When the jobs are somewhere else: The case for Aboriginal worker mobility

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September 2026

The Power of Work

Before discussing Aboriginal employment policy, we need to address a more fundamental question: why is work important? The argument in this section is drawn primarily from *Just Leave Them… Where They Belong: The Cruel Business of the Culture-Cult, Service Industry, and Welfare Dependency*, which examines the importance of work and the consequences of prolonged exclusion from it in considerably greater detail.

The obvious answer is income. Employment provides individuals with the means to support themselves and their families, accumulate savings, purchase goods and services, and reduce their dependence on others. These are the manifest benefits of work. But work does much more than provide a wage.

Employment also provides what social psychologist Marie Jahoda described as latent benefits. It gives structure and routine to daily life, brings people into regular contact with others outside their immediate social group, provides status and identity, creates a sense of common purpose, and requires cooperation with others. These functions are particularly important for young people. Work exposes them to different people, occupations, lifestyles and possibilities, while requiring punctuality, responsibility and an acceptance that actions have consequences.

This is also an important insight in social work. Employment is not merely an economic transaction. It is a social environment where people gain experience, develop relationships, assume responsibilities and build independence. We describe this developmental process as capability building. The underlying principle is simple: capability is developed by exercising it.

There is another function of work that has received remarkably little attention in Aboriginal policy.

Racial identification has increasingly eclipsed class identification. Aboriginal people are encouraged to understand themselves primarily as members of a racial and cultural group rather than also as workers sharing economic interests with other workers. This has left comparatively little institutional space for Aboriginal people to organise around their interests as workers, including through their own labour organisations.

Real employment broadens that identity. A young Aboriginal person entering a meatworks, farm, or other workplace does not cease to be Aboriginal but acquires an additional identity: worker. They share wages, conditions, supervisors, workplace problems, and economic interests with workers from many different backgrounds. This reflects our own experience of workplaces where young participants encountered workers and employers from an extraordinary range of cultural and national backgrounds.

This dual function of work—economic and developmental—is particularly relevant to remote Aboriginal employment policy. Success cannot be adequately measured by the number of programs attended, training courses completed, or government-funded positions created. The key question is whether young people are entering the real workforce and developing the capabilities needed to remain there.

Our experience also led us to question the assumption that young people must first be made "job ready". Some of our strongest participants moved directly from school into employment, whereas older participants who had spent years cycling through pre-employment training and personal-development programs were often considerably harder to engage and retain.

This led us to two simple conclusions:

Start young, and the best training for a real job is a real job.

The workplace provides what pre-employment programs cannot fully replicate: real expectations, responsibilities, relationships and consequences. Aboriginal employment policy should therefore avoid keeping young people in an extended state of preparation—or, worse, using programs as a holding yard until eventual transition to the age pension.

When the Jobs Are Somewhere Else

Remote Aboriginal employment policy must address an economic reality: many remote Aboriginal settlements lack an economy beyond welfare and government-funded services. For many, there has never been one, and there is little reason to believe one will emerge in the foreseeable future.

For more than half a century, this has been the default position. Where sufficient employment is not available locally, unemployment benefits and other forms of government support enable people to remain outside the workforce indefinitely. In effect, we have been running something akin to a Universal Basic Income (UBI) experiment in many remote welfare settlements for more than fifty years, without calling it one.

If we accept this situation, the employment problem largely disappears. The government can continue to provide income support and services without addressing geographical isolation or the absence of a functioning local economy. However, if we do not regard lifelong welfare dependency among people capable of working as an acceptable outcome, there are three choices:

Option 1: Create work where people are living.
Option 2: Bring employers and economic activity to where people are living.
Option 3: Help people go to where the work already exists.

For most of the past sixty years, Australian policy has concentrated overwhelmingly on the first two. Governments can fund positions, subsidise wages, purchase services, and establish community enterprises. But government-funded jobs do not necessarily constitute a functioning labour market. A functioning labour market depends on sustained economic demand for labour, with diverse employers, occupations, and opportunities to move and advance. Governments should encourage economic activity in remote areas where sustainable employment is possible. What they cannot do is manufacture sufficient economic activity in every small and isolated settlement to employ everyone capable of working.

