The Remote Community Closure Debate: an Analysis of the ‘Value’ of Remote Indigeneity in Australia

Jasmin Lauren-Rose Korte BA (Hons) Anthropology and Sociology

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The University of Western Australia
School of Social Sciences
Discipline of Anthropology and Sociology
December 2019
Thesis Declaration

I, Jasmin Lauren-Rose Korte, certify that:

This thesis has been substantially accomplished during enrolment in the degree.

This thesis does not contain material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution.

No part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of The University of Western Australia and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

This thesis does not contain any material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

This thesis does not in any way violate or infringe any copyright, trademark, patent, or other rights whatsoever of any person.

The research involving human data reported in this thesis was assessed and approved by The University of Western Australia Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval number: RA/4/1/8046.

This thesis does not include published work or work currently being prepared for future publication.

Signature: [Redacted]

Date: 16/12/2019
Abstract

In November 2014 the Western Australian Premier, Colin Barnett, announced that up to 150 of the State’s 274 remote Aboriginal communities might be closed. The announcement gained both national and international attention. The period that followed was characterised by a polarising public and political debate mirroring other debates now seemingly ubiquitous in the Australian polity, revealing fundamental tensions in the Australian nation state’s attempts to govern its Indigenous minority. The rising global influence of neoliberalism has led to an increasingly hegemonic view of ‘value’ as denoting solely the economic or financial enumeration of a thing. As such, state rationality regarding policy decisions is largely articulated in this way. Using data primarily gathered from those that administer and deliver Indigenous affairs policy, this thesis focuses on the remote community closure debate to analyse the undulating trajectory of Indigenous affairs policy in Australia. The various perspectives taken on the potential closure of remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia reveal vastly contrasting perspectives with regards to the viability, sustainability and ‘value’ of remote Indigenous lifestyles. The manner in which Australians conceptualise equality and their relationship with the state are largely influenced by the nation’s liberalist underpinnings, and bring into contrast the differing systems of value through which Australia’s Indigenous peoples are approached in policy terms. In this thesis, I argue that these contrasting values reflect ongoing tensions in the largely liberalist state’s attempts to negotiate a cohesive coexistence with Australia’s Indigenous minority, in a context where ‘value’ primarily holds legitimacy if expressed in monetary terms.
For Caleb and Raamah.
## Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** ................................................................. i
**List of Acronyms** ........................................................................ iv
**List of Tables and Figures** ........................................................... vi

**Figure One: Remote Indigenous Communities in Western Australia** vii
**Figure Two: Remote Indigenous Communities in the Kimberley Region** viii
**Figure Three: Australian Bureau of Statistics Remoteness Area Boundaries** ix

**Chapter One,** The Remote Community Closure Debate ...................................................... 1
  Methodological Positioning and Self-Reflexivity ................................................. 9
  Participant Breakdown ....................................................................... 15
  Clarification of Terms ....................................................................... 21

**Chapter Two,** From Protectionism, to Assimilation, to Self-Determination and Back Again (Everything is Changing, while Nothing has Changed at All) 30
  The Protectionist Era in Western Australia, 1829 - 1930s ........................................ 34
  The Inevitable Extinction of the ‘Full-blood’, and ‘Half-castes’ as ‘Outcasts’ ........ 36
  Indigenous Resistance and the March towards Equality .................................... 41
  The Assimilation Era in Western Australia, 1930s - 1960s .................................... 44
  The Collision of Three Movements: Equal Wages, Citizenship and Welfare .......... 49
  The Self-Determination Era in Western Australia, 1970s - 2000s ......................... 53
  Indigenous Affairs Policy in a New Era ........................................................ 60
  Indigenous Rights in a Contemporary Context ................................................ 62

**Chapter Three,** Contrasting Values and How the News Media can Influence Them 65
  Indigenous Use of Social Media in the Remote Community Closure Debate ........ 72
  A News Frame Analysis of the Remote Community Closure Debate .................. 81
  Participant Data and the Media ................................................................ 88

**Chapter Four,** Government Rationality and Funding Uncertainty: The First of Two Narratives 98
  The Regional Services Reform Unit .............................................................. 103
  Funding Instability and Haphazard Policy ...................................................... 105
  Value and Equality in Western Societies ....................................................... 114
  The Economics of Service Delivery .............................................................. 124
  Perspectives on the Sustainability of Remote Communities in Western Australia 129
Chapter Five, Government Rationality and Social Dysfunction: The Second of Two Narratives

- The Culture Wars
- Selected Features of the Debate
- Differing Viewpoints in the Post Self-Determination Era
- The Intervention (INTER) and the Remote Community Closure Debate
- ‘Little boys and little girls have a right to be safe...we will not abandon those children’
- Perspectives on Social Dysfunction
- Addressing Social Dysfunction

Chapter Six, A Negotiated Coexistence: The Emerging Third Narrative

- The First Aboriginal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs
- A Survey of Recent Government Documents
- The Single Noongar Claim and its Negotiated Settlement
- Place-based Design of Service Delivery
- A Reform Agenda
- A Negotiated Coexistence

Chapter Seven, A Conclusion

Appendix One: Timeline of Events

Appendix Two: List of Participants

Appendix Three: Outcome of the 2019 Federal Election

List of References
Acknowledgements

I once read somewhere that the lifestyle of an academic involved being loved by no one, drinking a bottle of wine each night and having three cats. Now, I am confident that I am loved by at least a few people and I’d prefer not to comment on my alcohol intake, but I will acknowledge that I have a number of cats in my life who have assisted me greatly throughout this journey. So thank you to Barry, Elaine, Herbert and Frank.

I’d like to thank my participants. Many took a great deal of care in emphasising why the fate of the State’s remote Aboriginal communities was important to them (despite the often routine and bureaucratic setting in which we met). Each of them were generous with their time and enthusiasm, and some were especially open in sharing their personal experiences with me. I thank those participants in particular. I met with some on a number of occasions, and thank those that were willing to follow our interviews with on-going communication, especially Fred Chaney, Terry Redman, Kado Muir, Ben Wyatt and Howard Pedersen. I am also in debt to the several individuals who declined to formally participate for a variety of reasons, but nevertheless provided me with some very valuable information.

Scheduling interviews with politicians, given their invariably busy schedules, is not an easy task. I thank all of the administrative staff in the electoral offices of the politicians I interviewed for their persistence. In particular, thank you to Alison from Ben Wyatt’s office, Jo from Senator Patrick Dodson’s office, and Michael from the Cottesloe electorate office. I really do insist that I owe you a drink someday.

Thank you to everyone within the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Western Australia, especially those of you that have frequently been there to lend an ear since I began my studies in 2009. Thanks to Greg Acciaioli and Loretta Baldassar for acting as mentors at various times throughout my academic career. Thanks also to Catriona Stevens, Charmaine Lim, Akram Azimi, and others that I worked with in the role of postgraduate representative. Thanks, too, to Alka Sabharwal, Marnie Tonkin and Glenn Savage for your interest in my research and enduring acquiescence to discuss it with me.
To my wonderful parade of supervisors: to Nicholas Harney, for his initial input...thank you for your kindness, your readiness to discuss politics, and for imparting some relevant personal advice; to Debra McDougall, for providing me with a valuable perspective and a great deal of constructive criticism (especially considering your brief involvement in my research); to David Trigger for your poignant feedback and your willingness to take on my project at such a late stage; and finally and most admiringly to Katie Glaskin, for the support you’ve offered me from the very beginning. I hope you know how dearly I hold the fact that you’ve been my constant all these years, Katie.

This research was supported by a Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship, and I therefore thank the Australian Government for its contribution.

To several others worthy of note (in no particular order):

I am in debt to the various friends and acquaintances that have encouraged me since I began my PhD. The importance of hearing someone say something like ‘what you’re doing is important’ cannot be understated given the inexorable self-doubt that comes with the territory of undertaking an endeavour such as this.

I’d also like to thank all those that I’ve fundamentally disagreed with over the years, particularly that former acquaintance of mine who, with a level of irony that I’m not sure they fully grasped, likened Aboriginal people to cane toads. Those sorts of difficult conversations present learning experiences which shouldn’t be discounted.

I’d like to thank Cecile Lucas for her help with the translation of a relevant French article.

Thank you to the several friends and family members that generously agreed to review chapter drafts at their various stages of completion, your input has been greatly appreciated.

Thank you to Tony Bourdain for his serendipitous appearance on my television screen when I was working on my chapter titles, clarifying the title for Chapter Two. Thanks also for the many lessons in how to delicately-phrase insults, and for whetting my appetite when I hadn’t eaten nearly enough. I hope you’ve finally found peace.
I’d like to thank all of the teachers who have taught me along the way, from my primary to tertiary education. I’ve never seen myself as a skilled educator, and I have much admiration for your craft.

Most importantly, I acknowledge my family. Thank you for putting up with me, my preoccupation with my research, my ever-present desire to discuss niche areas of Indigenous affairs policy, and for more than just that: Michele, Ralph, Kenneth, Jemma, Simone, Tenille, Lucia, Maya, Bailey, Jasha, Remmy, the majority of the population of Loxton, South Australia, and everyone else.

To those friends that have played one or more important roles at various times: Mei-ly & Adam; Luke; Libby; Brendan & Beth, for your always sage advice; Melissa & Karl; and many others; and, more importantly now than ever, Nicola...you’re irreplaceable. Thank you also to Morgan for being there to listen, especially when you didn’t have to anymore.

And finally, to Daniele: just for being you. You’ve taught me far more than you know.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHAA</td>
<td>Australian Heritage Action Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALT</td>
<td>Aboriginal Lands Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APA</td>
<td>Aborigines Progressive Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATSIC</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAEPR</td>
<td>Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDC</td>
<td>Cashless Debit Card (also called the ‘cashless welfare card’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDEP</td>
<td>Community Development Employment Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDP</td>
<td>Community Development Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHIP</td>
<td>Community Housing and Infrastructure Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTH</td>
<td>Commonwealth of Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAA</td>
<td>Department of Aboriginal Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FASD</td>
<td>Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMA</td>
<td>Housing Management Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILUA</td>
<td>Indigenous Land Use Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPP</td>
<td>Indigenous Procurement Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KLC</td>
<td>Kimberley Land Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNTT</td>
<td>National Native Title Tribunal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPA</td>
<td>National Partnership Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPM</td>
<td>New Public Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTA</td>
<td>Native Title Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTER</td>
<td>Northern Territory Emergency Response ('the Intervention')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Queensland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSRU</td>
<td>Regional Services Reform Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>South Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBS</td>
<td>Special Broadcasting Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STDs</td>
<td>Sexually-transmitted Diseases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWALSC</td>
<td>South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS</td>
<td>Tasmania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YMAC</td>
<td>Yamatji Bana Baaba Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Tables, Figures and Photographs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure/Photograph</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure One</td>
<td>Remote Aboriginal Communities in Western Australia</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure Two</td>
<td>Remote Aboriginal Communities in the Kimberley Region</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure Three</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics Remoteness Area Boundaries</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure Four</td>
<td>Indigenous Identification by Remoteness Area in Western Australia</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure Four</td>
<td>News Media Collected throughout the Remote Community Closure Debate</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure Five</td>
<td>News Media Used in News Frame Analysis</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photograph One</td>
<td>Discarded, Burnt and Bent Basics Card, Broome 2016</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Remote Aboriginal Communities in Western Australia (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2016).
Figure 2: Remote Aboriginal Communities in the Kimberley Region (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2016).
Figure 3: ABS Remoteness Area Boundaries (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016).
Chapter One
The Remote Community Closure Debate

The discord within the debate surrounding the potential closure of Western Australia’s remote Aboriginal communities was evident in the first thing that former Premier Colin Barnett said to me.

