

Indigenous Housing Tenure in Remote Areas: Directions and Constraints

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INTRODUCTION

On April 6, 2005 John Howard, on a visit to Wadeye in the Northern Territory, opened up the 'issue of Aboriginal land title' and its relationship to the possibility of home ownership in remote Aboriginal communities. My reaction, then as now, was that land title was not the key impediment to, or constraint on, home ownership in remote Aboriginal communities, but that rather the key constraint was the economic status of the residents of such communities. In this brief lecture I want to think about directions and constraints in remote area housing tenure, first by looking at census statistics and second by looking at a regional case study.

THINKING THROUGH CENSUS STATISTICS

In August 2005 I published a paper which used 2001 Census data, organised by the fivefold remoteness categorization used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), to show essentially two things. First, just how different housing tenure patterns are in remote Australia, compared to more densely settled Australia, both for Indigenous households and for other households. And second, how this difference in housing tenure patterns reflects income and employment differentials.

To put the matter bluntly, the dominance of home ownership in more densely settled areas is built upon households containing people with full-time, long-term, reasonably well paid jobs. And among Indigenous people in remote areas this is simply not the case. Only 14.2 per cent of the Indigenous people aged 15 years and over in very remote areas in 2001 were in general employment, compared to well over 50 per cent of non-Indigenous people in all five ABS remoteness categories. This meant that well over half of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over in very remote areas in 2001 had incomes below \$200 per week (Sanders 2005).

In terms of housing tenure, according to the 2001 Census 61 per cent of Indigenous households in very remote areas lived in community rental housing, with another 15 per cent living in housing tenures which were not being captured by the Census. The dominant housing tenures from settled Australia, of owner/purchaser and public and private rental were all reduced to figures of less than 10 per cent among Indigenous households in very remote areas in 2001. For non-Indigenous households in very remote areas, public and private rental also fell away to below 10 per cent and the owner/ purchaser tenure fell away to less than half of households, compared to the

ABS:

Australian Bureau
of Statistics

CHIP:

Community
Housing and
Infrastructure
Program

national average of 71 per cent. The housing tenures which increased to offset these falls among non-Indigenous households in very remote areas in the 2001 Census were employer rental, plus again a very considerable group which were not being captured by the ABS's categorization (Sanders 2005).

In essence the housing tenure system in very remote Australia is built around two tenures which are of such minimal importance in more densely settled Australia as to be hardly noticed in national census statistics. These are community rental for Indigenous households and employer rental for other households.

The remote area housing system generally operates in the following manner. If you move to a very remote area to take up any reasonably senior technical, professional or managerial job based on almost any formal qualifications, you are likely to be supplied accommodation with the job. And if you are one of the locals already living in these areas, you can scabble around between a few different alternatives, which include a bit of old established home ownership, not much purchase or private rental, a bit of public housing and finally, the major alternative for Indigenous people of recent years, Indigenous community housing which has been supplied by the Commonwealth through the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP) administered by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and then the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission over the last thirty five years.

This is not a particularly satisfactory housing supply system. And I have no doubt that it could do with considerable improvement. But it seems to me that to improve any system, you need first to understand how it works, and then be quite strategic in your interventions in it. And I don't think there was either much understanding, or much strategy in the former Prime Minister's 2005 idea that land title reform and home ownership would somehow address the housing issues of remote Aboriginal communities.

The debate has however moved on a bit since 2005, and some greater level of understanding and strategic thinking has begun to be introduced. Mike Dillon, who was in 2005 the Chief Executive Officer of the Northern Territory Government's Department of Local Government, Housing and Sport has, in particular, provided some interesting contributions.¹ In some recent publications, Dillon has embraced the point that the income status of Indigenous people in remote areas is a major constraint on home ownership. Indeed Dillon has explicitly criticized the Howard government for its 'single-minded focus on home ownership as if it is a cure-all elixir' for Indigenous housing issues in remote areas, arguing that this was 'clever politics', but unrealistic policy (Dillon 2007: 228, Dillon and Westbury 2007: 170). Dillon is also, however, very critical of the existing 'policy framework' for remote area housing, built around the Indigenous-specific community housing program, which he regards as in fact having worked to 'disadvantage' Indigenous interests (Dillon and Westbury 2007: 161-2). Dillon's prescriptive argument, looking to the future, is basically that for Indigenous housing in remote areas to improve, State and Territory public housing agencies will need to become involved, which he argues they have not in the past.

