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## The origins and history of outstations as Aboriginal life projects

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In recent years, there has been an acrimonious debate about the existence and significance of outstations or ‘homeland communities’ as they are sometimes called. These debates have cast various interpretations on the motivations for the establishment and support of these small and remote Indigenous residential formations. For example, outstations have sometimes been characterised by traditionalists as a *retreat* from modernisation, and from time to time they have been characterised in very negative terms. Indeed, one government minister called them ‘cultural museums’ (Eastley 2005; see Kowal 2010: 182). We hope to show, however, that such views give little hearing for an Aboriginal perspective, and trivialise complex policy issues and deeply held views. In these debates, we fear, something of the lived experiences, motivations and histories of existing communities is missing. For this reason, we invited a number of anthropological witnesses to the early period in which outstations gained a purchase in remote Australia to provide accounts of what these communities were like, and what their residents’ aspirations and experiences were.

Our hope is that these closer-to-the ground accounts can provide insight into and illumination of what Indigenous aspirations were in the establishment and organisation of these communities. Indeed, we think that in delineating what

took place in this earlier period, it is possible to understand these aspirations. However, it is not easy to do so. Often, we have to infer such aspirations, as historians have not infrequently done in seeing 'resistance' in the past. More importantly, we find that William Stanner's famous essay 'The Dreaming' reflects the sense of many observers of remote communities that an *explicit* discourse of a future imagined, or of a future collective aspiration beyond 'life is a one-possibility thing' (Stanner 2011: 68), was rare. Certainly, we have come to understand that where such aspirations existed they could be embedded in and expressed through a range of religious formations such as the Elcho Island movement reported by Ronald Berndt (1962) or *Tjulurru* ('Balgo Business') of the 1970s and 1980s in the Central and Western deserts (Kolig 1979; Myers n.d.; Glowczewski 1983), and were concerned with renewal and revitalisation (for example, see Austin-Broos, in this volume). Nonetheless, as an explicitly formulated aspiration, the outstation movement, we think, stands out for its clarity.

We use the term 'outstation' with a certain understanding. While some writers prefer 'homelands' to emphasise the link of many outstations with the founders' ancestral lands, appreciable numbers of outstations are not on such lands, but are, by agreement, elsewhere. Further, some conservative writers such as Helen Hughes (2007) have muddied the usage as they have sometimes used the term 'homelands' to refer to *all* Aboriginal settlements on remote Aboriginal lands, including what are today the Aboriginal 'townships' that have formed from the old mission and government settlements.

Outstations are small, decentralised and relatively permanent communities of kin established by Aboriginal people on land that has social, cultural or economic significance to them (cf. Blanchard 1987: 7). Generally speaking, the majority of them have fewer than 40 people. The term has a distinctly Australian history. It comes from the cattle industry and was used for a subsidiary homestead or other dwelling that was more than a day's return travel from the main homestead. It suggests a dependent relationship between the outstation and the main homestead, but with a degree of separation. While outstations in the cattle industry were presumably planned and sanctioned by the owner or manager of the property, the majority of outstations in the Aboriginal context are entirely Aboriginal 'life projects'.<sup>1</sup> By 'life projects', we refer to the desires of those Indigenous people who sought and seek autonomy in deciding the meaning of their life independently of projects promoted by the state and market, and to

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1 In the absence of the idea of a career among most remote-dwelling Aboriginal people (see Austin-Broos 2006), the nature of most Aboriginal people's life projects is obscure to outsiders. Some few do work as teachers or health workers over a normal working life, and in the past a career as a stockman was not uncommon, but grander ideas beyond such individual aspirations are harder to discern, except in one area: that of the outstation.

people developing their own situation-based knowledge and practices in the contemporary world (cf. Blaser 2004). These are not simply projects of isolation from outside influences or some sort of cultural apartheid. Mario Blaser's use of the term, in fact, draws specific attention to the ways in which Indigenous people might ally themselves with various categories of outsider in order to protect or sustain values or concerns of their own. But the term draws attention to directions of life that emanate from Indigenous histories that are not free of outside influences but are nonetheless distinctive in their shape, as in the example of Ntaria (see Austin-Broos, this volume) and in the case of the Yolngu outstations in eastern Arnhem Land, which Frances Morphy and Howard Morphy (this volume) describe as struggling to re-emplace a regional system of relationships through engagements with various outsiders. Many of the chapters in this volume note that government enthusiasm for and support of these life projects have waxed and waned, often with destructive consequences (see, for example, Cane; Morphy and Morphy; and White, this volume).

