

# **The Homelands Experience and Sustainable Micro-Communities in Rural and Remote Australia**

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## **Introduction**

Despite the fact that there are obvious differences between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians, there are many more aspects of their lives, their problems and most importantly their personal and community aspirations that are similar—if not identical. As Anthony Dillon has written:

If programmes and services for Indigenous people are to be effective, then Indigenous people need to be viewed as a race with a range of needs that are common to all people, and not just as a separate race of people who share little in common with the rest of the population.<sup>1</sup>

By extension, we must seek to identify and understand on the one hand, what is culture-specific and even group-specific and, on the other, what is similar to the rest of Australia, and even the world.

This approach will bring about both balance and perspective. It will enable us to understand that the issues of the Homelands are the issues facing other micro-communities. To talk about the viability and sustainability of the Homelands without considering other micro-communities and the context of local government is both poor analysis and poor policy-making. Furthermore, I believe that Government can learn a lot from considering these communities together, not separately.

## **Wadeye**

Wadeye lies 320 kms south-west of Darwin on the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf. It has approximately 2,000 permanent residents and there is an estimated service population of some 2,600 people within the area established under the Thamarrurr Community Government Constitution. Currently, Wadeye is the sixth largest town in the Northern Territory and will be larger than towns like Tennant Creek by 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> Dillon (2005:1)

## Establishment of the Mission

According to the eminent anthropologist, Dr W E H Stanner, prior to the 1930s the region “held out no promise for European avarice... It just lay there—inaccessible, far beyond the economic margin, wild, and supposedly inhabited by very ferocious blacks”.<sup>2</sup>

The people lived a traditional existence in groups of twenty or so, based on patrilineal clan groups. Their traditional economy was virtually unaltered until the mid-1930s, although they had contact with and probably traded with visiting Macassans. To the north of the region there was development. In the 1870s, European and Chinese enclaves were established in the Daly River region, and in the 1880s a copper mine began. The first Jesuit mission was founded at Daly River in 1886 and maintained its activities until 1899, when a flood swept it away. In 1912 local government was established in the Daly and it implemented small farming, such as peanut crops. This marked the start of more stable interaction between indigenous people and a Western economy.<sup>3</sup>

The Ports Keats Mission was established at Wadeye by the Catholic Bishop of Darwin, Bishop Gsell, in 1935 under the influence of two major factors, one economic and one civil.

Many people lived and worked in cattle stations in the Victoria River District, and also in the Fitzmaurice area. This distribution of people through various settlements, and their demands on the peanut farmers at the Daly, began to draw attention. Government’s main concern was to stop the drift of people and ease the pressure on the Daly. To this end, establishing a Mission in the region was seen as a solution.

At the same time, relations between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people were strained and persistent incursions of whites led to armed defensive action in which intruders were killed and any possessions were appropriated. Most notable was Namarluk and the ‘Red Band of Killers’. He was a warrior with an imposing build, two metres tall and ‘proper fighting man and funny man’. Namarluk and his followers lived and camped mainly on the Moyle Plain, and at the mouth of Port Keats.

There was a series of local battles, culminating in the killing of the Japanese crew of the lugger *OUIDA* at Injin Beach in July 1931. As with the contemporaneous events at Caledon Bay in East Arnhem, this led to police intervention and the subsequent capture of the culprits some four years later.<sup>4</sup>

As well, at this time there was intense inter-tribal conflict in the region that made people on each side of the Daly very anxious, and this intensified the negative Government and public views of the region.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, according to Stanner, when “things in and around Port Keats began to go publicly bad, Government characteristically turned to Bishop Gsell”, just as it had done with the Methodists in 1934 with respect to East Arnhem Land after the Caledon Bay Affair of 1933.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Stanner (1973:2).

<sup>3</sup> Desmarchelier (2000:10).

<sup>4</sup> See Reynolds (1998:201-215) for an account of the Caledon Bay Affair.

<sup>5</sup> Stanner (1972:2-3).

<sup>6</sup> Stanner (1972:5). Mowbray (2005:5-6) describes how the English local government schemes were used to manage colonisation.

In 1934, Gsell chose Fr. Richard Docherty, who took the unusual step of tracing people from Port Keats who happened to be in Darwin. Some were in Fannie Bay gaol due to the events surrounding Namarluk. He sought approval for the mission from the men with whom he spoke. There was a crew and a party including Stanner, and local people Harry Luke [Kolumboort] and wife Ruby, Albert [Muta], Billy Majindi and Jackie Marlin.

The Ports Keats Mission was established in June 1935 by Father Richard Docherty on the site known today as Old Mission. In 1938, the Mission was invited by the Elders of the Kardu Diminin clan to relocate to the site of Wadeye because the land was closer to a consistent water supply. In 1939, Wadeye was founded as a Roman Catholic mission.<sup>7</sup>

The local reaction to Docherty's arrival was interesting. Old Muta got his spears when he was told that someone was coming, not because they were white, but because he thought they were from another tribe.