Though I have considerable sympathy for Dillon's arguments, I think they run the risk of doing two things. The first is underplaying the contribution and benefit to Aboriginal people of the Commonwealth's Indigenous community housing program over the last thirty years. And the second is possibly overplaying the potential role of public rental housing in the future; of perhaps making public housing the supposed magical elixir rather than home ownership.

Public rental does already have some presence in very remote areas, alongside Indigenous community rental, particularly in Western Australia. Indeed I note that in the 2006 Census figures that Nick Biddle has just presented, public rental housing among Indigenous households in very remote areas has supposedly gone up from 10 per cent in 2001 to around 20 per cent in 2006, and is at that level little different from its tenure share among Indigenous households in other geographic areas.² These figures are, I think, somewhat questionable, and I will certainly explore them further with Nick and others as I too begin to work with 2006 Census data. But Nick Biddle's figures do reinforce the point that there is already some public rental

housing in very remote areas and it may well be wise to look more closely at how it has worked, alongside and in relation to Indigenous community housing, before opting definitively for one of these two tenures over the other.

HOUSING IN THE ANMATJERE REGION

In the rest of this lecture, I thought I would share with you some experience from the Anmatjere region of the Northern Territory, (where I have been doing field-based research for the last four years), about how public housing and Indigenous community rental housing work in relation to each other as part of the remote area housing system.

The Anmatjere region sits astride the Stuart Highway, between 150 and 250 kilometres north of Alice Springs. The 2001 Census suggested that Anmatjere had a population of around 1,000 people, slightly over 80 per cent of whom were Indigenous. The Census identified 163 households in the region, 127 of which it identified as Indigenous and 36 non-Indigenous.

Among the 127 Indigenous households, 106 (or 83%) lived in community rental housing, three lived in public rental housing, six lived in employer or other rental housing, and 11 lived in improvised dwellings. No Indigenous households lived in houses that were categorized as owned, being purchased or in private rental.

Among the 36 non-Indigenous households, the tenure split was roughly one third in ownership, one third in public, employer or other rental, and one third in a tenure not captured by the Census. Again there were no households in private rental or purchasing.

Hence we see very starkly in Anmatjere the vast difference of remote area housing tenure patterns from those of more settled Australia, and also the stark polarization of remote area housing tenures between Indigenous and other households.

If we dig below the Anmatjere area Census geography, we find some even starker contrasts. At the centre of the Anmatjere region is the little roadside town of Ti Tree. It has about thirty five formally constructed dwellings, about one third of which are owned and managed by the Northern Territory Government's housing department as either employee or public rental housing. About another third are owned by the local government in the area, the Anmatjere Community Government Council, and are used for employee housing, primarily for senior managerial and technical staff predominantly recruited from elsewhere. The last third of the formally constructed dwellings in Ti Tree are for the most part in ownership or employer rental in conjunction with the running of private businesses like the roadhouse and the art gallery café.

Out from Ti Tree in the surrounding region are nine or ten pastoral station homesteads and about as many discrete Aboriginal communities, ranging from 10 to over 100 kilometres out of town. The pastoral station homesteads presumably showed up in the Census as either in ownership or employer rental, and the discrete Indigenous communities contributed the 109 community rental dwellings containing Indigenous households, as well as possibly a few more employer rental dwellings. Some of these discrete Aboriginal communities may also have contributed to the 11 Indigenous households in improvised dwellings counted in the 2001 Census, though my suspicion is that most if not all of these were in fact contributed by Ti Tree town.

