Aboriginal Labour and the Pastoral Industry in the Kimberley Division of Western Australia: 1960–1975

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This paper surveys the Kimberley pastoral (or livestock) industry – historically the economic mainstay and largest employer in this remote region of Western Australia – and its relationship with Aboriginal labour, utilizing empirical material, much of which is presented for the first time. Part of the analysis reviews the labour market and employment conditions that existed during the period 1960–1968, when a significant labour shortage occurred. However, in the Kimberley (as elsewhere), beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, unemployment grew rapidly. Reasons for the rapid growth in unemployment, of which Aboriginals constituted the greatest proportion, included, among other things, a global downturn in commodity prices for livestock products and especially beef in this case, concentration of ownership and increased capitalization in the livestock industry, and the decision to pay Aboriginal pastoral workers award rates. The period 1960–1975 graphically illustrates the changing nature of the Kimberley pastoral industry, as well as the repercussions of global dynamics for regional economies.

Keywords: Aboriginal, Australia, employment and unemployment, livestock industry

INTRODUCTION

The Aboriginal work force was probably the first and most seriously affected by the general economic recession. With approximately 40% of the total Aboriginal workforce directly involved in agricultural, pastoral and related activities . . . it is this sector which is most affected by reduced wool prices, drought and changed operating techniques . . . (Annual Report 1972: 17)
The Kimberley is an extensive and remote region in the far north of Western Australia. Between the 1880s and the late 1960s, the pastoral industry was the cornerstone of the regional economy. In the period up until the late 1960s, the industry was labour intensive. Throughout this era, the pastoral work force was comprised mostly of Aboriginal labour that was forcibly domiciled on pastoral stations (large landholdings), government reserves or church missions.

From the commencement of the Kimberley pastoral industry, large tracts of the most productive land were given over to white farmers, including livestock farmers. As an indication of the extent to which the pastoral industry had developed, by the end of the nineteenth century, sheep numbers in the West Kimberley had reached 232,000, while the cattle herd throughout the whole of the Kimberley was estimated at 205,000 head (Kimberley Regional Plan 1987: 65). During the period 1897–1968, State governments of various political persuasions assisted in providing much needed labour to these livestock enterprises by such measures as subsidizing the cost of maintaining Aboriginal labour on station properties, church missions and reserves; legally restricting the movement of Aboriginal people; and providing training and education. As the Secretary of the Pastoralists Association argued in 1927: ‘The aboriginal is a valuable adjunct to the pastoral industry, and without him . . . it would be impossible to carry on

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1 In 1948 the Department of Native Welfare’s ‘strong, centralistic administration’ was altered and Western Australia was divided into six main administrative divisions, including the Northern (Kimberley), North West, North Central, Eastern, Central and Southern. Divisions were further subdivided into districts; in the Kimberley these districts were Derby, Wyndham, Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing and Broome (see Figure 1) (Commissioner of Native Welfare, Annual Report 1972: 8).

2 In 1967, according to the Commissioner of Native Welfare, in the Kimberley division approximately 1700 Aboriginal men and women were engaged in pastoral and related employment (Annual Report 1967: 66). Types of employment included stockmen, gardeners, horse handlers, rouseabouts, yardmen and kitchen staff, usually residing (with their families) on their place of employment. However, by 1972 the number of Aboriginals employed in the pastoral industry had fallen to less than 650, and these were mainly contractors and seasonal employees now living offsite in towns or regional centres (Annual Report 1972: 41). As Bill Bunbury has noted, ‘The pastoral industry in which Aboriginal people worked has been through a period of great change. In the last few decades the helicopter and the motorbike have largely replaced the mustering camp and the stockhorse. Pastoralism itself has been in decline due to poor prices and sometimes the exhaustion of the land. Where pastoralism is successful now it is run on different lines. The work is largely mechanised’ (Bunbury 2002: 165).

3 At the 1966 census, the Aboriginal population of the Kimberley comprised 5905 persons out of a total population of 7644 (or about 77 per cent), whereas across Western Australia Aboriginal people accounted for approximately 2.2 per cent of total population (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1971: 137, 140).

4 By 1967 a total of 1506 Aboriginal children were recorded as receiving formal education at twenty-two schools, both church and state, throughout the Kimberley. A further 115 children attended seven pre-school centres. Technical training continued with particular emphasis on ‘practical (agricultural) work’ that, according to the Department, ‘will prove useful in future employment’. The training involved ‘classes in . . . cooking, poultry raising, gardening, fencing, motor mechanics, welding, windmill construction and painting’. Importantly for the Department, all of these projects were effectively ‘training the pupils in the practical use of tools and mechanical equipment which in turn will make more useful employees, especially those who return to pastoral properties. This will further justify the claim of station employees for award wages’ (Annual Report 1967: 12–13).
Figure 1. The Kimberley division
under conditions as they exist . . . Frankly until their profit and loss (accounts) warrant it, pastoralists think there should be no cash payment to or on behalf of aboriginals employed by them. Indeed, low-cost Aboriginal labour – either paid in truck or at wages well below award rates – is what maintained pastoral station profit margins up until the late 1960s.

