

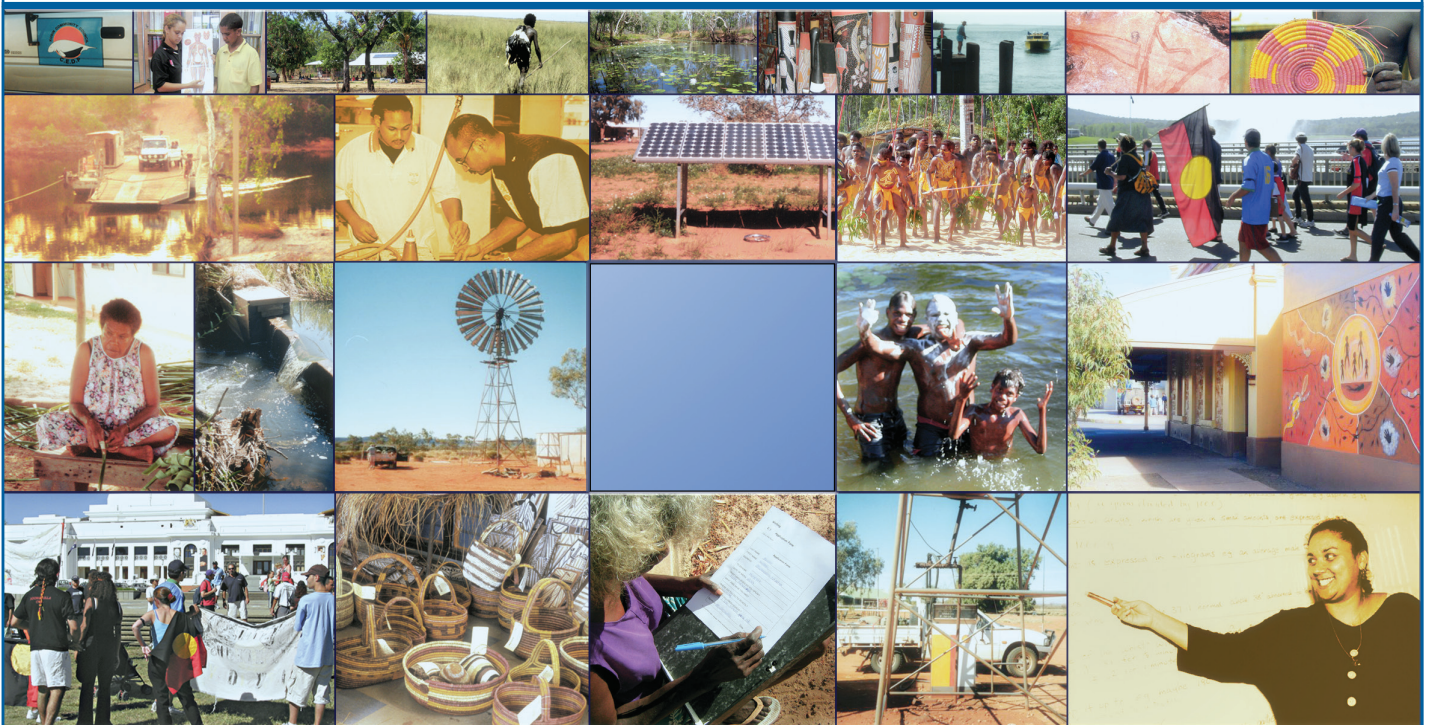
CENTRE FOR ABORIGINAL ECONOMIC  
POLICY RESEARCH



# Changing Scale, Mixing Interests: Generational Change in Northern Territory Local Government

W. Sanders

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# Changing scale, mixing interests: Generational change in Northern Territory local government

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines recent local government reform in the Northern Territory from two perspectives. The first is a quantitative perspective on population and finances, which focuses on the mixing of diverse interests in the recent changes. The second is a more observational perspective gained from working with one pre-reform local government and now the new larger local government that has replaced it. The paper argues that the recent changes are generational in nature in a number of different ways. It also argues that the greater challenge for the new local governments may be their vast geographic scale, rather than their mixing of diverse interests.

**Keywords:** Local government reform, Northern Territory Government, remote Indigenous communities

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## INTRODUCTION

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In late 2006 and early 2007 the Northern Territory Government announced a radical reshaping of its local government system. Sixty-one councils were to be reduced to just 13. Four urban municipalities were to be left largely intact, but 57 smaller, dispersed, more remote councils were to be amalgamated into nine shires. In the process, local government would also expand to cover the whole land mass of the Northern Territory, rather than just 10 per cent. This proposed reshaping was a major change in scale for remote area councils, but it was also an ambitious mixing of some very diverse interests. Many 'settler' landholding interests—such as pastoralists, miners and roadhouses—would be brought within local government areas for the first time. Also among the former remote area councils being amalgamated, some were focused on discrete Indigenous communities while others governed 'open' highway towns with larger proportions of settlers among their populations.

Resistance to this restructuring in the immediate Darwin hinterland led to the abandonment of a proposed shire in that region in early 2008 and the retention of the four existing councils covering just a small portion of the land area. However in more remote areas, the restructuring proceeded during 2008 largely as previously announced. Fifty-three remote area councils were reduced to eight shires, only one of which, the Tiwi Islands Shire, resembled a former local government (see maps in Fig. 1 and 2).

The next section of this paper uses 2006 population and financial data for the pre-reform councils in their new shire groupings to demonstrate the mixing of diverse interests in this generational change in Northern Territory local government. The paper then draws on direct observation of one of the pre-reform councils and the new shire into which it has been amalgamated to argue that the new, large, remote area shires in the Northern Territory may be suffering, as much as gaining, from their large regional size. The retreat of the shires into urban-based administrations with limited connections to and ownership by the numerous remote localities combined within them is seen as an emerging, and anticipatable, problem. The paper thus argues that while the mixing of interests is a considerable challenge for the new remote area shires in the Northern Territory, it is in fact the problem of too-big-a-scale which presents the more pressing challenges. The final section of the paper explains further the use of the term 'generational' to describe this change in Northern Territory local government.