Within a couple of weeks of Docherty's arrival the settlement had grown to about one hundred through the active intercession of the local people brought along on the trip.<sup>8</sup> In time, people were attracted by the services provided by the Mission and the availability of goods such as flour and tobacco.<sup>9</sup>

By the end of 1939, a chapel and a clinic had been constructed. One acre of land had been cleared for gardening purposes. A sawmill was completed in the following months and this led to the construction of other buildings, including a nun's house and a school, along with a kitchen and dormitory for youngsters. By the mid-1950s there was a garden, a bakery, a small-scale cattle station, and a brick factory. Local people were involved in every enterprise.

Wadeye became a local "centre" and the Kardu Diminin people effectively came to "host" members of the other nineteen clan groups. These visitors were welcome to visit but they did not have, and still do not have, rights of ownership, as Wadeye is not their country. Despite this agreement, well into the mid-1960s the majority of clans still resided on their own country.<sup>10</sup> This is probably due to the fact that the total population of the region was still quite small, around 766 in 1971, and the traditional Homelands could sustain small groups.<sup>11</sup>

It is fair to say that the Mission's establishment was not actively resisted. Perhaps this was because, even in 1935, traditional life was already changing: stone tools were no longer being made, iron tips were being used for hunting spears, cloth was available and the use of tea and tobacco was well understood.<sup>12</sup> Stanner thought that the Mission "further disturbed a tribe that was already changing the basis of its social life".<sup>13</sup> Later, in 1973, he went so far as to claim

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<sup>7</sup> See Desmarchelier (2000:23). According to Stanner (1973:8ff) there were plenty of disturbances, sometimes with spears, clubs and throwing sticks – but no-one was harmed.

<sup>8</sup> Stanner (1973:9)

<sup>9</sup> Speaking of his attempts to travel south of the Daly, Stanner (1973:4) remarked that the "the Aboriginal hunger for European goods - especially for tobacco, tea, sugar, clothes and iron tools - was so avid that I saw a good prospect of at least being stripped to the buff out in the blue."

<sup>10</sup> Desmarchelier (2000:31)

<sup>11</sup> We do not have accurate historical census data for one reason. It was only after the 1967 Constitutional Referendum that Aboriginal 'natives', that is persons with more than 50 per cent Aboriginal 'blood', were included in population counts. There were approximately 310 people in 1952.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Desmarchelier (2000:14). Prior to the Mission, these goods did not come directly from their source but through the complex economic system of exchange and contract that existed between the clans (Desmarchelier 2000:31-35).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Desmarchelier (2000:16).

that, had it not been for the arrival of the Mission, the fate of the local people would have been dispersion and eventual dissolution.<sup>14</sup>

Several points are worth noting of the Mission period:

- The creation of an artificial polity—a form of Balkanisation occurred if you like. Clans who had clearly separate cultural identities began to cohabit voluntarily within Wadeye with tacit approval from the traditional owners.
- The creation of a closed community in which access to and from the community was restricted.<sup>15</sup>
- The imposition of a single civil authority and what was effectively a disarmament of the clans with Docherty taking an active role. One account says: “[The] tribes were still enemies with each other, fighting and throwing spears at one another, fighting over wives and tobacco. Father used to stop them and the people believed him. After a while the people stopped fighting and some of them became friendly. Father took all the spears and burnt them. At other times he broke them in half.”<sup>16</sup>
- This artificial community tended to weaken the self-identity of the clans. This is most evident in the fact that, although English was and is spoken by most people, the lingua franca is Murinh-patha, which is the language of the Diminin, and the adoption of Murinh-patha was a practical choice if you lived in Wadeye.<sup>17</sup>
- Under the new local economic system, the traditional pattern of hunter-gathering became redundant and people became quasi-sedentary which, in Stanner’s words, produced certain problems such as idleness, supply of accommodation (even then) and material support such as food. In response to this, Docherty implemented an arrangement to alleviate these problems in which the able-bodied spent two weeks in Wadeye and two weeks on country.<sup>18</sup>
- The links that each clan had with its own traditional country were weakened through residence in Wadeye and reliance on the Mission.
- The governance and political framework that had existed was suppressed by the Mission and eventually local government; or in the words of local elder, Matthias Nemarluk, the way of working together, which is expressed as *Thamarrurr*, “went underground”.<sup>19</sup>

### **Assimilation, Self-determination and Self-Government**

Over the years, strategies to fix the “problem” of Indigenous peoples everywhere have veered between separatism, extermination, assimilation and self-determination.<sup>20</sup>

For some, Indigenous have been a nuisance or an obstacle to economic development and their relocation away from their traditional land has been accomplished by force. Others have assumed that, through education and economic development, these “uncivilised” people will make a rational decision to forgo their traditional life in order to live amongst the mainstream

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<sup>14</sup> Stanner (1973:10).

<sup>15</sup> See Mowbray (2005:6) for a discussion of closed institutions.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Desmarchelier (2000: 20).