However, in the Kimberley division in the late 1960s and early 1970s (hence coinciding with the end of the post-war global long boom), mass unemployment occurred 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 (1968) to Aboriginal workers. Importantly, the effects of the end of the global long boom for rural industries employing Aboriginal labour, such as the livestock industry, combined cost inflation with the emergence of overproduction in many international commodity markets. To ensure even short-term viability of pastoral stations, a rapid restructuring in production methods was required. One immediate effect of this restructuring was the expulsion of Aboriginal labour (and their families) from pastoral stations, and the emergence of surplus labour in rural towns and centres across the Kimberley, with attendant social problems.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section considers the labour market and working conditions in the Kimberley for Aboriginal labour during the period 1960–8; the second section investigates the pastoral industry (1968–75) and the consequences of global dynamics for Aboriginal employment, as well as the process of increasing capitalization and concentration; and the third charts the rural to urban migration of unemployed Aboriginals and the subsequent rise in impoverishment, crime and social disorder.


There is marked over-employment in this district, and the Field Officer is in the happy position of having more jobs available than natives to fill them

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5 Memo: The Secretary, Pastoralists Association of North and Central Australia. 1 June 1927.
6 In late 1968, the introduction of the Cattle Industry Pastoral Award was implemented, which guaranteed equal wages for Aboriginal pastoral labour in the livestock industry. Hitherto Aboriginal labour had been paid at lower rates than white labour. The Department reported that in ‘September 1967 a varying order to the Pastoral Industry Award 1965 was handed down by the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, a major provision being for the employment of Aborigines under award conditions. To assist in the readjustment of the industry in Western Australia, a “phasing in” period of 15 months was written into the award making it operative in other than the South West Land Division, in respect of . . . Aborigines, from 1st December 1968’. (Annual Report 1968: 13).
7 Prior to the late 1960s, most Aboriginal people in the Kimberley resided on remote pastoral stations, missions or reserves. However, beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, for reasons discussed below, there was a mass migration of people into semi-urban centres and towns both inside and outside of the Kimberley division.
8 The 1962 Annual Report outlined the ‘important’ duties one of its Offices in the Kimberley division was undertaking during this period of full employment. ‘The District Office functions as a very effective Labour Exchange and in future it is intended to keep an accurate record of jobs found’ (Annual Report 1962: 33).
– this results in a firm policy of guiding the workers to the stations that provide the best conditions and amenities. (Annual Report 1962: 34)

In Western Australia, between 1960 and 1968, due to a growing labour shortage, Aboriginal labour was required in ever increasing numbers. This was especially the case in agricultural and livestock regions such as the Kimberley. For example, in 1962 the Department of Native Welfare reported that in the Kimberley district of Broome: ‘Wages and general conditions of employment show a gradual improvement. The average minimum wage being paid is in the vicinity of £6 per week with the more skilled worker demanding and receiving the basic wage or better . . . at the present time the native is more favourably regarded as an employee than for many years past’ (Annual Report 1962: 34).

Furthermore, according to the Department, in the early 1960s the ‘traditional industries’ of the Kimberley were still providing the ‘greatest employment opportunities for native labourers’. At this time, the vast majority of Aboriginal labour was ‘employed on cattle and sheep stations but running a clear second at this stage’, more than at any time before, was the ‘employment of natives in towns. So great (was) the demand from this quarter that the stations (began to) lose more and more each year’ (Annual Report 1960: 35). (See Appendix A for the proportion of workers in each industry.)

During the 1960s, as a result of severe labour shortages and the continuing movement to towns, Aboriginal labour was still forcibly sequestered on pastoral stations and missions. For example, in 1961 the Western Australian Police Commissioner, J.M. O’Brien, responding to complaints from the Pastoralists’ Association about Aboriginal people leaving their designated place of work, pointed out: ‘My District Inspector at Broome reports that vagrancy laws are applied to natives at various times in Northern towns, by police throughout the district, with the consent of and by arrangement with the local Native Welfare Officer. Discretion is naturally exercised in applying this law in Northern areas’.9 This was done in order to return itinerant ‘natives’ to their pastoral or mission settlements.

From the early 1960s, development in the Kimberley was so rapid that the Commissioner of Native Welfare could make this bold assertion:

There is no doubt that natives will always fit the pattern of economic life in the remote area and the new skills imparted and old skills improved natives will never want for employment here (my emphasis). Wages are always improving and must continue to improve due now mainly to the shortage of labour but also the vastly more educated and semi-skilled natives entering employment. (Annual Report 1960: 35)

So buoyant was the labour market that the Commissioner in his 1962 Annual Report confidently wrote: ‘It can be seen that there is no unemployment “bogy”

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9 J.M. O’Brien (Commissioner of Police), Letter to the Secretary, Western Australian Pastoralists’ Association, Perth, 23 November 1961.
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(my emphasis) in the (Kimberley) district’ of Halls Creek (Annual Report 1962: 34). The following year’s Annual Report also described a continuing full employment situation for the Kimberley. District Officer Stevens observed that:

Derby and the surrounding district is developing rapidly and combined with this the higher standard of education of the younger generation of native people has opened up a number of new avenues of employment which has previously been limited to station work and general labouring. Many men are working with Government departments such as the Public Works Department, Main Roads Department, Harbour and Lights etc. and earning good money while others have positions as mechanics, truck drivers, lugger crews with private businessmen and are being paid award rates or more. This healthy situation is revealed also by the fact that many stations are having trouble finding employees as the people come into Derby to better paying jobs. Because of this some stations are being forced to implement improvements and higher wages to attract staff. All willing and efficient domestics are in constant employment; in fact, at present there are more positions available than girls to fill the vacancies. (Annual Report 1963: 33)

In 1963, Assistant Superintendent Brennan described employment conditions in Wyndham thus: ‘... there is full employment in the District; unskilled labouring work is available in Wyndham and Kununurra at the award rates and usually with paid overtime; stock work and lighter duties such as gardening, handyman etc., is available on the cattle stations. Some difficulty has been experienced in keeping the men residing in town at work’ (Annual Report 1963: 34). The labour shortage in the Kimberley was becoming so critical that ‘in some instances police pressure was necessary to oblige a few individuals to accept jobs and cease to be a burden to their friends’. Further, ‘It is usual for the police in these cases to deliver an ultimatum – accept one of the jobs offering or face a charge of being idle and disorderly’ (Annual Report 1963: 34). The police pressure, Brennan stated, ‘usually has the desired effect’ and ‘it is to the natives’ ultimate benefit to be in employment’. He continued: ‘Fortunately, most family men in Wyndham are in steady employment, in fact they earn good wages – well above the basic rate’ (Annual Report 1963: 34).

Nevertheless, in 1964 the Commissioner sounded a prescient warning: ‘Economically, Western Australia is prospering and there is little unemployment, even among unskilled workers. However, the latter will be the first to feel the effects of any recession and, unfortunately, too many natives remain in this category’ (Annual Report 1964: 13). For the Commissioner and his Department,

A higher standard of education . . . (was) seen, as being the best long-term solution to this problem and natives, both children and adults . . . (were) encouraged and assisted to this end. Generous scholarships and bursaries . . . (were) awarded to children, shearing and mulesing schools . . . (were) arranged for men and the adult education scheme . . . embarked on including
instruction in special skills (which it was believed) would enhance earning power. (Annual Report 1964: 13)\textsuperscript{10}

The development of the Kimberley division in the early 1960s included rapidly developing ‘new industries’, such as the ‘rice projects at Camballin (near Derby) and Kununurra (near Wyndham), new dams at Uralla Creek, Diamond Gorge and the Ord River Project’ that were all ‘proving lucrative sources of employment for natives’ (Annual Report 1960: 35). And, by the mid-1960s, there was the construction of ‘new meatworks and deep water jetty at Broome, new port facilities and investigation of tidal power at Derby, long-term irrigation potential of the mighty Ord and Fitzroy Rivers, (and) greatly intensified mineral searches’ (Annual Report 1964: 16). The profusion of development projects, underpinned by State and Federal government expenditure, required increasing amounts of labour. The ‘demand for reliable labour’ was so great that the Commissioner was convinced that it would continue to expand ‘for many years as the tempo of these projects increases’ (Annual Report 1964: 16). The most important aspect, for the Commissioner and his Department, was to be ‘able to have trained native people ready to meet vacancies as they occur’. The Department argued: ‘Adequate education . . . is a must for the young people of today to prepare them for the future’ (Annual Report 1964: 16).

In 1966, labour shortages in the Kimberley reached such a level that cotton farmers at Kununurra ‘went to the extent of importing native labour from outside the State’ (Annual Report 1966: 10). This predicament, according to the Department, did not affect the ‘local employment situation in any way and the position for the future appears very promising’. The Department also assumed that, in the ‘event of the pastoral award coming into force, a vast unemployment situation is not anticipated as it is felt that many employment avenues outside the pastoral industry will be open to native workers’ (Annual Report 1966: 10). The Department’s optimism about future employment potential was of course premised on the continuation of the global long boom, and the ongoing pro-development policies of the State and Federal governments.

Throughout 1967, full employment in the Kimberley remained, and was characterized by ‘demand far outstripping supply’. The Department found that ‘many smaller properties . . . (were) desperate for labour’ and that ‘these stations were experiencing extreme difficulty in obtaining workers’. Nevertheless, the ‘payment of the basic wage by Government and private concerns in towns . . . caused some pastoral properties to make slight increases (in wages) and this continued incentive plus the need for good employees’, it was thought, would ‘induce others to provide similar facilities’ (Annual Report 1967: 14). The 1968 Annual Report described the Kimberley pastoral industry as still the largest single employer of Aboriginal labour. Yet working conditions continued to vary considerably throughout the region and it was observed that, ‘increasing preference is being given (by Aboriginal labour) for alternative employment offering award conditions’ (Annual Report 1968: 13).

