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SELF-DETERMINATION IN ACTION

How John Hunter and Aboriginal people
in Arnhem Land anticipated official
policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s

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Introduction

The central figure of this chapter, John Hunter, was superintendent of the Maningrida Settlement on the Liverpool River estuary in Arnhem Land for most of the period between 1963 and 1973. Only 25 years old when first appointed in an acting capacity, a decade later he left Maningrida as a polarising figure. As Dan Gillespie, with whom I worked at both Maningrida and, later, Kakadu National Park, noted:

Though shy and retiring Hunter had a strong personality, a fine wit and a huge capacity for work of all kinds; the Aboriginal people of Maningrida looked on him with respect and affection; [and] the European population's reaction to him varied from considerable respect to an intense dislike.¹

1 Gillespie, 'John Hunter and Maningrida', 2.

Respect and affection for him were commonly expressed by Aboriginal people around Maningrida when I conducted interviews there during 2013; Wulaki man Ngaraidj Morogopina, for example: ‘He was the one ... who helped us, always [to do what we wished to do]. He worked day and night and would always do what he said’.²

Gillespie went on to remark that ‘Hunter’s support in word and deed for Aboriginal people’s right to basic equalities’ generated the ire of the European population.³ Gillespie’s informed opinion, based on several years as a teacher and art and craft outlet manager at Maningrida in the early 1970s, takes us to major issues of this chapter: (1) the playing out of official policy, determined in Canberra, in this remote setting; (2) the issues that so polarised the ‘balandas’, that is, the European population; (3) the agency of a relatively junior, albeit locally powerful, official working in partnership with local Aboriginal people; and (4) Aboriginal people’s pursuit of ‘basic equalities’, but as they, not policymakers in Canberra or other balandas, perceived them. This last point is linked to the first, my argument being that Maningrida’s Aboriginal people, assisted by Hunter, expressed their self-determination through their decision to establish outstations. In this chapter we will see how Aboriginal people and Hunter’s actions together anticipated formalisation of self-determination as policy under the Whitlam Government; and that such actions made for structural change, affecting large groups of people. Before exploring these issues, I turn first to the historical background of the town and the forces that brought it to where it was in Hunter’s time.

Making Maningrida and its part in the assimilation program

It is difficult to imagine how remote Maningrida was when Hunter became acting superintendent in 1963; these days it is possible to drive from the Northern Territory capital, Darwin, to Maningrida in a matter of hours. Although a very rough exploratory track from Oenpelli had been cut in the dry season of that year, the settlement (as it was called back then) was reached only by boat or light aircraft. For many years after, the road trip from Darwin to Maningrida would take two or more days.⁴

2 Recently deceased people are identified here, and later, by subsection and clan names.

3 Gillespie, ‘John Hunter and Maningrida’, 2.

4 Long, *The Go-Betweens*, 130.

The state established a permanent presence in 1957 when the first Government Manager, David Drysdale, sailed into the Liverpool River estuary with his wife, Ingrid, and two patrol officers, Ted Egan and Trevor Milikins.⁵ The details of Maningrida's early years are well described by Ingrid Drysdale and, more recently, by a Darwin-based historian, Helen Bond-Sharp.⁶ They depict the evolution of a tiny bush camp into a settlement, as it was officially proclaimed by the Director of Welfare, Harry Giese, in the Northern Territory Administration (NTA), in 1961.⁷

By 1961 Giese had articulated a coherent role for the settlements as a practical way of enacting the Commonwealth's assimilation policy in places where more traditionally based Aboriginal people lived, as expressed in the Welfare Branch Annual Report for 1958–59:

The main purposes of these establishments are:

- i. to bring natives together into a community and to teach them the habits and skills of living in such a community;
- ii. to provide welfare services fitted to their needs and to their stage of social development;
- iii. to provide the means whereby training may be given, particularly to children and adolescents;
- iv. to introduce the general concept of 'work' as a worthwhile aim in life; and
- v. to develop in the younger and middle age-groups an attitude that the settlements and mission statements are there to provide health and education services for their children, so that the latter may be prepared for a future life as adults living in a wider community than the tribe.⁸

