

HOMELANDS EXTRA: READ ALL ABOUT IT!

On 21 February 2013 the Hon. Alison Anderson, Minister for Indigenous Advancement delivered a ministerial statement *Homelands and Outstations—A Shared Responsibility* to launch her new policy *Homelands Extra*.

Like the two-humped Bactrian camel this is an unusual form of two-humped beast. It deserves scrutiny in an arena where policy makers have struggled for the last forty years to address the question: What should the state do in terms of service delivery, housing and development support for Indigenous homeland communities, especially in very remote locations?

Homelands and outstations, different regions use the terms interchangeably—for Aboriginal people they are important place names—are localities where some Aboriginal people prefer to live. In the early 1970s a combination of self-determination and land rights in the NT, combined with the failure of larger colonial places to deliver either productive engagement or social harmony saw the emergence of the homelands or decentralisation movement.

Since then the number of homelands has proliferated, now there are about 560 with a population of maybe 10,000, it is difficult to give precise figures as official statistics on homelands are poor and populations fluctuate.

From the early 1970s to 2007 homelands were supported from Canberra. In 2007 with the NT Intervention responsibility for homelands was dramatically and paradoxically handed over to the NT: dramatically because the hand-over was made a blackmail condition of a \$700 million housing package for larger places; paradoxically because the Commonwealth was intervening because of the purported failures of the NT Government.

From 2007 to 2012 the Henderson Labor Government struggled to develop a cogent policy to accommodate this new responsibility. In May 2009 there was the debacle of *The Working Futures* framework that focused attention on 20 Territory Growth Towns and said little about the homelands in their hinterlands.

In August 2012, just before electoral defeat the Henderson Government released a comprehensive and revised homelands policy at Gan Gan homeland in Arnhem Land. It was warmly welcomed but was too late.

This policy had been preceded by the Federal Government's commitment of \$200 million over 10 years for municipal and essential services dangled as an unlegislated sweetener alongside the *Stronger Futures* in the NT laws; and a skeleton policy proposal launched by then Shadow Minister for Indigenous

Affairs Adam Giles in May 2012 in Maningrida (see ‘Another decade for homelands policy debacle’ earlier).

The best thing about the Henderson/McCarthy package was a commitment of an unprecedented ‘extra’ \$100 million over 10 years (to \$300 million) to homelands to provide some future funding certainty.

Minister Anderson’s recent ministerial statement is the fleshing out of Country Liberal Party’s (CLP’s) new policy six months after election of the Mills Government. There are two extraordinary elements to this statement that stand out like humps.

Hump 1, is its high dependence on the ALP’s Working Future Homelands Policy. That policy consisted of a media release, a statement of funding commitment, and six fact sheets, all of which have disappeared from the NT Government website.

This dependence extends to some identical wording of very supportive principles. As an example, Working Future states:

The policy aims to:

1. Recognise Aboriginal people’s relationship to country and promote cultural connections and maintenance through homelands and outstations.
2. Support the right and authority of Aboriginal people to own, live on and develop their land.

Minister Anderson’s policy will:

1. Recognise Aboriginal people’s relationship to country and promote cultural connections and maintenance through homelands and outstations.
2. Support the right and authority of Aboriginal people to own, live on and develop their land (p. 14).

These common principles indicating a high degree of consensus between the ALP and CLP on homelands and a shared view on the exceptional policy approach that homelands require.

The consensus is also driven by a shared aspiration by all NT politicians to see lock-in of the Gillard Government’s promise of \$200 million seamlessly committed to the new conservative Mills Government.

Minister Anderson taking an Indigenous subject position, notes in her statement:

But of course there are some areas where Indigenous people are different to other Australians, rightly and proudly (her emphasis). Our spiritual connection to land is unique, and today I seek to explain that and to celebrate it, and describe what this

government proposes to do to maintain it through the homelands (p. 1).

What the Mills Government proposes is Hump 2. Here Minister Anderson's demonstrates an unusual dependence on the work of two researchers named Helen and Mark Hughes who, we are informed, have a long-running interest in Banyala, a homeland in East Arnhem Land.

The main work that Minister Anderson relies on is a submission to the Commonwealth's 'Indigenous Home Ownership Issues Paper' of December 2010 prepared by Helen and Mark Hughes and Sara Hudson of the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), a neoconservative think tank in Sydney.

The thrust of the CIS paper is that Aboriginal land that is currently held under the inalienable common property land rights regime should be individualised and privatised with 99-year leases.

This is relatively uncontentious and can already be legally done under s19 of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act*, although whether hyper-long 99 year leases are needed is highly questionable.