\textsuperscript{10} Mulesing is the surgical removal of skin in the breech of ewes to prevent fly strike.
By the late 1960s, however, global forces that had sustained the postwar long boom were already abating, and for the Kimberley division this decline would lead to a very dramatic transformation in economic conditions, especially those experienced by Aboriginals. The Kimberley pastoral industry, hitherto the largest employer of Aboriginal labour, was to be particularly affected.

END OF AN ERA. THE KIMBERLEY PASTORAL INDUSTRY: 1968–75

... with poor economic conditions and heavy domestic supplies of beef in the mid 1970s many of the major importing countries imposed quantitative limitations on their beef imports. Major beef exporting countries such as Australia, were hard hit. (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1980: 344)

The dramatic reduction in Aboriginal pastoral employment beginning in the late 1960s was driven to a large degree by changes in the long-term structure of the pastoral industry, with increases in capitalization and expansion of corporate entities, coupled with decreasing rates of viability and profitability. In other words, the ongoing process of the concentration of ownership was expedited by the deteriorating economic situation. The Australian Bureau of Statistics depicted the industry, as it existed in the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s, as being ‘associated with low beef prices, poor seasonal conditions and producer liquidity pressure’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1980: 344).

The Kimberley Pastoral Industry Inquiry (1983), chaired by Brian Jennings, and set up by the Western Australian Burke Labor government to investigate the viability of the industry, noted the ‘apparently relatively stable economic climate’ of the Kimberley during the 1950s and 1960s came to a close in the early 1970s when the ‘full effect of the beef slump’ had become obvious (Jennings 1983: 18). The decline in beef prices – culminating in 1974 when beef reached its lowest price in over two decades – was attributed to worldwide overproduction, especially in Europe. ‘As a result prices collapsed on world export markets and the slump in Australia’s beef industry was severe’ (Jennings 1983: 57). Importantly, ‘(b)eer from cattle slaughtered at Wyndham, Broome and Derby in the Kimberley Division (was) principally for export’ (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1977: 377–8).

The Pastoral Industry Inquiry also recognized that a major transformation of the industry was occurring, which included the growing concentration of the ownership of pastoral leases and businesses in the hands of what it termed 11

106,294 Kimberley cattle were sent to market in 1973; 60,548 in 1974 and 47,249 in 1975 – a reduction of over 50 per cent in three years (Pastoral Industry Review Committee 1979: 29).

According to the Pastoral Industry Inquiry, about 75 per cent of the meat from northern export abattoirs went to the North American market as hamburger mince. The balance of export production was spread between nine other major offshore markets (Jennings 1983: 54). In other words, Kimberley beef prices were, in the 1970s and later, very dependent on offshore markets.

In 1976, the ‘Kimberley Statistical Division carried 741,358 head of cattle for meat production, or 29.8 per cent of the State total’ (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1977: 377–8).

11 Even in 1966 absentee owners controlled more than 70 per cent of Kimberley cattle stations, the four major absentee groups included Vestey’s, Hookers, Peel River and Naughtons (The West Australian, 25 May 1966).

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14 In 1976, the 'Kimberley Statistical Division carried 741,358 head of cattle for meat production, or 29.8 per cent of the State total' (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1977: 377–8).
The Inquiry also noted the increasing ownership of pastoral enterprises by Aboriginal ‘owner-operators’ (Jennings 1983: 18).

Granting of the Pastoral Award

I’m afraid that we’re now realising . . . that the Aboriginal is not as important and not as essential to the pastoral industry up here (in the Kimberley) as we in the past have believed . . . and when the award wage comes in (1968) . . . you’re going to see (unemployment) in excess of 50 per cent, almost immediately. (Peter Morris, pastoral manager for Vestey’s Pastoral Company, cited in Bunbury 2002: 105)

In 1968 compulsory award wages were introduced into the pastoral industry – previously Aboriginal pastoral workers had been paid at rates below those paid to white workers. Combined with the slump in international beef prices, the worsening unemployment situation and the exodus of rural labour can be immediately attributed to the introduction of pastoral award wages to Aboriginal labour.

A major topic of conjecture and concern has been the introduction into the industry of the application of the Federal Pastoral Award to the employment of natives on station properties and its effects on rural communities. It was felt in many quarters that this would be responsible for the movement of large numbers of natives from the stations into towns and, indeed, it appeared that this was so during the first three months after the application of the Award in December 1968.16

In many ways the introduction of the Pastoral Award symbolized the beginning of the end of the ‘golden age’ of Aboriginal employment in the Kimberley pastoral industry (coinciding with the winding down of the global long boom).17 The decision to implement the Award meant that station owners could justifiably evict their Aboriginal tenants on the grounds that it was too expensive to pay

