

## WPS DEVELOPMENTAL NOTE #49

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**Topic: Early trail blazers**

In WPS Developmental Note #14, I talked about how these developmental notes are a record of the journey taken by the Work Placement Scheme (WPS); a journey of ideas and practices, disputes and agreements, successes and failures. I also talked about the importance of creating a record for those who may follow, or for those who may be travelling in parallel directions. If I collapse time, perhaps I am running behind, and for whatever reason those in front did not leave a trail.

Previously I discovered what could be described as a remnant of an old trail, a little bit of history, or a silhouette of some earlier version of the WPS. It was around November last year when I was talking about the WPS on Victorian ABC rural radio, when an elderly gentleman from Shepparton rang the studio presenter and stated that he could recall something similar to the WPS happening.

Apparently a long time ago some Aborigines from central Australia came to pick fruit in Shepparton. He said that he could not recall who arranged it, or what happened to them but they were very good workers. I was very interested in what he had to say but the trail petered out and I could not find anyone with any more information about it.

Eight months passed and I was sitting in Bob Welsh's office telling him this story. Bob is an elderly man who was the Coordinator of the Aurukun Justice Group. As I was telling Bob this story his eyes lit up and he gave me a big smile. He said "*I know all about this, I was one of the people who took them down.*"

I was surprised to receive this information from Bob. He then went on to tell me how in late 1965, while he was working as a Patrol Officer for the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory Administration, he was given the job of taking a group of Aboriginal men from Papunya in the Northern Territory to Shepparton in Victoria, to pick pears. Patrol Officers were responsible for arranging employment for Aboriginals, and their responsibilities didn't end once they matched employer with employee.

Bob said the scheme had begun earlier that year when another Patrol Officer by the name of David Stewart, took a group of 8 to 10 young Aboriginal men from Alice Springs to Gundagai to work in the asparagus harvest. This exercise was successful so the then Director of the Welfare Branch (Native Affairs), Mr Harry Geise approved for a larger group to travel to the Goulburn Valley. Bob was the Officer appointed to take this second group of about 15 young men from Papunya to work in Shepparton.

As you could imagine I was impressed with Bob's story. These men were the pioneers for work placements. David Stewart is still alive and he resides in Queensland. Bob also gave me the telephone number of Jim Wauchope. Jim was another Patrol Officer

involved in the scheme who later went on to be the Queensland Manager for ATSIC, and the Director of Family and Community Services Queensland. He is now retired.

David Stewart and Jim Wauchope told me about their pioneering efforts; who organised it, how was it organised, and what happened to the scheme. Jim referred me to a book titled; 'The Go-Betweens: Patrol Officers in Aboriginal Affairs Administration in the Northern Territory 1936-74' by Jeremy Long. Its context depicts this scheme and contained this picture showing four members of the first team of fruit pickers\*, including David Stewart.



23. *The first team of fruit pickers, Leeton, Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, January 1966. Standing: Keith Reynolds, J Higgs (Field Officer CES), WJ McCormack (Manager CES, Dept Labour & National Service), Eddie Turner (Orchardist). Seated: DA Stewart (Patrol Officer), Mark Oldfield, Bill Rennie, Peter Jangala, Frank Lauder. (Welfare Branch Collection, ATSIC, Darwin)*

It soon became apparent that there were a number of fundamental differences between the WPS and this earlier work. To begin with, this earlier scheme had a different purpose to the WPS. The WPS has been developed as means of helping young people escape the misery of harmful environments, improve the quality of their lives, helping them to realise more of their potential, and reduce their level of social inequality. This earlier scheme, on the other hand, was developed to address the chronic shortage of seasonal labour from December to March/April in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (Long, 1992, p.158). Furthermore, the WPS is based on principles that directly address the causes of social dysfunction and social inequality. These principles in turn guide our practices.

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\* All four of these men are now deceased. Mark Oldfield was from Yuendumu. Bill Rennie, Peter Jangala and Frank Lauder were from Warrabri (renamed Ali Curung) in central Northern Territory.

This earlier scheme had no such guiding principles and must be understood in the context of time and place. For example, the government paid for the participants to return home on their request, and many participants requested to be sent home a few weeks after arrival. Less was known in those days of the social sciences, and the nature of man. But I suspect that it had more to do with the same paternalistic policies and practices that patronise and infantilise Aboriginal people like those of today.

Prior to the 1960s, the pastoral industry was the largest employer and cornerstone of the central Australian economy. Types of employment included stockmen, gardeners, horse handlers, rouseabouts, yardmen, and kitchen staff, usually residing (with their families) at their place of employment (Smith, 2003, p.553), on their traditional land. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw mass unemployment due mainly to a combination of the consequences of growing capitalization and concentration of ownership in the pastoral industry, as well as the increased cost of labour due to, *inter alia*, the granting of the pastoral award in 1968 to Aboriginal workers (Smith, 2003, p.555). Prior to the introduction of this award Aboriginal labour had been paid at a lower rate than white labour.

In this context, we can now make sense of why many of the participants in this earlier scheme, found it difficult to conform to the structural and task demands of mainstream private sector employment. According to Bob Welsh “... [The] *lack of dedication to work (they were paid by the amount of pears picked, ie by the bin) were among the major drawbacks. Some of the pickers did not even make enough money to cover their board and lodging .... In such cases much resentment was caused within the group and some felt they were being used (or that they were working for nothing). At one stage the group as a whole went on strike and demanded the pay they felt was due* (Walsh, 2006).”