By the standards of today, these objectives were blatant social engineering that, as we will see, met with increasing resistance – at Maningrida and elsewhere. Yet they set the framework under which Hunter and other superintendents were required to work, especially in the early years. And so, consistent with such policy, by 1961 Maningrida had a 'town plan', with built up roads laid out on a grid. Tracks spidered out from the settlement into surrounding country and there had been considerable building and other development: a health clinic, school, government

5 Drysdale and Durack, *The End of Dreaming*, 79.

6 Bond-Sharp, *Maningrida*, 52–95.

7 Drysdale and Durack, *The End of Dreaming*, 77.

8 NTA, Welfare Branch, *Annual Report 1958–59*, 30.

offices, housing for government officers, a 4-hectare fruit and vegetable garden and a sawmill, for example. There was even a kitchen to provide meals for those people considered unable to fend for themselves. Out of town, a project to develop local forests was getting underway.

The NTA's original vision for Maningrida did not materialise as intended. Consistent with the detailed strategies that had been developed before the Second World War by the NTA's parent department, the Department of the Interior, and its minister, John McEwen, the initial intention had been to allow Aboriginal people on reserves such as Arnhem Land to remain undisturbed and the lands to be protected from exploitation.⁹ Arnhem Land had been made an Aboriginal reserve in 1931 and, although there had been a few patrols around Maningrida before and after the war, policymakers still considered it to be a very wild and untamed part of Australia in the early 1950s. Hence it seemed wise for the state to tread cautiously; besides, both financial resources and manpower in that postwar period were scarce. The small trading post that had been set up by patrol officers Syd Kyle-Little and Jack Doolan in 1949, although considered successful, was abandoned at the end of that year because these men were needed elsewhere.¹⁰

Yet, there were other aspects of the McEwen policy that called for intervention; for example, provision for the immediate medical and physical needs of all Aboriginal people, wherever they were.¹¹ Patrol officers reported widespread chronic diseases, notably yaws and leprosy, among the hundreds of people living in the vicinity of the Liverpool River. Their treatment required frequent nursing care that could not be provided from Darwin or even Goulburn Island and Millingimbi missions. By 1956 Harry Giese had decided the time was right to establish Maningrida as a station and, with the strong support of the Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, pushed ahead with its establishment the following year. Their intention had been to make a more permanent version of what Kyle-Little and Doolan had done in 1949; people from the bush could come in to trade crocodile skins and artefacts, receive healthcare and return to their homelands. Almost immediately, however, in an act of self-determination, they stayed around the new station, returning to homelands only for hunting and ceremonies.

9 McEwen, 'The Northern Territory', 5.

10 Kyle-Little, *Whispering Wind*, 172–74; Long, *The Go-Betweens*, 85–88.

11 McEwen, 'The Northern Territory', 1, 11.

The more or less permanent movement of the Aboriginal people to the station broadened the state's ambition for Maningrida. The transition from trading post and health service provision to proclaimed settlement took place within very few years. With the permanent settlement of Aboriginal people it became possible for Maningrida to become a site for the implementation of the assimilation policy as articulated in the Welfare Branch's 1958–59 policy on settlements, discussed above. Thus, very soon Maningrida was to see not only the small enterprises that Aboriginal people themselves had developed (sales of crocodile skins and artefacts) but also Western style (mostly primary) industries that could be undertaken by people without formal education. As can be seen from the annual reports of the Welfare Branch through the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was an almost formulaic approach to primary industries.¹² Thus, nearly all settlements had gardens, piggeries, poultry, cattle runs and dairies. Maningrida, with its good rainfall and soils, seemed to offer much greater opportunity than many other settlements: big, ambitious projects in fisheries, forestry and sawmilling.