15 During the difficult economic times after 1968, corporate entities in the pastoral industry took advantage of their larger economies of scale and corresponding ability to further reduce wage costs to protect their profit margins.
16 Letter to the Commissioner of Native Welfare from K.T. Johnson, Superintendent Northern Division, Department of Native Welfare. 27 June 1969.
17 Significantly, for the Kimberley pastoral industry, in the early 1950s the numbers of cattle in northern pastoral areas constituted 70 per cent of the total Western Australian herd, whereas by 1968 this figure had fallen to 38 per cent, in 1975 to 35 per cent and to less than 30 per cent in 1977 (Pastoral Industry Review Committee 1979: 29).
wages to all inhabitants of their properties. In effect, the award enabled livestock enterprises to reduce significantly their costs in increasingly difficult economic conditions. As one Kimberley station-owner commented: ‘The stores . . . used to comprise about 4 tons of flour, 2 tons of sugar, several tons of tinned goods, a couple of bales of blankets for the wet season, and much clothing . . . Now the order could be much smaller and a lot of money saved’ (Schubert 1992: 88). Thereafter, rather than assume the burden of indirect wages themselves in an unfavourable economic climate, enterprises successfully transferred the costs of maintaining a surplus population to the public sector, namely the Commonwealth, while paying award wages to those Aboriginal workers they retained. According to one account, ‘(i)t was no accident’ that the Federal parliamentary leader of the Country Party, Jack McEwen, ‘himself took the initiative in formulating the new policy’, in an effort to reduce labour costs to an absolute minimum on pastoral stations and farms (Hartwig 1978: 136).

Station owners, battling falling commodity prices and decreasing rates of profit from the late 1960s, were driven even more emphatically to restructure production. Now with the aid of new techniques, such as aerial mustering and the use of motorbikes, pastoral stations need only employ contractors during busy times. As the Western Australian Minister for Native Welfare, E.M. Lewis, pointed out: ‘I understand that generally pastoralists are applying the award rates to Aboriginal employees. It is possible that the cattle industry will become a purely seasonal source of employment and there could be a recession when the next wet [or rainy season, from December to March in Northern Australia] arrives’. The results of a report undertaken by the Commonwealth Department of Labour and National Service in 1969 found that in Halls Creek, for example:

There is an Aboriginal population of approximately 400 of which 130 are under the age of 15 years (During the wet season this builds up to over 600). A number of these were retrenched from neighbouring stations. It appears that the present policy of the pastoralists in the area is to reduce the numbers permanently employed and to engage contractors for mustering and yard building.

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18 At the time of the introduction of equal wages, Schubert was the proprietor of Louisa Downs Pastoral Station in the East Kimberley.
20 Report on visit to Aboriginal communities, Missions and Pastoral Stations in northern part of Port Hedland DEO area. P.J. Bright (Clerk) Aboriginal employment. 23 September 1969. The report followed a recommendation by the Interdepartmental Committee in its 1968 Cabinet Submission ‘that the Department of Labour and National Service, in consultation with the Council and Office of Aboriginal Affairs where appropriate,
(a) estimate the size and composition of the Aboriginal workforce and population of working age and its future growth;
(b) survey employment opportunities for Aboriginals and methods of increasing opportunities;
(c) investigate methods of providing incentives and employment training for Aboriginals; with a view to
(d) providing incentives and training for employment;
(e) increasing employment opportunities, including migratory, seasonal and contract employment opportunities;
(f) placing Aboriginals in employment in urban and country areas.’
Table 2. Kimberley Division. Agricultural and pastoral Aboriginal employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>1969(a)</th>
<th>1972(b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wyndham</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halls Creek</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broome</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1067</td>
<td>609</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As Dr H.C. Coombs, a senior government advisor, economist and bureaucrat, observed:

The accommodation reached between Aboriginals and the pastoralists was shattered by declining viability and structural change in the pastoral industry, coinciding with legislative change requiring the compulsory payment of award wages... Again, Aborigines were forced to build up new communities (my emphasis) and had to adjust to life as dependents of government, given the lack of other sources. (Coombs 1989: 1–2)  

Table 2 highlights the decline in pastoral and agricultural employment for Aboriginal workers in the Kimberley division between 1969 and 1972, amounting to 43 per cent.

THE PASSING OF THE ‘GOLDEN AGE’ OF FULL EMPLOYMENT

It is a reasonable hypothesis that the population is going to increase in numbers at the (Kimberley) towns... without the ability of the towns to absorb the population in the normal economic stream.  

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ‘golden age’ of full employment and rising living standards for the working population in the Kimberley, and especially Aboriginal labour, came to a close as the postwar global long boom was unravelling. Unemployment, poverty and social dislocation intensified for more Aboriginal people. In the Kimberley, this became most apparent once large numbers of unemployed Aboriginals began to move into regional towns and centres such as Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Derby, Kununurra and others.

21 Coombs was a well-known banker and economist with a special interest in Aboriginal affairs. He was personal advisor to seven Australian Prime Ministers, and both major political parties accepted his counsel.

