

Lands of Shame
by Helen Hughes
Centre for Independent Studies, St Leonards, 2007

Reviewed by Tim Rowse

In a recent *Weekend Australian* (18-19 August 2007), Robert Manne urged 'those who want to grasp the philosophic direction of the Government's policy' on Indigenous Australian to read Helen Hughes *Lands of Shame*. This was good advice. Many of the Howard Government's recent policy innovations (endorsed by the Rudd Opposition in August 2007), such as limiting the application of communal land tenure and abolishing many Community Development Employment Projects, are consistent with Hughes' ideas.

However, Manne was generous when he said that Hughes argued her proposals 'cogently and persuasively'. A book with such significant inconsistencies and gaps falls short of 'cogency', and its persuasiveness relies heavily on readers sharing the author's suspicion of Indigenous leaders (a feeling that may well be widely shared in the Coalition and Labor parties, but not, I would have thought, by Robert Manne).

To give an immediate example of the book's lack of 'cogency', take one of Hughes' prescriptions for rooting out the corruption that she believes to be widespread among Aboriginal leaders. They are effectively protected, she suggests, by corporate regulation that has been enfeebled by misplaced regard for cultural difference (pp.64-5). The Office of the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations (ORAC) treats Indigenous corporations as children, talking down to them while letting them get away with inadequate reporting of their affairs (pp.65-6). To deal with this allegedly indulgent regime Hughes would amend or repeal the (recently amended) *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act* to abolish ORAC. Incorporated Indigenous associations would then have to comply with the reporting requirements of the Australian Securities and Insurance Commission (ASIC) (pp.64, 66, 187). However, in another part of her book, she presents incorporation under ASIC as a ploy used by corrupt Aborigines who wish to shield their business affairs from public scrutiny (p.143). What would an Attorney General do if moved to action by Hughes' denunciations?

I will point to other inconsistencies and gaps later in this review. First, we need to understand Hughes' account of the Indigenous Australian situation.

Hughes distinguishes three types of situation in which Indigenous Australians now live. About 160,000 who 'work in mainstream jobs in cities, towns and country' and 'have mainstream living standards' (p.3). Hughes is not concerned with them, other than her suspicion that some of them are enjoying at others' expense the advantages conferred by their power and skill. She is much more worried about the well-being of those who live 'on the fringes of towns and in major city ghettos' and those who live in some 1200 tiny settlements in remote Australia that she refers to as 'homelands'. Most of her book is about this third group, the remote homelander, and she estimates that there are between 90 and 120 thousand such people (p. 3 and Tables 2.1 and 2.3).

Hughes' vision for the future of the homeland Aborigines is that they would become a more centralized population by living in a number of 'core centres' where economies of scale would allow essential services and retailing to be provided at a proper standard. There would need to be about 100 such centers, she estimates (p.23), but she does not suggest which current townships in remote and very remote Australia should be the beneficiaries of her strategy, other than suggesting the 'rehabilitation' of

Wadeye, Maningrida, Mutitjulu and Palm Island 'to decent civic standards' (p.23). She later adds Warburton to this list (p.85).

Hughes does not see her proposal as an assault on Indigenous culture. After all, she understands that those 160 thousand who 'participate fully in the mainstream' remain 'proud of their traditional culture and ties to their ancestral lands' (p.3). If homelands people migrate to core centers such as Warburton, she suggests, they can still 'own houses in their own "country" and preserve their culture' (p.85).

Hughes' attitude to Indigenous culture is that it is acceptable as long as it is not allowed to be an excuse for Indigenous Australians' continuing socio-economic disadvantage. In considering critically policy-makers' recognition of cultural difference, she condemns what she calls 'exceptionalism' – a philosophy that has flourished in the last thirty years. Though exceptionalism 'was intended to make up for past mistreatment' (p.181), it has led to such undesirable practices as: the recognition of customary law; the 'imposition of communal instead of private property rights'; the use of languages other than English in teaching; special local government arrangements (p.4); curricula that defer or stint basic training in literacy and numeracy (p.103); and undue tolerance of Aborigines' unhygienic and degraded living conditions (p.118). What she calls the 'Coombs model' or the 'Coombs experiment' (pp.12-13, 70, 90) has been an instance of 'exceptionalism'. She attributes to Coombs extraordinary executive powers when she writes that 'the Coombs experiment moved Aborigines to remote regions...' (p.70). In fact, Coombs's admiring account (in 1973) of Aborigines' decentralizing movement from settlements and missions to outstations was his response to Indigenous initiatives. In seeking to understand their actions sympathetically, he did not have to move the people he was writing about. They were capable of moving themselves, with or without policy intellectuals' approval, partly because a sequence of Coalition and Labor government decisions had declared nomadic Aborigines to be eligible for welfare payments. A reader has to make a conscious effort not to be distracted by Hughes' odd fixation on Coombs as apologist and mastermind of 'exceptionalism'.