‘So…are you going to write a safe thesis? Or are you going to write a real thesis?’

It was a warm Tuesday morning in April 2017, when, off the back of a catastrophic election defeat, the former Premier had unexpectedly agreed to meet with me to discuss the sustainability of the State’s remote Aboriginal communities. I had approached his office earlier in the course of my research, and had been told that the issue fell under the portfolio of the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs alone (and I would therefore receive no further comment). Additional attempts to make contact had failed. Adding to my surprise at his sudden acquiescence to meet was the fact that in the three weeks following the election defeat, he had kept quite a low profile: giving very few interviews on a narrow range of topics. Why, then, was he interested in speaking to me? Perhaps sounding surer of myself than I felt, I responded that I supposed that would depend on what one considered to be real.

The term ‘remote Indigenous community’ is an umbrella term used to denote a number of different types of Aboriginal communities that exist in remote regions of Australia. Other terms commonly used to describe such communities are ‘outstations’, ‘homelands’, ‘townships’ and ‘towncamps.’ The meaning of each term is contextual and they are not uniformly or consistently applied. For example, an outstation might attract a definition such as a ‘small, decentralised and relatively permanent community of kin established by Aboriginal people on land that has social, cultural or economic significance’ (Blanchard, cited in Peterson & Myers 2016: 2). When discussed throughout this thesis, however, ‘remote Indigenous community’ refers to one of the roughly 274 communities identified by the Western Australian government: some of which are occupied only seasonally by less than ten people; others of which are large, permanent, remote centres with populations over 500.
Some communities are dependent on multiple streams of government funding; others do not receive any government funding at all.\(^1\) Of the 2.5 million residents of Western Australia, about 95,000 are Indigenous. Of these 95,000 people, roughly 15,000 (or 15%) live in remote Aboriginal communities. That equates to about half a percent of the total population of Western Australia.

In September 2014 then Prime Minister of Australia, Tony Abbott, announced that Federal funding for essential and municipal services to many remote Indigenous communities would soon cease. This represented a departure from the decades-old agreement that had seen these services provided by the Federal Government. A new, ‘historic’ agreement had been reached with a number of States, including Western Australia, in which the Western Australian Government had accepted a $90 million dollar deal to fund essential and municipal service delivery to the State’s remote communities until June 2016 (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014). After such time, future funding responsibilities would become the State’s alone. In early November 2014, Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett stood before a large gathering of child protection workers at an official function. The comments he made that day related to what many considered to be unacceptably high rates of Indigenous youth suicide in remote Western Australia, following the release of startling figures in an article published in *The Weekend Australian* (Burrell & Robinson 2014). Linking this issue with the broader challenges facing the State’s remote Aboriginal communities, including the difficulties inherent in ensuring quality service provision to such remote locations and the perceived widespread abuse and neglect of children, Barnett asserted that some remote communities would need to be closed (Kohlbacher 2014; Helen Morton, pers.comm., November 2016).

In State Parliament the following week, Barnett faced questioning about the extent of the proposed community closures. In a statement made as Premier (as opposed to a reflection of an official Liberal party policy platform), he flagged the potential closure of up to 150 of the State’s 274 remote Aboriginal communities (Colin Barnett, pers.comm., April 2017). After describing how the Federal Government had walked away from its funding responsibilities, Barnett said:

\(^1\) Roughly 110 remote communities fit into this category (see Regional Services Reform Unit 2017a: 14).
It is a problem that I do not want and the government does not want, but it is a reality. There are something like 274 Aboriginal communities in Western Australia - I think 150 or so of those are in the Kimberley itself - and they are not viable. They are not viable and they are not sustainable (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8126).

Many within the Western Australian community took this statement, and other statements made by Barnett, at face value: assuming the Premier intended to forcibly close such communities and relocate their residents (as had occurred in the case of the closure of Oombulgurri three years earlier). Community members including Aboriginal organisations, the State and Federal Labor oppositions, a range of activist groups, some anthropologists (and the broader academic community), along with the United Nations, condemned this announcement for the potential human rights violations it represented (Kimberley Land Council 2015). The possibility of remote community closures was reported to be a cause of significant anxiety for remote community residents in the State and around the country (Alex Knight, pers.comm., May 2016; ‘Heather’, pers.comm., August 2016; Jayne Weepers, pers.comm., February 2017; among others). The closure of remote communities would, of course, have had a significant impact on the lives of the affected remote community residents, and would likely also have impacted the populations of larger regional and remote communities. There was little elaboration by anyone within the Government with regards to which communities would be considered for closure, or what metric would inform such a decision.

In response to the initial outcry, Barnett again fronted Parliament the following week. At this time, he asserted that ‘the State Government will not be closing communities as such. The issue is: for which communities will we be able to continue to provide essential services? It will not restrict people going back to lands - it will not’ (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8554). Far from being reassured by these statements, many contended that withdrawing the provision of essential services was still tantamount to closure. The perception that the State Government sought to reduce the number of remote Aboriginal

---

2 Formerly the Forrest River Mission, Oombulgurri was a community in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. It was closed in 2011 following a coronial inquest that highlighted serious incidents of sexual and physical abuse of children.
communities proved persistent, and the following months saw protests and organised campaigns in opposition.

Over time it became apparent that the large-scale closure of remote communities in Western Australia would not occur, at least not under the Barnett-led Government that had proposed to do so. By May 2015 use of the term ‘community closure’ by Government representatives had long since ceased, with the Government instead emphasising that they intended to ‘review’ and ‘reform’ the way in which essential, municipal and other services were provided to remote Aboriginal communities across the State. They introduced a reform agenda titled the Regional Services Reform, actioned by the Regional Services Reform Unit, which continues to the present. Funding for such services has remained the responsibility of the State Government. Since this time, the Commonwealth Government has subsequently withdrawn funding for another area of remote service provision: housing.

While the scale of the proposed community closures made this particular policy event unique, public debates regarding the merit of policy decisions affecting remote Indigenous affairs were not without precedent. In fact, a number of such debates have played out in the public sphere over the past few decades. Despite the introduction of various land rights and native title regimes in the past five decades; despite the greater number and visibility of Indigenous individuals in Australian public life; despite the recognition of Indigenous art on the world stage; and despite a sustained public discourse regarding reconciliation and the recognition of Indigenous rights, socio-economic disadvantage for the Australian Indigenous population remains entrenched (see Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019). There is no overarching national consensus regarding the way in which these outcomes should be improved. The central motivation for this course of research, then, was to better understand the underlying values beneath these oscillating debates and the complex anatomy of such ‘intractable policy disputes’ (see Schön & Rein 1994, among others) at a distinctive time in Western Australian history.

In this thesis, I analyse the recent processes involved in the administration of Indigenous affairs policy in Australia. I examine what the differing perspectives on the proposal to close

---

3 Noting, of course, that debates have occurred within Indigenous affairs since there was a federated nation to provide such a platform: and before it, within the separately-governed colonies across Australia.
up to 150 remote communities reveal about the values underpinning government policies towards remote-dwelling Indigenous Australians. The manner in which Australians conceptualise equality and their relationship with the state are largely influenced by the nation’s liberalist underpinnings, and bring into contrast the differing systems of value with which Australia’s Indigenous population is approached in policy terms. I address these differing systems of value, arguing that there is a tension regarding whether or not Indigenous people have a ‘right’ to live in remote locations, and whose ‘responsibility’ it is to facilitate this.

Australian ‘Indigenous’ and ‘White’ (that is, non-Indigenous) collectivities are interdependent social worlds, only making sense in relation to each other (Merlan 1998; 2006; Hinkson & Smith 2005: 157; Kowal 2015a: 31). While Indigenous socialities continue to attract anthropological attention, there are far fewer comprehensive accounts which focus on the other side of the intercultural field (for example, though, see Lea 2008; Kowal 2015a). My research is not a study of ‘whiteness’, but it is largely a study of the perspectives of those who interact with and/or administer Indigenous affairs policy. The vast majority of the individuals who work in this field are non-Indigenous. In a sense, then, this thesis is less about remote Aboriginal people than it is about the institutions within the Australian settler state which seek to govern and interact with them.

The era of self-determination (broadly understood as the 1970s - early 2000s) coincided, or was perhaps constitutive of, an era of recognition of Indigenous rights to land in Australia. This recognition challenged long-standing assumptions of Indigenous encapsulations within the Australian settler-state, which, as Lea (2012: 188) has argued, led to an ‘enduring preoccupation with questions of government’ within the Australian anthropological lexicon. This reconceptualisation of Indigenous rights and governance, largely centering on a perceived right to ‘self-determination’, was thoroughly enmeshed in similar movements world-wide. As a result, there is now an established field of international scholarship.

---

4 Lea (2012: 189) argues that Stanner’s White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938–1973 (1979) was the catalyst for the movement within Australian anthropology away from the classic foci, such as social and local organisation, to the ‘intercultural political struggles’ between white and black Australia.
5 Not all anthropologists conceive of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia in this way. Attempts have been made to shift the analysis of the ‘intercultural’ away from conceptualisations of an interface between two separate domains, and instead ‘towards an approach that considers Indigenous and non-Indigenous social forms to be necessarily relational, and to occupy a single sociocultural field’ (Hinkson & Smith 2005: 158).
exploring new and changing Indigenous encapsulations within liberal democratic nation-states. This field is growing with renewed interest in response to contemporary challenges spanning from the ecological, such as species extinction, to the political, such as challenges to established patterns of global governance given the emergence of surveillance techniques associated with neoliberal public management (see Ford & Rowse 2013; Dussart & Poirier 2017; Howard-Wagner et al. 2018). Contributions to this field are drawn from the areas of public policy, governmentality, liberalism and indigeneity more broadly. It is often said that Perth, Western Australia is the most isolated capital city in the most isolated country in the world: it is my hope that the conclusions laid out in this thesis regarding the negotiated coexistence between the Western Australian (and broader Australian) Governments and their Indigenous populations will not be precluded from contributing to this international scholarship by such distances.

Overarchingly, anthropological approaches to policy aim not only to illuminate particular aspects of specific fields of public policy, but to reveal broader processes of governance, power and social change (Shore & Wright 2011: 1). Australian Indigenous affairs policy represents the most significant interaction the state has with its Indigenous minority, and the formulation of such, tied as it is to the changing nature of Indigenous governance in Australia, therefore forms a significant part of the subject matter of this thesis. I draw on particular themes within this broad category of literature throughout to frame my discussion of the remote community closure debate. Thus, comparative analyses of state and Indigenous governance (Ford & Rowse 2013; Dussart & Poirier 2017); historical Indigenous affairs policy, or certain policy events in Australia (Rowse 1992; 2002; 2017; Jebb 2002; Altman & Hinkson 2007; Dillon & Westbury 2007; Peterson & Myers 2016), including how the discipline of anthropology (Sutton 2009; Altman & Hinkson 2010; Austin-Broos 2011) and broader Australia (Kowal 2015a) has responded; and various analyses of the current state of Indigenous governance (Sullivan 2011; Moran 2016; Sanders 2016; among others) provide important framing for the issues of Indigenous governance that I address in this thesis.