As a result of his research for the influential *Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (1970), C. D. Rowley, and Jeremy Long, who worked with him, felt the dissolution of the mission and settlement institutions was an important step forward in Aboriginal advancement. According to the eminent historian of Aboriginal policy Tim Rowse (1993: 34), they saw this deinstitutionalisation as liberating people to eventually move to the towns. It was an influential view, not only because of Rowley's standing, but also because Long was a key adviser to the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, which was the main source of policy at the time of the move to outstations. Rowley's likening of settlements to what sociologist Erving Goffman called 'total institutions'—delineated in his book on *Asylums* (1961)—gained ideological purchase among many critics during a period in which such enclosed social systems were widely challenged (see Rowley 1970: 48–9). This critique of institutionalisation, and its implicit assumptions about the significance of autonomy in well-being, was to provide fertile ground for the support of outstations in the following years, when evidence emerged that living in small groups was enormously positive for health because it allowed people to live life at a scale that gave them much greater control over their lives. The idea of population movement away from the centralised communities was eventually to raise real questions regarding the future role of the larger settlements and mission stations, although this concern did not emerge publicly for some time.<sup>2</sup> Thirty years later, however, the outstation movement was coming under attack, represented at this point as a *backward* step that was

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<sup>2</sup> Dexter (2015: 154) reports that the Department of the Interior, which had responsibility for Aboriginal issues and the Northern Territory, did not support decentralisation and was opposed to this 'setting back the clock'.

unsustainable economically—a criticism that was renewed in 2014. At the same time, however, others have strongly defended the sustainability of outstations with their mixed economies (for example, Altman 2012).

Policy for remote Aboriginal communities is a complex field of political debate, fraught with difficulty, not least because there are few clear or obvious directions for policy to take. This makes outstations of particular interest even if they seem to be going in a countervailing direction not only to current government policy, but also to what many Aboriginal people have done in the past by moving to regional centres and metropolitan areas. Interestingly, however, it is evident that since the 1970s there has been no great movement to metropolitan centres, where the natural growth in numbers has been greatly boosted by changes in self-identification, and living away from cities is by far the preferred option (Taylor and Bell 2004).

As Aboriginal life projects, outstations are one of the clearest manifestations of self-determination, and have been a rallying point for supporters of Aboriginal people as recognition of their aspirations.<sup>3</sup> If governments have, at times, supported the outstation movement, it has also been an area where policy can and has changed quite rapidly—indeed, right up to the time of writing when Western Australia and South Australia have announced they will withdraw financial and logistical support from many small communities that they say are too costly to service. And, in response, Australia has seen a revitalised movement—in capital cities and on social media—of protest against the ‘closure’ of Indigenous communities. The majority of these small communities are Aboriginal. Thus, outstations also provide an excellent lens through which to look at larger policy issues in Aboriginal affairs.

The chapters in this volume, then, examine the origins and history of specific outstations to explore the interaction of Aboriginal agency with policy, and to better understand Aboriginal engagement with the specific historical circumstances they faced. One might ask why we do not just record the history of these movements directly, as oral history. In our experience, this kind of historical framework—that is, of oral history—is culturally specific. The historical consciousness of many older Aboriginal people in remote communities seems to take a very different form. Their accounts of past events are usually encompassed in a rich array of contextually elicited or triggered stories about particular events. Such accounts, when gathered, are more commonly episodic, fragmented and reactive—not driven by the chronological narrative forms of historical discourse. Such a formulation of memory, or memories, may

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3 This is very noticeably the case in recent political demonstrations and social media campaigns against the threat of closure of or withdrawal of governmental support for contemporary remote communities in Western Australia and elsewhere.

in fact veil the persistence of people's motivations, their long-term commitment to particular courses of action and the way they have consistently worked towards specific goals—commitments and persistence registered in activity and movement as much as in discourse.

Here we proceed by outlining the origins of outstations and then the subsequent growth in numbers following the end of the policy of 'assimilation' and the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. We will follow this with a brief examination of the twists and turns of government policy in relation to them, and will conclude with a consideration of the implications of this history for the insight it provides into government policy for remote Aboriginal people more generally.

## The origins of outstations

If something like a 'movement' began in the 1970s, it is nonetheless the case that not all outstations have their origins in this moment, as the contributions by Bill Edwards, Jeremy Long, Peter Sutton and Neville White make clear. Some group locations thought of as outstations in the 1970s originated from groups of people who had never permanently left the bush. A case in point was eastern Arnhem Land, discussed by Neville White, where the Reverend Harold Shepherdson encouraged Aboriginal people living in the bush to stay there, telling them that if they cleared an airstrip, he would fly out to visit them so that they had access to the basic commodities they wanted. Originally, their wants were limited: mainly flour, sugar, tea and tobacco, with a few other items of material culture such as clothing, knives and mosquito nets. In her memoir of life as a missionary's wife, Ella Shepherdson refers to Gattji as the first outstation in eastern Arnhem Land (established in 1936), although her husband was unable to fly there, as the airstrip was not long enough (Shepherdson 1981: 35). The next outstation mentioned in this memoir was established in 1947 at Buckingham Bay, followed by one in Arnhem Bay and another in the Wessel Islands in 1953. Subsequently, a number of others were established.