There is another difficulty. Having a job available does not mean every unemployed person will want to take it up. Long periods outside the workforce can change routines, expectations and attitudes towards work. Unemployment benefits may provide a low income, but they are familiar and require relatively little in return. Employment provides greater income but also requires effort, discipline, regular attendance, acceptance of supervision and accountability for performance.

The decision therefore involves a return-on-effort calculation. The comparison is not simply between benefits and wages, but between a familiar income that requires little productive effort and a higher income that demands substantially more effort. Once a person has adapted to the former, even substantially higher wages may not provide sufficient motivation to enter the workforce. This is one consequence of long-term welfare dependency that governments have been reluctant to address. Low income can become the norm, as can non-participation in the workforce.

This does not mean that every unemployed person is unwilling to work, nor does it relieve the government of its responsibility to ensure reasonable opportunities exist. But where an able-bodied person—particularly a young person—is capable of working and a reasonable opportunity is available, welfare policy cannot remain indifferent to whether that opportunity is taken. Opportunity without reciprocal obligation is not employment policy. It is welfare provision.

Sixty Years of Trying to Take Jobs to People

The preference for creating work where people live rather than helping people move to where work exists is not new. One early example can be found in England's Speenhamland system of 1795. Speenhamland supplemented the incomes of poor agricultural workers while industrialisation was creating employment opportunities in towns. Writing in 1944, the economic historian Karl Polanyi argued that it helped maintain people within their existing settlements while weakening labour mobility: a new class of employers was emerging while the corresponding class of employees was being prevented from fully forming.

The circumstances of remote Aboriginal Australia are plainly different, but the underlying policy problem has similarities. A policy designed to protect people from poverty can also help sustain populations in places with limited economic opportunity.

The Community Development Employment Projects scheme (CDEP) became Australia's most substantial attempt to create work in Aboriginal settlements. At its best, CDEP provided structured activity, useful community work and an alternative to the passive receipt of unemployment benefits. But it could not create the economic demand for labour absent from many remote settlements. Over time, what was intended as an alternative to welfare could itself become another means by which people remained outside the ordinary workforce.

As one CDEP review concluded,

The communities in which CDEP operates are economies substantially characterised by the recirculation of public income and the consumption of public goods and services. In few instances is value created sufficient to justify the income and goods and services consumed ...[1]

CDEP was eventually abolished, but the geographical approach remained. The Community Development Programme (CDP) placed greater emphasis on participation and mutual obligation, while the current Remote Jobs and Economic Development (RJED) program has again turned towards creating what the government describes as "real jobs" and economic opportunities in remote settlements.

There is nothing wrong with this, as sustainable employment can be created. Options 1 and 2 should remain part of remote employment policy. But after more than half a century, there is little justification for pretending they can provide sufficient real employment in every remote settlement. Another approach was taken. More than sixty years ago, Australia experimented with moving Aboriginal workers to where employers already needed labour.

The Forgotten Alternative: Taking People to the Jobs

The history examined in this section is drawn principally from Milton James's *The 1960s Aboriginal Fruit-Picking Scheme*,[2] which provides a detailed examination of the scheme, its participants, administration and outcomes. In the 1960s, the Northern Territory Administration and missions confronted a remarkably familiar problem. Central Australia had Aboriginal people needing work, while horticultural regions in southern Australia had employers needing workers.

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[1] Australian Government Department of Finance and Regulation, 2009. Evaluation of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Program, 6

[2] James M, 2018. The 1960s Aboriginal Fruit-Picking Scheme: A Critical Evaluation—An Instructive History of Social Policy, Social Work, and Central Australian Aborigines. Critical Social Work Publishing House

Aboriginal station workers and their families were leaving cattle stations at a rate of about 1,000 a year and moving onto missions and settlements where there was little real employment. At the same time, the Murray and Murrumbidgee horticultural regions depended upon an estimated 10,000 seasonal workers and faced recurring labour shortages.

The solution was remarkably straightforward: take people who needed work to employers who needed workers.

