

## Don't lose what the homelands have gained

Editorial  
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**In trying to improve indigenous services, the Northern Territory must not unravel further the ties between communities and their land.**

FORMER Aboriginal affairs minister Fred Chaney expressed the dilemma perfectly. Commenting earlier this week on the Northern Territory Government's proposed concentration of indigenous services in 20 regional "hub" communities, Mr Chaney said: "If this is a substantial upgrading, that is a good thing." But he would be "extremely sorry" if the change led to people leaving their traditional country: "I think that's highly undesirable, given that many of the people who are out on outstations are much healthier."

Mr Chaney, who served in the Fraser government, has seen many changes in indigenous policy and indigenous politics over the years. He is one of the white politicians who can recall the origins of the homelands movement in the 1970s, when indigenous elders in many parts of northern Australia led their people away from the towns and their fringe camps, where lives were blighted by alcohol-fuelled violence, sexual abuse and chronic health problems, to re-establish themselves in outstations on their traditional lands.

The homelands, as the outstations are properly called, developed as very different places to the towns. As study after study by universities and health authorities has confirmed, people in the homelands are generally much healthier than those in the towns. Their communities are stable and cohesive. They have nurtured their traditional cultures through contact with the land. What is more, by keeping their cultures and knowledge of the land alive, they have begun to find new ways of supporting themselves. Most important of all, they have a sense of being in control of their lives. Life in the homelands is not without its problems, but scarcely anyone who has been able to compare them with, say, the fringe camps of Alice Springs, doubts that they are a better alternative.

The problem for governments seeking to provide the full range of health and educational services, and for those indigenous people who aspire to participate in the wider economy, is that homeland communities are necessarily small, isolated and remote. Providing services to all of them is a costly and complex project. So in its *Working Futures* policy document released this week, the Northern Territory Government announced that 20 communities would be developed as regional economic hubs, with services to 580 smaller communities to be wound back. Existing homeland communities will not be shut down, but the establishment of new ones will be discouraged. The implementation of *Working Futures* will effectively mean the death of the homelands movement.

The Territory Government has won Commonwealth support for its proposals, with a glowing endorsement from Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin. The Rudd Government, indeed, announced a similar policy earlier this year. Both the federal and territory stances are broadly consistent with the attitude to service provision taken by the Howard government's intervention in the Territory's indigenous communities.

*Working Futures* contrasts starkly, however, with the recommendations made by indigenous leader Pat Dodson in a separate report also commissioned by the Territory Government and published online the same day — though without the equivalent fanfare. Mr Dodson urged that more homelands with more than 100 residents

should be "designated as communities and be serviced and funded to the same level as like territory communities". And as *The Age* reports today, since the release of *Working Futures* the Henderson Government has faced not only anger and opposition from the communities themselves and from lands councils, but increasing discontent within its ranks.

It is not only the measurable things, such as life expectancy and the incidence of chronic lifestyle ailments such as heart disease and diabetes, that make those familiar with the homelands ask how it can be good policy to force people to leave them and return to the towns. Granted, it would be very expensive to maintain fully equipped hospitals or major clinics in every community — but since people in the homelands tend to be healthier, that isn't necessary. Even on the basis of comparative cost, a case can be made for not abandoning the homelands experiment.

But there is a deeper reason. The homelands have given their residents pride in themselves and their culture, staving off the social disintegration that in the towns has too often generated a destructive cycle of alcoholism, violence and sexual abuse. If the Henderson and Rudd governments wish to shift support away from the homelands, they must demonstrate that the new hub communities will also be able to nourish pride and self-respect. So far, nothing they have said gives assurance that this will happen.

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2009/05/22/1242498924303.html>*