Kim Beazley Senior, later Federal Minister for Education in the Whitlam Labor government (1972–5), explicitly recognized the terms of the shift in Aboriginal conditions and the ‘new’ parameters for government policy in 1967:

The Aboriginal population at present is an underprivileged, underfed, underpaid, untrained labour force, increasing in numbers and not closely considered. While we enthuse about the development of our natural resources we make no real effort to draw this force into the process of development. We are allowing social dynamite to accumulate.23


Work opportunities in some areas (particularly Derby, Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing and Wyndham), both of a casual and permanent nature, are limited and inadequate in relation to the Aboriginal workforce. In addition, there does not appear to be obvious viable projects that would provide any significant future employment opportunities . . .25

It is suspected that the cumulative effect of the introduction of the Pastoral Industry Award and the general rural recession is adversely affecting employment of Aborigines in these areas (the Kimberley). Unless adequate data collating schemes are established serious situations could develop unexpectedly . . .26

In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, then, there was a serious decline in Aboriginal rural employment, especially in regions such as the Kimberley, and an accelerated migration of Aboriginal labour to urban centres that were ‘providing more opportunity for employment in industrial and other activities’ (Annual Report 1969: 13). The Native Welfare Department envisaged that the shift to a more seasonal pattern of employment would increase in response to the economic difficulties now confronting the livestock industry in the Kimberley. The Department also predicted that one major consequence of the economic downturn would be the ‘impetus given to mustering by contract’; in other words, pastoral contractors would now perform the bulk of the work historically done by a labour force resident on pastoral properties (Annual Report 1969: 13).

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ‘combination of thousands of people leaving the stations, missions closing, universal availability of social security

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24 ‘None who knows the Kimberley could forget the despair of the refugee camps ringing the region’s towns – home for years to thousands of Aboriginal pastoral workers and their families kicked off the cattle stations after the introduction of equal wages’. Peter Yu (former executive director of the Kimberley Land Council) The Weekend Australian, 15–16 September 2001.
25 Report on visit to Aboriginal communities, Missions and Pastoral Stations in northern part of Port Hedland DEO Area. P.J. Bright (Clerk) Aboriginal employment. 23 September 1969.
payments, no alcohol restrictions, all in a few short years, was shattering’ (Yu 1994: 25).\textsuperscript{27} For instance, in February 1969 a ‘thorough’ census of people in Fitzroy Crossing alone found ‘133 displaced persons as a direct or indirect result of implications of the Pastoral Award’\textsuperscript{28}. Furthermore, the population of Halls Creek, Wyndham and Derby had ‘almost doubled over night’. ‘Turkey Creek . . . was suddenly transformed into a refugee camp of more than 300 people’ (Yu 1994: 26).\textsuperscript{29}

Only ten months after the Department’s ‘thorough’ census of people in Fitzroy Crossing, in a letter to the Minister for Native Welfare, E.H. Lewis, of 14 December 1969, the Commissioner of Native Welfare, F.E. Gare, found that the population had increased further:

The current situation at Fitzroy Crossing is that there are 210 men, women and children recently arrived there from Christmas Creek and Cherabun Stations . . . these people are camping on the bank of the Fitzroy River. All present indications are that the working men in this group will not be re-hired by any of the Emmanuel Brothers’ stations. The Superintendent, Northern Division, has some hope that a number of the men can be found employment on stations nearer Derby, but this is by no means certain . . . At this stage I am not able to suggest any immediate viable economic activity for aboriginals who have lost their positions on pastoral properties. With the exception of the 2,027 acres on which the UAM Fitzroy Crossing Mission is located, this Department holds no land in the area and it will not be a simple matter to create employment outside the normal economy there.\textsuperscript{30}

The severe overcrowding of reserves and facilities continued in most areas of the Kimberley, especially at Wyndham and Halls Creek. At Wyndham, the Commissioner reported that, ‘an attempt to find an additional reserve site (had) not been successful and this matter is becoming very protracted’. At Halls Creek ‘approval (had) been received for an extension to the existing reserve’ (Annual Report 1971: 10). Additionally:

Aboriginal families have continued to seek permanent accommodation in the towns, which service the main pastoral properties, and station populations have undergone a general reduction. Aboriginal men in the pastoral industry are much more mobile than hitherto and, as station work increasingly becomes more seasonal and its demand for labour (declines), this trend is likely to continue. (Annual Report 1971: 12)

\textsuperscript{27} Missions closed included the United Aborigines Missions: Sunday Island, Fitzroy Crossing, Mowanjum and Forrest River. The Catholic missions collapsed during this period as well.


\textsuperscript{29} By 1975, the population of Fitzroy Crossing had ‘swelled to over 2,000’ (Yu 1994: 26).

\textsuperscript{30} Letter to the Minister for Native Welfare, Lewis, from the Commissioner of Native Welfare, Gare, 14 December 1969.
Indicative of the concern of the Federal government about increasing unemployment in the Kimberley was a letter written by the Minister-in-charge of Aboriginal Affairs, W.C. Wentworth, on 5 February 1969.