The idea originated at Ernabella Mission. In late 1964, Superintendent Bill Edwards heard an ABC report about Greek women being brought to the South Australian Riverland to address a labour shortage. It occurred to him that Aboriginal men from Ernabella could do the same work. The resulting Ernabella Labour Export Project (1965–66) was successful and was followed by much larger involvement by the Northern Territory Administration.

What became the Aboriginal Fruit-Picking Scheme continued in various forms until 1973 and involved hundreds of Aboriginal people from Central Australia. The work was seasonal and voluntary, with participants employed by real employers at award wages and conditions. They went away for the season and returned home afterwards.

This distinction is important. Mobility does not necessarily entail permanent migration. Workers can retain their home, family, and community connections while temporarily accessing a labour market not available where they live.

When all the circumstances are considered, the results were outstanding. Participants covered their own return travel and living costs, and many returned with purchased goods and savings. They came off government-funded training allowances while away and paid tax. Most importantly, they participated in real economic production. Employers benefited as well. One employer was sufficiently impressed with the reliability and proficiency of a group to request 250 Aboriginal workers for the following season.

Not every group achieved the same degree of success.

Mission groups generally performed better than government groups, while recently arrived residents who had come in from the bush generally performed better than those who had spent much of their lives in government welfare settlements.

One important difference was selection: missions selected people deemed suitable for the work, whereas government settlements lacked an effective suitability assessment and sometimes sent people who were poorly suited to the placements. Alcohol also affected the performance of some groups after the repeal of prohibition laws. Yet these were not failed groups. All achieved varying degrees of success. The differences demonstrated an important practical lesson: worker mobility is not simply a matter of finding someone a job and buying a ticket. Selection, preparation, supervision, employer relations and practical support affect the degree of success.

The scheme was discontinued in 1973. Both men's seasonal work groups and women's cannery groups continued until that year. One explanation for its discontinuation was particularly revealing: as training allowances—effectively a form of unemployment income support—on settlements increased, the financial incentive to travel long distances for seasonal employment declined.

The scheme showed that geographical isolation from employment need not lead to either a lifetime of UBI-like income support or repeated attempts to create jobs where people live. There was a third option: connect people living in areas with scarce jobs to employers who needed labour. Decades later, without knowing the earlier scheme had existed, James found himself developing much the same approach.

From Proof of Concept to a Worker Mobility Model

The account and results presented in this section are drawn principally from James's *Work, Not Welfare*,[3] which documents the development, implementation and outcomes of the worker mobility projects discussed below. In 2005, James conducted a proof-of-concept trial with 16 young Aboriginal volunteers. All 16 travelled from Cairns to Adelaide and began fruit-picking. Fourteen completed the three-month trial, and when it ended, ten remained in employment.

The trial showed that young Aboriginal people from remote welfare settlements could travel long distances and successfully enter the mainstream workforce. The next question was whether the model could be replicated across other industries and locations and sustained over longer periods. It could.

The Work Placement Scheme achieved a six-month retention rate of 74 per cent in horticultural work and a twelve-month retention rate of 69 per cent in meat processing. The Remote Area Work Scheme achieved 50 per cent retention at twelve months, of whom 80 per cent went on to complete a second year. The Aurukun Youth Orbiting Project achieved 72 per cent retention at twelve months.

These figures need context. The meat-processing industry's twelve-month average retention rate was approximately 38 per cent. JBS Swift, Australia's largest meat-processing company, recorded a six-month completion rate of only five per cent in its Aboriginal employment program. The Australian Government's Intensive Assistance program achieved a job placement rate of just four per cent, with employment retention not recorded. Against these benchmarks, twelve-month retention rates of 50 to 72 per cent were exceptional.

Moreover, these outcomes were achieved despite many participants presenting with poor English-language skills, literacy and numeracy difficulties, behavioural problems, poor money management, aggressive behaviour, alcohol and drug problems, and, in some cases, long criminal records—a participant group described by the Cape York Institute as the "toughest of the tough."

The experience changed our understanding of the employment problem. Finding jobs was not particularly difficult. Helping people succeed in those jobs was. The practice problem increasingly came down to two things: recruitment and retention.

