In Search of an Outstations Policy for Indigenous Australians

J.C. Altman

CENTRE
FOR ABORIGINAL ECONOMIC
POLICY RESEARCH

SERIES NOTE

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Professor and Director, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra; e-mail: **jon.altman@anu.edu.au**

ABSTRACT

This paper explores some issues for urgent consideration before any new policy for outstations is developed under the new administrative arrangements in Indigenous affairs. The research reported here is animated by a long-standing interest in the livelihoods of Indigenous people who reside at small remote communities, usually termed outstations, or homelands, or emerging communities. The paper uses official secondary data to demonstrate that there is no compelling case for a policy change that would encourage recentralisation from small discrete Indigenous communities to larger discrete Indigenous communities. Nor is there a compelling policy case for a move from outstations to townships or from townships to larger urban centres to improve Indigenous people's livelihood prospects.

This paper suggests there is too little research and understanding of culturally distinct, but evolving, patterns of Indigenous mobility and migration in remote and very remote Australia. In particular, there is a danger that policy-makers will fall into the trap of conceptualising Indigenous residence as occurring in some fixed hierarchy of settlements, rather than as occurring regionally and flexibly between larger and smaller communities and between smaller communities. There is a distinct possibility that government policy aspirations are out of touch with the aspiration of many Indigenous people to decentralise. This aspiration is not surprising, in part because the Indigenous estate is expanding and new land owners are likely to want to live on their land. There is also local recognition in some regions that some townships, like Wadeye, are becoming too large and problematic (in part because they lack an economic base), and that decentralisation provides better livelihood options.

While recent ministerial calls for an open debate on outstations is endorsed, it is unfortunate that much of this debate is being conducted with little input from outstations people themselves and with limited reference to expert local and regional knowledge. It might be timely for a House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into the outstations situation before too much new policy is made. Such an inquiry might find that there are diverse futures for Indigenous people at outstations at variance with the monolithic mainstreaming perspective that appears to be dominating emerging policy discourse. Such futures might see Indigenous people living on the land they own, moving between larger and smaller communities, and pursuing livelihoods in a hybrid economy that includes payment for the delivery of environmental services, participation in the customary or non market sector, and the pursuit of commercial opportunities. Such non-mainstream possibilities need to be explored.

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INTRODUCTION

The research reported in this paper is animated by a long-standing interest, dating back 30 years, in the livelihoods of Indigenous people who reside at small remote communities, usually termed outstations, or homelands, or emerging communities. I have been looking at the governance of an outstation resource agency (ORA) in central Arnhem Land, the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC), under the auspices of the Indigenous Community Governance Project.[1] Since 2000, I have also been researching the long-term sustainability of the harvesting economy at outstations.[2] Much of my interest in outstation livelihoods meshes with other recent research on proposed land rights reforms (Altman, Linkhorn & Clark 2005) and changes to the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme (Altman, Gray & Levitus 2005). This research was specifically requested by the then Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) in November 2005. [3]

Outstations are a form of discrete Indigenous residential area that is difficult to define. This is in part because they are so variable in form, owing to different histories and interstate differences—especially of land tenure and state administrative practices. Nevertheless, some working definition of outstations is needed, both for the state in terms of public administration, and for social policy researchers who need some concrete, if problematic, definition for these locations.

Outstations are generally defined as communities, or infrastructural nodes, on Aboriginal land inhabited by a usually related, and always highly mobile, Indigenous population. Two observations can be made at the outset. First, there is often some confusion in policy between outstations as a place (residential area) and the people that own, or inhabit, that place (the outstation community). Second, there is a tendency in popular discourse to either create false dichotomy in settlement hierarchies between larger discrete Indigenous townships and smaller outstations, or else to conflate the two without recognising that regular movement between townships and outstations is a culturally distinctive feature of the way Aboriginal people live.

Such conflation can partly be explained by historical processes. What are now termed outstations (or homelands) are a form of residential location that was born of the failed state policy of centralisation, together with attempted sedentarisation and assimilation, in the 1960s. From the 1970s, a different set of state policies, including land rights laws, some service support for decentralisation, and most importantly provision of income support (to Indigenous people as remote-living Australian citizens from the early 1980s) facilitated and sustained the development of outstations.

Unfortunately, as soon as one looks to define outstations as a form of Indigenous community a level of locational and statistical—arguably highly fictional—fixity is required. This fixity is more important for bureaucratic convenience as a point of administrative mediation with the state and the market than for Indigenous lived reality. Outstations are often seasonally occupied and people associated with one outstation may live in many other places: bush camps, other outstations, townships, towns; and vice versa, township dwellers will often spend a part of the year at one outstation or other.

In this paper I will argue for a more holistic and inclusive policy approach. Outstations are an iconic form of living place, born in part of failed state policy and dotted at 1,000 plus localities around the Indigenous estate. These places and their residents are culturally and geographically distanced from mainstream Australia, beyond the public gaze and, in part because of cultural difference, are barely understood by the wider community. They are also as far from the reach of the state as is possible in Australia, where much of the contact between the state and its agencies on the one hand, and outstation people on the other, is mediated by ORAs.

ORA: Outstation Resource Agency

BAC: Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation

CDEP: Community Development Employment Projects

FACS: Department of Family and Community Services

For a variety of reasons, outstations are suddenly in the public gaze. It is as if the federal political and bureaucratic elites have suddenly discovered these communities and are concerned about the living conditions. More importantly perhaps, mobility from outstations has become an issue of public interest. Of equal significance, the new arrangements mean that mainstream Commonwealth agencies, rather than the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) abolished in 2005, have taken functional responsibility for outstations. And as part of the new arrangements, bilateral agreements are being negotiated between the States and the Commonwealth. Historically, there has been inordinate Commonwealth responsibility for outstation infrastructure and income support, and clearly the Commonwealth is keen to see some of this responsibility transferred back to the States. Finally, outstations symbolise a form of living that is at an extreme end of the spectrum for the Howard Government's vision for Indigenous Australians as part of the mainstream. Because of choice, location, and distinctiveness of living, outstations fundamentally challenge the government's goal of statistical equality or practical reconciliation.

This paper sets out to do five things:

- Offer a definition of outstations and provide some information about where they are located, and the numbers of localities and people involved.

- Examine briefly the policy history of outstations and offer an interpretation of two current policy concerns. The first is about meeting the infrastructure and services needs of these tiny localities that average 20–30 residents (such concern often conflates capital and recurrent cost issues). This is often expressed as state anxiety about economies of scale in services delivery to small, invariably remote, locales with highly mobile populations and the effectiveness of these services. As already noted, this is probably more about who will actually pay for these services (the Commonwealth or the States), especially if the number of outstations or number of residents expands. The second policy concern to be discussed in this paper is about the economic viability of outstations—which can be assessed both absolutely and relatively— compared to other Indigenous or non-Indigenous townships in similar geographically remote locations. These two issues, service delivery and economic viability, are clearly interdependent.

