

ALICE AT THE TIPPING POINT

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When I was asked to speak to you today, some time ago now, the general drift of what I would say was obvious – tension between indigenous and non-indigenous people in Alice Springs was higher than it had been for many years and many looked to the future with foreboding and apprehension, so “Alice at the Tipping Point” seemed an obvious title in a speech attempting to tease out some of these issues. However since that time the Brough/Howard initiatives have been put into operation and a more apt analogy today would not be a teetering see saw but a whirlwind. There are now so many twists and turns to the story, that it is impossible to predict what each day will bring.

What I will say at the outset is that Alice Springs is a strong town in many ways, a diverse and complex community that is unique in its balance of “bush” and sophistication. The sense of isolation from the bulk of Australian population is balanced by a strong community spirit that sees huge support for individuals down on their luck. Many of our well-known festivals such as Henley -on-Todd, Finke Desert Race and the Camel Cup, the Desert Festival and Beanie Festival are run completely by Service Clubs and volunteers. The town is strong economically although subject to variations in tourism numbers and building cycles, it has for instance some 2000 US residents who provide a fine underpinning of our economy.

Culturally and artistically the town is a Mecca for creativity, not just for indigenous but also non-indigenous people who seem to be attracted and inspired by the landscape. There is a high proportion of tertiary educated people who work for organisations as diverse as the CSIRO, Solar Industries and Desert Knowledge Australia.

Socially, we have a very mobile population with a “churn rate” of 30% every 5 years. One of the biggest brakes on our economy is a substantial labour shortage, not just of skilled workers but of every level. There would not be too many businesses in Alice Springs that are fully staffed and able to expand as they would like.

Population

The town has around 29,000 inhabitants of which about 18.8% are indigenous according to the latest Census which I think has drastically under counted. In wider central Australia, that figure is 30% and in the NT as a whole indigenous people comprise 27.8% of the population. Alice Springs has for some years had a huge issue with urban drift, particularly in the hotter months, from the 260 communities which use the town as a service centre.

Demographers Jon Altman and John Taylor, writing in "*The Australian*" on the 11th July this year¹ stated what has been popular opinion for some time that "*if the Alice Springs hinterland was emptied of indigenous people living on their traditional lands then the indigenous share of the Alice Springs population could increase from 20% to about 50%*". Some, including me, see the new Federal Government initiatives as just such a catalyst, but more of that later.

To put these figures in perspective, the State with the next highest indigenous population is WA with about 4% of their population and Australia as a whole has 2.3% of the population. This situation in the NT is due to a higher fertility rate but also I suspect an outflow of non-indigenous people in regional NT as they join the Australian rush for the coast. It is difficult to get accurate figures and often ABS statistics do not reflect what trends I see around me. A mobility Study carried out by Tangentyere Council and the Desert Knowledge CRC in 2005² showed that the base population of the 19 Town Camps in and around Alice Springs was twice that of the census estimate and the visiting population during the study was approximately an extra 30%. The visitor rate for indigenous people living in public housing in Alice Springs was higher still, estimated at 37% (from an unpublished DKCRC paper).

The 2006 census figure for the town shows a falling population since the last census and when I expressed some surprise (and indignation) to the ABS I was told the Estimated Resident Population is a much more

¹ Altman, Jon and Taylor, John "A Drift Towards Disaster" in "*The Australian*", 11/7/08, p. 15

² Foster, D., Mitchell, J., Ulrik, J and Williams, R. 2005 *Population and Mobility in the Town Camps of Alice Springs*. A report prepared by Tangentyere Council research Unit, Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre, Alice Springs.

reliable figure and that actually shows a small rise in population. Indigenous people particularly are hard to capture in a census because of their mobility through urban residential areas and to and from bush communities as well as between bush communities leading to what is referred to by one demographer as “*a substantial underestimation of demographic impacts*”.³ I have maintained a running battle with the ABS about their statistics for some years; however be all that as it may, there is a very high proportion of indigenous people in the NT

People/History

The first Europeans to arrive in Central Australia were John McDouall Stuart’s party on March 2nd 1860 and ten years later Alice Springs (actually an ephemeral waterhole in the Todd River) was discovered and named by William Mills, a surveyor for the Overland Telegraph Line. The subsequent Telegraph Station situated at Alice Springs was the start of European settlement. The nearby Town of Stuart was re-named Alice Springs in 1933 after officialdom finally gave in to popular usage. Afghans, pastoralists, Germans, Italians, Vietnamese, a joint US/ Australian Defence Facility, known locally as the Space Base, have all contributed to the current community mix in the town.