A common feature of these outstation localities, including the original Gattji site, was that they were good for making gardens, although none of the gardens seems to have been long lasting (Shepherdson 1981: 32; see also Peterson 1976; Kimber 1977: 3). Indeed, it is a common feature of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal advocacy for most outstations that there were opportunities for and a keenness to make gardens (for example, see Austin-Broos; Edwards; Peterson; Sutton, this volume). This is a trope. Most such gardens, if ever established, had a short life, and thus the significance of gardening has to be understood in terms of indicating a recognition that people needed to contribute to their self-

sufficiency and as a plan for activity, rather than as a manifestation of a social evolutionary view of the development process that Aboriginal people had to progress through in their transition from hunting and gathering. The emphasis on gardens also bears some relationship to the muscular Christian concern that modern subjects learn the value of 'work'. The emphasis on 'gardens' can be understood as a comprehensible mediation between Indigenous aspirations for autonomy and governmental/mission concerns for learning to labour as a basis for 'self-sufficiency'.

There were many forces at work that one can recognise in the broad movement to smaller and dispersed communities. Decentralisation encouraged by the person in charge of some missions was one. Thus, in 1953, the priest in charge of the Tiwi Mission at Bathurst Island encouraged some Aboriginal people to build their houses at a location of their choice between a half-mile and one mile from the mission as a kind of satellite village (Pilling 1962: 324). Such developments were likely related to the fact that the populations on some of the missions were too large for the mission to manage in terms of rations and work. Before the 1960s, many remote missions had to be relatively self-supporting, as was the case for northern missions, because most bulk supplies came by sea at three or six-monthly intervals. In a few missions, this led to the population being divided into two, with one group staying in the bush and supporting themselves for two weeks and then swapping with the group in the mission, who went bush for two weeks. Such was the case at both Milingimbi in Arnhem Land, Aurukun (see Martin and Martin, this volume) and at Port Keats in the Daly River area (Falkenberg 1962: 18). David Brooks and Vikki Plant (this volume) present the case of probably the most severely constrained mission, at Warburton, and the effects of this on community formations in the contact period.

In 1959, Jeremy Long, then an employee of the Northern Territory Welfare Branch, was reviving proposals for the decentralisation of Pitjantjatjara people at Areyonga. Long explains this proposal was occasioned principally by population pressures, although as he commented there was great enthusiasm for the idea of a community at Docker River in the home area of many of the people there (Long, see Appendix 3.1, this volume). On the basis of Long's and others' concerns about the population issue, in October 1961 the Northern Territory Administrator wrote to the Secretary of the Department of Territories (under which the Territory fell), emphasising the necessity for 'outstations' because of major problems of water supply and settlement hygiene at Yuendumu, Papunya, Haasts Bluff and Areyonga, where communities built to accommodate 350 people at the outside all had populations in excess of this (Appendix 3.1, this volume).

The enormous problems many recently settled people such as the Pintupi faced formed another basis for decentralised communities in Central Australia. Some of them had left an independent existence only between the late 1950s and mid-1960s (Long 1964; Myers 1986) and were traumatised by living in the large community of Papunya. There were extremely high rates of death, illness, conflict and depression. The Pintupi's desire to get a place of their own, combined with the administration's concern about bad publicity, led to several attempts at forming a separate community—beginning in 1967, reattempted in 1970 and finally achieved in 1973 with the establishment of Yayayi, on the basis of a decision made by the people themselves in the face of administrative difficulties, although supported with a \$30,000 grant (see Myers, this volume; Cavanagh 1974: 13).

A more ambiguous situation was that of the working populations and their dependants living on cattle stations. Their camps were not called outstations, as most of them were quite close to the homestead, but many of the people living in them were to become outstation dwellers following the change in the pastoral award between 1965 and 1968. Wages and conditions for Aboriginal people on cattle stations became a national issue in 1966 when there was a mass walk-off by Aboriginal people from the Vestey-owned stations in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory (see Hardy 1968). While most of the stockmen returned to work, one group at Wattie Creek (Dagaragu) held out, and the protest over conditions turned into a claim for return of traditional land (Doolan 1977: 106–13). At the same time, the Australian Workers' Union was pursuing an equal wage case for Aboriginal pastoral workers, which was settled with equal wages being phased in over a three-year period to 1968. Unfortunately, as is now well known, equal wages led to a more or less immediate layoff of virtually all Aboriginal pastoral workers, many of whom left the stations for the towns, as was the case in the east Kimberley region, or for the nearest mission or government settlement in other areas. Both Dagaragu and later Yarralin communities that resulted from these events were much bigger than most outstations from the start and both have evolved into major communities made up of ex-pastoral workers and their families. However, elsewhere in the Northern Territory, the Government approach was different and was:

[D]irected towards helping Aborigines to maintain themselves in their traditional areas and towards providing them with the advantages of a Western standard of health services and educational system. Policies have been directed towards providing Aborigines with the machinery and the opportunity (in the areas

where they live) to be as independent as possible of the pastoralists and to encourage and create opportunities for education and employment outside the pastoral industry if Aborigines wish to take this advantage. (Gibb 1971: 66)<sup>4</sup>

