Postscript

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In Chapter 9 Terry Whitby poses the question: 'Who represents CDEP?' He gives an all-inclusive answer: 'Everybody represents CDEP'. Yet, competing representations of, or descriptions of, CDEP emerge from this volume, and the resulting diversity makes it a very interesting document. In this Postscript I want to put the emphasis on 'competing'. The conference on which this book is based, like Parliament or the Press, was a political arena in which people tried out different ways of describing CDEP. Those exchanges of competing representations of CDEP made the conference a political process.

In the current political climate, or in any political climate, there are approved and unapproved ways of stating needs. One of the things that self determination policy is about is teaching Indigenous Australians 'correct' and 'incorrect' ways of stating their needs. Some will be rewarded with funding, others will be punished by a lack of funding, and the applicants will be sent back to rewrite their submission. So there is, in self determination policy, a politics of representation—an effort to teach the Indigenous person be a certain kind of political being who articulates Indigenous needs in a language that agrees with the available frameworks approved by the government of the day. The deployment of those frameworks, and the opposition to them from others, were very evident throughout the conference, and are reflected in these pages.

Here is an example. One of the dominant themes in the main government approach to thinking about CDEP at the moment, is to emphasise that there are some kinds of outcome that are more 'real' than others; and 'real' means 'more valued'. To quote Terry Whitby again: 'While the CDEP continues to demonstrate successful social, economic, and community development outcomes, the ATSIC Board does not see it as a substitute for real employment.' So there is something called real employment—but Terry does not define it. Peter Shergold (Ch. 8) emphasises that the best possible outcome for CDEP is to graduate people into what he calls 'private sector employment' which he appears to define very narrowly as employment to which government makes no possible contribution. This is his notion of 'real' employment.

In the language of some of my colleagues at CAEPR I have noticed the appearance of the jargon now employed by Noel Pearson. He talks about the 'real economy'—a term that is very poorly defined in his work, and that researchers would do well not to adopt uncritically. This is a debate that is going on within CAEPR—a friendly debate, I might add. For example, in Chapter 11 John Taylor and Boyd Hunter do not make a distinction between CDEP and other kinds of employment. Their overall analysis is based on the premise that participation in CDEP is no less 'real' than any other kind of employment, and that the way to raise Indigenous employment in Australia could therefore include putting a lot of resources into CDEP.

There is nothing that is necessarily second-best about CDEP, and yet this distinction between real and unreal jobs and outcomes puts CDEP and its proponents on the defensive,

as if what they are doing is not good enough unless it leads to participants finding employment in the 'real' economy. The language of the 'real economy' is terribly tendentious, and it should be questioned, not accepted as an unchallengeable description of the 'facts'.

I now turn to a brief summary of some of the main themes that came from the contributions by the community representatives. People were very concerned about equity with another program—that is, 'work for the dole'. If that is getting a certain amount of government support, why should CDEP not receive similar support? Community sector contributors clearly want equity with some programs in the mainstream welfare field.

A second and even more important theme, that is elaborated in almost all of the community contributions, is that CDEP must be recognised for having multiple objectives. It is not just a matter of graduating people into the so-called 'real economy'. CDEP has many objectives, and they should be recognised and properly resourced. This makes it difficult to provide a succinct definition of what CDEP is all about, and it makes it easy for the media to misrepresent CDEP as if it were a one-dimensional program. The struggle for the recognition of the multiple objectives of CDEP is very important.

Another theme that comes through from the community representatives is a plea for a more respectful engagement with CDEP schemes from other government agencies and other programs. This respect takes many forms, but it includes dollars: when CDEP is doing a job it should be properly paid for.

The final theme that I want to highlight is that the CDEP managers and leaders are starting to network on a national basis, as a self conscious political lobby group. This is a very positive development, and the reader of Part IV of this volume cannot fail to be impressed by the consistency and the persuasiveness of the words of people who are obviously amongst the leading activists in that lobby.

At the moment CDEP is in both a strong and a weak position. It is in a very strong position in a practical sense, in that, as a number of contributors point out, if the government decided that the CDEP had to go, what would they put in its place? CDEP is doing so many necessary jobs, in so many different ways, in so many places, that it is quite entrenched in the Australian system of government. It may not be getting the recognition it deserves, but it is going to be very hard to get rid of it. So in this practical sense, CDEP is in a very strong bargaining position.

But CDEP is in a weak position in terms of the politics of representation. That is, the CDEP managers find it difficult to articulate an account of what they think CDEP is. What they are actually doing is not well described by the dominant message about CDEP that comes from the government—that CDEP is a failure if it does not graduate people into mainstream jobs. That is a very strong message coming out of government today, and it is very evident in Peter Shergold's contribution. His remarks and remarks by other people from government, including some from ATSIC, are part of the process of redefining CDEP so that it is all about employment.

CDEP is practically strong but theoretically—or ideologically—a bit weak, in the sense that it is very difficult to get out from underneath the government's representation of CDEP, and to articulate an independent community-based conception of what CDEP is all about. The potential for articulating a community-based view obviously exists, because there are so many community representatives saying the same things, over and over again.

CAEPR could play a good role by helping the CDEP leaders to consolidate, to make persuasive arguments for and to back up with facts the kind of things that they are saying in this volume. CAEPR can help to formulate political and cultural rationales that CDEP managers can present to government, backed by solid research.

The interaction, in my opinion, would also be very good for CAEPR. One of the strengths— but also one of the weaknesses—of CAEPR is its very close proximity to the central agencies of government. That is of great benefit to CAEPR in many ways, but it is also a fault that should be balanced by more exposure to the views and concerns of the people who are delivering services at the community level.

There is a worry that we must not be seen to be other than neutral academics, but it is very hard to identify the neutral ground in this debate. The language and categories of government or the language and categories of the CDEP managers are all that is available. We have to use somebody's language, so we must make some self conscious choices about what kind of language and frameworks of analysis we use in our future research.