict of interest’ in these circumstances. Daryl also made the point more generally that when Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people were invited to speak of others’ competence on the basis of some kind of racial likeness, this compromised their professionalism. He preferred to be invited to assess others against the selection criteria for a position. Daryl wondered why he worried about this issue more than non-Aboriginal colleagues did. He saw them as encouraging him to represent a desirable Indigeneity by seeking out his ‘spin’, some kind of essential expertise that they assumed his Indigeneity gave him and consequently offered them.

Some interviewees seemed to be concerned that the government could misinterpret their unwillingness to accede to requests for their ‘spin’ as unwillingness to accept the responsibilities of seniority. These interviewees did not see it as that, but as sensitivity to the representation that it asked of them. Daryl said:

People put a lot of trust in you to put our spin on what's best on how things can be done in such a way, so you are sort of representing ... the broader remote or regional community.

At the heart of interviewees’ resistance to the obligations of ‘trusteeship’ was not that they were uninterested in making the contributions that it invited them to make, but the apparent inconsequentiality of the question to those asking it. Some interviewees felt that although they were often asked for the Aboriginal viewpoint, it rarely mattered what they answered. Others felt that those asking had very little understanding of the tensions that were involved in answering. These problems were what made the workplace request for their on-the-spot, extra-curricular viewpoint seem so coercive yet so difficult to refuse.

Very few interviewees spoke of a relationship between government expectations and their self-identification. Jade had no reservations about self-identifying – indeed, she described the ‘identifying senior officer’ as an important social identity in her urban town – but she made it clear that she saw a connection between self-identification and the expectation that an Aboriginal public servant would take on extra duties when she explained to me:

If you do identify as Aboriginal, and you're the only person in a particular area, everything gets dumped on your plate.

My question, ‘Have you ever felt the expectation that you *should* represent other Aboriginal people in your job, in a way that is beyond what you can offer?’ provoked a set of replies which highlighted that self-identification and working for Aboriginal policies and programs

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signed them up for more than most bargained for: that ticking the box somehow *obliged* them to represent Aborigines more actively in their workplaces, even though self-identifying is a private act and even if they felt they should not or could not represent on cue. As Jay asked so explicitly, and some other interviewees asked more implicitly: could they only ever contribute to the public service *as Aborigines* and not in any other way?

Resisting the inevitable: ‘substitution’

In work-based conversations around meeting tables and in corridors and tea rooms, many interviewees felt pressed by well-intentioned requests that they articulate ‘the Aboriginal view’. Interviewees generally saw this invitation as intending racial respect, but they found the way in which it differentiated them from non-Aboriginal colleagues unhelpful to their answering. ‘You’re *jumped* on straight away,’ said Lois, a non-senior interviewee in a regional office. Bertie caricatured his non-Aboriginal colleagues to be thinking: ‘I can’t pronounce this Indigenous word. I’ll ask Bertie, he’s Indigenous!’ He continued the caricature by anticipating his response: ‘Would Bertie know? What language is he?’

The expectation that Aboriginal people present in the public service would *fill the place* of absent Aborigines was seen by many interviewees as callow and presumptuous. The oft-heard request for Aboriginal perspectives on cue, without forewarning, was derided by many interviewees. Yet it was part of workplace conviviality, even conveyed by departmental colleagues as a specially gifted inclusion in the shared problem of Aborigines. It was always difficult to refuse, I understand from interviewees’ accounts. They recounted many instances of what I am calling the ‘substitutive’ assumption. From interviewees’ data I draw out three different manifestations of this assumption: firstly, that Aboriginal public servants knew or could anticipate absent Aborigines’ views sufficiently to become the objects of consultation in their stead; secondly, that they were parties to a single ‘Aboriginal expertise’ which gave them unique and uncontestable perspectives as Aborigines; and thirdly that they were thus willing to adopt the identity of the problematic Aboriginal policy subject.

Plain-speaking Spike set out the key features of the ‘substitutive’ moment graphically:

You will sit in meetings and that and it’ll be about an issue - I’m just trying to find an example - you’d be talking about a certain place and about issues in terms of Indigenous people and then they’ll look at you and say what do you reckon? Now why? It’s about *everybody* having input.

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Q: You feel singled out then?

A: Yeah, because I'm the Aboriginal person in there and whether it's because they want the information from me or [want to know] how I feel about it - that shouldn't have any relevance. It should be because they're [his largely non-Aboriginal work team are] working as a group. It should be the group's input, not one person's. You *feel* that. I *feel* that sometimes. That they'll ask a question and then they'll flag it with *you* because you're Aboriginal.

To be silent is to be unhelpful, in the norms of public service workplaces. The kind of silence with which Spike would have to have met those at this meeting in order to avoid 'substituting' for the absent would have made him appear preciously race-conscious, when colleagues only meant to be inclusive. Yet, to speak in the place of other Aborigines was for many interviewees to accept a role which many saw as beyond their brief. Standing in for the absent, an Aboriginal official could inadvertently disallow the direct hearing that many thought they should have. Aboriginal officials made the judgement, all the time: were the absent competent to speak on this issue? Could they as public servants successfully argue the need and proper process for direct communication with remote communities or was it better, on balance, to anticipate their views *before someone else did*?

Objects of consultation

The following excerpts from Jay's interview outline the process by which his sense of 'trusteeship' towards Aborigines enticed him into 'substitutive' terrain. We have seen that his Aboriginality had come to feel career-limiting to him. Here, Jay attributes some of his frustrations to appearing as an Aborigine of mixed descent:

Nobody looks at me as partly white. I'm seen as partly black. Until I start claiming to be Aboriginal and speaking for Aboriginal people, then they start saying well you're not really an Aboriginal.

He went on to describe what he thought of as a typical expectation:

It's your usual classics, you know you can get asked what Aboriginal people want and you go back to your line of, 'You need to go out and ask Aboriginal people yourself.' I don't know what they want, so many people give you different answers....

Jay's 'usual' reply was to deflect 'substitutive' pressures by recommending consultation with Aboriginal people. But, he continued:

And then when you're in a discussion about an issue and you put your point of view across, that's an Indigenous perspective...

Inauthentic Aborigine one minute, provider of the highly prized 'Indigenous perspective' the next – now back to being inauthentic, we see, as Jay continued:

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...and if the person disagrees with it, that's where it comes out every time without a doubt. They will bring it up that, 'Ah okay, so that's your view but you're not really Aboriginal. ...I'd like to know what an Aboriginal person thinks, a real Aboriginal person.'

Jay was not describing a single incident but a condition of his job:

You go to workshops, meetings here, senior officer meetings every Wednesday morning, this morning we had one. The discussion comes up and just the word Indigenous comes up and everybody looks straight at me and [he imagines saying]: 'You know I've got no idea what you're talking about!'

Q: How do you respond?

Oh, I'm at the stage now where I don't. So they'll look at me and I'll look back at them with a blank face...

Jay worked for a scientific and research-oriented department. He got on well with his managers and colleagues, he said. But as the single Aboriginal person in his workplace, his account suggests that he could not find a comfortable way to be representative. He could only resist the subtle pressure to 'substitute' for the absent by arranging a 'blank face'. But essentially, he could not avoid speaking as though he was 'Aborigines' because his opinions were always taken that way.

Bob, a non-senior employee in Alice Springs, did not see himself as representing Aborigines in his regional office workplace, but in the following exchange we can see that he was aware of the possibility that if he allowed himself to be recruited to an internal Aboriginal staff forum, his department could claim to be consulting with the Aboriginal community:

Q: Have you ever felt the government is *expecting* you to be a representative?

Sometimes yeah, I've been put on some things.

Q: What's an example of that?

...Oh yeah, it was talking about communities and stuff like that, how they want to re-set 'em all up [he was speaking of the NT Intervention] and they [the department] asked us [Aboriginal staff] to, you know, whether [he did not complete this phrase] - I thought, well, that's strange, they never really asked us beforeThey wanted to get the Aboriginal staff on board and I was thinking, 'Well, they must be trying to sound like *we consulted with Aboriginal people*.'

In his concluding comment to this incident, Bob revealed himself as a quiet tactician:

Yeah, so I'm very wary about that sort of stuff, because I prefer them to actually go and talk to people out in the communities, hear from them first hand.

Interviewees who discussed the 'substitutive' pressure saw it as asking them to act as a 'sounding board' in place of consulting the absent. Sarah offered the terminology of being 'used' – something that her account suggests she was practised at resisting. Sarah referred to

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instances when she was asked for her views in this way – that is when her presence was invited to be ‘substitutive’ – as instances ‘when people use me’. In such instances, she said:

I'll say, 'Well let me think about it,' and when I say that, then that gives me [time?] to go back and talk to people *outside* so, and that's with anything I do.... I always go back and get clarity from wherever, whoever – other Indigenous people, especially older people.

Sarah's case illustrates that she had some discretion to avoid ‘substitution’. When she saw that by acceding she might give her department an excuse not to consult with Aboriginal communities, Sarah drew on her discretionary ability to initiate such consultation herself.

The temptation of expertise

When interviewees drew my attention to the temptations of expertise, I saw this as a commentary on another form of ‘substitutive’ pressure – that which arises from being connected and knowledgeable, especially for those who have specialized in Aboriginal-specific work. Graeme was speaking of this dynamic when he observed:

You are considered the guru and nobody is an expert in our culture, nobody is.

Peggy was likewise cautious of the temptation to speak too confidently of the views of other Aborigines. She said that she was willing to ‘generalize to put a point across’. If she had specifically consulted with Aborigines, she ‘might be able to represent some people,’ she said. But that was her limit: ‘I don't think you can represent all other Indigenous people’.

Daryl, on the other hand, was happy to provide an ‘Indigenous perspective on policy’ if there was a proper process for asking him:

I think that it's a good thing. Sometimes it's a bad thing if it's not what they want to hear. Nobody wants to be a rubber stamp for anything but I think ... if there is a process for getting an Indigenous perspective on policy and I think it's probably important to try and sort of formalize it ... if there is a process of steering to a particular area of the department for a bit more in depth evaluation or what are the issues on a policy, rather than just give it to one person saying, 'What do you think?'

Daryl thought that ‘an Indigenous perspective on policy’ was ‘a good thing’. He had no objection to ‘substituting’ for Aborigines, as long as he had the chance to consult with colleagues in what he insisted that good government practice should give him the capacity to do. He suggested:

a process of steering to a particular area of the department for a bit more in depth evaluation or what are the issues on a policy, rather than just give it to one person saying, 'What do you think?'... I like to say, 'I'd like to talk to people first about this, you've put me on the spot.'

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Georgia tells us how she avoided certain aspects of the role of representative:

There's some things that I will run a mile, run away from. If people expect me to get up and do these whole big PD [professional development] things on culture, that sort of stuff ...people do, they really, they just assume that we're kind of all the same.

Having come from a southern city, Georgia explains:

I can talk about it generally, but I just didn't grow up in that situation, so that's where you've gotta call the right people in, and I understand and respect that.

Like Daryl, Georgia objected to being put 'on the spot'. She had observed many times the temptation to give offhand replies to critical issues and had deflected such invitations in her major service delivery department:

Well, they might be just one-off things really, sort of, 'I want you to think about this.' Well, you haven't even given a person a chance to have a *read*. ... if it's important, show a little bit of respect by giving someone a bit of a lead in. But they just think, 'Oh okay, that person will be able to think then and there on the spot.' If it's something that's really quite critical, often we'll just throw in a comment but it's not always well considered.

She added, warming to her subject:

It's taken as truth! Just seek one Indigenous person's point of view and you've *got it!*

'We don't know every issue', Georgia explained. Like Daryl, she set out some criteria for a more rigorous approach to Aboriginal inclusion:

You've got to have *inclusive practice* to actually invite and open it up for input. It can be structured. It can be structured so that you're getting the right information, but there aren't the inclusive practices and the department suffers dreadfully from cronyism and that sort of thing, which is really sad, but no, the inclusive practices just aren't there.

She added: 'People can tell when they're not really being listened to.'

Deborah agreed: 'Just because people have got black skin, they don't *know...*'. The temptations of 'substitution' were great. Deborah spoke wryly of always being believed:

Because I'm a black woman, they just agree with everything I say. I could tell them the sky is grey. But it's blue. How can it be?

How *can* it be? It seems the NTPS sought some kind of affirmation from Aboriginal public servants, perhaps affirmation of its relationship with the absent, but not necessarily new knowledge.

Impersonating the problematic policy subject

I conclude my discussion of the struggles with 'substitution' with a single account. I am brief because this interviewee did not consent to being characterized or directly quoted. To paraphrase: this person observed that it enabled their treatment as *policy or program subjects* if

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Aboriginal public servants accepted privileges which differentiated them from other public servants. As I see it, this insightful observation explains the more random writhing of so many other interviewees – such as those in the foregoing accounts – against the workplace currents which asked them to answer the question: ‘What do Aborigines think?’

We may now see why some found it necessary to differentiate themselves from the problematic Aboriginal policy subject. Interviewees were dismayed that when they looked to government to take care of a public which included Aborigines, it *looked back at them*.

Unrestrained, the obligations of ‘trusteeship’ could trigger those inevitable ‘substitutive’ moments which so challenged some interviewees’ sense of propriety in their relationships with the absent. But note that these were only the consequences of acceptance. That is – accepting the representative role by self-identifying, working in Aboriginal-specific programs and there drawing on identity to serve the absent *instigated* the dynamics which eventually imposed limitations on that acceptance. To remain afloat, most Aboriginal officials practised the subtle techniques of bureaucracy, finding ways to be constructive on behalf of their people and finely modulating their presence to make it tenable. This way, they could prevent being portrayed as the problematic policy subject.

However, some interviewees felt so cornered by the obligation to act *as Aborigines* that they refused the idea of being public servants altogether.

6.2 Declining the representative invitation: stories of exit

I have defined the decline of any interviewee’s commitment to public service representation as occurring when embryonic argument escalated to argument so fully realized as to culminate in his or her exit from the NTPS. We shall see how rare this was, and how even fully realized argument could still be internal and not vocalized.

The four exits I am about to describe were triggered by disagreements in just two subject areas: Aboriginal employment policy (the first pair of exits) and the servicing of remote Aboriginal communities (the third and fourth). A sense of inefficacy, or lost influence, is apparent in these cases. Not only that, but these interviewees were highly resistant to being characterized as Aboriginal policy subjects. They insisted on being heard, not just as

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Aborigines but as interlocutors of the government. Their vignettes may be read, in part, as the confidential ‘exit interviews’ that these interviewees were disappointed not to have been offered when they left the NTPS upon becoming aggrieved.

A forgotten ‘walkoff’

I start with the story of an interviewee who had not only left and returned, but who had been the NTPS’ most senior Aboriginal public servant at one time. Julia was one of a number of employees who had been asked to help the Northern Territory Government achieve an Aboriginal employment target in the policy era of ‘Aboriginalisation’. She was also among the staff who had orchestrated the ‘staged departure’, as she called it, from the Aboriginal Development Program in 1988. I term the incident ‘forgotten’ because interviewees did not see it as a prominently remembered episode, in the history of Aboriginal employment in the NTPS; and I elevate it to the status of ‘walkoff’ because this incident was the only one of its kind, as far as I am aware, in the NTPS. I am comparing the forgetting that seems to have erased this incident from the administrative memory with the honoured remembering of the Gurindji people’s famous walkoff from the Northern Territory’s Wave Hill Station in 1966 in protest against working conditions and the occupation of Aboriginal land. This was the symbolic launch of Aboriginal land rights.

Reflecting on her recruitment, along with others, to an innovative Public Service Commission which explicitly encouraged Aboriginal staff autonomy in the 1980s, Julia acknowledged the part played by non-Aboriginal public servants in the influence that her program had achieved over Aboriginal employment and training:

We really affected policy and ...we were seen to be able to make that difference. However ...I actually think though there were people there [non-Aboriginal public servants] that actually truly believed that you did represent and that what you were putting up was worthwhile testing and worthwhile committing to and putting those resources through and seeing how it worked.

Julia later added of her mentors: ‘as soon as they left, it was back to the old guard’.

Julia had also worked in the Commonwealth Government, where she related her experience of not being asked for ‘an Aboriginal perspective’ to ‘the situation in the NT Government at the moment’:

I was never called on once to actually give an Aboriginal perspective.....It’s like they want to increase Aboriginal people in their service because a lot of their clients are Aboriginal, so

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they're trying to bring some on with that perspective but it's [Aboriginal people are] the last person [people] that they'll actually ask for.

But then, she observed: 'a bureaucrat working in the public service now, in Indigenous Affairs, they almost want you to be content free'. Her comment was a reflection on the cost to well-constructed, appropriate Aboriginal service delivery of the trend away from specialized, 'bi-cultural' knowledge, Julia explained in a later conversation, towards managerialist approaches that valued generic management skills. Recall that Julia and her colleagues had protested at the separation of policy from its proper underpinnings, as they saw it, in practical implementation. She eventually found a way to re-enter the public service of her place of origin by quietly assisting communications between the government and Aboriginal people in remote communities.

This long time activist leaves us with a picture of Aborigines 'sitting' in workplaces which, having invited their contributions, cannot accommodate Aborigines' practical advice:

They've got to do business different but the only thing that they're doing different is that they've got the person sitting there ... God knows don't bring your ideas and don't really try and change the way we actually approach our business and how we engage with the community.