Recruitment meant identifying and engaging people who could and should enter employment, and obtaining sufficient commitment for them to take the opportunity. Retention meant helping them remain in the workforce when problems arose. The objective was never for a participant to remain indefinitely with the first employer. They could change employers, occupations or locations. The important outcome was that they remained in the real workforce rather than returning to long-term welfare dependency.

Worker mobility should therefore not be understood simply as an employment-placement service. Moving someone geographically is relatively easy. The real work is helping that person transition from life outside the workforce to working life.

Successive projects showed that the original trial was not an isolated result. Worker mobility could be replicated across groups, locations, and industries, with employment sustained for twelve months or more. These young people did not need a labour market manufactured around them. They needed a practical way to access existing labour markets.

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[3] James M, 2018. Work, Not Welfare: Critical Rural Social Work Practice and the History of the Work Placement Scheme. Critical Social Work Publishing House

What Makes Worker Mobility Work?

These projects taught us that worker mobility is not difficult to understand. The difficulty lies in making it work. There is no shortage of employers willing to employ reliable workers, and physically moving someone to a regional or metropolitan labour market is relatively straightforward. The difficult part is identifying suitable people, getting them to take the opportunity, and helping them remain in the workforce.

Retention requires practitioners capable of addressing problems as they arise—accommodation, transport, money management, family pressures, workplace relationships, alcohol and drugs, homesickness, or workplace behaviour. The objective is not to remove every difficulty from a participant's path, but to help that person manage difficulties without leaving the workforce.

There is an important distinction between helping someone solve a problem and solving it for them. The latter can perpetuate the dependency the intervention is intended to overcome. Assistance should increase a person's capacity to manage their own affairs, make decisions, and deal with consequences, and it should progressively require less assistance.

For this reason, worker mobility must be practice-driven. Proven practice capability should take precedence over administrative capability. Demonstrate through practice that an intervention produces the required outcome, then build policy, administration and scale around what has been shown to work.

This places considerable importance on practitioners. Worker mobility cannot be reduced to a manual, case-management procedure or a contractual performance indicator. Practitioners require wide-ranging life and work experience, a multidisciplinary practice framework, judgement, practical problem-solving ability, confidence to make decisions, and a willingness to accept responsibility for them. Above all, they require what we describe as a "do, not try" mentality: finding a way to achieve the outcome rather than compiling reasons why it cannot be achieved.

After twenty five years of developing worker mobility projects, the question is no longer whether the model can work. The results show it can. The question is whether governments and the Aboriginal welfare industry have the practice capability, institutional willingness and political courage to implement it.

Worker Mobility as a Policy Necessity

Structured worker mobility is a policy necessity for young Aboriginal people living in remote settlements where sufficient employment does not exist. This does not mean abandoning efforts to create sustainable local employment or to attract genuine economic activity where possible. It means recognising their limitations. Where jobs cannot realistically be brought to people, those capable of working must have a practical pathway to them.

Nor are we proposing another large employment bureaucracy. The next stage should build on what has already been learned while developing mechanisms that can operate on a larger scale. This brings us back to recruitment and retention.

Our experience showed that recruiting the required numbers was not particularly difficult when recruitment was undertaken directly as a practice task. The disappointment came when we attempted to engage conventional employment-service providers. The problem was not a lack of young people capable of participating. It was the system's capability and incentives to recruit them.

Many employment service providers lack the specialised knowledge of labour markets and employer requirements, as well as the intensive support needed to facilitate worker mobility. More fundamentally, the funding system has often rewarded providers for keeping clients engaged in community activities and in recurring pre-employment and personal development programs rather than moving them into sustained, real employment. Agencies can receive more funding to organise activities and deliver recurring training than to help welfare recipients secure meaningful employment.

This creates a basic conflict of incentives. The worker mobility objective is to move a person out of the employment-service system and into the real workforce. The welfare-training system can be financially rewarded for continuing to manage that person within programs. Expecting the latter to become the principal recruiter for the former therefore proved to be a mistake.

