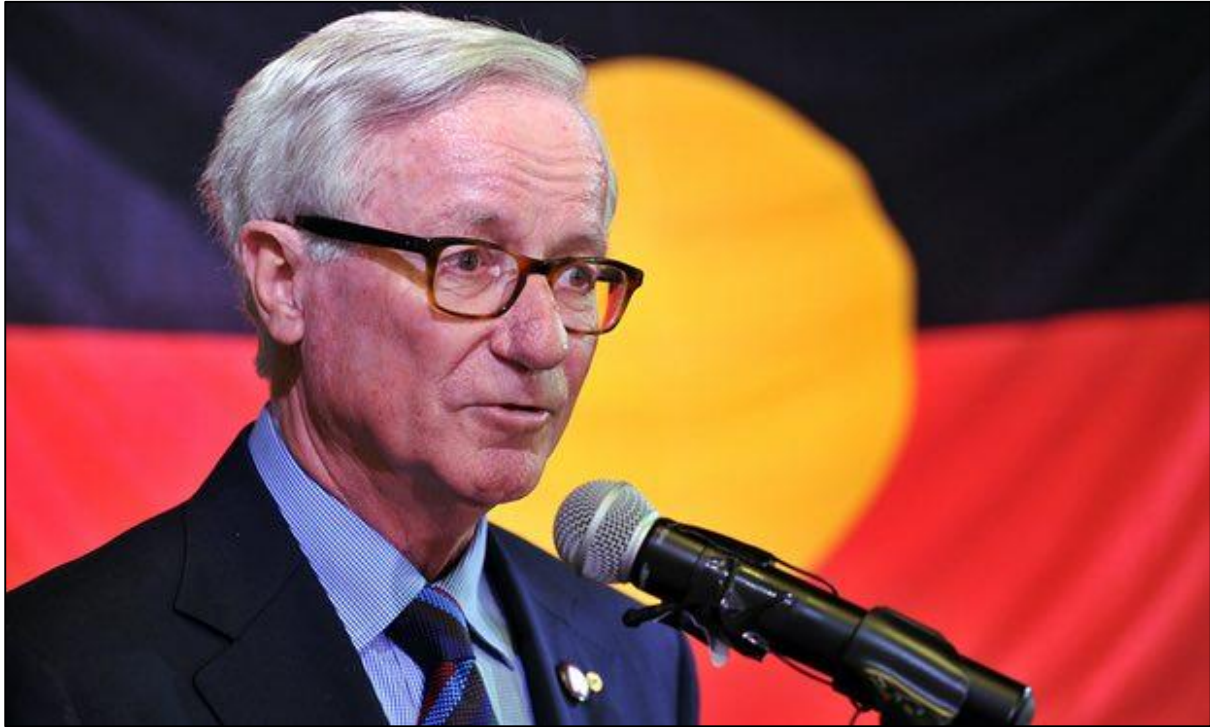


Indigenous Australians hurt by work-for-the-dole scheme, former Liberal minister says

Fred Chaney and former Atsic chairman Bill Gray say program fuelling resentment and causing jobseekers to disengage



Fred Chaney has attacked the Coalition's community development program but a spokesman for the Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, defended the scheme. Photograph: Paul Miller/AAP

Christopher Knaus

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A former Liberal Aboriginal affairs minister has warned that the Coalition's work-for-the-dole scheme is causing lasting damage in remote Aboriginal communities and is unfairly punishing jobseekers for failing to meet confusing, inflexible, often "logistically impossible" requirements.

The former Liberal deputy leader Fred Chaney joined the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission chairman Bill Gray to offer a scathing assessment of the government's community development program – a scheme designed to push 35,000 welfare recipients, mainly from remote Indigenous communities, into employment.

The CDP scheme has been criticised in the past for placing onerous and rigid requirements on jobseekers. It issued almost 55,000 penalty notices in three months last year for those who failed to attend activities or appointments.

In one case, an Indigenous man told Guardian Australia he faced losing welfare payments unless he walked 35km through remote Western Australia every day to get to a worksite.

Chaney and Gray say the scheme is harming remote communities, fuelling resentment and causing young jobseekers to disengage.

“We have repeatedly emphasised the need to ensure that in implementing their programs the principal objective should be to do no harm,” they wrote in a submission to a Senate inquiry. “We would suggest that harm has been suffered by many individuals and families within remote communities as a direct consequence of the implementation of CDP.”

The use of financial penalties had grown to a “very high level” in the past six months, they warned, and punishments were often imposed for reasons the jobseeker did not understand.

“CDP, instead of providing people with the experience of working for wages on appropriate award rates and the possibility of improving their living standards through earning top-up money, subjects them to a harsh regime which ... leads to disengagement rather than engagement,” Chaney and Gray wrote.

But a spokesman for the Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, defended the CDP scheme, saying it had had a “transformational impact” on thousands of remote jobseekers.

The spokesman said only 1% of welfare payments had been deducted as a result of penalties owing to non-attendance.

The scheme, which covers 75% of Australia’s land mass and includes more than 1,000 communities, had helped 15,300 people into jobs and delivered 5,000 six-month employment outcomes, he said.

The Coalition will begin a consultation process on a new model for remote Australia in coming months, the spokesman said, which would “build on the success of the CDP” and incorporate positive elements of previous programs, including the community development and employment program (CDEP), a policy in place from the 1970s to 2015, which is advocated by Chaney and others.

“Many of the criticisms being raised are elements of the remote employment system inherited from Labor’s [remote jobs and communities program] that the minister is seeking to address,” the spokesman said.

Chaney told Guardian Australia he remains cynical about promises for positive reform, which have previously gone unfulfilled, but would give the minister the benefit of the doubt.

His submission to the inquiry warned that the philosophy underpinning the CDP is “assimilationist in intent” and used compulsion and punishment to force Aboriginal people to fit into a metropolitan framework of choosing work or welfare.

Continuing to treat joblessness in remote communities as a welfare problem, rather than an employment problem, would “disrupt and disadvantage individuals, families and communities in a totally unproductive and damaging sequence of inappropriate prescriptions and penalties”.

“The unstated purpose seems to be to drive Aboriginal people into towns and cities,” they wrote. “There is no sense that remote Aboriginal people should be permitted to pursue or maintain a different set of ambitions within any framework of government support.”