

The future of remote Aboriginal Communities

A series of relic settlements of people created by the ebb and flow of contact with non Aboriginals

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Introduction

There is much made of the social dysfunction of remote Indigenous communities across Australia and the current intervention by the government is a clear demonstration that government, at least the Commonwealth Government is at last taking the situation seriously. However, to develop strategic remedies to address the high levels of adult deaths, bad health, substance abuse, the breakdown of social mores and the increase of socially destructive behaviour requires some reflection of what has brought us, the Australian Indigenous and non Indigenous people to this point in our mutual histories.

In the discussions of the dysfunction of remote communities there is the notion that the continued government support and therefore the existence of such communities is finite.

That is, similar to small non Indigenous agriculture based communities that have disappeared from the Australian landscape so too will remote Indigenous communities. They will become relic communities perhaps occupied by the very old who are hanging on to what they know.

The evidence that this is already happening is somewhat ambivalent. Taylor, Bell and others have suggested that the evidence is that there is a cyclical movement of people between the larger communities, urban regional centres and outstations that reflect the social communities of individuals and that the remote urban emigration pattern is unclear.

None the less, there is also evidence that in remote communities in the nearest regional urban service centres the Indigenous populations are growing and growing quickly. The combination of population mobility and growth in the remote communities and the urban regional centres is creating a challenging mix for the policy makers, implementers and service providers responsible for the governance, welfare and good order of Indigenous groups in remote areas.

The increase and youth of the populations in remote localities is often beyond the resources of the remote locality to cope. Accordingly the increase in the youth of the Indigenous populations in nearby urban regional centres is being accompanied by growing tensions between Indigenous and non Indigenous populations. These tensions are created by the complex inter-connection of social, cultural and economic dependence between Indigenous and non Indigenous people in the regional urban centres.

It is becoming obvious that if remote communities were to be closed by policies of omission or commission then the political social and economic capacity of regional urban centres in such areas may be overwhelmed.

The debate, therefore, requires much more reflection than some of the examples of assertions selected instances, false premises and circular logic currently being applied to these issues (Hughes, 2007).

I begin with a discussion that took place among some Angugarliya people at Maningrida in February this year (2007). The setting was the Maningrida Jobs Education and Training Centre (MJETAC) a community owned and operated Adult Education Centre. The principal participants in the discussion were Helen Djimbarwalla Williams, her partner Mr Dean Herreen, Don Wilton and myself.

Ms Williams is a traditional owner and has a Year 12 education and has several vocational qualifications. Ms William's partner Mr Herreen also has Year 12 and also has a number of vocational qualifications. She and her partner Mr Herreen have served on a range of Maningrida Corporations. Don Wilton is also a traditional owner and is a qualified diesel mechanic; he also serves on a number of Aboriginal corporations at Maningrida. I was the lecturer in Governance and the group of us were having coffee after the completion of a module of Certificate IV in Governance (Indigenous Organisations).

The conversation went something like this.

Don Wilton: Stuart how old were you when you first came to Maningrida?

Stuart: It was about 1968, I was eighteen years old

Helen: Welfare time

Stuart: Yes

Deane: When the whitefella were the bosses

Stuart: Yes

Don: What were you doing?

Stuart; Well I was just a young bloke working for Harry Geise in charge of welfare. Les Penhall was my day to day Boss and he had sent me out with Dr Hargraves to get some experience and to give him a hand with his leprosy program.

Don: Back then you welfare blokes really believed that within thirty years Angugarliya people would be the bosses did you?

Stuart: Yes, we did

Helen: So did we

Deane: So what happened?

So let us look at what did happen. We can do this by asking the following questions.

1. Why have the problems of remote Indigenous communities suddenly captured the policy attention of government?

2. How do Indigenous and Non Indigenous people see communities?
3. What has the role of civil and human rights been in contributing to the current situation in communities?
4. To what extent have the structures and processes for communal and individual accountability for resource allocation contributed to the situation?
5. Have communal and individual self -sufficiency been a focus of policy and policy implementation frameworks?
6. To what extent have community or capacity development policy or programmes played a part in Indigenous communities?