Hasluck had been pursuing forestry as a potential industry for the Northern Territory from when he took office in 1951. He got the scent of its possibilities after hearing mildly positive reports from foresters serving there during the war. The Commonwealth Forestry and Timber Bureau, the government's official source of forestry advice, had sent a professional forester, Bill Bateman, to evaluate the prospects of forestry. His report was, to Hasluck's disappointment, equivocal.¹³ It indicated only limited potential for commercial development of existing forests and urged caution about the possibilities of plantations. Notwithstanding Hasluck's impatience for a positive story, G. J. Rodger, Director General of the bureau, followed up with blunt advice to the head of Hasluck's department, C. R. Lambert, in February 1958. His opening sentence, 'there are no forests of consequence of economic value in the Territory at the present day and, at the best, the climate and soils are marginal for the growth of trees in forest', set the tone for a critical appraisal of what Hasluck was pursuing.¹⁴

12 See, for example, NTA, Welfare Branch, *Annual Report 1963–64*.

13 Bateman, *Forestry*.

14 Memo from G. J. Rodger, Director General, 19 February 1958, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA) A452, 1957/82 Part 1.

Despite the advice, Hasluck pushed a forestry program for the Northern Territory through Cabinet later that year.¹⁵ The program was modest and ‘experimental’ but was the basis of a start to forestry operations at Maningrida in 1961. Operated initially by the Forestry and Timber Bureau itself and, after 1968, as a branch of the NTA – not under the Welfare Branch, as Hasluck himself emphatically, but quite incorrectly, claimed in his autobiography – it was (like fisheries) to prove a major cause of frustration and anguish for Hunter later in the 1960s.¹⁶ Although Hasluck had pushed the program largely as a means to benefit local Aboriginal people, the foresters took almost exclusive charge and, as we will see, not even Giese was able to influence their approach.¹⁷ The conceptualisation and management of both the forestry and fisheries programs were completely outside the experience of local Aboriginal people; and that had much to do with the ultimate failures of these programs some years later.

Hunter as the Welfare Branch man

One of the 1939 McEwen policies was to establish a cadre of patrol officers to bring some cohesion to contact between the state and Aboriginal people throughout the Northern Territory. By the time Giese started as director in 1954, a handful of such officers were in place, but there were not nearly enough of them to do what Giese considered necessary. Again, backed by Hasluck, Giese set about negotiating training for recruits to the service through the Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA), already doing such work for Papua New Guinea. Recruitment was initiated at the same time but with disappointing results. Interest among the kinds of men he hoped to recruit was patchy and most of the applicants did not meet the high standards that Giese expected.¹⁸ Although feminist critics of Commonwealth policies in the 1930s have since pointed to the advantages of appointing female protectors, neither McEwen nor his successors recruited women as patrol officers, and none had been recruited by the time the service was discontinued in 1973.¹⁹

15 NAA Cabinet papers, A4926, decision 1557.

16 Hasluck, *Shades of Darkness*, 114.

17 Hasluck, *Shades of Darkness*, 114.

18 NAA F1, 1956/557; NAA F1, 1956/2663.

19 Holland, *Just Relations*, 239–41.

Raised on a small farm with oyster leases near Bega, New South Wales, Hunter knew many Koori kids as he grew up, contributing to his interest in working with Aboriginal people. Unusual for someone of a rural background at that time, he passed his Leaving Certificate and was thus immediately able to take up a clerical position in the Welfare Branch in Darwin, arriving only a few months after Giese in 1955. Too young to be a patrol officer, he waited 18 months before being selected to undertake the year-long Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA) course in 1958. He passed only moderately well, but well enough to be sent to Alice Springs where he remained for most of the time until the late 1963 appointment to Maningrida. Although he had spent several months as superintendent at Areyonga, it was a big step for someone so young. He left the post after about 18 months, in April 1965. It is not clear whether he was pushed out or asked to be relieved. Perhaps it was by mutual agreement. He told me years later, 'I made a mess of it, just too young for the responsibilities of the job'.²⁰ In any event he went back to patrol work and a period as acting superintendent at Bamyili (now Barunga) before returning to Maningrida in September 1966. At first he was acting superintendent before he was confirmed in the position about a year later. He was still only 27.