Julia's earlier career was well remembered by the older interviewees who referred me to her. Not all shared her representational style; indeed, another Aboriginal public servant took up the training programs and rebuilt them under different frameworks. I gained the impression, both from Julia's account and the account of this other long serving employee, of a loyalty among Aboriginal staff which tolerated and transcended their political differences.

A modern exit

Piecing together the stories of Julia and those who followed, I see that she left a legacy. Through the policy silence of the 1990s, a series of Aboriginal public servants took up the baton of Aboriginal public sector employment in various parts of government. One of them, Dora, spoke of representing 'Aboriginal-mob' in her community based developmental programs for Aboriginal staff. Dora continued to manage the programs for some time before their quiet demise and her own move into the Indigenous sector. Those who eventually had the opportunity to develop a sector-wide policy on Aboriginal public sector employment later in the 1990s faced the kinds of tension which are often experienced by central agencies as they try to coordinate departments which have different constituencies

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and resource requirements. Team after team has been assembled by the Commissioner for Public Employment to promote Aboriginal employment on a sector-wide basis, only to dissipate one after the other to create a kind of diaspora throughout other NTPS departments. The process of personal referral by which I recruited the participants in this research led me to interview many of the Aboriginal employees who had been involved in Aboriginal employment policy, some of them among the non-senior interviewees. My data lead me to the conclusion that all who have participated in the historic battle for Aboriginal public sector employment have found it very difficult to stay influential.

Yvonne had played a role in this history, after joining the NTPS in the 1990s. At one point invited to review and develop an Aboriginal employment policy, Yvonne was careful to explain she had not seen her role as advocacy. I have called her ‘modern’ because Yvonne seemed to typify the professional manager who had risen through the public service ranks. She explained that in the NTPS she had represented Aborigines ‘in a very broad sense’:

I think I can talk on, and I certainly did it at [my agency] in that I was able to influence, policies and programs we developed for Indigenous people in my position as a senior officer, so this was expected of me as the senior Indigenous person in that organization ... I would either agree, recommend or approve something or I would question it and say, 'No I don't think this is right for the betterment of this or for the general program.'

Thus Yvonne described her discretionary ability to assess ‘right’ and ‘betterment’ for the Aboriginal-specific program for which she was responsible. She distinguished carefully between influence and advocacy when she added, conscious of the ethics of public service:

...but I always made it clear that I never advocated on behalf of Indigenous people...

She also distinguished between a small, defined and a large, general object of representation:

...and I never spoke on behalf of a family or group or clan; never.

Between influence and advocacy, Yvonne explained, ‘it’s a fine line’. But she knew where it lay for her: in ‘influencing the program and the policy’ for the ‘flow-on effects’ in terms of ‘outcomes for Indigenous clients’, without speaking for ‘a defined Indigenous community’ but as ‘the senior Indigenous person’ in her organization. The undefined, categorical Indigeneity to which Yvonne referred was authorizing for her as a bureaucrat; but perhaps her Aboriginal audiences, while not undemanding, were less demanding on her than on other Aboriginal public servants because her traditional attachments lay largely outside the Northern Territory.

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When I pressed Yvonne to describe what she had found hardest in her time in the NTPS, she spoke of having had to accede to a text she had not written that painted a rosy picture of Aboriginal employment. She had felt that it would be seen by others to represent her views. She had advised her boss, whom she had felt to be highly supportive:

'I absolutely disagree,' I said. They were trying to paint it out that everything was rosy and ... that there were no problems and every Indigenous staff member was very happy.

Yvonne 'just couldn't' agree. Counselled to choose battles that she had a chance of winning, she had told herself that she could disown the text. When she did eventually leave the NTPS, it was for a different reason: the departure of her mentor and any chance, as far as she could see, of the continuation of a program they had built. Yvonne could face the unpalatable text, but not the prospect of continuing in the NTPS amidst the revisionism that as a seasoned public servant she knew was imminent under a new chief executive. Her willingness to represent 'in a very broad sense' had been workable; but she could not continue as a senior public servant once she judged that she had lost her influence.

'Walking the tightrope'

When I interviewed Bruce on one of his regular visits to family in Darwin, he had left the NTPS and the Northern Territory. He was bewildered by this outcome for a local Aborigine with professional qualifications, executive experience and a desire to contribute to the public service. His traditional connections extended from the north to the centre, but he was now interstate, 'living off my country' after a 20 year career in the NTPS. Starting as a NESA trainee in the 1980s, Bruce had 'travelled the whole of the Territory' to rise through the lower clerical grades to become a Senior Project Officer and an acting Director 'although in areas involving Indigenous,' he qualified without specifying the subject matter. His early career had been as the government 'eyes and ears', a field officer in community development. Overlooked for promotion to one of the now-upgraded Aboriginal Liaison Officer positions, he had found the personal funds for professional study. Eventually offered a cadetship to finish his degree, Bruce was still disappointed:

No-one [in my workplace] wanted to see my marks or anything. I was taking the money, but I could have been failing.

His worst fears were realized when he was 'shafted in a sense', he said, upon his return to the NTPS by not being given the chance to use his new credentials.

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Bruce was elected to a representative position as the chair of an Aboriginal council, an opportunity he described as ‘awesome’. He obtained a large amount of funding for social compliance programs by persuading his colleagues to sign off on an agreement with the Northern Territory Government. He recalled assuring his Indigenous sector colleagues:

‘It’s not just about words, you know. It’s about government functioning better.’

As Bruce saw it, ‘we showed good faith in getting this money’ that his council duly handed to the government in return for an in kind contribution to the same value. But ‘they never ever came to the party’. His next move was purposeful: he re-entered the NTPS, he said, ‘to know exactly what sort of in kind they were giving’. He was following up on the deal. Bruce accepted a newly created position with carriage of the agreement, with the charter of ‘looking at new ways of doing things’. He recalled saying to the official who recruited him:

‘I’m not sure how serious you are about this... I’m going to give you my full honesty.’

The deal was made; but once in the job Bruce realized, he said, ‘the money was gone’.

What spurred Bruce’s departure was the realization he had become ineffectual:

In the end, people were just going around me because I wouldn’t agree to some of the stuff they were putting up..... After a while, they were not hearing me.

On Bruce’s view, he had explicitly offered his representative capacity to the NTPS by bringing the trust of Aboriginal organizations. Questioned by superiors about his membership on various boards, Bruce decided that he was ‘more needed on those boards’ than he was in the NTPS. He ‘just left after [20 years] with the government and didn’t have an exit interview, nothing...’

Bruce saw himself as having been more principled than many public servants:

I could have sat there and collected my \$92,000, my phone, travelled around the Territory and do whatever I liked and drove a car too and had a free car park, but hey, you know, are they for real or just using me as a picture, just sponsoring me how they want to?

His conclusion?

*You can’t go to work *really wanting* to help blackfellas. ... if you get into the government, it’s all about give them what they want and maybe have a few of the things that come.*

It was not unusual for interviewees to be headhunted. Nine interviewees spoke of having been encouraged into seniority by very senior executives, non-Aborigines. Some were attracted by invitations to be ‘agents of change’, but they felt that they were left to fight losing battles with immediate supervisors when their mentors moved on. The way Bruce

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saw it, there was an expectation within government that Aborigines represent Aborigines, ‘but I think that they just don’t take it seriously you know’. We have seen that others had found the government’s invitation shallow, yet remain. What made Bruce resign?

In Bruce’s reckoning, he had been dispossessed of a role in which his credentials as a local Aborigine were impeccably broad and deep. Aborigines were of no consequence in the NTPS, he concluded: ‘We’re buried to whitefellas.’ Bruce’s program concerned matters of the most problematic and violent kind for Aboriginal communities. But he was unable to protect the resources that had been earmarked, upon his own initiative, to help. Bruce had remained firmly grounded in the community relationships that more enlightened workplaces had encouraged him to build. He saw the workplace which triggered his resignation from the NTPS as uncomfortable with these relationships. Summing up the problem, Bruce said:

If you try and walk the tightrope, one group’s going to have a go at you. The Indigenous mob just criticise you. The other group [the bureaucracy] will go around you. So it’s really difficult.

Bruce’s metaphor of the tightrope depicts the idea that the tensions of his role might have been endurable had colleagues been sensitive to them. As Bruce saw it, unwitting NTPS colleagues prevented him from continuing the balancing act that would have sustained his community relationships and his benefit to the public service. To extend his metaphor: Bruce’s resignation reflects too taut a rope. Bruce encountered collegiate anxiety just when he needed to show the Aboriginal community that the government trusted him. He refused to be trivialized – and especially, publicly trivialized.

‘Better outside’

Hanna had been a social policy executive in a central agency in which she was irritated by having to field senior executive colleagues’ assumptions that she might misuse her family connections with Aboriginal parliamentarians. Here, she conveys her side of a conversation:

I could have very easily picked up the phone and rung any one But I never did.

Hanna had not drawn on her relationships with Aboriginal parliamentarians or with powerful Indigenous leaders more widely. But she did not believe her restraint had been noticed: ‘I don’t think it’s recognised. I don’t think it’s respected or acknowledged.’ Hanna mused: ‘maybe we’ve been conditioned and trained too well’ – she meant, in the ways of

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bureaucracy and the ethics of public service. Here, she gives her perspective on what had so perplexed her colleagues:

[Aboriginal] Members of Parliament are incredibly aware of it and very conscious of it in terms of where the boundaries are, what you can and cannot do, and likewise I think it's absolutely well understood by the Aboriginal members of the public sector. I think people are very careful about it.....

Many interviewees spoke of managing carefully their connections to Aboriginal parliamentarians. In the Northern Territory, such connections are common. Like many Aboriginal public servants, Hanna knew her connections far better than they were known to non-Aborigines. Now, we may better understand Hanna's frustration with her colleagues' misplaced wariness:

I've been offended actually by being reminded by people of what my role was, and to have been ... let known ...that I needed to be careful about my relationships.

Hanna had come to the NTPS as a senior person with a public profile from her years as a respected Aboriginal advocate:

I've always worked in the area of, well, policy, advocacy, that kind of work, and I guess there was a certain expectation on my part that there would be an opportunity to really engage and to make a contribution.

But the message she received, upon arrival in the NTPS, was 'tone it down, tone it down,' she said. Hanna had found this difficult because:

The fact is, I know my stuff. ...I thought that it would have been seen as a resource.

Hanna saw herself as drawing 'practical knowledge' into the government. Her skill, she said:

...comes from drawing from practical knowledge and experience of what works and what doesn't on the ground.... You know, if it's not grounded in people's practical realities, then the chances are it's not going to work.

Here, Hanna explains her position on representing:

I didn't actually feel that I was there representing other Aboriginal people per se. I think I saw my role [in the NTPS] as presenting relevant information and insights and understandings that perhaps may not have otherwise been considered.....

With this mild agenda of public service contribution, Hanna met 'absolute and utter frustration in my inability to actually get Cabinet submissions to Cabinet'. An instance involving a remote community employment program triggered her resignation. 'I recoiled at the lack of critical thinking,' she said: 'the bureaucracy itself ...[is] almost wilfully obstructing any kind of reform'. What had driven this seasoned advocate to depict an inanimate object as wilful? Here is her own crystal clear articulation of how she perceived her reception as a senior Aboriginal public servant in her NTPS department:

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It's like you're meant to be there as this process workerrather than this real appreciation of ... particular skills or abilities or networks or whatever it is you have.

Hanna decided she was 'better outside of government'. From the outside, she felt she could do what she had thought she would be able to do on the inside:

I can go and meet with the senior bureaucrats and with departmental heads and so on. I have that flexibility to cover the field in a much more strategic kind of way, and a constructive way.

Hanna concluded that it was 'a really unrealistic assumption and expectation':

If you think that one or two or a handful of Aboriginal people are going to make one iota of difference ... We're working within the dominant paradigm.... There's a whole culture here that's been built up in the NT Public Service over the last 30 years. The capacity to change the way in which that culture operates, I think, is a big ask. ...

NTPS senior executives are encouraged to challenge the status quo, to take risks, to innovate to solve intractable Aboriginal policy problems. So how should I interpret Hanna's story? She made her last comment in the context of my question about the prospects of Aborigines' NTPS achieving the contribution to policy and decision-making that Aboriginal employment policy invites. As I see it, Hanna left the NTPS for two important reasons. One was that she could see no prospect of the NTPS trusting her sufficiently to allow her to be influential over Aboriginal policy – the reason she had entered it. The other was that she had, I believe, encountered the 'state effect' – a bureaucracy which would contain and limit those whom it marked as representative *just as it would contain and limit those who argued with that representation of them*. Unwilling to be so contained, she saw no reason to stay.

6.3 Considering the Indigenous sector alternative

I have asked: did those officials who were in 'orbit' between the NTPS and the Indigenous sector of publicly funded Aboriginal organizations move to the Indigenous sector to resolve the ethical ambivalence of public service?

Two of the four former NTPS employees whom I have just depicted as declining the NTPS' representative invitation went straight into senior roles in the Indigenous sector where they quickly became more effective interlocutors with the Northern Territory Government. The other two tried employment in other governments before eventually making similar moves. The terms of engagement for these interviewees had led them to expect trust and a hearing, as Aboriginal public servants. But each was tested on their loyalty to the public service as

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they found what some depicted as their ‘practical knowledge’ snubbed. I see their moves to the Indigenous sector as motivated by the ethical ambivalence of working in the NTPS.

My study did not aim to find out if work in the Indigenous sector is characterized by ethical ambivalence nor the extent to which working in that sector is contingent on tolerance for ethical ambivalence. But I did accumulate some general data on this issue, as many interviewees placed their career stories in the context of historically specific relations between the Northern Territory Government and the Indigenous sector.

Fifty of the whole group of 76 interviewees spoke to me of placing personal conditions of one kind or another on their NTPS employment. If their conditionality was based on ethical ambivalence about working for the public service, a correlation might be expected between those who placed such conditions on their public service employment and those who had been in the past or were now in the Indigenous sector. That there was no clear correlation of this kind in my data suggests either that interviewees placed great store on NTPS employment; or that whilst they had experienced ethical ambivalence it was not of the kind that would be resolved by moving into a more clearly representative role. A third possibility is that their NTPS employment was meeting their conditions, at least for the moment.

Yet, the Indigenous sector played a role of some kind. More than half the former employees were working in the Indigenous sector in 2007 (see Table 1 in Chapter One, page 15) and many current public servants had worked in the Indigenous sector at some time in the past.

Interviewees spoke of their work being more ‘grounded’ in the Indigenous sector. Some interviewees said that they considered the Indigenous sector a safe place for identity-building when the bureaucracy ceased to feel real. Leena said that Aboriginal public servants should be able to ‘step into community organizations’ for ‘time out’: local Aboriginal organizations were places ‘where you like the frameworks around you’, which ‘strengthen that sense of who you are’. Wanda, who had resigned, was about to establish her own Aboriginal employment enterprise; Louis, another interviewee, had already done so. While some saw the Indigenous sector as desirably ‘grass roots’ and more authentically representative of Aborigines, others found it the poorer employer for being under-resourced and less orderly than their public service workplaces. Although they viewed it sympathetically, my

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interviewees did not idealize the Indigenous sector. They spoke of clearer roles and better career opportunities in the public service even as they questioned their efficacy there.

Ethical ambivalence guided some career choices, but it did not guide all interviewees out of the NTPS. Some simply moved departments. Some saw working in the Indigenous sector as missing out on the chance for policy influence – that the Indigenous sector was too fragile and dependent, government’s handmaiden rather than a true interlocutor. Simon, who had also been an Indigenous sector leader and political advocate, saw no solid boundary between the Indigenous sector and the public service. Indeed, he saw the permeability between the two employment contexts as facilitating Aboriginal representative accountability:

I think they need to be here [in government] and some people need to be out, keeping others accountable... people out there and people on the inside.

Some interviewees saw the Indigenous sector as the place where they could reconcile a difficult public service history or gain the seniority they had not achieved in the NTPS. The Aboriginal Liaison Officer upgrading in 1983 did not necessarily move Aboriginal field officers into the senior hierarchy, as we have already seen for Bruce. Matthew, who started in the Office of Aboriginal Liaison in 1978, did not ever become senior although he was still in the NTPS in 2007, supporting youth programs in his town.¹¹⁰ But another of the former field officers, Davey, had felt foolish as the ‘eyes and ears of government or something’:

Really you just walked around and had a look and went back to the office.... You feel stupid.

Returning to the office after such community visits, Davey had felt unable to implement or progress what he had learned; that his field knowledge was inconsequential. ‘You’d be pulled back, pushed back’, he said, for presenting alternative viewpoints from the bush. Davey was the energetic Chief Executive of an Aboriginal organization at the time of our interview. Davey was one of the 10 non-senior interviewees who had become successful in the Indigenous sector (Table 5 in Chapter One, page 25; see also page 24).¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ At one point in his long career as a field officer in various welfare-oriented departments, Matthew said: ‘I got the wrong end of the stick because I stood up for my communities’. Matthew expressed enduring pride at this ‘shafting’.

¹¹¹ Seven of the 23 non-senior interviewees said they had left the NTPS expressly because they had felt unable to achieve a position of influence. Six of these seven were among the 10 who were in the Indigenous sector in 2007; only one of them had moved elsewhere.

