Housing policy in remote Indigenous communities from 1967 to 2018: how politics has obstructed good policy

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Abstract

When it comes to issues of housing policy, remote Indigenous housing often presents the extreme case, but despite the need to learn from policy mistakes of the past, there has been little detailed analysis of the policy history over the last fifty years.

Through documentary and empirical analysis, we show the long view is the normalisation of Indigenous communities along white settler lines. Policies have been politically driven, resulting in rapid policy u-turns, and inadequate attention to the complexities of service delivery. Under self-determination, policies were culturally responsive, but failed through policy neglect and funding shortfalls. Since then, top-down, centralised policy development, and neoliberal agendas of incorporating remote living Indigenous peoples into market society, have resulted in lost opportunities and poor alignment with geographic and cultural contexts.   Rather than politically motivated short-termism, governments need to develop a medium- to long-term approach that develops policy solutions incrementally, builds capacity within the state and Indigenous communities, and is based on the evidence.

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Introduction and background

Housing on remote Indigenous communities in Australia is regularly described as a wicked problem (Head, 2008). While dominant discourses identify the causes as residing in the characteristics of Indigenous people and Indigenous communities (Sutton 2001), and on the failings of Indigenous organisations (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2007), we argue the long view shows much of the difficulty in establishing sustainable housing on remote Indigenous communities results from politics obstructing good policy (Hunt et al. 2008). Housing on remote communities is costly to deliver and involves complex and intertwined structural problems, but the morally and politically contested nature of policy solutions is a critical compounding factor.

The position of remote living Indigenous people in Australia at the bottom of the hierarchy of wealth and power is one shared by other First Nations people in Australia, Canada, and the United States. Housing exclusion is part of this, with low levels of home ownership, high levels of crowding and homelessness and unsafe and deteriorated housing (Peters and Christensen 2016). But despite significant investment in improving housing outcomes over the last decade, efforts by the state to address this disadvantage have proved only marginally successful (Patterson 2017; PMC 2017). Crowding remains high at 37 per cent (PMC 2017), with projections suggesting an additional 10,000-15,000 new houses will be needed over the next decade (Dillon 2017:5). Poverty is also increasing, with Census data showing this is now at over 50 per cent of the population (Markham and Biddle 2018).

The similarities of the housing problems experienced by Indigenous peoples - and their intractable nature - has its roots in the impact of colonisation and its aftermath. Policy questions revolve around the tension between Indigenous aspirations for self-determination and cultural survival, and the state's tendencies towards the normalisation of difference, and demands for conformity to neo-liberal principles of citizenship. This tension directly and substantially effects Indigenous peoples because of their dependence on social housing. These issues are especially acute in remote locations, where the complexities of communal ownership of land and high costs of housing delivery and management (Eringa et al 2009; Fien and Charlesworth, 2012; Habibis et al 2010), make questions of who should provide housing services, and how these should be funded, a matter for public debate and media scrutiny (McCallum and Waller 2017).

Our analysis of remote Indigenous housing policy in Australia[1] from 1967 to the present day shows the long-term trajectory is one of ongoing colonisation in which a period of self-determination was the precursor to current paternalistic and assimilationist forms of Indigenous housing policy that characterised earlier periods in the history of Indigenous state relations. We argue both approaches are flawed. The emphasis on difference and diversity that commenced in the late 1960s masked policy neglect, while current efforts to increase social inclusion are framed within a neoliberal agenda of normalisation inappropriate for the geographical and cultural context. These failures result from the politicised context which has led to ideologically driven policy discontinuity, short-termism and 're-inventing the wheel'. This runs counter to evidence of the need to take a medium- to long-term approach to the development of policy solutions (Bailey and Hunt 2012; Closing the Gap Clearinghouse 2012; Habibis et al 2016; Moran et al 2016; Patterson 2017:15-6).

This paper is most relevant to communities with sizeable populations of remote living Indigenous peoples, but its broad concern with the intersection between colonisation and Indigenous housing access and tenancy sustainment has some application to urbanised populations in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. Indigenous peoples across the settlement hierarchy are affected by the complexities of converting land rights into increased housing opportunities, the neoliberal state's efforts to eradicate difference and normalise Indigenous housing services (Milligan et al 2011) and the impact of cultural difference on Indigenous housing access and tenancy sustainment (Proudfoot and Habibis 2015).

Our data is drawn from literature and policy review and empirical investigation of remote Indigenous housing in Australia. A desktop analysis of Australia's remote Indigenous housing policy identified academic and grey literature covering the history of the field from 1967 to the present day. Empirical analysis draws on research undertaken by the authors over a thirty-year period especially recent Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute funded research on the progress of housing reforms that took place from 2008 (see Habibis et al 2014 and Habibis et al 2016). This research used a mixed methods approach involving five case studies undertaken in 2013-4 and 2016 in remote communities in the Big Rivers region of the Northern Territory, in the APY Lands of South Australia, in the East and West Kimberley areas of Western Australia and at communities in the Cooktown region of far north Queensland.

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[1] *Remote Indigenous housing* refers generally, but not exclusively, to rental housing located in remote and very remote discrete Indigenous communities, as defined by the accessibility/remoteness index of Australia.