The paper will conclude by discussing what the future of communities might be. In this conclusion some comment will be made on the probability of communities becoming relic settlements of people who, in the face of some of the current policy changes being implemented would not or could not relocate.

Before addressing these questions, however, some definition and discussion of terms is necessary.¹

Firstly, there is a question of nomenclature, various words are used to describe the localities where Aboriginal people live in remote Australia². For the purpose of this paper the following definitions are used.

A community is taken to mean a common location where the majority of people are Aboriginal and which has more than 250 people. It is permanently occupied throughout the year and has a minimum of three services such as a school, clinic and store and full access to all utilities. It will also have a legal corporate governance and management structure.

Homeland is defined as a common location occupied by the traditional owners or those people with a direct link to the traditional owner of the land. It has less than three services and may or may not be permanently occupied throughout the year (Cook P, 1994).

Outstation is similarly defined to Homeland and is distinguished by the fact that the residents may not be able to demonstrate traditional ownership and may only have a general association with the area (Gerritsen and Phillpot 1996).

¹ Some authors continually refer to communities as though they were a homogenous classification, this approach distorts the demographic and number of Indigenous settlement by creating a perception of a larger number of permanent settlements than there actually is because many of these settlement are only occupied intermittently.

² Communities, outstation, homelands are the words of the most often used to describe remote communities, however their definition are not always clear. Indeed they are often used synonymously (Hughes 2006 p).

1) Why have the problems of remote Indigenous communities suddenly captured the policy attention of government?

The recent intervention by the Commonwealth Government in remote communities of the NT has raised a range of concerns not the least about government motivation. Some commentators have suggested that it is the electoral cycle; some have suggested that it has some dark purpose associated with land; and others have suggested that it is simply the outrage of political leaders who are also Fathers and Grandfathers and are legitimately concerned about the vulnerability of children on their "watch".

Clearly, the growing dysfunction of communities is not a new story, the data and issues have been progressively growing, at least since the late 1970s (Davis, Hunter & Penny 1977 & Shimpo, 1978, Phillpot 1989).

The need for action and government engagement if not intervention at the governance, program and operational level in communities has also been growing. This is evidenced by the Council of Australian Governments concerns at the lack of progress of Indigenous Affairs since 1992 and the confirmation of the lack of progress by the Productivity Commissions report in 2001 and its more recent report this year (2007).

Perhaps when all the speculative assessments are put to one side, it has simply been 'enough is enough' for the national political leadership and particularly for the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

Indeed, it may be seen as a sad reflection of the public sector leadership of the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments that they have not been able to respond more creatively and earlier to the needs of communities for safety and security. It is also perhaps a sad reflection of the inability of all levels of government to achieve success in whole of government approach endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). Additionally, the fact that the Minister was required to use the only command and control agencies at his disposal, the Australian Federal Police and the Army, is also indicative of past failure.

