The Northern Territory’s turnstile ticker

Representative bureaucracy is a relatively recent policy in the longstanding invitation by successive governments for Northern Territory Aboriginal people to participate in the administration of their population. Interviewees urged me time and again to follow the numbers. One man who had been watching the government’s relationship with Aboriginal organisations in Central Australia for a long time, described Indigenous employment as a ‘turnstile ticker’. It was not easy to find a consistent storyline in periodically revised categories of employment and reset baselines, but the interviewees’ general unease with the government’s decontextualised, over-optimistic reportage suggests we will find underlying issues, perhaps continuities, if we look hard enough over a significant timeframe.

Aboriginal people were used as labour in the earlier administration of Australia’s Northern Territory, but their work was menial under the policies of Aboriginal protection and assimilation that characterised the period of Commonwealth control before Northern Territory self-government in 1978. The Commonwealth administered the Northern Territory for some 66 years before self-government, involving many Aboriginal people in operational roles that were cast as so minor that these staff were excluded from public service privileges and conditions. The events of this era were formative of the family histories, political
identities and work ethics of the interviewees, as many were the children and grandchildren of the domestic labourers, railway workers and police trackers of the Commonwealth’s early administration.

The Indigenous employment numbers narrate the historic, still-remembered relationship with government that lies at the heart of Aboriginal political identity in the Northern Territory—Edith’s ‘poison cousin’. But Edith also said about the Northern Territory Government and its relationship with Aboriginal Territorians:

We’re all married to each other now. We’re all intertwined.

Edith was referring to a history in which people of mixed descent were incarcerated and trained for employment in ‘half-caste’ institutions—the Kahlin Compound in Darwin and the Bungalow in Alice Springs—under early protectionist policies. Some interviewees were first- and second-generation descendants of the very people who had supplied the labour for government departments and the households of key officials in these not-so-distant times (Department of External Affairs 1919: 44). ‘Government employment’ was seen as the exemplar for less reputable private employers—but this was not employment in today’s terms. There was little choice and there were no private wages.

A number of the interviewees were moved as ‘half-caste’ children to new homes on Melville and Croker Islands by patrol officers employed by the Native Affairs Branch under the Commonwealth’s expanded World War II presence. After the war, the Northern Territory Administration oversaw an elaborate machinery of settlements, missions and ‘town’ employment in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including 1,000 redundant Army recruits, were occupied in many forms of government labour. However, when the Northern Territory Administration took stock of government employment in 1949, there were only around 60 Aboriginal trackers and other assistants (Wilson 1998: 87; Northern Territory Administrator 1949).

The number of Aboriginal people in government employment nearly doubled over the next decade, as the definition expanded to include traineeships in hygiene, hospital and medical, teaching, domestic, catering, welfare, surveying and patrol work on government settlements and missions. In the 1960s, the number briefly skyrocketed then fell. Three thousand Aboriginal people were recorded as ‘employed’ on government settlements and missions
(Department of Territories 1964: 50) until the introduction of equal wages made that categorisation unsustainable for the limited financial capacity of the Northern Territory Administration (see Rowley 1971: 307). By 1966, the figure for government employment again excluded remote settlement workers and had fallen back to 300 (Department of Territories 1966: 57).

After decades of drawing Aboriginal people into menial labour, the Administration had drawn a line between ‘employment’, which was for those recruited into the administrative bureaucracy, and ‘training’, which was for those in the service delivery machinery of settlements and missions (Department of Territories 1968: 62). This distinction was expressed in two full-page portraits published by the Northern Territory Administration in 1968. One was of Canis Xavier, the fireman in this volume’s frontispiece who had already served four years with the Northern Territory Public Service.¹ The other, Zoc Mulda, from the remote settlement of Haasts Bluff, was photographed at an oxywelding class in Darwin. Canis was about to be paid award wages, whereas Zoc was in training (Department of Territories 1968: 60–1).

Through the 1967 Referendum, the Australian public gave the Commonwealth a clear mandate to make special laws and policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian states and the Northern Territory. Many thought there should be a reconsideration of Aboriginal affairs, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were now free to participate in government on a more equal footing. But Charles Perkins’ rise through the public service was a rarity, as past policies had not prepared many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for the opportunity of public service careers.

Perversely, it was just as the Commonwealth nurtured the first national institutions of Aboriginal self-determination and land rights that it began ceding control of the Northern Territory to self-government.

¹ There had been a Northern Territory public service since the early Commonwealth administration, which expanded and contracted relative to Commonwealth departments until Northern Territory self-government. This pre-self-government Northern Territory public service took on the Fire Brigade in 1965.
The original 10 per cent

During the final years of Commonwealth administration, arrangements in the Northern Territory gave the Commonwealth the opportunity to draw on Aboriginal employment in the Northern Territory as the nation’s first evidence of a socially diverse Australian Public Service. In the spirit of Aboriginal self-determination, the Australian Public Service treated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees with renewed numeric diligence and a new racial respect, inviting departments to contribute to an annual survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in 1973. The survey drew on the newly accepted definition: ‘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’ (Australian Public Service Board 1975: 2).