Facing all governments that respectfully recognise Indigenous difference and facing all policy intellectuals who invoke that difference when making Indigenous policy proposals is the troubling interplay of two liberal democratic ideals: equality and difference. Hughes shares in the dilemmas of contemporary post-colonial liberalism when she affirms her support for the survival of Indigenous culture while worrying about the perversely discriminatory effects of 'exceptionalism' (p.181). The question that Hughes' readers must answer is: what are *her* proposed trade-offs between respecting the right of Indigenous Australians to be different and upholding their right to conditions of life that are not scandalously inferior to those of Australians who live long and more or less healthy lives and whose cultural choices do not condemn them to squalid insecurity?

The characteristic tendency of her answer to that question favours the choices made by governments over the choices made by Indigenous Australians.

However, Hughes is no apologist for extant governmental practice. Far from it: she excoriates at least six of Australia's nine governments for not spending enough on Indigenous Australians. In the provision of housing, schooling and health care, governments have been able to get away with not doing enough. 'The Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia with "homeland", fringe and ghetto Indigenous populations, and New South Wales with the largest fringe and ghetto Indigenous populations, appear to be satisfied with present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander living standards' (p.165). In their derogation of

their duties to support Indigenous living standards, their 'bureaucratic insensibility' has combined with the 'philosophical' error of 'exceptionalism' (p.167).

Disdain for accountability is high among the qualities that Hughes refers to in her phrase 'bureaucratic insensibility'. Hughes is scathing not only about public under-spending but also about the weakness of the mechanisms of audit and evaluation that governments arrange for themselves (pp.162-4). The Department of Finance has 'driven out concepts of efficiency and effectiveness throughout the Commonwealth bureaucracy' (p.164). The ten COAG 'trials' were not real trials in that the agencies responsible did not collect baseline data, other than in a 'limited' study of Wadeye (p.164). The new (since 2004) 'Indigenous Coordination Centres' (ICCs) are 'process rather than results driven' (pp.160, 173). Most Commonwealth Departments do not publish budget or expenditure data. 'Their voluminous reports are entirely qualitative so that it is impossible to derive any sense of where funding is going or what it has achieved' (p.162). She derides, as 'information free', an 'outcome' report on expenditures under the Indigenous Women's Program in 2004-5 (p.162). She demands that the Productivity Commission disaggregate by region their national 'average' socio-economic indicators. Hughes invites the Commonwealth to learn from AUSAID, a government agency whose intellectual rigor derives, she believes, from its association with the World Bank (p.163).

Hughes' declared respect for rigorous, independent evaluation sits oddly, however, with her tendency to dogmatic judgment. She confidently conjectures that the unevaluated Women's Program is 'unlikely' to have achieved its stated aims (p.162), but she does not say what reasoning leads her to that view. She is equally dismissive in her discussion of Shared Responsibility Agreements. As she points out, they were not set up in such a way that they could be carefully evaluated. One would expect that defect to induce caution in her own evaluation. It does not. 'Shared Responsibility Agreements have degenerated into slush funds for politically smart operators and their bureaucratic supporters because they have not been willing to tackle basic deficiencies, notably in education...education and health have not been improved so that people have not been made more work-ready' (p.84).

