Robyn Williams: He has worked for over 50 years with Aboriginal people in all sorts of guises, and here to talk about the governance and service challenges of remote Australia, please welcome Fred Chaney.

The governance and service challenges of remote Australia

Fred Chaney[1]
[1]Desert Knowledge Australia

I acknowledge the traditional owners and, since we are in Cairns, acknowledge the people of Yarrabah and the Yalangi mob up the road, who have been part of my education, and I thank all of the Aboriginal people present for their patience with us in endlessly explaining over and over again, things that I am sure they think don't need explanation.

There are a couple of things that I want to try and deal with in this brief time that I have with you, and perhaps I could start by reflecting on the poem we just heard. I'm talking to an audience of people who are on the ground. Most of you are people who actually deliver services—some of you are academics and bureaucrats, public servants that is, but many of you are direct health workers, and I think that you're the key people, and I ought to express my respect for you by saying something which might be relevant to you. I want to talk about three things in 20 minutes. First of all, my sense of what it's like in the field. The second thing I want to talk about is what makes it so hard. Why is it harder than it need be, so often? And finally, the huge practical difficulty of turning good intentions into good outcomes.

To illustrate my concern about the field, I'm going to talk about three things that I know reasonably well and which are current, and I think they are quite typical. One of the organisations I work with is a little private foundation. We work with Aboriginal people in education and our simple objective is for Aboriginal children to finish year 12. We work mainly in remote parts of Western Australia but also on Groote Eylandt and Alice Springs and Port Augusta, and we've had some really nice success. For example I am currently emailing a girl from Roebourne who is now a fully fledged lawyer and who came out of the very difficult circumstance of that town. And we have got a whole network of young Aboriginal people who have done really well by finishing year 12 and going on to university or a trade.

And fundamentally, it's the sort of thing that Michael Raper touched on. We set up these little local partnerships of all the key players and we get maybe $150,000 per project, mainly out of the mining industry, and we use the school and the teachers and all the education authorities, private sponsors, and we use a program called ATAS to pay for the tutoring that is central of the success of the program: Except last year ATAS was abolished. ATAS was absorbed into the funding which, for reasons I can quite understand, was block handed over to the states and, of course, the state administrations have no tradition, at all, of substantially funding the non-government sector. No one could tell us whether there is a tutorial assistance program next year, and the only reason we've been able to supplement the $1.75 million of private money that we put into these projects this year to help these kids succeed, is because we got a special grant from the Commonwealth to cover this year. The point is that somebody in Canberra—might as well have been a million miles from our projects—made a decision that basically put something that was working at risk.

There's a very successful group—example 2—of Aboriginal communities around Warburton. They're called the Ngaanyatjarra communities. They have a shire. They've got a constellation of communities and they run everything. You don't read a lot about the Ngaanyatjarra Lands because they actually work pretty well. When I went there first in 1979, it was a shambles. But those people pulled

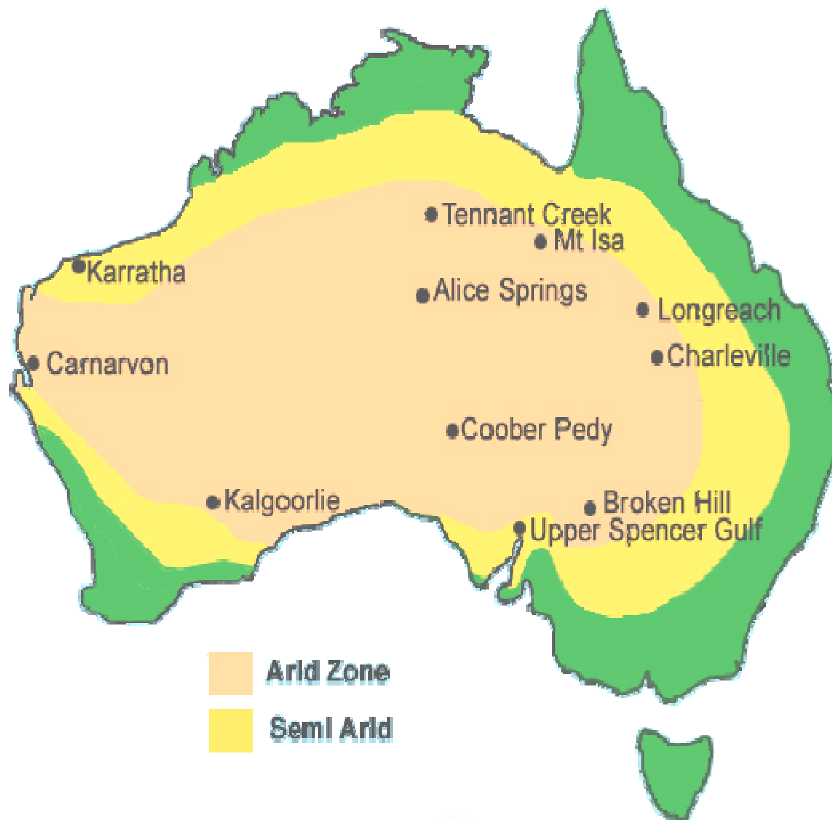
themselves up by their bootstraps and set up a working organisation that enables their communities to function.