In 1973, 450 Northern Territory-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees were recorded. In 1974, the number swelled to nearly 1,500 with the absorption of 1,039 formerly exempt municipal workers, hospital attendants and teaching assistants into the Australian Public Service ‘Fourth Division’ after full wages were awarded to those on training allowances in Northern Territory settlements. Many were temporary employees (Australian Public Service Board 1975: 3–4, 6; Rowley 1976: 369). In evidence to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Northern Territory, a Commonwealth representative calculated the Territory’s Aboriginal public sector employment rate at 10 per cent, omitting the original 450 (which would have increased the percentage) and setting the 1,039 settlement workers against a base figure of 11,000 Northern Territory-based Australian Public Service employees (Joint Committee on the NT 1974: 2559). For the entire history of the Northern Territory Administration, these settlement workers had been excluded from the full provisions of the Australian Public Service Act. Now they were celebrated (see also Briggs 2008).

In time, after a few hundred local employees had trickled into Northern Territory Aboriginal councils and associations, the Commonwealth handed over some 1,100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to the Northern Territory Public Service. This left just over 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff forming a concentration
of ‘Third Division’ clerical workers in the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs in the Northern Territory (Australian Public Service Board 1980: 5). The Northern Territory Public Service had inherited a nascent representative bureaucracy through responsibility for the delivery of services to remote communities (Australian Public Service Board 1976: 5).

Target practice in the early years of self-government

In the early years of self-government, Northern Territory politicians sought to carve out a unique future for the region. HC Coombs was encouraging the machinery to support a more responsive and socially diverse Australian Public Service (see Coombs 1977), but Northern Territory policies were reactive to, rather than cooperative with, national approaches. The Australian Parliament was concerned with the capacity of the incoming administration to manage the Territory’s demographic and cultural complexity, and the architects of the policies and structures of Aboriginal self-determination were cautious about the Territory’s capacity to be a vehicle for Aboriginal empowerment.

The original state of mind

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 satirised it for the nation’s delectation on the eve of self-government (Juddery 1978). The Northern Territory Public Service was cavalier with established practices in the pursuit of a Territory-style public service. Among those taking up the reins of self-government, the mood was ebullient and rebellious. The Public Service Commissioner asked Chief Minister Everingham to ‘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.’ and promptly amalgamated the unskilled and clerical divisions, which made school completion unnecessary to an individual’s rise to the top (PSCNT 1978).
Beneath the swashbuckling allusions to a new inclusiveness, the vision was predominantly for the employment of settler locals. Aboriginal people formed 25 per cent of the Northern Territory’s population, but the Northern Territory’s original and permanent population was barely in the picture. Territory officials preferred to employ the white settlers who had arrived during the period of the Northern Territory Administration.

The political economy of Northern Territory self-government presented deep challenges, and the Northern Territory Government was affronted by the continued presence of the Commonwealth in local affairs. Through the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the Commonwealth continued to administer community development programs in remote areas, leaving the Northern Territory Government to deliver health, education and policing services across the Northern Territory’s complex geography, while without full responsibility for Aboriginal affairs. The Commonwealth had secured legislated land rights for Northern Territory Aboriginal people in 1976, which placed a major limit on some of the aims of self-government, and the Northern Territory Government often presented itself as the adversary of traditional claimants who were represented by Commonwealth-funded land councils. Aboriginal Territorians were being enticed into a seemingly more benevolent political relationship with Canberra, while the Northern Territory Government provided a convenient scapegoat for the difficulties and costs of remote service delivery.

When Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser asked the Northern Territory Government to fund training positions for Aboriginal people over and above the staffing transfer, Chief Minister Everingham asked for ‘concrete evidence’ of the Commonwealth’s commitment to the Northern Territory by demanding the Commonwealth supply the positions ‘prior to transfer’ (Everingham 1978: 1). Behind the scenes, Everingham pushed his bureaucracy long and hard for imaginative proposals to improve Aboriginal employment and training. Departments deliberated over how they should engage with Aboriginal people to achieve it (Everingham 1979). In 1980 Everingham set Aboriginal employment targets of ‘10 per cent by 1982, 15 per cent by 1985, and 20 per cent by 1990’ as the public service contribution to a Five Year Program to improve remote communities. The Program also aimed for the 95 per cent ‘Aboriginalisation’ of government works (Everingham 1980: 3075–6) (PSCNT 1983: 24; see also OAL 1983: folio 262).
2. THE NORTHERN TERRITORY’S TURNTILE TICKER

The race back to 10 per cent

The 10 per cent target must have seemed safe enough for a public service of 11,000 staff that was still waiting for 1,100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian Public Service staff to transfer in with self-government. But Everingham’s 15 and 20 per cent targets were ambitious. After the transfers, an internal survey located 1,137 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, who formed 10.5 per cent of the public service establishment of 10,879 legislated positions (OAL 1983: folio 262). But the establishment figure inflated the percentage by providing a smaller base than the ‘actual’ workforce of around 14,500 allowing for staff turnover, leave and other variables (PSCNT 1983: Appendix A). Also, in 1983 the Northern Territory Public Service establishment excluded government authorities like the Northern Territory Teaching Service, Electricity Commission and uniformed police force (OAL 1983: folio 256). Both restrictions on the base figure were about to change, as these authorities were soon incorporated into the public service establishment figures. Comparison against the ‘actual’ workforce was to become the convention from 1985.