My suspicion here is based on what I was doing on the day John Howard visited Wadeye in 2005. With my colleague, Sarah Holcombe, I was carrying out a survey for the Anmatjere Community Government Council of some informal camps along the west side of Ti Tree town where Aboriginal people lived without reticulated water or electricity. We found 13 active camps, with about 60 current and 100 recent residents. Over the next ten months we observed that 25 of these residents in six camps lived in this area continually,

while others came and went from it depending on their service needs and circumstances elsewhere. One of the drivers of this usage pattern was that store services in some of the outlying Aboriginal communities had closed, or were becoming run down, and by 2005 Indigenous people in these communities were virtually obliged to come into Ti Tree town to shop. Another driver of camp usage patterns was employment of local people in Ti Tree, either by the local council or by the Northern Territory Government. Five of the long term residents of 'creek camp' were public sector employees who either were not offered housing with their employment, or if they were, had rejected it over time.

One creek camp resident who had been offered housing as part of employment with the local council told us that over time it had proved 'too hard'. Being only one of three or four Aboriginal people with a house in Ti Tree town, with up towards a thousand countrymen living in the surrounding region, his lounge room was constantly being occupied by people staying over. Interestingly, when we asked our interviewees in the 13 camps if they would be interested in a house in Ti Tree town, 12 of the camps basically said no, they would prefer to stay where they were and hopefully obtain reticulated water and electricity and possibly some buildings there. One camp did however express interest in a house in Ti Tree town and, as part of our study, we then helped them apply for Northern Territory Government public housing.

This application process was a learning experience, both for us and for them. We learnt that the Northern Territory Government housing department managed 11 houses in Ti Tree town, nine of which were then being used for government employee rental and two of which were used for public rental. We learnt that the two public rental tenancies were both long term and involved Indigenous households. And we learnt that before the public housing application which came out of our study, there had not been any public housing applications lodged for Ti Tree for some years, despite the obvious housing supply issues there. There was, in a sense, a certain passiveness about the approach of the Northern Territory Government's public housing agency to the situation at Ti Tree. At one level this could be explained by the fact that their housing stock had not been growing in recent years—so what was the point of encouraging people to apply for a stock that was fully occupied and not expanding? But at another level this passivity reflected a deeper seated historical division between town and country as places for settler and Indigenous residence, and also the division between Indigenous-specific and general housing programs.

Indigenous-specific community housing supplied by the Commonwealth over the previous thirty years in the Anmatjere region has almost all been supplied in outlying discrete Aboriginal communities, on Aboriginal-owned land or on excisions from pastoral properties. One reason for this is cost—there are no land acquisition costs. But another is a sense that this is the accepted social geography of this region. Ti Tree town is, and has long been, at least in terms of formally-constructed dwellings, a settler residential area. Indigenous people are essentially encouraged to live out of town in the surrounding communities. I am only aware of two Aboriginal community rental houses being built in Ti Tree in the last thirty years. These were built in the late 1990s on land already owned by the Anmatjere Community Government Council, and now house local Indigenous employees of the Council. Together with the two public housing tenants, they constitute four of about six Aboriginal households who have gained a housing foothold in Ti Tree town in recent years—the other two being Indigenous households who have gained employer rental housing through their work with the Northern Territory Government. So only a small minority of six of the 35 or so households in the formally-constructed dwellings of Ti Tree are Indigenous.

There is, thus, a very strong division not only in the social geography of the Anmatjere region between Ti Tree town and the outlying communities, but also in the housing programs and policies which lie behind and seem in many ways to perpetuate this residential segregation.

However we also learnt, in the course of our study of the camps, that Indigenous people were not exactly lining up for public housing in Ti Tree town. Recall that in 12 out of 13 of the informal camps on the west side of Ti Tree people said that they were not really interested in a house in town, which would in all likelihood be a Northern Territory Government public rental house. Why would this be so?

In the course of our study we also learnt that both the existing public housing tenancies in Ti Tree town had strained relations with the Northern Territory Government's public housing agency and had recently been under threat of eviction—and one of the households asked us if we knew how they might be able to get community housing instead.