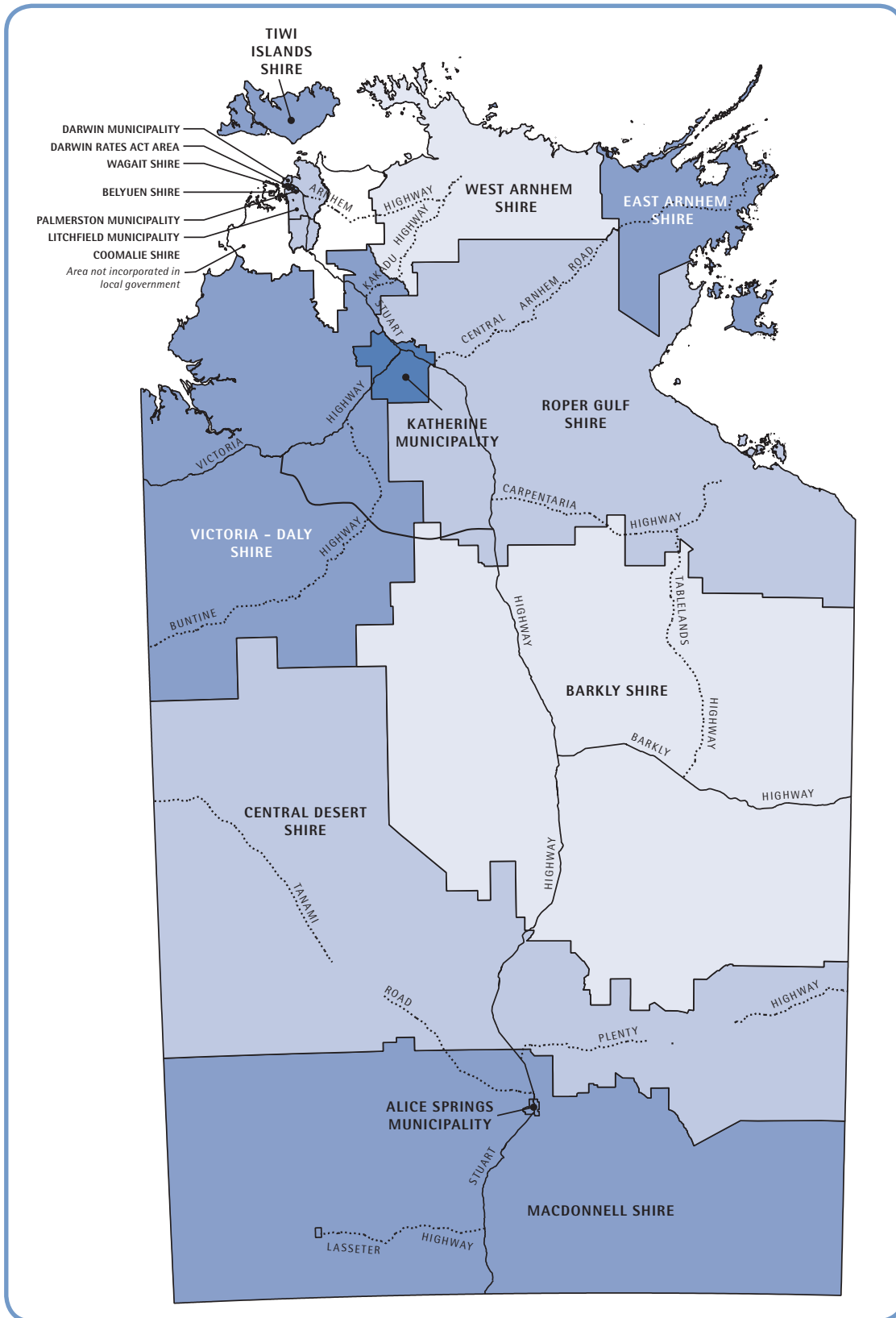
## POPULATION AND FINANCIAL ANALYSIS: MIXING DIVERSE INTERESTS

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The local government system which developed after Northern Territory self-government in 1978 was characterised by both diversity and permissiveness. While there were municipalities in the major urban centres, community government provisions in the Territory's Local Government Act permitted rather different local governments to emerge in remote areas. Those which did emerge voluntarily in the 1980s and 1990s, but with some encouragement from the Northern Territory Government, were on a small geographic scale, spotted across the landscape. Some focused on discrete Indigenous communities, while others covered open highway towns with larger proportions of settlers among their populations (Wolfe 1989). The Fig. 1 map shows the 61 local governments in the Northern Territory in 2003, covering about 10 per cent of the Territory's land area. Table 1 places these pre-reform councils in their new groupings from 2008, and gives population and financial data for the old councils for 2006.



Fig. 2. Local governments in the Northern Territory, from July 2008



Source: Northern Territory Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services.