I follow Sullivan (2011: 68) who characterises ‘the state’ as a particular expression of social relations that is ‘both brought into being by people and itself acts to constitute certain kinds of persons by recognising and regulating them’. Terms such as ‘ensemble’, ‘collage’ and ‘assemblage’ have been used by social scientists to conceptualise the varied, multilayered
and often competing forces within a nation state, and to account for the translocality of states in the contemporary globalised world (see, for example, Sharma & Gupta 2006; Marcus & Saka 2006). Just as individuals are enmeshed in social relations with the state, so too are states enmeshed in social relations with each other. The Australian state does not and cannot operate within a vacuum, and many scholars have pointed to the influence that certain international trends in Indigenous rights and governance, as well as non-Indigenous-related changes in the global political trajectory, have had on the comparable fields in Australia (Sullivan 2011; Ford & Rowse 2013; Dussart & Poirier 2017, among others).

Most significant for this study has been the international trend towards a rise of a specific managerialist theory termed New Public Management (NPM) in public affairs policy (see Head 2005; Sullivan 2009; 2011: 67 - 83). O’Flynn (cited in Sullivan 2018: 203) summarises the core guiding principles of NPM as:

- Economic markets should be the model for relationships in the public sector
- Policy, implementation and delivery functions should be separated and constructed as a series of contracts
- A range of new administrative technologies should be introduced including performance-based contracting, competition, market incentives and deregulation

New Public Management (also called neoliberal public management) approaches are indeed ‘neoliberal’ in the sense that the market is assumed to be the fairest and most efficient way of distributing a society’s resources (Sullivan 2017: 203). In Australia, these approaches informed significant changes across the public sector from the 1980s onwards. It seems counterintuitive that approaches to public policy which champion the independence of the free market would be entirely consonant with a liberal democratic state such as Australia, which intervenes in the distribution of resources through a number of channels such as tiered income taxation and the provision of social welfare. I argue that they are not, and this is one of many tensions inherent in contemporary Australian governance. The solidification of these new approaches since the turn of the century has coincided and interacted with the

---

6 To borrow Marcus & Saka’s (2006: 101) definition, an assemblage is ‘a sort of anti-structural concept that permits the researcher to speak of emergence, heterogeneity, the decentred and the ephemeral in nonetheless ordered social life.’ For a recent formulation of what might constitute a ‘policy assemblage’, see Savage (2019).
domestic shift away from the paradigm of self-determination, which has governed the administration of Indigenous affairs policy in Australia since the 1970s. The influence of these two factors has led to the mainstreaming of government services, ‘whole-of-government’ approaches to governance and a move away from Indigenous-specific institutions and funding streams. Another aspect of the NPM approaches which have become integrated in contemporary patterns of governance is the requirement for self-scrutiny, continuous self-evaluation and assessment and a hierarchical chain of authority. This ‘audit culture’ (Strathern 2000) can be read as having altered both the structure and mechanics of bureaucracies, and the culture within them: a process which has no doubt contributed to the continued intractability of Indigenous affairs policy issues. This reconfiguration of Indigenous affairs policy has had real-world impacts on Indigenous people (see for example Altman 2018b), and on those with whom they interact.

This most recent era in Indigenous affairs policy in Australia, which has been termed ‘normalisation’ by some (see Sullivan 2011, among others), has posed emerging challenges for the subfield of Indigenous Australian anthropology. A number of anthropologists have engaged with the broad public debate regarding the viability and sustainability of remote Aboriginal cultures and settlements, as they worked to interpret and respond to the unprecedented levels of public interest. Certain texts, such as linguistic anthropologist Peter Sutton’s The Politics of Suffering (2009), have sought to critique the discipline of anthropology in Australia, and detail the ways in which its lack of focus on Indigenous disadvantage has contributed to the meagre improvement in socio-economic outcomes for remote Indigenous people (despite decades of policies promoting ‘self-determination’). The resulting arguments, according to Langton (2011, cited in Lea 2012: 188), ‘showed a discipline unsure of its intellectual future, wrestling with fears of irrelevancy in the face of changed subjects and tainted authority’.

The backdrop of Indigenous affairs in Australia, then, has undergone rapid changes in recent decades, and by analysing one particular recent policy event (that I have termed ‘the remote community closure debate’) I join other scholars who have sought to interpret this rapidly-changing landscape.
Methodological Positioning and Self-Reflexivity

While I have described my academic motivations for conducting this course of research, it would be remiss of me to not also describe my personal motivations. As a politically-engaged person with an interest in the field of Indigenous affairs policy in my home State, I was both shocked and intrigued to hear former Premier Colin Barnett announce that up to 150 remote communities may be closed. I believed that any outright closures would lead to the unnecessary displacement of hundreds of remote community residents. Given Western Australia’s historical record of allowing this to occur in the past (for example, when Moola Bulla station in the Kimberley region was sold in 1955 (Kimberley Language Resource Centre 1996; Alannah MacTiernan, pers.comm., July 2016)), I could not see that any positive outcome would be achieved as a result. Additionally, I was concerned that if such closures were to go ahead, adequate measures would not be put in place to resettle residents in larger regional centres. I wanted to better understand the reasoning behind why such an agenda (which, to me, appeared ill-conceived) would be pursued by the State Government.

I thus began my research with a particular political view, and a challenge throughout has been to remind myself of this position and to not allow it to unduly influence my behaviour as an academic researcher. Many scholars have written extensively about the importance of self-reflexivity and the identification of internal biases within the practice of anthropology, but I prefer this simple explanation provided by Bourgois (2017: i): ‘we have developed strategies of...self-reflexive scepticism. You have to learn to be careful not to see only what you want to see and not to confuse the way you want the world to be with the way the world really is.’ I have sought to achieve this in a number of ways.

I was careful with my initial selection of participants. I sought to engage politicians from both sides of politics, and reached out to those with what I’d consider to be particularly conservative views on social issues (such as One Nation, which at the time was attempting to gain a presence in Western Australia) to ensure my data was not gathered solely from those with similar political predilections to my own. I was careful, too, in my consumption of media, ensuring that I read and listened widely to those with views on all sides of the debate.
I had a pre-existing relationship with two participants. I am acquainted with a number of people who identify as Indigenous, though I did not seek to include them in my research. There were two exceptions, who I asked to participate on the basis of their specific knowledge or because of their relevance in relation to one or more aspects of the debate: Melissa Dinnison, due to her role as the complainant in the Human Rights Commission case against Bill Leak and the Australian Newspaper; and George Walley, due to his status as an Indigenous leader and experience within the fields of health and education in both urban and remote areas. I was cognisant throughout that my personal relationships with these two individuals had the capacity to influence my views on what they said, and I therefore took this into account when I analysed the data collected from our interviews. Given some of my personal acquaintances had similar views to myself, I also actively monitored my use of social media throughout to ensure my view was not siloed by a particular type of response to this issue. After several years of wrestling with this ethical issue, and recognising that one of the aims of this course of research was to document the strongly-held and contrasting perspectives on either side of the public debate, the conclusion I have arrived at is that my initial personal political predilections were somewhat immaterial (assuming, of course, that I did not let them influence my analysis of the data I collected any more than was practicable).

This research relies on a combination of desktop research, participation in Indigenous affairs events and qualitative interviews with relevant individuals. The desktop research component involved an analysis of relevant contemporary and historical literature, media statements and Government press releases, the State and Federal parliamentary Hansard, and print and digital news media germane to the remote community closure debate or other Indigenous affairs issues. I attended a number of activist or governmental events throughout the course of this research, which served as a source of data, inspiration and a platform for networking with relevant individuals.

I conducted thirty-nine interviews with thirty-nine participants in Perth and Broome, Western Australia. The majority of Western Australia’s remote Aboriginal communities are in the Kimberley region (see Figure 2), of which Broome is a major centre, and I therefore wanted to ensure I included perspectives from those who were familiar with the demographics and policy context of the region. Two participants were formally interviewed
on more than one occasion, and two sets of two participants were interviewed together. Of those interviews, three were conducted over the phone and one was conducted via Skype. One additional participant sent me a written statement and corresponded with me via email, but declined to participate in a face-to-face interview. I audio recorded and subsequently transcribed all my interviews. There were numerous additional individuals who contributed by introducing me to other potential participants, or providing me with various information, but whom declined to formally participate.

The majority of those I interviewed were identified because of their relevance to this course of research. Many were involved in the administration of Indigenous affairs policy, the delivery of programs aimed at remote communities, or were otherwise placed within the machinery of the Indigenous affairs realm. Indigenous affairs policy reflects the most significant interaction the Australian nation state has with its Indigenous minority, and, therefore those politicians, bureaucrats and non-government agents who administer it were of particular interest to me. Others were identified because of their heavy involvement in the debate surrounding the potential remote community closures over the period in which it was a matter of public debate in Western Australia. All participants, in one way or another, were invested in the debate and the potential aftereffects on the State’s remote Aboriginal communities. See Appendix Two for a selected person and professional history of all participants consulted throughout this research (with the exception of those that chose to remain anonymous).

Some participants came to be involved through the process of snowballing: that is, I developed a network of contacts who subsequently introduced me to others within their own networks. Like Marshall (1984: 241), I found that accessing those in public office was largely a process of getting past the ‘gatekeepers.’ As she argues, ‘secretaries and bosses make initial judgements about a researcher’s appearance, credentials, intentions, clout, and sponsorship’. Once I became acquainted with some particular politicians (as well as former politicians and public servants), the process of gaining access to additional participants became easier: also like Marshall (1984: 239), I found name-dropping to be essential to gaining access to ‘elites’.
When I refer to specific organisations throughout and use phrases such as ‘engaged with’, I am not necessarily implying that I interviewed a specific representative of that body, group or institution. Some organisations merely provided information that formed part of the desktop-based research component of this thesis, while others I visited the offices of personally. I have also included groups with whose representatives I had informal discussions, or who were associated with meetings, events or demonstrations that I participated in during this research.

One of the main questions I have encountered throughout the course of this research is ‘have you spent any significant length of time in remote communities themselves?’ While I have not spent any lengthy period of time in any specific remote Aboriginal community in Western Australia, I have travelled to many rural and remote areas of the State in both a personal capacity and a professional one (as an employee of a company that delivered outreach circus workshops to children living remotely). Doing so broadened my understanding of the diversity of the places so often labelled ‘remote communities.’ There are roughly 275 ‘remote communities’ in Western Australia. These communities range from long-deserted patches of land with the odd dilapidated house through to relatively large regional centres such as Bidyadanga (formerly La Grange Mission, south of Broome), with a population of over eight hundred. Each community has distinct socio-cultural and geographical histories that feed into their present-day interactions with government policy and those whom administer it (Dillon & Westbury, 2007: 3). Put simply: there was (and remains) no unified perspective that can be ascribed to ‘Indigenous Australia’, any less than there is of ‘white Australia’. For this reason, while spending time in a remote community may have allowed me to gain an intimate knowledge of that particular area, gaining an overall representative view of the perspectives of Western Australia’s remote community residents was not feasible.

This thesis is also not a study of the reactions to and effects of the potential of community closures solely from the perspective of Indigenous community residents themselves. Rather, it explores the varying perspectives on all fronts of these types of policy debates within the realm of Indigenous affairs in contemporary Australia. Some of the numerous perspectives from within the State’s remote communities have been included in my research through a variety of means: through those participants of mine who are from or who have close ties to
a particular community; through participants who have spent time consulting with community members; through organisations such as land councils, Aboriginal representative bodies, activist groups and some political parties; and through those few Indigenous individuals and communities who successfully gained a presence in the mainstream media coverage and political debates surrounding the issue.