<sup>17</sup> This is inferred in a quote from a Diminin elder (Desmarchelier 2000: 22).

<sup>18</sup> Stanner (1973:11)

<sup>19</sup> Taylor and Nemarluk (2004)

<sup>20</sup> For example, see Mowbray (2005) and Cahn (1969).

community and enjoy the benefits of citizenship and opportunity. To these people, there is an inevitable line from savagery, to barbarism and then to civilisation.

In Australia, the policy of assimilation, which was forcefully argued in 1939 by the Commonwealth Minister for the Interior, John McEwen<sup>21</sup> was underscored by this notion of cultural evolution by virtue of its explicit intention to assist Indigenous people “to make the transition from one stage to another in such a way as will be favourable to their social, economic and political development.”<sup>22</sup> The policy stated that Indigenous people must be converted from their traditional nomadic social and economic life towards a settled life and offered, in return, the benefits of the ordinary rights of citizenship and opportunities. The aim was to encourage Aborigines to move out of the desert and into the white community.

The implementation of McEwen’s approach was delayed by a 1944 referendum and the war, and it was not until 1951 that the Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, introduced the policy of assimilation, which was subsequently adopted by all the States. The policy’s stated goal was for all Indigenous and part-Indigenous people

attaining the same manner of living as other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians...<sup>23</sup>

In the wake of the social activism of the 1960s and the generally unsuccessful implementation of the policy of assimilation, the policy was officially abandoned in 1972 by the Whitlam Labor Government and the policy of “community self-determination” was adopted to encourage self-determination, self-sufficiency and local capacity where people lived.

In this context, the Homelands Movement acknowledged that Indigenous people were unlikely to leave country and assimilate. The better approach was to encourage self-determination, self-sufficiency and local capacity where people lived.

At the same time, beginning in the early to mid-1960s, the Commonwealth began moving towards the municipal management of settlements and missions by “encouraging the establishment of what are variously known as village councils or councils of elders.”<sup>24</sup>

These external political and government policy directions did have an effect on the Mission at Wadeye.

After World War Two, the Mission developed steadily and with it came a natural expansion in organisational complexity. Simultaneously, Government placed increasing demands on the Mission to perform essentially secular tasks.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, in 1975, the Mission transferred its administrative role to Government and, in 1978, following the establishment of limited self-government in the Northern Territory, the Kardu Numida Association was established as the primary governing body, later becoming the Kardu Numida Council. With respect to Wadeye,

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<sup>21</sup> Arabena (2005:14ff); Mowbray (2005). The debates of the day in Australia are identical to the debates in, for example, the USA with respect to the First Nations peoples (Cahn 1969).

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Mowbray (2005:3)

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Mowbray (2005:3)

<sup>24</sup> Mowbray (2005:8).

<sup>25</sup> Stanner (1973:12)

this transition from mission to self-government was too rapid and was poorly implemented. The evidence from other areas, such as the Arnhem Land, is that the transition caused great disruption to and great pressure on Indigenous people.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, in retrospect, we should recognise that on both sides, the task was a mighty one and expectations were too high. As we now know from other situations—Iraq, Timor, Fiji, the Solomon Islands and PNG—there are frequent failures in implementing Western democratic government models. It is difficult to create new governance structures, especially where these are overlaid on cultures and pre-existing governance structures. The democratic ideal, let alone its form and practices, is neither inherently natural nor rational.

At this time, we can identify several reasons for the interest in the Homelands Movement in Wadeye:

- Not all people had moved permanently into Wadeye and many Homelands were maintained through the Mission practice of fortnightly rotation;
- The promotion of self-determination;
- The withdrawal of the Mission system and a lack of confidence in the new system;
- The increasing social and economic pressures brought about by population increase;
- A desire by the non-Diminin clans to re-assert their identity and to regain control over their family life and clan by returning to country;
- The concern of the Diminin people about the effect on their country and clan from the presence of hundreds of visitors who had now been, in some cases, there for nearly three generations.

Subsequently, settlements were developed on traditional estates: Nadirri and Yederr on the northern coast; Old Mission, Fossil Head and Nangu in the southern area; Wudipuli and Nama on the edge of the Moyle river plains. Kuy, Perrederr, Wurmimidim, Ngarrinithi, Nanthak, Nemarluk and Merrepen were established towards the end of the 1980s.

The obvious question is: why did the Homelands movement falter? There are several reasons:

- Lack of community and organisational capacity;
- The accumulative negative effects of learned helplessness arising from increasing welfare dependency;<sup>27</sup>
- Lack of a coherent government direction by the NT and Australian Governments *vis-à-vis* the Homelands;<sup>28</sup> and
- The gradual collapse of the Kardu Numida Council between 1978 and 1995 due to the unfunded assumption of responsibility for the delivery of both Commonwealth and

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<sup>26</sup> See Trudgen (2000:44) and Mowbray (2005).