- Examine the two issues of service delivery and economic viability with some available statistics. This examination is undertaken with a certain reluctance because the robustness of the statistics is so questionable as to be relatively meaningless. This is particularly the case because statistics are usually collected at service centres located in townships, yet the statistics purport to accurately describe hinterland localities and their populations.

- Provide some brief commentary on the capacity of the new arrangements to accommodate the distinctiveness of the outstations situation, focusing especially on bilateral agreements, the notion of shared responsibility, whole-of-government(s) approaches, and the 'mainstreaming' of ATSIC's Indigenous specific programs to mainline agencies.

- In conclusion, appeal for a more holistic inclusive policy approach that recognises the interlinkages between the 120,000 Indigenous people who live in 1,200 discrete localities mainly in very remote Australia, rather than creating a false policy distinction between the estimated 22,000 who are primarily associated with outstations and the rest. I make some proposals for informed debate, and say something about an alternate imagined future that, while at variance from the current dominant policy paradigm, is focused on realistic livelihood options for Indigenous people living on the Indigenous estate.

Table 1. Location and number of discrete communities with a population of less than 100, 2001[a]

State/Territory	Communities < 100	Total population	Average size
NT	547	10,342	19
WA	230	5,013	22
Qld	104	1,482	14
SA	79	1,447	18
NSW	29	1,397	48
Vic	1	79	79
Tas	1	57	57
Total & average	991	19,817	20

Note: a. Many of these are outstations/homelands.

Source: CHINS 2001 (ABS 2002b).

Table 2. Location and number of discrete communities with a population of less than 100, by remoteness, 2001[a]

State/Territory	Very remote	Remote	Other	Total
NT	481	58	8	547
WA	217	10	3	230
Qld	92	8	4	104
SA	73	4	2	79
NSW	5	6	18	29
Vic			1	1
Tas			1	1
Total communities	868	86	41	991
Per cent	87	9	4	100

Note: a. Many of these are outstations/homelands.

Source: CHINS 2001 (ABS 2002b).

LOCATION, NUMBERS OF COMMUNITIES AND PEOPLE

Outstations can be understood in at least two ways. They are locales where small groups of generally related people live on land to which they have statutory ownership and/or descent-based affiliation. This can be understood as the outstation, 'the place'.

Outstations can also be represented as the distinct Indigenous social groupings associated with these places. While there are usually some members of this flexible social group at an outstation, some members of this group also generally reside elsewhere. In this way, outstations can also be understood as 'the people' associated with the locale.

CHINS:
Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey

Most statistical collections tell us something about the number of individuals captured by data collection at one of these localities at one point in time. Alternatively, data collections may represent the number of people regarded by a wider regional polity as generally associated with a place, aggregated up for all places. This is how numbers have been estimated historically by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs Community Profiles or, more recently, in the Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey (CHINS) conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

ABS:
Australian Bureau of Statistics

In a national review of ORAs undertaken in 1998, Altman, Gillespie and Palmer (1999) differentiated minimum, maximum, usual and effective populations at outstations and estimated a minimum of about 13,500 and a maximum of 32,500 residents at about 1,000 outstations Australia-wide. At that time, this accounted for between 4 and 9 per cent of the Indigenous population. This was just an estimate, but it provided a sense of overall population scale and population variability.

CHINS 2001 used a similar approach to the ORA review, but with less local knowledge.[4] It provides information on 1,216 discrete Indigenous communities by size. The CHINS data for outstations, arbitrarily defined here as communities with populations of less than 100, is summarised in Tables 1 and 2. It is noteworthy that the CHINS 2001 focuses on community size only, rather than on type of community.

The key findings from CHINS 2001 on outstations populations and their distribution can be summarised as follows.

- There are an estimated 991 communities with a population of less than 100. Their total population is 19,817 and the average size of an outstation is 20.

- Outstations are mainly located in the Northern Territory, followed by Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia.

- The average size of outstations nationally is remarkably similar. Arguably, there is some similarity between this contemporary post-colonial figure and the average size of co-residing units in pre-colonial times.

- While there are a few small discrete Indigenous communities in the more settled States of New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, these might be a different form of community from outstations in remote and very remote regions; on average, these communities are markedly larger than communities in the other States.

- The vast majority of outstations are in very remote (87%) and remote (9%) Australia, and most are associated with Aboriginal land ownership (see Appendix A—Fig. 1, p. 18).

- Almost all outstations are linked to larger communities and ORAs (see Appendix A—Fig. 2, p. 19). It is estimated that there are about 100 ORAs Australia-wide: some are dedicated to outstation support, and some are general service organisations that also service outstations.

The aggregate population of small (population less than 100) discrete Indigenous communities is estimated at 21,700, or less than 5 per cent of the total Indigenous population at the time of the 2001 Census. These small communities appear to be occupying a great deal of space in present policy discourse given their small overall size. Even the 225 other discrete communities with populations greater than 100—also receiving much media coverage—have a total population of only 88,268 and an average size of 392. While these communities are far larger than outstations, they are still extremely small. I will return to the false dichotomy between communities of less than 100 and communities of greater than 100 later.

There is a remarkable similarity between the population estimated by the ORA Review in 1998 and the CHINS in 2001: the CHINS estimate of 19,817 lies in between the ORA Review's estimated usual population of 23,080 and effective population (calculated as usual population times part of the year at outstation) of 19,572. It should be noted that the ORA estimate was based on a 25 per cent sample of all ORAs.[5]

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUTSTATIONS POLICY AND CURRENT CONCERNS

The development of outstations is generally associated with what commentators have termed a social movement (Altman 1987; Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979; Blanchard 1987; Coombs, Dexter & Hiatt 1980). This unusual rural exodus—from government settlements and missions to smaller localities—coincided with the end of the assimilation era. This social movement was significant because it constituted an Aboriginal rejection of the modernisation or development paradigm as experienced at government settlements and missions. The population movement was predicated on the rejuvenation of customary economic practices that many had assumed defunct. This was initially for livelihood survival, in the absence of state income support beyond pensions and family allowances at remote outstation communities (Altman 1987).

Today it is often overlooked that the move to outstations reduced dependency on the state, as initially people had to forego access to training allowances or any employment or social security income when residing at outstations. In official correspondence[6] and early reports the movement was hailed as Aboriginal people seeking economic independence and self sufficiency (Coombs & Stanner 1974; Council for Aboriginal Affairs 1976).

In the 1970s the outstations movement was minimally supported by the state (either at the Commonwealth or State/Territory government level). This support gradually emerged because the policy framework of that time included self determination, land rights, and equitable payment of social security (and from the late 1980s, access to the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme) for outstation residents. Arguably, state support of outstations was also forthcoming because that period was historically close to the assimilation era. There was a general recognition of the costly failure of this policy and optimism that outstations might assist in solving some of the intractable development problems of artificially-established townships. People who went back to live on their traditional lands in the early days were required to demonstrate a six month commitment to outstation living before they could qualify for a small 'establishment' grant of $10,000. At that time a fiction of residential permanency took hold, generally with the complicity of local people and their resource organisations to ensure some support from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA).