Following assimilationist policy

By the time Hunter arrived, more than 400 Aboriginal people were living in the settlement. Their more or less permanent residence made it easier to give people medical attention, but the continuing presence of such a large number of people in a small area created many social and administrative problems. Inter-clan tensions that were aggravated by the relatively cramped spaces of the settlement would often escalate into mass spear fights, for instance.²¹ Hunter and his predecessors seemed to take these in their stride, able to mobilise their experience as patrol officers and the clear authority vested in the position of superintendent. In a popular article in the *National Geographic*, journalist Kenneth MacLeish gives us a glimpse of how Hunter dealt with such an issue in 1971 or 1972, towards the end of his term there:

20 The conversations to which I refer mostly took place either as we drove together in the bush around Maningrida or in one or the other's houses between 1972 and 1977. I had got to know Hunter when, as a junior forester for the NTA, I approached him about ways in which the Forestry Branch could work better with Maningrida's Aboriginal people in 1972.

21 Drysdale and Durack, *The End of Dreaming*, 102–4.

After dark, superintendent John Hunter returned to his house looking tired and carrying three spears. 'Family troubles again,' he told his colleague [Assistant Superintendent] Wilders. 'Brian's mob were getting ugly. They're Rembarnga. One of their women wouldn't stay with her husband, who belongs to another tribe and speaks another language. He protested, and the Rembarnga got their spears. I had to take them away. What's for tea?'²²

The article captures the tiredness resulting from Hunter's long days in the field and from the additional work after dark; it also conveys Hunter's confidence in carrying out his tasks. Such fights, and domestic conflicts, were almost routine. From the point of view of the government, there was no doubt that settlement residents must follow the white man's law. That was a matter Aboriginal people everywhere accepted only reluctantly.

The inter-clan tensions were accompanied by the not so well-known tensions among an already large population of *balandas* – nurses (who were present at the start of the settlement), schoolteachers, managers and foremen. Managers and foremen were there to teach and supervise tasks that required only minimal training for the industries discussed above. The *balandas* were also there to build and service the material apparatus of assimilation: the school, the clinic, public offices, houses (all for other *balandas* in those early days), the garden and all the rest. Some of these functions, for example, teaching, forestry and health, were performed by people who did not report to the superintendent; the officers in charge of such units sometimes having to deal with social and disciplinary problems that arose beyond Hunter's responsibility and even, sometimes, his knowledge. All the same, the superintendent and the other *balanda* authorities needed to liaise – and Hunter had to deal with social tensions that were an inevitable feature of a colonial outpost, especially among those *balandas* who reported to him directly.

The petty disputes that challenged his predecessors were an ever-present feature of Hunter's tenure and they were among the reasons he left the post in 1965.²³ Such disputes were still there when he returned in 1966, but he was now more confident about handling them. He often told me he did not expect to be backed by his superiors on matters of staff discipline, and he learnt to ignore all but the most serious trouble among

22 MacLeish, 'The Top End', 171.

23 See, for example, Report on dispute by M. Ivory, 10 October 1961, NAA E460, 1976/460 Part 1.

the balandas.²⁴ Gillespie's observation at the beginning of this chapter that 'the European population's reaction to him [Hunter] varied from considerable respect to an intense dislike' reflects a population polarised before Hunter's time.²⁵ A minority were, like Hunter, seriously interested, even at times enchanted, by what we now call the 'otherness' of the local Aboriginal people, but most found relationships with Aboriginal people awkward and stilted, often expressing barely concealed attitudes of white superiority. Some even referred to Aboriginal people as 'rock apes' or used similarly outrageous terms. We might note that while Giese was very discerning in his selection of patrol officers, he did not scrutinise all settlement employees in the same way. The increasing polarisation in balanda attitudes was strikingly evident in the local paper, *The Maningrida Mirage*, through the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁶ In what I have called 'separate group discourse', Europeans talked among themselves about Aboriginal people (and vice versa) and about the other Europeans who held alternative world views.²⁷ Hunter's understanding of this difficult sociality was more sophisticated than the rest of us held at the time; indeed, it is only much more recently that the outlooks of isolated populations of balandas have been the subject of academic study.²⁸

The industrial arm of assimilation

Returning to the statement about the purpose of settlements, we see how major effort was being made to re-form Aboriginal social organisation around Western institutions. The logics of words and phrases like 'teaching' and 'the general concept of "work"' flowed seamlessly into phasing out traditional hunting and gathering, for example, to be replaced by locally produced Western food. Such modes of production were to be taught and it was assumed that Aboriginal people would adopt them. When Hunter arrived, the settlement boasted a 4-hectare garden and arrangements were well underway for a cattle herd, poultry yard and some dairy cows, these being delivered soon afterwards. He dutifully kept all these activities propped up against considerable logistical and technical

24 See also NAA F941, 1966/13.

25 Gillespie, 'John Hunter and Maningrida', 2.

26 'Newsletters (*Maningrida Mirage*)', AIATSIS, accessed October 2019, aiatsis.gov.au/collections/collections-online/digitised-collections/maningrida-mirage-newsletters/newsletters-maningrida-mirage.

