12. Recruiting an Aboriginal voice: The state development of Aboriginal broadcasting

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To understand the situation of Indigenous people in Australia one must understand the role of the State. (Beckett 1985:7)

When the Whitlam Labor government launched the policies of Aboriginal self-determination in 1972, it seemed to assume that all Aboriginal people harbored an overwhelming desire to ‘liberate’ themselves from the past oppressions of the old ‘assimilationist’ era. In fact, the first Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Whitlam government, Gordon Bryant, fervently believed that once Aboriginal people had been provided with the means to ‘control their own affairs’, the state would, in his own words, ‘withdraw’ from any further engagement in Aboriginal life (Cavanagh 1974). Of course, this did not eventuate. As Altman and Sanders (1991) have shown, over the following decades a vast array of new governmental structures were introduced that only served to increase Aboriginal dependency on the state. It seems the Whitlam government had been too hasty in assuming the existence of an Aboriginal constituency willing and able to grasp the reins of its new policies. Indeed, it became apparent that it would have to find ways of nurturing this constituency in order to make its policies of ‘Aboriginal self-determination’ work.

I argue that in implementing its project of ‘Aboriginal self-determination’, the Federal government presupposed a certain Aboriginal agency capable of facilitating these governmental policies. This presupposition created the need, and therefore the conditions, for the formation of such agency.

The notion that Aboriginal agency is shaped by government policy may seem confronting, especially when the aim of such policy was to ‘empower’ Aboriginal people. Nonetheless, as I hope to demonstrate,
one of the primary objectives of the policy of Aboriginal self-determination was to produce ‘appropriate’ forms of Aboriginal agency imbued with the ability to undertake a variety of projects on behalf of the state. In supporting these arguments, I will focus on the Federal government’s project to establish Aboriginal broadcasting services between 1970 and 1979. It entailed a complex range of initiatives including the commissioning of feasibility studies, pilot projects, the investigation of Indigenous broadcasting services in other countries and many other strategies. This not only produced concrete expectations within government about the development of an Aboriginal broadcasting service, but facilitated the formation of an Aboriginal agency capable of creating it. Before discussing these developments, I will first provide a brief outline of what I mean by ‘Aboriginal agency’.

**Aboriginal agency**

As is commonly accepted in contemporary cultural theory, I view all ‘human agency’ as a social product and not as an ‘essential’ entity that exists beyond the realm of ordinary social discourse (see Easthope and McGowan 1992; Jenkins 1996). In this sense, human agency is not to be understood as something that emanates from a non-human, transcendental source (e.g. god); rather, it is constituted through mundane interactions with other selves, ideas or objects. As Mansfield (2000:3) suggests:

…our interior lives inevitably involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interests or as necessary sharers of common experience. In this way, the subject is always linked to something outside of it – an idea or principle or the society of other subjects…

I therefore reject the popular notion that Aboriginal agency exists in some ‘transcendental’ space removed from mundane reality. I also reject the kind of essentialised, undifferentiated Indigenous agency that is promoted in certain scholarly literature (see Lattas 1993; Wolfe 1999). Rather, I view ‘Aboriginal agency’ as a social product, just like all other forms of human agency. While there are innumerable social forces that might shape such agency, I have chosen to focus here on the specific effects of governmental power in its formation. Furthermore, by arguing that governments are directly implicated in the formation of Aboriginal agency, I do not wish to suggest that it is only Aboriginal agency that is given form and meaning within the mechanisms and policies of government. Indeed, liberal–democratic governments are
constantly initiating programs and policies designed to shape the agency of its citizen-subjects. As Shore and Wright (1997:25) state:

…policy has become an increasingly central concept in the organisation of contemporary societies. Like the modern state…policy now impinges on all areas of life so that it is virtually impossible to ignore or escape its influence. More than this, policy increasingly shapes the way individuals construct themselves as subjects…

An object of governmental interest

Official interest in Aboriginal broadcasting began in 1970 when a discussion took place within the Federal government’s Office of Aboriginal Affairs (OAA) about ‘the effect of radio coverage on the Aborigines of the Northern Territory’ (OAA 1970a). As a result of these deliberations the OAA’s chairman, H.C. ‘Nugget’ Coombs wrote to the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) seeking its advice on the matter. He asked: ‘Would the ABC be prepared to develop special programs for Aboriginal listeners in Northern Australia in their own languages?’ (OAA 1970b). Coombs considered that the programs should be broadcast in Aboriginal languages, not as a way of maintaining them, but for purely educative purposes. He (OAA 1970b) stated:

It is a sad fact…that the majority of the Aborigines in Northern Australia…have only a poor understanding of English. Until the present school generations attain sufficient fluency in English, Aboriginal Australians in remote areas will not know with any clarity about plans for their future advancement.

