To whom it may concern,
I would have liked to have written something a bit longer but I only found out about this enquiry late last night, by looking at the ABC's website.
I have worked in several aboriginal communities for the past eighteen years, at least one of which – Kiwirrkura – is among the most remote communities in Australia. It concerns me that the thinking prevalent among many who live outside those parts of the country inhabited by traditional indigenous people is that things have gotten better since 1945. At least among the Western Desert people, with whom I work, this is a dubious proposition. Most Western Desert people only came permanently into settlements in the 1950s, some time after the zone offset was established in tax law. Here in Papunya the last group came in from their nomadic lifestyle in 1966. At Kintore the last group came in in 1984. And at Tjuntjuntjarra in Western Australia the last group came in a couple of years later still.
The cultural gulf between traditional indigenous and mainstream Australian culture is about as great as can be found anywhere on earth. In their own areas they still speak their own language. Their limited English precludes them from providing detailed explanations of particular situations or of their own emotional states. And even where their English is reasonable they are normally still hampered by the conflict between their thoughtforms and the conceptual categories of mainstream English-speaking Australia.
Moreover there are lots of them. Linguist Denise Angelo has done some excellent work to show how numbers of indigenous language speakers are always underestimated in the census, often massively so. (If I had more time I'd provide a link. Sorry, you'll have to look her up yourselves.)
But the best book I can recommend to describe life in these remote communities is Tadhgh Purtill's "The Dystopia in the Desert: The Silent Culture of Australia's Remotest Aboriginal Communities." It was published in 2017 by Australian Scholarly Publishing. Unfortunately I don't have a copy right in front of me. But there is a relatively short chapter in the book entitled something like "The weirdness of communities." It is well worth reading this chapter alone just to get a brief snapshot of life in so many remote indigenous settlements. In my opinion, the book's description of life in these places is generally accurate. Only about 10% of its content would I put down to mild exaggeration or shock effect. (When Alice Springs library acquired a copy the librarian told me that there were *many* Central Australians who wanted to have a look at it.)
My point is, the situation in most of these communities is that of a slow train wreck. Health and education especially are still gargantuan problems. Many well-paid English-speaking workers who come to these places suffer *extreme* stress. And the media rarely reports on these situations either accurately, completely or in detail. (So Tadgh Purtill's book has been a breath of fresh air for many.)
So such settlements need well-trained people with the common touch who can stay the distance. As one guy at Kiwirrkura told me, "You pay peanuts, you get monkeys". And the zone tax offset is one well-established way of paying more than peanuts, and getting quality workers.
So please feel free to eliminate the zone tax offset in Cairns, Townsville or Darwin. But please don't forget us who live and work in remotest Australia. Reduce the zone offset if you must. But please don't subscribe to the illusion that things have been getting better here in these remotest settlements in the last few decades. Despite improvements in transport and communication, *overall* they haven't.

Paul Traeger (11/10/19)