A qualitative interview can be viewed as an exchange of knowledge (Given 2008). Despite this, as is the case with any human interaction, power dynamics are at play within the process of anthropological research. If there is a case to be made that an anthropologist is in a position of power given their qualifications and specialised knowledge of qualitative interviews or the subject matter being discussed, in my course of research this power dynamic was largely inverted. With regards to my participants who were politicians, most had in fact had decades of experience being interviewed. Such experience, as well as extensive training in how one presents themselves and in public speaking, meant that I was, in effect, interviewing seasoned experts in guiding conversation in the way in which they wanted it to go. Other interpersonal dimensions aside (most notably, the fact that I am a young woman of non-Aboriginal descent), the significant experience of most of my interviewees posed a challenge for myself as a relatively-inexperienced researcher.

In seeking to study the perspectives of those activists involved in the campaign against the proposed community closures, I faced several ethical and methodological challenges. It could be argued that there still exists a level of unease amongst those who may not necessarily consider their perspectives appropriate to be studied anthropologically. As Kowal (2015a: 21) argues of her ethnographic account of health workers in the development space, ‘to take as an anthropological object something that most people see as inherently good is to invite a particular type of suspicion.’

I encountered this hesitation on several occasions. Ethically speaking, the biggest issue I faced when interviewing activists was my concerns about how to mitigate their expectations. If the reason for analysing the behaviour of an individual or group such as those involved with social activism is not to offer good publicity, the assumption will be that you want to criticise them (Kowal 2015a: 22). In many of the interviews I conducted with activists, I felt there was a tacit assumption that I agreed with them, and that their contribution would go
towards producing a piece of research that furthered their cause. This ethical dilemma was compounded by the fact that on some level, I did agree with them. It is and always has been my perspective that the large-scale closure of remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia is not only undesirable, but would constitute an ill-conceived piece of public policy. Although perhaps not always entirely successfully, I worked hard to keep my language and formulation of questions as neutral as possible when interviewing all participants; the interviews in which this required perhaps the most concerted effort, however, was with activists.

In reviewing my behaviour throughout the qualitative interviews I conducted, I also noticed that I often performed a role similar to that termed by Marshall as the ‘bumbling academic’ or the ‘league of women voters’ (1984: 241). In this performance, a researcher presents as:

...nonthreatening but respectable and potentially useful, an educated, respected, working-within-the-system sort of person...politicians cannot refuse to give an audience since the person fits into the constituent category - the sort of person no politician can afford to offend.

Marshall discusses this performance with regards to gaining access to politicians as potential participants, but I believe I also positioned myself in this way due to my age, gender and relative inexperience working in public office. I learnt quickly that many participants did not take too kindly to value judgements on my part. I note late in the chapter that due to their public accountability, I occasionally worried that my participants may be blunting their perspectives to protect their reputations: however I too am guilty of this as I often found I received far more elaborate responses if I appeared noncommittal towards an issue or, more commonly, did not reveal the extent of my knowledge on a particular subject. On a number of occasions, participants made comments like ‘you wouldn’t remember this event/what it was like back then, given your age’ or ‘now this is something you’re likely unaware of because...what year were you born?’ Jabeen (2013: 228) argues that although Marshall’s (1984) work is rooted in a context some thirty years ago, the dynamic between male politicians and female interviewers is still apparent in her field of the Pakistani bureaucracy. While both researchers likely faced more significant challenges than I did, I would argue that some of the themes discussed with regards to ‘policy actors [being] accustomed to
see[ing] women in typical roles of naïve, harmless and admiring listeners’ were at play in some of the interviews I conducted in Perth and Broome over the period from 2016 - 2018. I, too, was met with surprised comments such as ‘well you really have done your research, haven’t you?’ when I indicated my breadth of knowledge of certain historical or contemporary aspects of Indigenous affairs governance (though, whether this related more to my gender or the aforementioned issue with my age, I cannot be sure).

**Participant Breakdown**

Of my forty interviewees, twenty-eight were male and twelve were female. Thirty-two identified as non-Indigenous and eight identified as Indigenous. As this research focussed on gathering participants who are heavily embedded in the institutions that administer Indigenous affairs policy, it is perhaps unsurprising that the demographic category most commonly represented amongst my participants was white males over the age of fifty-five.

Broadly, I have classified participants into the following categories: politicians; employees of land councils and other Aboriginal organisations; activists who opposed the prospect of community closures; and ‘others’ who did not fit neatly into the above categories, but nevertheless had some engagement with Indigenous affairs policy or the State’s remote Aboriginal communities. Of course, there were numerous participants for whom these simple distinctions were blurred, such as those politicians who would also consider themselves activists. One participant has been a representative of an Aboriginal organisation, is also an activist, and has made several bids to enter both State and Federal politics in the past decade.

**Politicians**

Half of those I interviewed were politicians. Initially, I intended to ensure that I had roughly equal representation across the four categories, however, on the whole I found politicians to be more responsive than anticipated (and some other groups, such as activists, to be less). In total, I interviewed nineteen politicians (or former politicians) and received written correspondence from one more. Of these twenty politicians, thirteen were male and seven
were female.\footnote{This is slightly above the 32% percent representation of women in the current forty-fifth Australian Federal Parliament (Hough 2016). I interviewed two of the five current Indigenous Members of Parliament, who represent just over 2% of current sitting Members (Gobbett 2017).} Eleven were involved in politics at a Federal level and nine at a State level. Eight of these twenty were representatives of either the State or Federal Australian Labor Party, seven the Liberal Party of Australia, one the National Party of Australia (WA), and one the Western Australian Greens. The remaining three chose to keep their identities concealed entirely, and I will therefore not outline their political affiliations.

**Land Councils & Other Aboriginal Representative Bodies**

Land councils are community organisations that are formed to represent the Indigenous groups of particular regions. I contacted all Western Australian land councils early on in the course of this research: the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, Yamatji Bana Baaba Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC), the Goldfields Land and Sea Council, the Kimberley Land Council and the Ngaanyatjarra Council. While I was not able to organise a formal interview with anyone who contemporarily represented any of these organisations (with the exception of the Ngaanyatjarra Land Council, of which one interviewee held a managerial role), a number of my participants had previously had some involvement with one or more of them. One participant was involved in policy development at the Central Land Council (which represents the Indigenous population in the southern half of the Northern Territory), and they were able to give me an invaluable perspective from outside of Western Australia.

**Activists/Activist Groups**

Several of the ‘activist groups’ I spoke to would not object to that title, as their primary aim is social activism. There were other organisations with which I spoke, however, whose charter includes a broader range of goals (albeit one of which is promoting the rights of Indigenous people in Australia). Some ‘groups’ could perhaps be better described as assemblages of people who would consider themselves activists within a broader organisation. The more self-ascribed activist ‘groups’, then, whose representatives I spoke to included: Home is Heritage, an anti-community closure campaign established within the Western Australian Greens party; SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA, the organisation behind the
forefront Indigenous-led social media campaign against the proposed community closures; and ANTaR, a group which describes itself as ‘an independent, national network of organisations and individuals working in support of justice, rights and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia’.8

Other Relevant Individuals & Groups

There were a number of participants who did not necessarily fit into any of the above categories, but nevertheless engaged with or were knowledgeable about Western Australia’s remote communities in some way. There were several who were able to bring a unique perspective owing to their broad knowledge of a specific time period or institution. For example, I spoke with Jack Webber, a former Pilbara and Kimberley pastoral boss, and his wife, Bev. Jack and Bev were able to describe what life was like living on a remote Western Australian pastoral station with a number of Aboriginal workers during the period which has been described as ‘pastoral paternalism’ (Jebb 2002: 3).9 Another participant who was able to provide me with some personal recollections of a specific time period was John Greysmark, who worked as a policeman in the Kimberley from the late 1950s onwards (until an injury subsequently forced him to retire).10 John described in great detail the social challenges he saw emerge after the implementation of various reforms such as the legalisation of Indigenous peoples’ access to alcohol and the introduction of welfare. I also interviewed one senior public servant and two former senior public servants, who helped me to understand some of the intricacies of the relevant Australian Indigenous affairs institutions (and the broader bureaucratic process in general). I have drawn upon the comments made by these participants throughout my historical overview in Chapter Two, and throughout specific analyses of particular institutions in other chapters. At the conclusion of the interview process, I conducted an inductive thematic analysis of the responses given by my participants (see Guest, MacQueen & Namey 2012: 3 - 20).

8 A full statement of purpose is available at the ANTaR website, <https://antar.org.au/>. Other organisations and campaigns referred to above have some digital presence which can be accessed by typing their respective names into a search engine.
9 Broadly, the period from the establishment of pastoral stations in rural Australia through to the late 1960s, in which it was common for Aboriginal family groups to reside and work on pastoral stations in exchange for rations and sometimes a small wage.
10 John passed away suddenly in June 2017, just three months after I had interviewed him. I thank him for his openness in discussing the challenges he faced throughout his life, and am grateful that I was able to record a small part of his story before his passing.
The issue of anonymity is one which all qualitative researchers must face. In the case of this research, however, the issue has particular salience. As I have outlined, the participants gathered were chosen on the basis of their specialised knowledge of, or particularly strong perspective on, the research question. In some cases, those that I interviewed were directly involved in the events that led up to the public and political debate surrounding the potential community closures. I would argue that the perspectives of these individuals doubtlessly hold more weight to a reader of this thesis if they are identified. Identifying those who are in the public domain, however, comes with certain concerns. In the case of politicians, for example, statements made on the record are open to public scrutiny. Overall, I was surprised by how many of my participants agreed to allow the release of their attributable information, as happened in all but three cases.

The three participants who chose to remain anonymous were all politicians. They did so for different reasons: one was concerned about concealing the identities of several third-parties they mentioned, while two were uncomfortable about voicing their personal opinions under the banner of the political party they represented. The period in which I conducted my fieldwork was both a turbulent time in Australian Federal politics, and a time in which political parties were increasingly recognising the need to mobilise political support through non-traditional means such as social media (see, for example, Bruns & Moon 2018). The requirement for politicians to ‘toe the party line’, nowadays, has thus diversified to include more realms of social life. In the case of all three of the participants mentioned above, the anonymity of their perspectives allowed them to speak to me more freely. Conversely, I often wondered whether those that did allow the release of their identities were curbing their perspectives to keep them in line with what they believed their political party or the Australian public would expect them to say: blunting their perspectives to fit within their conceptualisation of what was widely-accepted within the discourse of Indigenous affairs in Australia. A number of other participants agreed to the release of their attributable information with some caveats, such as myself running direct quotes by their office prior to publication. Many others counted the majority of the interview as ‘on the record’, but asked me to exclude from publication their more colourful language, or discussion of certain events, individuals or issues. As is often the case with qualitative interviews, but perhaps

---

11 I have assigned these three politicians pseudonyms and will refer to them as such throughout this thesis. Their pseudonyms will appear in inverted commas (i.e. ‘Simon’).
more so when interviewing those in positions of public accountability, I often found the most interesting conversations took place before the interview had begun or after it had concluded. As Jabeen (2013: 223) noted of her work studying the political elite in Pakistan, ‘bureaucrats had different stories to share when the sound recorder was switched off at the end of an ‘official interview’’. Negotiating these various requests for anonymity (or lack thereof) across thirty-eight participants was one of the most complex aspects of this research.