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Another field officer, Nick, had broken through the field officers' 'glass ceiling' to achieve a senior administrative position in the regional office of an NTPS department, but he was not being offered more higher management opportunities. He was granted leave to take on the leadership of a local Aboriginal service delivery organization. His request to extend these arrangements was met with the placing of conditions on his political independence: it would be approved, he was advised, if he 'didn't do anything that would embarrass the Minister'. Nick 'flatly refused', he said – not because he intended to abandon his political judgement but because, like Hanna, the insinuation that he might do so underestimated him.

Overnight, like Davey and indeed Bruce, Nick acquired a new influence, as he tells us in this passage where he contrasts being 'CEO of an NGO' with being a 'bureaucrat':

There's a whole heap of different things, as a CEO of an NGO, you wouldn't do as a bureaucrat, so having that knowledge and experience I should be able to come back and make a greater contribution.... I'm more wary now about joining the public service and just being a footslogger.

Nick was clearly in orbit between the NTPS and the Indigenous sector. He was honing his bureaucratic skills through the Indigenous sector posting to do just what Bruce had done: to become a more senior public servant.

Aboriginal careers in orbit tell us of permeable boundaries between the government and the organizations which deliver some services on its behalf. To speak from the Indigenous sector was one way to enact a representative identity; but to speak from government was more highly prized. My data suggest a ricochet effect: that the inadequacies in one sector propelled Aboriginal career-seekers into the other. Generally, the Indigenous sector was not interviewees' preferred employer; they spoke of the greater orderliness and better working conditions of public service departments, even if they craved the raw energy of the Indigenous sector's political independence.

Was it ethical ambivalence that swung interviewees between the two? Perhaps, in part; but for some, as we have seen, it was a search for representative accountability.

In closing, I shall introduce Edith who was referred to me as someone who might want to participate in the study on the strength of a series of temporary, senior level contracts she had had with the NTPS.

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Edith had an intense desire to join the NTPS on a permanent basis. In this marvellous rhetoric, considerably abbreviated by me, Edith compares the public service, where she craves to be able to make a contribution, with the Indigenous sector where she was located at the time of her interview in 2007:

I would love to get a position in the NTPS and have my five weeks' leave a year and take them without worry that I can't take them; ... the government outsources this tender..., expects NGOs to do it with half the resources and stands over the top of them and when they get criticism, they blame the NGO, they say listen, we've outsourced that service...

But as Edith then portrayed the dilemma of 'sitting pretty':

...I would have to compromise the thoughts of people like me saying: 'What are you mob doing in there? How are you helping your people? Are you there to help your people?'

What lay behind Edith's fervent wish to join the NTPS? She was emphatic that the working conditions were secondary to something far more important to her. She was asking, she said, to contribute to the government of her place:

I am entitled to contribute at a senior level in the town that we grew up in.

However, in an eloquent reminder of the feelings of many interviewees about the sense of being ushered too quickly and too finally into Aboriginal specific roles, she requested in imaginary conversation with the NTPS:

'Don't sit me in Indigenous sections.'

So Edith laid out the extent to which she would accept the role of public service representative. This was hypothetical, since she had not been offered the role she wanted, to be a self-identifying representative Aboriginal *permanent* senior public servant. But I took her to be saying that were she to be so invited, she did not want her contributions pre-judged. Edith's eloquent plea was for something we have seen was virtually impossible for many in the public service: not to be 'sat in Indigenous sections'. It was in this context that Edith was concerned to draw my attention to her social reality: 'We're all married to each other now. We're all intertwined.' As I understand her, Edith wanted the public service to acknowledge the Northern Territory's complex demography. There had been a long history of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal settler descent: why not embrace that history, rather than singling out Aborigines as the chief policy problem?

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Concluding remarks

If you are reluctant to accept an invitation but you cannot bring yourself to decline it, you have other options. You can arrive late, leave early or limit yourself to a comfortable corner. Or you can over-indulge, opting to satirize social and cultural norms which you find oppressive by flagrantly transgressing them. By some social or cultural barometer, you will find ways to moderate your presence. I found in my data the most finessed repertoires of acceptance of the representative invitation in the subtly elided arguments and oblique resistances that constitute demurrals. Watchful presence was the practical workplace strategy of the self-identifying Aboriginal senior official. Those who effectively navigated their acceptance were not naïve or unaware, hapless tokens, but mindful professionals who were alert to the fine line between contribution and argument and trod it carefully.

To sum up my argument so far: what makes the public service workable as a source of employment for many Aborigines is the prospect of being the trustworthy keepers of space for the absent. The problem is that in the workplaces that so desire their presence, they cannot always keep out of that space themselves. ‘Trusteeship’ works, it seems, until the desire to defend Aborigines tips into ‘substitution’; where Aboriginal officials speak as though the absent will never be present. ‘Trusteeship’ works until liberties are unknowingly taken with Aborigines’ wary presence by obliging them to become the problematic policy subject. Disaffected employees reduce their presence, blank their features. Few decline the invitation outright, although many move quietly into the Indigenous sector where most await a good opportunity to return.

I opened this chapter with the comment that interviewees found the signs opaque that could tell them how to interpret workplace events: when, and when they were not, being singled out *for their Aboriginality* in workplaces in which Aborigines were most familiarly a policy problem. Some interviewees were genuinely perplexed as to how seriously to take the invitation to be representative by contributing to the public service as Aborigines. Listening to them, it seemed to me that they were taking the representative invitation *more seriously than it was meant*. This was the misfit between invitation and reply: the invitation was superficial and callow, but it was easily misread by those who wanted it to be otherwise.

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I find the serious respondent a compelling characterization of those who try to answer the calls of representative bureaucracy. The invitation is very important to its recipients – but its blithe calls to representation are *unacceptable* if they cannot in all practicality be met.

Where were the limits of acceptance, for my interviewees? I found the limits of their acceptance at any point where acceptance trifled with their relationships and their sense of local honour. They reached these limits in ordinary workplaces, and they reached them when they felt that history was being too forgotten or when they felt that the absence of vast numbers of Aborigines from the public service was going too unseen.

Chapter Seven

Sustainable Selves, Practising Representatives

I have portrayed Aboriginal senior officials as willing and wary respondents to an ambivalent invitation to represent Aborigines in the administration of the Northern Territory. ‘Accepting’ and ‘reluctant’ describe no particular grouping but the circumstantial disposition of anyone. Interviewees could find the invitation frustrating if it asked them to represent the Aboriginal interest as though that was indistinguishable from the general public interest or if it asked them to accede to a competing version of the Aboriginal interest – even though the invitation might acknowledge their ‘trusteeship’. Or interviewees could be frustrated by the pressure to speak, as though they must ‘substitute’ for the absent when they preferred not to. We shall soon see that they could be frustrated by the opposite, if they wanted to speak and they were not recognized and so were, in effect, refused.

Workplaces were the sites of these contentions. The subject matter invited representation; absent Aborigines have no voice, in public service departments, without it. Bureaucratic discretion permits it. But public service norms weigh against it. The interviews were replete with memories of remembered conversations, even inner conversations, in which interviewees grappled with the norms that enticed and repelled their representations.

An ambivalent invitation is not easily answered. Is there an option, in the protocol of invitations, which is neither acceptance nor demurral/decline? There is always the option of deferring the invitation. An unacceptable invitation may be put off; and in the socio-political space thus created, its terms might be re-imagined to make them more sustainable to the self.

In this chapter, I explore how the representative invitation may be answered *such that the representing sustains a sense of self*. Interviewees spoke of feeling *misrecognized* when they understood themselves to be apprehended for the extent to which they ‘looked Aboriginal’ rather than for their contributions. Interviewees posed new dimensions in their relationship with absent Aborigines and with government when they called themselves ‘role models’.

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Was ‘role modelling’ a way of restoring self-esteem in the face of unacceptable terms of recognition? If so, the need for it arose with particular force during my fieldwork. The Northern Territory Intervention hit the airwaves and policy desks in July 2007 when I had only just begun interviewing. The Commonwealth spotlight on Aboriginal dysfunction – child abuse, substance abuse, ‘rivers of alcohol’ – singled out the Northern Territory’s remote communities. Protectionist policies found renewed purchase with the Australian public, but unlike in the previous century Aboriginal leaders had now joined the debate. Intense scrutiny, Commonwealth upon Northern Territory, non-Aborigine upon Aborigine and Aborigine upon Aborigine, was permeating the public service during my interviews.

Many interviewees not only had to participate in implementing the Intervention, they had to consider how its powerful representation of Aborigines as dysfunctional affected their own claims to be representative. Some felt that their warnings to government about the under-servicing of Aboriginal communities had been vindicated. Many expressed abiding concern for the good people *they* knew in communities, rising to support colleagues in community schools and clinics whose image was being shattered in the tabloids. Aboriginal senior officials presented themselves as guardians of the voiceless and defenceless against the whipped up panic of dire social emergency.¹¹²

The Intervention no doubt heightened the sensitivity of my research participants to the demeaning self-depiction that so damages historically disadvantaged groups. Some who felt suddenly more gazed upon at work were inclined to challenge the stereotypes of dysfunctional Aboriginality which surrounded Aborigines so profoundly in 2007. But even before the Intervention, ‘role modelling’ was understood to be a way of representing Aborigines to government and a way of representing government to Aborigines.

I begin the chapter with a discussion of ‘the visual judgement of people’, as one interviewee theorized a phenomenon that many mentioned affected their ability to contribute to the

¹¹² Povinelli (2008) critiques the Northern Territory Intervention’s declaration of a ‘state of exception’ for longstanding Aboriginal rural poverty and marginalization. The article reproduces Povinelli’s speech at a well-attended public forum at Charles Darwin University in Darwin on 20 July 2007 in which she observed that ‘the foundational dream of the last 30-plus years of the self-reparative aboriginal subject, nurtured almost entirely by the image of cultural difference and recognition, has been, if not shattered, then severely battered’.

NTPS in the way they desired. This sets the scene for my discussion of ‘role modelling’, through which some sought to show and teach self-discipline to other Aborigines. What values lay behind this characterization? Logically, ‘role models’ must imagine that others esteem them. I find in my data an alternative imaginary in which Aboriginal senior public servants saw themselves as meritorious by being grounded, localized in their orientations, Aboriginal ‘Territorians’. Here was *their* normative theory of the properly representative Aboriginal public servant.

Then I return to the representative relationship – the relationship between those Aborigines present in, and those absent from, the public service. Recall that representatives must be *like, but not too like*, those they represent. ‘Role models’ can be selective about the qualities they emphasize. We are in the realm of symbolic representation, where the political content can be under-estimated. So I explore more closely here the kind of authorities and accountabilities that, in my data, underpinned the idea of ‘role modelling’. Given the compelling idea that *mutual* relations between descriptive representatives and those they represent draw on a sense of sharing fates, I explore the extent to which Aboriginal senior officials, in depicting themselves as ‘role models’ in some sense *better than* the disadvantaged, were expressing politically interactive relationships. That is, if we suspend our own judgement to understand a relationship that takes place not only with government but between Aborigines, we may ask: to what extent did interviewees believe that their ‘role modelling’ *compromised* or alternatively *realized* mutual relations with absent Aborigines?

Gradually, this chapter draws all of the interviewees back into consideration – the non-senior, and later on those who did not self-identify – to complete my account of their theories of practice.

7.1 ‘The visual judgement of people’

One interviewee wore a uniform. But it was not this that non-Aboriginal colleagues first noticed about him. ‘They see your features straight away,’ he said. He could tell by how ‘some of them talk to you’. Another interviewee commented that ‘the presence of an Aboriginal person makes other people be careful what they say’. Many interviewees drew on their intuition as evidence that they were seen as Aborigines before they were seen as public servants – that their looks mattered more than their contributions. It was a recurring theme

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that interviewees felt exposed – whether uncomfortably or proudly – by the phenotypic characteristics of their race.

Deborah knew by ‘gut feeling’ how she was perceived by non-Aboriginal colleagues:

I can walk into a meeting and I'm a manager, but they don't see that.

However, she recalled this piece of evidence:

I've been in some meetings where ...a white man ...will go, and they'll give him hell; and I'll go and because I'm a black woman, they just agree with everything I say.

This was the point at which Deborah observed that no matter what she said, ‘the sky is grey’. Reviewing her interview, Deborah preferred not to draw hard racial lines but to distinguish between those in the government who were prepared to work with Aboriginal people – the ‘doers’, including herself – and the ‘rulemakers’, or the empty ‘talkers’ whom she characterized in her interview as the ‘gammon people...getting Aboriginal people together on the policy thing’. In Aboriginal English, ‘gammon’ means ‘pretend’ or ‘false’. Aborigines were not virtuous, Deborah was saying. They could just as easily be drawn into the meaningless world of ‘talking’ as non-Aborigines. Deborah disparaged obsequious racial ‘respect’ and the Aborigines who acceded to it. She neither gathered together Aboriginal opinion for the sake of it nor thoughtlessly ‘substituted’ her own opinion for consultation with absent Aborigines. But Deborah – and other interviewees who shunned callow invitations to contribute for their looks – felt *misrecognized* as public servants.

Louis, a non-senior interviewee in Alice Springs, spoke of ‘the visual judgement of people’. But the judgement was different in his case. ‘If they’re looking for an Indigenous person,’ he said in reference to senior colleagues:

They won't actually look *for me*, they'll actually look for a black face.

Nine senior interviewees spoke of the effects of ‘not looking Aboriginal’. Several were executives. One of them, Wanda, had identified as Aboriginal, in her research-oriented department, but she was not recognized as such by non-Aboriginal colleagues. Here, she highlights that it is not self-identification which identifies Aboriginal public servants:

I was at a senior meeting about five years ago now and [my Chief Executive] came in and basically gave us the big drum about recruiting and mentoring Aboriginal people and he basically said, 'Well look around the table, we don't have any Aboriginal people sitting here'. And I'm goin', 'Okay, obviously he doesn't read his stats.'

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Wanda described herself as ‘white’. Her mother had been the last full speaker of an Aboriginal language in her home state, but ‘most white people don’t know’ of her Aboriginality, she said. Although the assumption that her boss made was familiar and understandable to her, self-identification, Wanda explained, was ‘very complex’ in her life. Her mother had not told Wanda until very late, about her mother’s early life in an Aboriginal camp in a segregated town, nor of her language. ‘They’ve been flogging it out of us for 50 years,’ her mother had explained to Wanda. Wanda did not correct her boss because she thought her colleagues would see her as bidding for special treatment:

If you do stake your claim, they see that as then here comes the race flag: ‘Poor blackfellas, we’re gonna have to look after her because she claims it’.... So I left it.

Unable – because she did not look Aboriginal enough, as she saw it – to secure a role in which she could better serve Aborigines, Wanda was about to establish her own Aboriginal employment agency.

Ron, an executive in another department, was raised in a southern city. His mother had been institutionalized, but his family had not had to disavow their race. Not only had Ron self-identified, he had declared his Aboriginality on numerous occasions – on his entry to the department, to his staff and since, to his senior managers’ group. Despite his willingness to contribute his vast experience and a commitment that he attributed to his Aboriginality, he was often passed over for comment on Aboriginal issues. Ron reasoned:

It’s quite hard being a fair skinned Indigenous person in a place where you’re not from....I find it very hard to be taken seriously as an *Indigenous* person.

I will return to the issue of coming from outside the Northern Territory. For now, I note that ‘not looking Aboriginal’ seemed to the nine who discussed it to hinder the enactment of a representative identity that most of them desired. They felt *refused as representatives*. Their stories suggest – some had conducted private tests to confirm it – that the invitation to make Aboriginal contributions to the public service excluded those who did not have the appearance of Aboriginality *even if they self-identified*. My data support interviewees’ impressions, because the nine interviewees whose Aboriginality was not recognized overlapped significantly, for the small numbers involved, with another nine: those less exclusively involved in Aboriginal-specific programs.

To recapitulate: many of those who could not fail to be recognized as Aborigines were reluctant about some of the representations that being recognized led them into as Aborigines' self-appointed 'trustees'; and many of those who were not recognized as Aborigines were more willing to represent other Aborigines than was effectively allowed them. The apparent contradiction is explained by recalling that interviewees' reluctance as representatives was in response to having their representations *presumed*. To be overlooked was, for some, likewise presumptive.

I could argue that 'role modelling' was merely a kind of surrender to the social fact of 'visual judgement' by allowing Aboriginal officials to assume control of their self-image. But it seems to me that by calling themselves 'role models' – the only kind of representation for which they had a name – interviewees were evincing a more complex and sustainable idea.

7.2 'Role models': speaking to others

To be seen as 'role models' was the sense of representation that around half the interviewees preferred, or found least uncomfortable, over the other senses of representation which were present in my data.¹¹³

To see yourself as a 'role model' to others is to imagine that they hold you in their esteem.¹¹⁴ What roles did 'role models' model and to whom did they model them? I explore through the data how 'role models' drew on their authority as public servants to *speak to* their people.

In what follows, I tease from the data the ways in which interviewees modelled the deportments of self-discipline, in their representation of Aborigines to government. I then discuss a more instrumental purpose: 'corrective governing', by which some who called

¹¹³ The term 'role model' originates in American sociology, where it was first used by Robert K. Merton to describe the set of behaviours – even incompatible behaviours – that attach to an individual's place in a social structure (Holton 2005: 514).