The analysis draws on Sander's account of the history of Australian Indigenous affairs as involving a triangular relationship between three principles of equality, guardianship, and choice. Equality is mostly understood as equality of opportunity, although both socio-economic and legal equality are significant. Guardianship operates when 'governments believe that particular people within their jurisdictions are not competent judges of their own best interests' (Sanders 2009:8) and can be understood as involving, top-down, paternalistic policies which may involve some coercion. Choice is understood as respect for difference and diversity, so that individual and collective agency and forms of self-determination are emphasised. Each of these principles contains problematic elements. Equality tends to deny the significance of difference and diversity, guardianship operates with a negative understanding of difference and ignores the significance of freedom and choice, while choice may lead to white exploitation of Indigenous people or negative constructions of Indigenous agency (2009:8).

The service delivery context

Australia's First Nations peoples are the most disadvantaged group in terms of their housing needs (AIHW 2014), making up a large and increasing proportion of social and affordable housing tenants. A third of Indigenous households live in social housing and they make up 24 per cent of new allocations to public and state-managed Indigenous housing (AIHW 2016). Indigenous people are also over-represented in levels of crowding and homelessness (PMC 2017). In 2014-5, Indigenous people nationally, were 20 per cent of those accessing specialist homelessness services despite being only 3 per cent of the population (Council to Homelessness Persons 2016). The severity of these indicators increases across the settlement hierarchy, with levels of crowding, homelessness and substandard housing most acute in remote and very remote communities (ABS 2011a). Although most Indigenous people live in cities and towns, just over 20 per cent (142,900 people) live on traditional homelands or other remote and very remote locations where they have historical ties (ABS 2011b).

Delivering housing to remote Australian Indigenous communities presents particular housing challenges. These communities are amongst some of the remote on the planet, with some locations more than a day's travel by car from the nearest town, making labour and transport expensive and creating a shortage of local skills (Fien and Charlesworth 2012). Roads are generally unsealed and often dangerous and difficult to travel. A large proportion of communities are in tropical and subtropical regions where climatic conditions require special construction provisions as a result of exposure to floods and cyclones, as well as extreme temperature variations and local geological challenges.

These conditions add a considerable margin to construction costs, with industry cost-guides estimating they are likely to be at least double those of non-remote locations (Rawlinsons 2011). The distance from service centres creates occupational, health, safety and practical challenges, impacts on staff time, and makes it difficult to oversee and support community-based staff. Repairs and maintenance are constrained by a low rent base, with estimates suggesting annual rental revenues cover between 10 and 20 per cent of maintenance costs (PMC 2017). Extreme weather events, expensive contractor services and travel times can rapidly blow-out housing repairs and maintenance budgets while distances make accurate scoping of jobs and monitoring and regulation of contractors and suppliers challenging (Pholeros and Phibbs 2012).

In most remote communities the land is owned or controlled by communal tenure through either government or Indigenous owners. Consequently, the development of a private real estate market and financing of private housing through financial instruments such as mortgages, is difficult (Wensing 2016; Minnery et al 2000). Communities are kin-based and characterised by large, multi-family households, low skills and educational achievement, high levels of disability and language and cultural differences. Many residents speak English as a second or third language. Understandings of concepts such as home, land and law are different from the mainstream. Relationships to place are also distinctive, with frequent, culturally driven population movement between houses and communities. Values of mutual reciprocity create complex relationships of obligation and systems of exchange between family and community members (Habibis et al 2014).

Australia's federal system of government creates complicated administrative arrangements with responsibility for matters such as housing, infrastructure and essential services divided between the Commonwealth, the states and local government. Although the states are responsible for the delivery of housing, in remote communities the Commonwealth has historically taken responsibility for the delivery of housing and essential services, resulting in inter-governmental tensions and disputes over funding (Patterson 2017). The nature of Indigenous land tenure also gives rise to contested arrangements for the delivery of municipal services. These are normally provided by local governments, but because most communities are on Aboriginal land title, local governments often provide no services, resulting in disputes between the states and the Commonwealth on who should provide essential services. More generally, there is wide variation between communities, regions and jurisdictions in matters of culture, geographic conditions, Indigenous governance organisations and leadership and local, state/territory and federal governance arrangements (Patterson 2017; Wensing 2016).

Remote Indigenous housing in the self-determination era

Prior to the 1970s, national Indigenous housing policy in Australia was virtually non-existent because housing provision, along with all Indigenous affairs and powers, was the province of individual state and territory governments. Indigenous housing on reserves and missions was mostly administered through the churches under guardianship legislation. Where housing was provided by the states, it was often in their role, under various statutes, as guardians or 'protectors' of the 'natives'. In most cases this involved rudimentary shelters and dormitories on missions and reserves that to various degrees, and often simultaneously, promoted segregation or assimilation (Phillips 2015). But by the 1960s the global turn towards civil and human rights and the influence of liberal democratic ideals of meritocracy, began to have an impact. Public concern about the living conditions of Indigenous peoples in Australia, generated a new public discourse that recognised the disruptions caused by colonisation (Patterson 2017:4). The result was bipartisan agreement that the injustices enacted by the state on Australia's First Peoples justified the need for special policies to support Indigenous aspirations for self-management.