The local indigenous people are Arrernte and their name for Alice Springs is Mbwantwe. In 2001, a native title claim over Alice Springs was successful, the first in Australia over an urban area, and a native title holder’s corporate body Lhere Artepe, was formed. The name means “backbone of the river” and refers to the importance of the Todd River to the three clans of native title holders that make up the Body Corporate. Alice Springs Town Council has a partnership agreement with Lhere Artepe and the group featured prominently in local affairs and decision making for several years. It would now be fair to say, however, that in-fighting between the three clans and changing priorities of a new recently elected Executive, have meant that Lhere Artepe takes a more diminished role in town affairs these days. They are now rarely seen at meetings even when the subject is definitely in their interests as traditional owners - such as aboriginal migration to town and disrespect to Arrernte land by burning trees etc.

³ Taylor, J , 2006 “*Population and Diversity: Policy Implications of Emerging indigenous Demographic Trends*” Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Discussion Paper No. 283/2006.

I think this is a retrograde step as it is essential to harmonious relations in the town that Lhere Artepe and the Town Council speak with equal authority on certain social issues and the rights of traditional inhabitants are acknowledged as part of the unique complexity of Alice Springs. In the last few days, however, it appears that the Lhere Artepe executive has moved to reinstate their previous values with the sacking of the CEO and arrest of the Chairman.

There are also power plays and animosity between many indigenous organizations such as Lhere Artepe and Tangentyere Council (the Service organization for the Town Camps) that go back many years and whose origins are often in tribal or family feuding. A report in a local newspaper on 16th August 2007 records the Lhere Artepe CEO being “thrown out” of a meeting of the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of Alice Springs⁴ when he challenged their mandate to speak on behalf of local Aborigines.

These conflicts are also present in some indigenous services and organisations which may be dominated by one particular family or another. Although I was born in Alice Springs and grew up here I do not pretend to understand all of the complicated webs of relationships and family obligations that underpin indigenous relations in the town.

All that before we even get to indigenous-non-indigenous relations!

Nothing is ever simple or straight forward in Alice Springs because of the multi layered society, different Aboriginal groups, sometimes competing indigenous and non indigenous interests and different State and Territory legislation. Let me give you an example.

In 2005 the NT Minister for Central Australia, Elliott McAdam commissioned a Task Force, of which I was a member, to report on the condition of the Town Camps infrastructure and the lives of the people who lived there. The Task Force had representatives from Tangentyere Council, Town Council, NT and Federal Governments, police. There were 16 recommendations and for those who are interested it can be found at www.towncamps.nt.gov.au .

One of the findings was that there was an extremely high level of overcrowding in the 19 camps. The estimated population from the Mobility Study was around 3,000 people, who lived in 190 houses. This

⁴ Finnane, K “*Combined Aboriginal organisations ‘no mandate from locals’*” Alice Springs News, 16/8/07 p. 5

position was exacerbated by friends and relatives coming in from out bush and due to family obligation being able to stay in the Town Camps for as long as they liked. It was obvious that other accommodation needed to be found where people could stay in a safe and secure environment, where alcohol was not allowed and where people could enact the business that had brought them into town. Consultants were engaged jointly by Territory and Federal Governments to find two suitable sites, at the northern and southern ends of town. This corresponded loosely with the geographic spread of tribal groups and aimed to reduce fighting resulting from traditional antagonism between these groups.

It was about this time that Minister Brough and Chief Minister Clare Martin announced \$10 million each for upgrades to Town Camp infrastructure and the Minister also announced that there were demountables (locally known as dongas) on their way from Woomera which would be suitable for these Short Term Accommodation Facilities in effect to be caravan park-like places

There was an immediate and hostile reaction from the town to the notion of dongas and when two sites were identified an even more hostile reaction from residents in the vicinity.