I have been told that, whether or not as the result of recent wages decisions [my emphasis] there is likely to be some unemployment among Aboriginals in the pastoral industry in the northern part of Western Australia, and that they and their families may lose accommodation on pastoral properties. In particular, I am told that some twenty families, about 120 persons in all, have been sent off Christmas Creek by Mr. Emmanuel . . . If it is desired to develop any property (especially property in reserves) for the benefit of Aboriginals consideration should be given to providing the necessary funds . . . I can assure you that the Commonwealth realises the difficulties which are not confined to one State, and indeed which exist within the Commonwealth’s own territories. We will continue to co-operate with you in your endeavours to overcome your problems in Western Australia. Please do not hesitate to let me know any way in which you think we can help.31

It was calculated by the Department that in 1968 only 26.8 per cent of the male Aboriginal work force was engaged in the agricultural industry, as compared with 30.7 per cent five years previous. By 1969, across Western Australia as a whole, rural employment accounted for only 20.4 per cent (a reduction of over 10 per cent in only six years), while there was a corresponding increase in the overall percentage of Aboriginal industrial workers – from 23.8 per cent in 1968 to 29 per cent in 1969 (Annual Report 1969: 13). The Commissioner, in his Annual Report, inquired as to whether this ‘drift from the casual and seasonal employment of the rural areas to centres where regular unskilled and semi-skilled work is available will continue’ (Annual Report 1969: 13). The ongoing labour migration, the Department believed, signalled a ‘growing dissatisfaction with the seasonal type of work at present available for Aboriginals in rural areas, with its consequent depressed family economy’ (Annual Report 1969: 13).

In 1970 the Commissioner acknowledged that the ‘more seasonal form of employment and the development of contract mustering . . . appears now to be the future pattern of employment in this industry’ and observed that the ‘immediate effects of this change have been the rapid urbanisation of many women and children in towns, while their menfolk move from job to job’ (Annual Report 1970: 13).

The Department explained the deterioration in Aboriginal rural employment throughout Western Australia by the effects of the global economic slump exacerbated by drought conditions:

The decreasing influence of agriculture as a major source of employment for Aboriginals was heightened during the year by the widespread drought

In the last report it was observed that from providing employment for 30.7% of the male Aboriginal workforce, five years earlier, rural industry had dropped to only 20.4% in 1969. This trend has continued to the point where agricultural, farming and related workers constitute only 13.4% of the male Aboriginal workforce. While admittedly inconclusive, these figures are not inconsistent with population movements from areas predominantly rural to those with a secondary industry bias. (Annual Report 1970: 13)

As a consequence of diminishing employment opportunities in rural areas, increased numbers of people searched for jobs in urban centres. ‘(A) growing preference for industrial employment is becoming more apparent. Recent years have seen a consistent increase in the proportion of the Aboriginal male workforce employed in industry. Undoubtedly (there are) many factors . . . associated with the change including changing social pressures . . . and the need for stable rather than seasonal employment’ (Annual Report 1970: 13).

It was estimated that by the end of the 1960s more than 93 per cent of the indigenous population still lived and worked in agricultural and pastoral areas (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1971: 140). In 1971, the Aboriginal exodus from rural to urban locations throughout Western Australia accelerated, and its repercussions became even more obvious and critical. ‘The continued agricultural recession has meant a severe reduction in employment opportunities in country areas and this has had a particularly bad effect on Aboriginal country populations and increased the overall movement towards the city in a search for more stable employment’ (Annual Report 1971: 7). In the Kimberley, in particular, the Commissioner confirmed, ‘many families have moved from station properties to the nearest towns, overcrowding reserves and (are) placing a strain on available accommodation. The results of these upheavals in long established socio-economic patterns are manifested in ways which are distressing’ (Annual Report 1971: 7).

Growing Social Unrest

In 1969 ‘it was . . . reported in the local newspaper(s) that there were signs of unrest and dissatisfaction among aboriginals . . .’.32 The Pastoralists and Graziers Association was also well aware of the consequences of an environment of social discontent. In a 1969 West Australian newspaper, the (absentee owner) E.H. Lee-Steere, later Lord Mayor of Perth, was reported as saying:

The government was showing an appreciation of the problems that had arisen with the introduction of the Pastoral Industry Award for aboriginal workers. Mr. E.H. Lee-Steere, the president of the Pastoralists and Graziers Association said . . . The Association was concerned about the drift of

aboriginals into towns when they could not be employed under the award on stations. Mr. Lee-Steere said the specifically prepared native compound at Fitzroy Crossing was a good start on the State Government’s part. It was hoped that Native Welfare Minister Lewis’s plan for vocational training in the North West was brought into effect as soon as possible.33

Symptomatic of the spiralling Aboriginal unemployment from the late 1960s was the related rapid growth in crime and social unrest. The dramatic rise in crime is emphasized by the substantial increase in the number of Aboriginal convictions, especially those cases involving ‘offences against property’. Between 1967 and 1969, across the whole of Western Australia, convictions of Aboriginals for ‘offences against property’ increased from 1326 to 2129, over 60 per cent in just three years (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1971: 140).34 And by ‘1973 reports of racial tension were increasing in frequency’. In December 1974, for example, the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator J.L. Cavanagh, was informed that in the regional town of Wiluna an ‘unofficial curfew was imposed on Aborigines who constituted over 400 of the town’s 500 inhabitants, mainly because of problems of liquor and violence’. Also indicative of increasing social tensions was a violent encounter that took place (on 5 January 1974) between a number of police and a large party of unemployed Aborigines at the remote centre of Skull Creek, north of Kalgoorlie (Bolton 1981: 173).