Yet another impetus to decentralisation was the damage being done to sacred sites by the mining industry through prospecting in Central Australia. In 1971 a group of Aboriginal people from Amata in northern South Australia set up a 'permanent camp' (Coombs 1974: 136–7) to the west of Puta Puta to enable people to care for rock arrangements and other sites in the area. Subsequently, yet another camp was set up at a site where a bore had inadvertently been sunk through a ceremonially important hillock (Coombs 1974: 136–7). The members of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs were particularly struck by the 'contentedness and purposefulness' of some of these outstation groups as contrasted at the time with the unhappiness of the Pintupi at Papunya, and, as early as the council meeting of 8–9 July 1970, it had decided to encourage, initially, the establishment of the outstation at Puta Puta as well as another on Sunday Island off Derby in Western Australia (see Dexter 2015: 153, 155).<sup>5</sup>

A final factor in at least one place, Maningrida, came shortly after a major change in Aboriginal lives in remote Australia. This was the direct payment of social security monies to Aboriginal people in 1969, instead of to a mission or government superintendent on their behalf. At Maningrida, this availability of funds led to the opening of a wet canteen there in the same year. According to some accounts, the availability of alcohol greatly aggravated quarrelling and conflict between members of the nine different resident language groups. In 1970, some people who had left an independent bush life only 12 years earlier started to move away from Maningrida—a move that was greatly facilitated by the superintendent, John Hunter, who was very supportive (Meehan and Jones 1980: 133).<sup>6</sup> The same money that was making the increased consumption of alcohol possible also greatly facilitated the establishment of outstations as it provided the means to purchase items from the store without having to work for wages in the settlement.

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4 Dexter (2015: 480) indicates that Coombs' membership of this committee was 'unwelcome' but clearly had an important influence on its recommendations.

5 Note that Dexter (2015: 155) has misnamed Puta Puta as Pitti Pitti.

6 There are considerable similarities between Maningrida and Papunya, it should be noted. Both were large, mixed-language government settlements established at the height of the assimilation policy in the 1950s. Both were considered to be 'problematic' by the Welfare Branch, as sites of conflict, and particularly look like the problems Rowley emphasised in his books. It is further of interest, one could argue, that John Hunter had influence at both. His policies at Maningrida in support of decentralisation are a matter of record, but it is less well known that he was the DAA officer who visited Yayayi in 1974 to make recommendations about its future and he was very positive about supporting the community, despite his awareness of the still limited development of local political awareness (Myers, personal communication).

From the foregoing, it is clear that there were a considerable number of groups of Aboriginal people choosing to live or remain living in small groups well before the advent of the so-called outstation movement. For all of these groups, access to a limited range of commodities was fundamental to the possibility of outstation life, as well as to managing relations to the surrounding society's goods and services while retaining some local control over their lives.

## The impact of the Whitlam Government

The outstation movement proper, as it is generally thought of, started with the election of the Federal Labor Government in 1972. It came in on a platform of land rights and self-determination, reinforcing the end of the assimilation policy announced by William McMahon at the beginning of that year when, on 26 January, Australia Day, he said:<sup>7</sup>

[Aboriginal people] should be encouraged and assisted to preserve and develop their own culture, languages, traditions and arts so that these can become living elements in the diverse culture of the Australian society ... [and exercise] *effective choice about the degree to which, and the pace at which, they come to identify themselves with ... [the wider Australian] society ...* [The Government would] (a) encourage and strengthen ... [Aboriginal people's] capacity increasingly to manage their own affairs—as individuals, as groups, and as communities at the local level; (b) increase their economic independence. (McMahon 1972: 3–4, emphasis added)

Although this had no immediate effect in the north, what one might call the 'ultimate outstation' sprang up on the lawns outside Parliament House with the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, shortly after midnight of the day of McMahon's speech in protest at his failure to address the land rights issue.

McMahon's statement was meant to mitigate the negative decision in the first land rights test case, *Milirrpum and Others v NABALCO and the Commonwealth of Australia*, handed down on 27 April 1971. Mr Justice Blackburn had ruled that while the Yolngu people of Yirrkala had a system of law and customs in relation to land, this system could not be recognised under Australian law. The Yolngu had brought their case because a bauxite mine was to be developed on 'their' land without their consent and threatened a number of sites of religious significance near their community (for example, see Williams 1986).

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<sup>7</sup> The principal focus of the speech was rejecting land rights and proposing only leasing land to Aboriginal people, such as the Yirrkala community, which was to be offered a general purpose lease (see Rowse 2000: 67–8).