<sup>27</sup> This is not the place to explore this important topic. Nevertheless, the work done by Seligman (1991) and others over the past twenty years on both the causes and progress of depression and the relationship between learned helplessness and negative behaviours provides, at the very least, a compelling argument that the unilateral imposition of the welfare system onto Indigenous communities has led to learned helplessness on a community level, as well as an individual level. It is interesting to reflect that this situation occurred after 1966, when amendments to the *Social Services Act (Cwth)* removed all restrictions on Indigenous people accessing income support.

<sup>28</sup> See Heatley (1996), Mowbray (2005) and Westbury and Sanders (2000) for the background to the transition from Commonwealth to Territory and the difficulties regarding Indigenous policy and administration that arose.

Territory services, such as health, and the impact of cost-shifting when there was no avenue to generate revenue, unlike mainstream councils, to off-set or delay the effect on financial viability.<sup>29</sup>

Gradually people drifted back to Wadeye, although many returned to country regularly. Today people acknowledge that the migration back to Wadeye was instrumental in creating many of the current problems. People also acknowledge that the re-establishment and development of each clan's country is fundamental to solving these problems.

### **Homelands are Micro-communities**

The Homelands are settlements in which a group of families live together.<sup>30</sup> Rather than being unusual, this has probably been the most common and persistent form of human settlement. The size of these settlements can range from twenty or so up to 500 people and fall into three broad groups.

### **Ethnic and Cultural Affiliation**

The Homeland has been a traditional way of living for human beings for thousands of years and is recognised linguistically: village, hamlet, kampong, kraal, pueblo and commune. Currently, we estimate that in Thamarrurr about 430 people reside in nine communities of varying sizes.<sup>31</sup> It is difficult to be accurate about the number of Homelands in Australia, but it was estimated in 2001 that there are 991 communities with fewer than 100 people and a total population of 19,817 people. An upper figure might be around 13,500 with 32,500 people.<sup>32</sup>

Overall, the Australian profile is consistent with Indigenous communities overseas, such as in Alaska, where there are 229 Native Alaskan Villages and of these 31 per cent have fewer than 100 people and 79 per cent fewer than 500.<sup>33</sup>

### **Spiritual and Ideological Affiliation**

Micro-communities are also often called *communes* and have a spiritual or ideological affiliation. In relation to the hippie communes of the 1960s, Zwicklin says that it was a "group of people who looked like hippies and identified with the hippie way of life, and who had come together in order to share their lives in a meaningful way."<sup>34</sup>

Communes have existed since the time of Pythagoras's vegetarian commune in southern Italy *Homakoeion*, which was based on intellectualism, mysticism and the equality of the sexes. Frequently communes have been established by adherents of the major religions and their numerous sects and many have existed for hundreds of years.<sup>35</sup> The Shaker commune of Sabbathday, founded in 1794, is one of the oldest extant Christian communes.

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<sup>29</sup> McQuillan (1998).

<sup>30</sup> Altman (2006) distinguishes Indigenous Homelands from other kinds of settlement types.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor (2004).

<sup>32</sup> Altman (2006:3)

<sup>33</sup> GAO Report (2005).

<sup>34</sup> Zwicklin (1983:xi)

<sup>35</sup> The Buddha insisted that the *sangha* or community of practitioners was a cornerstone of Buddhist practice. It is one of the Three Jewels along with the Buddha and the Dharma and it is part of the prayer: "I take refuge in the Sangha, the community that lives in harmony and awareness". Jewish sects such as the Essenes set up communes in the second century BCE, as did the early Christian sects.

There have been communes with political and utopian agendas: the Diggers, Robert Owen's New Harmony, Brook Farm, J H Noyes' Oneida and Hull House. And of course in 1910 the first kibbutz, Deganya, was founded near the Sea of Galilee. Communes with a politically conservative persuasion exist in the USA and find support in writers such as Ayn Rand, whose *Atlas Shrugged* depicts a group of disaffected citizens establishing a pure capitalist commune in opposition to the socialist government of the day.<sup>36</sup>

As ideological agendas broadened in the last century, communes have echoed particular positions, such as in 1930, when Solheimar was founded in southern Iceland as an eco-village; and the Short Mountain Sanctuary for gays founded in 1979 in, of all places, Tennessee. Of course, communes have been in Australia since the Nineteenth Century, notably Nimbin in the 1970s.

Communes, like the Homelands, are an expression of the human desire to create a sense of home with others of a like disposition and are not culture-specific. Communes struggle for societal and political acceptance and are faced with the same practical problems as Homeland settlements.

### Social and Economic Affiliation

The last category of micro-community are those that have evolved through social and economic affiliation and have been the building-blocks of towns and cities. In Australia these communities have a somewhat unusual status.

For a start, Australians have a mythic and symbolic connection to the Outback and the Bush, but we don't actually like living there. In 1900, 61 per cent of Australians lived in the bush, but by 1999 this had dropped to 17 per cent.<sup>37</sup> As at 2003, 64 per cent of Australians lived in capital cities. The truth is we love living in cities, urban centres and suburbs.