27 Haynes, 'The Value of Work'.

28 See, for example, Kowal, 'The Politics of the Gap'; Lea, *Bureaucrats*.

difficulties. These included maintaining a cadre of balanda managers and other technical experts, and the social problems associated with this group that I have already discussed; but there were also problems in simply getting systems to work productively. A major technical issue emerged in 1964, early on Hunter's watch, when the water supply for the settlement failed and much of the garden that had offered so much promise had to be abandoned.²⁹

Giese originally had ambitious plans for even more projects that would lead to Western style self-sufficiency. Just before Hunter arrived in 1963, he set out a manifesto for the development of projects that included the beef cattle herd mentioned above.³⁰ Considerable work went into building fences, sowing pasture grasses and the introduction of a herd from Bamyili. By 1968, despite Hunter's own particular interest in this endeavour, it was clear that the cattle were failing to thrive and the project would have to be abandoned. In what turned out to be a good example of fertile collaboration between the superintendent and the director, Hunter recommended that they find another location, well south of Maningrida, at Bulman. This is a story that we pick up again in a later section where I discuss Hunter's capacity to turn assimilationist projects to ends that suited the Aboriginal people themselves. Meanwhile, this example also demonstrates that Giese was prepared to listen and adapt, an aptitude for which he has not always been given credit.

Good as he was at garnering resources for the settlements, Giese was often frustrated by the lack of technical expertise within the Welfare Branch, no more so than when confronted with the major projects located at Maningrida: forestry, sawmilling and fisheries. Notwithstanding Hasluck's belief that forestry was under the Welfare Branch's control, others had decided that these three projects would be controlled from other NTA branches. A sawmill was originally built and staffed by Welfare Branch personnel, but two years after the original mill burnt down in 1967, NTA Assistant Administrator Martyn Finger transferred control of the new mill to the Forestry Branch. Giese argued hard to retain control of the sawmill but was overruled.³¹ Hunter protested to Giese that at Maningrida he had no power to supervise the increasing band of local forestry people, let alone their superiors visiting from Darwin. To Hunter's list of

29 Bond-Sharp, *Maningrida*, 85–86.

30 NAA F1, 1962/287.

31 NAA F1, 1975/2181.

complaints about the mill (over issues such as location and size) were added a growing number from out in the bush. Aboriginal people were increasingly distraught at the Forestry Branch invading sacred sites and ceremonial grounds and at branch attempts to stop fires that Aboriginal people considered part of traditional practice and ‘right’ for the country.³² Ignoring these complaints, the Forestry Branch acted as if it had no need to consult people at Maningrida, continuing to offend both Hunter and the Aboriginal people whom he was attempting to represent.

Hunter also objected to the way that the administration promoted fisheries. In 1965, the government built a supposedly pilot fisheries factory. Like the sawmill, the factory was soon proven, in Hunter’s assessment, to be inappropriate for purpose, and it was hardly used. Although the potential Aboriginal fishers were keen and capable, the project was seriously underfunded by the NTA Primary Industries Branch, an important consequence of which was that the fisheries officer was at Maningrida for only half the time. This had a further consequence: that leadership and supervision of the project were inadequate.³³ Moreover, the first boats were totally unsuitable, being too big and unwieldy for the local conditions, and they fell into disuse very quickly.