DAA:
Department of
Aboriginal Affairs

But outstations were, and are, just places on the landscape, a convenient point for administrative and producer and consumer interaction between the state and the market and those Indigenous people living in the bush. The first outstation I saw in 1977 was Yai Yai, a place made prominent in the social sciences literature by the writings of anthropologist Fred Myers (1986). Yai Yai then consisted of a corrugated iron shed, some improvised Pintupi dwellings, a bore and a dripping tap. Similarly an outstation I lived at in

Arnhem Land in 1979 and 1980 (Altman 1987) consisted of corrugated iron and bark improvised dwellings with no reticulated water or ablution facilities. The Mann River that flowed most of the year was only 300 metres away from the outstation 'housing'.

From a program delivery administration perspective outstations were, and still are, a nightmare, owing to their small size and the extraordinarily high mobility of their residents—that is, if one envisages that policy requires fixity and if the mediating role of ORAs is overlooked.

Because the outstation movement began in the Northern Territory when the Northern Territory was administered from Canberra (i.e. before self government), it started and continued as a Commonwealth funding responsibility. After self government commenced in 1978, there was some debate about whether outstations should remain a Commonwealth responsibility under the Memorandum of Understanding.[7] In principle, the new Northern Territory government wanted functional responsibility for outstations, but in practice it was keen for the Commonwealth to continue to provide funding. Ultimately, the responsibility remained with the Commonwealth in part because both DAA and Aboriginal people appeared to have doubts about the capacity of the new Northern Territory government to deliver support to outstations, but also because the Northern Territory government acquiesced in order to limit its infrastructure liabilities.

Subsequently, there has been a trend for the Northern Territory policy precedent to extend to Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland where there are also large numbers of outstations (see Table 2 and Appendix A—Fig. 1). Debates have arisen from time to time about the responsibilities of different levels of government for the provision of essential services, versus other forms of services support, at outstations. In reality, most outstations are localities with no effective local government—they are largely dependent for infrastructure and logistical support on either regional organisations (ORAs) or community councils (in the larger townships from where outstation residents migrated).[8] These larger townships were, and are themselves, also invariably under-resourced in terms of housing, infrastructure and other services.

HRSCAA:

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs

The most comprehensive policy focus on outstations was undertaken by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs[9] (HRSCAA) between 1985 and 1987—this lengthy process reflected a recognition of the complexity of the issues. HRSCAA produced a report *Return to Country: The Aboriginal Homelands Movement in Australia* (Blanchard 1987). While nearly 20 years old, the report broached almost all the issues that remain of concern in policy discourse today: the location and numbers of outstations and their residents, appropriate government policies, the likely future of these communities, the relative Commonwealth and State funding responsibilities, economic viability, housing infrastructure, education, and health services. *Return to Country* identified 700 small communities with 14,500 associated people. While it is impossible to go into great detail here about *Return to Country* and its recommendations, the Report offered strong and bipartisan support of the outstations movement, despite some reservations about issues associated with levels of service provision. *Return to Country* set the scene for the 1990s—the ATSIC policy era—with respect to outstations. With the benefit of hindsight, the main legacy of *Return to Country* (and the subsequent Aboriginal Employment Development Policy) was the rapid extension of the CDEP scheme to outstations and a new focus on more realistic infrastructure at outstations, especially provision of access to potable water and housing.

In the 1990s, ATSIC developed the 'National Homelands Policy: ATSIC's Policy for outstations, homelands and new and emerging communities' and sponsored a major review of ORAs in 1997–98 (Altman, Gillespie & Palmer 1999). This review, coincidentally, identified the pivotal role played by ORAs as quasi local government/development agencies/representative bodies for scattered outstation clients who faced a massive political problem of small constituency size and dispersal. The ORA Review also documented how pivotal the CDEP scheme had become to the operations of most ORAs.

ATSIC's National Homelands Policy focused on the requisite conditions for the establishment of outstations because in the 1990s, as the Indigenous land base expanded, there were growing pressures from Indigenous people for support for decentralisation. The four principal criteria for establishment support were:

- Secure land tenure (a focus on outstations the place)

- The outstation must be the principal residence of members (a focus on people)

- Access to potable water at outstations (again a focus on the place), and

- Support from a community organisation or ORA.

A key policy issue was the tension between larger established communities with housing and infrastructure shortfalls and outstations with similar, or perhaps greater, needs. Information from CHINS 2001, presented in the next section, indicates that in the 1990s ATSIC did a fair job of closing the gaps between townships and outstations that were extreme in the 1970s and 1980s (as the earlier passing references to Arnhem Land demonstrated; for long-term changes for the Maningrida region see Altman & Johnson 2000). It should not be overlooked, as the ORA Review demonstrated, that much of this improvement was due to the efficacy of ORAs, especially as they became CDEP organisations in the 1990s and administered significant quantifies of Commonwealth Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP), National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS) and Housing and Infrastructure Priority Program (HIPP) dollars.

The ATSIC policy framework provided a balance between national principles and a regional assessment of needs and priorities made by elected ATSIC Regional Councils working with Regional Offices. The policy framework also allowed for transparent assessment of need, requirement of minimum standards in housing and infrastructure (a requirement that was problematic owing to high costs of delivery and the nature of local priorities), the need for planning, and the option for ATSIC to withdraw support. ATSIC policy also stated unequivocally that development at outstations would be staged. It was highlighted that outstations could not expect the same level of housing, infrastructure and services as available within existing communities unless populations stabilised and grew. This view reflected recommendations made in *Return to Country* (Blanchard 1987).

It is important to note that, while ATSIC slowly developed a comprehensive outstations policy, States and Territories had no policy framework beyond looking to the Commonwealth to continue to underwrite outstations. In Western Australia a framework was eventually developed that meshed with ATSIC's national approach (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2002). Even today, the Northern Territory and South Australia governments have no publicly-available policy framework for outstations. Queensland had developed a draft discussion paper in 2005, and late in 2005 two Commonwealth agencies, FACS and Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) (then in Department of Immigration and Indigenous Affairs) prepared internal and publicly unavailable working and draft discussion papers on outstations.

To summarise my view on policy developments, I make three observations. First, most policy to date has focused to a great extent on the basis for establishment of outstations. In terms of the distinction made earlier between places and people, there has been far greater focus on the former.

Second, the usual contestation about federal/state fiscal responsibility that is a hallmark of Indigenous affairs has been evident with respect to outstations (Blanchard 1987; Commonwealth of Australia 2001). Interestingly, in the case of outstations there has been excessive Commonwealth responsibility in this area which has given the Commonwealth too much influence in policy development. Paradoxically, in the past 30 years Indigenous people have looked to the Commonwealth to facilitate and underwrite outstations development. Now, in a rapidly changing policy environment outstation residents might be unduly exposed to broad Commonwealth policy priorities.