The OAA proposal met with a favourable response and, in November 1970, the Director of the OAA, Barrie Dexter, met with the ABC’s Federal Director of Radio Programs to discuss ways in which a broadcasting service for Aboriginal listeners could be developed.

After the election of the Whitlam government in December 1972, the interest in Aboriginal broadcasting shown by the OAA was given further impetus within the newly created Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA). In April 1973, DAA sent one of its departmental officers, Kel Lewis, to Papua New Guinea to investigate its Indigenous broadcasting system. When Lewis (1975:6) presented his findings, he concluded that:

A properly instituted broadcast system with regional stations at say Darwin, Derby, Geraldton, Alice Springs and Cooktown would
cover a large part of our country and bring a service to our indigenous people. It would strengthen Aboriginal groups from all walks of life.

Lewis’s report prompted high-level discussions between the then Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Cavanagh, and the Federal Minister for the Media, Senator McClelland. As a result, McClelland directed the General Manager of the ABC, Talbot Duckmanton, to write to his colleague in DAA, Barrie Dexter. Duckmanton (ABC 1974) stated:

We have been giving further thought...to the possibility of providing...special programs for Aborigines living in [Northern] Australia...We are anxious to move on this matter, but we...need your...guidance to enable us to do so...we would attempt to define the areas in which the proposed broadcasts might be most effective, as well as the nature and content of them. I realise there will be very real problems to be faced perhaps in determining the languages and dialects in which these broadcasts should be made, and also as to their content...

Duckmanton’s proposals did not result in any immediate action on the part of the Federal authorities. Nonetheless, this and other initiatives did create a small niche in governmental thinking about Aboriginal broadcasting which refused to disappear. Indeed, it was to become the subject of an endless round of investigations by various government departments, agencies and authorities that continued until 1979.

Aboriginal content

In officially concerning himself with the problems of Aboriginal content, Duckmanton was also making it a government concern; a concern that has continued to preoccupy — and divide — not only the formulaters of government policy, but media regulatory authorities, funding bodies, academics and Aboriginal broadcasting organisations up to the present time. In his essay ‘Aboriginal content: Who’s got it — who needs it?’, Eric Michaels (1994) went to the heart of this troublesome issue when he tried to imagine what the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) would accept as ‘Aboriginal content’. Michaels (1994:20–1) asked:

Would the Tribunal accept programs made by Europeans about Aborigines: a Country Practice episode with an Aboriginal character?
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Or only programs made by Aborigines themselves? And if the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) makes a videoclip of Midnight Oil, what is that?

For Michaels, there is little point in trying to answer these questions since they are ‘not even answerable’. Rather, he is concerned to know how an institution such as the ABT might establish a set of authoritative criteria to determine what constitutes Aboriginal content in radio, film and television programming. Ultimately, Michaels argued that any attempt to define such content by agencies of the government is not only racist, but destructive of what he termed ‘traditional Aboriginal society’. Michaels (1994:41) argued:

The means by which ‘Aboriginal Content’, as an identified and authorised category of television and film, risks the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society ultimately can be identified as racist. This is because it requires an act of false identification, or ascription, of Aborigines (consistent with the more general Australian conception of race) as an equivalent class whose culture is written in their blood. The point, precisely, is that culture is not written in blood, only genetics is. Culture is extrasomatic, and it is inscribed in the communication process itself.