Building an argument that such a large number of remote Aboriginal communities should be closed is not an easy thing to do, politically speaking. Despite the recent shift in terminology and policy direction (which I refer to throughout as the ‘paradigm shift’), the influence of the language of self-determination is still evident in Australian Indigenous affairs discourses. This is one of the factors, I believe, that led to me finding it easier to engage participants who expressed views that were strongly *against* the proposed community closures. It is likely that there were other politicians and bureaucrats who would have been more sympathetic to the idea who felt precluded from speaking to me for fear of the repercussions of attaching themselves to a proposal contrary to this litany. As mentioned earlier, I am also cognizant that some of my participants were likely actively censoring what they said throughout the course of our interviews. In the same way that Strathern (cited in Graeber 2005: 448) has long argued that objects exchanged are valued as ‘ways of making relationships visible’, I wondered throughout whether my participants’ assertions that they placed value on remote Indigeneity was a way of communicating their (real or imagined) relationship with ‘Aboriginal’ Australia.

In this thesis I focus on the differentiated values behind the debate regarding the potential closure of Western Australia’s remote Aboriginal communities. Behind the term ‘value’ is a legacy of anthropological scholarship. In contrast to the approaches of other disciplines such as economics, which seek to formulate universal theories of value common across human populations, anthropological theories of value seek to understand the complexities of differing values held by individuals and groups in particular contexts. In the process, anthropology takes values to be essentially social, and to have a far broader applicability than the more common use of the term. Neoclassical economics dictates that the ‘value’ of an object or thing is largely indistinguishable from its price. In other words, the ‘value’
that something has is equal only to a financial enumeration of it relative to a financial enumeration of comparable things in a market economy (see Graeber 2005: 440). As Dumont (1980: 209) argues, ‘in common parlance, the word [value], which meant in Latin healthy vigour and strength and in medieval times the warrior’s bravery, [now] symbolises most of the time the power of money to measure everything.’ This neoclassical system of values (that is, this way of valuing things) is now celebrated like never before, having become the standard by which all other value systems are judged (Gregory 1997: 2). By contrast, anthropology recognises both the cultural differences in judging value and the likelihood of contradictions occurring within value systems.

I argue that one of the primary reasons that the debate surrounding the potential closure of remote communities was both so nuanced and so intransigent, and more broadly, the reason that debates surrounding the administration of remote Indigenous affairs policy in general are so intractable, is that Australian society (and the individuals within it) attach differing levels of value to the concept of remote Indigenous living. That is to say, there is no consensus among Australian people and institutions as to whether remote communities hold any value at all (although more of a consensus exists with regards to their existing and potential financial cost, and, as many also believe, their social costs). The ‘value’ attached to remote indigeneity by the remainder of Australian society is determined largely by the manner in which Australian people and institutions conceptualise equality; that is, from a foundation of liberal democratic thought that views individuals in a contractual relationship with the state (a theme which has become more pronounced given the growing influence of NPM approaches to public policy). There are many different ways in which equality can be gauged, and achieved. Differing understandings of the value of remote Indigenous communities, and, more broadly, differing conceptualisations of equality, result in multiple tensions within the Australian state’s governance of its Indigenous minority. It is these tensions that make the policy field of Indigenous affairs so intractable.

Given that ‘value’ is increasingly conceptualised according to a solely economic framework, it follows that policy decisions by government are primarily rationalised according to these same terms. I argue that the proposal to close Western Australia’s remote Aboriginal communities was rationalised by the State Government as necessary due to a perception that the State could not afford to provide the funding previously provided by the Federal
Government. In Chapters Three and Five, however, I assert that another rationality was simultaneously articulated by the State: that there were unacceptably high levels of social dysfunction in many remote Aboriginal communities. These issues are legitimately linked, inasmuch as the delivery of services such as policing, child protection and the proper judicial process are complicated by the essential remoteness of many such communities; I argue, though, that the confluence of these two narratives, coupled with (long-standing) negative media representations of remote community residents, contributed to a broadly negative view of remote Indigeneity that was (and remains) clearly visible in contemporary public discourse.

Clarification of Terms

The term ‘remote Aboriginal community’ is an ambiguous one. Throughout the remote community closure debate (at least those aspects of it that played out in Western Australia) ‘remote Aboriginal community’ was the term most commonly used. Referring to the residences of Australia’s Indigenous population that live remotely, other terms such as ‘outstation’, ‘homelands’ or ‘homelands community’, ‘township’ and ‘town-camp’ are also regularly used. All refer to a specific type of settlement, with geographical or historical connotations that differentiate them from one another. There is a significant amount of misinformation about the lived experience of remote Indigeneity in the public sphere, and the constant conflation and misuse of these terms has not improved matters. ‘Outstation’ is a term which is generally used to describe a small, decentralised community, usually occupied by less than fifty people who are usually kin. ‘Homelands’ or ‘homelands community’, as Peterson & Myers (2016: 2) note, is used by some writers to emphasise the presumed link between the geographical location of the community and the founder’s ancestral lands (as ‘outstations’ are not always located on such land). The terms ‘outstation movement’ or ‘homelands movement’ are often used similarly interchangeably to refer to the period of time (generally understood to have begun in the 1970s) in which Federal Government policy actively facilitated the founding of outstations.12 The term ‘townships’ is sometimes used to refer to those communities that formed out of what were once missions, ration stations or other government settlements (as opposed to those formed during the outstation movement). That distinction too, however, can be challenged. ‘Town-camps’ are

---

12 See Peterson & Myers (2016: 5) for a discussion of the existence of some outstations prior to the 1970s.
generally understood to be settlements located on the fringes of larger towns, often existing as a result of historical government intervention to prevent Indigenous people from residing in the centres. Often, these ‘formally informal’ settlements became formalised and recognised under various land rights regimes (Markham & Biddle 2016: 3). The way in which the term ‘remote Aboriginal community’ (or simply ‘remote community’) was used (and continues to be used) in Western Australian political discourse is as an umbrella term for all the types of settlements just discussed. Altman (2011) adds that ‘discrete Indigenous community’ is another umbrella term that has emerged on a national scale as a result of ‘state attempts to make the Aboriginal population legible’. Given the lack of specificity in the Barnett Government’s initial announcements regarding the closure of up to 150 ‘communities’, perhaps the ambiguity of this term is apt; it is certainly reflective of the broad conflation of the various types of majority Indigenous settlements in public and political discourse.

Very early on in the course of my fieldwork, I was contacted by a member of the State Department of Aboriginal Affairs after I had provided the Department with introductory information on my research (hoping to secure an interview with the Minister). This individual made it clear that they did not agree with the way I had phrased the issue. The terminology I have used to describe the Government’s actions in 2014 has changed since that time: partially because I have become increasingly knowledgeable of the events surrounding the former Premier’s announcements, and partially because it was clear throughout the time that Colin Barnett was still Premier that representatives of the Government shied away from any terminology that implied (deliberately or otherwise) that discussions of community closures were a reflection of any sort of official government policy. At the time I first contacted the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs’ office, however, my participant information form read:

In November 2014, the Western Australian Government announced its plan to reform the way it provides essential services to the State’s remote Indigenous communities. This proposal included the possible closure of up to 150 of the State’s 274 communities.
The individual within the Minister's office took exception to my use of the word 'proposal', arguing that it implied that there was an official policy document that underlay the former Premier's announcements that up to 150 remote communities may close. This was mirrored in an official response I received from Peter Collier, then the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

He wrote:

First of all, there is no overall plan or proposal to close Aboriginal communities (Peter Collier, pers.comm., June 2016).

There was no intended implication behind my phrasing, as I attempted to explain to the person who contacted me from the DAA in response to my initial request. Given that this was clearly a point of contention, however, I asked Colin Barnett to clarify when I met him the following year.

[Colin Barnett nodded].

[Colin Barnett]: No, it was a Premier statement. It wasn't Liberal policy, it was my statement as Premier (Colin Barnett, pers.comm., April 2017).

Given his clarification, I will add one of my own. The word 'proposal' is not used throughout this thesis to convey a policy proposal. I use it in the most general sense, to relate to the way in which someone might propose an idea. I have also sometimes used the term 'announcement' (or, perhaps more accurately, 'series of announcements') to denote the
same event: that is, the act of the former Premier suggesting that up to 150 remote Aboriginal communities may need to be closed.

I was also able to gain clarification as to where the figure ‘150’ came from, which had been a point of some debate. His clarification aligned with what a number of other participants had suspected: that is, a rough estimate not based on any particular relevant data.

[Jasmin Korte]: Could you clarify where that ‘hundred and fifty’ figure came from for me?

[Colin Barnett]: Well, there's two hundred and seventy-four remote communities, many of them extremely small. It was just a broad estimate in my mind as to how many were actually viable (Colin Barnett, pers.comm., April 2017).

When I use the term ‘debate’ throughout this thesis, I refer to a public, political or policy issue that has gained prominence and featured heavily in Parliamentary discussions, the news media and around the dinner tables of the broader Australian public over a specific period of time. Throughout this thesis, I conceptualise the administration of public policy as a process, with specific peaks in which certain issues take on a new level of prominence (depending on the alignment of a number of political, social and environmental factors). As Schön & Rein (1994: 3) note, in matters of public policy, disputes are endemic. They delineate between two types of policy disputes: those that are settled by reasoned discourse (they term these ‘policy disagreements’) and those that are ‘stubbornly resistant’ to resolution, even in the face of such reasoned discourse. I argue that the funding of primary, essential and municipal service delivery to remote Indigenous residents around Australia, and the value of remote Indigenous communities in general, are examples of such disputes. When I use the term ‘debate’, then, I refer to the reasoned (and equally, unreasoned) discourse that has periodically risen in intensity as the process of trying to resolve this issue has played out. The ‘remote community closure debate’, as I have termed it throughout this thesis, refers to the part of an older and broader debate regarding remote Indigeneity and its value that splintered off following the former Premier’s announcement, and was rooted in a Western Australian context. The other context in which I have used the term ‘debate’ is to refer to the scholarly debate within the Australian anthropological community that has
coincided with the rise in public prominence of issues regarding remote Indigeneity in Australia.

In the following chapter, I trace the historical movements in Australian Indigenous affairs policy as they relate to the creation and maintenance of discrete Aboriginal communities around Australia. Some reductionism is required when representing the breadth of Indigenous and non-Indigenous interactions across multiple settler colonies, and later, six States, two Territories and one Federal Government. For the purpose of gaining a general understanding of the historical political processes at play, I will follow the usual classifications of historical Indigenous affairs policy. Such policy is generally categorised into four (or sometimes five) ‘eras’: conflict and appropriation; protectionism, guardianship and segregation; assimilation and integration; self-determination and self-management; and finally, the new policy era that emerged and has been consolidated since the turn of the century, which many term ‘normalisation’ (see Sutton 2009: 14 - 17; Sullivan 2011; Kowal 2015a: 160 - 164; Rowse 2017: 9 - 10). This most recent policy era, as it applies to remote community residents, appears to be guided by values reminiscent of those of the bygone eras of protectionism and assimilation. As Altman (2017: 11) notes, ‘the current suite of programs based on paternalism and punishment’ are focused on ‘reprograming [the] subjectivities, or lifeways [of those living in remote communities] to match those of mainstream Australians’. These policy movements were paralleled by the interdependent Indigenous rights movement. This movement both shaped and was shaped by the predominant political and ideological paradigms of the day. The interdependency between government policy (and the underlying values that guide it) and the Indigenous rights movement is a process which continues, as I will demonstrate through analyses of contemporary Indigenous rights issues such as constitutional recognition and attempts to ‘close the gap’ of Indigenous disadvantage. In this chapter I analyse the shifts within Australian Indigenous affairs policy over the past two centuries, while also demonstrating that there are multiple competing themes that appear to stubbornly persist over time and space.