**Table 1. Populations, revenues and expenditures of Northern Territory local governments, 2006**

Post-reform council name	Pre-reform council name	Population	Indigenous proportion of population	Total revenue (\$)	Total expenditure (\$)	Surplus ratio ((Rev – Exp) / Exp)	Revenue per capita
Alice Springs	Alice Springs	28,903	0.27	18,451,401	20,567,057	-0.11	638
Palmerston	Palmerston	24,123	0.13	17,272,053	17,068,602	0.01	716
Darwin	Darwin	70,055	0.09	59,434,338	59,674,732	0.00	848
Katherine	Katherine (incl. Binjari)	9,180	0.27	8,023,141	8,192,120	-0.02	874
Litchfield	Litchfield	16,219	0.07	14,139,185	12,006,804	0.15	872
Coomalie	Coomalie	1,650	0.27	3,362,948	1,975,135	0.41	2,038
Wagait	Cox Peninsula	362	0.10	1,046,544	431,055	0.59	2,891
Belyuen	Belyuen	252	0.98	844,087	1,010,076	-0.20	3,350
Barkly	Tennant Creek	3,450	0.55	3,613,206	4,498,794	-0.25	1,047
	Urapuntja	900	0.98	1,795,000	1,482,000	0.17	1,994
	Aherrenge	350	0.96	1,294,313	1,332,934	-0.03	3,698
	Elliott	594	0.88	3,415,067	3,128,462	0.08	5,749
	Alpurrurulam	744	0.96	6,160,102	6,246,477	-0.01	8,280
	Ali Curung	432	0.97	4,125,807	5,234,152	-0.27	9,550
Central Desert	Nyirripi	320	0.95	982,996	1,158,504	-0.18	3,072
	Lajamanu	950	0.96	4,220,000	4,857,000	-0.15	4,442
	Yuendumu	999	0.97	4,782,932	4,645,851	0.03	4,788
	Anmatjere	1,221	0.95	6,636,408	7,152,367	-0.08	5,435
	Yuelamu	289	0.99	1,742,000	1,613,000	0.07	6,028
	Arltarpilta	295	0.99	2,097,285	1,769,832	0.16	7,109
East Arnhem	Ramingining	683	0.97	1,827,763	1,733,179	0.05	2,676
	Milingimbi	1,500	0.97	4,384,812	5,423,532	-0.24	2,923
	Galiwinku	1,870	0.97	11,043,584	11,376,429	-0.03	5,906
	Angurugu (incl. Milyakburra)	1,354	0.96	8,619,147	8,841,353	-0.03	6,366
	Gapuwiyak	1,000	0.97	6,488,141	6,715,117	-0.03	6,488
	Umbakumba	467	0.98	5,371,749	5,720,614	-0.06	11,503
	Yirrkala Dhanbul	980	0.96	13,147,743	13,197,029	0.00	13,416
	Marngarr	299	0.90	5,632,720	3,697,436	0.34	18,839
MacDonnell	Imanpa	207	0.97	534,000	1,066,000	-1.00	2,580
	Walungurru	475	0.88	1,397,773	1,780,384	-0.27	2,943
	Ntaria	650	0.97	3,052,594	3,116,906	-0.02	4,696
	Watiyawanu	240	0.95	1,146,184	1,498,171	-0.31	4,776
	Wallace Rockhole	112	0.99	569,134	708,448	-0.24	5,082
	Aputula	240	0.95	1,690,130	1,728,835	-0.02	7,042
	Kaltukatjara	405	0.95	3,294,939	2,624,664	0.20	8,136
	Areyonga	225	0.98	2,091,997	1,756,583	0.16	9,298
	<b>Ikuntji</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>0.93</b>	<b>1,772,318</b>	<b>1,788,120</b>	<b>-0.01</b>	<b>10,128</b>
	Amoonguna	350	1.00	3,933,759	2,901,779	0.26	11,239

*continued →*

**Table 1. continued**

Post-reform council name	Pre-reform council name	Population	Indigenous proportion of population	Total revenue (\$)	Total expenditure (\$)	Surplus ratio ((Rev – Exp) / Exp)	Revenue per capita
	Ltyentye Purte	573	0.97	9,594,995	9,304,972	0.03	16,745
	Tapatjatjaka	270	0.93	5,009,797	4,956,319	0.01	18,555
	Papunya	340	0.90	6,457,370	2,195,645	0.66	18,992
Roper Gulf	Borroloola	747	0.82	1,320,722	1,231,131	0.07	1,768
	Mataranka	224	0.33	644,501	597,369	0.07	2,877
	Yugul Mangi	1,713	0.97	8,219,375	9,699,893	-0.18	4,798
	Numbulwar Numburindi	1,354	0.98	10,578,593	8,443,134	0.20	7,813
	Nyirranggulung Madrulk Ngadberre	1,204	0.97	11,899,640	10,363,403	0.13	9,883
	Jilkminggan	287	0.98	3,100,774	2,664,342	0.14	10,804
Tiwi Islands	Tiwi Islands	2,659	0.97	19,850,654	28,464,767	-0.43	7,465
Victoria Daly	Pine Creek	344	0.33	951,188	1,053,196	-0.11	2,765
	Timber Creek	304	0.67	1,058,067	673,614	0.36	3,480
	Daguragu	730	0.95	4,358,000	6,716,000	-0.54	5,970
	Nganmariyanga	430	0.95	3,024,176	3,206,317	-0.06	7,033
	Thamarrurr	2,858	0.95	20,373,077	20,177,338	0.01	7,128
	Walangeri Ngumpinku	570	0.97	4,178,000	5,519,000	-0.32	7,330
	Peppimenarti	197	0.92	1,948,009	1,461,183	0.25	9,888
	Naiyu Nambiyu	580	0.90	6,511,564	5,861,734	0.10	11,227
West Arnhem	Maningrida	2,661	0.95	8,741,745	7,980,718	0.09	3,285
	Jabiru	1,165	0.27	4,194,629	4,335,232	-0.03	3,601
	Warruwi	401	0.99	3,374,175	2,956,283	0.12	8,414
	Minjilang	308	0.95	3,119,738	2,330,157	0.25	10,129
	Kunbarllanjnja	1,510	0.97	16,791,766	12,600,723	0.25	11,120

Source: Northern Territory Department of Local Government and Housing.

At the top of Table 1 are the four urban municipalities which were to be largely left intact in the 2008 reforms. In comparison with the councils further down Table 1, the municipalities are notable for two population and financial characteristics in 2006: Indigenous people were minorities among these larger urban populations, and the municipalities had revenue—and hence also expenditure—of below \$1,000 per capita. This latter characteristic reflects a local government which plays only a limited servicing role within its jurisdictional area. Most servicing in these urban areas is undertaken by private or community sector organisations, or by other levels of government.

By contrast, further down Table 1, lots of the old, dispersed, more remote area councils in the Northern Territory had much higher levels of revenue, and hence expenditure, per capita. This reflected a much greater servicing role for local governments in remote areas, sometimes providing housing, employment and even retail services, as well as the more usual infrastructure and community services. Also these councils had a far higher proportion of their far smaller populations who were Indigenous. Most remote

area councils had populations of less than 1,000, of whom over 90 per cent were Indigenous. These were local governments for discrete Indigenous settlements or communities, usually single settlements but sometimes small regional groupings of settlements.

Scanning the 'Indigenous Proportion of Population' column in Table 1 however, readers will also note that there were a few remote area councils further down the table which had minority Indigenous populations back in 2006. Jabiru within West Arnhem Shire, Pine Creek within Victoria Daly Shire and Mataranka within Roper Gulf Shire are the three that stand out. These are highway towns, open to non-Indigenous residents, and they are also notable for having quite low levels of revenue and expenditure per capita in comparison to the other councils with which they have since been amalgamated. Table 1 ranks the old councils within their groupings from lowest to highest revenue per capita, so these old highway town councils appear towards the top of their new shire groupings. There are three other old, open, highway town councils which also appear at the top of their new shire groupings due to low levels of revenue per capita, but which have majority Indigenous populations. These are Borroloola within Roper Gulf Shire, Timber Creek within Victoria Daly Shire and Tennant Creek within Barkly Shire. Hence four of the eight shires have, within their new grouping, clear examples of old councils which serviced open highway towns rather than discrete Indigenous communities. This local government reform in the Northern Territory involved a very clear mixing of rather diverse types of previous remote area councils.