So why is it that Indigenous people living in camps without reticulated services might not be that interested in public rental housing five hundred metres away, and that a family living in such a public rental house was asking about other housing possibilities? I would suggest two reasons. First, the regulation of resident numbers, and second, cost.

In relation to the first, the campers often told us that one of the things they liked about the camps was their spread out nature; that relatives could come and camp nearby, but still have separate camps. By contrast the public housing tenants are cooped up in a conventional housing estate and when their relatives visit, the camping is closer and the neighbours sometimes complain. To save their tenancy, one of the two public housing tenants in Ti Tree town had just done a deal with the housing department that certain family members who had been staying there, but were not actually listed as tenants, would leave.

On cost, public housing was seen as quite expensive compared to community housing, and of course, even more expensive compared to camping free of charge. Census data tend to bear out that community housing rents among Indigenous households in very remote areas are indeed considerably less than public housing rents (see Sanders 2005).

It is possible, then, that even at the level of choosing between camping, community rental and public rental housing, the low income status of Indigenous people in remote areas is already coming into play as a factor in housing choice. How unrealistic then does home ownership seem, of the type and cost-structure we know in settled Australia?

I added in that last sentence, 'of the type and cost-structure we know in settled Australia', because I want to finish with a story which suggests that the social norms of individualised attachment to dwellings are in fact quite strong among Indigenous people in at least this region of remote Australia. I don't believe that a lack of these social norms either is the major constraint on housing tenure patterns in this area, in much the same way as I don't believe that land title is the major constraint.

April 6, 2005 was a Wednesday and, as I noted earlier, my colleague Sarah Holcombe and I were conducting a survey in the Ti Tree camps. One of the families we interviewed told us of the house they had in an outlying community which was currently unoccupied and offered to show us the house that weekend. That Saturday we travelled to a community 50 kms out of town and were proudly taken to a specific house which was identified as theirs—but which they had not lived in for a number of years. We had a picnic on the back verandah, had a look inside and a walk around the community to examine about seven or eight other empty houses and their associated infrastructure. After lunch we drove back into town, shot a kangaroo along the way, and by four o'clock the family were back in their camp in Ti Tree west. A week or so later another more occasional camper took us out to another such community, where again we were shown a particular house as being that of our guide, and again walked around a community to see eight or ten other empty houses as well. On one of those other houses I found a greeting painted which seemed also to suggest that someone was very attached to that house, as their own.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT CONSTRAINTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It does not seem to me that a lack of norms of individualised attachment to and control of dwellings or communal land tenure are the big impediments to, or constraints on, improving Indigenous housing conditions in very remote areas. Indeed within Indigenous community housing, it seems to me that strong individualised norms of 'ownership'—at least in the informal if not the legal sense—already exist, and that these could in time be built on in any move towards more formal, individualised legal ownership. It seems to me that the big constraints on improving housing conditions among Indigenous people in very remote areas are firstly housing supply, and secondly housing costs and their relationships to available income. For public housing advocates like Mike Dillon, there are also issues to be dealt with regarding the regulation of resident numbers, and consequent feelings of lack of personalized 'ownership' and control among public housing tenants.

Indigenous community housing of the last thirty five years is not an overwhelming success story. Yes, as the figures from the 2006 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey which Nick Biddle quoted suggest, there are major asset management issues in this sector.³ But Indigenous community housing has increased the supply of housing for Indigenous people in remote areas, has rented them dwellings at a cost they can afford, and does give them some sense of personalized 'ownership' and control of dwellings. These are modest but significant achievements in a difficult cross-cultural policy arena. Perhaps Indigenous community housing can be built on and strengthened, in conjunction with a growing role for public housing and home ownership.

NOTES

1. Formerly the Department of Community Development, Sport and Cultural Affairs.
2. Biddle's adjacent lecture focused on 2006 Census figures. His work will also soon be published on the CAEPR website.
3. The Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey is carried out in discrete Indigenous communities in conjunction with Census planning, but generates a separate and very different database from the Census. Biddle quotes figures from this database about houses needing repair.

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