

An Anniversary Remembered:

When Homelands Were Celebrated

By Jon Altman

An anniversary is the yearly recurrence of a date when an event first took place or when an institution was founded. Some significant anniversaries, like the passage of Northern Territory land rights law 40 years ago last year and the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, are celebrated; others, like the 10th anniversary in June of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response – the “Intervention” – will be marked, I suspect, with very mixed emotions.

March this year marked the 30th anniversary of the tabling of the report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, *Return to Country: The Aboriginal Homelands Movement in Australia*. This was also referred to as the Blanchard Report with deference to the chair of the committee, the late Alan Blanchard MP. This anniversary should have been widely celebrated for many reasons, but it slipped under the radar – perhaps there are just too many anniversaries to remember.

I am keen to both revisit and celebrate the Blanchard Report for several reasons.

The Aboriginal homelands movement that saw the re-occupation of Aboriginal lands by their owners and kin began in the NT in the early 1970s. There are a number of reasons for this, including: the late colonisation of the NT and hence the continuity of strong traditions and links to ancestral lands; the early implementation of land rights laws there; and the earlier existence of a reserves system that allowed a degree of maintenance of connection to country and associated economic reliance on wildlife harvesting.

The homelands movement was a rejection by thousands of Aboriginal people of the joint colonial projects of centralisation at government settlements and mission stations, and assimilation. With the policy shift to self-determination in 1972 people literally voted with their feet and moved to homelands – defined by Blanchard as “small decentralised communities of close kin established by the movement of Aboriginal people to land of social, cultural and economic significance to them”.

Homelands have represented a vexed policy challenge since their re-occupation, as an unusual form of settlement in ‘postcolonial’ Australia; they are generally tiny hamlets with small flexible populations of fewer than 50 people that sit at the very bottom of the size-sensitive settlement hierarchy.

In some places, including where I mainly work in west Arnhem Land, homelands are called outstations but I will use the term homelands here in keeping with the language

of the Blanchard Report – but also because I want to find a name for the residents of these places who have been totally absent in policy language, and the term “homelanders” is probably as good as I can get in a single word.

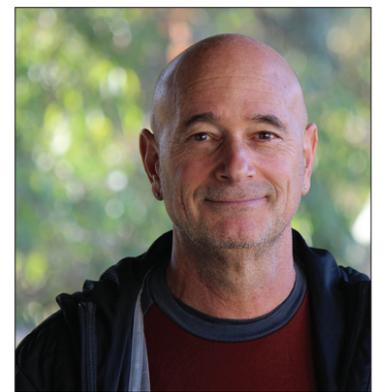
All too often in public and policy debates it is far from clear if the focus is on homelands, the places dotted across the landscape, or on homelanders, the people who live at these places on permanent, seasonal or occasional bases.

visited more than 50 homelands, it received 44 written submissions and examined 111 witnesses. It was a form of rigorous and bipartisan parliamentary inquiry unimaginable these days. I made two written submissions (one specifically requested by the committee) and provided verbal evidence as a witness focusing on the economic viability of homelands.

I cannot summarise this report of more than 300 pages and its 58 recommendations in any

and transport; and access to education and health services.

The Blanchard Report marked a critically important juncture in the history of the homelands movement because it debunked official scepticism about the commitment of homelanders to isolated living with limited access to services, and also recognised that when at their homelands people were more self-sufficient, more active and productive and less dependent on income support from the



Jon Altman is Research Professor at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University, Melbourne, and a regular columnist for Land Rights News.



Baniyala (Yilpara) Homeland on Blue Mud Bay, East Arnhem Land.

Indeed, a large part of the reason why both the Commonwealth and NT governments have failed to develop sensible policies for homelands and homelanders since the 1970s is that these places find no ready niche in their governmental or bureaucratic machinery, in part because this machinery is tuned only to thinking about stable places and populations and not about tiny remote places with highly mobile populations. Homelanders from the 1970s often live between places, with this “in-between-ness” influenced by minimal service delivery and seasonality, especially in the Top End.

The Blanchard inquiry was undertaken between 1985 and 1987. The Committee

detail here. I just note that its overall tenor was positive and progressive; it accurately predicted that homelands would be permanent fixtures on the Indigenous policy landscape, and that homelanders would require access to basic services despite often living in very remote inaccessible locations.