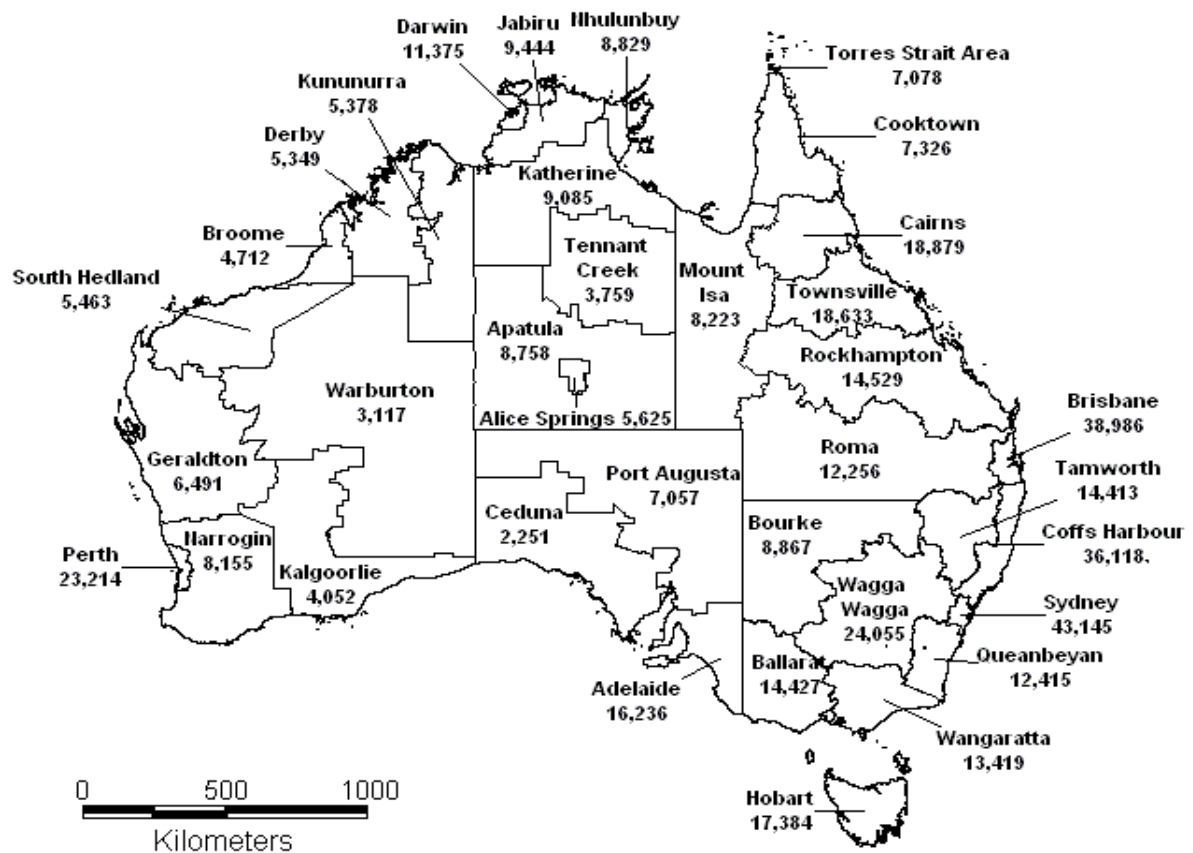
Whatever the trigger to the Commonwealth's actions there is no doubt that one of the underlying causes behind the Government's actions is the demography of the remote Indigenous populations. Based upon the 2001 figures the total population of the remote Indigenous communities is over 100,000 and given that 60% of this population is under 25 it will continue to increase (Taylor, 1998).

It follows then that if the issues identified in the *Children are Sacred* report and in the Productivity Commissions latest update are not addressed then the situation of Indigenous people in remote communities is highly likely to deteriorate even further. Action and follow up actions by government at Commonwealth State and Territory and Local level is therefore necessary.

There is another factor that has largely gone unnoticed. That is, remote Australia is no longer remote. Large scale domestic tourism particularly the early retirees travelling by road around Australia regularly visit remote communities and the urban regional centres that service the remote communities. During their visit they have observed first hand the disastrous effects of the policy and policy failures of the last thirty years. On their return home they have carried the stories of what they have observed and this I would like to suggest has created a constituency of concern and

frustration which in turn has meant the call for actions. The question remains, however, what type of actions and for what purpose?

Map 1. Indigenous population, by ATSI region — 2001



How do Indigenous and Non Indigenous people see remote communities?