In attacking the ways in which ‘Aboriginal Content’ had become ‘an identified and authorised category’ of government, Michaels did not restrict his criticism to governmental agencies. Indeed, he tried to establish a link between the state governance of Aboriginal content and the ways in which Aborigines themselves might be recruited into this project. Michaels (1994:39) commented:

Oddly, contemporary Aboriginal politics encourages certain Aborigines, identified by the government, to position themselves much more conspicuously than the system traditionally encouraged, identifying their newly, bureaucratically constituted selves as signifiers, to engage in a massive opportunity for self-inscription that these new media provide.

Although Michaels contradicted himself where he relied on an essentialist notion of traditional Aboriginal society (while at the same time arguing for a non-essentialist ‘extrasomatic’ notion of culture), he nonetheless brought into focus not only the complex problem of defining Aboriginal content, but how the state comes to bear on the definition, verification and authorisation of such content. More importantly for the purposes of this chapter, he draws attention to the way in which governmental processes make available certain subject
positions, or roles, that may or may not be taken up by those for whom such positions are created.

**Working party on Aboriginal Broadcasting**

Apart from raising the vexed issue of Aboriginal content, Duckmanton’s letter to Dexter had the practical effect of initiating the establishment of a Working Party on Aboriginal Broadcasting, convened by the ABC and DAA which met from 1974 to 1976. At a meeting held in October 1975, the Working Party proposed that a pilot project involving the construction of a community-based Aboriginal radio station be undertaken. It noted that (DAA n.d.):

> …the establishment of an Aboriginal community station — like other ethnic…stations…was desirable and…if the pilot project proved successful, further study might then be undertaken on the feasibility…of establishing further Aboriginal community broadcasting stations in other locations.

Two areas were nominated for the trial: Milingimbi and Bathurst Island. However, the project never eventuated. Indeed, the Working Party ceased to exist in 1976. It seems that the dismissal of the Federal Labor Government in November 1975 had some effect in halting the development of Aboriginal broadcasting, at least for the time being. In broader terms, the lack of co-ordination between various departments and the absence of any policy made the process almost impossible to implement.

The Working Party also tried to develop a national radio program for Aborigines through the ABC. In fact, a set of programs were pre-recorded on tape. However, like the Aboriginal Community Broadcasting scheme, they too failed to go to air. The then Controller of Radio Programs in the ABC, John Newsome (who was not a member of the Working Party), refused to broadcast the pre-produced programs. In an interview conducted in 1997, Newsome said:

> …I rejected those tapes…They were not satisfactory…not that there was anything wrong with them in a technical sense…the problem with them was that they had been done by white people reporting on Aboriginal issues and I didn’t think, at the time, that it was quite what we needed…We were beyond that even in 1975…

Newsome considered that the ABC had no business in producing Aboriginal programs at all. As far as he was concerned, such material should have been produced by Aborigines themselves through
Aboriginal controlled organisations. Of course, at that point in time, no such organisations existed.

Indeed, the absence of any effective Aboriginal broadcasting organisation was one of the primary impediments in the government's broader plans to develop Aboriginal broadcasting services. Nonetheless, the development of various governmental administrative structures designed to facilitate the formation of such organisations had commenced a few years before Newsome rejected the ABC’s Aboriginal radio programs. Although these structures were initially concerned with the formation of Aboriginal organisations in areas such as health and housing, they also precipitated, at a later stage, the formation of Aboriginal media organisations that did indeed eventually supply the ABC with appropriate Aboriginal programming content.

To understand the emergence of Aboriginal broadcasting, we therefore need to understand the development of the ‘Aboriginal community-controlled organisation’. As I hope to show in the following brief section, these bodies provided an institutional arena in which certain forms of Aboriginal agency began to emerge that could accomplish the plans of government, including the development of Aboriginal broadcasting.

**Seeking an alignment of Aboriginal–state aspirations**

In implementing its policies of Aboriginal self-determination, I will argue that the Labor government sought to establish what Nicholas Rose has termed an ‘alignment’ between its own ambitions and those of Aboriginal people (see Rose 1996:126). This would not be accomplished via a program of compulsion but through the incorporation of Aboriginal agency into the mechanisms of government itself. In other words, the state would not seek to act directly on Aborigines as it had in the past. On the contrary, they would be encouraged to act on themselves in order to manage programs and projects proffered by the state. This was made clear when Prime Minister Gough Whitlam proposed in 1972 that his government would ‘seek to devolve upon…organisations of Aboriginals themselves, responsibility for carrying out the policies decided upon by my government’ (Whitlam 1973:697).