This mixing of diverse old councils can also be seen in Table 2 and, in passing, in the second panel of Table 1 listing the four councils which were to become part of the abandoned Top End Shire on the outskirts of Darwin. Top End Shire was to be an amalgamation of three urban fringe councils, in which non-Indigenous people predominated (Litchfield, Coomalie and Wagait) and one discrete Indigenous community council (Belyuen). It was the urban fringe settler interests who mobilised strongly against the amalgamation and won its abandonment.

Table 2 breaks down the revenue sources of the old councils in 2006 into eight categories, ranging from rates and annual charges, to various types of grants, to contracts, to user fees, charges and sales. Within the new shire groupings, Table 2 maintains the organisation of Table 1, which ranks the old councils from lowest to highest revenue per capita. At the top of Table 2 it is clear that the four largely unchanged municipalities derived the majority, or at least a substantial proportion, of their revenue in 2006 from rates and annual charges. However, rates and annual charges dropped away to a much lesser proportion of revenues in the urban fringe councils which were to become part of Top End Shire and to an even lesser proportion in most of the remote area councils. Indeed many of the remote area councils raised no revenue from rates and annual charges in 2006, or just a tiny proportion. Among the remote area councils, only the town councils in Tennant Creek and Jabiru raised a significant proportion of their revenue from rates and annual charges.

Remote area councils in the Northern Territory in 2006 relied heavily for revenue on grants, both tied and untied, and in some instances on contracts or rents, user fees and sales. Among the grants, untied money from the Northern Territory Government and its Grants Commission (distributing Commonwealth local government funds) provided general base funding for remote area councils. However it was tied grants from the two super-ordinate levels of government which increased local government revenue, and expenditure, to higher levels per capita. The Commonwealth's Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, an Indigenous-specific, work-for-welfare scheme which has been running in remote areas since 1977, was particularly important. Thirty-four remote area councils in the Northern Territory in 2006 had CDEPs and in 12 instances this pushed their revenue per capita above \$10,000 per annum. In some instances remote area councils had a significant proportion of revenue from rents, user fees and sales, reflecting a major role in housing provision or occasionally also in retailing.

**Table 2. Revenue breakdown of Northern Territory local governments, 2006**

Post-reform council name	Pre-reform council name	Rates and annual charges (%)*	Tied CDEP grants (%)*	Other tied Aust Govt grants (%)*	Tied NTG grants (%)*	Untied NTGC and NTG grants (%)*	Contracts (%)*	Rents, user fees and sales (%)*	Misc (%)*	Per capita revenue (\$)
Alice Springs	Alice Springs	71.0	0.0	0.3	6.6	9.5	0.0	0.6	11.9	638
Palmerston	Palmerston	66.7	0.0	0.8	8.0	7.4	0.0	1.9	15.2	716
Darwin	Darwin	74.9	0.0	2.6	4.0	4.6	0.0	2.8	11.2	848
Katherine	Katherine (Binjari)	38.9	0.0	2.6	15.7	18.2	0.8	3.1	20.6	874
Litchfield	Litchfield	35.8	0.0	5.5	3.8	17.5	0.0	0.0	37.4	872
Coomalie	Coomalie	14.4	0.0	38.0	6.8	32.0	0.0	0.3	8.5	2,038
Wagait	Cox Peninsula	7.4	0.0	16.4	43.7	20.4	7.4	0.4	4.2	2,891
Belyuen	Belyuen	1.0	0.0	11.0	23.8	26.8	9.9	19.6	7.9	3,350
Barkly	Tennant Creek	49.2	0.0	0.4	23.7	16.0	2.8	5.1	2.8	1,047
	Urapuntja	0.0	0.0	25.5	20.2	36.0	1.6	7.6	9.0	1,994
	Aherrenge	0.0	0.0	23.2	22.1	26.0	5.2	14.6	8.8	3,698
	Elliott	1.6	38.3	16.2	14.2	11.0	4.9	6.2	7.6	5,749
	Alpurrurulam	0.0	62.7	8.6	5.5	6.8	1.7	12.8	1.9	8,280
	Ali Curung	0.0	43.9	12.0	12.7	7.8	0.2	12.5	11.0	9,550
Central Desert	Nyirripi	0.0	0.0	16.6	25.4	35.0	9.6	5.5	8.0	3,072
	Lajamanu	0.0	47.2	6.0	13.1	15.0	8.4	7.1	3.1	4,442
	Yuendumu	0.0	30.5	8.6	13.0	25.2	7.8	11.4	3.6	4,788
	Anmatjere	0.0	32.0	18.8	9.0	18.4	5.0	7.3	9.6	5,435
	Yuelamu	0.9	0.0	44.1	18.5	15.9	7.6	9.2	3.8	6,028
	Arltarlpilta	0.5	42.7	7.8	17.9	13.1	3.3	12.5	2.1	7,109
East Arnhem	Ramingining	0.0	9.9	2.6	18.3	25.9	13.6	23.4	6.3	2,676
	Milingimbi	0.0	25.4	5.9	13.7	11.6	15.8	20.3	7.3	2,923
	Galiwinku	0.5	28.1	17.9	22.3	8.6	3.1	12.4	7.1	5,906
	Angurugu (incl. Milyakburra)	0.0	20.6	10.6	19.8	7.5	3.5	34.8	3.3	6,366
	Gapuwiyak	0.0	27.7	21.2	6.0	10.0	12.0	14.7	8.3	6,488
	Umbakumba	0.8	37.3	8.7	7.0	7.6	0.1	8.0	30.5	11,503
	Yirrkala Dhanbul	2.2	13.5	14.0	0.0	3.6	0.0	11.9	54.9	13,416
	Marngarr	1.4	35.0	35.2	10.5	4.7	1.8	4.0	7.4	18,839
MacDonnell	Imanpa	0.0	0.0	4.5	20.3	33.3	19.5	8.2	14.2	2,580
	Walungurru	0.0	0.0	15.1	24.2	30.1	9.3	9.8	11.5	2,943
	Ntaria	0.0	29.8	18.5	9.2	11.9	18.2	4.8	7.7	4,696
	Watiyawanu	0.0	0.0	35.7	12.8	21.5	9.8	7.9	12.3	4,776
	Wallace Rockhole	1.1	0.0	1.0	20.9	33.6	9.1	31.9	2.4	5,082
	Aputula	2.5	45.1	5.1	16.7	12.3	10.5	4.6	3.3	7,042
	Kaltukatjara	3.3	0.0	43.4	12.6	13.0	3.2	6.1	18.3	8,136
	Areyonga	0.2	43.2	10.7	15.4	11.1	6.5	6.5	6.4	9,298