Compare Hughes' swift appraisal of all SRAs with the recent study of them published by the ATSI Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma in *Social Justice Report 2006*: Calma's ambivalent conclusions rest on data that his staff collected, while Hughes' judgment is not encumbered by evidence. Towards the end of 2006, Calma surveyed 108 SRAs, involving 124 communities, that had been signed before December 31 2005. 67 SRAs replied to his survey. They told Calma that their SRAs were about ten different concerns, the four most frequent of which were: 'cultural revitalisation', 'capacity building', 'sport and recreation' and 'health and nutrition'. Two out of every five of the reported SRAs were suggested by the government (the local Indigenous Coordination Centre), and another two out of five were initiated by the community's own perception of its needs (*Social Justice Report 2006*, p.141). About half of the SRAs said they were satisfied: with the pace of the SRA negotiations (45 per cent, p.144), with the amount of information provide by the government (53 per cent, p.145) and with the way the government met its obligations (57 per cent, p.147). We could not call these survey results a glowing Indigenous endorsement of SRAs, but nor do Calma's data support Hughes' generalized description of them as 'slush funds for politically smart operators and their bureaucratic supporters'. The conclusion that stands out from Calma's survey is that no generalized conclusion about SRAs is possible. Sometimes empirical evaluation does not lead to clear cut conclusions about the worth of programs. This is

inconvenient for Hughes for whom no assertion is worth making if it is not made boldly: whether advocating policy evaluation or blithely exhibiting her indifference to it, she seeks to impress the reader with her unequivocal disdain for extant practices.

Confident overstatement is indeed her signature tune. She writes that 'decent education and living standards' is 'the only known way to reduce levels of alcoholism and drug addiction' (p.37). This assertion ignores the extensive literature that seeks to gauge precisely the effectiveness of various forms of therapeutic intervention into drug and alcohol abuse. I would not contradict her insistence on 'decent education and living standards', but no good can come from disregarding therapies when they are shown to be effective. In being insistently dismissive, Hughes is deaf to good news. Thus, when she cites data that indicates program success – such as in the numeracy and literacy achieved recently by Pitjantjatjara children – she does not pause to wonder what the ingredients of success might be (p.95). She calls for an audit of the health of 'all children' (p.127), and she says that it is 'high time' that someone evaluated Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHOs). Why bother? Hughes knows already what such a study would reveal: 'In the "homelands", Australian taxpayers are asked to pay for a multiplicity of inefficient health providers that waste the scarce medical practitioner and nursing skills. Communal medicine is not working' (p.128). It is not 'inadequate funding' that renders ineffective such public services as health, she adds later, but 'inherent structural defects' (p.154).

What 'structures' does Hughes refer to? In Hughes' book, there are two kinds of obstacles to the better government of Indigenous Australians. One is an inappropriate form of land tenure; the other is the interests of bureaucrats and Big Men. In the past, Hughes has pointed to a connection between land tenure and corruption. In an interview with Frank Devine she portrayed the Northern Territory Land Rights Act as an avatar of the Soviet Union:

The theory is that all decisions are communal, because ownership of property is communal. In practice, the "elders", the members of land councils, the local government organizations, the health organisations make the decisions, and get most of the benefits. It's not stretching too far into ideological analogy to think of them as commissars....*excessive central planning always creates corruption*. The old Soviet Union relied on corruption to keep it moving. It developed a vast black market because it had no other market. But the corruption in our remote Aboriginal communities confers no benefits at all on the majority. Moreover, it is deeply entrenched. The commissars stop at nothing to protect their rackets (Frank Devine 'A conversation with Helen Hughes' **Quadrant** Dec 2005, p.49, emphasis added).

It is difficult to think of a socio-political order more unlike Soviet society under central planning than the Northern Territory homelands. The feature that the situations have in common is that state activity circumscribes (or disallows altogether) certain market activity.

Hughes cannot resist sneering at public servants. She describes one intervention into petrol sniffing in the following way: "'Truckloads of bureaucrats", social workers and police bribes in the shape of sports equipment and even motor bikes were ineffective' (p.36). When she deplores the adoption of CDEP schemes by Indigenous communities, she says that 'bureaucrats spread it' (p.72). When she praises the potential for mining companies to employ local Indigenous labour, she cannot resist concluding her point with a sneering *non sequitur*: 'Progress will be achieved by the

entrepreneurial initiatives of competing mines *rather than by* government and mining industry bureaucrats sitting around tables’ (p.77, emphasis added). There are ‘bureaucrats’ everywhere, fouling the Indigenous scene. ACCHO bureaucrats ‘often see [information systems] as an attempt to monitor their performance and so resist their introduction and use’ (p.123). Governments should avoid using ‘bureaucrats’ to engage the residents of her proposed one hundred Core Centres because Indigenous people have learned to resent and distrust them. Instead the government should mobilize retirees active in such service clubs as Rotary (p.184).

