Australian Indigenous self-determination: past practices, future options

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Self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been subject to critical scrutiny in recent years, but debate suffers from a lack of consensus about the policy implications of this ideal. This workshop asks what Indigenous self-determination has meant practically in Australia, and what lessons can be learned for the future practice of self-determination.

The objective of the workshop is to produce historically-informed, practical definitions of ‘Indigenous self-determination’, for governments and Indigenous organisations to consider.

In 1973, the newly elected government led by Gough Whitlam announced that its policies towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would enable ‘self-determination’. After about thirty years, policies labelled as ‘self-determination’ were under attack as an experiment that had proved ineffective in overcoming ‘Indigenous disadvantage’. The Howard government repudiated ‘self-determination’, and some who supported this change welcomed it as the ‘new paternalism’. Some would argue, in response, that Indigenous ‘self-determination’ has not failed; rather, they would argue that Australian governments have not attempted it, and that a deficit of self-determination underpins continuing Indigenous disadvantage.

Such a debate about ‘self-determination’ presents two sets of questions that this workshop will tackle.

1. What policies, laws, programs and institutions have Australian governments introduced under the banner of ‘self-determination’ since 1973? In what ways have Indigenous Australians and their associates/employees taken up the opportunities and coped with the pressures created by these policies, laws, programs and institutions?

2. What have Indigenous intellectuals understood ‘self-determination’ to mean? What evaluation of extant policies, laws, programs and institutions is compelled by their normative and critical concepts of ‘self-determination’?

The first set of questions is empirical and historical: to answer these questions is to describe what governments and Indigenous Australians have done, in the name of ‘self-determination’, since 1973. The workshop will harvest existing and recent scholarship to create an empirically rich account of public policy and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance practices since 1973. This workshop will consider self-determination in both remote and urban Australia, considering the analytical
value of North (‘colonial’)/South (‘settled’) binary. To understand ‘self-determination’ historically, the workshop will examine critically the claim that ‘self-determination’ was a radical rupture from earlier approaches. The workshop will consider how self-determination evolved from and/or broke with previous assimilation and integration policies.

To answer the second set of questions, the workshop will be both historical (what have Indigenous intellectuals written and said?) and normative (how do Australian practices of self-determination measure up to the aspirations and standards that are evident in this Indigenous discourse)? In answering these questions, the workshop will also place self-determination in its transnational intellectual context, exploring the ways in which self-determination in Australia took place within a global discourse around Indigenous rights and international law over the twentieth century. We are interested in the development of discourses around Indigenous freedom, choice and capacity, how these changed over time and how they were understood and applied differently in various circumstances, especially in relation to the above distinctions among regions of Australia.

That is, by addressing the questions grouped as (1) and (2) our workshop will examine not only what happened under self-determination but what ‘self-determination’ could have/should have meant, and what it now means.

The workshop will include papers on the following themes: institutions of self-determination, including Indigenous representation in governance, Indigenous enterprises, missions and settlements, language and education; self-determination in remote, regional and urban centres; and self-determination and discourses of human rights. The papers will represent a diversity of geographical locations, disciplinary approaches and institutions. They will draw on the insights of political science, history, anthropology, sociology, legal studies and linguistics to build a multifaceted and holistic account of self-determination. Finally, and crucially, the workshop will invite several Indigenous academics to present papers on self-determination, drawing on their rich personal, family, professional and scholarly knowledge.