¹¹⁴ Rational choice theorists propose that 'forces of esteem and disesteem' may be exchanged like material goods in an 'economy of esteem' and in that sense play a part in the desire for high office (Brennan and Pettit 2000: 78; 2002). While I do not position my argument this way, I acknowledge these intriguing explorations and the influence of Brennan's unpublished paper on the subjectivity of self-esteem on my discussion (Brennan 2007).

themselves ‘role models’ represented government to Aborigines. Some felt this as both their responsibility and their entitlement as Aboriginal people with the connections and the capacity to help. But not all interviewees held the same view of entitlement. Non-senior interviewees in Central Australia, for example, contested the representative capacity of those who appeared remoter from their people by being in more centralized positions in Darwin.

Self-discipline: ‘what kind’s this woman?’

Mary explained that Aboriginal audiences expected Aborigines to exercise public sobriety and behavioural self-discipline, when they were in senior positions:

A lot of our mob, we want to be seen as a good role model - like you can't be out drunk and misbehaving otherwise [they will say], '*what kind's this woman?*' She is supposed to be there representing us and ... look at her behaviour! With blackfellas, because people really look at you, you know, because there is only so many people in key positions that are having an influence ..., you really are being watched a lot. ...if you stuff up, well everyone is going to hear about it. So it's that sort of a thing, a close network.

Mary was explaining a social phenomenon. She did not work alone. She was the member of a group – the ‘close network’ of her extended family, community, peers and colleagues in Aboriginal affairs. To this group, her representations were on display.

Mary’s career spanned representative roles in the Indigenous sector, the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments. To explain ‘role modelling’, Mary referred to the hazards of ‘demand sharing’ in Aboriginal relationships, or ‘sharing’ on the demand of kin.¹¹⁵ As a public servant Mary imagined such demand, we see in her metaphor of ‘my auntie’s car’:

It's like, 'Oh yeah, you broke my auntie's car,' you know, a long time ago. You'd better look after it or the people will, you know, then people will just carry on about that for years and years.

‘You get blamed for a lot of things,’ she said, including problems in government service delivery. We saw the same with Kel, who was ‘rubbished’, as a public servant, by his local community. Note the indirectness of these descriptions of relationships with other Aborigines: to *get* blamed’ or to *be* ‘rubbished’. There was no personal agency here, just the passively felt consequences of being part of a group that embraced its members this way.

¹¹⁵ ‘Demand sharing’ redistributes material goods by transfers which are demanded, not offered, among kin (Austin-Broos 2003: 128). To make such a demand is to confirm a relationship, as Austin-Broos discusses in her ethnography of a desert community’s encounter with the welfare economy and the idea of work. Austin-Broos frames difficulties in this encounter as ‘the problems of articulation that occur between kin-based and market-based societies’ (2003: 118).

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To think of yourself as a ‘role model’ was to expose yourself, potentially, to blame. That this exposure was indirect, oblique, is in the nature of Aboriginal kin relationships. Even as urban people, many interviewees were immersed in such relationships. Mary did not speak of being better than other Aborigines, but she spoke of *being expected* to pitch herself as better. ‘Role modelling’ was a phenomenon of Aboriginal relationships, albeit that it was empowered by officialdom.

Mary had ways to measure the esteem in which she was held; but the engagement of another interviewee, Ben, with the Aboriginal community was more tentative as he had recently returned to the Northern Territory after years away. Less well known, he could not so easily be blamed. But he still exposed himself to Aboriginal scrutiny when he called himself a ‘role model’ to those who had had the same truncated secondary education. Ben worked in a major infrastructure department. As for other interviewees, to ‘be looked up to’ was passive:

I would like to think that as an Aboriginal person you may be a role model or be looked up to. Maybe people would come to you, to me eventually for advice or for direction, you know, but I don't think I represent Aboriginal people. No. I think I can show the way, be a role model....This is all possible and if you want to get up the top I think the opportunity is there. And as I said, I had one year of high school.

Ben was proposing that others may see him as a symbol of success by getting to a senior position with only one year of high school, but he did not presume to speak for other Aborigines. Ben distinguished ‘role modelling’ from representation. ‘To represent people they'd have to ask you to’, he said, evoking the ‘delegate’ notion like others who did see themselves as representing. As I see it, Ben distinguished ‘role modelling’ from representation because he lacked the delegation to represent more explicitly. Ben left it to his beholders – more junior Aborigines in his department, I take it – to respond as they saw fit to the qualities that he modelled. Even though he was not closely connected to the local Aboriginal community, Ben fulfilled the criterion ‘better than’ by his achievement of seniority with incomplete education. This gave him the ability to assist others.

Randall spoke of ‘representing the Northern Territory Government and plus like even my own people, my people, they see me working and they like what I do for a living’. Randall was ‘looking after’ activities on Aboriginal land, for which one of his people had recently said to him, on the street: ‘that’s good’. Likening himself to ‘a role model to younger people that’s trying to have a go,’ he explained:

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Indigenous people see an Indigenous man coming from the Northern Territory Government coming to help. They sort of accepted me in their, coming into their land and showing them what to do ..., that's a really good feeling. I suppose I've been around town, that I've been working with the Northern Territory Government and some people know me really well ... that I've got a bit of Indigenous blood in me.

I see Randall as a broad-ranging representative of both government and his people. Not only that, he introduced a substantive purpose in 'Indigenous people seeing an Indigenous man' from the government when he described himself as 'showing them what to do'.

A note of didacticism crept into the meaning of 'role model'. Through this idea of themselves, diversely positioned senior public servants took opportunities to exhibit and explain self-discipline to other Aborigines. For example, Carol said that she represented other Aborigines in her work by 'trying to teach people things'. Simon, too, 'wherever you're working and your mob is proud of you,' said that they – 'mainly family' – often told him 'you need to be this, you need to do that'. In return, he said: 'You get an opportunity virtually to explain to them how the government operates.'

'Role modelling' was moralizing, in the relationship between Aboriginal senior officials and their subject Aborigines. I do not find such moralizing adequately explained as government's benevolent hand meting out lessons to its citizenry. Though partly governmental in its bid for social order and partly designed for wider audiences, the 'role modelling' espoused by my interviewees was understood by them to be *Aborigines' business*.

My data suggest that 'role models' who were deeply embedded in Aboriginal relationships were comfortable exuding knowingness and seeming better off than other Aborigines. Viewed in the context of Aboriginal relationships, 'role modelling' was not a break in connection. It expressed, even realized, social connection. In some jobs, interviewees were not speaking on behalf of Aborigines *to the government* but *to other Aborigines* – their policy or program subjects – *as Aborigines in government*.

We have moved from the idea of self-discipline to circumstances in which interviewees disciplined others by drawing on governmental authority to correct problematic behaviours: what I am calling 'corrective governing'. Those working in what I am terming 'corrective governing' were not necessarily given to the self-characterization 'role model'; and

‘corrective governing’ was not the only context in which interviewees spoke of ‘role modelling’. But there was a correctional component in both that I now explore.

‘Corrective governing’

‘I wouldn’t come to your country drunk. How dare you come into my office drunk?’

So Deborah recounted her spontaneous admonition of an Aboriginal man who entered her office under the influence of alcohol. The inebriated man had first wandered off the street into another section. Deborah saw it as through ‘fear of not being seen to be politically correct’ that non-Aboriginal colleagues in that other section brought him to her. Deborah was renowned for her directness with Aborigines who sought to abuse the resources of her office, a shop front on the main street of town.

Thus, some interviewees spoke not ‘for’, as ‘trustees’ might, or ‘as’ as ‘substitutes’ might, but ‘to’ other Aborigines by way of reprimanding anti-social behaviours. In so doing, Deborah drew a parallel between this man’s ‘country’ and her public service ‘office’ which was more than witty story-telling. Her interesting equation of ‘country’ and ‘office’ suggest pride in her positional authority and protectiveness towards her Aboriginal staff who were ‘good’ citizens by seeking to maintain traditional lives as well as earning their families’ livelihoods. Deborah was prepared not just to stand for and stand up for, but to *stand over* other Aborigines when anti-social behaviour threatened her program. The drunk’s behaviour trampled on the right of her staff members to do their work for other Aborigines in peace. What is more, Deborah’s own country was elsewhere. Her office was her domain in a way in which the town was not, although she had married locally and had lived there for many years.

Six senior officials and three non-senior interviewees had all been involved in a less spontaneous instance of ‘corrective governing’ in what I am calling the ‘social discipline’ project.¹¹⁶ This was one of various government efforts over the past decade or so to control swelling Aboriginal populations in Northern Territory towns. Through this project, some who spoke of themselves as ‘role models’ assisted with social discipline. Each interviewee who had been involved in some version of the program raised it when I asked what they had

¹¹⁶ These interviewees were a subset of the group whose field of work I have described as encouraging Aborigines’ compliance with Government programs.

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found hardest about working for the government. Here I record interviewees' reflections on what they found difficult in this work and why they did it nonetheless.

The 'social discipline' project was 'something that we didn't want', said Sophie – although it was, she persuaded herself, 'an opportunity to provide intervention services to a group of people who didn't know how to access them'. The work involved inducing 'agencies who had primary responsibility to take those primary responsibilities' but it placed Aboriginal public servants in the public spotlight and in the line of fire of local Aboriginal organizations, local businesses and community groups.

Lucy, one of several interviewees who had managed the 'social discipline' project, explained:

It was targeted towards the remote community people that were coming into town - we were sort of looking at helping people who came into town and got stuck here - we'd encourage them to go back home or do something more productive with their lives.

Lucy had left this job 'because of the social issues that we were confronted with all the time', she said without elaboration. Sandy, another manager, said that it 'tested us tremendously':

You get tested to every aspect of your moral fibre from both sides of the agenda, both the black and the white. ... I'd get NGOs beating up on my staff verbally You found yourself walking this line on behalf of the NT Government. 'Who made the decision?' [NGOs asked]. I said well this is the decision; it was made by the government. 'Who specifically?' They wanted names and numbers and the time the decision was made That was really hard but - good - at the same time, because it really tested me as an individual, tested what I was about.

Sandy defined 'really hard stuff' as the recognition of anti-social behaviour, something that she said not all Aboriginal people were willing to acknowledge:

That's the hard stuff that some Aboriginal people don't acknowledge that there is bad behaviour there in the streets. ...those were the moral issues and the tough issues that we had to sort of come to grips with and deal with and face head on.

Sandy was guarded about relating her credentials, for this work, to her Aboriginality:

I'd like to think it's because I'm a caring person. Maybe it was a little bit easier because I'd got the networks and you have that empathy and understanding and you're prepared to work in that environment.....

I don't want to sound as though, yeah, because I was Aboriginal, I made it work. I don't know if I did. But I'm just letting you know that I think my heart was in the right place.

The social pressures that came with the job of entreating acceptable public behaviours from Aborigines in the town made Sandy examine her conscience, at times:

At times I would go home, look at myself and think, 'am I betraying Aboriginal people by being like this and saying these things, that it [anti-social behaviour] is not acceptable?'

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Sandy had had to face the possibility she would be locally seen as siding with racist ill-feeling. But she was prepared to stand up for women's rights and for human rights:

*You'd get up and have to talk about anti-social behaviour and how wrong it is and not condoning Aboriginal men bashing women in public.... I don't condone that. Any sort of violence against women is terrible. It's not acceptable at a *human level*....*

If the job meant being on public view as a government representative, that was a small price to pay for the satisfaction of efficacy for Sandy, a long serving public servant with traditional connections to places near her town. 'Role modelling' had a substantive purpose, for Sandy in this context at least: to model, by her presence and her public stance, not only the humane treatment of Aboriginal women and children but her capacity to face confronting issues when doing so was bristlingly uncomfortable.

Edith reflected on how she resolved her own discomfort with calling other Aborigines on anti-social behaviour by reminding herself of what came with being both senior and a *local*. In the following passage, 'educating the uneducated' meant explaining the reasons for Aboriginal itinerancy to local businesses, the police and other town-based services:

I started to get uncomfortable but we were really, we were senior Indigenous people in our town and if we didn't stand up and ... do something about it or educate the uneducated about it, what's the point?

Entitlement

Itinerancy had not been Edith's own experience, but she was a local person who had multi-linguistic and extensive local connections. A 'coloured mob' descendant, Edith was proud that her grandfather 'came to Australia and married an Indigenous woman and then fought, all his life, for the rights of coloured kids'. To speak for racial justice was her calling. Recall that Edith said she felt 'entitled to contribute at a senior level in the town that we grew up in'. She was adamant that being a local person with the requisite administrative experience entitled her to a permanent appointment to its public service. She had worked on a 'social discipline' project on extended temporary contracts. Although she had made her desire for permanency known, her position was never secure:

I was going home at night saying, '...They're entrusting me to go out and do all this stuff ... but they're not rewarding me by giving me security of tenure.' This is what I needed. It would have made me do it even better.

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It was her local connections that enabled Edith to moderate between transient populations and the wider community. She sought a particular kind of recognition from the government in return: to fulfil her destiny as a racial descendant of the town environs by becoming the public servant she should be *as of right*. This, after all, was her ‘home town’:

It's my home town and this is the structure that's going to be there for my kids when they come up. I want them to pick up Hansard and see their mother's name in it. I want them to see that their mother contributed to these things, just like I see in my grandfather, who got locked up for a bottle of beer because his father was white and his mother was black. So the history goes on and we've got a vested interest in all of this

I believe that I should be and my kids, we should be the ones [in the public service].

Edith was not speaking of any particular job but her right to be a ‘role model’ for her people by taking on the responsibilities of government. Through Edith, we may see that ‘role modelling’ enacts a political conscience. The ‘role model’ wants to tackle the Northern Territory’s deep historical problems because he or she has been affected by them, but has *personally emerged from them relatively unscathed*. The ‘role model’ is not necessarily a docile or obedient public servant. The ‘role model’, potentially, makes demands.

Edith was not alone in speaking of her entitlement to a place in the public service; and she was not alone in her efforts to bring her relative social advantage to bear on the fates of less advantaged Aborigines. Nor was she alone in representing her work as honourable. Remember, for example, Sally’s comment that ‘we can be flashy too if we want’. Sally went on to say: ‘We can achieve really, really well but still be grounded in our culture.’

Thus, some senior Aboriginal public servants argued their relevance to absent Aborigines. My research did not evince the wider Aboriginal population’s perception of them. But a subset of interviewees, a group who saw themselves as marginal to the NTPS, drew out the tension between those in the central administration and those regionally based who were closer to their communities. These interviewees painted a distinct social world which was in the centre of Australia but at the periphery of the Northern Territory Government. They were ‘role models’ for their communities, some were active proponents of ‘corrective governing’ and they felt entitled to be public servants in their town. But none of the following interviewees was senior. And they did not model themselves on those in Darwin.

Contention

Gabby had spent her childhood in a town camp in a desert town. Her mother was ‘always down the street, she was literally belly up’ and had left Gabby and her siblings to bring up other babies, ‘kids raising kids’ as Gabby put it. Gabby remembered ‘doing all my times tables in a house full of drunks’. She didn’t finish Year 12, but ‘the teachers didn’t really mind because you’re an Aboriginal’. In Gabby’s reckoning, her childhood experiences gave her insights which she did not see in those at senior levels of the public service:

Indigenous people, through no fault of their own, that are at those levels, well they have never had an Indigenous lifestyle, so they can't relate to the Indigenous person walking down that street... They're like the untouchables, and then they're put in there and they're making policies that - [we] may as well not even have them there as far as representation [goes] - it might as well be a non-Indigenous person

To make it to the upper levels was the converse of having lived an ‘Indigenous lifestyle’ which by Gabby’s measure meant to have had personal experience of grinding disadvantage. Of course, Gabby’s suspicion of Aboriginal senior public servants had been fanned by her desert town’s historic distrust of the priorities of Darwin offices. ‘Top End or ‘saltwater’ Aborigines were seen to reap benefits not available to desert people by residing in the more populous northern electorates, nearer to government. Gabby saw them as ‘untouchables’. She may have meant disconnected, beyond criticism or perhaps unaccountable. Gabby saw herself as a better kind of ‘role model’ by being more grounded in her place:

That's what I'd like people to think - 'Well, if *she* can do it,' because I've just normal schooling like everyone else, '*We* can do it too'... My thing is whole of picture, and that's what I mentor kids onit's about the way you behave.

Louis described having been ‘handed around’, as a child, among unfamiliar Aborigines:

I came from a very bad background. There was a lot of violence, there was a lot of alcohol, there was a lot of sexual and mental abuse.

Louis had lived on the streets of a southern city before returning to a Northern Territory desert town to find his family. They turned out to be alcoholics living in a dry creek bed. He had joined them for a while, so intense was his need to know them. But Louis cleaned up his life and joined the NTPS. Now running his own local business, he concluded:

So - and now I work with ... people who've got a violent history I understand where the violence comes from. If I work with people who've got no education, I'm a person with no education. So I can empathise really well and I think that this got me to where I am.

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Louis asked of Aboriginal senior officials only that they had ‘travelled into remote areas’. ‘We had people writing policy in Darwin,’ he said of his department, ‘that had never worked on the ground’. Whilst Louis had been encouraged and supported to complete a qualification whilst in government, he felt that taking up this opportunity had initiated the problems which broke his NTPS career. His propensity to ask direct questions had met with suspicion, in his telling of the story, on the part of his senior Aboriginal manager. Thereafter, his performance was closely scrutinized. It conveys the power of seniority – of adding public service authority to already complex, cross-geographic Aboriginal relationships – that Louis described his fall from grace in the public service as more shattering than anything he had experienced.