There is little doubt that the establishment of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Land Rights and its inquiries across the Northern Territory in 1973 were a major proximate stimulus for the establishment of outstations (Meehan and Jones 1980: 135).<sup>8</sup> Everywhere the commissioner Mr Justice Woodward went, he asked people how they were going to 'look after' their land and what they were going to do with it. This aligned with the new policy outlined by McMahon, which entailed, in theory, funds being available to support such Aboriginal choice. Together, the two policies of 'self-determination' (choice) and land rights were a very powerful combination. Within the year, a number of people at Yirrkala were moving back into the bush (see Morphy and Morphy, this volume), a response that must have been facilitated by the existing outstations in the region serviced by the Reverend Shepherdson. The speed and rate at which groups of people left the communities across Arnhem Land took policymakers by surprise (Rowse 2000: 84). By the beginning of the wet season of 1974, 25 per cent of the Yirrkala population had moved to outstations and likewise approximately 450 people had left Maningrida for outstations, reducing the population by 35 per cent. It was expected that more people would leave in the immediate future (see Gray 1977: 115). In Central Australia, the movement was generally slower to develop, although the third Pintupi attempt at securing their own outstation was probably among the very first, if not the first, post-Labor Government outstation to be established (see Myers, this volume). The Yayayi location was not itself on their own land, which lay in and around the Kintore Range to the west, where they were to eventually get a fully serviced settlement of their own, first established in 1981. However, their move out from Papunya also led to the local landowners setting up another outstation, at Mount Liebig bore, eventually leading to the emergence of a whole new identity group (see Holcombe, this volume).

Rather than articulating anything like the full range of motivations for moving to outstations, most Aboriginal participants themselves simply emphasised their desire to return to their own country. The primary evidence for other dimensions of these decisions has come from reports by anthropologists. Some of the earliest public formulations of the reasons, however, were synthesised by H. C. ('Nugget') Coombs both on the basis of his own visits to the early outstations in 1973 and from his conversations with anthropologists (see Coombs 1974). His accounts of the movement are particularly relevant because Coombs was at the height of his powers and influence on policymaking in Aboriginal affairs in the period 1967–75. He was at that time the chair of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs and the chief government adviser on Aboriginal policy. In his account of Coombs' legacy in Indigenous affairs, Tim Rowse (2000: 84) reports that the outstation movement

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<sup>8</sup> Peterson makes this point on the basis of having worked as the research officer to the commission and being present at the consultations across the Territory.

cut across his earlier assumption that places like Yirrkala, where the outstation movement got off to a very rapid start, would persist. Coombs subsequently devoted considerable energy to understanding the choice by Aboriginal people to move to outstations (for example, see Coombs 1974, 1978, 1979; Coombs et al. 1982). His initial understanding was in relation to three factors: the special relationship to the land and concern about protecting sacred sites from damage; the desire to regain control over the young and avoid the stress and conflict associated with living in large communities (see Myers; Peterson; Cane, this volume); and a desire to minimise white presence and influence in their lives, including the alcohol they were associated with (Coombs 1974: 141).<sup>9</sup>

More nuanced understandings emerged quite quickly from observers close to the activities. One issue that became clear was the significance of what one might call 'local' or 'inter-group' politics, particularly as it related to the relationship between the landowners on whose land the missions and settlements were originally built and the majority of the population, whose land was elsewhere. Local attachments were clearly more significant than assimilation policy anticipated. This seems likely to have been as significant at Yirrkala, as described by Morphy and Morphy (this volume), as it was at Maningrida (Altman, this volume) and Papunya (Myers, this volume). As a second influence, the financial support available for people on outstations was also attractive. If a group demonstrated that they were committed to living at their outstation for a year, through all the seasons, they would become eligible for a \$10,000 grant that provided enough to buy a four-wheel-drive vehicle (typically, a Toyota LandCruiser). Thus, by moving back to the bush, senior men were able to draw the administration into direct negotiations with them, circumventing the domination of their lives by the landowners of the mission or settlement, who often appropriated more than a fair share of the resources at the disposal of the council. Such financial support articulated with long-prevailing Indigenous understandings of senior men's authority and political autonomy as the foundation of Indigenous polity.

Other arrangements followed, it seems necessarily, the establishment of outstations themselves. As early as 1974, the community of Maningrida started to develop a special unit to help service the outstations, which was to turn into the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation in 1979 and become the oldest outstation 'resource centre'. By the early 1980s, there were a number of such

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9 Interestingly, Barrie Dexter (2015: 153) indicates that the report written by Stanner after his visit to Yirrkala, and submitted to the council on 28 November 1969, suggested two additional reasons for people wanting to move out of Yirrkala: to tend to their land and perform ceremonies necessary for its continued health and bounty; and to occupy their land in the forlorn hope of thereby preventing non-Aboriginal people from moving into it and devastating it by exploitation.

outstation resource centres, which consolidated the separation of the resources for outstation populations from those of the local town-dwellers (see Palmer, this volume).