Remote Aboriginal communities have not arisen as a result of communal interest, a common need or activity as the word ‘community’ normally implies. They have arisen as a result of contact with non-Aboriginal settlement – a settlement characterised by conflict, oppression, exploitation and encapsulation of Aboriginal people. In this sense, the use of the term ‘community’ is less than appropriate in that it usually implies joint ownership, unity of character, or a structured organic nature that has a shared identity.

As Smith (1989) indicates in his analysis of remote Indigenous communities, “To jump straight from ‘community’ as locality (geographic community) to a socially organised community is possible but often artificial”. Smith goes on to describe the impact of non-Aboriginal settlement generally in the formation of Aboriginal communities that derive from fringe camps, government settlements and missions.

Some of the larger outstations located on the traditional land of the families that occupy them could be regarded as having some joint ownership, unity of character, or a structured organic nature that has a shared identity. Even in these communities, however, the corporate entities that enable the community to provide services are usually the constructs of non Aboriginal society and as such are a structure imposed by the non Indigenous community.

The communities also are not generally homogenous. Different families, different clans and often different language groups have taken up residence at different time under different circumstances.

The range of circumstances under which Indigenous people took up residence has been variable. In some cases, the land on which the government settlement or mission was located was inhabited by the traditional descent group. Some drifted in to experience the bright lights and novelty that such locations offered or to receive food, some were forcibly relocated, and still others sought protection from the violence and exploitation of the frontier.

It is important to note that the institutional communities provided an opportunity for a different life to that provided elsewhere on the frontier. In mission and government settlements there were services available, a measure of the rule of law, and a measure of accountability. There was also a risk of acculturation from both secular and religious assimilationist evangelism.

In a world of limited choices such as staying in the bush, hanging around the fringes of a town, locating on to a pastoral property or locating to a mission government settlement or rations stations, for many families communities represented a reasonable and hopeful alternative despite the risks of acculturation that accompanied such a move.

The majority of people who located to such places were survivors of contact with non Indigenous society and they had relocated or had been relocated as a consequence of that contact. It is valid then to say that the antecedents of many so called remote Indigenous communities were locations set up to serve, manage and transform internally displaced Indigenous people.

The development of town camps in Alice Springs, Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing also represented groups of families some of whom were the traditional owners for the area and others were displaced as the pastoral industry began to replace labour with capital in the 1960s.

A further point to be made is that the issues of remote Australian Indigenous communities are not a micro situation, that is, the numbers are not small. Some 100,000 Indigenous people live in remote localities across Australia. These communities range from over 2,000 in the case of Wadeye (NT) and Maningrida (NT) to under 100 in places such as Wallace Rock hole. The dispersed nature of these communities makes the future development of their populations more problematic not less.

While the situation is not Dafur or East Timor, there are no militia killing people, three carloads of drunks returning from a successful football match can terrorise a community who are without adequate access to policing for one or two nights. Regular breaches of the peace and other forms of violence can become normalised.

This suggests that Indigenous people in remote areas of Australia meet the international definition of internally displaced people, that is "*Internally displaced people – or IDPs – have been forced to flee their homes because their lives were in danger, but unlike refugees they have not crossed an international border. Many IDPs remain exposed to violence, hunger and disease during their displacement and are subject to a multitude of human rights violations (IDMC, 2006)*

Instead of seeing communities as rural ghettos full of violence and dysfunction, one can see communities as locations of internally displaced survivors who for various reasons have been trapped in a set of co-dependence relationships of various welfare support arrangements. Might we begin to see some possibilities of developing relationships that enable us to work with these survivors to find alternative pathways of living?

It is also useful to look at some neglected aspects of the collateral impacts of the increase in Indigenous human and civil rights on remote communities. Partly because in the process of acquiring these rights there have been unintentional consequences and partly to increase the awareness of the policy makers and implementers of the risks associated with the potential collateral impacts of policy reform.

What has the role civil and human rights been in contributing to the current situation in communities?