Two people whom I interviewed together, at their request, in a desert town, spoke candidly of careers in which they had both mounted proud challenges to government. Lois was still in the public service; Nolan had left to pursue an activist career. Lois described Nolan as an ‘outcast’, as a public servant, because he ‘always shot from the hip’. But Lois was also outspoken in her insistence that superiors ‘tell it straight’ to her Aboriginal clients. They contrasted their representations with those of a senior Aboriginal colleague who:

...wouldn't be there if he/she didn't know how to say, 'Yes sir, how high do you want me to jump?'

Carly's family had settled in Central Australia after her mother had been taken from a Top End remote community. Checking that she could be ‘honest’ in her interview, she commented of her department that it's ‘their way or the highway’. This choice of metaphor was highly relevant to her interview, as she told me how Aboriginal people in her region perceived Darwin-based public servants at the north end of the Stuart Highway:

We all say, 'The Top End mob'. We see that Top End mob are more exposed to information than the Centre. The Centre from probably other side of Katherine down, Central people... we take a bit more time. I don't know whether it's because of law and culture or just because of the exposure to information, exposure to the bigger picture stuff...[but] you hear that now and again, just in conversation, 'Oh, them mob get more than us.'

Thus, Carly contemplated whether the uneven resource distributions she had observed between Top End and Central Australian communities came from rivalries that she sourced in Aboriginal ‘law and culture’. In a similar vein, a man of stature in local politics, Gerry, described Aboriginal senior public servants in Darwin benefiting Top End communities by participating in structures of governance which favoured their more populous electorates:

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I still live in the hope that the Northern Territory Government actually listens to the aspirations of people south of Katherine [three hours' drive south of Darwin] and actually don't just continue to consider just because the numbers are all in Darwin and the northern suburbs that's who they need to cater for ...and *that includes the public service.*

A feeling of missing out typically characterizes the relationship of those at the periphery with those at the centre of administration. But I see Gerry's and Carly's critiques as important. From positions both inside and outside the public service, they saw the NTPS as neither trustworthy nor impartial; and not made so by the presence of senior Aborigines. For them, the NTPS was a place in which Aborigines' inter-group rivalries could be transformed into bureaucratic power. But hear Carly's wistful, hesitantly confidential tone as she revealed her desire to unlearn how to 'write like I talk' so she could do 'high level writing':

I wanna learn about all that sort of stuff too. I write like I talk and I think I need to - I don't wanna be - you know, that *high level* writing: I probably wanna tap into that at some stage

The ideal of seniority invoked complex yearnings for those to whom it seemed unattainable. While these non-senior interviewees saw others as compromised elites in a politicized public service, they still aspired to succeed in it. While there was authenticity in proximity to clients, there was respectability – professionalism, influence and external reward – in being more distant from clients. As representatives, those in the desert – those in any regional office, perhaps – sought to locate themselves somewhere on a continuum where they could be 'role models', but not too flash.

I introduced this discussion by suggesting that 'role modelling' was a more complex social and political idea than mere symbolism. Irrespective of any 'role model's' position on the continuum between proximity to communities and proximity to government, I see 'role modelling' as a kind of argument in which senior Aboriginal officials are not merely the *symbols* of functional, self-disciplined Aboriginality but they are socially and politically *effective*.

I call 'role modelling' an *argument*, in its portrayal of socially and politically effective Aborigines, because the ways in which I understood my interviewees to be proposing themselves as 'role models' fundamentally challenged the public service view of Aborigines. They were posing an alternative social imaginary in which Aborigines are not mere policy subjects, the passive recipients of welfare and government services. In the social imaginary that inspired the self-depiction 'role model', Aborigines had choices and capacities.

7.3 The alternative imaginary: our true merits

Stuart had been an executive in the field of Aboriginal employment, in the 1980s. In 2007, he ran a successful local business, employing and training Aborigines as his personal mission. Stuart had been diagnosed with a terminal illness at the time of his interview, his family told me after he died. With the permission of Stuart's family, who also asked that I reveal his name, I reproduce Stuart's eloquent plea for the recognition of Aboriginal people's skills:

Few people want to get anywhere just [because they're Aboriginal] and are regarded less than the real thing... This 'less than' issue is big, because if you're Aboriginal are you 'less than'? I think you're 'more than'.

The 'real thing', 'less than' or 'more than': measuring was very much on Stuart's mind. Interviewees expressed faith in the merit principle. Their stories were littered with the language of competitive hierarchy – 'winning' positions and navigating higher duties and professional development. They were embedded in the career service and resistant to any inference that they were in need of special representation. Aboriginal senior officials tended to see themselves as highly ethical, particularly if they were executives. But many at the beginning levels of seniority evinced a residual anxiety about the reasons for their employment, as we see from comments like 'hoping that I did win it on merit rather than being Indigenous' and wondering if peers thought:

'Has this person been recruited because they are Aboriginal or do they have the goods?'

Regardless of how senior they were, those who reflected on what 'goods' they brought to their work tended to frame them as 'delivery' rather than 'policy'. Yet, many felt that their practical skills were overridden by the weight attached to 'policy skills' at senior levels. They found the NTPS oblivious to what it should see in them – their true merits.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ In 2009, the Public Sector Employment and Management Act was amended to allow selection panels to 'give consideration to the diversity a person from an EEO target group brings to the specific workplace' (OCPE 2009a).

Grounded

Marcia spoke of policy ‘hitting’ the ground, the place where policy is ‘implemented’ and people are ‘affected’. Sophie had a good feel for ‘what goes on’ through her ‘networks on the ground’, she said in reference to the Indigenous sector. Sally was ‘grounded in her culture’ as we have seen. Sarah wanted to empower people ‘on the ground’ by which she said she meant ‘in the bush’. She contrasted ‘the ground’ with ‘government departments’ which had ‘*their values*’ and ‘*their views*’ on what should be done for Aborigines:

It's not about that, it's about how do the people on the ground access that?

For Leila, the ground was the community in general. She spoke of a senior executive who would often ‘really need her comments’ because he wanted ‘the view from the ground, from the community’. Kel’s ‘ground’ was at once the place where his community saw him as responsible for policy decisions and his regional office remote from the Darwin bureaucracy.

‘The ground’ was interviewees’ very common idiom. The word was mentioned at least once by nearly half the senior interviewees, irrespective of their job and where they were from. If ‘the ground’ had a common meaning, it was to contrast where Aboriginal people lived with the incorporeal, disembodied arenas in which policy theorized them. We see this in Lucy’s contrast between policy work and the place where the ‘outcomes’ were:

You're writing things and you're having the meetings with other groups, which I guess is for outcomes for Aboriginal people on the ground.

The ‘ground’ shifted with context, but it was always associated with the absent policy subject and juxtaposed with the superfluous, rhetorical, not evident and, by inference, groundless. ‘The ground’ distinguished contributions by Aborigines from what they frequently characterized as the less grounded, less engaged work of those, generally non-Aborigines, whose contributions to government were limited by being more exclusively ‘intellectual’. Recall that Julia claimed, ‘We actually do know.’ What did Julia say that Aborigines knew? ‘Exactly what’s needed’.

Interviewees saw themselves – in their ‘role modelling’ and their other kinds of representing – as the all-important but under-estimated *deliverers* of government programs. I heard it said often that Aboriginal public servants had capacities that non-Aboriginal public servants did not, in working the people and the politics to make Aboriginal communities reachable and

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serviceable. Being grounded gave Aboriginal public servants the ability to *implement* the programs of government.

Locality-oriented

To associate with the ground, you did not have to come from the Northern Territory. But localness was nonetheless a virtue, in the eyes of many interviewees. For three interviewees, each a public voice in Aboriginal affairs on a larger stage than the Northern Territory, to promote the localization of Aboriginal public sector staff was a stronger agenda.

Hanna proposed that Aboriginal employment ‘ought to be targeted to Territory Aboriginal people’, in particular those working in ‘Aboriginal-specific areas’. Her argument centred on ‘knowledge of Aboriginal issues in the Territory’, something ‘those people that come from interstate’ did not necessarily have. Jade worked for the public service in their home town. She was more inclusive of non-locals, preferring to see Aboriginal public servants ‘either from that area [in which they worked] or those that are trained to work within that area. Aboriginal people in other countries – that’s okay’. Simon’s theory was more demanding:

The government has a responsibility for delivery of its programs, to have the best person to deliver the program or to become the public service for that region, the designated area that requires servicing. That’s fine, they can become public servants as long as they’re local people....

These proposals for explicitly *geographic* Aboriginal representation in the NTPS were not advocating for local Aboriginal constituencies to have undue influence in the public service as I understand it, but to bring to the policy table issues that would otherwise go unseen. Simon said that he was trying to take seriously selection criteria which asked for abilities in ‘understanding contemporary Aboriginal society’ and ‘communicating with Aboriginal people’. He had found it hard, he said, to ‘get a response’ to questions designed to elicit these criteria from job applicants ‘when they don’t belong to the group’.

These proposals aimed to introduce *specific* understanding of Aborigines into the public service. These were explicit arguments for the policy value of Aborigines’ local knowledge.

A rough test of geographic representation

My data enabled a rough test of the extent of geographic representation among those I have called local – those who were associated by ancestry with a Northern Territory place or

linguistic group. Table 9 shows that on this definition 35 of the 53 senior interviewees were locals and 18 were interstaters. The table compares work locations with places of origin.

Table 9: Comparing Work Locations with Places of Origin for 53 Aboriginal Senior Officials (different results for 76 interviewees shown in brackets)

Where based when last in the NTPS	Place of Origin				Outside the NT	Total
	NT regional centre (Darwin or Alice Springs)		NT remoter place (regional town or remote community)			
	Same region	Other region	Same region	Other region		
Darwin/elsewhere in the Top End	9(12)*	1	18(25) /1(2) worked elsewhere in the Top End	3	16(17) 2 worked elsewhere in the Top End	47(58) /3 (4) worked elsewhere in the Top End
Alice Springs/elsewhere in the Centre	0(5)*	0	3(8) /1(4) worked elsewhere in the Centre	1(3) /(1) worked elsewhere in the Centre	2	6(18) /1(5) worked elsewhere in the Centre
Total	9(17)	1	21(33)	4(6)	18(19)**	53(76)

* Three interviewees who had last worked in Darwin when in the NTPS were employed interstate in 2007.

** Of the 19 interviewees for whom the NT was not their place of origin, 5 were born and raised in the NT (Darwin and Katherine).

Within the framed area of Table 9, we see an interesting pattern of regional connection. Of 44 Darwin-based senior officials, 26 had linguistic associations in the Top End: nine who were local to the town of Darwin by (Larrakia) descent and linguistic association and 17 who were from the regional towns and remoter communities across the region. Only four had come from a remote place in the ‘other region’ of Central Australia, whereas 16 had come from interstate. Was there a similar pattern in Central Australia? Of five Alice Springs-based senior officials, none were local by language or direct descent to the town of Alice Springs (Arrernte) although two had been drawn in from the immediate hinterland, one of whom had lived in Alice Springs for much of his life. Fewer senior positions were available in Alice Springs. But the pattern for Central Australia is more similar to the Top End pattern when non-senior public servants are included (the bracketed figures).

Looking to understand the extent to which interviewees were involved in the administration of regions that included their places of origin, my test revealed that Aboriginal senior

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officials were working *as close to where they had originally come from as possible*. Those who came from the two major administration centres of Darwin and Alice Springs rarely worked anywhere else, but the pull of large urban centres through residential opportunities and the availability of senior jobs constrained those from remoter places from living and working in those remoter places. Whether a senior official worked in Darwin or Alice Springs (less likely due to the relative scarcity of senior positions), it was many times more likely that he or she had come from a remoter place within the same region or from interstate than that he or she had come from the *other* Northern Territory region. The two major centres *attracted* Aboriginal employees who were historically from communities within their purview; and *repelled* (with a few notable exceptions) Aboriginal public servants from the opposite region. Interviewees of mixed Larrakia/Arerrnte descent had generally worked in *both* towns. Apart from these instances, the effect of the higher availability of senior positions in Darwin was not, in the main, to bring Central Australian Aborigines north but to open the field to those from outside the Territory – despite the historical fact that policies of child removal had relocated several families in both directions.

That is: the sphere of influence of those Aboriginal senior officials whose place of origin was in the Northern Territory tended to embrace that place of origin where possible in their work – however disembodied or attenuated the embrace. Even though some thought it ideal that public servants were local to the places they served, this was not always feasible at senior levels. My interviewees who had come from the Northern Territory were nonetheless locality-oriented. They worked as locally as possible.

Aboriginal Territorian

The most universally authenticating identity among Aboriginal public servants was the pan-Northern Territory Aboriginal identity – to be an Aboriginal Territorian. Did this identity better embrace ambiguities in contemporary Aboriginal lives than the criterion of localness?

Nineteen of 76, or 25 percent of the interviewees, came from interstate. Only one had never been senior in the NTPS. That leaves 18, of whom 11 were in the NTPS in 2007. Those from outside the Northern Territory formed one-third of the current senior employees, and my data show that they were more likely than those from the Territory to have finished

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school and tertiary education. Those from outside the Territory formed a significant proportion of Aboriginal senior public servants – a greater proportion of senior than non-senior Aboriginal public servants, my data suggest. How did they handle their outsider status, if that applied to those deemed by NTPS standards to be representative; or did Aboriginal identity make them insiders to a greater extent than geography excluded them? I cannot generalize, nor even attribute a single position to any individual. What made someone an insider in one sense, such as by being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, could make that same person an outsider in another, if his or her identity was non-local. To have an Aboriginal identity is both to be a member of an indigenous population and also – vicariously, associatively – to be a policy problem. Paradoxically, this social fact bonded everyone at the same time as their structural locations excluded some.¹¹⁸

But given the circumstances in which Aborigines from elsewhere were included, and included themselves, in the Northern Territory Aboriginal community – let us suppose a continuum of possibilities between insiderness and outsidership.¹¹⁹ I do this to shed light on the idea of a Territorian Aboriginality. Did the potency of this idea, for interviewees, come from its resonance with the realities of dislocated and mobile Aboriginal lives?

¹¹⁸ My working definition of local – originally, by descent, to have come from a Northern Territory place – includes three interviewees who had returned to the Northern Territory after being born and raised interstate. But because these interviewees were nurturing rediscovered families, their tentative sense of local acceptance likens them in other ways to some of those whose affiliations lay elsewhere. On the other hand, my working definition excludes some who although they came from elsewhere, had married into the local Aboriginal community and lived their lives in the Northern Territory. Such interviewees could be deemed more local than those recently returned. I could, some would say should, interpret localness this way. But there was something fundamentally authenticating in the connection to place, for my interviewees. And those from elsewhere acknowledged a certain lack of standing in relation to those whose place of origin lay nowhere else.

¹¹⁹ Crocker explores the categories of insider/outsider as an alternative to the pitfalls, for development ethicists, of the dichotomies that are inherent in debating ethnocentrism/antiethnocentrism or particularism (*we* are different)/universalism (we are *all* different). The problem is that difference is always relative; but that complete relativity is ultimately unhelpful. Crocker suggests: ‘An insider is one who is counted, recognized, or accepted, by himself/herself and the other group members, as belonging to the group... on the basis of such things as shared beliefs, desires, memories, and hopes. Accordingly, one is an outsider with respect to a group *just in case* he or she is not counted, recognized or accepted by himself/herself and/or the group members...’ (Crocker 1991: 155, my italics). Crocker finds that ‘the insider/outsider distinction is better understood as a continuum or spectrum rather than a rigid dichotomy whose categories are mutually exclusive’ (1991: 157).

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When Georgia explained, ‘this just, you’re not, this isn’t your place,’ she said it without rancour and without question. She had felt like an outsider, as an Aborigine from a southern state, always throughout her 22 years in the NTPS, 18 of these as a senior official, all of them working productively with local Aborigines. Perhaps it was Georgia’s humble acknowledgment of outsidership, her agreement with the local/interstate distinction, which made her more of an insider when it came to the relationships needed for her work. Margie, a relative newcomer from another state, was more confident that although she had ‘only gone out to a couple of communities’, she would be able to understand the needs of ‘Aboriginal Territorians’ once she had been shown around by a local person. But she acknowledged that it had been ‘hard to get a sponsor’, as she put it. When Margie said that ‘anything I’m doing here is on behalf of Aboriginal Territorians’, she excluded herself.

Others may have more confidently regarded themselves ‘Aboriginal Territorian’. All Trevor knew of his ancestry was that his family had come from elsewhere, but he was born in the Northern Territory. He said that his ‘working class, urban background’ had given him ‘no amazing insight into Aboriginal culture’ but the ‘competitive advantage’, as he termed it, of many local connections that ‘sort of cut through’ the questions: ‘Who is this bloke? Who is this bureaucrat? What does he want?’ Another interviewee was deeply obligated to a local language group through marriage although he had discovered his Indigeneity as an adult. Rose, also locally connected through marriage, believed that an interview panel had favoured an applicant from ‘a remote background’ because she was an ‘urban Aboriginal person’ – not that the winning applicant was local and Rose’s traditional connections were elsewhere. Her objection was that the implicit criterion was non-transparent in a process that had been presented to her as merit-based, not that she thought the winner undeserving – but the point is that she emphasized the *remote/urban* distinction, and not the local/non-local distinction, in her interpretation of the event. Perhaps, she simply regarded herself as a local.