*continued* →

Table 2. *continued*

Post-reform council name	Pre-reform council name	Rates and annual charges (%)*	Tied CDEP grants (%)*	Other tied Aust Govt grants (%)*	Tied NTG grants (%)*	Untied NTGC and NTG grants (%)*	Contracts (%)*	Rents, user fees and sales (%)*	Misc (%)*	Per capita revenue (\$)
	Ikuntji	0.0	0.0	38.3	6.1	12.4	4.2	10.1	28.9	10,128
	Amoonguna	1.0	18.8	33.8	11.6	4.1	0.6	10.6	19.5	11,239
	Ltyentye Purte	0.2	23.6	9.7	14.3	4.4	7.8	29.6	10.2	16,745
	Tapatjatjaka	0.0	35.7	10.3	3.8	5.8	0.0	33.1	11.3	18,555
	Papunya	0.0	11.1	79.5	3.4	4.0	1.3	2.3	-1.6	18,992
Roper Gulf	Borroloola	6.2	0.0	8.0	20.3	41.5	8.5	6.3	9.2	1,768
	Mataranka	5.0	0.0	18.8	12.4	32.7	8.5	14.1	8.6	2,877
	Yugul Mangi	0.0	45.1	9.0	9.4	15.5	4.4	15.9	0.7	4,798
	Numbulwar Numburindi	0.0	11.9	3.3	27.3	7.4	1.8	47.5	0.9	7,813
	Nyirranggulong Mardruk Ngadberre	1.1	38.0	12.2	14.8	12.4	11.9	4.7	4.9	9,883
	Jilkminggan	5.7	40.0	29.3	5.0	11.5	2.3	3.0	3.0	10,804
Tiwi Islands	Tiwi Islands	5.3	42.5	8.5	9.4	14.3	0.6	8.7	10.7	7,465
Victoria Daly	Pine Creek	6.7	0.0	29.4	11.6	41.5	0.5	2.3	8.0	2,765
	Timber Creek	1.8	0.0	34.4	4.8	41.8	6.4	5.2	5.5	3,480
	Daguragu	2.6	42.8	11.5	9.0	12.4	7.1	12.6	1.9	5,970
	Nganmarriyanga	3.9	0.0	7.1	5.8	11.9	0.9	64.9	5.5	7,033
	Thamarrurr	2.4	21.6	21.5	13.7	7.6	0.4	11.4	21.5	7,128
	Walangeri Ngumpinku	0.0	50.9	13.9	8.5	11.3	3.0	11.8	0.6	7,330
	Peppimenarti	1.4	0.0	9.3	47.7	23.0	1.7	11.5	5.5	9,888
	Naiyu Nambiyu	1.6	39.5	7.2	9.9	8.2	23.2	5.9	4.5	11,227
West Arnhem	Maningrida	0.0	0.0	2.5	6.7	12.0	0.3	30.2	48.2	3,285
	Jabiru	39.2	0.0	2.5	12.6	5.0	3.7	7.0	30.0	3,601
	Warruwi	0.8	28.1	18.2	14.4	10.1	4.6	6.5	17.2	8,414
	Minjilang	0.7	28.3	2.3	4.8	13.6	4.8	6.6	38.9	10,129
	Kunbarllanjnja	0.4	12.4	9.6	26.5	7.6	10.1	19.1	14.2	11,120

Source: Northern Territory Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services.

The reshaping of local government in the Northern Territory in 2008 involved the amalgamation of some rather different remote area local councils, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. However, these tables cannot capture the full extent of the mixing of diverse interests involved in the new, large shires in the Northern Territory, as many settler landholding interests in remote areas, such as pastoralists, roadhouse owners and miners, were for the first time also being pushed into the local government system. For the most part, these settler landholding interests did not wish to be included in local government and fought it quite strongly. The Northern Territory Government insisted, but in the process conceded some conditional rating arrangements which would limit the annual charges that could be levied on such interests by the new shires for some years to come. In many ways, it is the dramatic change in the two maps (Fig. 1 and 2) which best suggests this added dimension to the mixing of diverse interests in the Northern Territory's generational reshaping of local government.