Worse than ‘bureaucrats’, in the Hughes bestiary, are Big Men (she seems, in this book, to have abandoned the term ‘commissars’). Big Men need not be men, for they ‘may also be grandmothers’ (p.41). To the extent that ‘Big Men’ is a metaphor, it refers to the institutionalized beneficiaries of the policies that Hughes would abolish. Hughes introduces the term by citing the Bennelong Society’s Peter Howson: ‘He showed that a *rentier* class of Indigenous “Big Men” as well as academics, cultural consultants, politicians, public servants, administrators and service providers soaked up the bulk of considerable taxpayer funding devoted to keeping the Coombs model in place’ (p.14). There is no denying that some people – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – earn wages, salaries and consultants fees because the governing of Indigenous Australians creates a demand for their labour. In Hughes’ view, all those who do so are under suspicion of being Big Men or their accomplices.

Hughes makes grave allegations against Big Men.

One type of organization in which Big Men thrive, she says, is the Northern Territory Land Councils. She accuses elected and appointed Land Council personnel of securing their power to ‘run the Land Councils’ (p.48) by ‘kinship relations that include child marriage, polygamy, sorcery and pay-back’ (p.46). She acknowledges that Land Councils are effective in settling disputes between clans that courts would not be able to resolve (p.29), but the sentence in which she makes this concession concludes with the begrudging comment ‘...so that the councils absorb resources like sponges’ (p.46). Land Council Big Men, she declares, appropriate royalties from mining on Aboriginal land, rather than distribute them equitably (p.66). Land Council Big Men bitterly opposed the Howard government’s amendment of the leasing provisions of the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act in 2006 (p.56). Hughes accounts for their stance by suggesting that the Land Councils have been able to ‘channel...rents into a few pockets’ (p.187). Failing to distinguish their private interests from their public duties, Big Men also derive monopoly profits from the ‘communal businesses’ that they run in remote Aboriginal lands (p.143). Hughes thus casts Northern Territory Land Council leaders as corrupt, but she offers no evidence for her accusations. She goes further. The alleged criminal predations of Big Men have vitiated the politics, as well as misdirected the finances, of the homelands, Hughes would have us believe. Local government in remote Australia is under the thumb of Big Men (p.110). And the Big Men who run the ACCHOs and their peak body NACCHO are ‘well satisfied with the services that they deliver’ and with Aborigines’ levels of ‘health and short expectation of life’ (pp.119-20).

The most disturbing feature of these accusations is not that they are unsubstantiated. They do not require substantiation if we concede that it would be surprising if Hughes’ accusations of political bullying and financial corruption were always and everywhere untrue. We should assume that among Indigenous Australians, a section of the human race, there are some greedy, unscrupulous and violent people. The occasional exposure of such individuals in the political process

and in the courts is a necessary antidote to the wishful thought that Indigenous Australians are virtuous children of Nature.

However, there is more than this salutary reminder of Indigenous imperfections in Hughes' preoccupation with Big Men. To an extent that she probably has not realized, Hughes' 'Big Men' metaphor betrays her contempt for Indigenous Australians' success. The vile things that Big Men do, Hughes insists on telling us, include sending their children to good schools, being politically articulate and organisationally effective, earning an income in the Australian average range, and being role models for those undertaking a mainstream education. Here's how Hughes lets slip her loathing of the emergent Indigenous middle class.

Hughes warns that 'all parents – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – who choose to live in remote areas must recognize that if they are not to cripple their children, they have to send them away to board during term time' (p.107). But when Hughes comes across instances of Indigenous parents doing so, she is outraged, for if you send your kids to boarding school you arouse her suspicion that you are a Big Man who cares only for his/her own children: 'The sons and daughters of "Big Men" frequently [sic] attend mainstream boarding schools so that in the absence of secondary schooling the "homeland" elite is perpetuating itself' (p.96).