In 1969 the superintendent, exasperated by lack of meaningful response to his many memos to Giese, found a new way to express himself. Recently elected as first president of the newly formed Maningrida Progress Association (MPA), he used his new hat to approach William Charles Wentworth, minister with special responsibilities for Aboriginal affairs, appointed by Prime Minister Gorton earlier that year.³⁴ Wentworth’s presentations to Cabinet often clashed with the Minister for the Interior, Peter Nixon (Country Party), who considered the Northern Territory a Country Party domain and resented Wentworth’s advocacy of new policy.³⁵ Hunter was not to know that his representations to Wentworth would be just one of many issues already causing considerable tension between Wentworth and Country Party ministers.

32 Haynes, ‘Submission’; Haynes, ‘The Pattern’.

33 NAA F1, 1967/1674.

34 In the early 1960s a group of welfare officers and others had formed a cooperative society, mainly to help them buy stores at cheaper rates from Darwin. Over the decade they opened a store which proved popular with Aboriginal people as well and by 1968 it was decided to broaden its franchise and reincorporate as the MPA.

35 Rowse, *Obligated to be difficult*, 42–46.

Hunter's letter targeted both forestry and fisheries, expressing frustration that while these projects showed promise for economic independence, they paid too little attention to the needs of Aboriginal people.³⁶ He invited Wentworth to come and see for himself. The letter caused a major stir because Hunter had sent a courtesy copy to Giese and it was passed up the line much faster than usual. Before Wentworth had read it he received a 'warning off' letter from Doug Anthony, Acting Minister for the Interior. Wentworth punched back, telling his ministerial colleague that he would go and see whatever he wanted and, in due time, he went to Maningrida. Simultaneously, embarrassed senior officers in the Department of the Interior intended to charge Hunter with a breach of the Public Service Regulations. Although eventually heeding the advice of their legal counsel that the charge would not succeed, they remained irritated by this junior officer's cheeky intervention. When Giese reminded Hunter of the need to keep him informed, Hunter replied with another blast from the field:

The inability, or unwillingness, of the Forestry to play their part in our work at Maningrida is a source of great disappointment to me. ... [T]he timber development and the advancement of Maningrida people are well and truly bound together ... but this is not being done to the fullest advantage. ... In regard to fisheries the same comments will apply. I could not attempt to express the bitterness I have felt at being associated with such a monumental example of a good thing gone wrong. The plant is there, the fish are available, the people are enthusiastic, but the Government has been weak. If ever the spirit of the N.T. Administration were epitomised in one manifestation, then the Maningrida Fishery is just that.³⁷

In the years following this episode Hunter told me (and anyone else willing to listen) that he saw forestry as a key part of Maningrida's development, but 'it was [also] a good thing gone wrong'. Although the enterprise employed (and trained) people and much of the roading done by forestry was widely appreciated, there was no consultation with Aboriginal people until much later. This is what Hunter meant by the project 'not being done to the fullest advantage'. Regarding fisheries, Hunter found less cause for complaint when the government opted out of its failed enterprise and the MPA took over fishing. The MPA had the flexibility to better match technology with Aboriginal aspirations.

36 Maningrida Progress Association to Wentworth, 10 June 1969, NAA F1, 1967/1674.

37 Hunter to Giese, memo, 23 December 1969, NAA F1, 1967/1674.

Self-determination Maningrida style

Just as whole groups of people settling in Maningrida in the late 1950s were an act of Aboriginal self-determination, so were the choices of those who chose to remain in their homelands, living more or less as their forbears had for millennia. In deciding to eschew the settlement, these leaders made the tough decision to remain self-sufficient and relatively independent. Recognising and admiring these characteristics early in his tenure, Hunter made and maintained contact with these small groups for the whole time he was at Maningrida. He also admired the way hundreds of people would leave Maningrida to celebrate the Kunipippi and other ceremonies in their homelands. Right from his earliest days, back in 1963, when occasionally visiting people out at the ceremonies he noticed a remarkable change in demeanour in the very people who, in the settlement, would gather in supplication outside his office day after day. Here those same people were totally independent, going about the business in hand without a sideways look at the superintendent.