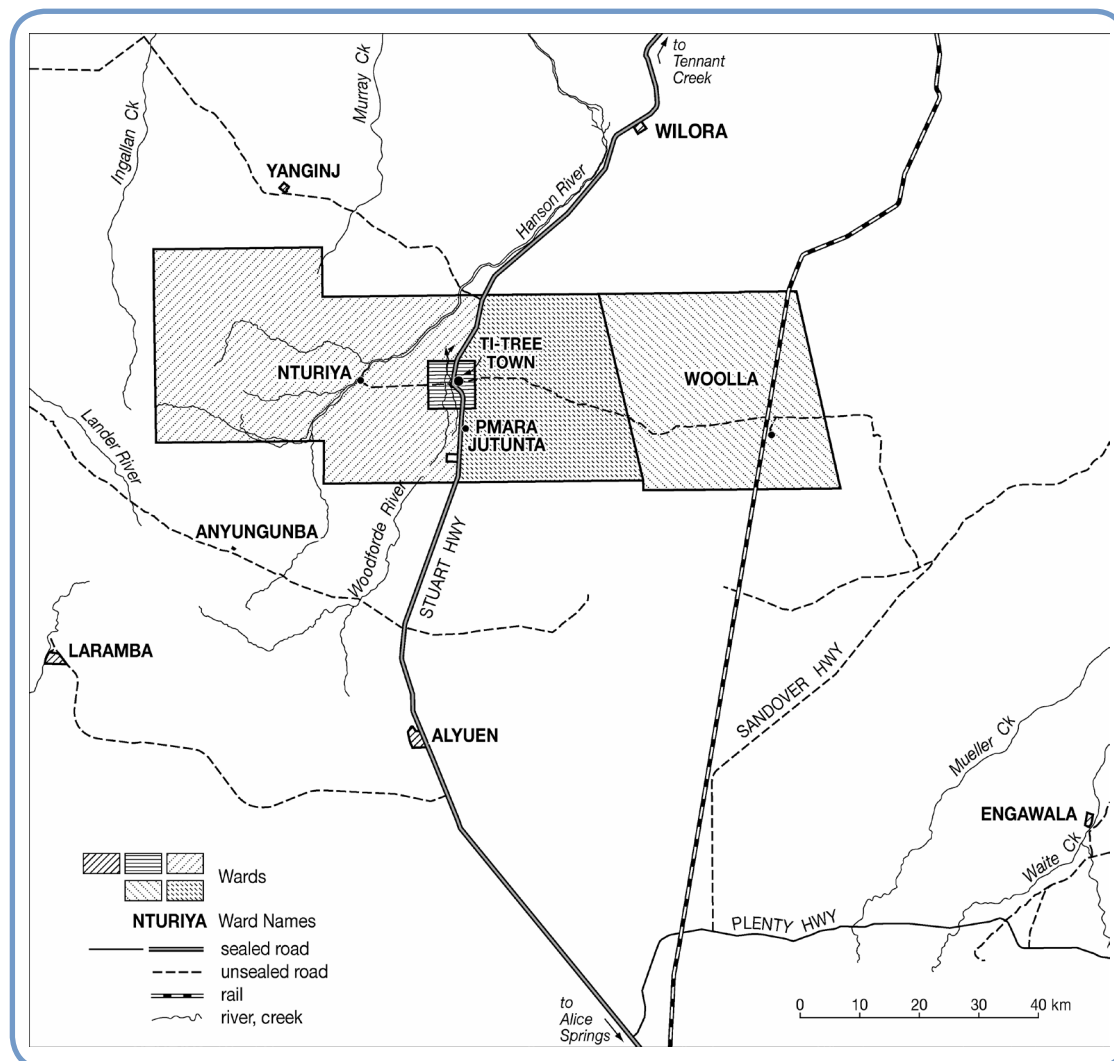
## THE PROBLEM OF SCALE: AN OBSERVATIONAL APPROACH

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Let us now move from a statistical to a more observational approach. As an academic, I have been watching with interest the development of the Northern Territory local government system for some 30 years. In the early 1980s, there was permissive growth of community government councils in remote areas which tended, under local community influence, to emerge as single-settlement councils. Then came encouraged-regionalism, in which settlements were gently guided by the Northern Territory Government to band together in regional groupings (Wolfe 1989). In 1988 this produced the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council, in the Roper River region; and in 1993 the Anmatjere Community Government Council, 200 kilometres to the north of Alice Springs. In the rest of 1990s, no new voluntary regional groupings emerged despite ongoing encouragement from the Northern Territory Government. However, in the early 2000s, with a more concerted encouragement from above, three more regional groupings took shape: the Tiwi Island Local Government in 2001 and the Thamarrurr and Nyirranggulgung groupings in 2003 (see Fig. 1).

It was in 2003 that my long-standing academic interest in Northern Territory remote area local government became more active, as part of research within the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre and an Australian Research Council Linkage Project. In 2004 I began attending monthly meetings of the Anmatjere Community Government Council three or four times a year and offering my services to Council on issues of importance to them. Based in the open town of Ti Tree on the Stuart Highway less than two hours drive north of Alice Springs, the Anmatjere offices and council chambers were readily accessible both to me and to constituents and councilors. On the third Wednesday of each month councilors from the outlying discrete Indigenous community wards would drive into town for up to an hour or possibly two for the Council meeting (see Fig. 3). Whenever I could, I would join them.

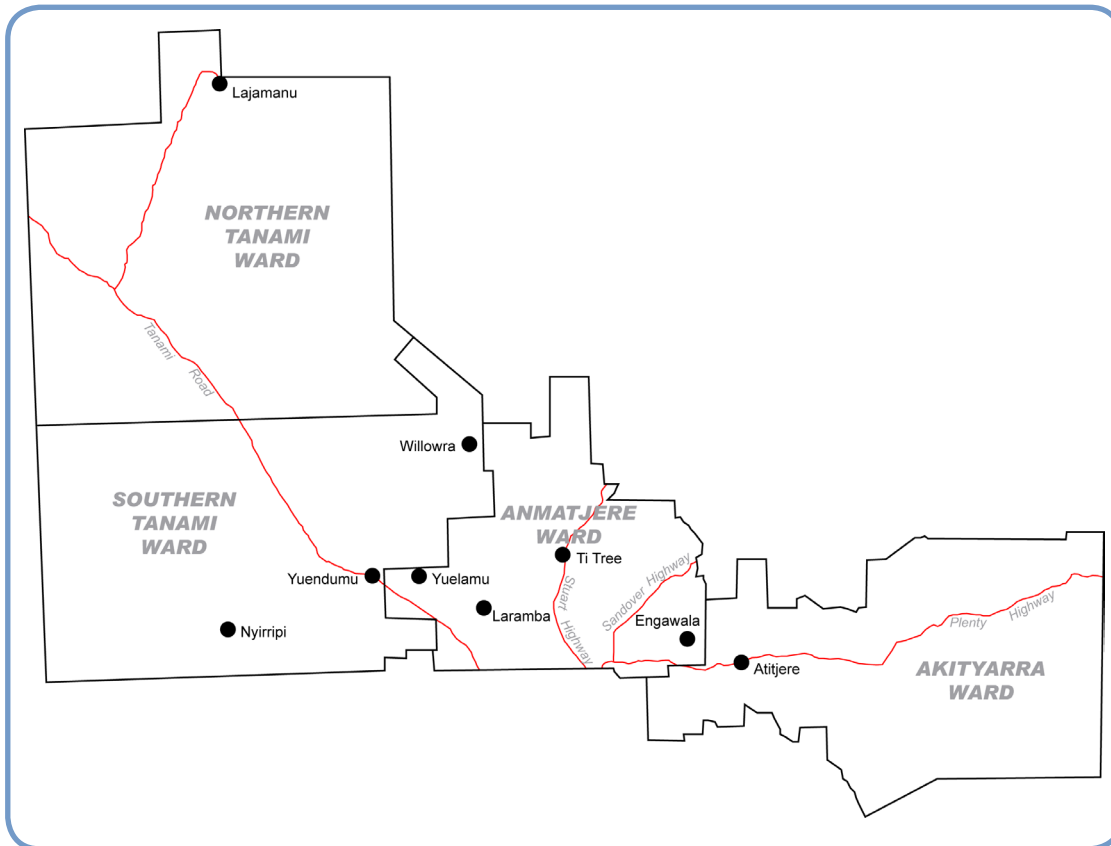
I was, by then, already somewhat positioned in the debate about regional up-scaling in Northern Territory local government. I had, between 2001 and 2003, written four brief papers arguing that existing patterns of dispersal and localism in remote area governance were understandable and reasonable social phenomena that should not be simply disparaged as undesirable negatives. I was also skeptical of the search for single, unified local governing bodies of just the right scale to be culturally appropriate and of the idea that incompetent, corrupt, unethical non-Indigenous staff were the major cause of local government's troubles in remote areas (Sanders 2004). However, I did acknowledge that these small, remote area councils that had developed in the Northern Territory did have problems of organisational continuity and managerial isolation due to their small size and that regional up-scaling was in many ways a reasonable objective (Sanders 2005, 2006a, 2006b).