And the glue that holds them together is CDEP. There are 650 people on CDEP and that money is used to actually enable the community to organise itself. Now, it's not perfect out there but it's a damn sight better than most places that I visit in remote Australia. Well, CDEP is going, isn't it? You see, again, someone a long way away, has put a lot of thought into this and so they say, "Well, CDEP has got to go," and they do say, "We'll phase it out over three years in remote areas," but, in fact, the phasing out will start on 1 July. And people out there who have really done a good job of looking after themselves—no, not perfect—lots more to be done but a pretty good job—a decision made a long way away puts all that at risk. And so suddenly they are told, "Well you can have 50 full-time jobs and the rest of you will go on"—what I used to call unemployment benefits—"Job Search." But the glue that made this whole system work is at risk. And it's been terribly hard to argue to get people to go to Warburton and sit down and actually make this work, which is surely what these people are entitled to. So, example 2.

Example 3: sitting in Darwin the other day, I sat next to a distinguished Aboriginal woman, a painter as an artist and teacher, Miriam Rose Bauman. I have known her since she was a young woman. I met her at Daly River, again about 30 years ago. She is a considerable person and she sat next to me writing out her notes about what she was going to say to the conference, and in summary what she said was, "We've had local government reform and all the money that we had as a community that we'd put away is no longer ours. It's been taken. And the decisions we used to make for ourselves, we can't make any more, and we don't know what to do."

My point is quite simple. I want to talk to you about what sounds such a silly and irrelevant subject; the governance of governments—how governments actually conduct themselves. And yet, to me, it is absolutely central as to why it is so hard to achieve things in even regional, let along remote, Australia. This government by remote control—decisions made in good faith, money allocated, very clever people—much cleverer than probably anyone in this room, I'm sad to say—devising grand plans and writing grand agreements; but the issue is delivery.

Now, can I ask for a few slides to be very quickly shown, because at Desert Knowledge Australia, which I chair, we're concerned with the 70 per cent of Australia, which contains 2.5 per cent of the population and which is arid or semi-arid. And it's a wonderful part of Australia, culturally rich, resource rich, potentially very important in terms of future environmental management and the great world issues that have been touched on at this conference.