The self-determination era can be understood as commencing with the 1967 referendum on the Constitution. This removed the impediment to the Commonwealth Government making special laws with respect to Indigenous peoples, enabling the Commonwealth government to take a role in Indigenous policy and service delivery (Pratt and Bennett 2004:3). It allowed the Commonwealth to take direct intervention in Indigenous affairs at a time when the states and territories were widely perceived to have abrogated their responsibility for ensuring the well-being of Indigenous peoples (Pratt and Bennett 2004). For the first time, equality of opportunity and self-determination became core policy principles in Indigenous affairs nationally.

In response to Indigenous demands for land rights, in 1974 the Whitlam Labor government enacted legislative, and other measures, providing the foundation for Indigenous self-determination. A series of landmark land rights cases in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and New South Wales resulted in the return of significant tracts of land, including missions and reserves, to Indigenous entities under a mix of Crown, reserve leases and Indigenous community trust tenures. Three years later, the Commonwealth Development Employment Program (CDEP) substituted the mainstream unemployment program with a community-based one, enabling Indigenous people to live on community lands, in the absence of labour markets (Sanders 1993). This provided the foundation for the homelands movement with many Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people moving from country towns and remote reserves and communities, to small decentralised communities of close kin that were removed from the social problems prevalent in many larger settlements (Sanders 1993; HRSCAA 1987).

Table 1: Historical summary of remote Indigenous housing policy in Australia: 1970s–2016

Policy Period	Dominant Policy Principles	Governance and institutional arrangements
Pre 1970s	Guardianship and separation; broader policy of assimilation.	State/church administered housing on reserves/missions under guardianship legislation. Citizenship granted following 1967 referendum
1970s–2004	Self-determination, connection to country, retention of cultural integrity	Access to income support in remote locations through the Community Development Employment Program from 1977 Establishment of Indigenous Development Authority (ADA) 1980: loans and grants for Indigenous housing Dedicated housing funding for ICHOs via Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP) in 1982. Administered through ATSIC from 1990. Expansion of community controlled housing through ICHOs and Indigenous Councils/Shires Indigenous housing authorities established in four states/territories. Building Better Futures (BBF)—10-year national Indigenous housing plan—support for ICHO growth/capacity. 2000
2004–2018	Mainstreaming: Normalisation through equality and guardianship	ATSIC abolished 2004. ICHO responsibility devolved to states/territories with funding delivered through the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Northern Territory Emergency Response: 2007 National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) in 2008 that included ambitious targets aimed at 'closing the gap' in Indigenous disadvantage (COAG 2008) Strategic Housing Investment Program (NT) (SIHIP) 2008 Australian Remote Indigenous Accommodation Program replaces the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program 2008 10-year National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) introduced 2008. States and the Northern Territory take responsibility for managing remote housing. Contraction of ICHOs, especially in Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia Increasing role for state housing authorities to meet Indigenous housing need Dismantling of Indigenous governance models (NSW and Victoria the exception).

Source: Adapted from Milligan, Martin et al 2016:76; Pratt and Bennett 2004

Because housing infrastructure and services were non-existent or inadequate in most of these locations, in 1982, the Commonwealth established the Community Housing Infrastructure Program (CHIP). This provided funding to Indigenous organisations for housing, including on remote and very remote communities, resulting in the establishment of a key instrument for Indigenous choice and control over housing. Indigenous community housing organisations (ICHOs) became the main vehicle for housing delivery, with the sector growing continuously throughout the self-determination era (see Table 1). Many remote ICHOs were also community councils that acted as resource agencies providing a range of services for their communities, forming the nucleus for responses to employment, economic development, social services and community engagement (Habibis et al 2013; Milligan et al 2016:77). Residents often paid a levy for services, including power and rent, directly debited from their CDEP wages and, under the CDEP program, also sometimes worked on housing maintenance and construction.

Indigenous control over policy and funding streams was boosted in 1990, with the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) (Pratt and Bennett 2004). ATSIC comprised national and regional councils, elected by Indigenous Australians, and had policy and funding responsibility for Indigenous programs of which CHIP and CDEP were the largest. These programs provided a more integrated approach to housing, economic development and employment. The establishment of ATSIC was also accompanied by an increase in dedicated funding for CHIP, resulting in further expansion of the ICHO sector. which by 2001 stood at 616 organisations (see Table 2) (Milligan et al 2016).

Table 2: Indigenous community housing organisations by state or territory: 2001, 2006 and 2012

State or territory	All ICHOs	All ICHOs	Funded ICHOs
	2001	**2012**	
NSW and ACT	205	207	122
VIC	25	19	18
QLD	116	33	33
SA	31	34	33
WA	125	7	7
TAS	3	2	2
NT	111	28	28
Total Australia	**616**	**330**	**243**

Source: Adapted from Habibis, Phillips, et al 2014:26

Self-determination or policy neglect?

Reflecting on the self-determination era from 1967 to 1976, Barrie Dexter, who was secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs at the time, observed: 'We had high hopes in those exciting days' (cited in Patterson 2017:4).   But by the 1990s, this optimism had given way to concern that the experiment in self-determination was failing (Pratt and Bennett 2004). Census indicators showed that overall, living standards were improving, but progress was slow (Altman 2004:36), and successive reports described communities as suffering from severe crowding, inadequate service infrastructure, unsafe water supplies, inadequate sanitation and social, health and safety concerns (Pholeros et al, 2000).   Policy failings were a major contributor to this. Numerous analyses argue that policy was implemented too rapidly (Patterson 2017), and a lack of clarity over functional responsibility between different levels of government, resulted in little co-ordination between the states and the Northern Territory and ATSIC, leading to duplication, gaps and poor service oversight (Howard-Wagner 2017; Rowse 2002; Pratt and Bennett 2004). Funding arrangements also took inadequate account of the level of service need (Altman 2004, 2010; Neutze 2000; PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2007; Wensing 2016).