The opportunity to put the increased amenity afforded in the settlement together with the much greater energy and vigour that went with self-reliance on the homelands came in 1968. The failures of the settlement water supply in 1964 and 1965 made it clear that the gardens were not a viable proposition in the long term. Hunter had begun an investigation of the country surrounding Maningrida from the time he had arrived, sometimes with other welfare staff and sometimes with Aboriginal guides alone.³⁸ Sometime in the mid-1960s Aboriginal guides led him to a large waterhole on the Cadell River, about 50 kilometres from Maningrida, Gochan Giny-jirra, a central place for the Gun-nartpa language people.³⁹ Hunter persuaded Giese that this site, with its good deep loam and adequate water supply, would be ideal for a larger commercial proposition and, as Giese well recognised, an outstation.⁴⁰ Access was aided by the expansion of the forestry road network in 1968, and in 1970 the newly formed MPA under the leadership of an energetic new manager, Glen Bagshaw, took over its running. (Later Senator) Bob Collins, the first on-site manager, set up a garden that was as productive as the Maningrida

38 See, for example, Long, *The Go-Betweens*, 130; England et al. *Gun-ngaypa rrawa*, 96–106.

39 I am following the orthography of England et al., *Gun-ngaypa rrawa*, for all Gun-nartpa language names.

40 NAA E460, 1983/487.

garden had been years earlier. Its progress was accompanied by an almost complete exodus of Gun-nartpa people from Maningrida. Some, both men and women, worked for wages but, arguably as important, Gochan Giny-jirra was now a focus of decentralisation. A self-determining people had voted not with words or a ballot box, but with their feet.

In that same period (1968–71), Hunter took advantage of the failure of beef cattle husbandry at the settlement, discussed earlier. The fact that Bulman, where he found fertile soils, good water supplies and potential for both cattle and buffalo, was nearly 200 kilometres south did not worry Giese, who authorised good levels of funding for the trial.⁴¹ Ultimately that project lapsed, but it provided the opportunity for members of the group that Hunter considered troublesome, ‘Brian’s mob’ of the *National Geographic* article, to decentralise and live more independently.⁴² Both this group and those at Gochan Giny-jirra received minimal services that helped smooth the way back into bush living. Both cases represent a team effort: between the Aboriginal people themselves, who had to accept responsibility for their actions; Hunter, who acted as their intermediary, formulating plans that would be palatable to Giese; and Giese, who found the funds to support the enterprises. Giese’s decision implies that, by 1968 at least, the harshness of the settlement policy was softening and, incidentally, foreshadowed changes in policy under the McMahon Government in 1971.

The momentum towards this form of self-determination was unstoppable, with many other groups following the Gun-nartpa and Bulman groups back to homelands. As Jon Altman records in detail for the Kuninjku language group, many did not wait for financial assistance, simply going out with limited material benefits to build traditional bark huts and make use of traditional food and ‘stay on country’.⁴³ They went for many reasons: to escape the constant inter-clan tensions noted earlier; to get beyond the constant gaze of the balandas who by 1968 were flooding into the settlement to drive the assimilatory apparatus there; to keep a necessary watchful eye on Forestry Branch balandas and the miners who were, in those days, starting to go wherever they liked within their untrammelled exploration licences; and, perhaps most of all, to gain succour from being on the country of their ancestors.

41 NAA F1, 1973/4731.

42 Most of them ultimately resettled in outstations closer to Maningrida.

43 Altman, ‘Imagining Mumeka’, 283–87.

It would be wrong to say Hunter and the movement around Maningrida were unique in this period. Missionaries to the east and west were supporting similar decentralisation movements. They did not have to report to the director in the same detail as the welfare superintendents, however. Nor did they contend with the antagonisms of balandas in the settlement who regarded the movement as a 'step back into the stone age', as I often heard. It would also be wrong to say that Hunter battled those balandas and many senior officers in the Welfare Branch on his own. As Gillespie notes, Hunter was encouraged by the continuous fieldwork of archaeologists-anthropologists, Rhys Jones and Betty Meehan, in 1972 and 1973 with the Anbara Gidjingali people who had established an outstation at Gopanga on the mouth of the Blyth River.⁴⁴ The Cadell is a tributary of the Blyth and it was possible to use the landing near the new gardens at Gochan Giny-jirra to gain access to the new outstation. Despite the hostility of the majority of balandas, Hunter was always supported from the time of his first arrival by Rev. Gowan Armstrong, the United Church of North Australia minister. From the late 1960s the list of supporters grew: Assistant Superintendent John Wilders; Progress Association manager Glen Bagshaw; Dan Gillespie himself and about a dozen teachers and others.