When calculated against the larger workforce figure, 1,137 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees formed just 7.8 per cent of the Northern Territory Public Service. Everingham’s targets had become even more ambitious. They were doomed for definitional reasons alone, but in the face of public service growth they stood even less chance. On whatever calculus—the inflated 10.5 per cent or the more realistic 7.8 per cent of the larger workforce—with only 37 more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees than the 1,100 inherited with self-government, there was no apparent justification for Everingham to tell the Commonwealth that his government was ‘ahead of its targeted percentage’ in Aboriginal employment in 1983 (Everingham 1983). Target-setting quickly went out of fashion, although it would later tempt new political actors.

‘Are you a radical black?’

By 1983, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants were working as teachers and teaching assistants, health workers, police aides, rangers, community workers, essential services operators and liaison officers (OAL 1983: folio 256). Some Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander public servants also assisted with centralised employment and training. Through some of these officers, departments made sporadic but significant efforts to encourage the active representation of Aboriginal community interests.

Two such efforts will be described here. Through archived memoranda and the observations of the interviewees who were involved, we shall see how both efforts ran afoul of other priorities in the end.

The first is the story of a small cohort of Aboriginal Liaison Officers in the Department of the Chief Minister who became known as the government’s ‘eyes and ears’. When voting enrolment became compulsory for Northern Territory Aboriginal people soon after self-government in 1979, the government had a new incentive to capture the hearts and minds of the Aboriginal constituency. Intent on establishing trust with Aboriginal constituents, the Department of the Chief Minister had begun recruiting a local Aboriginal field force in the Office of Aboriginal Liaison. Through these specially recruited local Aboriginal people, its ‘eyes and ears’, the Office was asked to ‘facilitate a close contact’ between the government and Aboriginal communities (Department of the Chief Minister 1979: 2; Deputy Director-General & Director Office of Aboriginal Liaison 1981: 4). The Aboriginal Liaison Officers were asked to ‘encourage an understanding by Aboriginals of their responsibilities within the Northern Territory community’ (Department of the Chief Minister 1979: 2).

The Aboriginal Liaison Officers were part of the wider cohort of field workers across the departments who were assisting building relations of trust with Northern Territory Aboriginal people. But the Aboriginal Liaison Officers were special messengers. A consultant described their role as ‘provider and receiver of information, perhaps on controversial subjects’ (Cross Cultural Communication Consultant 1980: 4). The visibility of these officers was crucial for a program of representative bureaucracy that was both passive and active, as we can see in the consultant’s advice that ‘a number of factors related to personality, appearance, cultural affiliation, etc. … determine the level of trust that an officer can achieve as an individual’ (Cross Cultural Communication Consultant 1980: 4–5).
Matthew had been one of the government’s ‘eyes and ears’. A Commonwealth transferee, he remembered being asked when he applied for the role in 1978: ‘Are you a radical black?’ In his interview, Matthew laughingly attributed getting the job to his quick assurance: ‘No, I’m just a simple family man’. But the question is interesting. The interviewer might have finished the question ‘… like Charles Perkins?’ The invitation for active representation was not an invitation for external advocacy, as Matthew well knew. But the interview panel’s question about Matthew’s personal politics acknowledged that these Liaison Officers had some discretion to act beyond departmental control. The question is also poignant, because it turned out that one of Matthew’s supervisors had been involved in the removal of his baby sister to a ‘half-caste’ home many years before. Matthew had asked for, and received, a private apology. Matthew held no grudges. 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 up this period in his long and loyal public service career:

That’s the best job I ever had. They utilised each and everyone’s talents.

Matthew called the time of the Office of Aboriginal Liaison the ‘golden years for Aboriginal people’. These early days had set the tone for Northern Territory Aboriginal people to be embraced as the colleagues and agents of self-government.

‘Eyes and ears’: A sacrificial upgrading

A review of the Office of Aboriginal Liaison in 1981 found that Aboriginal Liaison Officers had been ‘thrust into the field without sufficient training’ and ‘suffered from growing pains’. There was clearly an intention that the officers would ‘move into higher managerial and/or executive positions’ (Deputy Director-General & Director Office of Aboriginal Liaison 1981: 11), but the reviewers reported that ‘some critics in Government’ felt the Liaison Officers ‘do not communicate effectively’ and ‘do not play a sufficient role in some issues’. The Office had acquired a propagandist reputation in some sectors, particularly with the Aboriginal Land Councils, with whom the Territory Government had waged ideological battles
over Aboriginal land and other rights-based claims. Arguing that
the government was benefiting from a service that made the Chief
Minister ‘indirectly accessible’ to Aboriginal communities ‘through
individual Liaison Officers’, the reviewers recommended that the
Office be dismantled (Deputy Director-General & Director Office
of Aboriginal Liaison 1981: 13).