CHIP: Community Housing and Infrastructure Program

NAHS: National Aboriginal Health Strategy

HIPP: Housing and Infrastructure Priority Program

OIPC: Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination

Table 3. Housing and infrastructure standards in Indigenous communities with populations less than 100 and with populations greater than 100, 2001

Housing	Permanent dwellings	People	Density
Communities < 100	3,980	19,817	5 per dwelling
Communities > 100	12,980	88,268	7 per dwelling
Temporary dwellings	No. of temporary dwellings	Total dwellings	Per cent of dwellings that are temporary
Communities < 100	1,179	5,159	23
Communities > 100	703	13,683	5
Potable water	Organised water supply	No organised water supply	Per cent with water
Communities < 100	970[a]	21	98
Communities > 100	225	0	100
Electricity supply	Available	Unavailable	Per cent with electricity
Communities < 100	911	80[b]	92
Communities > 100	225	0	100
Sewerage	Available	Unavailable	Per cent with sewerage
Communities < 100	900	91[c]	91
Communities > 100	225	0	100

Notes: a. 2% failed a water quality test.

b. Mainly communities with < 20 persons and representing 681 residents.

c. Mainly communities with < 20 persons and representing 1,110 residents.

Source: CHINS 2001 (ABS 2002b).

Third, in the absence of any policy framework for outstations, the Howard Government left all responsibility to ATSIC. It was only in December 2005 that the then Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Amanda Vanstone, made cursory reference to outstations (Vanstone 2005). In subsequent media interviews, the Minister had a great deal to say mainly about two issues: service delivery to outstations, and their economic viability (which is addressed in the next section). The Minister also alluded to an open debate that Australia 'has to have' about outstations. Unfortunately, as I will highlight later, this debate is currently being conducted in the halls of the bureaucracy behind closed doors, in preparation for consideration by the Secretaries Group on Indigenous Affairs.

INFRASTRUCTURE, EDUCATION SERVICES AND ECONOMIC VIABILITY

While there is some reference in Senator Vanstone's speech and subsequent radio interviews to the economic viability of outstations, the primary policy concern appears to focus on the state's capacity to deliver infrastructure and services (particularly education) to small dispersed settlements. These are issues that had been thoroughly explored in *Return to Country* (Blanchard 1987). These are legitimate concerns for governments, especially as it is clear that they already experience difficulty in delivering housing, infrastructure and services to Indigenous communities with populations over 100.

Table 4. Access to educational facilities at Indigenous communities with populations less than 50 and greater than 50, 2001

	Communities with school available within 10 km		Communities with school available 10 km+ away	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Primary School				
< 50	265	27	712	73
> 50	211	93	14	7
Up to Year 10				
< 50	115	12	860[a]	88
> 50	112	50	113	50
Up to Year 12				
< 50	81	8	900[b]	92
> 50	64	28	161	72

Notes: a. > 250 km for 261 communities.

            b. > 250 km for 461 communities.

Source: CHINS 2001 (ABS 2002b).

Infrastructure, of course, is more concerned with places than people (to return to my earlier distinction) because infrastructure, once constructed, exists in places irrespective of whether people are there or not. Table 3 presents some housing and infrastructure information from CHINS 2001, comparing Indigenous communities with populations less than 100 to Indigenous communities with populations over 100.

Bearing in mind that these are the only official statistics to undertake such a comparative analysis, the findings from this table are as follows:

- Permanent housing at the smaller communities is less crowded than at the larger communities

- Temporary dwellings are far more common in the smaller communities

- Potable water is available at all larger communities and at 98 per cent of smaller communities

- Electricity is available at all larger communities and at 92 per cent of smaller communities, and

- Sewerage is available at all larger communities and at 91 per cent of smaller communities.

This comparative analysis suggests that, in terms of housing and infrastructure, the differences between larger and smaller communities are not particularly marked, which leads to three observations. First, ATSIC policy appears to have been effectively applied (if CHINS 2001 data are accurate). Second, the lack of apparent difference between smaller and larger communities is probably a testament to the performance of ORAs often operating in very remote and difficult circumstances. These regional and local organisations

appear to have delivered, something that is rarely acknowledged in popular discourse. Similarly, the delivery of such housing and infrastructure is testament to ATSIC's ability to get CHIP, NAHS, HIPP and CDEP funding effectively to these organisations, something recognised by the Commonwealth Grants Commission in its Indigenous Funding Inquiry (Commonwealth Grants Commission 2001). Third, given the investment in infrastructure at smaller communities (especially in housing), what will be the impact of a move of people to larger communities—150 of which have been described by the current Minister for Indigenous Affairs as 'living hell holes' (*The Age*, 20 and 21 March 2006)—or to larger towns like Alice Springs.

In contrast to housing and infrastructure, access to education is very much about people rather than places, and Table 4 presents data about access to educational facilities although the contrast here is between communities with populations less than and more 50 as this is how CHINS reports these data. Delivery of educational services to small dispersed communities is clearly a challenge: Table 4 data suggests that primary schooling is far more readily available in larger communities and this is clearly an issue of concern. What is equally of concern, though, is that secondary schooling is relatively unavailable at larger communities, so that a move from an outstation to a larger community hardly provides a guarantee of secondary educational access, with only 28 per cent of the larger communities having schooling available to Year 12. While this statistic may have implications for proposals for migration of people for education to larger towns, it is far from clear whether these larger towns would have capacity to accommodate additional students or house or employ in-migrating families.

Senator Vanstone (2005) has focused on access to education, which is not surprising given that her imagined future for successful Aborigines centred on opportunity in the mainstream labour market—clearly a future as a doctor or a lawyer or a plumber will be dependent on a western education. Equally clearly, however, a future as a successful artist or hunter or land manager will be dependent on Indigenous knowledge and on-country education.

The educational dilemma to which Senator Vanstone alludes has had a long history in social policy debates (Johns & Sanders 2005) and was originally raised in the 1960s. The case for education as a tool for advancement was a core component of Schapper's book *Aboriginal Advancement to Integration* (Schapper 1970).[10] Interestingly, Schapper's view was critiqued in its foreword by anthropologist Stanner (1970) who sought to highlight the role of Indigenous agency in the lifestyle choices made by Indigenous people. The issue of choice and access to education was addressed quite comprehensively in *Return to Country,* where it was noted that while living at outstations could constrain educational opportunity, basic access to primary education in particular should be provided by visiting teachers (Blanchard 1987).

The issue of the economic viability of outstations is complex. In the 1970s and 1980s, economists Altman and Nieuwenhuysen (1979) and Fisk (1985) were making the point that given the limited options in artificially created townships, the ex-missions and government settlements of the assimilation era, outstation living could provide better livelihood options and opportunities than larger townships. This was primarily because engagement with the market via the arts and engagement with the customary sector via wildlife harvesting provided opportunity to supplement both cash and imputed (non market) incomes. A report titled *The Economic Viability of Outstations and Homelands* (Altman & Taylor 1989) summarised the evidence on this point and indicated that while the available empirical research was geographically skewed to the tropical north, this was indeed the case in many contexts.