The intention behind the establishment of ATSIC was that, as an Indigenous governed entity, it would supplement rather than replace national and state programs, but the reality was that other state agencies withdrew from Indigenous affairs (Altman 2004; Patterson 2017).   This was particularly problematic in the field of housing, where Commonwealth funding took little account of the service delivery context, with its small rent base, costs of service delivery, high levels of wear and tear, and complex community politics (Lea and Clark 1995). Most ICHOs were small, kin-based organisations, dependent on government contracts and with limited capacity to manage the financial and practical challenges of housing delivery in remote Indigenous communities.   The survival strategies they employed included deferring maintenance and cross-subsidising housing costs from other programs such as CDEP (Eringa et al. 2008; Davidson et al 2011; Wensing 2016). Over time the already inadequate housing stock deteriorated further, tightening supply and increasing crowding (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2007).

Today many scholars argue that the rhetoric of self-determination was used by the Australian government to disengage from the difficulties of delivering services to remote Indigenous communities (Dillon and Westbury 2007; Howard-Wagner 2017; Eatock 2016).   The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) went so far as to describe self-determination as 'a cruel hoax' for Indigenous people:

They were not really being offered self-determination, just the tantalising hint of it. Instead they were being bequeathed the administrative mess which non-Indigenous people had left, and were being told to fix it up. It was their mess now (RCIADIC 1991 Vol 4: 27.6.1).

From self-determination to paternalism and guardianship

A change of government in 1996 marked the beginning of the end of self-determination on remote Indigenous communities. The new conservative Liberal National Coalition government was led by John Howard who had long been opposed to an Indigenous rights approach, and instead favoured normalisaton. Howard's approach to Indigenous affairs denied the significance of race, the impact of colonisation on current disadvantage, and the need to treat some populations differently (Howard-Wagner 2017:5-6). He observed:

> We cannot share a common destiny together as Australians if different groups in our society have different standards of conduct and different systems of accountability. (cited in Howard-Wagner:, 2017:6)

The pendulum had swung too far, and rather than special measures to address Indigenous needs, Howard argued for 'practical reconciliation' - measurable targets to improve Indigenous lives. These were framed within a top-down policy framework, framed by neo-liberal principles of removing barriers to self-responsibility and participation in the mainstream economy. This shift towards guardianship and equality of opportunity was boosted by the support of some influential Aboriginal leaders who shared the Coalition government's view that a welfare mentality – often referred to as 'sit down' money' or passive welfare – was creating debilitating dependence and dysfunction amongst Indigenous populations and that the solution was for Indigenous people to take their place in the formal economy (Langton 2007; Pearson 2000). The mainstream media was key to shaping public discourse, especially Australia's only national daily, the Murdoch-owned*, The Australian* which plays an 'outsize role in the Australian media ecology' (McCallum and Waller 2017:18) and which provided significant space for the views of the government and conservative Aboriginal leaders. The editor took the view that :

> On Indigenous issues...we have been very committed to moving away from what we feel was the commitment to progressive and unsuccessful policies in Indigenous affairs. We have worked with Indigenous leaders, in particular, Noel Pearson, to try to change the agenda and put a much greater emphasis on individual responsibility. (cited in McCallum and Waller 2017:83).

Rather than locating the difficulties on remote communities in buck passing, poor resourcing and government oversight, politics and the mainstream media, portrayed these as a failure of Indigenous self-governance, caused by problems of financial mismanagement, poor accountability and pathologies within Indigenous culture itself (Howard-Wagner 2017:13; McCallum and Waller 2017).

Throughout the first years of the 21st century, media portrayal of remote communities as universally dysfunctional intensified, and the Howard government became increasingly strident in its critique of principles of reconciliation, reparation and self-determination as a means of advancing Indigenous affairs. ATSIC was portrayed as a failed experiment that needed to end. In 2004, contrary to the government's own report recommending structural change rather than abolition (Altman 2004; Pratt and Bennett 2004:10), ATSIC was abolished, thereby ending the main vehicle for Indigenous self-government. At the time, the then Minister for Indigenous Affairs, observed:

> We believe very strongly that the experiment in separate representation, elected representation, for Indigenous people has been a failure (Vanstone, cited in Pratt and Bennett 2004:n.p.) .

The final blow to principles of self-determination was delivered with two reports published in 2007. *Living in the Sunburnt Country* was a Commonwealth funded review of CHIP which argued the program was wasting taxpayers' money because 'policy confusion, complex administration and poor outcomes and accountability of government funded housing, infrastructure and municipal services' had resulted in the failure to provide appropriate housing (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2007:16).   The review recommended CHIP be abolished, and responsibility for provision and management be transferred from ICHOs to the public housing sector. It also recommended shifting infrastructure from remote areas to more centralised locations. One year later, these recommendations became national policy.