The retiring director defended the Aboriginal Liaison service,
arguing that the government’s public opposition to traditional land
ownership had compromised it. He advised ‘particular patience and
couragement to overcome disadvantages which characteristically
often inhibit the rapid or spectacular progress of Aboriginal officers’
(Director Office of Aboriginal Liaison 1983). But the Liaison Officers did
not survive a second review in 1983, and it was decided to ‘upgrade’
their positions to bring in ‘Aboriginal content at more senior levels’
(Acting Director Office of Aboriginal Liaison 1983: 6). A handwritten
note to the Chief Minister explained that the upgraded new positions
were needed ‘to get better Aboriginal input into policy making and
implementation’ (Office of Aboriginal Liaison 1980 [1983], underlining
in original).

Ironically, the decision put Matthew and his colleagues out of a job.
Matthew and some others moved into other departments, as there
was no ready market of local Aboriginal people who could compete
with other applicants for the senior positions.2 Advertising for the
new positions was mulled over at length, and eventually approved
in November 1983. In the end the advertisement was anodyne and
impersonal, hardly inspiring of the Aboriginal involvement in high-
level policy formulation that had been fought all the way to the top
and had sacrificed careers: ‘Aboriginal people are encouraged to apply’
(Deputy PSCNT 1983).

What notion of representation sat behind these reforms?

The first review of the Office of Aboriginal Liaison suggested that
senior Aboriginal public servants should provide a consultative
mechanism within the public service. Noting that ‘Aboriginal people
remain under-represented in the labour force’, it was recommended

2 Within two years, the Office of Aboriginal Liaison had been subsumed into the Department
of Community Development. Here, the field force was rebuilt as the Northern Territory’s Office
of Local Government.
as an important step in ‘improving consultation and communication’ that the government ‘take concerted action to ensure that Aboriginal people are encouraged, and equipped to move into positions of influence within government’ (Deputy Director-General & Director Office of Aboriginal Liaison 1981: 18). The second review criticised a national representative body, the National Aboriginal Conference, for failing to represent Aboriginal communities, and the Northern Territory’s Land Councils for having ‘too narrow’ a charter. Aboriginal Council Presidents’ Conferences, which brought Aboriginal council members together with government ministers and public servants on a regular basis, were seen as ‘ad hoc’ and as promoting ‘localised or parochial issues’. Through the files, community issues were downplayed in favour of ‘the upgrading of a genuine policy capacity’, which was clearly intended as the selective representation of interests agreeable to the government. The assumption was that disbanding the Aboriginal Liaison Officer service would not reduce Aboriginal representation in the government ‘if we are able to attract Aboriginal impact at a higher level in policy formulation’ (Deputy Director-General 1983: 3). Unlike Aboriginal Liaison Officers, the proposed Aboriginal Advisory Bodies would ‘of their own volition advise Government of Aboriginal concerns’, ‘avoiding localised issues’ and attending to ‘real policy matters’ (Acting Director Office of Aboriginal Liaison 1984: 3, underlining in original).

The Aboriginal advisory bodies were never established. In the absence of such bodies, there was clearly a working hypothesis among some in the bureaucracy that Aboriginal senior officials would actively fill the representational void through the representation of their communities in government and the representation of government in their communities. But the Aboriginal Liaison Officers had scattered or left.

‘A pretty political statement’: A sacrificial downgrading

The second story of active representation records the fate of another small cohort—this time, of more senior Aboriginal public servants. In 1984, the Public Service Commissioner invited the ‘12 most senior Aboriginal employees’ across the service to join a working party. The working party was to develop ways to assist Aboriginal staff ‘to apply with equality with other Public Servants for promotion’
and prepare the public service ‘culturally’ for an increased number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees (Scott 1985: 198). Aboriginal training officers were employed to organise and deliver courses in letter and report writing, ‘interviewing results’, time management, motivation, job applications and assertiveness (PSCNT 1984: 20; see also PSCNT 1981).

By 1986, the Commissioner had established an all-Aboriginal enclave of local recruits. This small unit had the remit to encourage ‘upward mobility’ for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in the public service (Aboriginal Development Division 1986). Its services included personnel grievance counselling and ‘interview panel membership’. The unit ran very specific training courses: telephone techniques, ‘practical public speaking’ and ‘graphs in the work place’ (PSCNT 1987: 27). An interviewee who developed these courses had felt her responsibility to the trainees keenly:

> 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?’

This interviewee had concluded her warning to the trainees: ‘We’re not going to let you give Aboriginal people a bad name.’ Behind these efforts was a growing industrial voice. Instances are apparent in archived file notes, as when some members of an advisory committee to the Public Service Commissioner who worked in the unit recorded their objection to being told they could not use the colours of the Aboriginal flag in promotional material for the training courses (Advisory Committee to the PSCNT 1985). Over time, successive restructures and transfers downgraded the unit. On hearing plans of a final restructure that threatened to separate their underpinning practical knowledge from the policy aspects of their role, the industrial unrest reached a peak and the staff staged a walkout. Around 10 staff arranged alternative employment for themselves, announcing their departures simultaneously. The director was the last to resign, at which point the ‘staged departure’, as an interviewee called it, was made public. By the time of the restructure, there was almost no team left.
2. THE NORTHERN TERRITORY’S TURNSTILE TICKER

The ‘downgrading’ was discussed in the Northern Territory Parliament. In an interview in the *Northern Territory News* in 1988, the outgoing director described herself as ‘dedicated to the task of finding paths of independence for urban and remote Aborigines’. Analysing the event, Loveday and Cummings suggested that the staff’s actions should be understood in the light of the fact that ‘early directives had outlined an activist and reforming role for the Branch’ (Loveday & Cummings 1989: 5–6). As an interviewee in 2007 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.