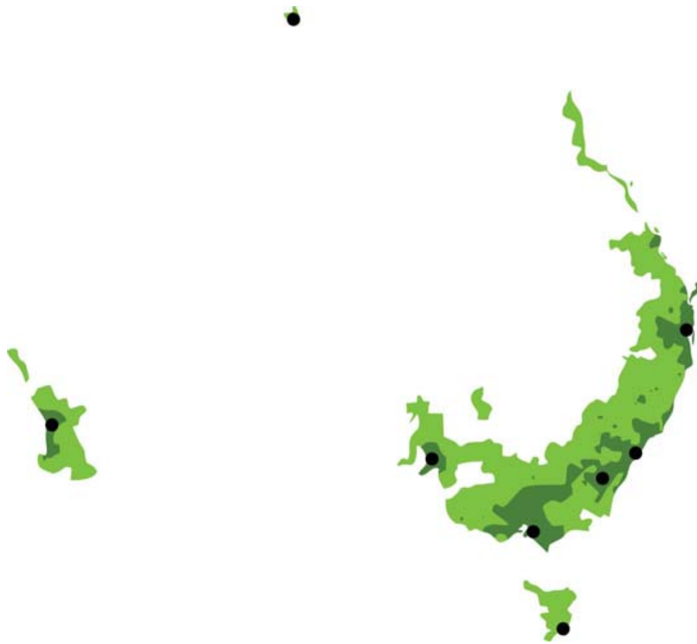


Remoteness Areas

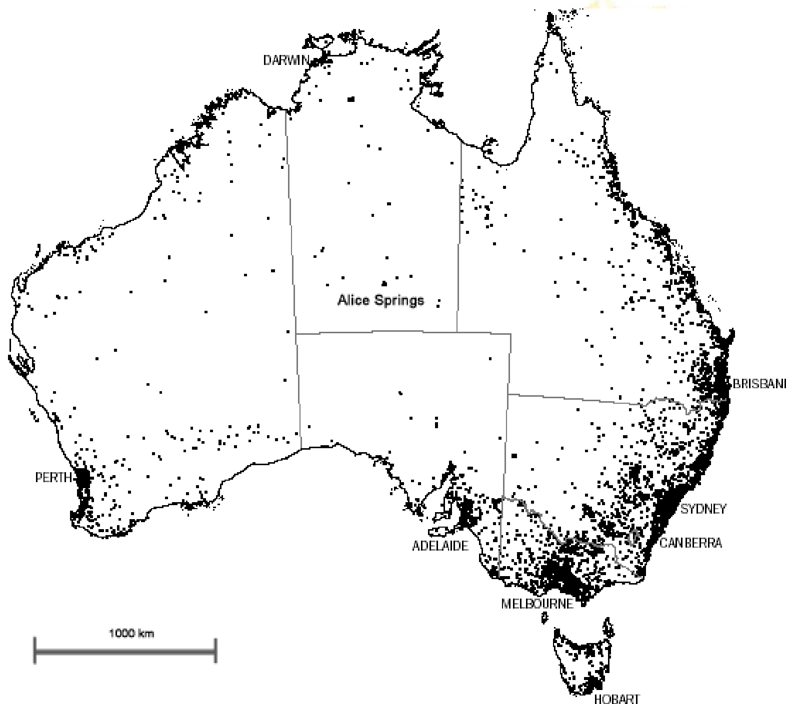
- Major Cities
- Inner Regional
- Outer Regional
- Remote
- Very Remote

Darwin
Brisbane
Perth
Sydney
Adelaide
Canberra
Melbourne
Hobart

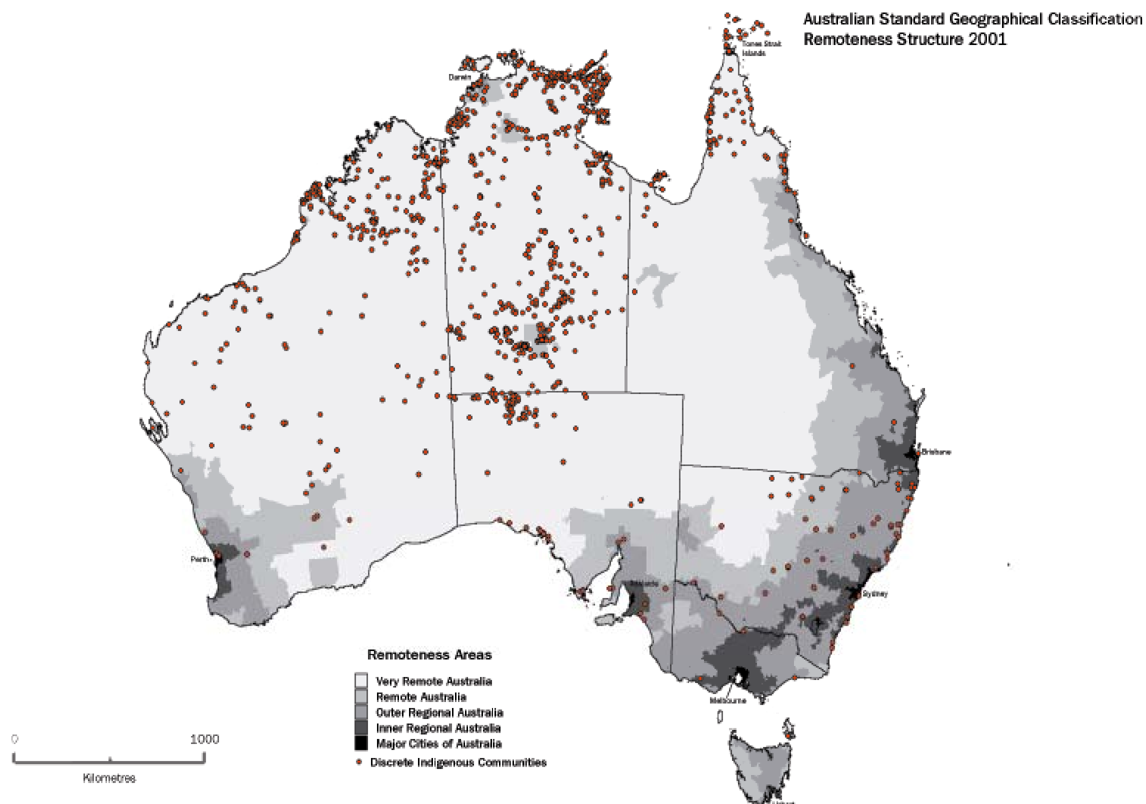
You will see that where 70 per cent plus is arid or semi-arid, 85 per cent of Australia is remote and that contains only 4.5 per cent of the population. If you want to understand the lack of political clout, those numbers are self-evident.