But it was the *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle* (Little Children are Sacred) report (Wild and Anderson 2007) that had the most dramatic impact in shifting the pendulum towards principles of guardianship. The report identified high levels of sexual abuse and neglect of children in remote Indigenous communities resulting in a media driven moral panic (McCallum and Waller 2017; Proudfoot and Habibis 2008). Less than a fortnight after the report's publication, Prime Minister announced he was sending in the military to stabilise, normalise and exit' 73 Northern Territory communities (Altman and Hinkson 2007). The Northern Territory Emergency Response (usually referred to as the Intervention) comprised nine punitive and welfare measures imposed on all Indigenous residents in these communities. These included compulsory 99-year leases over Indigenous land, the imposition of government appointed business managers,

the abolition of CDEP and the introduction of compulsory income management – necessitating the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (Proudfoot and Habibis 2014). Justifying these extreme measures, Howard, stated:

> The right of an Australian to live on remote communal land and to speak an Indigenous language is no right at all if it is accompanied by grinding poverty, overcrowding, poor health, community violence and alienation from mainstream Australian society. Reconciliation has little meaning in a narrative of separateness from that society (Howard 2007: 2).

The measures also included the transfer of responsibility for the delivery of housing infrastructure and housing services from the ICHO sector to the Northern Territory housing agency.

The Intervention was greeted with outrage by many Indigenous leaders, including those directly affected by it, as well as the community sector, human rights activists and scholars (Altman and Hinkson 2007; Coyne 2007a). From their perspective, rather than genuine concern about the living conditions on remote communities, the Intervention was a cynical political move related to the impending election which polls suggested the Howard government would lose (Carpenter cited in Coyne 2007b: 10; *Koori Mail*, 2007:12). The Indigenous scholar Pat Anderson, who co-authored the *Little Children are Sacred* report, pointed out that the Intervention's policies had little to do with the report's recommendations and argued her findings were used to justify paternalistic measures, and to shift blame from the state to Indigenous people. Reflecting on the Intervention she later wrote:

> What we needed was a good kick up the bum, and then the non-Indigenous state would just have to come in and fix it all for us, as we were obviously incapable of doing so ourselves (Anderson 2011).

Mainstreaming and neo-liberalism in remote Indigenous housing: 2007 to today

The election of the Rudd Labor government in early 2008 saw many elements of the Intervention extended across all remote communities in Northern Australia. Through Australia's peak intergovernmental forum, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), Rudd established a series of whole-of-government strategies. These included the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA), which set out a commitment by the Commonwealth, states and the Northern Territory, to a National Integrated Strategy for Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage (COAG 2008). One of the building blocks for achieving improvements was 'Healthy Homes', interpreted principally to addressing the housing and related service needs of remote communities. This resulted in the

National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH), which extended nationally many of the housing measures within the NTER. This became the main policy framework for remote Indigenous housing for the next ten years, thereby delivering a substantial blow to one of the main vehicles for Indigenous self-determination in remote Indigenous communities.

The housing policies associated with Closing the Gap were directed towards reducing crowding through a program of new builds and refurbishments, and establishing robust and standardised tenancy and property management to ensure the long-term viability of housing infrastructure. These goals were located within an over-arching framework directed towards the normalisation of remote Indigenous communities along white settler lines. Principles of choice and self-determination were reduced to broad statements about the importance of consulting Indigenous people. Increasing home ownership was part of this. First introduced under the Australian Remote Indigenous Accommodation Program (ARIA) which had replaced CHIP in 2007, it was continued under NPARIH, whose goals included the resolution of land tenure on community-titled land to allow home ownership and economic development. The reconstruction of Indigenous people along white settler lines was also evident in efforts to reduce the number of small communities by encouraging population movement to larger ones. The National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery established a hub and spoke model of service delivery in which services and investment were concentrated in 26 'priority' remote communities, placing the viability of smaller, surrounding ones in doubt (DIA 2009). Other measures designed to encourage people to move from smaller communities to larger ones, included building accommodation in regional areas and linking these with training and employment programs that encouraged movement to larger population centres.

Initial efforts to reduce crowding were focused on the Northern Territory through the Strategic Housing and Infrastructure Investment Program (SIHIP), but this was extended to all jurisdictions through NPARIH. NPARIH was a 10-year A$5.5bn capital works and tenancy management strategy that aimed to bring living standards in remote Indigenous communities to the same standards as applied to comparable locations elsewhere in Australia (COAG 2008). Funding agreements required the states and the Northern Territory to ensure compliance with Residential Tenancy Acts (RTA) legislation, introduce effective repairs and maintenance regimes and apply rent payment regimes in line with those in public housing (PMC 2017:10). This focus on improving living standards was largely framed within a disciplining agenda. New homes and refurbishments were only available to communities that agreed to long-term leases to state and Territory governments on the grounds that governments needed to protect their investment (Habibis et al 2013).

The normalising agenda of NPARIH created many difficulties. The requirement for long-term leases to state and Territory governments proved a stumbling block for some communities who resisted relinguishing hard-won land rights (APONT 2015), and whose mistrust of the state often meant lengthy negotiation before they were willing to acquiesce to these. The behavioural requirements of the new tenancy agreements also proved problematic. Public housing policies on rent settings, allocations, visitors, good order, and property damage were vastly different from the regulatory regimes of ICHOs where most tenants had paid little or no rent, maintenance was minimal or non-existent, property damage was not penalised, and – since housing was usually on Indigenous land - the distinction between ownership and renting was blurred. Housing decisions, such as allocations and transfers were mostly undertaken locally, through informal consultation with family and community.