The struggle over resources is important in the understanding of Aboriginal motivation for the formation of outstations, and helps to ground the sometimes romantic views of the public who imagine a disinterested Aboriginal political field and believe Aboriginal people to be community-oriented communalists (see Martin and Martin, this volume). These struggles also can be seen to illuminate the limits of Indigenous polities as self-governing forms, limited by the capacities to share resources and moral identity in larger, sedentary communities. Rolf Gerritsen argued that the entry of the Commonwealth Government into providing funding for outstations (as well as the NT Government), created the opportunity for prominent men to circumvent the power of the dominant male landowners of the mission or settlements by moving to an outstation and securing a highly prized vehicle.<sup>10</sup> In Gerritsen's view, these vehicles were a constant source of tension with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs since they were used for a great deal more than servicing the outstations, leading the Government to start providing tractors instead, which were a major cause of complaint (Gerritsen 1982: 62).

In any case, the struggle over resources—at least that between settlements and outstations—was somewhat reduced with the advent of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme in 1977. This allowed the pooling of all unemployment benefits due to people in any community, together with a 20 per cent add-on for administration and equipment, so that people could work for the dole on a wide range of projects, including those that would not normally be counted as appropriate 'work'. This CDEP money made the proliferation of outstation resource centres possible and contributed greatly to the growth of the Aboriginal art movement in the 1980s. Such money could be used to help fund the art centres that marketed art, which became a major source of income for many in remote Australia, including those on outstations (see Altman; and Thorley, this volume).

## The complex history of policies for outstations

The majority of outstations have always been in the Northern Territory. Thus, policy for these has influenced the policy for outstations elsewhere, especially because it directly involved the Commonwealth. Complications began with

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<sup>10</sup> See also the arguments and discussion in Myers (1986) about the centripetal push of Indigenous concerns of autonomy on the formation of dispersed outstations in the Pintupi case.

the granting of self-government to the Northern Territory on 1 July 1978. The resulting self-government divided services to outstations between two jurisdictions. At that time, the Commonwealth Government handed over responsibility for running municipal and local government services for Aboriginal townships, of which there were approximately 70, to the Territory. It retained responsibility, however, for the provision of most services to all other communities—described as ‘smaller communities’ or ‘outstations’—of which there were approximately 500. Calling these smaller communities ‘outstations’ was very confusing because it included a wide range of settlement types, many much larger and older than outstations as discussed here. This arrangement remained in place until 1 July 2008 when the Commonwealth handed back responsibility for all these smaller communities (‘outstations’) to the Northern Territory along with a small annual payment of \$20 million to fund them. The irony here, as Bob Beadman (2011) points out, is that if full responsibility for ‘outstations’ had been transferred to the Northern Territory in 1978 the funds would have been factored into baseline funding and indexed forever.

Outstation policy has been a varied story, overseen by many differently acronymed and politically embedded administrative forms. During this 30-year period, ‘outstations’ were initially under the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA), then the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), then the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs and then the various manifestations of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Because the Territory has always had responsibility for essential services (water, power, sewerage, roads, airstrips and barge landings) for townships, there was constant argument about when an ‘outstation’ was so big that it was a township. Further, the Territory has also always had responsibility for education, health services and policing on ‘outstations’. Housing, on the other hand, was a Commonwealth responsibility, taken on in 1980 by yet another body, the Commonwealth Aboriginal Development Commission. One can imagine the three-way arguments that were occasioned between the commission, the DAA and the NT Government about the provision of what sorts of housing and where. A consequence of these shifting and split administrations was that some conventional houses were built on outstations without power or water. From another perspective, of course, a more positive consequence of this complexity was the small political space it left for outstation communities, either directly or through their local outstation resource centre, to try to play one administration off against another.

Such complexities became a central part of the subsequent histories of outstations. Scott Cane (this volume) and Jon Altman (this volume) both provide searing accounts of the difficulties encountered by Indigenous leaders who sought to establish and maintain their communities in the face of almost

endless administrative changes in their 'political environment'—difficulties that led to their exhaustion, depression and decline. One has to wonder at the 'capacities' imagined for 'self-determination' on a scale that included management of infrastructure that few non-Indigenous communities would face. Cane (this volume) considers some of the implications of the change from 'self-determination' to 'self-management'. These have continued to be significant issues in the representation of 'outstations', although there has been little attention to the history of such projects of 'self-determination' in their actual political environment, while failure has often been cast as the result of cultural inadequacy, nepotism or lack of interest.

In July 1985, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs received a reference on outstations and their futures, eventually reporting in March 1987. Its report, known as the Blanchard Report, listed 588 outstations, with an estimated population of 9,538, and a further 3,921 Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory living on excisions—in effect outstations—from 111 pastoral leases (Blanchard 1987: Appendix 4). Other estimates put the total number of outstations at 625 and the total population at 17,527 in 1985 (see Altman and Taylor 1987: 4). The dynamic nature of the situation is revealed by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs' estimate that in June 1981 there were only 165 outstations, with a total population of 4,200 (Blanchard 1987: 18). Overall, the report was very supportive and made a range of recommendations about service delivery.