A key problem with that report was that by its very title it suggested that people living at outstations and homelands could be neatly differentiated from those in townships. This was probably more the case in the 1970s than it is today. But even if one falls into the trap of comparison between townships and outstations what does the evidence that can be garnered tell us today? In Table 5, some information is provided from

Table 5. A comparison of outstations and townships' indicators of socioeconomic status in western Arnhem Land, 2001

Socioeconomic indicator	Outstation	Township
Health		
Aged under 55	696	2,017
Aged > 55 years	53	99
% > 55 years	7	5
Education		
Not completed Year 10	382	790
Completed Year 10 or higher	38	226
% completed Year 10 or higher[a]	9	22
Median income ($)	$120–199	$120–199
Employment		
Not employed	251	590
Employed	213	231
Employment to population ratio	46	28
Home ownership		
Not purchasing or owns home[b]	97	203
Purchasing or owns home[b] (no. of households)	0	6
Purchasing or owns home[b] (% of households)	0	3

Notes: a. Of population aged 15 years and over and not still at school

           b. Refers to households with an Indigenous person. It should be noted that this question has limited meaning when a house is located at a remote outstation on Aboriginal owned land.

Source: ABS 2002a.

Western Arnhem Land from the 2001 Census. This region is used here as an example, in part because my research since 1979 has focused on this region, but more importantly because the census geography allows a neat statistical division between townships and outstations.

Using the measuring stick of statistical equality, the central platform of the practical reconciliation policy agenda, one finds a very mixed scorecard in this region. It is important to note that in the census the non-market (or customary sector) is totally ignored and that market engagement is probably understated owing to incomplete reporting of art and craft activity in the census. With these provisos in mind, at statistical face value, education and home ownership[11] appear better at townships. On the other hand, employment and health status appear better at outstations. Higher formal employment, of course, is counter-intuitive and probably reflects the higher penetration of the CDEP scheme for people associated with outstations, which in turn may reflect the fact that ORAs are also often CDEP organisations. Median adult income at outstations and townships is the same.

There are other data sources that can be used to make economic comparisons between outstations and townships, although all have shortcomings. For example, a study of some outstations in this region indicates that the customary sector (harvesting of wildlife) does make significant non-market contributions to livelihoods (Altman 1987, 2003). At a broader level, two other data sources are worthy of reference. First,

the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) 2002 tells us that in community areas harvesting of wildlife (hunting and fishing in a group) is most prevalent at outstations, although the distinction between homelands and traditional land is murkily defined in NATSISS and therefore statistical significance can be questioned. Nevertheless, the NATSISS suggests that hunting and fishing are occurring at a high rate across very remote Australia (Altman, Buchanan & Biddle forthcoming). Conversely, the experimental outcomes from Labour Force Survey released by the ABS in May 2006 do not suggest that employment prospects for Indigenous Australians improve as an individual moves up the settlement hierarchy (ABS 2006).

On the question of economic viability, two further observations can be made. First, as recent data analysis by George Megalogenis shows, one needs to be clear on how the term 'viability' is applied (*The Australian*, 14 January and 22 April 2006). Examining postcodes and assessing viability as the ratio of non-employment to employment income, he shows that there are many parts of non-Indigenous Australia where this ratio exceeds 100 per cent. In these situations—where there are more residents on welfare than in regular jobs—there appears to be a proposal to either close communities down or to stop welfare payments to their residents. Clearly, the term 'viability' needs to be applied equitably.

Second, it is important to be cautious not to become too trapped in the realm of measurement. As post-development theory warns us, 'standard measures of development become instruments of oppression, tools whereby one group of people exercise power over others' (Storey 2003). This is especially so when we know that official statistics are problematic, case studies tell us something quite different (that livelihood opportunities at outstations on country are greater), and comparisons between larger and smaller communities are spurious because people live between outstations and townships—and so it makes greater sense to consider what is economically possible on a regional basis.

OUTSTATION POLICY AND 'THE NEW ARRANGEMENTS'

The Howard Government appears somewhat belatedly to be considering an outstation policy under the 'new arrangements'. Little attention was paid to outstations between 1996 and 2005, with the policy framework established by the Hawke government in the 1980s and implemented by ATSIC throughout the 1990s being allowed to continue.

The Howard Government's Indigenous affairs reform agenda, however, has increasingly had direct and indirect impacts on outstations in three areas. First, the shift of the CDEP scheme to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) in July 2004 has seen rapid change, with the scheme increasingly defined as a labour market program instead of also being a community development program (as it was from 1977). As noted above, the CDEP scheme's administration and capital components are important in sustaining ORAs, while many outstation residents are recipients of CDEP payments for income support (in lieu of unemployment benefits). Second, a longstanding commitment to amend land rights law in the Northern Territory is being implemented. Proposed amendments aim to facilitate mainstream development and associated individual home and business ownership, aims that are at odds with the group land ownership and kin-based economy dominant at outstations. Third, the recent abolition of ATSIC resulted in the disappearance of elected regional councils which provided considerable regional knowledge about outstations.

At an ideological and political level, there has been a growing conservative critique of outstation living. It embodies strong elements of Indigenous customary and kin-based rather than market-based practices—harvesting of wildlife, remote living in small communities, and hyper-mobility. To some extent, outstations represent the very antithesis of the neo-liberalism and individualism that has been at the heart of Australia's economic success and the Howard Government's political dominance of the past decade.

The mainstreaming agenda and the human capital approach that seek enhanced Indigenous engagement with the 'real' economy and private property are all embodied in Senator Vanstone's (2005) reference to 'cultural museums' and concerns about education at outstations.

Some potential policy inconsistencies have appeared in the last few months. In December 2005, Senator Vanstone suggested that outstation people might need to migrate to larger townships if they were to access services. But not long afterwards in March 2006, the new Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, referred to 150 (out of 225) of these townships as 'living hell holes' and town camps as 'urban ghettoes', as discussed earlier in this paper. It does seem problematic when one Minister suggests improvement is only possible if small outstations are closed down, while the next Minister identifies the proposed destinations such as larger townships and urban centres in very negative terms. Perhaps politicians and policy makers are too distanced from the problems of centralisation and the reasons why today's outstation people chose to decentralise.

It appears that the Howard Government, perhaps a little simplistically, sees a trade off between economic equality and cultural plurality (Altman & Rowse 2005), with outstations symbolising the most culturally different and, consequently, the least likely to succeed in mainstream economic terms. It is noteworthy that such views have been supported by some Indigenous spokespeople like Warren Mundine, who has a somewhat evolutionary take on outstations (*The Australian*, 29 May 2006), and Noel Pearson (2000), who sees Indigenous futures, perhaps a little homogeneously, in the 'real' (or mainstream) economy.

In the 'Beyond Conspicuous Compassion' speech, Vanstone (2005) appears to have targeted the opportunity for Indigenous people to choose to live fundamentally differently from the mainstream as an issue up for 'open' debate. While the need for a national debate is to be encouraged, this needs to be an informed, transparent and evidence-based debate. So far this is far from the case, with suggestions from State and federal bureaucracies that the Secretaries Group on Indigenous Affairs and the Ministerial Task Force on Indigenous Affairs are to develop an official outstations policy by mid 2006. The Queensland Government has identified the need for policy in this area, and the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy is in the early stages of coordinating policy development. OIPC and FACS each had prepared internal working and draft discussion papers prior to their amalgamation in January 2006. One suspects that these two agencies took a somewhat different approach to developing an outstations policy, and may be looking to reconcile after their amalgamation into the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FACSIA).