By June 2016, NPARIH's construction program resulted in an increase of 3,233 houses, and the refurbishment of 7,350 houses in 350 communities (PMC 2017). This was a considerable achievement, but political pressures resulted in many mistakes and lost opportunities. The SIHIP program in the Northern Territory had been slow to roll-out, resulting in politically damaging media coverage (Davidson et al 2011). To avoid a repetition of this, the Commonwealth applied financial pressure on the states and the Northern Territory to meet ambitious capital works targets. This included a competitive bidding process and a system of incentives involving two-year capital works programs, with penalty payments of up to 25 per cent of funds if targets were not met. While this ensured high levels of compliance by the states in meeting performance targets, it also had many detrimental effects.

The funding arrangements added onerous reporting requirements that took energy away from service delivery. The short funding cycle distorted planning processes, created obstacles to planning investment, compromised value for money and resulted in a stop/start program of housing delivery. Tight timeframes meant investments were sometimes made in communities that were quickest to agree, rather than those where the need was highest. They also compromised housing quality and appropriateness of housing, as there was insufficient time to engage with, and consult communities about housing location and design and to ensure contractors were adequately skilled and supervised for the demands of building in the Australian outback. Although Indigenous employment targets were met, the hasty nature of the roll-out of the building program meant there was little attempt to build locally sustainable employment outcomes from the investment (PMC 2017; Habibis et al 2016).

When it came to housing management, the results were similarly patchy. Although the Commonwealth was not prescriptive about how housing services under NPARIH should be delivered, the program's emphasis on normalising service delivery resulted in an assumption by almost all the states and the

Northern Territory, that service delivery should be mainstreamed. Consequently, policies developed in white, urban contexts, were introduced to communities that were radically different in terms of culture and geography. With some notable exceptions, (see Habibis 2018 for a discussion of this), housing was largely delivered directly by state housing agencies, rents were set to transition to market levels, tenancy management policies were standardised, and repairs and maintenance systems were mostly centralised.

Both our own research (Habibis et al 2016), and that conducted by the Commonwealth (PMC 2017), found that overall, NPARIH's achievements were mixed, with much remaining to be done. In all jurisdictions state housing agencies succeeded in introducing a more consistent and systematic approach to housing management than the largely crisis driven approach that previously existed. But there were also many areas that required improvement, largely because of the difficulty of applying mainstream policy settings in the vastly different context of remote Indigenous communities.   Crowding was estimated to have decreased from 52.1 per cent in 2008 to 41.3 per cent in 2014-5, with predictions of further falls to 37.4 per cent by 2018 (PMC 2017:1), but there were many areas where it remained high, especially in the Northern Territory. Repairs and maintenance were slow, inefficient and expensive.   Fair and transparent allocations proved difficult to achieve, tenant support programs were non-existent or inadequate, tenants' understanding of their rights was poor, and they were not provided with timely information about rent arrears. Most jurisdictions applied income based rent models, but these proved difficult and costly to administer. Frequent movement between houses and communities made identifying occupants and collecting rent difficult and tenants also moved frequently in and out of casual/short-term work and income support payments. There was often a shortage of local housing officers and they struggled to check who was in the house, to complete sign ups, update household and income information, review rents and ensure direct debit forms were signed and lodged. (Habibis et al 2016).   The concentration of investment in larger communities meant many small communities faced an uncertain future.

In 2016, NPARIH was replaced by the Remote Housing Strategy, but to date, the Northern Territory is the only jurisdiction to receive new funds. Rather than building on the achievements of NPARIH, it seems the Commonwealth is moving to end its role in remote Indigenous housing delivery and management on the grounds that it is a state responsibility (Dillon 2018; Habibis, Phibbs and Phillips 2018).   If this happens it will likely bring a return to policy neglect, the end of efforts to ensure uniform quality of housing across different jurisdictions and the risk of a return to crisis within the next decade.

Home ownership on Indigenous lands

Efforts to establish home ownership on remote Indigenous communities have been a part of Indigenous housing policy since the 1970s, however, in many locations, native title and other forms of communal tenure prevent the private sale of land. Despite this, successive governments have continued to regard increasing home ownership as a core remote Indigenous housing policy plank. This has involved a concern with 'regularising' land tenure arrangements to allow this. For example, in 2005, the then Liberal Coalition Prime Minister, John Howard observed:

> I believe there is a case for reviewing the whole issue of Indigenous land title, in the sense of looking more towards private recognition. I certainly believe that all Australians should be able to aspire towards owning their own home and having their own business (cited in Sanders 2008:443).

One year later the Home Ownership on Indigenous Land (HOIL) program was established. It provided residents of communities on Indigenous land with access to special subsidies not available to other borrowers, including loan co-payments of up to $25,000 over the first ten years of the loan, including a reduced interest rate and a grant to assist with meeting up-front costs. The target was 460 loans in eight communities in the first four years. Since then every policy targeted at remote Indigenous communities has included the goal of increasing home ownership. Despite this emphasis, there has been little success. A 2010 review of HOIL by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO, 2010) found that in the four years since its establishment, only 15 loans had been granted. While 49 houses had been constructed for sale under the program, only three had been sold to homeowners, with the remainder transferred to Territory Housing to be used as social housing. In some cases the costs of construction had been so great they were unaffordable even with the subsidies available under the HOIL program. This was associated with excessive administrative costs of $9.9 million, compared with the $2.7 million worth of loans awarded.