H. C. Coombs's visit in 1972 also encouraged Hunter from the highest levels of government. Chair of the three-person policy advising group, the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Coombs included Maningrida in his frequent travels to Aboriginal communities. The independence and demeanour of people living in the outstations, introduced to him by Hunter, made a strong impression.⁴⁵ For Hunter, the contact with Coombs was very different from what he experienced within his own department and he told several people happily: 'I'm on Nugget terms now!' Coombs relished meeting outsiders. 'I like people who *don't* conform', he had told the world on his retirement as governor of the Reserve Bank in 1967.⁴⁶ Hunter was content to be included in their number, and content also to have the admiration and encouragement of the relatively few balandas who were prepared to watch and learn from him. But, in the end, he was driven by the steely logic of the message he told anyone who was prepared to listen: 'In all my years of working with Aboriginal people this [the outstation movement] is the only thing that has been initiated by

44 Gillespie, 'John Hunter and Maningrida', 5.

45 Coombs, *Kulinma*, 65–66.

46 Rowse, *Obligated to be Difficult*, 3.

them'.⁴⁷ The regular visits to the outstations he was making after about 1968 gave him the satisfaction of witnessing palpable independence and energy in self-determining groups. All the other industries and activities were dependent on initiative and supervision by the balandas who were increasingly dominant around the settlement.

Hunter finished at Maningrida in December 1973. The government had changed and 'self-determination' became the new government's Aboriginal affairs policy. Although Hunter told me he welcomed the policy, that welcome was qualified because, like all the other superintendents, he was taken away from Maningrida for much of that year to attend reorientation courses for the 'old welfare' staff. He felt constrained by his enforced absences. Nevertheless, he was able to push through many requests that came from Aboriginal people, including those from the traditional owners of Maningrida itself, the Gunividji, who often complained to Hunter (and anyone else prepared to listen) that their country was being overrun by outsiders, both balandas and other Aboriginal people:

The Gunividji group at Maningrida are having more than their fair share of culture break-down problems being experienced at Maningrida. This is showing up particularly in child delinquency; e.g. petrol sniffing, minor crime, vandalism and promiscuity ... I am afraid that the group are suffering an accelerated rate of breakdown because of impingement on their area by other Aboriginals and Europeans.⁴⁸

He was gratified that most of the arguments he advanced (like this one) were accepted and that his requests were approved. But time was short, exacerbated by his promotion to a position in Darwin at the end of the year. He used that position to make great changes at Maningrida in 1974, but he left frustrated and disappointed at not being able to do more to assist Aboriginal people – at the very time that the self-determination they had all so courageously pursued in previous years now had the backing of the new government.⁴⁹

In his parting message in *The Maningrida Mirage*, Hunter reflected, among many other issues, on the richness of Aboriginal culture, how we balanda had failed to listen and take note, and how Maningrida was a piece of

47 Personal communication to author.

48 NAA E460, 1976/1108.

49 Bond-Sharp, *Maningrida*, 162–77.

colonialism over which Aboriginal people had no say, concluding that his taking leave was encumbered by a sense of personal failure.⁵⁰ With Gillespie, my view is that he achieved a great deal, much of which carried on in later years. He made structural changes that go to much more than individual choice. True, the passage of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* allowed Aboriginal custom more influence, but I argue here the work of Hunter and his Aboriginal partners paved the way for self-determination by whole groups of people, not just individuals. The final words about him should be from an Aboriginal voice, the late Bangardi Mildjingi, who worked closely with Hunter:

He was a good man, you know, he was helping people, talk about land, everything, take you back home, where you belonging, you out from [the] Maningrida yard, like bulliki ... and you go home, to make your own stations and that's why this work, Hunter's work, made everything good, you know, like go back to your outstation, establish your home, everything. And we did, yo, from him.⁵¹

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50 Hunter, 'A Confession!'

51 Bangardi Mildjingi, interview with author, July 2013.

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