A note of advocacy and sense of shared interest are conveyed by this interviewee’s reference to an understood ‘we’. In seeking a mirror of the Northern Territory sociality, the Northern Territory Government had encountered active representation in a public dressing down by its own protégés. In refusing to participate in the restructure, these public servants were defending the value of Aboriginal networks and connections at senior levels of the public service.

**Mirror, mirror …: Steady numbers**

After these early entanglements, the quest for the public service to mirror the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal population was haphazard. Invitations for active representation can be identified, but they were more enigmatic. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee headcounts were carried out with varying degrees of enthusiasm. No approach was fully realised, and none completely disappeared. These were not clear pathways to known destinations but winding trails with occasional offshoots, some dwindling to nothing, others overwritten by successive bureaucrats trying to animate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the public service.

**A statistical vacuum**

The Northern Territory Government joined the general trend towards a hollowed-out public service in the 1990s. In the absence of a sector-wide policy, departments took the approach of grooming individuals
for seniority. Under new legislation in 1993, the Public Service Commission became a kind of consultant to a newly consolidated public service, eventually subsuming its satellite authorities into a single legal entity. Chief Minister Steve Hatton introduced a policy of mainstreaming Aboriginal service provision, holding 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). From the mid-1990s, it was up to departments to interpret this requirement through their own plans for Aboriginal employment and career development.

The quest for a representative mirror and improved Aboriginal training and career development continued through the efforts of the more diligent departments, such as the Office of Aboriginal Development and the Department of Education’s Aboriginal Development Branch. Between 1995 and 2000, departments put in place various programs to support Aboriginal employment, including organisational exchange programs, cadetships, new apprenticeships and community partnerships. With a brief to work across the government to improve service delivery through better government–Aboriginal relations, the energetic Office of Aboriginal Development boasted 36 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff one year (Office of Aboriginal Development 1996: 39). Working on some of these initiatives, several interviewees spoke of feeling that a baton had been passed to them by former Aboriginal colleagues. Relay teams of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants cut their teeth on Aboriginal employment policy, moving between the Commissioner’s office and departments.

One interviewee called the 1990s a period of ‘huge opportunities but no commitment’. There were certainly opportunities through public service growth. From 14,000 staff in 1993, by 1999 the Northern Territory Public Service was again nearing a 15,000-strong workforce. Northern Territory Aboriginal people were not measurably sharing in the opportunities of this growth, although by now they formed more than 25 per cent of the population.

What did this interviewee mean by ‘no commitment’? The Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, as it was now known, did not monitor employee numbers over these years. Sector-wide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee surveys were twice
attempted, each time resulting in a ‘low response’, it was reported, which ‘illustrated the complexities involved in self-identification’. There was a vague promise of ‘additional emphasis over the next year’ (OCPE 1997: 33). Some key departments were uncomfortable with programs that acknowledged social diversity in the public service. Indeed, one department expressed the view that the achievements it had reported in Aboriginal employment were the direct result of ‘there being no distinction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous programs, thereby minimising the “them” and “us” attitude’ (OCPE 2001: 22). Another interviewee commented that this lack of recognition and relationship was the ‘policy gap’ of the period. She said she had felt shame on realising that the Aboriginal community, even within the public service, had seen her as personally representing this ‘policy gap’. She observed that some Aboriginal colleagues had distanced themselves from the public service during this time: ‘A lot of them tended to step into community organisations and have time out … and work in an environment where you sort of like the frameworks around you.’

But in the eyes of many, the leadership program supporting the careers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men had been an outstanding success. ‘The Kigaruk’, as it was called, was rare in its open recognition and encouragement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and difference. An interviewee who had helped set up the program described its purpose as ‘for Aboriginal men to get through their glass ceiling’. He noted that before the Kigaruk, the Northern Territory Public Service used to have ‘all these little Indians … we hadn’t sort of moved past the concentration of entry-level trainees’. The Lookrukin program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women soon followed. Some interviewees were able to exploit these programs to build executive careers. One who had done so summed up the secret of his success as ‘patience, pragmatism, practicality’. The logic of executive success for a committed Aboriginal careerist was ‘to lose a few battles to eventually win the war’, he said. This interviewee worked for:

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.
He added: ‘I think I’d give the game away if I lost sight of those goals.’ For this Aboriginal senior public servant in 2007, public service seniority was ‘where the real power is’.

The 1990s had produced an articulate and committed professional strategist. But, more than two decades after the sacrificial upgrading of the government’s original ‘eyes and ears’, and more than a decade after the sacrificial downgrading of those defending practical knowledge, there were precious few senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.

2001: Back to the future

The Territory’s first Labor Government arrived to a statistical vacuum. A new Commissioner for Public Employment reset the Indigenous employment baseline, calculating his endowment as 725 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees or 4.6 per cent of the Northern Territory Public Service (OCPE 2005: 9). Treating this figure as an undercount, those implementing the Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy of 2002–2006 set about correcting it by encouraging more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to self-identify (OCPE 2008: 27).