Firstly, the increase of Indigenous peoples' civil and human rights has had a number of collateral effects which have gone largely unresolved. Examples of these collateral effects include -

- (i) The side effects of granting pastoral industry award wages
- (ii) The unintended consequences of the 1967 referendum
- (iii) The success of land rights movement and the responsibilities of land management

Granting award wages intensified the structural adjustment taking place in the pastoral industry and was a further displacement factor driving many people to mission settlements and the edges of the towns. For example, the growth in permanent fringe camps in Alice Springs and the establishment of communities such as Appurulum (Lake Nash) has a direct correlation to the pastoral industry structural adjustments and legacy of the pool of unemployed labour that was part of such adjustments.

The 1967 referendum occurred in the midst of many changes,³ but effectively gave the Aboriginal Affairs power to the Commonwealth which ultimately enabled Aboriginal people to experience universal suffrage and the right to pursue their interests at common law, also gave them full access to a citizens social security benefits and the right to drink.

Another example of the collateral effects of the acknowledgement of the Indigenous people human and civil rights is demonstrated by the impetus the NT Land Rights Act gave to the development of the outstation movement, as people sought to move

³ The Commonwealth had been involved in Aboriginal affairs since 1911 when South Australia handed over the Northern Territory to the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth and WA governments granted Aborigines the vote in 1962 and Queensland in 1965. Although it should be noted that this right only applied if an Aboriginal person was not a ward of the state which in the Northern Territory's case the majority of Aborigines were. Limited social security benefits came in 1959. In 1966 the entitlement was extended to those classified as "nomadic" or "primitive". This also gave them the right to drink in communities where there was no industry and no labour market such access to social security and drinking as various reports have attested has had mixed benefits and significant costs.

back to traditional country. Without continued government support,⁴ however, the intensity of outstation or homeland expansion has decreased and many outstations or homelands are now intermittently occupied.

The NT Land Rights Act 1977 also gave Indigenous people ownership of large tracts of land in the NT and increased the access to communal and individual land royalties. The access to such windfall gains created inequities within and between communities in terms of who was eligible for such payments. Such payments when combined with social security payments also reduced the perception in the recipient's mind of the need for work derived income.

The granting of title to Aboriginal people also transferred the land management responsibility and in the case of South Australia the governance responsibility. Anangu Pitjantjatjara and Maralinga land is governed by the Anangu Pitjantjatjara and Maralinga Tjarutja Land Rights Act 1980 SA and both Acts provide some of the services and functions expected of a Local Government authority. The transfer of such responsibilities was not accompanied by a commensurate amount of resources to carry out such functions (Phillipot et al 1998, 1999).

To what extent have the structures and processes for communal and individual accountability for resource allocation contributed to the situation?

Until very recently accountability and enforcement of the various governance requirements of Aboriginal Corporations has ranged from non existent to variable. For example, the Registrar position was part time for the first ten years of the Aboriginal Councils and Associations ACT 1976. In the States and Territory the Territory Registrar of Associations have very limited enforcement powers or if they have them they are under resourced.

I would acknowledge, however, that in the last five years the Commonwealth Government has increased the resources of the Office of the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations (ORAC) and more recently with the passing of the Corporation Aboriginal Torres Strait Island Act 2007 they have strengthened the Office of the Registrar Corporations and Torres Strait Island (ORCATSI) legislative authority.

Those Aboriginal Corporations incorporated under State and territory legislation are not subject to the same legislative rigour. Funding bodies, however, have increased the accountability of all Indigenous corporations by developing such performance based mechanisms as Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRA's).

Prior to the dissolution of ATSIC the historical lack of accountability mechanisms and poor performance in policy and program by contracted community based service providers was able to be ignored or compensated for by a variety of mechanisms such as the appointment of grant controllers and special grants or advance payments to enable debt and mismanagement to be compensated.

Since the dissolution of ATSIC these management mechanisms have no longer been available and there has been an increase in the number of community based organisations under administration.