What I find interesting is Long’s explanation for the abandonment of the scheme. “... *the rewards for the work were not great and as ‘training allowances’ paid for work on the settlements were increased in 1968 the inducements for men to travel so far from home to find work for a few weeks disappeared. No more fruit picking teams were organised after the summer of 1968, and the practice of sending men from the Centre settlements to work on forestry and projects in the north, where demand for labour exceeded the supply, also ceased* (Long, 1992, p.159).

Of course, what Long calls “training allowances” was in fact welfare: detaching people from the real economy and providing them with money for little or no effort. My guess is that this so called government “training allowance” was the forerunner to CDEP (introduced in 1976). For people unaccustomed to work and life outside cattle stations forced into new communities or regional towns and placed on a “training allowance” proved to be disastrous. We were warned in 1974, by a social worker named John Tomlinson who said; “*The institutionalisation of so many people in the welfare-rehabilitative style rather than the engaging of people in the producer-consumer struggle of the wider society has the effect of mortgaging future generations*”. Likewise, one of Australia’s most outstanding and influential public servants, “Nugget” Coombs warned in 1973 that “*present policies are producing a race of cripples*”.

I am now told by David Stewart that he understood the importance of the scheme, and he also foresaw another reason for its demise. This other reason has particular relevance to our present dispute with DEWR, in relation to the department's objection to the WPS helping unemployed 15 years olds, who are refusing to attend school or to gain employment, and the Department's determination to overturn our policy position on Indigenous welfare reform and fly troublesome participants back home free of charge.

According to Stewart, the scheme was ruined by senior bureaucrats of the then Department of Labour and National Service and the Welfare Branch. *"It was the government bureaucrats."* said David Stewart. *"They took over. It was stupid. They didn't think it through and they got it all wrong. They put too many people, from the wrong places and wrong ages. The government bureaucrats just didn't listen"* (Stewart, 2006)." By late 1968, the scheme was in disarray. Participants were refusing to work, they engaged in high levels of public drunkenness, violence and there was a severe breakdown in law and order. After participants ran riot in Griffith, NSW, later that year everyone was taken back home and the scheme was abandoned (Walsh, 2006).

It is important to note that the practice of the scheme was developed by the Patrol Officers from the Welfare Branch of the NT Administration, and they reported that the initial trials worked well. The practice of the scheme was not developed by senior bureaucrats from the then Department of Labour and Welfare Branch, but when they did interfere into practice matters, they buggered it up – an all too familiar story.

It was shortly after I received the call from the elderly gentleman from Shepparton, when I received a call from another elderly gentleman who identified himself to be a member of the Barmera Baptist Church. He had heard about my work in bringing down young Aboriginals from Cape York Peninsula and the Kimberley to pick fruit in the region. He rang me and stated that his Church was also involved in doing the same sort of thing back in 1965-66. He spoke fondly of the NT Aboriginals and said the scheme worked well. I had thought that the Baptist Church probably got the idea from the NT Welfare Branch. How ironic, when you think how I had just moved the Waikerie group to Barmera, because of the problems I was experiencing in Waikerie at the time.

On the 24 October 2007, I visited Turkey Creek (Warmun), a small Aboriginal community in the Kimberley, while on tour across northern Australia to assess the level of interest in the WPS. I met Turkey Creek's Chief Executive Officer - an elderly gentleman by the name of Chris Clair. I was telling Chris about the WPS when he said, *"Yes, you know this sort of thing has been done before"*. I replied, *"You are right, it was done back in the 60s by Northern Territory Patrol Officers"*. Chris said, *"Yes, I was one of the Patrol Officers"*. He then went on to tell me about his involvement in the 1965-68 scheme.

The Weekend Australia dated 23 August, 2008, published this interesting letter by Bill Edwards from Cumberland Park in South Australia.

*"In 1965, as superintendent of Ernabella Mission in the far north-east of South Australia, I heard an ABC news report that women were being brought out from*

*Greece to fill a need for more fruit pickers in the Riverland region. As we had young men who were regular workers in the sheep, cattle, garden and building industries at the mission, I mentioned the report to our sheep overseer who contacted a former mission employee who lived at Barmera, in the heart of the Riverland. Although most fruit growers reacted to his offer of Aboriginal labour with the usual resort to stereotypes, one man agreed to take on six men. From those who volunteered, we selected reliable workers who did not drink alcohol. They worked so well that the following year we placed 23 men and two women as cooks with five growers. The project expanded over the following years with 40 men employed from Ernabella and nearby settlements in 1969. The scheme worked so well that a government department took it over. Less care was taken in the selection of workers and within a year or so the program collapsed.”*

This again reinforces my point about the ideas of many government bureaucrats not squaring with the reality on the ground.

Long, J. (1992). *The Go-betweens: Patrol Officers in Aboriginal Affairs Administration in the Northern Territory 1936-74*. Northern Australia Research Unit, Australian National University.

Smith, T. (2003). Aboriginal Labour and the Pastoral Industry in the Kimberley Division of Western Australia: 1960-1975. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 3 (4), 552-570.

Tomlinson, J. (1977). *Is Band-Aid Social Work Enough?* The Wobbly Press.

Stewart, D. (2006). Private phone interview, 26 June 2006.

Wauchope, J. (2006). Private phone interview, 27 June 2006.

Welsh, B. (2006). *Some recollections on the NT Aboriginal Fruit Picking Scheme of 1965-66*, Aurukun, June 2006 (unpublished note).