This has led to an uneasy relationship between the Outback and the Big Smoke. For example, the commentator Janet Albrechtsen has asked: "Why is the bush on a continuous drip of taxpayer funds, when small business in the city is left to fend for itself against whatever economic ravages come their way?"<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Professor Brendan Gleeson has remarked that "the cities themselves have been terribly injured by structural reform—perhaps more so, if one accounts for their demographic significance—than has rural and regional Australia."<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, even with this decline in rural population, there are still hundreds of micro-communities throughout Australia—places like Lal Lal, Bonshaw or Condong.

Elsewhere, such as the USA, of the 35,933 municipal and township governments, 18,013 had populations of fewer than 1,000 as at 2000 with a combined population of 6,810,944. My own analysis of demographic data reveals more than 9,000 towns with fewer than 1,000 people, of which half have fewer than 500.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> I am indebted to Charlie Sanderson for this reference, although I have not read the book.

<sup>37</sup> Mission Australia (2006:7)

<sup>38</sup> Albrechtsen (2005)

<sup>39</sup> Gleeson (2006:2)

<sup>40</sup> US Census (2002:Tables 7 and 8). This is based on my analysis of data provided at [www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com)

Finally, we must not forget that vast stretches of the world are inhabited by millions of people on farms and agricultural plots. They are, for all intents and purposes, as remote as the remote Indigenous communities of Australia. They do not even have a name for their community, but that does not mean that it is not their home and that they do not wish to stay there, despite the privations and remoteness they endure.

### **Are the Homelands viable and sustainable?**

According to Altman, the Homelands appear to have only recently become the focus of the Australian Government's attention<sup>41</sup> and it is certainly true that media reports of petrol sniffing, violence and sexual and child abuse have alerted mainstream Australia to the problems of many remote Indigenous communities, Wadey included.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, interest has come from academics and public affairs commentators as it relates to specific topics, such as education. Johns, for example, says:

Many remote communities are not economically viable. They are artificial economies that rely entirely on government payments and services, and provide little independent economic activity.<sup>43</sup>

Others, such as Helen Hughes, have isolated the cause of both the deprivation in remote communities and their uneconomic status as being the "socialist" policies of Coombs *et al.*<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, supporters of the Homelands do not assert that *all* Homelands are viable and instead argue that there is substantial evidence that Homelands could be more economically independent through the fostering of traditional economic activity and small business opportunities.<sup>45</sup>

This debate is, by and large, an external one. In the briefings provided to Thamarrurr by both the Northern Territory and Australian Governments, there has been no specific claim made by either government that the Homelands are, unilaterally or inherently, unviable or unsustainable.

The current review of the Homelands stems from the April 2005 Overarching Agreement to co-ordinate, and where desirable integrate, the delivery of a number of services. One area that was identified for further examination was the delivery of essential and municipal services to Indigenous communities.

It was in this context that Senator Vanstone, the then Indigenous Affairs Minister, said "[We've] got lots of small communities and we should admit that it is not going to be viable to put schools there and to put housing there."<sup>46</sup> For the Senator there could be no unconditional and unlimited support of communities for the sake of preserving them as "cultural museums".

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<sup>41</sup> Altman (2006:12)

<sup>42</sup> See articles by Rothwell (2006) and Toohey (2006).

<sup>43</sup> Johns (2006:18).

<sup>44</sup> See Hughes and Warin (2005) and Hughes (2005).

<sup>45</sup> See Altman and Whitehead (2003), Altman (2006), Morphy (2005).

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Senator Vanstone, 12 December 2005.

From my reading of the various commentators on all sides of the current debate, I have identified several uses of the terms *viable* and *sustainable*:

1. economic independence
2. financial independence
3. sustainable settlement
4. social functionality

All these senses are valid, operatively inter-dependent and relative, rather than absolute and they warrant brief discussion.

1. Economic independence is a catch-phrase, rather than an empirical reality. Very few communities are truly economically independent. Most are connected to at least one other community.<sup>47</sup>

Communities are not so independent as to be unaffected by external economic forces or events, be it structural adjustment,<sup>48</sup> the closure of banks and public services,<sup>49</sup> or business decisions. For example: (a) the “gold rushes” created towns of thousands within months across parts of Australia in the 1850s and whilst some towns survived (eg Ballarat), others are but historical curiosity, although they flourished briefly; and (b) mining companies have found it more efficient to fly in and fly out staff than to keep them in towns such as Tom Price. The result is that Tom Price’s residents are concerned about the future of their town. Local resident and worker, Kevin Walsh told *The 7.30 Report* in October 2005: “Keeping people local, you had some sort of ownership of the area you were working in and a bit of pride in your town. When you take a portion of that work force, and get them to reside in Perth, you take a lot of the people that are integral to all these community-based sports and, say, the SES and you’re taking a great deal of knowledge and history out of the place.”<sup>50</sup>

2. By financial independence commentators mean paid employment, rather than public welfare. But what kinds of welfare? Clearly, age and disability-based welfare is available to everyone based on objective criteria. Similarly, the maternity payment of \$4,000 per child is neither income nor assets tested and is a non-taxable lump sum payment. And the so-called baby bonus is a deferred benefit and is based on the number of children. Both of these payments have been actively promoted by the Australian Government and can be accessed by anyone.