The population of Australia, as you can see, is focused in the south-east and south-west, with spotty bits everywhere else. And that population in the remote areas is sparse, patchy, and mobile and the white people are mainly birds of passage.



There are, on the other hand as we were told earlier, about a quarter of the Aboriginal population scattered in communities, some of which are quite large.



And this shows what is not the case. Although we, at Desert Knowledge, are working on networking the interior, economically and otherwise, most of what these centres shown on the map have to deal with is the coast. The money flows to the coast, the good jobs flow to the coast, the white population, and to some extent, the black population, flows to the coast. We don't have that internal network.

So what to do about it? Well, we think there's a real need to re-look at the way Australia is governed—remote Australia and even regional Australia is governed. And politically, this issue is actually very alive. In Western Australia, in my state, the National Party got an unprecedented vote by running on a program called Royalties for Regions, building on the deep resentment—and this is not an Aboriginal issue—this is a colour blind issue—the deep resentment, whether you're on the north coast of Queensland or in the centre of the Northern Territory or the Kimberley or the Pilbara or around Esperance or the eastern goldfields of Western Australia—a deep resentment about the incapacity of government to speak our language, to understand our problems, and to execute policy in a way which delivers services fairly to us.

So I guess I want you to go away from this conference understanding that many of the difficulties you face arise from the stop/go changes that occur from the top, often without warning, and as we were told this morning, certainly without consultation. How many times have I heard the word consultation used when in fact Aboriginals being told was what actually happened? And so what we're saying at Desert Knowledge Australia is that we really need to work hard on this question of government, and we invite all of you to come to our website, to look at it, and to see if you agree with what we've said in the prospectus we've produced, which is that, fundamentally, remote and desert Australia has got all the attributes of a failed state.

If you want proof of that, look at the intervention. If you want to argue that the normal processes of government are working, why do you need an extraordinary intervention? Why do you need to behave

in the Northern Territory the way we behaved in the Solomons? If it was working, why would you need such drastic action?

So until you do something about the money flows, where policy is made and where administration is run, we will go on having the ineffable benefit of Fred from Claremont and Michael Raper from—where was it—Balmain, coming in and helping you fix things up. Well, I don't think that's good enough, ladies and gentleman. I think until we accept that people need to fix their own problems locally and have the power and the money and authority to do it, we will have conferences like this forever, which will be nice for people like me who attend conferences almost professionally, but not all that good for the people we should care about.