In Chapter Three, I analyse the public and political debate regarding the sustainability and viability of remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia. I contextualise this debate within broader debates on a Federal level which have intensified since the turn of the
century, particularly with regards to the way in which media portrayals of remote Indigenous people have both constructed and been constructed by the contrasting perspectives on either side. With Australia’s Indigenous minority representing less than three percent of the population, media representations of them can be powerfully formative for the average non-Indigenous Australian. There is a complex relationship between public opinion, public policy and the media, and the interrelationships between these facets will be examined for the purpose of exposing the constitutive effect they each have on the others. I pay attention in this chapter to the parallels in the ways in which remote Indigenous communities were represented in the media throughout the remote community closure debate and the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), colloquially known as ‘the Intervention’. Largely, the media portrayals throughout this period reinforced negative representations of Indigenous people as transgressors of societal norms, as an underlying societal risk, or as a threat to societal values. A number of issues within Indigenous affairs in Australia, then, can be seen as ‘intractable policy disputes’: issues in which actors narrate particular agendas through media technologies with the intention of influencing policy outcomes (Schön & Rein 1994; McCallum, Waller & Meadows 2012: 103).

In Chapter Four, I turn to the economic viability and sustainability of remote communities and the vastly contrasting opinions these issues evoke. I argue that the inescapable foundation of the question of viability and sustainability is whether or not the benefits promoted by remote communities outweigh the challenges inherent in funding them. The formation of this opinion invariably depends on whether broader Australia ‘values’ remote Indigeneity, and how this ‘value’ is determined. The remoteness of many discrete Aboriginal communities presents significant challenges for government service delivery in Western Australia. Most of my participants framed their responses to the question of economic viability around the state’s (Federal, State or local government) responsibility to find a way to deliver services in spite of these challenges. I argue, too, that the Barnett-led Liberal Government harnessed this to build a narrative about the financial unviability of remote communities in Western Australia. In this chapter, I show that Australia’s liberalist underpinnings guide the way in which government and broader society conceptualise ‘equality’ as individuals’ rights before the state (Robbins 1994: 21 - 70). I use examples from contemporary public discourse and the comments made by my participants to demonstrate this trend.
In Chapter Five I analyse the corresponding debates within the scholarly discourse. Since the nineties, these debates have grown in intensity and become increasingly focussed on the value and validity of the kind of lifestyles lived by remote community residents. Anthropologists are still engaging with this debate as they work to interpret and respond to this unprecedented public interest: a process which has given rise to what some term the ‘culture wars’ debate (see Hinkson 2010: 1 - 14), which focusses on the way in which remote Indigenous culture should be understood in a contemporary context. The increasing amplification of the voices of several politically conservative commentators and a few prominent anthropologists has led to a renewed focus on the centrality of disadvantage in remote Indigenous communities. There is a perception that, on the other side of the debate, the bulk of anthropologists and those with left-leaning political affiliations have generally sought to emphasise the importance and value of cultural difference, and, have therefore been criticised for ignoring the persistent and entrenched disadvantage experienced by remote community residents. While many have made the distinction between the need to address genuine challenges associated with remote living, such as the complexities involved in primary service delivery to remote areas, and the widely-reported issues of social dysfunction including the sexual abuse of children, this distinction has not been as clearly defined in broader public discourse. I argue, as others have, that this has led to a general pathologising of remote community residents (particularly Aboriginal men). Building on Chapter Three, then, I argue here that there was a second rationality articulated by the State government for the necessity of the closure of remote Aboriginal communities: that they contained unacceptably high levels of social dysfunction, and that in order for women and children to be adequately protected they must be moved to more easily-serviceable areas. I use anthropological and historical sources to analyse whether or not this is the case.

These four chapters demonstrate that a number of perspectives existed throughout the remote community closure debate that, in many cases, were reflective of the contrasting values inherent in broader debates regarding Indigenous affairs policy in Australia. These contrasting values exist because there are yet unresolved tensions in the interaction between the Australian nation state and its populations, owing largely to the liberal democratic ideology that underpins it. In Chapter Six, then, I analyse a number of contemporary Indigenous affairs policy initiatives for the purpose of revealing both the intractability of
these types of policy disputes, and the differential set of values that underlie them. Despite many of those I interviewed self-identifying as being of a particular political persuasion, or subscribing to a particular school of thought, there was a significant consensus about the outcomes they wanted to achieve. I identify the two most fundamental barriers to improving Indigenous disadvantage pointed to by the literature, by my participants and by various government institutions as: first, the complexity within government programs in the Indigenous affairs arena leads to ineffective implementation of policy and a lack of consistency. Many Government programs operate on short-term funding cycles, which are not conducive to long-term planning. Second, the administration of Indigenous affairs policy from urban centres perpetuates a lack of place-based solutions, while acting as a barrier to the voices of local Indigenous people being heard in the decision-making process.

It would appear that despite the divarication in perspectives at a relatively superficial level, a surprising number of politicians, bureaucrats, scholars and even activists agree on many of the fundamental pathways forward. I argue that this broad agreement forms part of an emerging third narrative, that of a negotiated coexistence between the Australian state and the different populations of which it is comprised. The new Labor Government that took office in 2017 has, in many ways, built on the threads of this narrative that existed in the Western Australian political machine prior to their election. They have also harnessed the first of the two narratives I describe in previous chapters (that of the financial unviability of remote communities without Federal Government assistance), while resisting what would perhaps have been the easier option of relying on a rationality of social dysfunction. Despite this, progress on achieving the cited outcomes in Indigenous affairs has been slow. Tension between the varying layers of government and between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous sectors continues, as I demonstrate in this chapter.

In the Conclusion, I echo other scholars who have argued that it is a feature of Australian Indigenous affairs policy (Sullivan 2011: 34; Moran 2016: 178) and policy in general (Mosse 2004: 658 - 661) that past policy is ‘purged’ and denounced as a failure, before new policy is introduced. There has been a preoccupation over the past forty years with self-determination and the right of Australian Indigenous people to self-govern and self-manage their communities. The shift in policy that has occurred since the early 2000s, therefore, may explain the popularisation (in public discourse and in academia) of the view that such past policies have failed. The way forward, I suggest, is towards a negotiated coexistence
between the state and its Indigenous people. Just as other discourses have held more or less prominence throughout different periods in Australian history, and different eras in Indigenous affairs policy, a negotiated coexistence is the narrative of this new era of normalisation.

I have been told many times throughout this research that the issue I have chosen to investigate is one of paramount importance. Even four years after the event, those that follow Indigenous affairs (and many that do not) respond to an explanation of my research with a knowing and enthusiastic nod. I do not raise this to laud my ability to choose apposite research questions, but instead to convey the continuing pertinence of this issue. Regardless of personal, political or academic persuasion, there remains a tangible frustration in the seeming intractability of policy issues within the realm of Indigenous affairs, and the value and future sustainability of remote Indigeneity is one such issue requiring resolution.
Chapter Two
From Protectionism, to Assimilation, to Self-Determination, and Back Again (Everything is Changing, while Nothing has Changed at All)

Such were the tidal changes of Indigenous affairs: first centralisation to missions, then decentralisation to outstations, and now centralisation to economic ‘hubs’ (Moran 2016: 70).

What’s the song by Kevin Carmody? ‘In the right hand they had a bible, in the left hand they had a gun.’ Have we changed? We have a bit, you know. We have a wider range of weapons, and we’re probably not carrying on so much about our bible, right? (John McBain, pers.comm., March 2017).

According to the Western Australian Government, today there are ‘about’ 274 discrete Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, with an estimated population of between 12,000 and 15,000 (Regional Services Reform Unit 2016; 2017a; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018b). The variation in demographic features, geographical location and historical and socio-cultural context of these communities is significant, as are the ways in which they relate to the various governing bodies from whom they receive services. This is not surprising, as the administration of Australian Indigenous affairs policy is a process which has been continually revised, remade and reconceptualised on both a State and Federal level. In this chapter, I discuss both the specific historical policies that have impacted Western Australia’s Aboriginal population, and several recent analyses of the history of Indigenous affairs policy in Australia more broadly. Exploring this history is integral to making sense of the contemporary enmeshment of the State’s remote Aboriginal communities within the broader power structures of the Australian nation state.

This summary is not intended to be an exhaustive historical review. My intention is to provide a basic understanding of the complex array of historical factors that have led to this point, as any contemporary analysis of the policy landscape (especially one which suggests future policy directions) must recognise the many precedents in our State’s historical archive. As Altman (2018a: 166) notes, the Australian settler state’s ever-changing policy
approaches to development continuously structure and restructure the livelihood options of Aboriginal populations.

The terms ‘right’ and ‘responsibility’ are common features of contemporary debates regarding the existence of remote Aboriginal communities in Australia. In this chapter, I also discuss the historical Aboriginal rights movement to emphasise its enmeshment and interdependence with the historical shifts in Australian Aboriginal affairs policies. This discussion forms the contextualisation for one of the central questions of this thesis, and of the contemporary Australian Indigenous affairs discourse: a question of ‘value’. That is, do Aboriginal people have the ‘right’ to reside in communities in remote parts of the country, and, if so, does the Australian Government have a ‘responsibility’ to service them?

In a comprehensive examination of Australia’s historical Indigenous affairs policy, Sanders (2009) identifies three ever-present ‘competing principles’: equality, choice and guardianship. Sanders says:

At particular times in history the dominant debates in Australian Indigenous affairs have tended to emphasise one or two of these principles at the expense of another; but also...the limitations of each principle and the persistence of the others...[has led] to an ongoing process of policy debate and readjustment (2009: 1).

The principle of ‘equality’ may sound broadly self-explanatory (the view that Indigenous Australians should be ‘equal’ to non-Indigenous Australians). Like ‘value’, however, it should not be assumed that ‘equality’ is a meaningful cross-cultural category. Equality in relation to what, and by what means should it should be achieved, has long been a focus of political and anthropological scholarship (see, for example, Myers 2010). Analysing the way in which a given society conceives of equality can be instructive in explicating that society’s value system: the two concepts are irrevocably linked. As Fallers (2017: 217) argues, ‘one universal source of inequality is the tendency of every human community to develop, as part of its body of common culture, a system of values in terms of which persons may judge themselves or each other’. Despite some level of material and socio-economic inequality appearing to be present in all human societies, the contemporary Western world remains
preoccupied with the pursuit of equality (Fallers 2017: 216). Perhaps understandably, then, staunch agreement on achieving parity, but ambivalence regarding the correct process by which it should be achieved, is a common feature of Australian Indigenous affairs discourses. Consequently, Sanders (2009: 6) breaks down the principle (citing Bennett 1999: 2, see also Myers 2010) into ‘legal equality’, ‘socio-economic equality’ and ‘equality of opportunity’.

At the opposing end of the spectrum to equality is difference and diversity. If these values are seen in a positive light, Sanders argues, they can invoke the second competing principle: ‘choice’ (2009: 8). This principle can justify some level of inequality, as long as this difference is seen to be the result of an informed, responsible collective decision on the part of the Indigenous population (or group). However, if the values of difference and diversity are viewed negatively within society, they may foster the third principle, guardianship.