Key recommendations included the need for information about homeland locations and the number of homelanders; appropriate policy making processes; funding for homelands and outstation resource agencies; support for projects to promote economic independence; equitable access to social security; the need for basic infrastructure – water supplies, housing

state than in larger communities.

In a sense, the highly informal arrangements that had seen very limited support for homelands were given a far greater degree of formality after Blanchard. The newly formed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) looked to implement its recommendations between 1990 and 2004 in what constituted a social compact for homelands living. This was incorporated in its “National Homelands Policy”.

Through this policy homelanders received some services support when living on country, mainly delivered by a network of about 100 community-based outstation resource

agencies. But, in return for being afforded the right to live in their own places and spaces in accord with their own norms and values, there was a realisation that services would never be delivered to the standard enjoyed by other Australians, especially the vast majority living in metropolitan situations.

The dominance of the Commonwealth government in this area of Aboriginal affairs in the NT is an issue that the Blanchard Report neglected to properly address perhaps because of political sensitivity at that time.

From 1911 to 1978 the NT was administered from Canberra and was only granted self-government in 1978. At that time a highly irregular deal was imposed on the first Chief Minister of the NT, Paul Everingham, via exchange of letters from the then Commonwealth Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Senator Fred Chaney.

This deal asserted that the Commonwealth would retain responsibility for homelands, perhaps in the belief that all were on land vested in Aboriginal land trusts under the Commonwealth Aboriginal Land Rights Act of 1976 – it was mainly a strategic response to the anti-land rights stance taken by the CLP government in Darwin.

This move annoyed the new NT government immensely, in part because it lost effective political jurisdiction (which comes with fiscal muscle) over a large part of the NT terrestrial estate and literally hundreds of small places. A form of policy resentment set in whereby the NT government would do as little as possible for the thousands living at homelands, forgetting they were not just among the longest term and most committed NT citizens, but also among the neediest.

So, while NT departments of education and health made token efforts to deliver services to homelands, these were never NT government priorities, let alone serious considerations.

At homelands it was the Commonwealth government that was of primary importance, particularly as it funded (via ATSIC) two programs crucial to homeland living: the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme that provided flexible basic income support, and the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP) that delivered rudimentary infrastructure and some housing, and importantly funded the community-based outstation resource agencies that provided services support, development assistance and political advocacy for homelands.

With the demise of ATSIC in 2004 government policy shifted quite dramatically from resigned tolerance and limited support for living at homelands to outright intolerance and hostility; homeland living and the social compact on which it was based were suddenly at extreme risk as a policy of “new mainstreaming” was introduced with undue haste and poor planning.

This shift was very clearly signalled in December 2005 by Senator Amanda Vanstone in her last days as Minister for Indigenous Affairs in her poorly informed and provocative “conspicuous compassion” speech where she raised the spectre of homelands as “cultural museums” where children would be deprived of educational opportunity and might be “at risk”. This signalled the early days of the emerging discursive trope concerned with the safety and wellbeing of children that was turned into a political art form during the NT Intervention launched 18 months later.

In 2006 I published a paper, *In Search of an Outstations Policy for Indigenous Australians*. Using Community Housing and Infrastructure



Protesters gather in Canberra, March 2015, when the Western Australian Government was threatening to close homelands.

Needs Survey data collected by the ABS and commissioned by ATSIC, I reported 547 homelands in the NT with an estimated total population of 10,342 at an average 19 per community – almost 90 per cent were in very remote regions.

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I was seriously concerned at the loss of direction with the abolition of ATSIC and its National Homelands Policy; and the emergence of an ominous narrative that depicted homelands as places where the strength of Aboriginal culture was being identified by powerful voices as a negative barrier to “advancement to integration” rather than as a positive means to improve livelihoods when at homelands, as a growing body of evidence demonstrated.

I sensed a total absence of any comprehensive or joined-up government approach to the challenge of delivering citizenship entitlements to homelands. This was evident in extreme vacillations in policy rhetoric, with the new Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, now saying that “safe and healthy” homelands would not be closed down, no matter how small they might be.

I ended that publication by suggesting that it might be timely for the Minister to again request the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs to inquire into the homelands situation, 20 years after Blanchard, before too

much new policy was determined. There was no serious consideration of this proposal.

