

## **ANOTHER DECADE FOR HOMELANDS POLICY DEBACLE**

In a media release issued on March 28 this year the Australian Government announced a \$221 million ‘investment’ in municipal and essential services for outstations and homelands in the Northern Territory over 10 years.

It stated \$206 million would come from the Commonwealth Government and \$15 million from the NT Government.

Evidently, the Australian Government is keen to assure Aboriginal people living on outstations and homelands that they will receive access to power, water, and sewerage and road maintenance, as well as garbage collection and dog control programs.

The media release correctly noted that essential services are critical to supporting the health and wellbeing of families living in these very remote communities, although thankfully the Closing the Gap mantra was not bleated on this occasion.

Families will now have some comfort in knowing these services—basic citizenship entitlements—will continue for the next 10 years.

At face value this Australian Government commitment to homelands sounds positive.

And this is certainly how media reporting and key advocacy organisations interpreted this strategic pre-Budget announcement, or ‘managed leak’.

Amnesty International ‘welcomed the continued 10-year commitment for traditional Aboriginal homelands’ and the Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the NT ‘welcomed homeland support’.

Both palpably relieved that 10,000 homeland residents, 25 per cent of the rural Aboriginal population of the NT, were not going to be allowed to ‘wither on the vine’, to recall the evocative words of Pat Dodson in 2009.

Concern was expressed at the tiny NT Government contribution, just 7 per cent of the package, and the absence of any funding whatsoever for new housing.

Politicians were divided in their response.

Retiring member for the NT seat of Arafura, Marion Scrymgour, who had fought long and hard for equitable support for homelands, felt that the Australian Government announcement vindicated her struggle on behalf of her constituents in a bush seat.

The Country Liberal (CLP) Opposition used the announcement as a springboard to announce its Homelands and Outstations Policy, attacking the Henderson Labor Government's focus on 20 Territory Growth Towns to the detriment of 560 homelands, suggesting its policies were forcing people off country.

The CLP policy, on the other hand, apparently commits to the preservation and maintenance of homelands and outstations and will back this commitment with significant support into the long term— if elected.

The Shadow Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion was scathing in his criticism, suggesting that the Government was 'clueless on real action to help end Aboriginal disadvantage'.

This investment, he observed, only amounted to \$42,000 per homeland per year and suggested there was little to show from such a level of support that had been provided since 2007.

Scullion neglected to mention it was the Howard Government, of which he was a member, that had set this totally inadequate benchmark.

It was only the Australian Green's Rachel Siewert that seemed to have noticed that this funding was being promoted as a part of the Stronger Futures package.

She noted that minimal funding of basic services should not be used as leverage to encourage support for punitive Intervention measures, also coincidentally proposed for another 10 years.

To see some contestation over homelands policy between political parties in the Australian and NT Parliaments is welcome at a time when there is too much complacent bipartisanship over Indigenous policy.

There is a hint of cooperative federalism in the package—the Australian Government has actually managed to persuade the NT Government to chip in \$150 per homeland resident per annum.

Conversely, the NT Government is the real winner outflanking the Commonwealth who bears the bulk of the fiscal burden.

But behind all of this public discourse is a story of extraordinarily bad homelands policy making.

It has been overlooked in the media coverage and political debating.

It sees remote and relatively powerless homeland residents yet again unfairly deployed as political and ideological footballs.

This story of injustice needs to be told.

From 1911 to 1978 the Commonwealth administered the Northern Territory.

It implemented policies of protection and preservation and then assimilation.

It promoted the centralisation of Aboriginal people in remote NT into government settlements and missions on gazetted reserves.

By 1972, the abject failure of the assimilation policies resulted in their replacement by a softer form of assimilation termed ‘self-determination’.

The homelands movement of the 1970s was born from a conjunction of land rights, ‘self-determination’, that allowed Aboriginal people the choice to return to their ancestral lands, and the development failure—from both western and Aboriginal viewpoints—of artificial colonial settlements and missions.