FACSIA:
Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

There would seem to be some tensions in the emerging bureaucratic approach to develop an outstations policy within the new arrangements framework that includes terms such as practical reconciliation, mutual obligation, shared responsibility, mainstreaming, and whole-of-government. There are, however, some potential pluses in the new policy approach. For example, if shared responsibility means that the Commonwealth and States will amalgamate their programs and service delivery and equitably share responsibility, this could be good for outstations. And if mainstreaming means that outstations will be supported on equitable needs-based criteria that take into account their limited revenue raising capacity (owing to small size) as well as the higher costs of service delivery (owing to remoteness), this too would be positive.

From an outstations and ORA perspective, the new whole-of-government approach might be problematic. This is primarily because the now defunct ATSIC was a great deal more whole-of-government and coordinated than the new arrangements because the most important recurrent programs for outstations, CDEP, CHIP Municipal, land rights support, and the National Arts and Crafts Industry Support Strategy (NACISS) and the Regional Arts and Culture Strategy were all managed by one agency. Now CDEP is administered by the employment and training agency (DEWR), CHIP by FACSIA, land rights support by OIPC, and NACISS and RACS by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. On top of this fragmentation, each Canberra-based agency has a view on how each of 'its' program(s)

NACISS:
National Arts and Crafts Industry Support Strategy

should be run, but little corporate knowledge or agency history dealing with remote and highly mobile Indigenous populations. These four agencies suddenly inherited programs that they were ill-equipped to administer (in terms of agency experience and capacity) and that they probably did not fully comprehend. For example, it is likely that DEWR was somewhat surprised to discover that thousands of CDEP participants live at outstations in very remote regions as geographically and culturally removed from mainstream labour markets as possible in Australia. Furthermore, DEWR was probably unaware that the funding base of ORAs came primarily from CDEP administrative and capital on-costs support. These realities, however, have not stopped DEWR from trying to revamp the CDEP scheme to focus on mainstream employment outcomes, from lifting remote area exemptions on activity testing, and from ignoring non-mainstream economic activity at outstations alluded to earlier in this paper.

There is a real danger that the Secretaries Group on Indigenous Affairs will attempt to develop a position on outstations that overlooks the lessons of history, that lacks cultural analysis and an Indigenous outstations voice, and that lacks any local knowledge. There is already some evidence of this in DEWR's dealings with some ORAs about imagined CDEP outcomes, as noted last year in research undertaken with an extremely successful ORA in central Arnhem Land (Altman 2005).

Worryingly, while concern is widely expressed in policy and media discourse about the economic viability of outstations, the very basis for their limited dependence—flexible CDEP income support and remote area exemptions in relation to welfare payments—is being dismantled. More viable economic alternatives are not in place, beyond vague notions of improved education (at township schools?) for future employment choices to be lawyers, doctors and plumbers. There is a real danger that in seeking imagined economic independence and in pursuing statistical equality through a 'practical reconciliation agenda', new government policy will reinvent the extreme dependence that many of today's outstation residents experienced at townships (with their artificial economies and make work) in the 1960s and chose to leave in the 1970s.

It was demonstrated in the 1980s that outstation living was good for people (Altman & Taylor 1989; Fisk 1985). The late 1990s and early twenty-first century have seen an emerging and more sophisticated take on the benefits of outstations, not just for Indigenous people living on the lands that they own, but for regions, the nation and the world. These wider benefits have been evident in biodiversity conservation on the expanding Indigenous estate that will become increasingly ecologically important as the Australian continent gets hotter and dryer in some places and wetter in others. A logical extreme corollary of the Howard Government's intended mainstreamed future for outstation residents based on recentralisation and urbanisation is an empty Indigenous estate, *terra vacua*. And yet a growing body of evidence tells us that we need a peopled hinterland with Indigenous land owners actively engaged in landscape and species management, contributing to national and global goals of biodiversity conservation and reduced greenhouse gas emissions (Altman & Whitehead 2003; Bowman, Walsh & Prior 2004; Burgess et al. 2005; Whitehead 1999; Whitehead et al. 2003; Woinarski et al. 1992; Yibarbuk et al. 2001).

There is a real danger that recentralisation will see a cost to the nation in terms of the conservation benefits foregone without a peopled landscape. There is also a danger that in the quest for cheaper service provision for the state, livelihood opportunities for Indigenous residents of outstations will decline with recentralisation. Associated problems might be the exacerbation of housing and infrastructure shortfalls in the larger communities and a re-ignition or heightening of social tensions in townships. There is certainly some emerging evidence that in many regions like the Pilbara (Taylor & Scambary 2005) and the Gulf of Carpentaria, and even in large Indigenous townships like Wadeye in the Northern Territory (Taylor & Stanley 2005), Indigenous people are looking to decentralise because townships are getting too crowded and sociologically and politically complex (*Northern Territory News*, 7 June 2006).

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored some issues for urgent consideration before any new policy for outstations is developed under the new administrative arrangements in Indigenous affairs. The paper has used some secondary data to demonstrate that there is no compelling case for a policy change that would encourage recentralisation from small discrete Indigenous communities of less than 100 persons to larger discrete Indigenous communities with populations of over 100. Nor is there a compelling case made that demonstrates that a move from outstations to townships or from townships to larger urban centres will improve Indigenous people's livelihood prospects. The research reported here is neither comprehensive nor complete, and mainly focuses on some available evidence and policy history. I conclude with four comments.

First, there is too little research and understanding of culturally distinct, but evolving, patterns of Indigenous mobility and migration in remote and very remote Australia. In particular, there is a danger that policy makers will fall into the trap of conceptualising Indigenous residence as occurring in some fixed hierarchy of settlements, rather than as occurring regionally and frequently between larger and smaller communities and between smaller communities.

Second, there is a distinct possibility that government policy aspirations are out of touch with the aspirations of Indigenous people to decentralise. This is not surprising, in part because the Indigenous estate is expanding and new land owners are likely to want to live on their land. There is also local recognition in some regions that some townships, like Wadeye, are becoming too large and problematic (in part because they lack an economic base), and that decentralisation provides better livelihood options.

Third, I endorse Senator Vanstone's call for an open debate on outstations. Unfortunately, at present much of this debate is being conducted clandestinely with little input from outstations people themselves about their imagined futures, and with limited reference to expert local and regional knowledge. Like so much in Indigenous affairs, the outstations debate has become highly politicised. Nearly 20 years ago, the Australian Government conducted and published a comprehensive report *Return to Country: The Aboriginal Homelands Movement in Australia* (Blanchard 1987). It might be timely for the Minister for Indigenous Affairs to again request the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs to inquire into the outstations situation before too much new policy is determined.

Finally, such an inquiry might find, I suspect, that there are diverse futures for Indigenous people at outstations at variance with the monolithic mainstreaming perspective that appears to be dominating emerging policy. Such futures might see Indigenous people living on the land they own, moving between larger and smaller communities, and pursuing livelihoods in a hybrid economy that includes payment for the delivery of environmental services, participation in the customary or non market sector, and the pursuit of commercial opportunities. These possibilities also need to be explored.