Our proposed family-remittance model responds directly to this problem. Rather than relying on employment agencies as the principal mechanism for recruitment and ongoing encouragement, much of this responsibility would shift to people who already exercise considerable influence over whether a young person takes up an employment opportunity and remains in it: their family.

The economic incentives that drive worker mobility also need to be recognised. International workers are often attracted to Australia by wages substantially higher than those available at home, and this advantage is magnified by exchange rates when earnings are remitted to their families. Australia's Pacific labour mobility arrangements provide a clear example. Workers earn higher incomes and gain experience, while their families share directly in the economic benefits through remittances.

Other incentives can also encourage people to relocate for work: access to better goods and services, education and training, entertainment, adventure, new experiences, and the capabilities developed by living and working away from home. For some international workers, the prospect of permanent residency is an additional incentive.

The incentives facing a young unemployed Aboriginal person in a remote settlement are different. There is no exchange-rate advantage and no migration outcome. Higher wages, greater access to goods and services, new experiences and capability development remain important benefits, but they may not be sufficient to overcome the appeal of familiar surroundings, unemployment income and established family and social relationships.

This is where a government-funded family remittance plays a particular role.

A structured payment to the family or caregiver while the young person remains employed would give the family a direct economic incentive to support recruitment and retention. Rather than the young person's departure being experienced primarily as a loss, continued employment would deliver a tangible benefit to those at home.

An obvious question is why the worker should not simply send part of their wages home, as migrant workers commonly do. They may choose to do so, and over time many undoubtedly do. But that is not the purpose of the proposed payment. The remittance is a policy incentive for recruitment and retention. Requiring a young person entering the workforce for the first time to finance it would reduce the immediate financial reward of working, while leaving government expenditure on employment services largely untouched.

Our proposal is to redirect government expenditure towards the people whose influence can directly improve employment outcomes. Rather than paying employment-service providers to keep young people participating in training and community activities, government would pay a conditional remittance to families or caregivers who support them in entering and remaining in the real workforce. The payment purchases an outcome, not dependency: it continues while the young person remains in employment.

There is nothing unusual about the underlying relationship. Labour mobility worldwide routinely links the worker's economic advancement to that of the family left behind. What differs here is the mechanism. International workers commonly enable their families to benefit from the substantial wage and exchange-rate premium generated by migration. Our target group does not enjoy that same premium. A government-funded remittance recognises this weaker incentive while giving the family a direct stake in successful worker mobility.

Why Has Worker Mobility Been Rejected?

If worker mobility is such an obvious response to geographical unemployment, why has it remained largely absent from Aboriginal employment policy? After all, geographic mobility is routinely accepted when the well-to-do and their children leave home for education, employment and opportunity.

Part of the explanation lies in how the problem has been framed. Proposals for young people to leave remote settlements for employment can raise the spectre of the Stolen Generations. The comparison is misplaced. The Stolen Generations involved the removal of Aboriginal children from their families under state authority. Worker mobility concerns a different group of people for a different purpose: predominantly young adults who voluntarily leave home for paid employment, while retaining their family and community connections and remaining free to return. Invoking the Stolen Generations risks conflating forced removal with voluntary labour mobility.

But this does not fully explain the resistance.

A more uncomfortable explanation lies in the large Aboriginal welfare, training and employment services industry that has developed around the existing system. Government departments administer it, service providers deliver it, advocates defend it, and organisations depend on it for funding and employment.

Worker mobility challenges this structure because its objective is not to improve the management of people within the welfare system. Its objective is to help people leave it. Successful participants no longer require long-term programs, activities, training, or case management.

There is also a practical barrier. Worker mobility requires practitioners with capabilities in recruitment, assessment, employer engagement and intensive retention work—capabilities that are chronically in short supply. Social work education has been less than helpful in developing this field of practice. Contemporary social work education has increasingly emphasised identity, culture, representation and recognition, while giving considerably less attention to class, labour-market participation, welfare dependency, behavioural incentives and the practical development of capability. The result is a profession well equipped to discuss disadvantage, but much less well equipped to move people out of it.