Jerome had melded the remote, the urban, the local and the interstate into an official identity. Jerome was a notable exception to the pattern of regional association, as he was Table 9’s Alice Springs-based interviewee who had come from a remote community in the Top End. Although he did not use the expression ‘Aboriginal Territorian’, he seems to me to characterize the possibilities of that identity.

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Jerome was born in Darwin after his grandmother and great grandmother were taken to the Kahlin Compound from a Top End remote community. After an interstate education arranged by Jerome's white father, he returned and rose through the ranks of an NTPS department. In Alice Springs in 2007, Jerome had responsibility for a set of clients who were mainly Aborigines. He presided over their rehabilitation and return to communities, as he described his involvement in a project of 'corrective governing'. His goal was to convey a positive image of Aborigines to other Aborigines and the town. Arriving to take up his posting, Jerome had announced his Aboriginality and had encouraged other Aboriginal staff to do the same.

Jerome said that he was 'probably looked upon as a something like a bit of a role model, to get me to where I am at the moment'. He wanted to show those hierarchically beneath him that it was possible for Aborigines to 'beat the system'. Jerome had started out as one of two local Aboriginal recruits in Darwin where he described himself as 'looking after your countrymen Aboriginal way'. If it was difficult for him to do this in Alice Springs, he did not say so. He constantly explained his origins to local Aborigines who could not place him among kin. He employed local Aboriginal staff. Local Aborigines, he believed, 'know the problems in those communities, and ... they've got more of an idea how to fix it'. Jerome represented them, he said, 'in how I moved my way up through the ranks'.

Jerome wore the mantle of Aboriginal senior official with unassuming pride. He never once returned an email; I dealt with his secretary. Our interview was memorably warm and engaging. I had to deal with a succession of minders in order to gain access to him, explaining my purpose to them in more detail than was my practice in the interests of confidentiality. But it was apparent that they had his trust and he had theirs as he opened his institution to my research. Here was an alternative social imaginary: competent, empathic and determined Aboriginal officialdom in the government of Aborigines.

Jerome was one of only 11 executive level officials, among my interviewees, who were in the NTPS in 2007. Seven were from the Northern Territory. Six commanded a service in their region of origin. One worked in her home town. None presented Aboriginality as a 'substitute' for having the relevant capabilities for public service work. Their normative theories were not identical; but each defended their groundedness, their respect for localness

and their commitment to Aboriginal Territorians as meritorious qualities for Aboriginal senior officials.

7.4 The present – absent relationship

The problem, in the relationship between those who are present in the public service and the absent whom their representation brings forth, is that the present have invariably transcended their original disadvantage and the absent have no formal sanction over them. How, as ‘role models’, did interviewees argue their authority from, and accountability to, Aborigines? In the discussion that follows, I have in mind Young’s description of the representative relationship as one which ‘moves between moments of authorization and accountability’. These moments, in interviewees’ accounts, were expressions of a relationship which had some kind of collective history, it seemed to me, which was beyond the reach of any public service program.

Vicarious authorities and accountabilities: ‘eyes are watching’

Mary, whose deep traditional connections spanned northern Australia, recommended as a general source of authority that Aboriginal public servants ‘respect elders, even though they might not be your elders – because they’re *someone’s* elders’. Marcia explained that no matter what you look like, if you are known, in the Aboriginal community, as the descendant of someone, that is what makes you count as ‘Aboriginal’ in the eyes of other Aborigines. But Sally commented that ‘they don’t consider me as Indigenous in some areas’:

...because I’ve got an education, I’m white- skinned...and I don’t live on an Aboriginal community anymore, I live in a house...

Sally recalled arguing to her detractors in Aboriginal communities that she had been ‘brought up around Aboriginal people, by an Aboriginal woman’. It seemed a necessary condition of authenticity, as a public servant, that one had ‘grown up Aboriginal’, even if this criterion was not sufficient for those who insisted that senior officials had experienced disadvantage.

On the matter of interviewees’ accountability to other Aborigines, it seemed that some interviewees felt even greater scope for imaginative solutions. ‘A lot of people look to me that way,’ said Ted when I asked if he saw himself as representing Aborigines in his work:

Most of the old people, I ask, talk to them about their options. That’s outside of work. They ring me at home.... I’m there for Indigenous [service deliverers] 24/7, 365 days a year.

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Most interviewees were more circumspect about their accountability to the represented. ‘People may not even realise’, said Peter, the interviewee who ‘carried’ Aboriginal interests, the interests of youth in his region. He framed his metaphor carefully:

How do you put it? I think I *carry* - and people may not even *realize* - but I feel that I'm carrying their interests, you know - for those kids to get a better education and have more options in their lives in the future. I really strive for that.

Old people, ‘kids’, ‘the remotes’ – interviewees conjured many imaginings of their absent, which as we have seen ranged from the specific to the generic Indigenous. Their diverse and scattered connections, always imagined, never forgotten, legitimized their presences in the absence of direct evidence of the views and opinions of the represented. ‘How’s it helping the oldfella or the youngfella sitting under the tree or on the beach?’ Jay asked himself all the time. Pending an answer, he kept up the pace of community visits that informed his imagining and worked to create the conditions where answers would be possible.

Perhaps it was to compensate for the lack of direct checks and balances in their relations with absent Aborigines that my interviewees closely watched each others’ performances.

‘We are hard on one another,’ said Simon, ‘but that’s *just us*.’ I often had the sense that Aboriginal senior officials measured themselves against each other. Remember that Simon spoke of permeability between the public service and the Indigenous sector as facilitating Aboriginal representative accountability. When Simon spoke of ‘people out there and people on the inside’, he said that he meant some kind of ‘cultural’ accountability:

I just see it from a *cultural* perspective that you've got to have that balance.

I took Simon to be suggesting that Aboriginal officials watched each others’ performances as the differently positioned caretakers, inside and outside government, of some kind of an understood absent. Speaking of forthcoming negotiations between his organisation and the government, Nick was seeking the attendance of an Aboriginal senior public servant with the ‘cultural connection’ to his region:

I want X in the room simply because X has a cultural connection [here]. We fully understand X's position... It would still be an advantage ... so I've asked X to be involved in our negotiation... just to have that senior bureaucratic representation.

These interviewees did not explain what they meant by ‘cultural’, but it seemed to mean something obligatory in the relationships these interviewees were drawing to my attention.

Jean had a stricter notion of accountability when she insisted on quality senior public servants. She spoke of ‘people out in the street who care’ and ‘notice’ the identity and the quality of Aboriginal public servants in leadership positions. ‘If you put someone in there who is just a figurehead, they recognise that,’ Jean explained about those ‘in the street’: ‘They can discriminate even between their own mob.’ Jean was in the public service when she said this, ‘sending messages’ about Aboriginal competency by insisting on a generalist public service career. But there is something else to know about Jean. She was one of the three senior level participants in this study who preferred not to self-identify.¹²⁰

By self-identifying, interviewees signalled their initial willingness to be seen as representative of other Aborigines. What about those who did not? Did they not feel sufficient likeness to other Aborigines to be their descriptive representatives? Did they not feel authorized by Aborigines, or accountable enough to other Aborigines to represent them as public servants?

Not self-identifying: refusing description

I see Jean’s position on self-identification as her way of insisting on being taken seriously as a public servant. It was not to deny her Aboriginality or to resist representing other Aborigines, as she was well known in the public service as being from a prominent local family and represented others, she said, by insisting on a job in which her obligations to other Aborigines were reduced. Not self-identifying gave her the space to set these terms.

The two other interviewees who did not self-identify were Randall and Leena. They tell two very different stories, one about authority and one about accountability.

Randall had never self-identified in the NTPS because he did not see himself as Aboriginal:

In the old days, the old full blood man said that the yellow fella was a mongrel... You know when one of the big old TOs [traditional owners], the black man, said that the half-caste man is a mongrel breed bastard.I’ve got a white father and black mother; I reckon it’s pretty clear. You can go either way. With that Aboriginal side, if you’re a man you follow your father’s way.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Jean did not clarify whether or not she had recently self-identified; she was the only interviewee to exercise her right to remain a private entry in the Indigenous statistic within this research. She did tell me she had ‘refused to tick the box before, on occasions’.

¹²¹ Randall followed a patrilineal descent principle. His father was white. He had inherited this norm through his ‘Aboriginal side’, his mother. If his father had been Aboriginal, would he have identified?

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Randall also disqualified himself, he said because ‘I sort of haven’t been brought up on the community or in the camp’. Working on a skilling program for Aborigines living on their country, Randall described a profound commitment to Aborigines, ‘our clients out there’:

It's just not the four men and the six ladies that you deal with when you're having a meeting, it's the whole clan, so you're looking at thousands of people that you're giving to, to the elders that are taking the advice and what's behind them old people is their tribe and then the kids coming up, ... if you get them thinking now, this is what your country needs and this is the best scenario or way to go about it to be make it viable and having an income for your people and getting that information out there, that's a bonus. ... I'm going to hear a tear drop in a minute.

With his near-inaudible aside about the ‘tear drop’ – I only heard it when I replayed the audio file of his interview – Randall caricatured those who wear their heart on their sleeve. His eloquent statement demonstrates that Randall’s policy not to self-identify was not out of reluctance to work in the interests of other Aborigines or to be known as an Indigenous person to his colleagues and clients; and we have already seen that he saw himself as representing both Aborigines and government by being a ‘role model’. I see him as having no sense of an Aboriginal authority or desire to call himself Aboriginal for NTPS purposes.

Leena had come to a conclusion that it was neither ‘comfortable’ nor ‘safe’ to ‘tick anything any more’. She told her story in carefully elided, ill-fitting pieces. She had supported an employment and training proposal which had been put forward by a community. But her office had not acted. She spoke of ‘community pressures’ in and out of government. Her loyalties had been split between ‘the strategy on the one side’ and ‘Aboriginal people on the other’. But she had keenly felt her responsibility to ‘watching’ Aborigines:

This is what you carry with you, you carry it with you from the time that you're born, you know your values, your world view and I also think that the community actually reminds you of it too. ... negatively, positively they remind me of it. You know, eyes are watching.

It is my understanding that Leena ceased self-identifying to satisfy her sense of accountability to other Aborigines. She is the only interviewee, apart from Jean, to have moved to a job unrelated to Aboriginal affairs.¹²² Other Aborigines knew who Leena was (hence our

Perhaps, but this is not entirely clear because his formulation of Aboriginality also precluded ‘yellow fellas’, as he called himself.

¹²² We laughed wryly at the challenge of finding such a role in the NTPS where it was frequently said that Aborigines, 30 per cent of the population, were everyone’s ‘core business’. But Leena had done it, ingeniously – to ‘fade into the background’, she said. She was categorical: she would ‘never ever, ever, ever, ever again work in Aboriginal affairs in Government ever’.

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interview), but she was not widely recognized as Aboriginal. By not self-identifying and by changing jobs, Leena effectively made her representative identity ‘fade’ away. ‘*Oh right, Aboriginal people, important viewpoint*’, she satirized the NTPS’ invitation to Aborigines.

I can now answer my much earlier question: can an Aboriginal senior official *choose not to represent*? Recall that Harry was the only purely descriptive representative out of the 50 senior interviewees. We now know that three senior interviewees did not intend to be descriptive representatives at all, but that two who did not self-identify represented Aborigines substantively anyway. Only Leena refused *any* kind of representation in the NTPS. So an Aboriginal senior official *can* choose not to represent; but it is rare, at one out of 53.

Although Aboriginal senior officials had no formal constituency in, authorization from or accountability to a specific group, we have seen that they were public servants in a social context in which their authority to act was sometimes a matter of contention and in which their accountabilities to other Aborigines were keenly felt.

It remains to know the extent to which my interviewees thought that ‘role modelling’ *compromised* or *realized* understandings between themselves and other Aborigines.

Compromised elites or practising representatives?

With management, comes responsibility, comes a whole package of behaviours in the way you operate. You get into a - paradigm, I guess, in the way you see things ...

Sandy was an executive. Her eyes were wide open regarding her embedding in the trappings of seniority and bureaucratic culture. Had I asked her, I do not believe that Sandy or indeed most other executive level bureaucrats would altogether have dismissed the label ‘compromised elites’. They advocated, though with care; and they were tokens, just by allowing the government, through them, to call itself representative. Aboriginal senior officials are technically, irredeemably, ‘elites’ to those below them and, I infer in the absence of data, outside the public service. They cannot become senior bureaucrats without acquiescing in government. But to speak of compromised elites is to reduce a complex political identity to a single dimension.

Some outside government begrudgingly admired Aboriginal senior public servants for their ability to do what one called ‘unpalatable’ things. So it is equally plausible to understand

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Aboriginal senior officials as exemplars of self-discipline and morality through their willingness to stand out when that risks their popularity. In their disunified sociality, how could they rely on the esteem of peers? Many believed that the public service did not recognize what was salient about their identity or their commitment to public service ethics. Did those whom they represented have any idea of their commitment? Not always, as we have seen. But by knowing that they strove as grounded, localized and part of a Territorian Aboriginality to channel the interests of others, in the absence of other more meaningful accolades or direct evidence that they were in fact held in anyone's high esteem, Aboriginal public servants could *judge themselves* meritorious.

My drawings on normative political theory in this thesis have not been aimed at designing the standards by which to judge Aboriginal senior officials. It has been to guide my description of *their* working models. But there was no unanimity, among my interviewees, over the criteria for judgement – no single idea of Aboriginal authority, and no common sense of accountability.

Some saw their self-discipline and tutelage as expressions of their sharing of fates with the absent. From their perspectives, it would not be difficult to imagine some community members finding relief in hearing of Sandy's protectiveness for those suffering from neglect and violence; equally, I can imagine urban itinerant populations appreciating Edith's pointing out to the police that their women and children needed a place to stay. Family members must have heard Simon on the way government works; Aboriginal public service recruits and remote community workers must have benefited in some way from those who defended and explained them to the public service and showed them the ropes. Jerome's rehabilitative programs could not have been more alienating than already alienated lives. Even Deborah's inebriated office intruder now knew what to do, from someone who understood how to tell him: leave and sober up.

Only Aborigines could be so frank with other Aborigines. There was little romance or idealization in this relationship; these were not the 'bleeding hearts' of Lea's ethnography. Aboriginal officials stepped in where the politically correct feared to tread, drawing on their relationships to aid the government of their towns. Exemplifying self-discipline, they would reason that Aboriginal people had to speak this way to be heard *within Aboriginal relationships*.

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If some Aborigines found other Aborigines less grounded than they were, how could they judge? There was no final arbiter, only the understanding that each brought to their practice.

Two interviewees, youngish men, who had both lived rough lives at points, had had their aspirations to seniority foiled. One was in Darwin, one was in Alice Springs. Both had family in their towns. Hear their hopes of government and their interactions with their communities in these passages from their intense, searching interviews:

So you have to be like a man of your own words I guess and you have to like tread a fine line ..., because you get dragged into domestic violence, or disputes with other families or things like that. You've got to be able to stand above them and say, 'Look, I know these families are fighting but I've still got to conduct my job and I've got to get on with these [families] too.' At the end of the day, I've got to be able to sort of move between these groups, so I can't afford to sorta like take sides. I can say, 'Hey look, I'll sympathize with you but I can't fight your battles for you because I need to be able to make a living and *conduct* myself and I need to work with the other group that you're fighting with.' Otherwise I become *inefficient*.

That was Vincent, whose high personal standards included that his 'efficiency' as a public servant, of which he was immensely proud, was never at the expense of his community relationships. Vincent's job, before he had felt ostracized for his personal politics and left the NTPS, had been to open communication channels between Aborigines and the NTPS.

The other non-senior interviewee, Jett, had been seconded to an NGO to cool his heels following angry outbursts at work. Speaking of his years of substance abuse:

It's put me two feet in front of a lot of other people in regards to what I know [about]... how to go about fixing the social problems. That ain't just done at grass level roots,,, *That's why I need to keep going up* because for me to make real effective change in regards to Aboriginal people, I've got to be up there, at the table with them when they make the decisions...

'*You blackfella,*' Jett told me that Aborigines where he came from said to him, 'We need you in government.' That, Jett said, made him want to 'do the right thing by Aboriginal people'.

Neither Vincent nor Jett had ever been senior, although they both clearly wanted to be; both had found the public service a difficult place when their mentors had moved on. Although they were in strikingly different Northern Territory places, the intensity of their commitment is indistinguishable. What interests me is their search for positions of influence, and their belief that seniority would not compromise them as Aborigines or as public servants.

I give the last word to Sarah, who as a senior public servant mediated between communities and the government. Sarah had this to say about Aboriginal contributions to the NTPS:

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Our views, our experience, our knowledge, our understanding, *our relationship* means nothing to the group of non-Indigenous people who's running this show - who's making *decisions* about Aboriginal people. How can you make decisions about Aboriginal people when you can't even talk to the people you've got *here* that are blackfellas?

Sarah was insisting that she be heard, if her people were to be taken into account. She was proposing a high standard of inclusion in the government, one which took all that she had to offer, including her relationship with the absent, into account. She was asking the government for a truer engagement with Aboriginal employees and communities alike. That was her professional standard and sense of service; that is what she showed her people. She asked no less of her non-Aboriginal colleagues. To quote her again:

You have a pool of Indigenous people and you have a group of whitefellas sitting there talking about blackfellas' issues - without even engaging you!So that's why I question whether we're just numbers, we're just bums on seats.