Mal Brough had visited both sites with me and representatives from Lhere Artepe, who gave the sites the thumbs up. The proposals then had to go to the Development Consent Authority who held what turned out to be very acrimonious hearings. The DCA recommended against the sites to the NT Minister who ignored that recommendation (as is her prerogative under the legislation) and announced that the sites would go ahead, subject to many conditions including Sacred Sites clearance.

There were many protests, residents groups attending Council for months with angry displays, letters to the paper, on-air opinions etc. Minister Brough then upped the ante with an offer to Tangentyere Council of \$80 million to bring the Town Camps up to the standard of normal suburbs in Alice but tied that offer to the Accommodation facilities going ahead. I strongly supported this offer telling one heckler (from the Northern Action Group, aptly named NAG) that I had 80 million reasons not to support their stand against one of the accommodation facilities. This resulted in posters going up around town "We have 80 million reasons to get rid of this Mayor".

The heat was rising with local custodians of the area (also Arrernte) claiming there were sacred sites in the vicinity of the northern site and long-held resentments between Aboriginal groups bubbling away. Finally after many months of community angst, the AAPA refused to issue a clearance for the site and that was that, end of story, no appeal.

We are still waiting for the AAPA clearance for the southern site and looking for another northern site. Meanwhile, the dreaded dongas proved conveniently handy for use as accommodation for the many Commonwealth public servants that are coming to the region and I believe that most have since gone bush. There is also another 200 from Baxter on their way up north as well.

THE INITIATIVES AND ALICE SPRINGS

Alice Springs has been battling with issues of alcohol, violence and anti-social behaviour for many years now. Some residents have not easily accepted our position as the service town for a huge area of SA, WA and Queensland and both the good and bad that this brings. The good is of course, the level of prosperity that money flowing from these communities brings and also the contribution to the economy that the many indigenous organisations make - but much of the so-called “black dollar” is uncountable and in some cases, unrecognised. “The Age” recently ran an article, repeated in the local “Centralian Advocate”, about Centrecorp Aboriginal Investment Corporation. This company was created by Central Land Council in 1980 and according to “The Age”, controls assets of over \$100 million and is the “most successful indigenous financial conglomerate in Australia”. The article raised some questions as to how the 18,000 beneficiaries actually benefit and has resulted in a barrage of articles and letters in recent weeks, again indicating a downturn in relations between Centrecorp and Lhere Artepe.

The bad is the simmering tensions which have been evident for many years. Passages in a book about Alice Springs by Peter Donovan⁵, written in 1986, could have been written about the current state of relations, but were actually referring to events in 1974.

Fundamental to this problem, has been the separateness of the black and white communities. This has bred an ignorance of one group of the traditions and aspirations of the other, and with it a certain mutual fear and suspicion.

⁵ Donovan, P., 1988 “*Alice Springs Its History and the People who Made it*” Alice Springs Town Council, p.338

A rape by Aboriginal youths focussed national attention on the town. Media descended, attitudes were polarised and hardened, public meetings were held and people complained about drunkenness and abusiveness of intoxicated Aborigines and police inability to stop people congregating in public areas. This mirrors a high level of community outrage over the rape and death of a young aboriginal girl last year.

Residents have expressed anger at the high level of anti-social behaviour and violence in town and the last 6 months has seen the formation of a citizen's action group, walking the Mall at night - and the hostile reception given to the Chief Minister by a protest group of 500 business owners and staff. Media have flocked to the Centre and the high level of murders in Town camps led to the dubbing of Alice, somewhat sensationally, as "the murder capital of the world". More recently, a study by a local Surgeon published in a Medical Journal detailed the rate of stabbings in the town, equivalent to the highest in the world and the majority of victims female. A recent study by the Australian Institute of Criminology reported in the "NT News" claimed that every female homicide victim in the NT over several years recently was indigenous. In Alice, much of this violence occurs in the Town Camps.

The initiatives announced by Mal Brough proposed sweeping changes in many areas – alcohol, the permit system, land tenure and compulsory acquisition, welfare, CDEP. The Alice Springs Town Council has strong positions on the first two of these and is broadly supportive of the others although like many others we feel not just caught up in the Federal changes but affected daily by events and initiatives beyond our control. Mal Brough may seem to some to be a breath of fresh air, but to others he is more like a tornado!

