

## **A Drift Towards Disaster**

With John Taylor\*

Wittingly, or otherwise, the Howard Government's 'national emergency' response in the Northern Territory, which includes a mix of new and old policy instruments, could see a rapid migration of Indigenous people from remote townships.

New proposals targeting these communities include, among other things, immediate alcohol bans, changes to welfare that will link school attendance with payment, health checks for children under 16, and changes to the Community Development Employment Projects scheme that will make all participants ultimately accountable to a commonwealth administrator rather than their community-based elected organisations. Many of these changes are part and parcel of the dominant policy discourse and emerging program settings that emphasise mainstreaming and migration from remote communities where labour markets are limited or absent.

The recent release of 2006 census data indicates that the NT Indigenous population has risen in line with projections from an estimate of 49,000 in 1996 to an estimate of about 63,000 in 2006. This rapid growth is happening everywhere, not just in remote communities. This growth places pressure on meeting shortfalls in housing and infrastructure and services such as health, education, and training for Indigenous people in private dwellings, public housing, community housing, and in town camps and informal camps.

A combination of policies that aim to move Indigenous people up the settlement hierarchy from outstations to townships and now from townships to mainstream urban employment could see urban migration in NT at an unprecedented level. Even before the emergency measures were announced last month, it was estimated that if the Alice Springs hinterland was emptied of Indigenous people living on their traditional lands, the Indigenous share of the Alice Springs population could increase from 20 per cent to about 50 per cent. This is obviously a statistical extreme, but if the full suite of commonwealth policy is taken at face value, and is effective, then this could be the outcome. Negative social cohesion impacts from relocation would make Alice Springs a very different sort of town.

Similar migrations could also occur in other centres, such as Darwin, where urban Aboriginal communities could be swamped by more than their usual share of visitors; and informal 'long grass' homeless camps would likely increase both in size and number. These are the possible direct consequences of

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current and planned actions.

Ironically, success in conducting health checks and in police interventions could also enhance urban drift if they result in higher rates of urban-based hospitalisation and incarceration, since patients and inmates are frequently accompanied by kin from home communities intent on staying close to and caring for relatives. The imposition of public housing occupancy levels on commonwealth-acquired community housing in remote townships will also need careful thought.

Overcrowding in community housing is substantially higher than accepted public housing levels, raising questions about how 'normalisation' will be achieved in the absence of either mass out-migration (possibly to outstations) or a massive housing construction program in situ. This latter is hard to imagine on land that has been compulsorily acquired for only five years.

Even the best-intentioned and thoughtful public policy-making can have unintended consequences. But policy-making on the run, such as we are seeing at present, greatly increases the risk of mistakes.

It is worth recalling that a large-scale unregulated movement to towns associated with the Pastoral Award decision in the late 1960s led to many of the social ills that remain in NT town camps. In the present policy climate of uncertainty we run the risk of repeating this migratory effect at a higher level and amplifying the marginalisation of Indigenous people that lies at the very heart of social dysfunction.

Only last year, Gary Johns, head of the conservative and influential Bennelong Society, warned the Government that policy changes would spark a move away from remote communities, creating problems in north Australian towns. Rather than encourage rural decline and prepare for a refugee influx, as Johns predicted, serious action needs to be taken to address investment backlogs in education, housing, health and economic development in townships and outstations in the Aboriginal-owned hinterland.

Such investment is essential to avert the likelihood of people moving once again from rural poverty to far more extreme poverty in urban slum dwelling situations. Evidence suggests that a potential socioeconomic disaster may well emerge.

Unintended consequences of policy on the run need to be avoided at all costs by more considered policy-making.

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