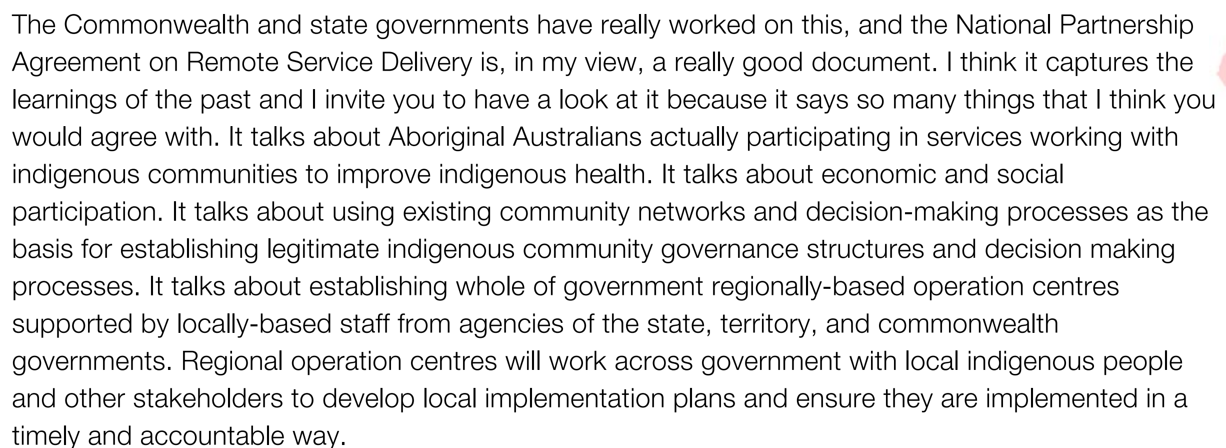
What is my dream? My dream, to pick up the point made by Sir William Dean, is that every Aboriginal child would have the same life chances as any other child in this country. And unless we change the way we work, we won't achieve that.

Now, I know that all progress is local, and I know that all of you would be able to point to wonderful things that you have achieved, and that is, of course, what keeps us going. How important is it to me that a boy from Roebourne who came into our first project in 1997, is now a diesel mechanic with a mining company? How important is it to me that his two children at the Karratha primary school, a school that is one fifth Aboriginal—topped years 1 and 3? That keeps me going for quite a while. That is the joy of knowing that change can be made, something that grows and is repeated and keeps going. But everyone in this room knows how long the tail is. Everyone knows how slow the progress is. And everyone knows that we have to do better.

Now, let me move to my third point. I have never known a time in Australia which was more open to success in Aboriginal Affairs. I've never known a time, (and I have been following this since the 1950s because the first Aboriginal person I met as a boy of 13, taught me that there was something really wrong) that was more promising. This is the best time because government is really committed. The state governments, which I actually think have performed abysmally in the main, through COAG are committed more than they have ever been before. The COAG arrangements show the commitment of all governments, both administratively and, very importantly, financially. I would give governments 10 out of 10 in 2009 for good intentions, and 10 out of 10 for money committed.

My worry is whether they can score better than two out of 10 for turning good intentions and money into what everyone here wants, progress on the ground. I really intended to dedicate what I had to say to Mick Adams. If you're not worn out, you'll remember Mick Adams was the first indigenous person to speak to you today. He said, "Aboriginal people's active involvement is central to success"—I don't quote him exactly, but that's what he said. And he said, "Governments are talking the talk but we're yet to see whether they're walking the walk." I thought Mick was right. And what really worried me about Mick was not just his cautionary words but his body language. Mick's not quite as old as I am but he's been around and he knows how hard it is to turn good intentions into real change.

We are going to hear shortly from the Katherine West Health Board, and I'm really thrilled about that because Katherine West has always been, to me, a bit of a beacon about governments trying to do it differently. And I don't want to pre-empt their story because it's a really good story about how, with imagination and with governments approaching things differently, maybe we can turn into reality what Mick talked about and what Terry Moran, the head of the Prime Minister's department, said in Melbourne just the other day in my presence. He said, after listing the COAG commitments, "I shall talk about the vital importance of engaging indigenous Australians in the strategy because we can be sure that, without their engagement, this enterprise will fail."



The Commonwealth and state governments have really worked on this, and the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery is, in my view, a really good document. I think it captures the learnings of the past and I invite you to have a look at it because it says so many things that I think you would agree with. It talks about Aboriginal Australians actually participating in services working with indigenous communities to improve indigenous health. It talks about economic and social participation. It talks about using existing community networks and decision-making processes as the basis for establishing legitimate indigenous community governance structures and decision making processes. It talks about establishing whole of government regionally-based operation centres supported by locally-based staff from agencies of the state, territory, and commonwealth governments. Regional operation centres will work across government with local indigenous people and other stakeholders to develop local implementation plans and ensure they are implemented in a timely and accountable way.