Homelands were perceived by the Commonwealth as places where people could be more self-sustaining and where there was greater social cohesion and less political friction and stress.

But homelands were rarely isolated economically, socially or culturally from larger places that usually served as their services hubs.

With self-government in 1978 town management and public utility responsibility was transferred to the new NT Government.

But for a variety of reasons, the Commonwealth retained responsibility for support of homelands. This ran counter to the wishes of the NT Government.

The views of both were outlined in a momentous exchange of letters in 1979, between Fred Chaney, then Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Paul Everingham, then NT Chief Minister.

Chaney wanted the Commonwealth to retain responsibility for homelands because they represented special situations where there was a strong emphasis on self-sufficiency.

The Commonwealth did not believe they required standard municipal services and was unsure about the long-term permanence of these Aboriginal initiatives; an issue that by now, 33 years on, has surely been resolved once and for all.

Everingham was disappointed with Chaney’s decision.

He observed, quite correctly, that homelands were, and are, invariably closely associated with larger townships.

He believed that an integrated system of services might be effective and efficient and that the only proper approach would be not to distinguish between groups on the basis of size.

The Commonwealth, with its fiscal muscle and Aboriginal concurrence, won the day.

This was, in large measure, due to the ambivalence of the NT Government to land rights.

This undermined its jurisdictional authority.

And so things remained for nearly 30 years with homelands supported on a shoestring first by the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs and then by the now abolished Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC).

This support came through three key programs, generally channelled through homeland resource centres: the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme; the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP) Municipal; and, for a time, capital housing and infrastructure support under the broad umbrella of the National Aboriginal Health Strategy.

Then in 2007 with the Intervention, a bizarre ‘National Emergency’ reversal occurred.

The Commonwealth deployed special Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) laws to take over the townships, 73 prescribed communities, and then sought to offload 560 homelands onto the NT Government.

In an unconscionable Memorandum of Understanding signed between senior Commonwealth and NT Government Officials Wayne Gibbons and Mike Burgess on 17 September 2007, the NT Government was blackmailed with a total offer of over \$500 million of new money if it took over full responsibility for homelands for an annual amount of \$20 million (roughly equivalent to the CHIP municipal funding stream) to be provided for just four years.

The offer was contingent on agreement that no Australian Government funding would be used to construct any new housing at homelands.

What is even more bizarre perhaps is that the incoming Rudd Government did nothing to change this totally inadequate and inequitable arrangement.

And to add insult to injury, the Gillard Government is now looking to maintain this policy debacle for another decade, in the name of security and certainty

and the health and wellbeing of families at homelands.

It is important to recognise that what is being provided here are funds for the most basic essential services, and even these have not been assessed using any objective needs-based evidence.

Indeed the only information to undertake such an assessment from the Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey was last collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2006; no similar survey was conducted on this most important issue alongside the 2011 Census.

There is no mention in this policy announcement of the health, education, housing or economic development needs of homeland residents; or any comparative assessment of outcomes at homelands compared to large places, so called Territory Growth Towns.

Nor is there any consideration of the national interest in properly supporting homelands that strategically occupy and environmentally manage a large chunk of remote Australia.

Nor is there any thought given to the social justice grounds for the Australian Government to honour a social compact agreed in 1978.

This is a difficult area of policy, not least because dispersed communities and mobile regional populations so tax the political and bureaucratic imaginations that they seek imagined technical solutions to recentralise and sedentarise homeland populations—much as occurred during the failed assimilation era.

And at the ideological level, neoliberal sensibilities are offended because homelands are possibly more productive places than larger ‘growth’ towns where ‘real’ jobs and the ‘real’ market economy are supposedly located.

Homeland residents today are in a worse place than five years ago because any ‘security and certainty’ this policy pronouncement might deliver is more than offset by high insecurity and uncertainty about CDEP and the community-based resource organisations that have been at the very heart of their development prospects.

People, one might say, do not live in remote Australia by municipal services alone.

Evidently, it has not yet occurred to the Australian Government that neglect creates socioeconomic gaps, it does not close them.

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