Instead, a year later, homelands and homelands got caught up in the NT Intervention maelstrom and the early social compact was unilaterally obliterated by the Australian government.

While initially, in emergency haste, the Commonwealth totally focused on the takeover of 73 prescribed larger communities, subsequently there was a belated realisation that there were more than 500 homelands and up to 10,000 homelands in the hinterland.

The response to this was extraordinary.

First, after intervening in the NT using constitutional “territory powers” because the NT government was assessed as incompetent,

three months later the Commonwealth overturned the Chaney/Everingham arrangement and handed responsibility for homelands back to the NT as a part of a massive housing and infrastructure deal for townships.

This “homelands deal” provided \$20 million per annum for infrastructure support for 500 places, but was contingent on the NT government agreeing not to build any houses with Commonwealth funding at homelands. Effectively, the neglect of homelands was ensured and any potential growth was stymied. This arrangement has been locked in now till 2022.

Second, homelands became entangled in the new Closing the Gap policy framework introduced by the Rudd government. In this context homelands were always going to be deeply problematic places because gaps, as measured by standard social indicators, will be impossible to eliminate at homelands.

Having supposedly handed over responsibility for homelands to the NT government, the Commonwealth remained keen to ensure that it extended governmental controls over the homelands.

Hence the Council of Australian Governments National Indigenous Reform Agreement of 2009 states quite explicitly that major investments in service provision are to be avoided where there are few economic and educational opportunities – which basically means almost all homelands. And there is much reference to the promotion of behaviours consistent with positive social norms, code for paternalistically trying to inculcate mainstream Australian norms.

Such sentiments are replicated and stated even more bluntly in the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, with all its evolutionary connotations,

introduced by the Abbott government in 2013. The mantra of Tony Abbott, the self-proclaimed PM for Indigenous affairs, simplistically aimed to get the adults to work, the kids to school and build safer communities.

But such a policy approach is disastrous for homelands because at homelands there may be no schools and no jobs and community safety may not be an issue – although if homelands are artificially concocted as dangerous places, then heightened police surveillance can be justified.

There is little room in the current overarching policy framework for living on the land, using its natural resources for a distinct lifeway based on a high degree of mobility and a flexible way of life inclusive of hunter-gatherer subjectivity – an economic right embedded in land rights and native title laws.

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CDEP that was the income support foundation of livelihood at homelands has been replaced by the Community Development Program. This new remote work-for-the-dole scheme requires the jobless to work five hours a day five days a week in supervised work or training. Self-provisioning in the bush is not regarded as legitimate work or training, so homelander work effort is forcibly diverted from productive self-provisioning to unproductive make-work. Failure to comply is penalised by loss of income support. This malfunctioning program is more effective in punishing non-compliance than in generating jobs; it is impoverishing thousands.

Income management administered via BasicsCard requires half of welfare income to be expended at community stores licensed by the Commonwealth government. Income management is a measure that is looking to discipline and reform expenditure behaviour. BasicsCard is designed to deliver food “security” and to bypass customary norms of sharing with kin. But in effect it reduces the possibility of Aboriginal people exercising their own food sovereignty in the vicinity of homelands and increased poverty is resulting in intensification rather than intended dilution of sharing.

Housing policy as noted has focused all effort on larger places, what NT government policies like Working Futures and Homelands Extra termed “Territory Growth Towns”, policy language that has quickly disappeared because there is no economic growth evident at these larger places where administrative attention and financial support is focused. Conversely, no public housing is being provided at homelands, now conveniently deemed ‘private’ places.

The School Enrolment and Attendance

Measure (SEAM) and the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) require kids to attend school, or parents are financially penalised. As many homelands do not have schools, parents need to move to townships to access basic education. There is evidence that providing education at homelands and on country is more effective in increasing attendance.

After the Intervention, policing at “prescribed communities” was ramped up considerably to help build “safer communities”. But for homelands this increased presence is resulting in excessive policing of drivers, vehicles and guns. Even though vehicles are used mainly in the remote bush, police nevertheless impound ones that are unregistered and unroadworthy, thus depriving people of links to homelands and the means to hunt. Drivers too are prosecuted and fined if

caught driving without a current licence; the same happens with unlicensed guns that are impounded. Access to the hunting “means of production” is declining rapidly.