**Fig. 3. Anmatjere Community Government Council Wards, 1995–2008**

Source: Sanders 2008a: 285.

I will not here give a detailed account of my work with the Anmatjere Community Government Council from 2004 until its dissolution in 2008, as I have done so elsewhere (Sanders 2008a; Sanders & Holcombe 2007). However, I will say that over four years I observed a small regional local government that was big enough to achieve organisational continuity and was both useful to and valued by its 1,000 or so constituents. I observed the building of a managerial team of about half a dozen and some increase in the range of services provided by the organisation. I observed two orderly transitions of Chief Executive Officer and of Council chair. I observed engaged councilors who took seriously their representation of the ten distinct local wards within Anmatjere, as well as their responsibilities to the regional jurisdiction as a whole. I also observed, in a microcosm resembling the Territory as a whole, a local government which only covered about 10 per cent of its region's land area—as settler interests with landholdings outside Ti Tree town had been left out of the incorporated area of the Anmatjere Community Government Council in the mid 1990s. Anmatjere was, nonetheless, an interesting attempt to mix discrete Indigenous community interests with those of the open roadside town of Ti Tree (where the Council administration was centred). This mixing of interests was not entirely successful, as the settler interests in Ti Tree town seemed to withdraw from the Council as a representative body over time and leave it to the Aboriginal residents. But Anmatjere did achieve some degree of mixing.

**Fig. 4. Central Desert Shire Wards**



Source: Central Desert Shire.

After four years observation, my assessment of Anmatjere Community Government Council was that it was a modestly successful remote area local government which provided a useful focus and range of services for a small, non-urban region approximately associated with a single Aboriginal language group. It was somewhat limited by the lack of settlers among its representatives, but still a worthwhile small regional local government (Sanders 2008a). If Anmatjere was to be gently reformed, I would have suggested maintaining the existing regional scale and having another go at drawing in some of the interspersed settler landholding interests. However, by late 2006 gentle encouragement of local government reform was no longer the Northern Territory Government approach. Instead, a massive change in local government scale was to be imposed from above. Anmatjere Community Government Council and the settler landholding interests of its region, which were previously outside the incorporated local government area, were all to be included as one of four wards within the vast new Central Desert Shire (see Fig. 4).

Central Desert Shire amalgamated five other local governments with Anmatjere, two with similar populations and three with smaller populations (see Table 1). All these amalgamating councils focused on discrete Indigenous communities, widely dispersed in a band of the Northern Territory to the north of Alice Springs, stretching from Queensland to Western Australia. Among the six, Anmatjere had the most experience with the mixing of open town and discrete Indigenous community interests, through its inclusion of Ti Tree town as one of its wards (see Fig. 3). Indeed in many ways, Ti Tree town would have been a logical administrative base for Central Desert Shire: an open town, on the bitumen at the geographic centre of the new Shire's vast east-west spread. However, to avoid any sense of favouritism

between the amalgamating councils and locations, and under the gentle guidance of the Northern Territory Government, the Central Desert Shire Transition Committee chose to have Shire management based in Alice Springs, 100 kilometres south of the Shire's southern boundary. This decision, made in late 2007, seemed in many ways to set the pattern for much that was to come.

I have been observing regular Central Desert Shire meetings since November 2008. These are two-monthly and run for two days, either in Alice Springs or in one of the Shire's nine 'service delivery centres'. Councilors travel to these meetings on Monday, have a preparation day for meetings on Tuesday, meet on Wednesday and begin to travel home on Thursday. Being a councilor thus involves a two-monthly trip away from home for almost a week. Further, if councilors become members of the Finance Committee this can be repeated in the off-month as well. In addition, under the guidance of the Northern Territory Government the Shire has established nine Local Boards. This is a laudable attempt to give a sense of localised influence to Shire constituents, particularly in the areas where the former six councils were operating. But these Local Board meetings also need to be organised by the Shire administration and attended by councilors on a two-monthly basis, at least in principle. In practice, like other shires, Central Desert is having trouble maintaining interest in these Local Boards, which are only advisory (Central Land Council 2010).

If all this sounds like an ambitious and somewhat cumbersome representative structure, then I have created an impression of what I detect. The Shire, I argue, is so large and geographically dispersed that it spends much of its time and energy just trying to keep in touch with its many far-flung parts. This is in no way a criticism of either the councilors or the staff who are running the Shire. The staff are dedicated and competent and the councilors are trying hard within the framework that has been given to them. Together they are working hard, developing procedures and policies which are duly put on the Shire website for all to see, as encouraged by the Northern Territory Government. Yet at the same time, there is a vast distance, both social and geographic, between the Shire's administrative headquarters in Alice Springs and the lives of its constituents out around its nine service delivery centres. Councilors are also told to respect the 'separation of powers' between themselves and the managers in these nine service delivery centres and to direct their representations of constituents' concerns up through Council to the central Shire administration.