Sanders describes the principle of guardianship as entering the political arena when governments believe that a particular group (or groups) of people are unable to judge their own best interest and thus require government intervention to survive or prosper (2009: 8). The most common reason by which a government evokes this principle is in cases where children are parentless (or have parents that are deemed inadequate), however, it can also be applied to Indigenous groups in a settler state context. As Sanders argues, ‘Indigenous people...can be judged as vulnerable to the encroaching power of settler industrial society, or parts thereof, and as not therefore competent judges of their own best interests’ (2009: 8).

Scholars generally discuss the dominant shifts in Australian Indigenous affairs policy in terms of three eras: protection and segregation (from the assertion of sovereignty until roughly the 1930s), assimilation and integration (from the 1930s until the 1970s) and self-determination and self-management (from the 1970s until the present). Many would argue, as I do, that the significant shift in Indigenous affairs policy throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s constitutes a new era (Sutton 2009; Altman & Hinkson 2010; Austin-Broos 2011; Sullivan 2011; Lea 2012; Moran 2016, among others); I will return to this shortly.

Fifty years after Australia voted in the 1967 referendum that was widely understood to have granted full citizenship rights to Indigenous people, significant statistical inequality still
exists between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population. Those involved in the campaign for Indigenous rights have varied across time: from Indigenous leaders, to anthropologists, to university students, to Christian women, to non-Indigenous politicians and professionals working in Indigenous communities. Throughout this Chapter, I track the Indigenous rights movement with reference to one of the fundamental dilemmas at the heart of contemporary discussions of Indigenous rights: that is, whether or not achieving ‘equality’ (usually termed ‘civil’ or ‘citizenship’ rights) with the non-Indigenous population is enough, or whether to be Indigenous should guarantee something else: a set of distinctive rights, usually termed ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Indigenous rights’.

Post-Enlightenment ideas regarding ‘race’ have historically governed Indigenous affairs policy in Australia. State enumerations of Indigenous Australian populations from the 1860s onwards, for example, included distinguishing between ‘full blood’ and ‘half-caste’ individuals (Rowse 2017: 4). Based on post-Enlightenment theories of racial determinism and the ‘culture loss’ theory (which posited that less ‘civilised’ populations would rapidly lose their distinctiveness upon contact with more ‘civilised’ ones), it was believed that ‘full-blood’ Aboriginal people were not capable of assimilating into any broader Australian polity. These ideas historically influenced our understandings of the types of rights that Indigenous people should receive (Attwood 2003: xi).

The Aboriginal rights movement has adapted to changing policy circumstances over time: so too has the definition of who is afforded the term ‘Aboriginal’, and what form that category has taken. Perhaps the most obvious example of this fluidity is the relatively-recent emergence of the pan-Aboriginal identity. From a liberal rights perspective, Sullivan (2011: 6) argues that liberal social philosophy can only conceive of a rights-bearing group in terms of a bounded community, tribe or nation. The category of ‘Aboriginal’ is not a given or natural fact, but a product of its dynamic interaction with another (in this case, a colonial authority, see Rowse 2017: 4). If we are to accept this logic, then the boundedness of the Indigenous collective within the Australian state is a prerequisite of its ability to bear certain rights. Ariss adds ‘it is only in juxtaposition with a foreign presence that an Aboriginal otherness becomes meaningful...pan-Aboriginality is a politically necessary concept for Aborigines to present a united...front to a government reluctant to recognise their demands (1988; 136).
This Aboriginality is inherently historical (Attwood 1989; 2003: xii, 316 - 318).

By narrating ‘affective histories’ about their suffering as Aborigines and by fighting for rights in the name of Aborigines, they reconstituted aborigines as a group called the Aborigines or the Australian Aborigines or the Aboriginal Australians, whose identity encompassed but nevertheless transcended earlier, aboriginal identities [sic] (2003: xxi).

Attwood (2003) poses the question: if we are to accept that the Indigenous population should be granted Indigenous rights, then on what basis are these rights founded? On the basis of their historical status as Indigenous people; on the basis of the historical injustices levelled against them; on the basis of their contemporary disadvantage? Or all three?

**The Protectionist Era in Western Australia, 1829 to the 1930s**

Political scientist and psychologist Milnes takes a literal approach in defining the shifts in Western Australian Aboriginal affairs policy, framing the earliest Government administration as the ‘British Colonial Office Administration’ (1829 - 1897), then as ‘Western Australian Government administration’ (1897 - 1967), then ‘Commonwealth Government Administration’ (1967 - 2004).\(^\text{13}\) Citing Brown, Milnes (2005: 14) argues that early British colonists believed they had a God-given right to ‘extend the blessings of civilisation to all parts of the earth and to prosper from the proceeds’. Guided by Freire’s (1970) conceptualisation of myth-making, Milnes argues that a complex web of myths formed the basis of the early British Administration’s legislation regarding Aboriginal people in Western Australia.

Although it was not quite [an] ‘empty land’, former inhabitants were either invisible (or made so by the power of the gun) or insignificant (or made so by the power of the myth) (2005: 15).

---

\(^\text{13}\) 2004 is the year prior to the publishing of the second edition of Milnes’s book, and is not indicative of a perceived policy shift such as that which have discussed.
While Milnes (2005: 28) identifies the Aboriginal population’s ‘protection’ by those designated ‘protectors’ within the early administration was one such myth, Rowse (2002: 167) argues that at least one of their purposes, to prevent the physical extinction of Aboriginal people, was fulfilled. As assumptions regarding the impending extinction of Aboriginal people were seemingly confirmed by depopulation resulting from disease and conflict, the policy approach of the colonial administration in the decades after the assertion of sovereignty turned to ‘humanitarian care of the unfortunate’ (Hasluck, cited in Biskup 1968: 448). The concept of ‘protecting’ Western Australia’s Aboriginal population was legally enshrined in the Aborigines Protection Act 1886 (WA). This Act established a basis for Aboriginal employment, as previous engagements had fallen under European master and servant laws (as Biskup (1968: 448) notes, it shifted the focus of ‘protection’ away from the humanitarian antecedent to protection of Aboriginal people as economic assets). The Act also established an Aborigines Protection Board, legalised the removal of Aboriginal people from townships, and was particularly concerned with preventing ‘cohabitation’ between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (Milnes 2005: 32 - 33).

Shortly thereafter, Western Australia became a self-governing colony after the passing of the Constitution Act 1889 (WA) (Rowley 1970: 242; Phillips et al. 1998: 20; 26 - 30). Section 70 of this Act legislated that the Aborigines Protection Board was to receive an annual grant of £5000 or 1% of gross colonial revenue, whichever was higher. The colonial Government still did not have legislative power regarding the Aboriginal population, as this remained the responsibility of the Governor (who represented the British Colonial Office) (Milnes 2005: 34). This changed with the passing of The Aborigines Act 1897 (WA). Repealing the requirement for 1% of gross revenue to be spent on the State’s Aboriginal population, Aboriginal annual expenditure was fixed at £5000 (Milnes, among others, speculate that this is because by then, 1% of gross colonial revenue amounted to £30,000 (2005: 38)).

One participant in this research, Federal Labor Member for the Western Australian electorate of Burt, Matt Keogh, speculated about how different outcomes for the State’s Indigenous minority might have been had that percentage value remained fixed:

---

Rowse (2017: 134 - 168) notes that the question of ‘did protectors protect’ is largely complicated by the fact that there were multiple competing meanings associated with phrases such as ‘dying out’ and ‘extinction’, and that the enumeration of the Aboriginal population remained problematic until the late 1960s.
I mean, historically, if you look at the original incarnation of the Western Australian Constitution, I think it was around 2% of the State’s GDP was supposed to be spent on the protection and promotion of Aboriginal people. Of course, if we spent anything near that amount, you would like to think that we would have a vastly different result (Matt Keogh, pers.comm., December 2016).

After a lengthy process of contestation, the 1897 repeal was finally ratified with the passing of *The Aborigines Act 1905* (WA). Johnston (1989: 319) argued that, even after eight decades, the betrayal felt by Aboriginal people at the loss of this revenue (and the surreptitious way in which it was divested) is still present. Given that similar sentiments have been expressed in recent years, I would now update that figure to eleven decades.15

Johnston argues that the impact of this perceived betrayal can be felt in three ways: psychologically, as part of a broader sense of grievance felt by Aboriginal people in Western Australia; politically, as a constitutional basis for present day compensation claims; and therefore legally, as a yet-unanswered question regarding whether a legal action based on ‘notions of public fraud, or on allegations of unconstitutional repeal of section 70’ could be levelled (1989: 319). Interestingly, Johnston claims it was Pilbara-based activist Don McLeod in the 1960s who reinvigorated public discussion of the repeal (1989: 343). The issue has been raised numerous times in the intervening years, notably during the Noonkanbah Station walk-offs16 (1989: 345; see also Hawke & Gallagher 1989: 230 - 31).

The Inevitable Extinction of the ‘Full-blood’, and ‘Half-castes’ as ‘Outcasts’

*The Aborigines Act 1897* (WA) Act laid the foundation for future Aboriginal affairs policy in the State of Western Australia, and included provisions regarding the segregation of...
education and the abolition of the Aborigines Protection Board (and appointment instead of a Protector of Aborigines, operating under a newly-established sub-department called the Aborigines Department). The population concentrations of Aboriginal people varied markedly across the State by this time: in the north, coordinated groups were still offering militant resistance to the encroachment of white occupation, while in the south numbers had fallen so significantly that they ‘looked the pattern of a dying race ready for the soothing pillow’ (Bolton 1981: 124).

By the turn of the century, a number of accounts had revealed the injustices perpetrated against Aboriginal people in the State’s north: this resulted in the commissioning of the Royal Commission on the Condition of the Natives (1905) (the Roth Royal Commission). Much of the report focussed on the administration of the Aborigines Department, labour relations, the native police system and the treatment of Aboriginal prisoners (Western Australian Government 1905; see also Bolton 1981: 129 - 131). Importantly for the history of Western Australia’s remote communities, however, it also recommended that large swathes of northern land be designated ‘native reserves’, to counteract the dispossession of land for the purposes of non-Indigenous industry. These areas were primarily to be used as hunting grounds, the provision of which was imperative ‘not only on humanitarian grounds, but also on grounds of practical policy (Western Australian Government 1905). This recommendation paved the way for the establishment of remote reserves in Western Australia, such as the 1.6 million hectare Marndoc Aboriginal reserve in the east Kimberley, in November 1911. While the establishment of the reserve did not achieve many of the aims imbedded in the Roth Report, such as the protection of Aboriginal people from police patrols or pastoral violence (nor did it contain Aboriginal people within such designated areas, see Green 1995: 74 - 76), it was nevertheless an important factor in the later formation and distribution of remote communities throughout the State.

The Roth Royal Commission led to the passage of The Aborigines Act 1905 (WA), which broadened the State’s power with regards to managing the lives of Aboriginal people. The powers laid out in the 1905 Act, as Rowley (1970: 244) notes, seem ‘harsh’ in retrospect; at their core, however, was:
...an attempt to get some control of situations which had long been out of control...in the colonial world, legislation to control the use of indigenous labour often has a harsh appearance, yet it was generally an attempt to ameliorate the still harsher facts.