Alcohol

Alcohol is being increasingly recognised in the town as not just a symptom of indigenous disadvantage but as one of the most significant causes. One only has to recall the reference in "Little Children are Sacred" to "rivers of grog" to understand the scale of the problem. The NT has the highest rate of alcohol consumption in Australia and although the issue is well recognised, efforts to turn the tap down are slow and somewhat hampered by a general opinion that it is an indigenous problem and not a non-indigenous one. The community has, however, accepted that changes are necessary and although you still get the occasional Letter-to-the-Editor complaining about restrictions, most people believe that the scale of the problem is so big that they will accept some restrictions. There are also issues with the availability of alcohol and its

effect on tourists but my view is that if you can reduce anti-social behaviour the town will be much more attractive to visitors anyway. Alice Springs has an Alcohol management Plan and a courageous Racing Gaming and Licensing Commission that is not afraid to make hard decisions. In the last year we have seen changes in three broad areas – reductions in alcohol demand, and supply, and harm minimisation. In approving the changes the Licensing Commission said that they acknowledged “the deep concern and frustration of many Alice Springs residents about liquor abuse issues and public safety. Every resident has the right to feel safe in his or her community and it is apparent ... that many residents do not feel safe”.⁶

In the last 12 months we have seen restrictions on cask wine, in terms of cask size, time of availability and only being able to buy one a day. Fortified wines are also restricted to after 6pm sale. When these initial measures were introduced we had a massive problem with broken glass everywhere as drinkers switched from cask wine to the next cheapest form of alcohol, in particular longneck beer bottles. Council was forced to invest in a \$50,000 sweeper capable of sucking glass from roads, cycle paths and ovals. Longnecks were banned - and drinkers switched again and now we have a sea of green cans to be removed.

We have seen an 11% drop in pure alcohol being drunk and also a decrease over three successive quarters in alcohol related admissions to hospital. There was also an immediate drop in Hospital admissions for acute alcohol related conditions (45.5%) and also chronic (38%).

LITTER

Now would be the time for a brief word about litter – not a huge issue in the scheme of things you may think, but certainly one that is high on the lists for residents of the Alice. Council spends \$1 million a year on litter control, most of it brought about by drinkers in the parks, streets and rivers. The Alice Springs community feels powerless in the face of such a continuous onslaught of litter, and it lessens that feeling of pride that is so necessary for a strong community spirit and for people to plan to stay in the community long term.

Lhere Artepe has a number of protocols aimed at improving the behaviour of visitors from communities. Council and Lhere Artepe also

⁶ Northern Territory Licensing Commission “Reason for Decision on Application by Alice Springs Town Council for a Public Restricted Area” 9/5/07

have a joint program of individually painted bins reflecting local stories to encourage putting rubbish in a bin.

We have long clamoured for Container Deposit Legislation in the Alice to cope with this issue but this does not look likely. Council has recently been successful in our application for \$10,000 to run a trial of encouraging people to return cans for 10 cents a can and we are about to kick off with this.

However we do appear to be having some wins – Council approached the NT Government in early 2006 to implement Dry Town legislation, and they responded with a very quick passage of enabling legislation. As soon as the legislation was passed, Council applied to the RGL Commission to have a Dry Town introduced. This means basically no drinking in public but also has provisions to channel people into rehabilitation and detoxification facilities. It acts in conjunction with a 1982 law that prohibits drinking alcohol in public within 2km of a licensed liquor outlet. The Dry Town legislation started on August 1st, accompanied by a comprehensive media campaign – TV and radio ads beamed to all communities, posters pamphlets and signs. Initial results have been very heartening with an appreciable drop in numbers of drinkers and also litter. This campaign has corresponded with the Federal Government’s initiatives out bush and is the reason, I think, that we have not had the big influx from the communities that other Territory towns are experiencing so far.

On November 1st we will also have to produce photo ID to buy alcohol in Alice – most people will use a Drivers Licence while tourists will be able to use passports or other form of photo ID. This will stop under-age people purchasing alcohol and also allow easy identification of those on prohibition orders or alcohol free bail conditions. My Council strongly supports photo ID as a measure to reduce the supply of alcohol while current community conversations revolve around the buy-back of take away licences and a “grog-free day”

Last week, in an effort to curb alcohol related violence and child abuse, the NT Government introduced amendments to the Licensing Act to make all 19 Town camps in Alice Springs “dry” including inside private residences. At the same time, the Federal Government has announced a 6 month blanket ban on alcohol in communities, all of which in Central Australia at least, are dry communities anyway.