To give an indication of the rate of increase in the number of criminal offences committed in the Kimberley, in 1961 the Commissioner of Native Welfare reported that in the Broome region, ‘no serious cases of crime occurred in the native community . . . whilst no figures are yet to hand, it is felt sure that the number of court cases of natives during 1960/61 was less than the previous year’ (Annual Report 1961: 59). For the Halls Creek district it was recorded that ‘the native population’ was ‘remarkably law-abiding’ and, what is more, ‘during the year (1961) there has not been one native case before the Court of theft or interfering with property’ (Annual Report 1961: 60).35

Table 3 outlines the increase in reported Aboriginal crime across Western Australia during the years 1967–9 (see Appendix C for the proportion of the Western Australian Aboriginal population residing in the Kimberley).

CONCLUSION

The pastoral industry, from its inception in the 1880s until the late 1960s, was the backbone of the regional economy of the Kimberley, and by far its largest

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34 According to the 1966 census, 32.02 per cent of the Western Australian Aboriginal population lived in the Kimberley (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1971: 140).
35 In the 1961 Annual Report, the Commissioner’s concluding remark on the section dealing with Aboriginal crime for the Kimberley division was that ‘the ratio of offences to population is roughly the same as for whites and would be lower except for discriminatory legislation against natives’ (Annual Report 1961: 60).
Tony Smith

During the period 1960–8, the labour market, of which Aboriginal labour was the most significant element, was characterized by full (or ‘over’) employment and improved rates of pay and conditions. The extended postwar long boom and the pro-development policies of State and Federal governments underpinned this ‘golden age’ of employment.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, the era of full employment and rising living standards for working people living in the Kimberley came to a halt when beef commodity prices collapsed. The subsequent depressed economic environment had a devastating impact on the viability of the pastoral industry and its Aboriginal workforce. As a result, growing unemployment, poverty and social dislocation meant a search for more reliable employment, typically in more urban settings. In the Kimberley, the social upheaval was most apparent once Aboriginal labour began to move in large numbers from previous places of employment and abode into regional towns and centres including Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Derby, Kununurra, Wyndham and others. The effects of global dynamics on regional economies, such as the Kimberley, and especially its Aboriginal inhabitants, continue to be pervasive and profound.

APPENDIX A

Aboriginal employment in the Kimberley 1967

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1967</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wyndham</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>477</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halls Creek</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>559</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>880</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broome</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>943</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>969</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key to employment:
1. Professional.
2. Clerical and commercial.

Table 3. Offences by Aboriginales in Western Australia – number of convictions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offence</th>
<th>1967</th>
<th>1968</th>
<th>1969</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offences against the person</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offences against property</td>
<td>1326</td>
<td>1857</td>
<td>2129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offences against good order</td>
<td>7476</td>
<td>7498</td>
<td>7917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other offences (including breach of Native Welfare Act and Liquor Laws)</td>
<td>1296</td>
<td>1672</td>
<td>2427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10,415</td>
<td>11,409</td>
<td>12,913</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Tradesmen/skilled occupations – dressmaking, photograph tinting, yandying etc.
4. Rural workers (male) – farm employees, shearsers, fencing and clearing contractors.
Unskilled occupations (female) – fruit picking, grass seeds etc.
5. (a) Female domestic workers (656 of total) – urban, agricultural and pastoral. (b)
Industrial workers (287 of total) – factory hands, meat workers, wharf labourers,
railway fitters, road workers, truck drivers etc.
6. Mining industry.
7. Pastoral industry.
8. Pearling and fishing industry.


APPENDIX B
Kimberley Aboriginal population as at 30 June 1959

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Full bloods (sic)</th>
<th>Other bloods (sic)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broome</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Kimberley</td>
<td>654</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>2041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Kimberley</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>1849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1809</td>
<td>764</td>
<td>4860</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


APPENDIX C
Aboriginal population of Western Australia as at 30 June 1972

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Aborigines</th>
<th>Part-Aborigines</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern (Kimberley) – Derby</td>
<td>1291</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>1662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyndham</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halls Creek</td>
<td>1158</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>1539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzroy Crossing</td>
<td>943</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broome</td>
<td>764</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>1401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4679</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>6618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>4679</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>6618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>2231</td>
<td>2042</td>
<td>4273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central</td>
<td>845</td>
<td>2258</td>
<td>3103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>1529</td>
<td>1238</td>
<td>2767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>5679</td>
<td>5739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>2844</td>
<td>2914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall totals</td>
<td>9414</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>25,414</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual Report (1972: 39). “The . . . figures are based on all records and
information available, but are still, of necessity, near approximations only of those
persons in Western Australia who possess more than one quarter Aboriginal blood. Variations from previously published figures are due, in the main, to changes in administrative district boundaries and the movement of Aborigines’ (*Annual Report 1972*: 39).

**REFERENCES**