While the main focus of NPARIH was on improving social housing, it included elements of home ownership in its focus on resolving land tenure to secure home ownership opportunities. In practice, land reform was limited to cadastral surveys. The Commonwealth's own review of NPARIH concluded that home ownership 'cannot have any significant impact on reducing overcrowding and improving housing condition in the forseeable future' (PMC 2017:41).

Policy lessons from the long view

Remote Indigenous housing is a complex, wicked problem, not easily fixed. A long view of the policy history is therefore essential in order to understand what policies have been tried, and where they have - and have not - been effective. Policy development generally suffers from high levels of policy and staff churn, with a consequent loss of institutional memory. This is especially the case in Indigenous affairs where reinventing the wheel without the benefit of hindsight is one of the reasons for policy failure (Patterson 2017). Documenting the history of remote Indigenous housing over the past 50 years places knowledge on the record that should contribute to getting the policy settings right in the absence of personnel with the depth of experience necessary for success in this field.

This analysis of remote Indigenous housing policy in Australia shows that the failings of remote Indigenous housing policy stem from a combination of systemic issues and the moral and political questions arising from the governance of First Nations peoples. Systemic issues include political short-termism resulting in a lack of policy consistency and rapid policy development, as occurred both with the transfer of housing to Indigenous organisations and the removal to state housing agencies. An analysis of the last 50 years of the Commonwealth's administration of Indigenous affairs, by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet observed the extent of policy churn, with ten different organisational structures over the last 30 years. This has led to a loss of corporate memory and personnel, a focus on internal organisation rather than the target population, a loss of government capacity and a legacy of distrust within Indigenous communities. The report notes that:

> Where machinery changes introduce uncertainty, effectiveness suffers in the short term and potentially into the longer term as well (Patterson 2017:16).

Federalism has also had resulted in a lack of clarity about responsibility contributing to underfunding, buck passing and policy neglect. The difficulty of delivering housing to remote Indigenous communities scattered across harsh terrains and far from service centres is a substantial policy challenge. This has been exacerbated by policy development in Canberra (the nation's capital), by personnel geographically and culturally distant from the realities of the service delivery context (Patterson 2018). But the moral and political questions of how the state should respond to the aspirations of First Nations peoples to remain on their ancestral lands and maintain their distinctive culture, is key to the explanation of policy failure. The long view reveals the extent to which remote Indigenous housing policy has been politicised and the lost opportunities and problematic policies that result from this.

While recognition of Indigenous concern with substandard living conditions in remote communities has played a part in policy responses, and there have been moments and places where respect for Indigenous culture and a concern with human rights have been a motivating force, the overwhelming tendency has been towards politically driven assimilationist policies that have had little to do with evidence that policies work best when they are delivered in a culturally adaptive way. Housing policies in the self-determination era supported Indigenous aspirations to manage their own affairs according to Indigenous cultural values and lifeworlds, but efforts to empower Aboriginal peoples were fatally compromised by the absence of ingredients essential for successful policy, including adequate funding and proper understanding and regulation of the services on the ground. When this resulted in deteriorated housing that contributed to problems on communities (Wild and Anderson 2007) media-driven public discourses of Indigenous dysfunction facilitated a political response that constructed Indigenous people as in need of paternalistic policy intervention, rather than addressing the limitations of policy. In these circumstances and conditions, the experiment in self-determination had little chance of success.

Current approaches of guardianship and equality have proved equally problematic. The Commonwealth's requirement that state and territory housing agencies take over management of housing services to remote Indigenous communities was a top-down, rapid policy development, driven partly by a concern to bring Indigenous housing responsibility in line with mainstream housing where it is a responsibility of the states. It occurred with minimal consultation, either with Indigenous people, or with the states and the Northern Territory, and was challenging for both groups. In the Northern Territory, property numbers doubled from 5000 to 10,000, with many properties in a deteriorated condition (Habibis et al 2016). The policies were poorly aligned with on-the-ground realities of geography and culture with many proving challenging to implement, especially rent models, repairs and maintenance and allocations.

The loss of funding from the ICHO sector directly affected the viability of many organisations and contributed to the sector's contraction in all jurisdictions except NSW (the ICHO sector in South Australia and Victoria was always small) (see Table 2). Nationally, the number of organisations fell from 496 in 2006 to 330 in 2012 (Habibis et al 2016:20) weakening one of the main structures for Indigenous choice and self-determination. While the ICHO sector has potential to be a major resource, policy disruption, government failure and lack of capacity-building has left the sector diminished and vulnerable (PMC 2017).

NPARIH is now in its final years and in most jurisdictions has been replaced by the Remote Housing Strategy. This, and other measures continue the push for the incorporation of Indigenous people into market society through the

defunding of smaller communities, the concentration of funding in regional communities, and provisions to encourage greater mobility of remote residents to better labour markets, increased requirements to enforce mainstream tenancy obligations and an emphasis on the reform of land tenure to allow commercial investment and home ownership (PMC 2015). There is little evidence of changes to the application of mainstream rent settings, or towards local management and delivery of repairs and maintenance.