However, if Aboriginal organisations were to take over responsibilities once vested in the state, then a level of bureaucratic rigour would be required to ensure their managerial and financial competency. Labor
therefore began to draw up legislation that would allow for the incorporation and regulation of such bodies. Yet, it was not until the election of the Fraser government (1975–1983) that the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976* was eventually passed, under which most Aboriginal organisations were later incorporated. Furthermore, it was determined that only organisations incorporated under this legislation (or similar Acts), could qualify for government funding. Since its inception, more than 3000 bodies have been established under this legislation. Indeed, on a collective basis, they now play a significant role in the governance of the Aboriginal population.

Under these arrangements, I will argue that the collective Aboriginal ‘self’ became an object of intense governmental scrutiny since it is now expected to carry out the work of the State. The *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976* not only allowed Aboriginal individuals to form themselves into organisations, but provided the State with a range of controls concerning the administrative operations of such bodies, particularly in relation to their fiscal probity. For example, under Sub-section (3), Section 61 of the Act, the Registrar of Aboriginal Incorporations has the power to dissolve an Aboriginal organisation if it fails to provide a set of audited accounts in a timely manner. Thus, in restoring to the Aboriginal peoples ‘their lost power of self-determination’, the state provided Aborigines with a regulated freedom to be determined, as Rose (1996:23) puts it, by ‘the rationalities of accountability’. At the same time, the state created an institutional framework through which it could constitute a competent and verifiable Aboriginal agency that could carry out the policies ‘decided upon’ by government.

Although the development of the Aboriginal corporate body provided an administrative blueprint for the future establishment of Aboriginal broadcasting organisations, there was another perhaps more significant factor that facilitated the formation of these organisations. This related to the emerging importance of ‘ Aboriginal cultural tradition’ in government thinking. Specifically, the government began to adopt the view that broadcasting could play a vital role in the maintenance of Aboriginal languages. To illustrate this important point, I will now return to the government’s attempts to establish Aboriginal broadcasting during the 1970s.
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Aboriginal broadcasting and the ‘restoration’ of Aboriginal culture

In August 1978, the then-Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, was approached by a group of Aborigines while on tour in the Northern Territory who asked that existing radio and television services be extended into their local regions (DAA 1979). These representations prompted the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Ian Viner, to reconvene the Working Party on Aboriginal Broadcasting. He also addressed the House of Representatives on the issue. He stated (Hansard HR 1978:3449):

Aboriginals are…now very conscious of their cultural identity and of the extent to which it is everywhere threatened…The government has been helping Aboriginals…to restore and rebuild their cultural identity…we have been working on proposals for the development of local community-based broadcasting services for Aboriginals in their own languages…the government’s Working Party on Aboriginal Broadcasting will give first consideration to remote communities. Accordingly, the major Aboriginal languages that could be serviced have already been identified…

Viner’s speech was significant as it shows a marked departure in the government’s original thinking about Aboriginal broadcasting. As we have seen, in 1970 Coombs suggested that broadcasting could play a useful role in informing Aboriginals about government plans for their ‘future advancement’. Eight years later, however, Viner presents an entirely different position: that radio could restore and rebuild Aboriginal cultural identity.

Of course, this radical shift in policy was not restricted to Aboriginal broadcasting; it was a fundamental component of the broader project of Aboriginal self-determination. Henceforth, government policy would not only attempt to revitalise Aboriginal ‘cultural tradition’ but would seek an alignment with it in order to prosecute its programs for Aboriginals. In short, Aboriginal culture would be enlisted as a vital element in the implementation of state policy. Indeed, the recruitment of Aboriginal culture had been one of the central aims of government policy since the early 1970s.