The crux of the matter is the proportion of income derived from employment, as distinct from passive support benefits. And yes, this is a problem for Indigenous communities, but it is also a problem for Non-Indigenous rural and remote communities with high unemployment levels. Indeed, in reports from organisations such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (Sidoti 1998), Catholic Social Services (2000) and Mission Australia (2006), we see that the kind of

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example, the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department, *Economic Linkages between Small Towns and Surrounding Rural Areas in Scotland* (2005)

<sup>48</sup> See McColl and Young (2005).

<sup>49</sup> See *Money Matters in the Bush*, Report of the Inquiry into the Level of Banking and Financial Services in Rural, Regional and Remote Areas of Australia (2004) by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Corporations and Financial Services.

<sup>50</sup> Mick O’Donnell, “Industry supports fly in, fly out operations”, *The 7.30 Report*, 17 October 2005

disadvantage found in Non-Indigenous rural communities is also found in remote Indigenous communities.

There is also a need to distinguish between welfare and subsidisation from the public purse. Since the introduction of the National Competition Policy there has been a rigorous pursuit of a level playing field. Nevertheless, both Non-Indigenous people and the private sector still receive substantial financial assistance from the public purse through such mechanisms as Community Service Obligations, taxation incentives and public funding programs.

To claim that it is only Indigenous communities that cannot exist without external public assistance is to ignore how much small towns and small councils rely on public funding. Ask rural communities how they could have survived without drought relief payments?

3. With respect to sustainable land to support communities, this is a matter of will and luck. Governments have established settlements for strategic and other purposes in the harshest environments at taxpayer expense. As for luck, settlements are affected by environmental changes, and activities such as water usage and agriculture.

Only recently, it was reported that rising sea levels are threatening Torres Strait island communities. Elsewhere, prolonged drought conditions have pushed once viable communities and farms to the edge, yet this has long been a fact of life in Australia. Simon Nasht writes of the effect of the great drought at the time of Federation: “All that remains of the little settlement of Mt Bryan East, in the shadow of South Australia’s Mt Lofty Ranges, are the abandoned homes of the pioneers who struggled for three generations to turn the red dust into decent farming land. Broken-hearted, they walked off the land a century ago, defeated by the drought.”<sup>51</sup>

Today’s viable community can be tomorrow’s ghost-town.

4. Lastly, communities do differ in their social viability and sustainability. And yes, Indigenous communities do have unacceptable levels of substance abuse, family violence and civil disorder. But many communities right across Australia have these same problems and it is not being suggested that we need to remove children from Macquarie Fields or Sunshine or Woodridge, or close these communities down. As well, it is easy to focus on the negative and sensational aspects of community life and ignore the happy and mundane. Whilst Wadeye has its problems, it is not the basket case that some outsiders would have you believe.

But let us assume that all Homelands are up for review. Could we use a set of criteria that would enable us to identify those that were unviable?

Yes, we could. There are several kinds of criteria we could use based on readily available standard metrics:

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<sup>51</sup> “Unsung Hero”, *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, October 15-16 2005

- *Population*—using a minimum critical mass and identifying each Statistical Local Area that does not meet this minimum;<sup>52</sup>
- *Remoteness*—using the current Accessibility/Remoteness Index;<sup>53</sup>
- *Economic capacity*—measured by how much welfare payments contribute to the community;
- *Financial Viability*—using standard financial and accounting criteria;
- *Social Dysfunction*—as measured by the level of crime;
- *Quality of Health*—using the Burden of Disease model that adjusts for life expectancy, premature mortality and disability;<sup>54</sup>
- *Occupancy rate*—measured by the amount of time people stayed there.

But why stop at Indigenous communities? Over the past decade, Australians, as well as Canadians and Americans, have been debating the viability of rural and remote communities, small towns and small councils.<sup>55</sup> In Australia, local government associations have mustered considerable evidence that many mainstream councils are financially unsustainable, even though they operate in a much more economically favourable position than Indigenous councils.<sup>56</sup>

Any review of the viability of the Homelands could be extended to communities across Australia. If we compare Indigenous communities with Non-Indigenous councils on the criterion of financial viability at first the evidence is damning. Recently, the Auditor-General of Queensland has stated with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councils that the audit findings over time indicate that the “ability of some Councils to operate without ongoing assistance is problematic”. But then he goes on to say that the issues affecting this specific capacity of Indigenous Councils

are being addressed in the wider Local Government sector through the principles set out in the Local Government Association of Queensland’s paper on *Size, Shape and Sustainability of Queensland Local Government* and should be considered in respect of the operation of Aboriginal Shire and Torres Strait Councils.<sup>57</sup>

### **If the Homelands are not viable—Relocation or Investment**

But let me be provocative and suggest that our review concludes that there are unviable communities. What are the options?