The 2002–2006 Strategy aimed to improve ‘business outcomes’ and address ‘the economic and social costs associated with low levels of employment amongst Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people’ (OCPE 2002: 3). ‘Skilled and knowledgeable Indigenous people’ were required ‘in appropriate numbers at all levels’ of the Northern Territory Public Service. The Strategy aimed ‘to address the critical under representation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people within the Northern Territory Public Sector workforce’. The Strategy eschewed the diffidence of previous governments, listing foremost among its intended outcomes ‘increased numbers’ and the ‘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, emphasis added).
The Cooee newsletter advertised professional development opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and the ‘Indigenous Employment Tool Kit’ provided a ‘model for community engagement’ (Ah Chin 2006: 21, 25). Biennial reports enumerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees by agency, level and gender. The Strategy claimed steadily increasing numbers of Indigenous employees. From its putative 4.6 per cent baseline in 2002, the Strategy reported 7.6 per cent Indigenous employment in the Northern Territory Public Service at the end of 2006 (OCPE 2007: 7).

The Strategy invited both numbers and contributions, but only seemed interested in the numbers. It certainly introduced a new note of Indigenous recognition into the Northern Territory Public Service through the encouragement to self-identify. But like so many previous attempts, it too trailed off to an uncertain close when a new Commissioner replaced its champion and wondered what to do next.

This was the situation during the interviews in 2007.

Doubting ‘increased numbers’ of Indigenous employees, one interviewee described the Labor era 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.’ Although a sponsored evaluation of the 2002–2006 Strategy also pointed to an increase (Vemuri 2007), the longitudinal data do not suggest there had been any significant increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. Taking the 2007–2008 Indigenous employment figure of 7.8 per cent as an end point, Table 2 shows that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees had only barely increased—by just over 100, from 1,137 to 1,250, in the 25 years between 1983 and 2008. Against public service staffing overall, the 2008 ratio of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees had simply returned to the 1983 ratio.

The same Indigenous employment rate after 25 years suggests an unshakable ratio. After a long history that we have seen was deeper than self-government, by 2007 the Northern Territory Government’s invitation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to join the public service had resulted in hardly any increase in their numbers.
If the overall rate of Indigenous employment had not changed, had anything else?

The figures in Table 2 suggest that the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees who were in administrative roles nearly tripled between 1983 and 2005, from 15 to 42 per cent of total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. This may be explained in part by the trend towards generic administrative classifications, as the vast majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees were still in community roles as Aboriginal health workers, community police officers, assistant teachers, and interpreters (OCPE 2004: 18). But Table 2 also tells us that 64 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander senior public servants had self-identified and were reported to be at their desks in December 2005, and that between 1983 and 2005 the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who were in senior positions had multiplied from 1 per cent to 5.8 per cent. Sixty-four was a tiny cohort, and this cohort only constituted 2.2 per cent of all senior staff in the Northern Territory Public Service, but it was there.

There is no doubt that the Northern Territory Government had inherited an incipient representative bureaucracy from the Commonwealth in 1978. Since that original bequest, the total proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees had barely increased by 2007, the year of the interviews. But as we have seen, through the scarring battles that followed self-government, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees who were in administrative roles, and who were at senior levels, had grown.
Table 2: Indigenous employment rates in the Northern Territory Public Service (NTPS) 1978–2008

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<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>(OAL 1983)</td>
<td>14,552</td>
<td>(PSCNT 1983)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1,137</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. Indigenous employees</td>
<td>~725</td>
<td>788</td>
<td>(OCPE 2004: 22, 25)</td>
<td>1,006</td>
<td>1,119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Indigenous employees</td>
<td>7.8%**</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>(OCPE 2006: 7, 9, 18)</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. administrative</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>(OCPE 2007: 7)</td>
<td>381 (38%)</td>
<td>467 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(% of Indigenous)</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>(OCPE 2008: 27)</td>
<td>6 (0.8%)</td>
<td>12 (1.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. senior</td>
<td>11***</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(OCPE 2008: 27)</td>
<td>12 (1.5%)</td>
<td>52 (5.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(% of Indigenous)</td>
<td>(1%)</td>
<td>(1.2%)</td>
<td>(OCPE 2008: 27)</td>
<td>64 (5.8%)</td>
<td>(2.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(% of NTPS senior)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>(OCPE 2008: 27)</td>
<td>64 (5.8%)</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 1,250 is 7.8% of the NTPS workforce of approximately 16,000 in 2008. The Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment figure of 1,380 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in 2007–2008 (2008) does not reconcile with the percentage.

** 10.5 per cent of the NTPS establishment (OAL 1983).

*** In 1993, the cut-off was at ‘A5’, which is equivalent to the Administrative Officer level 7 in the classification system still current in 2007.