POSTSCRIPT JULY 2006: EVIDENCE–BASED RE–RECONSIDERATION?

On 19 June 2006 I was driving to Maningrida in central Arnhem Land to work again with BAC and to re-visit outstations in the region when I heard via ABC Radio National that there was a sudden shift in the policy rhetoric. The Commonwealth Government would now not make decisions about supporting outstations on the basis of population size alone, now other factors like safety and health would also be taken into account ('No community too small for outstation review', ABC Online, 19 June 2006: 'The Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister says safe and healthy outstations will not be closed down, no matter how small they might be.').

Senator Vanstone's 'Beyond Conspicuous Compassion' speech was made in December 2005, but it was a speech made, as suggested here, without any recourse to evidence, a speech based more on emotion than fact (Altman 2006). Early in the northern dry season, the new Minister Mal Brough and some of his senior officials actually started visiting some outstations (a reported 'auditing' of a randomly selected handful) and found, as noted in this paper, that the socioeconomic situation at outstations might in fact be superior to the situation in townships. So why close them down? And a community that has been in the media spotlight for some time, Wadeye, articulated publicly the view that a major factor in the social problems at the township was its size, and that a mechanism to ameliorate its problems would be decentralisation. It was after a lightning visit to Wadeye that the Minister made his 'no community too small' media statement.

This sudden change of policy rhetoric requires mention as there have been some marked fluctuations in such statements over the last six months, and there are likely to be more in the next six. I make a few additional brief comments that are probably warranted by such vacillations in the policy discourse.

First, should decisions about outstations policy really be made by people with thin local knowledge making random spot checks on outstations—is this a good basis for policy making even if the recent change is, without question, in the right direction? Can judgments about outstations (some of which have been re-established for over 30 years) be made during a part-day visit, especially when these are communities renowned for their population fluidity? Surely it would be preferable to make policy on the basis of deep local knowledge.

Second, what does closing outstations down actually mean? To answer this question, we need to ask, and be able to quantify, what the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments are actually putting in. The answer, it seems, is very little, beyond some infrastructure and income support, either via the CDEP scheme or welfare payments. A crucial issue is what proportion of the support provided is basic citizenship entitlements that would need to be provided elsewhere? And what would be the potential cost of closing down outstations, were this possible, in terms of existing sunken investments and in terms of additional pressures on larger townships?

Third, what has been the public policy aim of this debate to date? There is no doubt that both senior politicians and senior bureaucrats have been successful in demeaning outstation residents, many of whom are struggling valiantly to make a livelihood for themselves in remote and very difficult circumstances with little in the way of state enablement. The policy debate has been negative and unconstructive— about closing down outstations without any clearly articulated alternative strategy—rather than about supporting, more realistically, livelihood options at outstations.

It is positive that in the post-Vanstone era, some policy sense has emerged, but worrying and unnecessary discretion still seems to reside with politicians and bureaucrats about the future of outstations. The Canberra Indigenous affairs bureaucracy has tried to micro-manage eight COAG trial sites and over 100 Shared Responsibility Agreements, and there is no evidence that either has been a success. This same political and bureaucratic elite is now shifting its focus to micro-manage, from afar, nearly 1,000 remote communities that in almost all cases already have community-controlled support organisations, ORAs. It might make better policy sense to resource ORAs to more effectively deliver services and outcomes to their clients.

A re-reading of the Blanchard Report *Return to Country* has convinced me that on this occasion history may provide a way forward. At the start of the twenty-first century, States and Territories do need to develop outstation policies and deliver services, especially basic education and health services, to outstations. There is also a need to provide realistic livelihood options to people whether they live at outstations or in townships or between them as is often the case. And such options need to accord with local aspirations and possibilities, at least for those who wish to remain on the land over which they now have legal ownership or other residential rights.
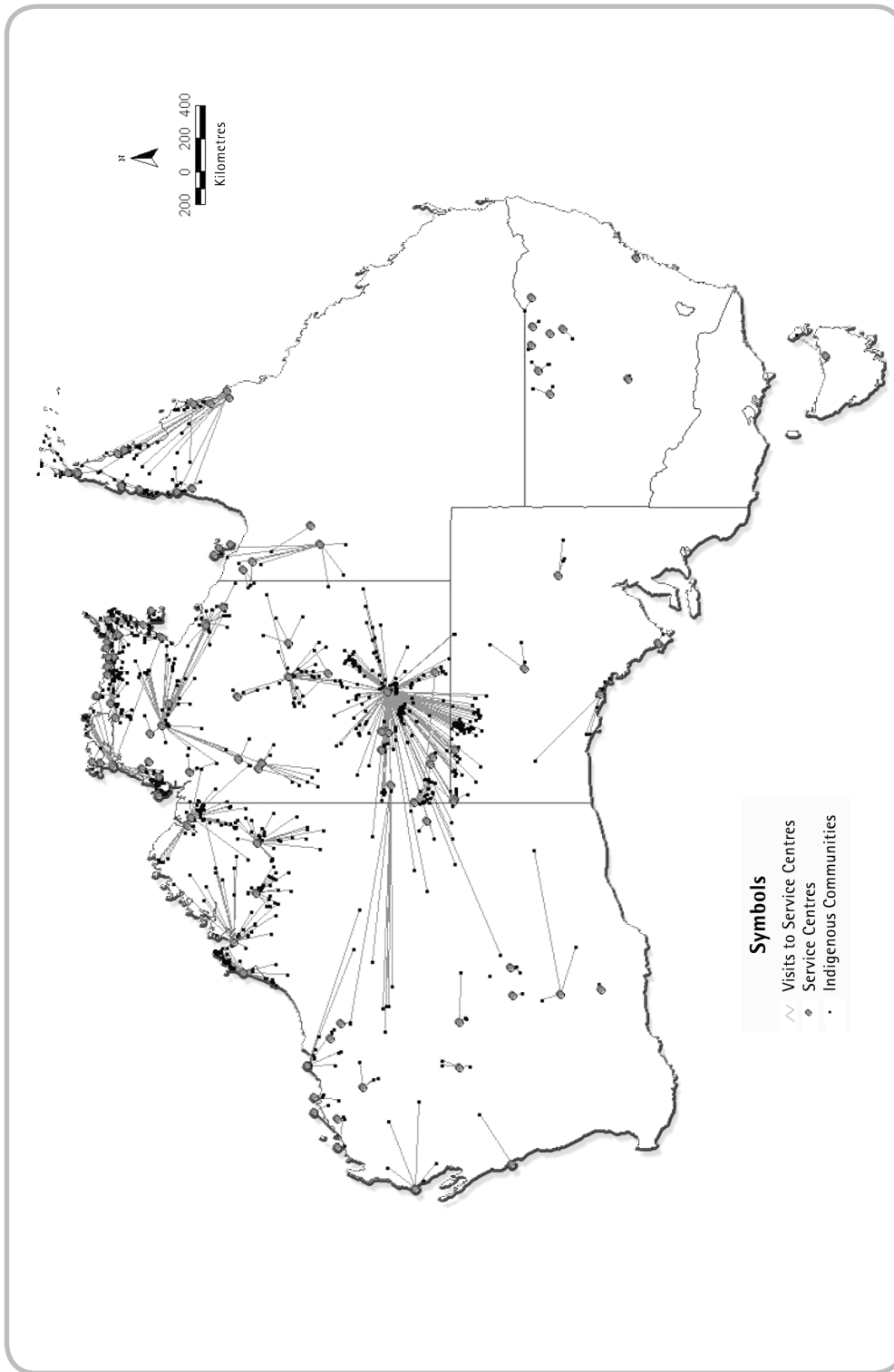
APPENDIX A: COMMUNITY POPULATION AND SERVICE CATCHMENT AREAS