One factor for poor performances of community based corporations was that prior to 2002 there was little access to governance and senior management training for Community Leaders. For example, prior to 2002 because there were no direct

⁴ ATSIC declared a moratorium on funding Outstations in 1998.

employment outcomes until 2002 it was very difficult to get funding agencies to fund access training for Indigenous members of boards.

This thankfully is being addressed by the Governance programs of ORCATSI and the leadership programs of the Australia Indigenous Leadership Centre (AILC) and that of the Office of Indigenous Policy (OPIC).

To what extent have community or capacity development policy or programs played or not played a part the current issues in Indigenous communities?

Community development and/or active capacity development as it is understood in the International development community has simply not been a feature of Indigenous policy or program development.

The two dominant models of development have been either service delivery or a program implementation model.

A service delivery model can be defined as an approach where a range of services generally available to the community are provided to an Indigenous community by way of a contract or service agreement with a representative body in that community. For example municipal services which are contracted to a community government council.

A program implementation model is where a program of a specific policy is delivered through a specific community based organisation established for that purpose, for example, local Indigenous health boards.

Both models have preferred to use a contracting out approach to service delivery. The service delivery approach dates back to the withdrawal of government from direct service delivery to communities under the policy of self determination and self management (1972-1996) when the policy was to effectively contract community organisations to deliver what had previously been delivered by government.

In 1972, the enthusiasm for this approach meant that a range of community organisations had to be established. The range of corporations to be established included the incorporation of community councils, stores, health clinics, pastoral companies, housing associations and market gardens to name a few. The legislation available under which community based groups might incorporate was also limited. The indecent haste with which government withdrew from communities meant that there was little explanation of how these new supposedly community representative bodies were to govern and operate. The new Indigenous corporate organisations had little and mostly no governance education and training, and in many cases they experienced a reduction in the assets and recurrent funding. Commensurate with these changes, local policing by community leaders such as early forms of night patrol were abandoned as the administrative arrangements that supported them were deconstructed. These factors account for many of the governance dysfunctions being experienced today.

The withdrawal of direct government engagement in communities changed the relationship between government and communities members. No longer did government officers share community life nor were they as well trained⁵. They were now located in regional centres such as Alice Springs or Katherine.

⁵ Prior to 1975 it was required that the senior Government officer in a community be a qualified welfare officer. They were required to complete two years of field work in communities and 12 months (later 18

For many Indigenous individual community representatives the de-personalisation of government officers and their withdrawal from communities was a breach of a partnership and the common understanding of the ultimate objective of Aboriginal governance and management of community.

For the government officers, Aboriginal Governance had been achieved when government had withdrawn and handed over service delivery under contract to the newly incorporated community. For the Indigenous community representatives they were just beginning, that is Indigenous representative were looking for a development partnership.

The role of government officers had also changed. In the 1970s the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs had a community development program and the Northern Territory Government had a Department of Community Development. The field officers were not responsible, however, for actual community development instead they were responsible for managing the program or project contract with the community based organisation contracted to deliver community development. These community based organisation were often under resourced and under funded to carry out such functions⁶

More recently the contracted service delivery model has been broadened, and now community based Aboriginal corporations have to compete, often unsuccessfully with mainstream organisations to win such agreements or contracts.

None the less, community or capacity development of communities and individuals in communities is a critical factor in people being able to move from welfare dependence. A key element of capacity development is the development of some degree of self sufficiency. This is difficult in the remote areas of Australia where in Rowse's words, *"Aboriginal land not Aboriginal labour is what the colonising immigrants have always wanted"* and *"Once rural industries, such as pastoralism became efficient and capitalised, the Aboriginal camps were revealed as surplus population."* (Rowse, 2007)

In some area of remote Australia such as the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands, the Ngyaatjatjarra lands and Martu country of the Western Desert area which were never settled, there was always a surplus population.

So given that in the remote communities of Australia we are faced with a growing population of people who have been intermittently displaced since first contact with non Indigenous people and given that the majority of these people have limited skills and knowledge valued by mainstream, where do Australian policy-makers go next?