We could use financial incentives such as the “exit grant” suggested by Senator Gary Humphries in May this year.<sup>58</sup> We could apply financial disincentives by withdrawing funding

<sup>52</sup> Howe (2002/3:5-6) states that of the 1,336 SLAs in Australia as of 1996, several had no persons and 342 had fewer than 2,500 people (based on Estimated Resident Population).

<sup>53</sup> Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (2001)

<sup>54</sup> Department of Human Services (2000)

<sup>55</sup> There is a substantial literature on this topic both in Australia and overseas, including two major conferences on the future of the Australian Country Town (2000 and 2005). For example, see Alston (2002), Courvisanos and Martin (2005), Forth (2000, 2005), Keneley (2004), Kenyon and Black (2001), Macgregor (2003), Slack *et al* (2003), Western Economic Diversification Canada website (*The Resilient City*).

<sup>56</sup> There has been a substantial amount of material on this over the past few years. For example, see ACCESS Economics (2006); Local Government and Shires Association of NSW (2006); Local Government Association of Queensland (2005); Hammond (2006); Martin (2005).

<sup>57</sup> (2006:5)

<sup>58</sup> ABC On-line “Pay Aborigines to leave communities: Senator” Friday 19 May 2006

and letting the community wither. But, regardless of the mechanism, the real issue is where to relocate these people, because relocation will require government to

1. find a place to relocate the people;
2. get agreement from the residents of the intended destinations to the relocation;
3. find or build the infrastructure to house the relocated people;
4. collect all the people and transport them to their new homes;
5. and keep the relocated people where they have been relocated to.

Relocation need not be to distant towns and cities.<sup>59</sup> In Thamarrurr's case, the destination would be Wadeye and we are back to square one.

Relocation did not work in the past. It was a cornerstone of the policy of assimilation when encouraging Indigenous people to settle in communities was seen as breaking down their nomadic habits in order "to teach them the habits and skills of living in a permanent community".<sup>60</sup>

Yet, even in times of crisis, such as earlier this year when vandalism left more than 400 people from our community dislocated, the proposal to relocate people to Darwin brought this response from Darwin's Lord Mayor: The City would not be able to cope as it didn't have "that amount of spare housing around".<sup>61</sup> Well, who does?

The relocation scenario implies that Indigenous people could be put anywhere because they are the same, share the same world-view and can get along. Yet, in mainstream Australia, we acknowledge and respect the fact that different religious, ethnic and socio-economic groups choose to live together because they have a shared world-view and feel comfortable living where others share that world-view. This is true, whether it is the Diminin clan of Wadeye, the Vietnamese of Cabramatta, the Jews of Bondi, the Italians of Leichhardt or the wealthy of Darling Point.

Indigenous people should have the same right of free association based on familial and cultural criteria as other groups are afforded in Australia. Indigenous people are not unique in choosing where to live and creating a sense of identity for themselves and their community.

Similarly, rejoicing at being in one's own country is not unique to Indigenous people. How many times have you heard someone say that they were going home to the Old Country—meaning England, Greece, Lebanon, India etc? It is a longer journey from Sydney to Turkey, than from Wadeye to Manthape, but both journeys entail rejoicing in the expectation of being home.

As well, most people have a connection to place and derive a sense of identity from living in that place. Back in Ballarat, many is the time I was scolded in Buninyong for referring to them as part of Ballarat. And finally, what of the numerous planning battles fought by people everywhere to preserve the quality of life they have established from the clutches of evil

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<sup>59</sup> An interesting variation on the relocation scenario is the "urban reserve" model that has been implemented in Saskatchewan in Canada (Western Economic Diversification Canada). They have been seen as a viable extension of the traditional rural reserve, rather than an "either/or" alternative.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Mowbray (2005:4)

<sup>61</sup> ABC On-line "Darwin 'not equipped' for Wadeye evacuation", Tuesday 23 May 2006.

developers? In Warringah it was seriously proposed that day tourists from outside the Shire be charged to come in and use “their” beaches.

The reality is that, despite the most conscientious efforts by government to forecast what people will do, where they will live and work government works with a lag time in policy and program development and implementation.

For example, the Sea Change trend was first observed after the 1996 Census when it was reported that, between 1986 and 1996, 31 per cent of small towns, mainly inland in wheat-sheep belts, dryland grazing or mining regions, had population declines. However, most towns experiencing substantial population growth were coastal, located around metropolitan capital cities, or associated with growth in particular industries such as wine growing or tourism.<sup>62</sup> Despite this information, the Sea Change phenomenon caught out government.