Central Desert Shire seems, in my observation, to be in danger of becoming a well governed, urban-based organisation that is of rather limited daily relevance to its remote area constituents. This is not an organisation which the remote area localities and constituents created for themselves, or over which they feel great influence. They can accept the services the Shire offers or look for alternatives. But any attempt to influence the Shire through representation will come up against its vast geographic scale, its distant central administration, and also an inadequate electoral system which concentrates representation in larger settlements in multi-member wards (Sanders 2009). (On 24 November 2011 the Minister for Local Government announced the change of this electoral system to Single Transferable Vote in time for the March 2012 local government elections (see McCarthy 2011)).

Central Desert Shire, and possibly six of the other seven shires, seem to have been designed on just too-big-a-scale to be accessible to and valued by their dispersed remote area constituents. Seven of the eight shires now have major offices outside their boundaries in the Territory's major urban centres of Darwin, Alice Springs and Katherine. For most constituents, these are no longer accessible local governments whose headquarters are just down the road, or even an hour or two's drive away. They are distant, urban-based organisations experienced by locals as somewhat alien and bureaucratic, like higher levels of government.

This may seem a premature judgment, after less than three years of shire operations in the Northern Territory. Critics could also note that I was already inclined to a view which defended the previous smaller councils. However, I have long acknowledged that the small, remote area councils developed in Territory in the 1980s and 1990s did have problems of size and that regional up-scaling was, in many ways, a

legitimate objective—but not on this vast geographic scale, which has been imposed from Darwin and simply fallen back on an urban-based approach. In terms of scale, remote area local government in the Northern Territory would seem to have changed from 'possibly a bit small' to now 'definitely too big'.

## HOW DID IT HAPPEN? THE IDEA OF GENERATIONAL CHANGE

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If this judgment about the scale of new shires in the Northern Territory is accepted—and could reasonably have been foreseen—how did this 'over up-scaling' of local government come about? Here I think the idea of generational change is helpful; particularly as it relates to Australian Indigenous affairs, to which remote area local government in the Northern Territory is clearly very closely related.

In recent work I have suggested that there are generational revolutions in Australian Indigenous affairs in which a growing diagnosis of past policy failure leads to an extraordinary level of organisational and policy change (Sanders 2008b). Conceptually, this once-in-a-generation extraordinary level of change can take the form of a switching between the three competing principles of equality, choice and guardianship, which I have also argued are at the heart of Australian Indigenous affairs (Sanders 2010). Since the turn of the millennium, I argue, there has been a rediscovery of the guardianship principle in Australian Indigenous affairs after thirty years of emphasising the choice and equality principles.

In the context of remote area local government in the Northern Territory, it was the principle of choice, or self-determination, which greatly informed the development of small community government councils in the 1980s (Coburn 1982; Phegan 1989). Even as the encouragement of regional up-scaling developed through the 1990s, there was still great respect for localism and even for distinctive Aboriginal cultural contributions (Coles 1999). As late as 2005, the long-serving, senior Northern Territory Government public servant in local government, David Coles, argued that voluntarism was essential in up-scaling and had to be built on 'effective engagement and communication' (Coles 2005). By 2006 however, Coles had retired and so too had the first Aboriginal Minister for Local Government in the Northern Territory, John Ah Kit. Their replacements were another Aboriginal minister, Elliot McAdam, and an administrator who had come up through urban local government in Alice Springs, Nick Skarvelis. Both seemed less patient with remote area councils than Coles and Ah Kit and wanted to put their own stamp on local government reform. Within months a plan was being developed to impose shires from above and to incorporate the whole Territory land mass within local government. The lure of the grand plan, with its neat administrative rationality, was rapidly winning the day. The old councils, developed over the previous 30 years, and including some like Anmatjere that were regional groupings, were now defined as failures and as part of the problem. Conceptually, there was a move back towards the idea of Aboriginal people in remote areas needing to be told what to do, following the guardianship principle, rather than having their existing choices relating to council scale engaged with and respected.

In the background during 2006–07 was also an increasingly assertive Commonwealth Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Queensland Mal Brough, who would in June 2007 convince Prime Minister Howard to launch the Northern Territory Emergency Response. Although the Commonwealth had no direct role to play in Northern Territory local government reform, the pushy presence of this assertive Commonwealth minister probably also contributed to the sense that continuing past reform efforts were not enough and that something different had to be done. Thus the shires were born, as a grand plan on a grand scale that would fix remote area local government in the Northern Territory once-and-for-all.

This was generational change in at least three senses. First, it was a move from 'permissive' local government covering parts of the Territory to 'mandatory' local government covering the whole population and land area (Power, Wettenhall & Halligan 1981: 6); except as it turned out in the Darwin hinterland where

local voices of protest did overcome grand visionary planning. Second, it was a change which discarded as failures the ideas and organizational creations of a generation of public administrators, ministers and policy thinkers who had slowly built and encouraged the previous remote area councils since the late 1970s. Third, it was a change which relied anew on the idea that remote area Indigenous people needed to be guided and directed, or even overridden, in their choices relating to matters such as council scale, rather than engaged with and respected. In these second and third senses, I argue, local government reform in the Northern Territory was part of a larger generational revolution in Australian Indigenous affairs (Sanders 2008b; Sanders & Hunt 2010).

## CONCLUSION

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When I began to write this article, I did not anticipate that it would emerge to be quite as critical as it has. Clearly I have trouble believing in the new remote area shires in the Northern Territory. This may be because I am myself part of the generation which debated and nurtured the previous generation of community government councils, trying to balance localised choice and ownership with an organizational scale large enough to ensure basic managerial and administrative continuity and efficiency. I hope the new shires prove me wrong, and that they do become valued by their remote area constituents, as well as efficiently administered from their major offices in urban areas. However I cannot help but think that the mixing of interests in these shires was always very ambitious and that their overly large scale of operation was simply determined by centralised, administrative rationality. To be effective, local government must be on a scale to which local communities and constituents can comfortably relate. Otherwise it is not so much local government as just another manifestation of centralised State or Territory government. Unfortunately this may be where generational reform has taken Northern Territory local government. Only time will tell.

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