In an effort to stop grog running to these supposedly dry communities, Federal legislation will also require that anyone purchasing more than 1350 ml of pure alcohol must provide written details of the reason why, although how a hapless takeaway attendant is going to calculate that in a hurry is anyone's guess.

STATEHOOD

This brings another aspect of the Federal intervention to light and that is that it overrides Northern Territory legislation in many areas. For example, the Emergency Response Bill directs the NT Licensing Commission to report to the Commonwealth Minister bypassing our own democratically elected Government. Surprisingly, this aspect has raised little public comment apart from alarm bells from the Statehood Steering Committee who see this as a demonstration of the lack of democratic power when you live in a Territory, not a State (and of course it is). Apart from the Liquor Act, The Commonwealth Minister can now play a direct role in several Acts including the Local Government Act, Crown Lands Act, Associations Act and the Police Administration Act.

PERMIT SYSTEM

The Alice Springs Town council supports the removal of the Permit System for major towns and access roads, but not for homeland or sacred sites. We see this as part of a process for opening up communities to commercial activity such as tourism and other job opportunities and more scrutiny particularly for things such as the health and education of children.

WELFARE REFORMS

Welfare should be a safety net, not a hammock.
Bob Beadman, Chairman NT Grants Commission

I strongly support welfare reforms designed to ensure that children are properly cared for, have food and a roof over their heads and are sent to school. Even as recently as a couple of years ago, I would have seen this as discriminatory and a violation of human rights. But with desperation about deteriorating quality of life for indigenous people comes a hardening of the heart. Welfare money is not given in order to be drunk or gambled away while kids go barefoot and barely clothed in our minus degrees winters.

Apart from the effect on dependent children there is another aspect of considerable significance to the NT. 2006 census figures indicate that the indigenous proportion of our population is growing faster than the non-indigenous and in some places such as Tennant Creek the proportion has reached 48.8%. Young indigenous people make up 45% of the population under the age of 19 and many primary schools in Alice Springs have an enrolment figure of around 50% although many of those kids would not go to school on a regular basis. Mal Brough said in a recent talk to the National Press Club⁷ that over 2000 kids in the NT, between 6 and 15, are not enrolled for school, let alone attend. In my opinion the biggest economic issue for the NT today is that a rising proportion of the population is neither educated or job ready and unless that can be remedied then our future economic growth is untenable.

There are initiatives happening which provide some optimism for the future. Recently a Clontarf football Academy has been established which has 160 young men enrolled. Ability to play football is dependent on attendance at school and this is proving a powerful incentive. The Polly Farmer Foundation has also been established which provides facilities, mentoring and tutoring for indigenous kids “with a spark in their eye”. Next week the Aboriginal Employment Strategy established by Dick Estens in Moree opens its doors in the Todd Mall and hopefully will emulate its great track record in getting indigenous people into employment. We also have a drumming group of town camp kids whose position in the group is dependent on school attendance.

But getting g back to the welfare reforms - the major consideration of these changes to welfare seem to be focused on the money indigenous people receive through Centrelink. That money is really only half of the issue. Conservatively, millions of dollars each year flow into communities, to individuals and families and a substantial amount is spent, as much of the other money is, on gambling and in particular, cars. Second hand car dealers in Alice Springs react to imminent royalty cheques by trucking large numbers of cars from down south because they know there will be a steady stream of people looking for vehicles – many of which are decidedly short-lived and may in fact be lucky to survive the trip back to the community.

It would be a far more visionary and valuable approach to pay royalties into a community fund, to be used for community infrastructure and in

⁷ Brough, M, *Speech to the National Press Club* 15/8/07

particular, housing. Minister Brough seeks to bring about conditions where indigenous people will want to buy their own houses, but in many communities that is a completely foreign concept. It's a chicken and egg situation. Who would want to take out a mortgage when you have a house full of family and relatives but on the other hand, the only way to get rid of the chronic overcrowding is to build new housing.