Sarah was looking to be an important part of the government's relationship with Aborigines, *not an unimportant part*. Her test for whether the public service was serious in its dealings with Aboriginal people was whether it was serious with her. She, onetime policy subject, asserted her right to speak as an Aborigine who was present. Her presence was circumstantial, produced by events which had started with her removal from a campfire at the age of three. Sarah – and Sandy, Simon, Sophie and others – would not speak of 'the remotes' but only of specific Aboriginal communities. Sarah laid out an encyclopaedic knowledge of Northern Territory communities, their traditional ownership and settlement histories – the 'ground'. She neither understated nor overstated the sense of loss that framed her own identity.

Modelling what she saw as a good process for Aboriginal engagement, Sarah hoped to be treated to that engagement herself. She saw that she should and could influence policy's process; her 'role modelling' was not at all symbolic, but the expression and realization of her political conscience.

So Aboriginal senior officials remembered, respected and fulfilled mutual relations with other Aborigines by seeking to influence the process and content of policy making concerning them – in particular, concerning their 'remotes'. Many interviewees were the single exception in the remote-living rest of their families; some worried that their adolescent children were being attracted back out into youth gangs. That their efforts were not always recognized or even successful adds weight to a portrayal of them as exemplary. Interviewees

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judged themselves the poorer, the less effective, if their relationships were not grounded. Localness was a virtue, groundedness a necessity, in their theories. Proximity to the ground and exposure to the dilemmas of government gave each, in their own eyes, unique capacities and discernment. I see in them a sense of collective history and an ethic of practice, sufficiently imaginative and sufficiently concrete to see themselves as participants in a community – an Aboriginal Territorian community – of shared fate.

Perhaps this was what Matthew, the non-senior but long serving ‘eyes and ears’ who had been in the NTPS since the moment of Northern Territory self-government, meant when he said something profoundly interesting. His interview was full of anecdotes and rich commentary on the public service characters he had known. He said these words over a cup of tea, without the fresh damper that he joked we should have been sharing during his historic story-telling – which he insisted not be conducted in either his office or mine but outside, in the breeze. Here are his words:

We're the engine-room, mate. We're what's on the ground.

Concluding remarks

Frustrated, offended or refused as representatives, Aboriginal officials drew on a social imaginary as they re-fashioned the ambivalent invitation that they represent Aborigines in the Northern Territory bureaucracy. In this imaginary, they were competent and indeed, as ‘role models’, *exemplary* Aboriginal Territorians who did not ever forget their people or their past as they worked for a socially inclusive future. ‘Role modelling’ was sustainable. For many interviewees, it offered an alternative to descriptive symbolism by realizing a relationship of greater political substance.

Was ‘role modelling’, for my interviewees, representation? Some called it that. It looked and sounded like representation, and it echoed representation’s dilemmas. Was it good representation, in their judgement? It was the best representation that each could achieve. It was the representation that was possible for 76 Aboriginal public servants to practise in a time and a place. And they did what representatives do. They argued *for*, and to the greatest extent possible *with*, beleaguered Aboriginal Territorians. They made a substantive political proposal for others, potentially, through their claim for themselves: Aborigines are fit to govern.

PART III

CONCLUSION

Chapter Eight

From Representatives to Theorists

I have arrived at a depiction of Aboriginal senior officials in which they are neither tokens nor advocates but *practising* representatives – people who, mindful of their responsibilities as public servants and imagining themselves to share fates with the absent, find opportunities in the cracks and crevices of daily work to be Aboriginal representatives.

How *compelling* is the Northern Territory Government's self-account as a representative bureaucracy to Aboriginal senior officials? How convincing and persuasive is it to Aboriginal senior officials when the public service calls them representative of the Northern Territory's constituent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations?

The Northern Territory Public Service both welcomes and denies Aborigines. It welcomes them by a policy which explicitly invites them to confirm their Indigeneity and contribute to policy and decision-making throughout its ranks. But it is in workplaces that they are recognized, by each other and by non-Aboriginal colleagues, and it is in workplaces that their contributions are received. The public service denies them when it does not acknowledge the partialities and discretions which mean that *all public servants represent*.

Aboriginal employment policy offers ambivalent hospitality; and I believe that many Aborigines would find my analysis resonant with their experience even as they enjoyed the material benefits of public service employment. To some, the invitation would read:

You are Aborigines, or you mostly look like Aborigines. What you say reflects them. This will improve us. We want your contributions. But we have work to do, so don't interrupt us.

The problem of representative bureaucracy is not that it is improper for public servants from particularized populations to represent, but that its invitation to Aborigines is hollow.

In polite hospitality, the invitation sets the terms of reply. But did ambivalent invitation meet with ambivalent reply? Dividing the body of the thesis by the idea of an invitation and its answering gave full weight to both. The invitation was historical, theoretical and political; the answer, somewhere in the realm of compliant, is questioning and creative.

8.1 Invitation

I chose the beginning of the Northern Territory administration in 1911 as the starting point for my analysis because that commenced a relationship in which the Commonwealth first governed Northern Territory Aborigines and Aborigines were invited to help. The terms of the invitation were very different then, but Aborigines were always a public service presence.

I went so far back for another reason: to acknowledge my interviewees' personal histories. Many of their parents and grandparents had emerged from the protectionist and assimilationist eras as 'released half-castes' when many mixed descent Aborigines sought public housing in Darwin and Alice Springs in the 1950s. Some *were* the steady trickle of domestics, labourers and mission workers who aided the Northern Territory administration during the first 60 years of Commonwealth control. Interviewees often attributed their work ethic to the earlier generations of government employees whose presence allowed the administration to portray itself as the Aboriginal employment exemplar. There was *history* in the employment relationship that Aboriginal employment policy implies is only recent.

The emergence of representative bureaucracy coincided with the policy era of Aboriginal self-determination and a new language of Aboriginal empowerment, in Australia. Political representation was meant for Aboriginal organizations, although they were dependent on government largesse. I turned to the theoretical literature at this point in my history, partly to historicize the ideas behind the public policy; but also because I needed to develop an analytic frame to continue my account. What thinking made it imaginable that a Western liberal democratic bureaucracy could reflect Aborigines' views without those Aborigines needing to do any *political* representing?

Political theorists were exploring the kinds of questions I was asking. Some were defending the idea that historically dispossessed groups should be represented by the members of those groups – the very idea that is implicit in representative bureaucracy. Their concerns were with electoral accountability, yet the concept of bureaucratic representation involves the political choice between alternative values no less than does electoral representation. An inadequate understanding of the nature and democratic possibilities of *representation* limited the visions of representative bureaucracy to a counting exercise.

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How did the new Northern Territory Government invite Aborigines' passive and active representations? This question framed my continuing account of Aboriginal employment policy. The Northern Territory was granted an inheritance, on self-government in 1978: an incidental, nonetheless incipient representative bureaucracy of some thousand Aborigines, many of them temporary or community-based.

In seeking to mirror the Northern Territory's social composition, my research revealed that the Northern Territory Public Service encountered repeated instances of Aboriginal agency: by Gypsy, Matthew and the other Aboriginal Liaison Officers who lost their positions; by Julia and the Aboriginal trainers who left their positions and by Yvonne, Bruce and Hanna who each exited so decisively. But many thousands of Northern Territory Aborigines exercised another kind of agency by not being drawn into representative bureaucracy's invitation. And the social mirror or passive approach did not achieve its aim of increasing the proportionate representation of Aborigines in the public service because in 2008 the proportion was the same as 25 years before.¹²³

What has the Northern Territory Government's Aboriginal employment policy achieved? The people who constitute the statistics have changed. I found a sufficient proportion of the 64 Aboriginal senior public servants whose reporting inspired this study to suggest that they really did form the tiny two per cent of the public service that was claimed. An intriguing, inexorable consequence of their seniority, like a thin wisp of smoke which winds lightly upwards through air, is that many of these officials manage others. They manage growing Aboriginal workforces, still health workers, teachers and council workers but also new brokers in communications and local economies, Aboriginal language interpreters, community rangers and others who look to Aboriginal senior officials for a policy voice.

In polite hospitality, the invitee awaits a reply.

I took interviewees' orientations to the representational aspects of their work as indicative of their reply.

¹²³ See Table 7 in Chapter Four, page 127.

8.2 Answering

Public servants do what political representatives do when they ‘make present’ those who cannot be present themselves. Aboriginal public servants have many encouragements, working in Aboriginal-specific programs, to construct their absent policy subjects as constituencies. I found it possible to formulate my interviewees’ accounts of their work in such terms. But there is more to know about moments of representation. When is a representative ‘standing for’ someone passively or ‘acting/speaking for’ them, as their more active agent? Are active representatives ‘trustees’ with a general mandate to exercise their discretion to assess the needs of the represented, or ‘delegates’ who only act on instruction? When does ‘standing for’ the represented become ‘standing in for’ them and when is that appropriate? Moreover – in *descriptive* representation, in which representatives are drawn from particularized populations, what makes representatives accountable to the represented?

Such questions are difficult to answer in the public service; but to accept the representative invitation, as I saw it through my interviewees’ accounts, was to navigate a representative identity. To draw on that identity was to enact it more fully by making empathic, knowledgeable and connected contributions to Aboriginal-specific policies and programs. This fulfilled a sense of ‘trusteeship’ towards those who looked to Aboriginal senior officials for assistance, or so they believed – Aboriginal staff, communities, Territorians.

Where were the limits of acceptance? ‘Trusteeship’ can be unsatisfying if policy does not shift, and ‘substitution’ can feel disingenuous if it is taken as consultation. Mostly, my interviewees found ways to moderate the expectations of colleagues and their client communities. But some interviewees felt so distrusted and ineffectual that they left altogether, often moving into more clearly representative positions in the Indigenous sector.

‘Role modelling’ was more sustaining, as it enabled some to ‘speak to’ the represented and to engage in ‘corrective governing’. ‘Role models’ presented a social imaginary in which Aborigines were grounded, locally-oriented and politically committed Aboriginal Territorians. For many, this was the kind of representation they could best steer; but did they feel compromised in their relationships with the absent by their social advantage? As I have portrayed them, some saw ‘role modelling’ as fulfilling their political conscience: to guide other Aborigines towards social compliance, as only the truly empathetic can do.

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If we see Aboriginal senior officials as citizens and not just bureaucrats, as hard-headed criterion-seeking self-critics instead of unthinking recruits to a government agenda, we see the political dimension in their ‘role modelling’. Here was an *alternative* to the merely symbolic and rhetorical, and a substantial counter-proposal to be included in the government of their place as a kind of entitlement – not just as the look and feel of Aborigines by their symbolic presence, but as the active assertion of their modern selves.

Aborigines’ authority to be so engaged with their people came from tied-in lives. This authority was not pristine or uncontested, and nor was their ‘role modelling’. People questioned them. Interviewees explained, discussed, justified, withdrew or pushed on, in engagements which were not always consensual but at least dynamic and grounded. The guiding authority for many Aboriginal senior public servants, as I saw it, came from the knowledge that they, the present, could still be among the absent, if it were not for fortune. They were willing to be the voices and agents of social discipline, as long as they could draw on their reserves of empathy, knowledge and connections *to do it properly*.

I travelled widely and communicated extensively, in the Northern Territory in 2007. The interviewees were in schools, clinics, prisons, rehabilitation services and associated policy areas. They negotiated education, health, housing, local government and industry agreements, they worked for parliamentary agendas and the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment. But my organic interviewee recruitment process opened a social field which was deeper and wider than Northern Territory self-government. The interviewees had experienced land councils, research institutions, health services, representative bodies, other governments and the private sector. Did anything unify them, apart from the security of their employment? My data have shown that their commonest agenda was to entice others into the government. Defending Aborigines from misinterpretation and misinformation, they helped make their people serviceable.

In working to build Aborigines’ institutional presence, coordinate their policy, facilitate their partnership, get their compliance and deliver their services, Aboriginal officials were clearly agents of the postcolonial enterprise. But as representative bureaucracy’s policy subjects, they were also the objects of representation. Subject and object, absent before, present now – Aboriginal officials were the ‘twice involved’ (Rowley 1978: 206).

8.3 Postscript

In the three years since the interviews, I have stayed in touch with most of the interviewees. From our communications, including their bounced emails, I am aware that of the 33 interviewees who were senior Northern Territory public servants in 2007, 10 have left and one has returned. This means that nearly one-third of the senior employees who I interviewed for this research have now left the Northern Territory Public Service.

In 2008, Jett had cooled his heels and was ‘back at the table’. He emailed me just one more recounted conversation in which it sounds as if his hard won knowledge of the correctives for Aboriginal self-abuse both horrified and impressed non-Aboriginal colleagues:

I sit in amazement at people who sit in a meeting - say nothing, agree... then after I have said something that goes against the grain ... say 'that's good what you said, you are right'...

Jett continues to wonder what this kind of ambivalence suggests about his contributions.

Contacting some interviewees for their final consent to my use of their interviews has provided the opportunity for more recent conversations. In 2010, Edith is still hoping for a permanent role in the public service where, she says, she would feel at home. Jay is still in the same department and still doing ‘the Aboriginal stuff’. Deborah challenges more than she used to, she says; she is feeling appreciated. Carly still writes like she talks, she says, but she does not mind so much. What bothers her more is that she has been told not to ‘let passion get in the way’. ‘I’m still trying to understand that,’ Carly says: ‘If we don’t have passion, we’re just doing it any old how.’ Sophie indicated that she is comfortable with my use of her interview – but like others, she waits with interest to see her portrayal in full context.

In May 2010, the Commissioner for Public Employment released a new Aboriginal employment policy for 2010-2012 (OCPE 2010), once more seeking Aborigines’ active representations through their ‘effective contribution to policy and decision-making affecting Indigenous people’ (OCPE 2010: 12).¹²⁴

¹²⁴ The foreword expresses the views of two Ministers – one the Indigenous parliamentarian the Hon Malarndirri McCarthy, Minister for Indigenous Development, that ‘we want the NTPS to more closely reflect the make-up of the community it serves.’ Announcing the starting line as 8.0%, the Strategy

Will the Northern Territory Public Service let Aborigines speak? It does not bode well for Aborigines' contribution to policy that success will be measured by the number of Aboriginal employees 'participating in learning and development programs' (OCPE 2010: 41). Why not by a process of internal deliberation in which Aboriginal perspectives have been explored? Why not by programs to slow down the intake of southern white graduates and make time and room for experienced locals, albeit that some may 'write like they talk'? Mentoring is planned, but is substantive engagement? The importance of workplace context is acknowledged, but the plan does not allocate any more specific responsibility than 'all agencies', any more specific timing than 'ongoing', to ensure there will, in fact, be Aboriginal contributions (OCPE 2010: 23).

The Strategy sets a target for which executives will be held accountable: 'an increase in the representation of Indigenous Australians employed in the NTPS to at least 10 per cent by 2012' (OCPE 2010: 8). This seems a modest and achievable aim – like 30 years ago when Chief Minister Everingham aimed to reach 10 per cent by 1982. But now, as then, it could prove elusive.

8.4 Returning to the research question

I have depicted Aboriginal senior officials as mindful professionals – as people who stand up for Aborigines in the corridors of power; who prefer not to speak in place of the absent, although they might if they must; and who are prepared to defy political correctness to rise to the complex occasion of administering government. Most were not content to bring forth the absent by mere symbolism or the osmotic effects of their presence, but desirous of influencing democratic structures to make it possible for the absent to become more present.

It was with such motives that they did jobs that made them feel they were failing and worked in cultures that questioned them. By submitting to criteria of merit and impartiality which

aims to improve Indigenous representation by extending it to all 'occupational groups, levels, locations and employment arrangements', by creating 'a workforce with workplaces that recognise and respect Indigenous culture and values' (OCPE 2010: 5, 7). The Strategy is a comprehensive, explicit program of representative bureaucracy which targets workplace managers and public service executives, pressing for cross-cultural awareness by including in the selection criteria for all NTPS job vacancies the new cover-all: 'An ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures' (OCPE 2010: 11).

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inherently did not favour them, by risking the disparagement of those for whom the true Aborigine is only ever disadvantaged and the committed Aborigine is only ever righteously situated in the Indigenous sector, they were exemplary representatives.

For a community to be a community of shared fate, there needs at the very least to be a story that could be told about it which has ethical significance; and that what this community sees as significant needs no final arbiter (Williams 2009). Even if Aboriginal senior officials do not work in structures that clearly evince the views of the represented, the relationship between my interviewees and their absentees suggests representation. Or at the very least: they all had a story to tell which would be of ethical significance to a representative relationship. Aboriginal senior officials' relationships with other Aborigines were communities of shared fate. In these communities, Aboriginal senior officials sought out the highest possible standards of interaction that allowed them to believe in their accountability.

But I wish to avoid the abstract ideals of normative political theory, and settle for a more pragmatic situational approach in which I acknowledge Aboriginal senior officials at least as service providers, not just service recipients. As officials, they were more willing and more complicit in government than Northern Territory Aborigines are usually depicted. As policy advisers, they were more discerning. Some were also more ambitious.

