

No Movement on the Outstations

In the early 1970s, something extraordinary happened in the Northern Territory. Aboriginal people started to migrate out of government settlements and missions to live on their traditional lands. This decentralisation was called the outstations movement. It challenged evolutionary logic. Hunter-gatherers had been coaxed or coerced to centralise in larger communities by the Australian colonial state. The purposes of this project were to sedentarise, civilise and assimilate nomadic Aboriginal people, at that time wards of the state. But with the policy shifts to self-determination and land rights, not only did people return to live in small groups away from settlements, but the state supported such decentralisation. There was an unchallenged recognition that the state project of assimilation had been an expensive failure.

Over the next 30 years, the Commonwealth took responsibility for outstations, but a proper policy was never developed. With minimal support, sometimes bordering on unconscionable neglect, the outstations movement persisted and grew. Today, there are an estimated 560 communities with populations of fewer than 100 people dotted across the Territory. Almost all are located on Aboriginal-owned land that covers 500,000 square kilometres—nearly half of the NT.

There is enormous diversity in outstations that statistical averages can mask. Most are populated by small family groups, but some number more than a hundred people. Some are occupied year-round, others seasonally or rarely; in almost all there is considerable population movement between outstations and larger centres. Some have robust local economies built on arts production, employment as rangers, and wildlife harvesting; others are highly dependent on welfare income.

The key commonality is that their residents have made a determined choice to actively engage with their land. This choice might be based on a desire to protect sacred sites, to retain connections to ancestral lands and ancestors, to live off the land, or to escape social dysfunction that might be prevalent in larger townships.

In September 2007, in the dying days of the Howard Government and amid the ‘National Emergency’ Response, the Commonwealth—with stealth and fiscal blackmail—divested responsibility for outstations back to the Northern Territory. A new agreement was signed, locking in the historic chronic underinvestment of previous decades. The Territory acquiesced, because it had no choice. Since then it has worked to develop a coherent policy, a ‘new deal’ for outstations.

Last week this much-anticipated framework—*Working Future*—was released. The policy, paradoxically, had little to say about outstations. Instead it focused

on the targeted delivery of support to 20 larger Aboriginal communities now rebadged as ‘Territory Growth Towns’. The policy statement anticipates these towns will become robust nodes for vibrant and sustainable economic development.

The only ground for this optimism is considerable federal funding of these development nodes; it resonates with the failed plans to develop similar Aboriginal regional centres with significant public underwriting in the 1960s. Most of these large communities are also targeted for support by the Commonwealth as ‘priority communities’; there is policy collusion evident here.

During the past 30 years, a growing body of research has indicated that life at outstations is better—in health outcomes, livelihood options, and social cohesion, even housing conditions—than at larger townships, despite neglect. In present parlance, prospects for ‘Closing the Gap’ might be more likely at outstations.

Many Aboriginal people remain determined to live on their ancestral lands, pursuing a way of life that is informed by fundamentally different value systems. *Working Future* envisages only a conventional mainstream future for remote-living Aboriginal people. While paying lip service to the value of outstations, it proposes that the status quo—ongoing neglect—continues.

There is an alternative ‘working future’ for outstations that deserves serious policy consideration. Rather than revisiting the past, the NT Government should champion the aspirations and determination of outstation people to live on their land pursuing a way of life that incorporates two ways: the customary and the market, Aboriginal and European.

Such a hybrid mode of living is clearly beneficial for Aboriginal people. But it also has spin-off benefits nationally. Living on country, Aboriginal people occupy and manage nearly 10 per cent of Australia. At present they provide a wide range of environmental services. Empty landscape—*terra vacua*—is not in the national interest.

Devising public policy for outstations is a serious challenge. *Working Future* reeks of Canberra capture, fiscal mendicancy, and the continued exclusion of the politically vulnerable from decision-making about their own future.

Sensible policy would provide practical support for what is working on-the-ground rather than just for imagined growth towns, while enabling a more culturally and economically diverse, productive, and evenly populated Australia for the 21st century.

26 May 2009