There is also another issue with regard to housing on communities. Many communities are already depopulated because people move into Alice Springs and other Territory town and the question has to be asked "Why would you build on communities when it seems that the process of urban drift is bringing more into urban areas where there is little suitable housing"? The Northern Territory Government currently has signed an MOU with the Australian Government on Housing and Infrastructure initiatives that includes a \$100 million investment from the Territory and a \$163.5 million package from the Australian Government for housing out bush, but there are no forward plans for more public housing in Alice Springs.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

One of the other complicating factors is the process of Local Government Reform initiated by Minister Elliott McAdam. This is a result of rising concern about the financial viability of many bush communities (indeed a previous Local Government Minister Jack Ah Kit, called them "basket cases") and the small population of many that gave them no critical mass when it came to the provision of even basic services. 63 Communities Council will merge into 9 shires and 4 Municipalities by July 1st 2008 in an attempt to provide better governance, service delivery and cost effectiveness. Presently, only 6% of the NT is incorporated under Local government, but under this proposal, all of the Territory will be incorporated. This fact, while generally welcomed, has not pleased the Cattlemen's Union or some Mining Companies who will have to pay rates for the first time.

It is a little unclear how Federal government Reforms will affect this process but the formation of Shire Budgets also incorporated CDEP money, in particular \$20 million per annum for capital equipment which will no longer be available.

All the Country to the south of Alice Springs will become the MacDonnell Shire while to the north will be the Central Desert Shire. The administration of these huge areas will be situated in Alice Springs so we

will have the unique position of two Shire and one Municipality headquarters in one town.

CDEP

One other reform which is expected to impact on the Alice and other Territory towns is the end of CDEP, to be replaced by “real jobs”. Minister Brough and many others believe that CDEP has become a “destination” in itself and has created a false and ultimately unsustainable economy on communities. Having operated for 30 years, the Scheme is now to be replaced by a form of Work-For-The-Dole and Structured Training and Employment Projects (STEP). For some Community Councils, CDEP constitutes 50% of their budgets. So great is the reliance on CDEP that its removal will be what Nicholas Rothwell writing in the “Weekend Australian”⁸ calls “unbelievable in its likely cascade of consequences”. Government control over finances will increase, Art centres, night patrols, child care and other industries which have been supported by CDEP money will struggle and job for indigenous people will have to materialise. My fear is that when life on the communities becomes too restrictive or too uncomfortable in its level of change, bush people will head for Alice Springs rather than stay. That will exacerbate our issues of accommodation and finding jobs for people, or rather people for jobs.

TERRITORY GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO CHILD ABUSE REPORT

Weaving in and out of all these other changes is the response of the NTG to the “Little Children Are Sacred” Report, announced a couple of weeks ago. Titled “Closing the Gap”, the Chief Minister has announced \$286 million and 223 additional positions over the next 5 years. In identifying seven priorities (Safety, Health, Housing, Education, Jobs, Culture and a Better way of Doing Business) the NTG has recognised that all Territorians pay the price for indigenous disadvantage in the enormous strain it puts on our hospitals, gaols, police and the economy.

⁸ Rothwell, N “*No Turning back*” The Weekend Australian 28/07/07

Although the Federal Government initiatives have been greeted with a sense of relief there are real concerns about the long-term sustainability of the Reforms especially if there should be a change of Government. Mal Brough and John Howard have shown a unique strength of purpose and Mal Brough's personal commitment cannot be doubted, but if things change and there is less political will or fewer resources, it is uncertain what that will do to the indigenous communities that have been caught up in this process. A significant question is, how will they get a sense of responsibility for their own lives under these reforms and, more urgently, what if the process stalls?

There is an uneasy alliance between Federal and Territory Government in regard to both Government's initiatives but plenty of action on the ground as communities are inundated by bureaucrats. LGA NT received an email recently from a community CEO-

We didn't have an emergency before, but now we do!!! I must have 20 meetings booked with us in the next 10 working days from every Fx@#\$ agency... there is no time to work, only attend meetings to talk about nothing because nobody has any answers or resources...!!!

Finally, there is a buoyant feel in the Alice at the moment, the Mall is full of people, there are fewer drunks, large building investments are being announced, people are feeling confident, cappuccinos and lattes are being drunk by the gallons – but the sense of imminent wholesale change, and change beyond our control still lingers.