And finally, when outstation resource agencies that supported homelands were also CDEP and CHIP organisations they were afforded a degree of financial autonomy and exercised political power to represent their homeland constituents. In the aftermath of the Intervention these organisations have been effectively depoliticised and silenced and now increasingly need to work as administrative agents of the state just to survive.

The current suite of programs based on paternalism and punishment is looking to recentralise homelands for surveillance and to reprogram their subjectivities, or lifeways, to match those of mainstream Australians.

And yet there is no evidence that any of this is working.

But the government persists because not to persist is to tolerate a refiguring of the state and capitalism to suit homelands’ different aspirations. What I have termed economic hybridity or plurality that includes the customary can work better than what is

being provided at larger places. Such alternate possibilities highlight the clearly evident failure of the Commonwealth government’s decade-old project to Close the Gap.

More sinisterly, this creative destruction of homelands might be motivated by a corporate state concern that homelands can get in the way of capitalism’s spread as imagined in the grand project to Develop the North. A cursory glance at resource atlas maps shows few

identified mineral deposits on a commercial scale on Aboriginal lands. With major existing mines at Ranger and Gove facing closure and decline respectively, there are growing imperatives to explore for new prospects and a landscape cleared of homelands would form attractive “greenfields”.

The historian Patrick Wolfe argued that the logic of elimination is an organising structural principle of settler-colonial society. But in the project to eliminate the homelands and alter homelander lifeways we see something more targeted than his generalisation, something akin to what the renowned legal scholar Raphael Lemkin termed “genocide” way back in 1944.

In his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*,



Baniyala (Yilpara) Homeland on Blue Mud Bay, East Arnhem Land.

Lemkin argued genocidal policy can deploy numerous techniques including the economic: “The destruction of the economic existence of a national group necessarily brings about the crippling of its development, even a retrogression. The lowering of the standard of living creates difficulties in fulfilling cultural-spiritual requirements”.

The impoverishment of homelands, their struggle for physical survival and the growing difficulties they are experiencing in retaining connection to country resonate with Lemkin’s acute theorisation of genocide.

Circumstances for homelands are currently dire; they are what American anthropologist Lucas Bessire has termed “hyper marginalised”.

But I do not wish to end with despondency.

Indeed, in spite of the best efforts of governments to eliminate the homelands,

And there might be some emerging opportunities for push-back, decolonising pathways out of the suite of genocidal programs being deployed.

One is to appeal to those sectional state and wider public interests that see value in the homelands as nodes of productive conservation action, carbon farming and cultural industry. While it might be imagined that these activities can be undertaken independently of cultural knowledge and on an expeditionary basis from larger places, in reality people on country with lived knowledge of country are crucial to such ventures.

As when the homelands movement first began, people are looking to generate income for survival in creative ways, tradition is being

refigured and deployed for the paid provision of environmental services and for carbon abatement; culture is marketed for cash; and people look to get meat any way they can, including via the culling of feral animals. Some might even find the means with philanthropic support to privately fund their homelands.

Politically, and with the critically important assistance of representative organisations like land councils, community organisations and civil society, homelands might mobilise domestic or international law to counter the attempt to evict them from their homelands; such action by governments constitutes a form of structural violence and human rights abuse that is counter to a number of international conventions and articles in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

It is possible that the struggle for alternative ways of living on country, a form of economic hybridity predicated on the maintenance of hunter-gatherer subjectivity, might constitute an economic formation of value for survival in an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable world. There may be avenues for homelands to build alliances with others living precariously and so be part of a wider struggle for economic and social justice.

I end by returning to the Blanchard Report. Its approach was progressive, it looked to open up possibilities, it was not fixated on delivering sameness but saw potentiality and benefits in difference and alterity. The challenge today is to ensure that the homelands way of life is not obliterated and to leave open the options envisioned as long ago as three decades ago in a bipartisan report to the Australian parliament. That would be the way to celebrate the 30th anniversary of *Return to Country: The Aboriginal Homelands Movement in Australia*.

the only information available in a decade collected by the Centre for Appropriate Technology and published late last year (after considerable governmental delay) shows that there are 630 homelands still in the NT with an estimated minimum population of 4,532 and a maximum of 11,174; it is reported that 70 per cent of homelands are occupied 70 per cent of the time. Some homelands are remaining on country despite all the barriers erected by governments.