Hughes is tough on those Indigenous people who benefit from education. Ostensibly she admires educated Aborigines. She quotes, in apparent agreement, an educationist who complains that children in the homelands are not given the chance to observe the 'benefits of education': they do not see enough 'adults working and earning mainstream incomes so that they can buy a house, a car and travel' (p.97). You would think that Hughes would not lose the chance to admire such achievers herself. You would think so particularly after reading her insistence that if Aborigines are to be 'effective land care agents', they must become literate and numerate and able to communicate in English (p.52). Literacy and numeracy are essential skills for artists, as well, if they are to avoid exploitation (p.62). And 'illiteracy in corporation managers has to be tackled by intensive adult education' (p.66). Who could dispute the benefits that the acquisition of literacy brings to Indigenous Australians? Hughes finds a way to do so. And shouldn't we admire and commend Aborigines of such attainments? Hughes does not. Instead of praising Indigenous people who share her faith in literacy, numeracy and articulateness in English, she holds them in suspicion, for these skills are the tool kit of Big Men who lord it over their illiterate, innumerate and inarticulate fellow residents (p.144, 161), checked neither by (ineffective) electoral systems nor by the homelands' (poorly attended) meetings (p.146).

In her book's most remarkable use of statistical evidence, Hughes shows the reader four graphs of the incidence of low and high incomes among Indigenous households in the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, from the 2001 Census. The curves on these graphs have two peaks: one shows that many families got only the low incomes (\$300-399) allowed by welfare payments; the other, secondary peak was around one thousand dollars per week. Hughes labels the latter families 'a high income Indigenous elite'. Big Men are the 'homelands' members of this elite, she assures the reader, their bank accounts fattened by 'their appropriation of a high share of public funding through official positions' (p.89). There are Big Men in the cities too: she offers the example of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (Tom Calma). Among the perquisites of these Indigenous voluptuaries are helicopters in which each Big Man visits his 'several wives' and carries his beer (p.87).

There are two Helen Hughes. One Hughes – a development economist of neo-liberal persuasion - advocates that Indigenous Australians acquire human capital so that they can participate successfully in the mainstream labour market. The other Hughes despises those who have already done so: she attributes their success to deviousness, luck, greed and bad public policy. Their middle class incomes she labels ‘appropriation’ by Big Men, and she pities other Indigenous people as the Big Men’s victims. One of the tasks of public policy reform, according to this second, ardently populist Hughes, is to dismantle the structures that have given some Indigenous Australians advantages over others. It is this crusade against Big Men that lends moral fervour to her case for strong government intervention into the lives of Indigenous Australians. Champion of the victims of Big Men, she urges governments to act for the least politically effective Indigenous Australians against vested Indigenous interests.

Central to her proposals is the issue of land tenure. Communal tenure should not be allowed to survive: it gives no security or real sense of ownership (pp.56, 86, 173); it frustrates economic development (p.64) and undermines pest eradication (p.51). Private ownership would instill pride in the family home. If people cling to communal ownership, suggests Hughes, it is because they ‘fear change because of its uncertainty and risks’ (p.56). If they are to taste the advantages of private land ownership, they will have to submit to the Commonwealth’s unilateral amendment of land rights legislation: the Commonwealth will stand up to the Land Council Big Men on behalf of those who are intimidated (p.56). Governments can also exert pressure to end communal tenure through the provision of public housing. The Commonwealth should fund house repairs in the homelands only for those ‘who opt [sic] for 99-year lease house and garden plots’ (pp.139), ‘with core communities being given priority’ (p.186).

Could a government follow the Hughes program? The Howard government is already following it in its approach to Northern Territory land tenure – avowing recently that a step towards private land ownership is also a step towards better child protection. However, these resonances between Hughes’ policy prescriptions and the Howard government’s recent actions should not blind us to the inconsistencies within Hughes program. Not only is she ambivalent (at best) about Indigenous people who prosper from their political skills, their entrepreneurial flair or their sale of their human capital on the labour market, there is another inconsistency within her vision that would frustrate its faithful implementation.

Early in this review, I summarized Hughes’ three-part account of the situations facing Indigenous Australians. In fact there are two such accounts in the book, and in the subtle differences between them (not acknowledged by Hughes) the author has sown the seeds of deep policy confusion. Recall that she regards about one third (160,000) of the Indigenous population as not needing any special help because they are ‘in mainstream jobs’ and enjoy ‘mainstream living standards’. The other two thirds are problematic: about 250,000 ‘on the fringes of towns and in major city ghettos’ and about 90,000 to 120,000 in impoverished, job-scarce ‘homelands’. Hughes offers two significantly different accounts of the dynamic relationship between these three sectors.