The greatest obstacle to worker mobility may therefore not be geographical distance at all, but a system with ideological, institutional and financial incentives to continue managing people where they are—and too little practice capability to do otherwise.

Conclusion

For more than sixty years, remote Aboriginal employment policy has focused overwhelmingly on creating work where people live or on bringing economic activity to remote settlements. These approaches should continue where they can produce sustainable employment. But they cannot create a functioning labour market in every small and geographically isolated settlement.

If lifelong welfare dependency for people capable of working is not an acceptable alternative, the third option can no longer be ignored: help people move to where the jobs already exist.

This is not an untested proposition. The Aboriginal Fruit-Picking Scheme demonstrated it in the 1960s, and our worker mobility projects have demonstrated it again under modern conditions. The question is no longer whether young Aboriginal people from remote settlements can successfully enter and remain in labour markets elsewhere. They can.

The policy challenge is therefore to build on what has already been demonstrated: start young, provide access to real employment, develop the practice capability needed to support recruitment and retention, and align the incentives of government, families and participants to sustain workforce participation.

Remote location need not determine economic destiny. Nor should another generation of young people spend their working lives moving between welfare, training programs and government-created activities simply because employment happens to be elsewhere.

The jobs are there. The young people are there. The task of policy is to connect them.

Milton James

Milton James began his working life at the age of 18 with Peko Mines in Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory in 1973. Over the next three years, he worked in a variety of jobs in mines across Australia before returning to South Australia to join his parents on their newly purchased horticultural property at Waikerie in the Riverland.

In 1978, he travelled to India to manage a horticultural project in a remote region of Bihar. That experience sparked an enduring interest in community development in the developing world and led him to pursue it professionally. He returned to Australia in 1980 to undertake a Diploma of Agriculture at Roseworthy Agricultural College, followed by a Diploma of Social Work at the South Australian Institute of Technology. He later completed a Bachelor of Social Work at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales.

After qualifying as a social worker, James worked in Renmark in regional South Australia before moving into statutory social work in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, and later the Torres Strait and Cape York in far north Queensland.

In 2003, his work came to the attention of Indigenous leader Noel Pearson, who seconded him to the newly established Cape York Partnerships. There, James began developing a different approach to engaging and assisting disadvantaged young people through work. His early efforts concentrated on establishing regional enterprises, but increasingly shifted towards helping young people enter mainstream employment in southern Australia.

He subsequently established his own organisation, *Boys from the Bush Projects*, and relocated to the Northern Territory, where he continued to develop and test worker mobility as an alternative to long-term welfare dependency. This practical work continued until 2014, when declining health brought the organisation's direct service work to an end. By coincidence, this occurred just after its trials had concluded successfully, allowing the organisation to shift its focus to documenting its work and advocating worker mobility as a policy approach.

Prue Gusmerini

After obtaining a Bachelor of Arts/Law from the University of New South Wales, Prue began her career at the Cape York Land Council. There, she spent three years working with Traditional Owners to overturn state-based conservation laws that restricted their right to develop their own land and create employment.

During this period, and later as Policy Director of the Cape York Institute, Prue travelled extensively across Cape York, visiting most Indigenous communities in the region. Through these experiences, she observed the damaging effects of welfare dependence on individuals and communities. Fortunately, during her travels, Prue met Milton James and learned about his successful worker mobility trials. She recognised that providing Indigenous Australians with the opportunity to travel for work could offer them a life enriched by the dignity and purpose of a real job.

For the remainder of her time at the Cape York Institute, Prue advocated for the expansion of Milton James' worker mobility trials, alongside economic development on Indigenous land and the creation of local employment opportunities for local people.

Recognising that meaningful policy change was essential—not only in Indigenous Affairs but across many areas affecting ordinary Australians—Prue decided to enter political advising. Since then, Prue has enjoyed a successful career as Deputy Chief of Staff and Policy Director for a range of Liberal Ministers, the Premier of New South Wales, and two Premiers of Tasmania.

She continues to advocate for worker mobility for all Australians, the adoption of evidence-based literacy and numeracy instruction in schools, and a range of productivity reforms to improve the economic wellbeing of Australians.