I would be reasonably confident that at least eight out of 10, if not 10 out of 10 of the people in this audience who have worked in remote Australia, would say, "Yeah, that all sounds—that's good stuff." My concern starts to arise when I get to the implementation plan because what you get is that bilateral plans, identified locations, milestones, performance benchmarks, and indicators are to be agreed within three months of signing the agreement. You see there's a political urgency here. The glory, and I say that meaning it—the glory of the apology—the long-overdue apology, has to be shown to be followed by real actions so—time is short for the bilateral plans. Then we're going to get baseline mapping agreed and the integrated service delivery mechanism is to be established within six months of the bilateral plans being signed.

I understand the good faith that is represented in all those parts of the agreement but I think they are not internally consistent with the professed need for Aboriginal engagement. You see, the lesson of the Katherine West Health Board is that the process of genuine engagement takes time. The process of capacity building takes time, and this record of the first four years of the Katherine West Health Board shows the impatience of government, because it wants to do the right thing tomorrow and not acknowledge that doing the right thing requires the engagement of Aboriginal people at a time which permits them to know what's going on, to understand what's going on, to really put their views into what's going to happen, and to be part of it all in a deep and genuine way.

I don't like sounding negative at a time when BHP, Rio Tinto, the Commonwealth Bank, Qantas, Curtin University, Princess Margaret Hospital, Commonwealth and State departments, are entering into Reconciliation Action Plans, when people are putting billions of dollars on the table; there is so much good stuff happening. But this is my worry. Will we allow the time and the local influence that is absolutely essential in remote Australia—the local influence of the workers, as well as the Aboriginal people—the non-Aboriginal workers as well—to shape things which will really make a difference? Wouldn't it be good if you could put the money in the bank until you got the engagement right? Deadlines about expenditure are the curse, in my view, of doing this properly. I know the Commonwealth and the States are wrestling with this issue of implementation because I don't just come and talk to conferences; I bash people's ears wherever I can find them, and I know they are working on this. But I believe that political timelines are an immense danger to doing this properly.

So what does that mean to this audience? I think you've got to be as tough as they were in Katherine West in fighting for what you know will work. And I'd invite you all to get this account of their story. (Something Special. The Inside Story of the Katherine West Health Board) It was published by the Aboriginal Studies Press of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. It's a nice case study of the guts that it requires to make things work and not just to be over-run by the demands, the political timetable of Brisbane, Darwin, Canberra, Perth, Adelaide, Sydney, because

those timetables have very little to do with your reality. And you have got to be really blunt about the impact of these changes made by remote control, which trip-wire you and make a difficult task, at times, seem impossible.

So ladies and gentleman, I guess—why do I come all this way from Perth? I come because I think you are important. I think what you do is fundamental because I don't like to think of Aboriginal children any differently from the way I think about my own grandchildren, and I don't like reading the Little Children Are Sacred report, and I don't like to think that we're not tackling Aboriginal health to the absolute best of our endeavours. And I think that you should have the courage of your convictions in your work. You have to make Aboriginal engagement real. You have to have the patience and dedication and humility to do that. And humility, as an ex-politician I have to concede, hasn't always been my own long suit. But if you do not do this in a respectful, humble, and committed way, then you know it won't work.

Read Tess Lea's "Bureaucrats and Bleeding Hearts: An Anthropological Study of the Territory Health Service". How do people behave when they do work which seems to be producing no results? To the people here, who wants to live in the land of the long white board, because that's what Tess describes—endless replanning—because what you're doing isn't working?

The last thing I want to say to you is that this requires a combination of things. You have to be really clear and good here, in your head. You have to be deeply committed here, in your heart. And you have to have incredible stamina. None of the work you do is a sprint. Everything you do is a long-distance race. And my plea to you would be, hang around long enough with the right combination of head, heart, and stamina to remove what I think is the worst feature of this wonderful country.

Presenter

The Hon Fred Chaney AO is Chair of Desert Knowledge Australia. Formerly a lawyer, Fred served as a Liberal Senator for WA (1974–90) and a Member of the House of Representatives (1990–93). He held various ministerial appointments in the Fraser Government, including Aboriginal Affairs. After leaving Parliament in 1993 he undertook research into Aboriginal affairs policy and administration as a Research Fellow at the University of WA. He was Chancellor of Murdoch University for eight years until early 2003 and retired as a deputy president of the National Native Title Tribunal in April 2007.