In the first scenario, she sees an already existing tendency for the homelander to move to where many of the 250 thousand live. She refers to the ‘the decline of the total homeland’ population, and it is implicit that those who leave the homelands arrive on the fringes of towns and in city ghettos (for where else can they go?). She gives no data to evidence this ‘flight’ from the homelands (p.61, and see p.139), and

she remarks that we do not know what proportion of homelander's visits to larger settlements 'become permanent' (p.22). Whether or not there is already such movement, one version of Hughes' core center strategy would encourage this flight from the homelands. Economies in servicing homelander's would arise if they lived in the one hundred 'core' centers that she has in mind (though some would probably move into the cities). Depending on where the one hundred core centers are (and Hughes names only five examples of core centers), her core center strategy implies rapid growth, over the next few years, in many Indigenous town populations – in effect an addition to the 250 thousand people living 'on the fringes of towns and in major city ghettos'.

Note that in this scenario the two more problematic sectors of the population (homelander's and town/urban fringedwellers) are both characterized by unemployment and low living standards. Where Hughes becomes confusing (and perhaps she is confused herself?) is that her second scenario emphasizes how different are these two population sectors. Hughes argues that government policy should be based on the 'fundamentally different' (p.160) situations of the town fringe/city ghetto 250 thousand and the homelands 90-120 thousand. Most of the fringe and ghetto dwellers 'are located in areas of ample employment, mainstream infrastructure, functioning local government, police and law, and literate English speaking populations...' (p.160). The homelander's people are not locationally advantaged, and so the government must address them with different solutions. This appeal for fundamentally differentiated policy implies not that the homelands must be emptied (through migration to towns and cities) but that the homelands somehow will be made more liveable – with more ample government services, investment and employment programs. This scenario is consistent with her advocating that Wadeye, Maningrida, Mutitjulu, Warburton and Palm Island be funded to support 'decent civic standards' (p.23).

Is Hughes hoping to empty the homelands or to render them more liveable? That is the question that her book fails to answer. If it is also a hard question for the Howard government to answer, then the current reform of policy in the Northern Territory lacks coherence and will generate enormous uncertainty for Aborigines, bureaucrats and State/Territory governments.

I have difficulty discerning the spatial implications of Hughes' 'core center' policy agenda. How many of the core centers is she hoping to build up within the 'homeland' regions, if she proposes to continue treating the homelander's as a distinct policy problem? Alternatively, how many of the core centres are to be in the town/city zones into which the 90-120 thousand homeland residents are to be encouraged to move? The regional impacts of Hughes' strategy are impossible to judge unless she names more of the one hundred proposed 'core centres' than the five mentioned. The publisher should have insisted that Hughes include a map showing the core centers and the regional populations that they would serve. The reader should be able to visualise her scenario spatially.

I suspect that there is political cowardice, rather than political innocence, in Hughes' failure to name more than five of her projected 100 core centers. For those places not named would have to include towns such as Port Augusta, Kalgoorlie, Wiluna, Newman, Dubbo, Broken Hill, Cloncurry, Cairns, Cooktown, Coen, Mount Isa, Tennant Creek, Katherine, Alice Springs, even Darwin, and so on.... Hughes does not explicitly deal with the way that her strategy for the Indigenous homelands must also be a strategy for public investment in scores of regional towns in which there are already substantial Indigenous minorities. And even if granted the necessary

investment, will these towns welcome the influx of homelander impoverished and bewildered by governments' calculated neglect?

If Robert Manne is right in presenting Hughes as an influence over the Howard government, then Hughes' crucial vagueness about what she is proposing may also be a vacuum in the social and economic planning of the Australian government (whether led by Howard or by Rudd). *Lands of Shame* may be a guide not only to the 'philosophy' (a generous word) but also to the intellectual vacuity of Australia's current political elites. The appealing chords that Helen Hughes has struck in *The Australian's* op ed pages – profound ambivalence about the emergent Indigenous middle class, scorn for the homelands as Coombs' 'socialist' experiment - are no substitute for policy realism. Where is the 'cogent' policy thinking? Hughes' call for greater public investment in Indigenous Australians is dogged by a simple question that she does not bother to answer: where best to spend it?

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