Remember that Rowley said the first Aboriginal public servants: 'hoping to be received as the representatives of their people must have been dismayed to find themselves cogs in the bureaucratic machine' (Rowley 1978: 207). Some of my interviewees felt the opposite, I believe, after 30 years of representative bureaucracy. Hoping to be received as public servants, some were dismayed to be received as representatives. It seems fitting to present representative bureaucracy's antithesis through the committed individualism of someone who had experienced abandonment by both his community and his public service. Louis had not made it to seniority, and he did not see himself as a representative. He articulated his reasons with a far finer sense of oratory than he claimed to possess, as he said that he found writing hard and only spoke 'very simple English'. Louis did not see himself as a representative, he said:

I can't, because I'm only me. And I don't expect anyone else to represent me, either - because I can't find any other Indigenous person like me, that's why.

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The interviewees were as diverse and contradictory as 76 people could and should be. But as their researcher and interviewer, I shall venture now to answer my original research question. How compelled were those who had become Aboriginal senior public servants by the accounts of representative bureaucracy? Did they feel that they embodied the Northern Territory's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, including the unreachable and non-compliant among them?

My interviewees were not always convinced by policy's posturing about their so-called rising numbers. They were not always persuaded into the tight corners of representative practice by the invitation to contribute to policy and decision-making concerning their people. They did not even all see themselves as representatives. However, many interviewees were drawn nevertheless, by their history and their political conscience, to participate in the representative bureaucracy of their place. If the hospitality they received there was ambivalent, so be it – there are worse things than invitations that say one thing and mean another. They could reply in kind, by meeting ambivalence with ambivalence. Or they could answer with a return invitation to their government and those who doubt or romanticize them: take our service seriously.

For my final characterization, I will not judge the interviewees. I present Aboriginal senior officials as their own vernacular theorists: public servants with highly developed antennae for the intricacies and relationships in what they do.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Research Agreement With The Northern Territory Government



North Australia Research Unit
PO Box 41321
Casuarina NT 0811
Telephone: 08 8920 9978

Mr Dennis Bree
Deputy Chief Executive
Department of Chief Minister
PO Box 4396 DARWIN NT 0810
13 March 2006

Dear Dennis,

Thank you for agreeing to be the industry adviser on my PhD supervisory panel. I am writing to formalize our arrangements.

As are you aware, my PhD is in the field of Public Policy at the Australian National University. I am located in the History program of ANU's Research School of Social Sciences under the supervision of Dr Tim Rowse, who chairs my panel.

I was granted 3 years' leave without pay from the Department of Business, Economic and Regional Development for this research, and expect to return to the NT Government upon completion. I also have the support of a scholarship from the Desert Knowledge CRC, in which my research is aligned with DK-CRC's Core Project 5, *Desert Services That Work*. I enclose previous correspondence with the Department of Chief Minister about my research intentions.

After reviewing the literature of Aboriginal-governmental relations, which primarily views Aboriginal people in the role of service recipients, I have decided to focus my research on those Aboriginal people who are participating in the machinery of government. This is an opportunity to present a different perspective on Aboriginal-governmental relations reflecting some of the practical realities of public administration in the NT. Such a perspective has to draw on the views and experiences of Aboriginal people in senior positions in the NT Government bureaucracy.

I am particularly interested in the idea of representation. By its own accounts the NT Government is increasingly representative of Aboriginal people. As a central research question, I want to ask how compelling this view is for its senior Aboriginal officials. To bring historical depth to my analysis, I would like to compare the periods before and after the 2001 change of government.

I hope to conduct one hour interviews with up to 100 people, mostly NT Government employees:

- Each of the Aboriginal employees at senior and executive levels in the NT Government's administrative and professional streams identifying as Aboriginal (OCPE reports a total of 64 as at December 2005);
- Approximately 20 non-Aboriginal officials throughout the bureaucracy, including at least one from each of the agencies employing senior Aboriginal officials; and
- Other influential Aboriginal officials including parliamentarians and ministerial staff, together with some officials from publicly funded organisations and community councils.

These interviews will be confidential in the interests of research integrity and the conditions of approval of this research by the ANU's Human Research Ethics Committee. I will ask for each interviewee's written consent before proceeding. I will assure participants I will suppress their identities in any discussions of the data – with my supervisory panel and colleagues, in my thesis and in any publications and presentations – and destroy their interview record after the project concludes.

My thesis will be available to the NT Government upon completion. While I am working on it, you, as my adviser, will see draft chapters. I do not expect to produce any drafts based on my interviews until early 2008. You may see possible policy applications arising from my draft findings. I would be happy to discuss with you these and other implications of my research. However, it is important that my interviewees know that although I have the NT Government's permission to interview them as public servants, I am not conducting the study at the government's request. As an ANU PhD candidate, I have independently designed my research on the basis of the academic literature.

I am located in Darwin in 2007 for the field-based stages of this project (having relocated to Canberra last year), and plan to write my thesis during another stay in Canberra in 2008. I would be very grateful if you could facilitate my data gathering at this point by:

1. signing your acknowledgement of the confidentiality requirements of this research;
2. assisting with my invitations to Aboriginal employees in senior and executive positions (AO7 level or equivalent and above) through the Commissioner for Public Employment;
3. following up these invitations with the attached letter to relevant Chief Executives; and
4. advising me in relation to the involvement of Aboriginal parliamentarians in this research.

To trace the relationship between the NT Government and its Aboriginal officials historically since self-government, I may also seek access to some government records not yet publicly available. However, I will request such access on a case by case basis if the need arises.

I understand that my research topic is potentially of political interest. I acknowledge my obligations as a public servant and will respect participants' similar obligations not to disclose confidential information obtained as an employee without the government's consent. I am bound by my agreement with DK-CRC and my personal aim to build positive relationships through this research.

DK-CRC has confirmed I can monitor employee contributions to this research anonymously so they may be claimed, along with your own time, as part of the government's in kind commitments. Please contact me at ANU's North Australia Unit on 89209978 or 0400124639 if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Ganter
Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University

RESEARCH AGREEMENT

I agree that Elizabeth Ganter may proceed with the PhD research set out above, in accordance with the privacy and confidentiality requirements of the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Signed on 19 April 2007

DENNIS BREE

Appendix B – Information Sheet



PHD RESEARCH PROJECT – ELIZABETH GANTER

ABORIGINAL SENIOR OFFICIALS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT

I am conducting research into aspects of the Northern Territory Government.

By its own accounts, the Northern Territory Government is increasingly representative of Aboriginal people. My question is: how compelling is this view for its senior Aboriginal officials? I hope to answer this question through an interview-based and documentary study of the Northern Territory Government's relationship with Aboriginal officials before and after the 2001 change of government.

I am interested in the views and experiences of senior Aboriginal officials and in the Northern Territory Government's changing expectations of these employees since the time of self-government.

I would like to interview government and other officials for this research.

What does the research involve?

The research involves interviews with:-

- Aboriginal employees at senior and executive levels in the Northern Territory Government;
- Other Aboriginal people in key positions, including those in publicly funded Aboriginal organisations and community councils and former NT Government employees; and
- Non-Aboriginal officials at particular vantage points throughout the bureaucracy.

Participation is purely voluntary. There will be no repercussions if anyone chooses not to participate.

I will invite those who are willing to participate to attend an interview which will last up to one hour, at a time and place of their choice. This will involve giving their written or oral consent and answering questions about their past and present work. They can choose not to answer any question or withdraw from the project at any time without giving reasons. I will not use any information they ask me not to use. If they agree, I may record the interview and I may ask if they would be prepared to attend a second interview.

The results of this research will be published as my PhD thesis or in academic journals or presented in public seminars. I will welcome any comments on my findings, however the final judgements about this research will rest with me.

Interviews will be completely confidential. Interviewees' names and position titles or other obvious identifying information will not be revealed. All interview records will be kept in locked storage or in a computer accessible only by password and discarded securely after the end of the project. I will not reveal these records to any other party, except if I must by law.

Are there any risks in participating?

Some of the information I am seeking may be considered sensitive if misused. I will inform participants that due to the nature of this research I cannot guarantee that others could not guess their identity. Unless they withdraw their consent, the content of their interview may be used in my research. I will encourage them to use their discretion about disclosing particularly sensitive or confidential material, to alert me if they do disclose such material and inform me of any material they do not want me to use.

Please turn over for more information, my contact details and where to direct your further enquiries.

Project details

This research is my PhD project in Public Policy, which is supported by a scholarship from the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DK-CRC). My PhD is associated with DK-CRC's Core Project 5: *Desert Services That Work*, however my focus is on the Northern Territory as a whole.

I am an independent researcher on leave without pay from the Northern Territory Government for the purposes of this project. The Northern Territory Government's interest in the research is as a core partner of DK-CRC and intended research participant. Mr Dennis Bree, Deputy Chief Executive of the Department of Chief Minister, is the industry advisor on my supervisory panel.

Contact details

Elizabeth Ganter - PhD student
History program, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University

Supervisor: Dr Tim Rowse, Head of History Program, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University

Address from February-December 2007:-

North Australia Research Unit,
The Australian National University
Ellengowan Drive, Casuarina, NT 0810
Tel: 08 8920-9978
Mob: 0400 124639
Email: elizabeth.ganter@anu.edu.au

Address from January 2008 onwards:-

History Program, Research School of Social
Sciences, Coombs Building,
The Australian National University ACT 0200.
Tel: 02 6125-2354
Mob: 0400 124639
Email: elizabeth.ganter@anu.edu.au

If you have any questions or complaints about this project, please feel free to contact:-

The Secretary, Human Research Ethics Committee
Research Services Office
Chancelry 10B, The Australian National University ACT 0200
Tel: 6125-7945
Fax: 6125-4807
Email: Human.Ethics.Officer@anu.edu.au

Dr Tim Rowse – *Supervisor*
Head of History Program, Research School of Social Sciences
Coombs Building, The Australian National University ACT 0200
Tel: 02 6125-2445
Fax: 02 6125-3969
Email: tim.rowse@anu.edu.au

Mr Dennis Bree – *Industry Adviser*
Deputy Chief Executive, Department of Chief Minister
NT House, 22 Mitchell St Darwin
PO Box 4296 Darwin NT 0801
Tel: 08 8999-6490
Email: dennis.bree@nt.gov.au

Dr Mark Moran – *Core Project 5 Leader*
Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre
Centre for Appropriate Technology, Alice Springs
Tel: 08 8951 4320
Email: mark.moran@icat.org.au

Appendix C – Letter Of Invitation To Interviewees



Elizabeth Ganter
North Australia Research Unit
23 Ellengowan Drive, Brinkin
Northern Territory 0811
elizabeth.ganter@anu.edu.au

PO Box 41321
Casuarina NT 0811
Telephone: 08 8920 9978
Facsimile: 08 8920 9988
<http://naru.anu.edu.au>

Dear [Interviewee]

I would like to invite you to participate in my PhD research about the relationship between the Northern Territory Government and its senior Aboriginal officials. I believe you could tell me much about the views and experiences of senior Aboriginal officials working in the Northern Territory Government.

Your participation is purely voluntary. If you choose to take part in the research, this will involve an interview at a time and place convenient to you which will last up to one hour. There may be a follow up interview at a later time.

I enclose an information sheet giving you more details, as well as the consent form I will ask you to sign if you are willing to participate in this research. I will call you to follow up this invitation and, if you would like to proceed, arrange a time for your interview.

Thank you for considering my invitation.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Ganter

History Program, Research School of Social Sciences
The Australian National University
Tel: 08 89209978 (North Australia Research Unit, Darwin)
0400 124639 (Mobile)

Appendix D – Interviewee Consent Form



PHD RESEARCH PROJECT – ELIZABETH GANTER

ABORIGINAL SENIOR OFFICIALS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT

Researcher: Elizabeth Ganter, PhD student, The Australian National University

Supervisor: Dr Tim Rowse, Head of History Program, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University

1. I,(please print) consent to take part in this PhD project about Aboriginal senior officials in the Northern Territory Government. I have read the information sheet for this project and understand its contents. I have had the nature and purpose of the research, so far as it affects me, fully explained to my satisfaction by the researcher. My consent is freely given.
2. I understand that if I agree to participate in the research I will be asked to attend an interview. This will take up to one hour and will involve questions about my work. These questions will be about my experiences as a senior Aboriginal official or the Northern Territory Government’s expectations of such officials. I may be invited to attend a second interview.
3. I understand that while information gained during the research project may be published or publicly presented, my name, position title and other obvious identifying information will not be used in relation to any of the information I have provided, unless I explicitly indicate that I am willing to be identified when quoted.
4. I understand that my personal information such as my name and position title will be kept confidential so far as the law allows. This form and any other identifying material will be kept in locked storage and discarded securely after the conclusion of the project in accordance with ANU requirements. Data entered onto a computer will be accessible by password known only to the researcher.
5. I understand that although any comments I make will not be attributed to me, it is possible that others may guess the source of information, and I should avoid disclosing information to the researcher which is particularly sensitive or confidential within government or which is defamatory of any person.
6. I understand that while my comments on the research findings will be welcomed, the final judgements about this research will rest with the researcher.
7. I understand that I may withdraw from the research at any stage without providing any reason, and that this will not have any adverse consequences for me. If I withdraw, the information I provide will not be used by the researcher.

Signed..... Date.....

(turn over page)

Voice recording

I consent to have my interview recorded by the interviewer. I understand that this data will be stored securely and will be destroyed after the conclusion of the research.

Signed..... Date.....

Researcher to complete

I, Elizabeth Ganter, certify that I have explained the nature and procedures of the research to..... and consider that he/she understands what is involved.

Signed..... Date.....

Appendix E – Guide To The Interview Questions

Interview Guide for Current and Former NTG Senior Aboriginal Officials

IDM/F Age: 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s From the NT/ elsewhere

Department

Identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in OCPE statistics: Y/N

Total time in NTG/Senior..... NGO experience: Y/N

Thank you for coming to this interview. I'm Elizabeth Ganter and as you know, I'm a PhD student in Public Policy at ANU. My supervisor is Dr Tim Rowse and my industry adviser is Dennis Bree of DCM.

This interview will be all about your relationship with the NT Government as a senior Aboriginal public servant – your job, your experiences in it and what difference you believe it makes, if any, that you are Aboriginal. I would like to record it if you don't mind, to help me to listen now, reflect on it later and quote you properly.

Neither my panel nor anyone in the NTG or anywhere else will have access to the recording or to your identity. I will write about what you say in a way that protects your identity. My panel will view my draft findings, but this is independent research which will only be available to the NT Government in the form of my final thesis.

Please read the consent form and sign it if you are willing to proceed with the interview.

I'm hoping to ask all senior Aboriginal officials within the NT Government a similar series of questions, but please don't let this stop you telling me anything else you think is important as we go along.

Current job

1. Firstly what is your job, and how long have you been in it? What do you do?
2. What, if anything, do you feel you are achieving for Aboriginal people in this job?
3. Who are the Aboriginal people who benefit from your work? Including people in Central Australia?

Involvement in the NTG

4. When and why did you join the NT Government? What (other) roles have you played in the NTG?
5. Did you notice a change in the course of your career with the 2001 change of government?
6. What encourages you to stay in the NT Government? What do you think could make you want to leave?
7. *If you've left the NTG, what would (or did) make you leave? Under what circumstances would you return?*
8. Is there anything you'd describe as particularly hard about working for the NT Government?

Aboriginal identity

9. Where are you from – NT/where, elsewhere?
10. Do you identify as Aboriginal for OCPE statistical purposes? Have you always? Any reservations?
11. Do you know of Aboriginal people within the NTG who choose not to identify as Aboriginal?
12. What does identifying as Aboriginal mean to you?
13. Do you think that you are seen as Aboriginal before you are seen as a public servant? Why do you think so?
14. How do you see yourself – can you hold both identities at the same time?

Relationship with the Indigenous sector

15. Where else have you worked? Have you worked in any Aboriginal organisations?
16. Are your professional networks stronger inside or outside the NTG? Are these Aboriginal networks?
17. Do you feel part of an Aboriginal affairs policy community? Does this include non-Aboriginal people?

Education

18. What formal education have you had? Have you used this much in your career?
19. What role do you think informal learning and experience have played in your career?

Representation

20. Do you think the NTPS is more representative of Aboriginal people now than in the past? Why?
21. Do you feel that you represent other Aboriginal people in your job? In what way?
22. Have you ever felt an expectation by others that you should represent other Aboriginal people in your job, in a way that is beyond what you can offer? How have you responded?
23. Have you ever faced a conflict of interest between your identity as an Aboriginal person and your role as a public servant? How did you resolve this?

Influence

24. The NT Government has stated that 'adequate representation of Aboriginal people at all levels' will mean their 'effective contribution to policy and decision making affecting Aboriginal people'. Do you think that Aboriginal people can contribute to the NTPS just by being there?
25. What difference do you think it makes to the NTG that you are an Aboriginal person?
26. What specifically do you feel that being Aboriginal has enabled you to influence in the NT Government?
27. What, if any, difference does it make to you that there are 6 Aboriginal parliamentarians?

Relationship with the NT Government

28. How would you describe your relationship with the NT Government? Has this ever changed?
29. Any comments on your relationship with the NT Government in Central Australia?
30. Is there anything you would like to have been asked, but haven't been? Any questions for me?

That concludes our interview. Thank you very much for your time. I may be back in touch invite you to a second interview. Would you like me to keep your contact details so I can also invite you to any public presentations on this research or to view my final thesis at the end of the project?
Yes / No

In the meantime, please call me if you have any queries about this interview or the project.