Towards the future

For any one making an argument for community or capacity development in remote Indigenous communities, the lack of a market economy and therefore a labour market presents a number of problems. Just as there is a limited number of theories

months) at the Australian School of Pacific Administration followed by 12 months on probation. After 1975 this requirement ceased and regional officers responsible for programs were drawn from the pool of the public service.

⁶ The author was the council clerk at Minjilang from 1977 until 1980 during that period the Minjilang Community Inc was funded to carry out some community development projects none of which received funding for overhead costs or capital costs.

about economics (Ralston Saul, 2005)⁷ there are probably only four or five development models available for remote Australian Indigenous communities. Five of these are outlined below.

1. The welfare model is effectively the one that exists now, where people are recognised as being outside the mainstream economy and on that basis are supported until such time as they have the desire and the capacity to relocate and participate in the mainstream economic life of the community.

2. A self sufficiency substitution model where labour is substituted for capital through what could be termed as "sweat equity" is used to build up reserves for investment in activities that create employment and foster commitments to acquired additional skills and knowledge. The acquisitions of skills and knowledge then provide people with the capacity to seek employment in the mainstream. Part of this model was a feature of missions and government settlements and elements of this approach underpin such programs as Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP) and Work for the Dole.

3. A national interest transfer model where representatives of a community or individuals in a community take on contracts to carry out activities that are of regional or national interest that are funded regionally or nationally and are also designed to develop skills and knowledge that are transferable to other industries. The activity creates a link for the individual from their community based activities to the mainstream. Examples of such models could include:

(i) The creation of a national Indigenous land conservation and management program that employ Indigenous surplus labour on land conservation programmes.

(ii) The use of contemporary alternative building construction approaches to enable Indigenous people to construct their own dwellings and other buildings.

(ii) The establishment of a national remote area Indigenous coastal protection program to support existing initiatives in border security.

There are some examples of this model already existing. Examples include the Department of Defence's NORFORCE and the land management work of the various Land Councils. With the exception of NORFORCE there has not been any strategic attempt to use these approaches nation wide.

4. A population relocation model where continued location in remote localities is made so prohibitive that people in remote communities have no other option but to relocate to regional localities where there are services and employment. The risk of this model is that people will move to such centres without the skills knowledge or social capacity to operate independently and as a consequence will create underclass communities in regional centres whose various needs and behaviours are beyond the resources of the regional centre to cope with.

⁷ Much of the debate about remote communities has been an economic one because Aborigines in remote communities are outside the mainstream economy and until they are part of it the problems of remote Indigenous people cannot be addressed.

It is clear from comments made by members of the government and by the policy and practices of government departments that a population relocation model (DEWR 2006 personal communication) underlies much of the current policy. The implications of a large scale displacement of Indigenous populations from remote communities to urban regional centres appears to be ignored and not for discussion.

5. A final model might be a policy and policy implementation model that applies a mix of all four of the above approaches as the circumstances of a specific group required and as negotiated and developed between the group and government in a partnership approach.

At present it would appear that the dominant models are the welfare model and the relocation model. Although there are increasing calls for substitution or self sufficiency model and a transfer models to be developed (Pearson 2007).

The reality may be that the application of various Commonwealth, State and Territory policy's and programs, with their direct and their inevitable but unpredictable collateral impacts will mean that various elements of each of the above models will be applied at different times and in different localities, so creating a confusing maze which Indigenous people will once again have to navigate and survive.

What is required to make sense of the mix of models and their application? Perhaps more importantly, what are the key considerations if in the mix of models the dominant model is a population relocation model?

Making sense of the future

There are perhaps eight key perspectives that need to be fundamental to any national approach to reforming Indigenous policy and policy implementation on the ground in communities.