The variability in the statistics suggests a dynamic situation but also gives some grounds for caution about them. While there was great variation in the size of the outstation population, the average was 25 people, so it is not surprising that Blanchard recorded 159 outstations (see Altman and Taylor 1987: 5) as having no population, since many outstation populations were not serviced from the local centre but had to go into the local centre to purchase supplies, cash their social security cheques and access medical treatment. These figures underline the fact that outstations are not isolated places but are linked into complex regional social networks with other outstations and one or more regional centres, between which there is a great deal of movement (see Morphy and Morphy, this volume).

The rapid growth of outstations was probably responsible for ATSIC's 1996 moratoriums not only on support for new outstations but also on building more houses at any of them. In the next year, ATSIC arranged a review of outstation resource centres, which estimated, on the basis of official statistics, that there were about 1,000 outstations serviced by approximately 100 funded outstation resource centres with a total population of about 12,000 (see Palmer, this volume). In this study, the reviewers tried to mirror the residential complexity and mobility by providing minimum, maximum, usual and effective population

figures. They extrapolate from their sample to suggest an effective population of 19,572 across approximately 1,400 outstations nationally. These figures make it clear that outstations were central to the life of many people in remote regions although their significance varied greatly from outstation to outstation. While many had permanent populations year in and year out, others were more like holiday camps or were just visited at the weekend (for example, Thompson n.d.: Ch. 6, on eastern Cape York).

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, a strong and effective case has been, and is still being, made by Jon Altman and others (for a way into this literature, see Altman and Kerins 2012) for the enormously important role outstation populations could play in looking after what has come to be called the 'Indigenous estate'.<sup>11</sup>

The 'Indigenous estate' includes large areas of some of the most pristine environments left in the country. Looking after it in the national interest, it is argued, could provide employment opportunities for outstation residents who are ideally located to provide a wide range of environmental services. Aboriginal people's interest in these opportunities is shown in the wide adoption of 'Caring for Country' programs, and their preparedness to grant Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) status to large areas of Aboriginal land, covering 260,000 sq km between 50 IPAs in 2012 (see Altman 2012: 13), making this land part of the National Reserve System. Nationwide, 680 Aboriginal people are now employed in ranger positions.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, however, as the first decade of the twenty-first century passed the halfway mark, there was a hardening of government attitudes to the funding of 'outstations' and some strong voices criticising them. Critics such as Gary Johns (for example, 2009) and Helen Hughes (2007) were receiving a hearing in policy circles. The same people, and others, have also been highly critical of the CDEP scheme, which has been characterised as not providing 'real' work, and indeed in some cases as being no more than an income support program. Such a poor understanding of the nature and complexity of 'outstation' economies and the role of CDEP schemes in them has threatened what informed observers feel is a scheme crucial to many very worthwhile projects. Hughes and other critics view 'outstations' as the ultimate expression of what they regard as a senseless policy of supporting Aboriginal people to maintain separation from the mainstream economy. For Hughes and Johns, there is no justification for the long-term support of even the remote Aboriginal towns. What is needed, they

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11 This term refers to the totality of the land held under various titles by Aboriginal people, which now amounts to more than 22 per cent of Australia.

12 This allowed large areas of Aboriginal land with high environmental and cultural heritage values to be incorporated into the National Reserve System, which is established according to criteria set out by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (Altman 2012: 13).

maintain, is to get the economic incentives right to motivate people to join the mainstream. Neither author shows any sign of understanding the diversity of life situations in Aboriginal Australia, nor any understanding of the diversity of motivations and cultural orientation present today.<sup>13</sup>

With the transfer of Commonwealth responsibilities for 'outstations' to the Northern Territory in 2008, and the rapid changes of policy after the Intervention in 2007, from 'Closing the Gap' to the 'Working Future' policy issued on 20 May 2009 and then a first ever NT policy for 'outstations/homelands', a new and unsympathetic regime was clearly articulated. There is to be no support for new outstations or building houses on them. The rationale for this is articulated in terms of outstations being on private land and so outside government responsibility for public housing. To secure support, existing outstations must be occupied for at least eight to nine months of the year, each resident can only maintain one principal place of residence, there must be adequate drinkable water as per national guidelines, and the residents must commit to increasing self-sufficiency by making reasonable financial contributions for services.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Writing about malaise in the Central Australian community of Areyonga in 1970, Nugget Coombs (1978: 11) commented that it was a community that appeared to lack the stimulus of achievable aspirations. Much the same could have been said about many such remote communities. The changes to policy in 1972–73, however, provided Aboriginal people across remote Australia with the stimulus of immediately achievable aspirations to which many responded rapidly. It is evident that initially older men led these movements, but by the late 1970s, the population structure in the larger communities had stabilised to approach that in the regional centres (see Young 1982: 73; Blanchard 1987: 32–3). Indeed, the masculinity ratios and age structure suggest that women and children were the anchors in most regions of the Northern Territory (Young 1982: 81). The motivations of the movers to outstations came to be well understood as driven by the desire of people to take charge of their lives, to be on or near the country of the founders of the outstation and to gain access to newly available resources. They were also an immediate response to the growing conflict in the larger communities aggravated by access to cash and alcohol, and loss of control over younger family members. The achievable aspirations were not long-term plans for the future. Likewise, with hindsight, it is evident

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13 Of course, the future of these orientations and motivations for the younger generations remains to be seen.