In a somewhat confused but revealing statement made in 1974, the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Cavanagh (1974:9-11), said:

The whiteman has done much to kill the culture of the Aboriginal, but it is worth preserving. It is something that means much to
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Australia…Therefore we have something to gain from Aboriginals. We must get into the position of trying to utilise Aboriginal culture, a culture that could assist us to have Aboriginals living in a more acceptable form of the standards that the white man has developed…That this gain from culture will be developed and brought out, is the determination of the government. It’s my determination; it is the determination of most officers in the Department and we must be ruthless and ride roughshod over those who would seek to stop us from achieving this ambition in Aboriginal Affairs.

Thus, throughout the 1970s, we begin to see the emergence of a whole range of state–supported projects that incorporate certain reconstituted versions of Aboriginal culture into the administrative practices of government. For instance, the establishment of outstations on traditional homelands is seen as a significant way to improve Aboriginal health; the insertion of traditional forms of education into school curricula is proposed as a way of combating poor educational achievement, and Aboriginal ceremonial life becomes the ‘key’ to arresting community break-down since its perpetuation is seen as a way of re-establishing traditional forms of social organisation and authority.

Nonetheless, I argue that these cultural traditions were deployed to accomplish particular governmental ends and as such should be understood more as ‘artefacts’ of rule than as separate or essential cultural attributes (see Hindess 1996). In other words, such ‘traditions’ were shaped and given a meaning largely in relation to their constitution and usage within the mechanisms of government. As O’Malley (1996:317) has proposed:

…the process of self-determination involves its constitution via the selective valorisation of those aspects of indigenous [culture] that produced administratively desired effects…

Viner’s parliamentary statement ensured that the project to develop Aboriginal broadcasting became securely attached to the state’s wider project to incorporate Aboriginal cultural tradition into its policies and programs. Indeed, it was no accident that the first Aboriginal media organisation to be funded by the Federal government (in 1980) was located in Central Australia (CAAMA). Certainly, for Viner, the kind of ‘Aboriginal traditions’ evident in this region made it an ideal arena for the development of Aboriginal broadcasting. Just as importantly, an extensive administrative network had been established in Central Australia under the policies of Aboriginal self-determination that supported the formation, incorporation and funding of Aboriginal
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organisations. Here, an alignment between the interests of the state and those of Aboriginal peoples with regard to Aboriginal broadcasting was finally established.

Conclusion

It took ten years (1970 to 1980) for the Australian government to establish broadcasting services for Aboriginals. As I have tried to show here, the long delay in accomplishing this task was largely due to the ‘problem’ of Aboriginal agency. In the end, a broadcasting service operated by the state for Aboriginal peoples was not what the state wanted. Ultimately, what was required was a broadcasting service run by Aborigines themselves. Only then could such a service claim to represent the ‘voice of Indigenous Australia’. Indeed, to what extent could the state be involved in a project that demanded, by its very nature, freedom from state interference? On the other hand, the Federal government and its representatives, particularly Viner, knew that without state support the development of a viable broadcasting system for Aboriginal peoples would not be possible. The state was therefore confronted with a peculiar dilemma: on the one hand, it had to establish procedures that might facilitate the constitution of an effective Aboriginal agency capable of controlling and operating the envisaged service; on the other hand, such an agency would need to be ‘authentic’ and, most importantly, work independently of the state.

Of course, this agency did not pre-exist in some ready-made form. It was not an essential object located in some transcendental realm, waiting to be ‘appropriated’ by the state. On the contrary, the state would need to find ways of creating the appropriate conditions that might foster its construction.

For this to occur, Aboriginal agency itself would have to be enlisted in the broader policies underpinning the state’s governance of the Aboriginal population, which, as I have argued, began to occur only after the election of the Labor government in 1972 when the policies of Aboriginal self-determination were implemented. These policies and the radical changes they brought to the governance of Indigenous Australians throughout the 1970s eventually constructed the necessary agency capable of facilitating the formation of Aboriginal broadcasting services. This leads to two importance points, one specific and the other general. First, although the policies of Aboriginal self-determination are grounded in essentialist notions of the Aboriginal subject, they are in
fact directly implicated in the formation of such subjects. Second, as with the application of all forms of governmental policy, there are linkages between the practices of government and the formation of differing forms of subjectivity.

References

ABC — see Australian Broadcasting Commission.
DAA — see Department of Aboriginal Affairs.


OAA — see Office of Aboriginal Affairs.