1. It needs to be recognised that simply displacing the existing Indigenous populations from remote communities to regional urban centres is not in the interests of Indigenous and non Indigenous people of Australia nor is it in the Australia nation's interest.
2. It needs to be acknowledged that Government needs to engage directly with indigenous communities rather than playing rescuer. Government needs to enter into partnership with communities and individual indigenous members of communities including community and family leaders.
3. There needs to be agreement between the Commonwealth, the State and Northern Territory about the appropriate mix of strategic policy courses of action available to address remote Indigenous community issues.
4. There is a need for two to three systemic systems that provide valued employment in areas of national interest or in increasing the self sufficiency of communities.
5. In order to do this the government staff and the staff of any contract agencies need to be trained in cross cultural work and what could be loosely called development work. As part of this process, the employment and training of government staff and the staff of

contracted agencies needs to be biased towards indigenous people themselves.

6. Pathways from community and community based employment into mainstream locations and employment need to be mapped and the lessons learnt from successful and unsuccessful pilot programs that have attempted to increase Indigenous employment. They need to be incorporated into all training employment programs direct at remote Indigenous community residents.
7. Regional urban centres that are most likely to be a point of immigration for remote communities will need to have their social infrastructure and service capacity developed to cope with such movements of people.
8. The ongoing development of Indigenous representatives of remote Indigenous communities in contemporary community leadership and governance needs to be strengthened.

These perspectives are not new, Arabena (2005) and Sullivan (2006) and Pearson (2005) have both argued for similar approaches. As Pearson has said on several occasions, the hard part is doing it. The important point is we do know how to apply these things. The Productivity Commission has identified four key features of things that work.

1. Cooperative approaches between Indigenous people and government (and the private sector).
2. Community involvement in program design and decision-making — a 'bottom up' rather than 'top-down' approach.
3. Good governance.
4. On-going government support (including human, financial and physical resources).

It is putting these methods together at the community or local level that is the hard part. In cases where groups or individuals have been able to apply some of the above features, success has been a feature. For example, the recent construction of an environmentally sustainable waste water system at Malabugilmah community in Northern NSW.

Clearly, the appointment of Government Officers to work in communities may represent a first step in government re-engaging with communities at the local rather than the regional level. If they are to be just managers and operational auditors of Commonwealth programs, however, then there will inevitably be a reprise of the old colonial Welfare role. On the other hand, if they were to have a developmental role (Sullivan, 2006) then a pathway might be found from where we are now, to a future better place.

What might a developmental role look? Sullivan (op cit) and Arabena (op cit) argue that it should be about "effective communication", a two way transfer of information between the community residents and government and "a monitoring of consent processes and effective local policy input" (Sullivan 2006 p30).

I would go a step further for a community based facilitator working with a group, community or camp. The facilitator role is probably insufficient, however, and they would also require some delegated resources and some authority to facilitate the integration of resources from a range of government programs. If they did not have these types of delegations and were in a position of relying on the regional or the central office multiple agency decision making, then they could very quickly find themselves discredited at the community level.

Government officers with a developmental role as described by Arabena and Sullivan and with the delegated authority to integrate and package resources to support civil groups and governance in communities could enable government and communities to enter into partnerships with other sectors of Australian society that may address the mutual civil and governance concerns of community residents and the government.

In conclusion, there is one last consideration and that is the question of Aboriginal resistance to policy reform based on a population relocation model. There may be a variety of legal challenges at a community level. Inevitably any resistance will be the weapons of the weak (Scott, 1996), gossip, rumour, innuendo, intimidation of individual policy implementers and administration, sporadic acts of sabotage and spontaneous group violence are some of the possible responses to incompetent ruthless pursuit of policy objectives.

As governments proceed to address the suffering of remote Indigenous survivor groups, let them proceed with care acknowledging that the situation that Indigenous people in remote areas find themselves is largely a response to inadequate and flawed previous policies, a myopia about the unintended consequences of such policies, and a failure to act when the destructive impact of the unintended historical policies was apparent.

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