14 See policy at: [www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/senate/committee/indig\\_ctte/hearings/Northern\\_Territory\\_Government\\_b\\_pdf.ashx](http://www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/senate/committee/indig_ctte/hearings/Northern_Territory_Government_b_pdf.ashx) (accessed 31 July 2014).

that the policymakers' vision of the place of the outstation movement also did not look to the future or incorporate any long-term view, although somewhere in the recesses of their minds there was a concern about it. Indeed, Charles Perkins, then secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, described the movement as creating a 'breathing space' from which outstation-dwellers 'can start a number of other things. They can look at what options are available to them; what opportunities are available; what the good and bad things are in white society' (Blanchard 1987: 85).

It is significant that only a small number of outstations have metamorphosed into permanent townships in their own right, reproducing the settlements with the full range of services but at a more manageable scale. In each of these cases, they were originally outstations located at a maximum distance from the regional centre and created by people who were among the last to settle down. As the chapters by Nicolas Peterson, Sutton and David and Bruce Martin suggest, the role of non-Indigenous outsiders was usually important if not crucial in this transformation. The reason seems to be the role they played in ensuring the reliability and predictability of supplies and the working of key infrastructure.

Support from policymakers for the outstation movement initially simply tracked Aboriginal desires in the context of a period of radical reorientation of government attitudes with the Labor Party election that saw the establishment of the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (in 1973), the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Land Rights (1972–74), the passing of the *Racial Discrimination Act* (1975) and the policy of self-determination. The rhetoric was the right to choose and the obligation of the Government to support Aboriginal people as citizens. With the general shift to the right and now a Liberal Federal Government, land rights are being cast as private property when it suits government, and citizenship is conceived of in terms of an obligation to move towards, if not achieving, self-sufficiency. In November 2014, when it became clear that the limited Commonwealth funding for outstations in the States would not be extended, both Western Australia and South Australia made it clear that they could not support very small communities often with only five people. In Western Australia, up to 150 such communities have been identified as likely to lose all support and it seems clear that virtually all of these are Aboriginal.

While there clearly are significant issues about equitable expenditure in remote areas, the extent of the negative focus on outstations appears as a huge diversion from the real issues. Only a small proportion—about a maximum of 10 per cent at the very most—of the remote Aboriginal population lives in outstations, which by and large provide their residents with satisfactory lives. All of the real policy challenges relate to the large regional centres, where social problems are often considerable and economic activity is limited. All that withdrawing support from outstations will do is to swell the numbers in the regional centres, adding

to their immediate problems, such as in the area of housing, and to the number of people without work. When government has resolved the policy issues around the major remote communities, outstations might sensibly feature on the agenda. Meanwhile, outstations provide a more desirable form of long-term dependency for a portion of the remote population who have crafted their life projects around them and it is in the interests of all concerned to find ways to continue to support them.

Reflecting on this history of the early period of the establishment of outstations, it is evident that it was never a simple attempt to turn the clock back to a pre-contact ideal, although key Aboriginal motivations had their basis in pre-existing cultural orientations. Central to the life projects that the founders of the outstations were seeking to realise was the desire for political autonomy, to be in charge of their lives, which drew on a long history of value related to ideas of personal autonomy and authority, with their basis in land ownership. Land ownership determined in most cases where people established their outstations, as in western Cape York, throughout Arnhem Land and in much of Central Australia. This was not always in terms of the primary rights of the founders, as in some situations practical factors such as logistical constraints intervened, as in the case of the Pintupi at Yayayi or the Balgo residents who moved to Yagga Yagga, or in the light of pre-existing infrastructure, as for the Ngaanyatjara, or land title constraints at Ntaria/Hermannsburg. But in these compromise situations, the drive for autonomy by being separate was clearly there, as confirmed by the situation at Hermannsburg, the emergence of satellite outstations from Yagga Yagga and in the way that Pintupi worked their way westwards back to their homeland. In the case of Doyndji and some of the early South Australian outstations, another enduring value was quite explicit: the desire and responsibility to protect key sites on the land.

The varied histories and successes of the many outstations clearly suggest the complexities of the issues around self-determination. The evidence from those outstations that have turned into small sustainable communities, where contentedness and purposefulness are more clearly evident than in some of the larger communities, provides further evidence that such communities are not a disengagement from Australian society. All of them have been established and sustained collaboratively with the help of non-Indigenous people who have been attentive to the life projects of Aboriginal men and women seeking their own solutions to the wicked policy problems around the future of remote communities. Outstations are only one solution, and they are not without some of their own problems, nor are they a solution necessarily attractive to the majority of the remote population, but government needs to recognise their true significance and to find equitable ways to draw them into the array of policies for remote area populations.

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