

To: Outstations Policy,
Office of Indigenous Policy
Department of Chief Minister.
From: Ernie Mitchell
2 Fergusson St
Anula, NT 0812
30/11/2008.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on your proposed Outstations Policy.

I have lived and worked with and for Aboriginal people in north east Arnhem Land since 1982.

I have got to know them very well over this period of time, and have taken every opportunity to learn from them about their culture and their history. I have been visiting people on communities in this area, and have had a number of discussions with senior Aboriginal people about what they think about the present state of Government intervention, and proposed changes to be implemented, or done to them.

I have a number of concerns about issues raised in the Outstations Policy Discussion Paper.

The first is para. 3 on p.1 of the executive summary regarding the NT Government recognising that people deciding to live on outstations is a trade off between lifestyle and access to essential services and that the government needs to implement measures to ensure that children have access to adequate services, especially education.

I would like to say that my children grew up in remote communities in the NT, and had access to education through School of the Air, a NT Gov. Service, which provided an excellent education for my children, and I understand is still being used by many children living in remote parts of the NT. These children are not forced by government policy to move to a township or larger community to attend a normal government school, and no one is suggesting that it is OK for their parents to make a trade off between their lifestyle and access to services but that the government needs to implement measures on their childrens behalf. The history of the NT is that it has always been a remote place, and everyone who has ever come here has made that trade off. No government has ever before contemplated measures to limit peoples choice to live in remote places.

Regarding the economics of living in remote places. I have always understood that I was living in remote places, and did not expect to have the same services that I could have had if I had stayed in Melbourne. I chose to make that trade off and I have never regretted it, and my children who are now adults say that their childhood living in Arnhem Land was amazing. Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land have been living on their land for a very long time, and something that I noted 25 years ago was that we didn't need to teach them how to be self sufficient on their own land. If they weren't able to look after themselves, then they wouldn't have been here when white people arrived. Further to that they actually had international trade agreements with the Macassans who came every year and traded with them. Unfortunately, these trade agreements, which I understand had been going for over 400 years, were forced out of existence by government policy decisions.

Aboriginal people want to live on their land. They do not expect to live like people in cities. The government has over the last thirty or so years been providing some facilities for Aboriginal people, but a lot of Aboriginal people would still choose to live on their clan lands without this assistance.

Regarding the definition of outstations.

Aboriginal people have a complex network of clan and family relationships. They have obligations to other clans and families as a result of these networks. They have told me that the definition of an outstation is that it should be the “principal” place of residence, not the “sole” place of residence, because they do travel and stay with family in other places from time to time, just as I go and stay with my family in Melbourne, and my in-laws in NSW from time to time.

On page 2 it says “Any **substantive reform** in this area must be well thought out and involve **significant engagement** with existing service delivery providers **and residents.**”

It appears to me that this is a substantive reform, but I have noticed that the engagement with residents, is going to happen over a two week period for all of the NT, and that in north east Arnhem Land there will be one day in Yirrkala, and one day in Galiwin’ku, both major communities. I do not think that this is significant engagement with residents of outstations. If you want to have significant engagement with Aboriginal people, then you have to give them a good opportunity to think over the issues, and this will generally take much longer than a day. I would suggest that this community consultation is a token consultation. I think that a lot of other people would agree with this.

Regarding Status and Security of Land Tenure.

Aboriginal people have owned the land in n.e. Arnhem Land since long before white people arrived. They have a system of Land Tenure. They know which clan owns what land, and they get permission from each other before they go onto another clans land. This is a very secure system of Land Tenure. It is much more secure than the Western system of Land Tenure because the land will always belong to the clan, and is not just sold off to anyone as the Western system does. Aboriginal land has the same owners for ever, it is not changing constantly as ours does. Aboriginal people do **not** want the Western system of Land Tenure **imposed** on them. As far as I am concerned Aboriginal Land **is** the private property of the clan, and there is no need to change this, just a huge need to recognise it by the government. I do not believe it is necessary to change the Land Tenure system in order to provide public housing to Aboriginal Communities.

Regarding the “Hub and Spoke Model”

It looks like someone thinks this is a new idea. The reality is that it is how every remote community that was ever established anywhere in Australia, including every town and city, began. As communities grow they get more services. I have seen some outstation communities grow from small communities into very large communities over the last 26 years, and I have also seen huge growth in major cities in Australia. This is normal, and we should expect it to continue to occur, and we should not legislate to stop Aboriginal people from being part of the mainstream trend of growing communities.

There are a lot of other issues I could comment on but I think these are the key issues for people I have talked with.

Yours Sincerely

Ernie Mitchell.