But what is contentious is Minister Anderson's view that such land titling will provide the elixir to address the problem of housing shortage and much more at homelands. The mechanism to do so is mortgaging. Minister Anderson proposes a mortgage-led development strategy for homelands.

It goes like this:

Private ownership of housing is good because it encourages people to take out mortgages. Warren Mundine has spoken of this, of the great benefits of a mortgage once you start to think about it. Having a mortgage means you can build a better house for yourself and your children. It means you get up in the morning and have a shower and go to work, to earn the money to pay the mortgage. That means you set a good example for your children, who get up to go to school.

And later:

I want that to be the reality for Indigenous people in the Territory, in the homelands as much as anywhere. To achieve it all that is needed is for the Land Councils to give private leases to individuals. I mean 99-year leases of the sort you can get in Canberra. If it works in Canberra, it will work here (pp. 6–7).

This is Anderson's vision, 'A Shared Responsibility', the requirement for joint efforts by governments, landholders and residents.

Where the ALP's Stronger Futures Homelands Policy offered certainty, the CLP is offering strict conditionality.

And so, for example, Homelands Extra will provide a payment of \$5200 per

eligible dwelling for repair and maintenance work if adult homeland residents demonstrate active economic participation, pay a residential service fee in full, and ensure that resident children regularly attend school. It is unclear who will do the monitoring. And what if jobs and schools are not available?

The lynchpin and sensitive issue that Anderson is seeking to address is new housing at homelands. In September 2007 the Howard Government and a reluctant NT Government (of which Anderson was a member) agreed to preclude homeland residents from gaining access to any Commonwealth funding for homelands housing.

Her new proposal, inspired by the CIS paper, is to use the Aboriginals Benefit Account (ABA) that receives the equivalents of royalties raised from mining on Aboriginal land as a bank.

In her statement Minister Anderson quotes Helen Hughes that the ABA receives \$220 million a year, but in fact the ABA has only received such an amount once in 2008/09. Its annual income over the past 10 years has averaged just over \$100 million, with most pre-committed by law.

While the ABA held equity of \$432 million at 30 June 2012 that could be granted or loaned for housing, these millions are controlled by the Commonwealth Minister for Indigenous Affairs in Canberra (advised by a Territory-based committee) not from Darwin or by the NT Government.

Importantly, homelands are not Canberra, there is no real estate market at homelands so it is difficult to see what will securitise mortgages; and Canberrans earn a great deal more than homeland residents and so have a far greater capacity to service a loan.

Recent evidence on housing is overlooked. For a start there is the expensive disaster of the discontinued Home Ownership on Indigenous Land Program reported on by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) in December 2010 that has documented the reluctance of Indigenous people to seek private home ownership in the NT.

And then there is Anderson's evidence that there are 2400 dwellings at homelands with a total population of 10,000. This is an occupancy rate of 4.2 per house which is far better than the aspirational 9.3 persons per dwellings of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing at larger priority communities in the NT.

The 'new' policy approach that has many positives is complex and cannot be reviewed in its entirety here. But what it embodies, and why the metaphor of the two-humped camel is apposite, is a dual approach—a view that

individualism, the free market and other neoliberal ideas can sit comfortably alongside Aboriginal emphases on kinship, reciprocity and rights.

Homelands Extra is heavily imbued with Anderson's personality and life history: her charismatic bicultural success cannot be questioned. Indeed she is one of few Australian politician who has held ministerial responsibility in two successive governments of different political persuasion (others include Prime Ministers Billy Hughes and Joseph Lyons).

Clearly Anderson has the capacity to straddle a progressive rights-based approach, in ALP manifestation, and an approach based on individual responsibility, in CLP manifestation.

The challenge for her Homelands Extra will be to convince the homelands constituency to embrace its contradictory key elements: a right to live on ancestral land, but accepting that support will be conditional on governmental scrutiny and that new housing will depend on property privatisation.

Another challenge will be to ensure that the Commonwealth delivers its promised \$200 million for essential services during the long election campaign of 2013 with no signed agreement yet in place.

To return to the camel metaphor Homelands Extra will require homeland residents to live with a policy that dissolves the two-humps of the Bactrian camel into the one-hump of the Dromedary camel so commonly found in central Australia.

The new policy is very risky and the enigmatic Anderson will be under pressure to deliver. The election of August 2012 demonstrated the emerging highly pragmatic approach of the rural Indigenous electorate.

With a number of CLP seats held with tiny margins of less than several hundred, it is not the rural Aboriginal vote but the homelands vote that could determine electoral prospects at the next election due in 2016.

Evidently Homelands Extra is the best policy framework that the Mills Government and its Minister for Indigenous Advancement has been able to conjure up; time will tell if it is good enough to deliver new houses, essential services, and the votes, of course, of the homelands constituency.

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