A longstanding and ambivalent invitation

The interviews began within days of the Australian Government declaring the Northern Territory Emergency Response, also known as the Northern Territory Intervention, in July 2007, following a report on child abuse in Aboriginal communities (Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007). Arguing that the Northern Territory Government had presided over a failure of policy and service delivery, the Australian Government passed special legislation imposing new controls over Aboriginal lives by controversially suspending the Racial Discrimination Act 1975. The Intervention cast a spotlight on Aboriginal dysfunction—child abuse, substance abuse, ‘rivers of alcohol’—singling out the Northern Territory’s remote communities. On the day of the announcement on 21 June 2007, Minister Mal Brough described a three phase military-type strategy of ‘(1) stabilisation, (2) normalisation and (3) exit’ (Brough 2007). Protectionist policies found renewed purchase with the Australian public, but this time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders joined the debate. The intense contestation, between the Commonwealth and the Northern Territory, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, permeated an astonished Northern Territory Public Service during the interviews. Two former government executives who had worked for the Commonwealth and the Northern Territory over the previous 25 years released a book depicting services to Northern Territory communities as part of a ‘failed state in remote Australia’ (Dillon & Westbury 2007: 30). Many bought into the rhetoric of failure.

In 2007, under the scrutiny of the entire nation, the Northern Territory Government announced the Generational Plan of Action. For the first time, there was a 20-year vision for Aboriginal affairs. Through the Generational Plan, titled ‘A Better Way of Doing Business’, Chief Minister Clare Martin set Indigenous employment targets for the first time since Everingham’s targets. They were the same as Everingham’s—10 per cent in five years (this time, by 2012) and 20 per cent in 10 years (by 2017) (Northern Territory Government 2007: 17–18). The Generational Plan introduced a new aim, that Indigenous employment rates would reflect local demographics. This would mean ‘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’ (Northern Territory Government 2007: 21). As in 1983, the Generational Plan committed the Government to setting up an advisory body to advise the Chief Minister and the Indigenous Affairs Advisory Council.

Through the Generational Plan, the longstanding invitation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in the administration of the Northern Territory continued, seemingly oblivious to the historical revisionism. The Northern Territory Government continued to invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into its confidence and its ranks. But appealing as this might have been, after a generation of ambivalence it would take more than promises of localism and listening to turn the numbers around.

Employees in orbit

Reading the report that 64 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior public servants were at their desks at the end of 2005 sparked my curiosity. Who were the people behind this statistic? Trying to find them in 2007 opened an apparently closed social field into something more fluid when my criteria for participation in the research expanded to include any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who had been a senior Northern Territory Government public servant at any time since Northern Territory self-government. The method of personal referral snowballed to reveal a social network of past and present senior public servants—162 in all. Informants were constantly pointing to those who had left the Northern Territory Public Service.

Nearly 40 per cent of the referrals were to former employees, and more than half of these former employees were now employed by non-government organisations in receipt of public funds to deliver services to Northern Territory Aboriginal communities at arm’s length from government departments—the so-called ‘Indigenous sector’ (Rowse 2002, 2005). They were working in Land Councils and in Aboriginal health, housing, legal, research and community organisations. Some sat on the boards and committees of these organisations as their primary occupation. Some worked in Indigenous-focused
or Indigenous-owned businesses. Some owned businesses. It turned out that nearly 60 per cent of the final interviewee group of 76 had been employed in the Indigenous sector at some stage of their careers.

When our long-time watcher of the government’s relationship with Aboriginal organisations in Central Australia called Aboriginal employment a ‘turnstile ticker’, he implied there had been frequent entries and exits. The research corroborated this observation. The flow of staff between the Northern Territory Public Service and the Indigenous sector went both ways, as more than 50 per cent of those who were in the Northern Territory Public Service in 2007 had been employed in the service on a separate previous occasion. It is also the case that more than 50 per cent had worked in the Indigenous sector in-between their public service entries. While the group was mobile into other sectors as well—non-Indigenous organisations, Commonwealth departments (particularly the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission), other state governments, the broader research and private sectors and electoral politics—the pool of potential interviewees foreshadowed what was later confirmed in interviews. This was that the Indigenous sector was the dominant alternative to the Northern Territory Public Service as a source of employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander careerists.

Of the former employees, 10 had become senior elsewhere. Some of those still in the service who were non-senior had tried unsuccessfully for promotion, whereas the 10 who had risen to positions of seniority elsewhere had developed public profiles and a level of voice they had not achieved as public servants. Seven were running Aboriginal organisations or businesses, and three had public identities as the members or chairs of boards or as community leaders. They were all in the Indigenous sector.

A professionally mobile group was in some kind of orbit between the public service and its publicly funded, arm’s length organisations. Only nine interviewees had only ever worked for the Northern Territory Government.

The Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment had noted a high staff turnover rate and acknowledged a ‘churn’ factor (OCPE 2009: 78–80), but had not reported the level of mobility found in this research. No core of longer serving officials had emerged since
self-government, but was there a core of officials in orbit? Seniority
seemed like a closed circuit, with the same people moving around
departments and in and out of the public service. Half those recruited
between 1990 and 2001 had left by 2007. Of the 33 senior Northern
Territory public servants interviewed in 2007, another 10 had left by
2010. At that stage, one had returned. More have since returned, and
more have left. Again, the government’s less politically constrained
partner in service delivery, the Indigenous sector, was a common
destination. Given Aboriginal senior public servants’ clear interest in
participating in the government of their place—by way of entitlement,
as one interviewee said—it is important to understand what made
them reluctant to stay. By moving into the Indigenous sector where
they could occupy roles that more clearly sanctioned advocacy, it is
conceivable that some were seeking to resolve the ethical ambivalence
of their roles as public servants.

