

## **Helping the Homelands**

It is predictable perhaps that COAG is putting the most concerted effort to ‘close the gap’ at 29 priority communities, while ignoring the needs of nearly 1,000 outstation/homeland communities.

Evidently, the gap will close even as Australian citizens living at these most remote and smallest localities, established with Australian Government support in the 1970s and 1980s during a more benign period of Keynesian social democratic consensus, languish neglected during a belated neo-liberal time of Canberra consensus in the early 21st century.

The Closing the Gap mantra is most heavily focused on priority communities (or Territory Growth Towns in the Northern Territory) targeting larger more visible communities only because they are larger and more visible and because economic rationalist thinking is so convinced that size, be it of townships or shires, will deliver cost savings from economies of scale.

And so the logic goes, a large school even if devoid of students is more cost effective than a number of small schools where attendance might just be higher.

Outstations/homelands (the terms can be used interchangeably) represent a service delivery headache for the state, but this is mainly due to unimaginative policy approaches.

Hub and spoke models have worked efficiently and effectively for outstation resource agencies and regional art centres and CDEP organisations over the past four decades.

Even schooling and health services and the delivery of consumer goods to remote homelands occurred more effectively in the 1980s as documented in the parliamentary report *Return to Country* in 1987.

So what has happened since then? Have we become less efficient? Has the widely reported loss of national productivity impacted disproportionately on remote Indigenous Australia?

Or has there just been unconscionable diminishing investment at such communities? Perhaps COAG has not applied evidence to assess relative returns from investments?

During the current neo-liberal ‘revolution’ in remote Indigenous Australia we are seeing the creative destruction of community-based organisations that historically delivered to homelands, not in the name of contestability and marketisation, but in the name of Closing the Gap and associated imagined development for some in larger places rather than for all.

And yet what evidence there is suggests homelands might be as, or more, productive, viable and socially vibrant communities than larger places.

This is not to suggest that all larger places are unproductive, unviable and socially dysfunctional, it is just that they often face more complicated political challenges than smaller more cohesive places: imagined service economies of scale might in fact be offset by real diseconomies of scale resulting from past colonially imposed presence of people on someone else's country.

It is of deep concern that to date there is no evidence of any economic growth at Territory Growth Towns, despite the massive pump priming by National Emergency Intervention programs and National Partnership Agreement multiyear multibillion commitments, at least not for most black residents.

A recent Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) report 'Indigenous Employment in Government Service Delivery' notes that jobs created by the Australian state in townships in the name of proper employment to replace state-subsidised CDEP jobs are only deemed sustainable if accompanied by continual state subsidisation. This surely gives sustainability a very new meaning.

It is also of grave concern that not only has there been no scenario planning for what is possible or desired (including by the land's owners) at larger places targeted for growth, but that the inter-connections between larger communities (of which there are about 200) and smaller places (of which there are about 1,000) is neither recognised nor explored in any systematic way.

Australia is a signatory to a number of international human rights conventions that oblige the nation to provide basic services to its citizens, including at places that have been repopulated as a direct consequence of colonial and post-colonial policies including land rights and native title rights.

Importantly, the provision of such basic services, health, housing, education and livelihood opportunity could be a mainstay of the economy of larger places, if properly resourced.

Equally importantly there are compelling Indigenous wellbeing and livelihood reasons to support homelands.

Data from the 2008 NATSISS show that wildlife harvesting (food security) and cultural production is highest at homelands; there are even official statistics that suggest subjective views of happiness and wellbeing might be enhanced at smaller places.

The massive Indigenous estate needs to be populated for environmental

management reasons and for strategic reasons; Australia was concerned for a long time to populate the north and centre, but clearly with particular types of citizens.

Other settler colonial and Scandinavian countries seem able to support tiny Indigenous communities in remote and difficult circumstances better, but we seem to be incapable of learning from others.

Instead, Australia clings to abstract utopian views that neoliberal moral restructuring alone (to inculcate individualism, private property, accumulation-focused norms) will deliver development outcomes, even as report after report indicates that progress is slow or non-existent or that wellbeing is declining.

Perhaps it is time to look at some development alternatives, with homelands in the mix?

Evidently, the bipartisanship of the 1980s, when there was agreement by both major parties that homelands should be supported, has been replaced by a new dangerous and highly ideological bipartisanship that homelands hamper the new state project of normalisation.

Not only is this new approach neglecting people living at homelands, but it is also jeopardising service organisations that have been carefully developed over decades.

So in the name of Closing the Gap we are seeing outstation people with less opportunity for education and employment, and who are less likely to receive health and housing services on an equitable needs basis where they live.

This new approach is based on a misguided belief that people will respond to the deployment of state power to enforce centralisation to access services at bigger places; and that living on someone else's country or on land now compulsorily leased or owned for between 40 and 99 years by the state will magically improve people's quality of life.

The deployment of spin to plaster over the possible emerging tragedy of homelands neglect will come, with time, to haunt the Australian nation and its dominant political parties who stand by condoning pain in the name of some imagined longer-term normalisation 'gain'.

In the absence of national political leadership in sensible outstations policy, the smallest and politically most vulnerable group of Australians is placed at risk.

This is an issue not just of rights and social justice, but also of freedom and choice.

The current national smugness driven by resource plenitude and strategically managed by big business interests (including the compliant media) and a minerals dependent state and citizenry is very evident; but the emerging post-neoliberal world is far from certain. Common sense suggests that a heterogeneous approach to development might minimise risk.

And policy needs to be crafted with care, without too much emphasis on statistics and numbers as if people do not matter.

Evidently, and unfortunately, we as a nation do not have the strategic vision nor the common decency to recognise the value of alternative possibilities at homelands on the Indigenous estate as a livelihood option.

*25 October 2011*