Pressure to establish home ownership continues despite the problems of HOIL and other home ownership attempts being well documented in the literature (Sanders, 2008; Crabtree, 2014). While home ownership may be an important goal in urban and regional settings where there are opportunities for generating income that would sustain a mortgage and the cultural capital to manage the demands of repairs and maintenance, unless the goal is for the state to divest itself of responsibility for remote Indigenous housing regardless of the long-term consequences, it is hard to see how remote Indigenous home ownership makes sense given levels of poverty and the significance of land rights for Indigenous people. For Indigenous people living on remote communities the goals are not wealth creation but stability, inheritability and autonomy and they are also reluctant to open their market to non-community members (Crabtree 2014:744).

How does this compare with what the long view suggests remote Indigenous housing policy should look like? The rapid policy u-turns that characterise the history of remote Indigenous housing have often been driven by moral panics and political opportunism in which the evidence serves principally as a handmaiden for political ends. Mainstream media have played a critical role in this with discourses of policy failure driving political agendas with no systematic approach to ensuring an evidential foundation for the revised policy direction.

Although there is a need for further research on what housing arrangements are likely to be most successful, there are consistent messages on what works best. Research on home ownership suggests current efforts to establish market based models have little chance of success and new models are needed that meet community residents aspirations for financial independence from the state but which provide some acknowledgement of collective forms of land tenure. But at the present time, home ownership of any kind is unrealistic in most locations, with housing needs best met through a partnership between government agencies and local services. The evidence suggests that services work best when they are adapted to the geographical and cultural context and maximize opportunities for local partnerships and employment of Indigenous people. Our research found a strong preference for Indigenous management with satisfaction highest when Indigenous people were involved in service delivery (Habibis et al 2016). This result is consistent with almost all the research on key

ingredients of successful Indigenous programs (Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, 2013; Minnery, Manicaros and Lindfield 2000; Moran et al 2016).

A critical issue that is repeatedly ignored is ensuring services are adapted to the realities of the remote environment. Viewed from a distance, the idea that housing services to remote Indigenous communities should be provided by mainstream services is incomprehensible. Distance, population mobility, kin-based communities bound by an ethic of mutual obligation and high levels of poverty mean mainstreamed service delivery models make little sense. All the evidence points to the embedded nature of values such as mutual reciprocity in which cultural obligations require family members to look after one another (Birdsall-Jones and Shaw 2008; Habibis et al 2011; Moran et al 2016). This make it difficult to comply with public housing occupancy requirements and makes sanctions such as threats of eviction or financial penalties less effective. For tenancies to be sustained, policies need to be culturally appropriate. Adaptive rent models are also needed. Market-based rent models take no account of the high living costs in remote communities or the high needs and disadvantage of the population. In his analysis of Indigenous housing during the self-determination era, one of Australia's most influential urban researchers, Max Neutze observed:

> Policies that begin by trying to improve their housing conditions, while a legitimate response to poor living conditions, treat a symptom rather than the underlying problem of poverty (2000:489).

Rather than centralized repairs and maintenance, efforts need to be made to build local capacity and establish local partnerships, so that jobs can be locally scoped, and wherever possible, work is undertaken by local Indigenous people, thereby contributing to the local economy.

Our own research suggests the most successful arrangement in many locations is likely to be a hybrid housing model – one that combines the cultural understanding of an Indigenous housing organization with the resources and capacity of a public housing agency. The closest analogy in Australia might be the NSW Aboriginal Housing Office which is an independent entity with its own Act but partners with the mainstream public housing agency in the same state (Milligan et al, 2011). The discussion of the increasing hybrid nature of Australian housing organization has been receiving increasing attention in recent years (Gilmour and Milligan 2012; Nethercote 2014). To help evolve appropriate models like this, policy makers, researchers and Indigenous people need to engage in negotiations at local and national levels, to establish some agreement about how the goals of both Indigenous people and governments can be met (Bailey and Hunt 2012; Moran et al 2016).

Any approach needs to acknowledge that remote housing provision will always be costly but that without housing subsidies, the advances that have resulted from current investments will prove short-lived. Supporting the ICHO sector to become a player in the delivery of Indigenous housing also makes sense, along with the same regulatory standards and oversight that applies in the mainstream community housing sector.

Throughout the policy churn of the last 50 years one constant is Indigenous resolution to maintain their connection to their homelands. Given this consistency, it is hard to see how policies that fail to recognise this can be successful. Applying the lessons of the long view to remote Indigenous housing in Australia can be located within a reconciliation agenda that seeks to address past wrongs by acknowledging, and being respectful of, the deeply felt and enduring aspiration of Indigenous people to remain on country. We leave the last words to Pat Anderson whose analysis of the Intervention reflects many of the lessons from this paper:

> *Whatever the real motivations behind the intervention, one thing I know for sure: it was not concern for the welfare of Indigenous children and communities that drove it. And it was not undertaken with a knowledge and respect for the evidence.*

> *And this seems to me to be a continuing theme in the history of the relationship between black and white in Australia: that action on Indigenous disadvantage gets continually caught up in other, contradictory agendas.*

> *This perhaps has been the biggest barrier to genuine progress. Because, you would think that if government was really serious about addressing the disadvantage so many Indigenous communities suffer, there would been a rational process.*

> *They'd sit down and look at what the problems were, look at what has already been tried and what we know works, look at the kind of principles that we know should underpin action — and then, a make a commitment to action and of resources* (Anderson 2011).

(8065 words)

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