The interviewees had all been engaged in some way or another by
the invitation to contribute to the Northern Territory Government,
and their experiences of a complex policy history are etched into the
interviews. So are their doubts and triumphs as participants in the
public sector employment programs that gave them careers. We shall
see that issues of identity loomed large for them, and that a number
who had become dislocated from their ancestral country had found
a way back to that country through public service work. Some spoke
of fostering arrangements—their own or their antecedents’—through
policies of child removal, describing themselves or their ancestors
as ‘Stolen Generation’. This was a reference to the ‘Bringing Them
Home’, also known as the ‘Stolen Children’, inquiry into the extent
and effects of the policies of child removal for Australian Indigenous
A number of interviewees had personally been fostered or adopted
under these policies, two of them into missions in the 1950s. ’Mixed up
culture’ was the name one interviewee gave to the generational effect
of these policies. Most had acquired ‘Stolen Gen’ as a family identity
through a parent or grandparent. We can see this in Bruce’s account:

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.
Bruce was a well-known local man with a mixed ancestral geography. His connections now extended between Darwin and Alice Springs.

Some interviewees had assisted others to self-identify to achieve the public acknowledgement of what had previously been for many employees a more private ethnic identity. That process relied on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees knowing each other, because 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 the process more seriously, explaining the delicacies:

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 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to be seen as a government employee—and what did it mean for a government employee to be seen as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, in the Northern Territory? The interviewee who spoke these words sounded confident of the benefits of self-identification, but she later spoke of doubts. Enthusiastic agents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment policies continued to have diverse encounters with the practicalities of implementation well beyond the 1980s.

The Northern Territory Government’s Indigenous employment program has most certainly drawn on both notions of mirror and agency. By 2007, how was it faring on population proportionality, with 7.8 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in the Northern Territory Public Sector workforce? There were
approximately 60,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Northern Territory, and they formed a very significant proportion at 31 per cent of the total population. So the public service was nowhere near proportionately representative of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of the Northern Territory. In 2010, the Northern Territory Government reported that Indigenous employment was 8 per cent of the public service, suggesting for the first time a significant increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee numbers (1,600) in a workforce approaching 20,000 (OCPE 2010). In 2015, as we will see in the concluding chapter, the Indigenous employment rate had only increased to 9 per cent.

Achieving proportionality would struggle against the geographic distribution of the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Only one-third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in the larger multiracial urban towns where government is centred and where most other Territorians have settled. Two-thirds live in the smaller rural-remote communities that are scattered across a large expanse at various distances from these larger multiracial urban towns. The smaller rural-remote communities range in population from approximately 1,600, in the case of Wadeye, down to single families in some of the many very remote homelands that dot the landscape. These populations are highly mobile within their service delivery regions.

Achieving proportionality would also struggle against the low socioeconomic status of these populations. The Northern Territory accounts for 10 per cent of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, but a much larger proportion of those who live in Australia’s remote areas. The Northern Territory’s remote Aboriginal communities are often seen to encapsulate Australia’s remote area problem. From the Prime Minister’s latest reports on closing the gap in Indigenous socioeconomic disadvantage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, we can see from the results for remote and very remote areas that Northern Territory Indigenous people would rate lowest on many indicators (Commonwealth of Australia 2016; see also Commonwealth of Australia 2015). This is a low rating indeed, as Australian Indigenous people as a whole rate poorly against most socioeconomic indicators. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have for many years been, and still are, overrepresented in the criminal justice system with worsening rates of youth detention
and adult imprisonment, as well as high rates of chronic disease, hospitalisation, child neglect, mental health issues and suicide. Literacy and numeracy rates remain well below national averages, and most indicators worsen with remoteness (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2014).

Against such overwhelming odds, the precise public sector employment ratio hardly matters. What matters more is an understanding of the people who constitute the public sector employment statistic and the kind of representing they do. How is it practically possible in the Northern Territory for Aboriginal public servants to contribute to government policies and programs as Aboriginal people?

The office environment in the Northern Territory Public Service celebrates informality, egalitarianism and a ‘can do’ attitude. In this hail-fellow-well-met culture, the laughter is contagious. Many workplaces exude the infectiously warm, casual inclusiveness that is often presented as the Northern Territory’s own. On emerging from their offices to attend meetings, busy executives may change course to converge on the sound of laughter or wish someone a happy birthday over sausage rolls and the ubiquitous Australian tomato sauce. Formality is lampooned. The Northern Territory Public Service seems to welcome Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees with open arms, conveying sensitivity to the possible objection that it is a largely white bureaucracy populated by north-migrating southerners. Departments try to acknowledge the original inhabitants of a vast expanse who have long been the subjects of government administration. Aboriginal public servants are invited to improve their people’s odds by joining the Northern Territory Government, which since the granting of self-government has been the biggest employer in the economy and for many, the main game in town.

What happens when blackfella bureaucrats speak?