Now there is the Tree Change movement, in which people are moving back to the country because of the problems associated with the Sea Change phenomenon. Five North-eastern Victorians shires (Benalla Rural City, Mansfield, Mitchell, Murrindindi and Strathbogie) are becoming destinations for these tree-changers. I expect that government will be caught out again.

Finally, despite political, economic and environmental incentives and disincentives, people are remarkably stubborn and wilful when it comes to where they live. They are highly mobile, within countries and between them. The history of human migration is consistent and there is no reason to assume that this will change.

Is there an alternative to relocation? Yes, investment in the Homelands. To some extent, even critics of the Homelands see that this could be a more effective strategy. Hughes writes:

Uneconomic communities cannot simply be abolished or moved. This would not only cause great hardship, but merely shift Indigenous problems to fringe settlements and ghettos. If remote community dwellers are to be able to opt for a decent life, in addition to policy reform, very considerable investment will have to be made community by community in transitions that will deliver real education, good health services and private housing so that employment can replace welfare.<sup>63</sup>

In Thamarrurr we have had prepared an opportunity costs report that has identified and quantified both the positive return on investment and the reduction in the cost to government from negative spending. Taylor and Stanley state that the report is

primarily concerned with the efficiency of a proposal to undertake a program to raise the socio-economic status of Indigenous people in the Thamarrurr region to a more “normal” level for Australian citizens. The arguments related to citizens rights and equity in favour of doing this are recognised but are not the subject of this report.<sup>64</sup>

Therefore, unlike other Indigenous communities we have baseline data that are being used to measure policy and program performance.

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<sup>62</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (1998)

<sup>63</sup> Hughes (2005:2)

<sup>64</sup> Taylor and Stanley (2005:13)

The evidence and arguments presented by Taylor and Stanley have provided the foundation for the Community's long-term strategy to develop country (the Homelands) in a sustainable manner. This strategy is contained in the discussion paper, *Rural Living—A Strategic Investment in Thamarrurr*.

We believe that the opportunity for more people to reside in rural settlements on their traditional estates will:

- Ease the growing social pressure in the main township of Wadeye;
- Facilitate development of estates to foster enterprises, and generate jobs and other activities that will provide tangible economic and social returns;
- More than justify the investment in housing and infrastructure, and provision of services to settlements;
- Provide choice of locations for living and working in line with mainstream Australia;
- Enhance rather than compromise education and health outcomes.

What this makes crystal clear is that the Community has no desire to relocate or leave the Homelands. They see their future as being there and will, even if government declares that some of the Homelands are unviable, persist with them. The challenge is to find a way forward and that leads me to my final point.

### **Homelands, Community Capacity and the Capitals Framework**

Much of the foregoing discussion has focussed on the similarities between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous communities. Yet there are differences and these differences affect the ability of the respective communities to address their problems by implementing sustainable and cost-effective solutions.

The capitals framework provides a means for understanding the differences and going forward.<sup>65</sup> Five major capitals can be identified:

- Natural or environmental
- Social
- Human
- Institutional
- Economic

These capitals define the degree to which a community is sustainable, healthy and functional and can be used to explore the deficits that contribute to a community's specific level of disadvantage.

On the evidence available to us, Indigenous communities currently lag behind in every one of these capitals.<sup>66</sup> Non-Indigenous communities have, by and large, greater levels of these

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<sup>65</sup> Mission Australia (2006). The capitals approach is now widely used in different ways (eg Alston 2002a, Wallis and Dollery 2002, Woolcock *et al* 2003).

<sup>66</sup> See the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision's Overview (2005) of Key Indicators, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*; ACOSS (2006:6) reports that Indigenous people are six times more likely to use community services than their representation in the general population suggests. On indigenous governance, see

capital to enable them to identify problems, develop solutions and, most importantly, advocate for funds and resources.

At the same time community capacity is shaped by equally important external factors:

- Roads Infrastructure
- Telecommunications Infrastructure<sup>67</sup>
- Health and Education Infrastructure
- Access to Government and Private Sector Services

With respect to these, the picture is less clear because both kinds of communities are located in rural and remote areas and are therefore subject to the same conditions. However, on the basis of evidence collected by Taylor and Stanley, a town like Wadeye compares very unfavourably with a similar town like Longreach in many of these items.<sup>68</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Indigenous communities share much more with other remote Non-Indigenous communities both here and overseas than with urban centres. Their problems are similar and I strongly believe that, by broadening the basis of discussion, government can develop more effective strategies to improve the quality of Indigenous life by looking to the research and successful strategies that have worked elsewhere.

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Cleary (2005), Coles (2005), Crime and Misconduct Commission (2002), Holcombe (2004), Hunt and Smith (2005), Sanders (2004, 2005a, 2005b), Smith (2004), Westbury and Sanders (2000).

<sup>67</sup> The deficit and obstacles facing remote Indigenous communities in this area are discussed in Daly (2005) and DCITA's Discussion Paper (2006), *Backing Indigenous Ability*.

<sup>68</sup> Taylor and Stanley (2005:12ff)

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