Fig. 1. Discrete Indigenous communities by usual population, 2001
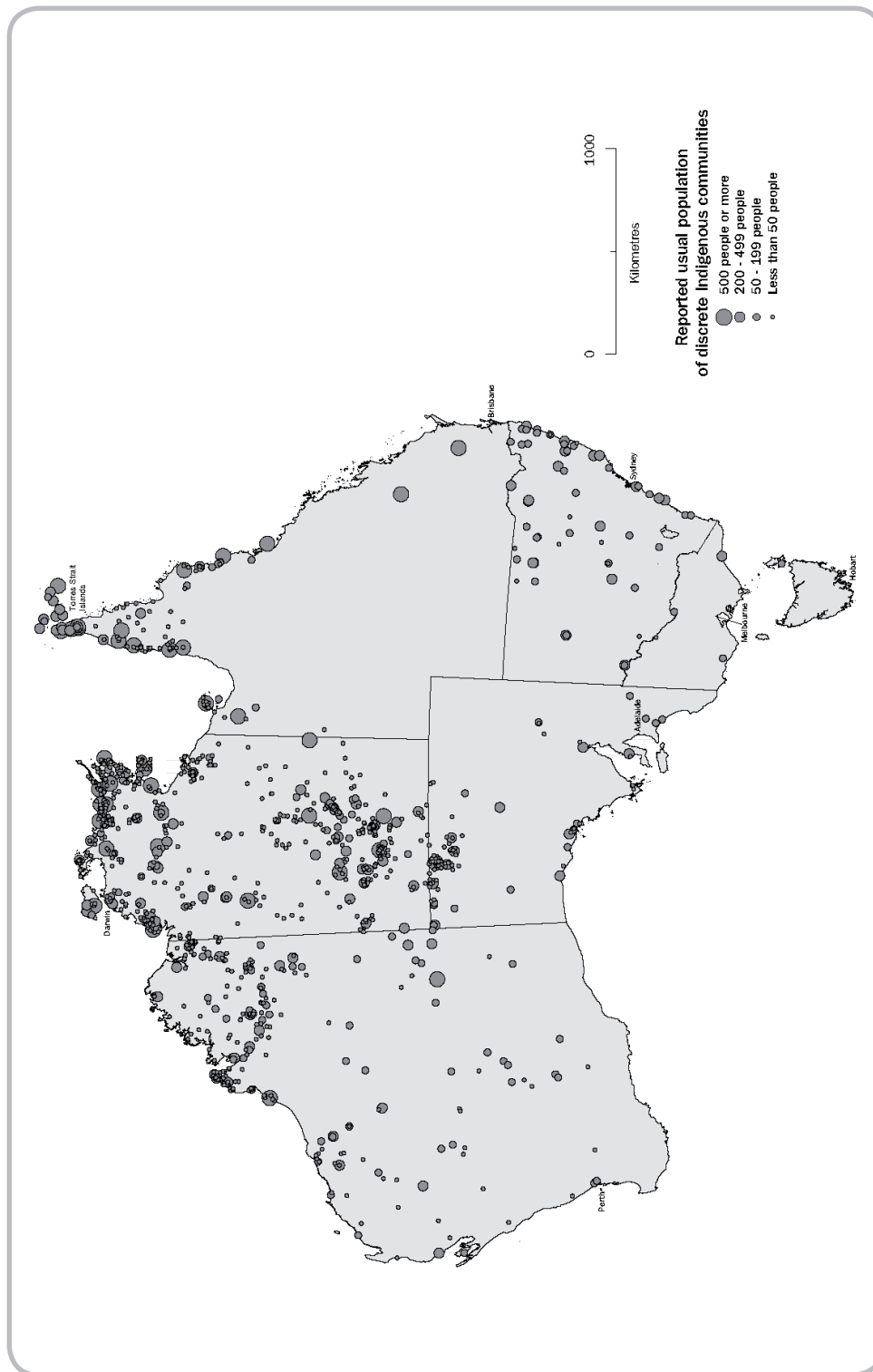
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Fig. 2. Service centre catchment areas for discrete communities

Symbols

Visits to Service Centres
Service Centres
Indigenous Communities

200 0 200 400
Kilometres

Source: Taylor 2002.

NOTES

1. I have undertaken research with BAC since 1979 when I was a doctoral student working in the Maningrida region (see Altman 1987). The Indigenous Community Governance Project is an Australian Research Council Linkage Project between the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University, and Reconciliation Australia. The Project is exploring the nature of Indigenous community governance in diverse contexts and locations across Australia through a series of case studies.

2. Initially this research was undertaken with colleagues from the ARC Key Centre for Tropical Wildlife Management, more recently in collaboration with the Tropical Savannas CRC, the Northern Australia Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance and the School for Environmental Research, Charles Darwin University.

3. In January 2006 the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination was amalgamated with FACS, and in April 2006 CAEPR was asked to change its research direction from a focus on outstations to a focus on remote regions livelihoods. The research reported here represents progress that was being made in the first quarter of 2006 to the earlier request from FACS.

4. Researchers engaged on the ORA review all had long-term research experience in the localities that they visited.

5. It is important to note that the NATSISS 2002 estimated that 22,300 persons aged over 15 years of age lived on homelands/traditional land. However, this NATSISS question introduced a degree of confusion by collapsing homelands and traditional lands together. Because these are different categories it is likely that the estimate is too high for homelands and too low for traditional lands.

6. Letter from Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Fred Chaney to Northern Territory Chief Minister Paul Everingham dated 27 June 1979.

7. Letter from Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Fred Chaney to Northern Territory Chief Minister Paul Everingham dated 27 June 1979, and reply from Everingham to Chaney dated 20 July 1979.

8. There is some difference here between the Northern Territory and the South Australian Pitjantjatjara lands where there is no formal local government, and Queensland and Western Australia where there is complete local government coverage.

9. Now called the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCATSIA).

10. The view that all real jobs require is real education has been recently argued somewhat polemically by Johns (2006).

11. While the home ownership rate at outstations is 0%, it would be difficult for anyone other than a traditional owner or an authorised Aboriginal person to occupy a community house built at an outstation on Aboriginal land. Nominal home ownership might be 0%, but effective home ownership is 100%, although rents are levied for repair and maintenance.

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