The stated aims of the Act were as follows: to clarify the legal status of Aborigines to the State; to consolidate State legislation pertaining to Aborigines; to provide for the greater protection of Aborigines, to make provision for their welfare, medical care and education; and to prevent the extinction of the Aboriginal race (Haebich 1988: 79). As well as expanding the definition of ‘ Aboriginal’ to include ‘ half-castes’,17 the Act gave the Department the power to interfere with the movements and living arrangements of Aboriginal people and appointed the Chief Protector as the legal guardian of all Aboriginal children under the age of sixteen, as well as a host of other measures that brought many aspects of Aboriginal people’s lives under Departmental control (Rowley 1970: 242 - 249; Haebich 1988: 79 - 90; Milnes 2005: 42 - 49; Host et al. 2009: 162).

In line with the Act’s protectionist underpinnings, many of the parliamentary debates surrounding the passage of this bill had strong social Darwinist connotations.

All we can do is to protect them as far as possible and leave nature to do the rest. It is a case of the survival of the fittest but let the fittest do their best (Piesse, cited in Haebich 1988: 80).

The passage of such legislation strongly guided by the principle of guardianship was not unique to Western Australia throughout this period. Although there was no Federally-unified Indigenous affairs policy until after the 1967 referendum, by 1912 all States and the Commonwealth-controlled Northern Territory had passed similar laws: The Aborigines Protection Act 1890 (VIC), The Aborigines Protection and Restriction on the Sale of Opium Act 1897 (QLD), The Aborigines Act 1905 (WA), The Aborigines Protection Act 1909 (NSW), The Aborigines Act 1910 (NT) The Aborigines Act 1911 (SA), the Aboriginals Ordinance 1911

---

17 The Act only included ‘half-castes’ who either lived with an Aboriginal husband or wife, regularly had contact with other Aboriginal people, or were younger than sixteen years old. It also included the child of any such person (Aborigines Act 1905 (WA) s. 3).
(Cth, NT) and the Cape Barren Island Reserve Act 1912 (TAS) (McCorquodale 1987; Milnes 2005: 48).

The impact of the protectionist era was felt differently around the State, as different industries and infrastructure developed non-concurrently from south to north. Protectionist policy, however, invariably had implications that reached far into the ensuing decades. The provisions laid out in the Aborigines Act 1905 (WA) facilitated strict control over the lives of Aboriginal people living in the State, allowing the Government to distribute Aboriginal people away from the towns who wished to exclude them, into industries (pastoral, agricultural, pearling) who wished to employ their labour, and to align with the Departmental ideology which increasingly focused on segregating Aboriginal children of mixed descent from their parents. This control was felt most acutely in the urban centres of the south or the larger regional hubs in the north; in remote areas, the main state influence on the day to day lives of Aboriginal people was on the local Government level (then called ‘road boards’, see Fletcher 1992: 1 - 10). As Rowse (2017: 20) notes, however, the state was but one of many authorities in the early twentieth century colonial occupation of Northern Australia, and not necessarily the most consequential.

Pastoral exploration in Western Australia’s north began as early as the turn of the twentieth century, but was not widespread until the early 1920s. Early pastoral lessees (as well as fossickers and others seeking to profit from the State’s land or mineral resources) capitalised on the cheap labour of Aboriginal people. This was especially the case at the onset of the Great Depression, as the pastoral industry in northern Western Australia hit its lowest point, and many pastoral properties cut expenditure and attempted to stay afloat with just ‘one or two veteran stockmen and a team of Aborigines and half-castes’ (Bolton, 1971: 202). Once the pastoral system was ingrained, many Aboriginal individuals and families aligned themselves with white pastoral bosses ‘through unspoken and unequal contracts of ownership and protection’ (Jebb 2002; see also Bolton 1981: 127; Haebich 1988: 2). Bill Bunbury (2002) argues a ‘tenable truce’ was negotiated between many Aboriginal stockmen and their white bosses; to varying extents, the relationships could be considered mutually
beneficial. In many cases, Aboriginal groups were able to exchange pastoral work for the right to remain on their land, rations, the support of their dependent kin, and the continuation of ceremonial practices. The *Aborigines Act 1905* (WA) restricted government interference on pastoral stations throughout northern Western Australia and served to reinforce the system of ‘pastoral paternalism’ (as Aboriginal people were exempt from forced removal from their land if they could produce a work permit from their white pastoral boss, see Jebb 2002: 77). Catholic and other Christian churches established missions throughout northern Western Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in an effort to draw in Aboriginal people and offer them ‘an alternative authority’ (Rowse 2017: 21).

Concurrently, then, remote sites were established throughout northern and central Western Australia, by the authority of the State Government, church missionaries, and private interests: many of which would become the foundations of Western Australia’s remote Aboriginal communities today.

The Aborigines Department’s segregationist stance was deepened by the *Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1911* (WA) and the appointment of A. O. Neville as Chief Protector in 1915 (who remained in the position until his retirement in 1940). The period under his administration, according to Haebich, was characterised by an aggressive leadership, strict implementation of the *Aborigines Act 1905* (WA), and an unprecedented Government interference into the lives of Aboriginal people (1988: 153). Neville, who had no previous administrative or academic experience in Aboriginal affairs prior to his appointment, soon considered himself somewhat of an amateur anthropologist, publishing several papers throughout his administration (which culminated in his book, *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community*, after his retirement (Haebich 1988: 154; Gray 2007: 93 - 114)).

The decades following A. O. Neville’s appointment saw slow but steady progress towards the solutions he espoused, beginning with the establishment of new, and expansion of existing ‘native settlements’ in the south of Western Australia (branded his ‘settlement scheme’, see Neville 1947: 133 - 143 for Neville’s own comments regarding Aboriginal living arrangements;

---

18 Though ‘mutually-beneficial’ does not necessarily denote a relationship entered into on equal terms, nor does it preclude exploitation. As Biskup argues, the relationship between pastoral bosses and Aboriginal workers was ‘not unlike the contractual relationship between a European feudal lord and his serfs’ (1968: 449).

19 The first of these was Beagle Bay Mission (now Beagle Bay community), established in 1891 by the Roman Catholic church (see Rowse 2017: 25 for a chronology of remote mission formation).
see Haebich 1988: 165 for comments on the settlement scheme; and Delmege 2015 for an analysis of a specific native settlement in Western Australia). For those who were not incarcerated in one of these settlements, life in a ‘town reserve’ (which were used as a base for those going to work on nearby farms or through periods of unemployment) was often the only option (1988: 222). Though A. O. Neville’s influence and motivations are contested, he was certainly one of the architects of the Western Australian iteration of the assimilation policy. Building on previous government policy, ‘full-blood’ Aboriginal people were to be segregated from the broader community (the belief that they would soon pass into extinction persisted well into the second half of the twentieth century, see Haebich 1988: 156; Rowse 2002: 168), and those of mixed descent (or ‘half-castes’) should be educated so that they could participate in the biological breeding-out of the Aboriginal ‘race’. That is to say, ‘half-castes’ should intermarry with the white ‘race’ to produce ‘quadroon’ (or ‘quarter-caste’) children, who should marry white and produce ‘octaroon’ children (Neville 1947; see also Jacobs 1990: 192 - 193; Zogbaum 2003; Solonec 2013: 76 - 84). By this stage, it was believed that enough of the ‘Aboriginal blood’ should have been bred out so that the resulting individual could participate fully in white society.

The ostensible purpose was to bring about permanent segregation of Aborigines of full descent, who were believed to be near extinction; and temporary segregation and training of those of part descent who would re-enter society as domestics and farm-workers, eventually blending with the white population through intermarriage (Haebich & Reece 1988).

It is these views that informed Neville’s enforcement of Western Australia’s Aboriginal affairs policy, until attempts to biologically assimilate the Aboriginal population gave way to attempts to culturally assimilate them instead, in what is broadly branded the ‘assimilation era’ (from around the 1930s onwards).

Indigenous Resistance and the March towards Equality

All those Acts, which are ostensibly designed to protect and define our rights, in one direction or another, can so easily be bent or subverted to facilitate the pressing demands of economic necessity - which is rarely our own economic
necessity. We all thought our land could not be touched, except by ourselves. It was not long, however, before we were disabused of that illusion! (Colbung, 1979: 101, emphasis in original).\textsuperscript{20}

Indigenous resistance to colonial advances was, of course, evident from the beginning. In 1988, Markus (1988: 2) emphasised the influence Indigenous people have had on the British political process since the early period of British occupation, arguing that ‘to the present there has been little historical research into this aspect of post-frontier politics and a number of misconceptions are to be found in the general works which cover the subject’. Though a large body of scholarly work on the subject has accumulated since the late 1980s, incongruity regarding the extent of British colonial violence, the frontier wars and even the general manner in which the colonial venture began in Australia is still present in contemporary public discourse (evidenced, perhaps, by events such as the recent public furore about the University of New South Wales encouraging the use of the term ‘invasion’ instead of ‘discovered’ or ‘settled’, see Bye 2016).\textsuperscript{21}

The early years of the Indigenous rights movement (Attwood (2003: 3 - 78) brackets this period as 1870 to 1930) was characterised by the desire to achieve equal civil rights, with Indigenous activists and groups emphasising their common humanity with non-Indigenous people. They positioned themselves as human beings, unbounded by race, culture and history. Attwood (2003: 78) argues that the desire to achieve rights on the basis of their status as Australian Indigenous people was present to a certain extent, however the priority remained to achieve an equal civil rights status. Off the back of prevailing European paradigms of scientific racism and social Darwinism that included an assumed ‘racial hierarchy’, Indigenous people were generally categorised throughout this period as somehow less civilised, less intelligent and essentially, less human, than their non-

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{20} Ken Colbung (1931 - 2010) was a prominent Noongar activist who, among other things, was instrumental in the repatriation of the head of Yagan, a Noongar warrior killed in 1833. See the Australian Broadcasting Corporation documentary ‘Yagan’ (2013).
\footnotesize\textsuperscript{21} The University of New South Wales came under public scrutiny in 2016 after it instituted a ‘diversity toolkit’ on Indigenous terminology, which was prescribed reading for some Undergraduate students. The toolkit encouraged the use of the term ‘invasion’ as opposed to ‘discovery’ or ‘settlement’. It also encouraged students to refer to ‘Indigenous Australians’ (instead of ‘Aborigines or Aboriginal people’) as having occupied Australia since ‘the beginning of the dreamtime’, as opposed to ‘for forty-thousand years’ (Bye 2016).
Indigenous counterparts. Tackling the issue of equal rights (above Indigenous rights) was a tactical move deemed more likely to succeed (Attwood 2003: 78).

Early campaigners adopted colonial political discourses to articulate their arguments, often incorporating elements of the myths of ‘struggle’ inherent in both biblical accounts of history and socialist paradigms (2003: xii; 28; 78). Attwood also notes the contribution of white activists and campaigners, whom he argues had two main sources of inspiration: anthropology and humanitarianism. Interestingly, in the interwar period the most prominent white activists were Christian, middle-class women (2003: 83).

Aboriginal spokespersons, and by the late 1920s a small group of whites, including clergymen, academics, female philanthropists, businessmen and politicians urged governments to accept that extinction was not an inevitability, that it was possible for Aborigines to ‘advance’ towards ‘civilisation’ with the appropriate guidance (Markus 1988: 4).

The 1920s saw the establishment of the first Indigenous political organisations: the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association in New South Wales, the Native Union in Western Australia, and the Australian Aborigines Association in South Australia. Shortly thereafter, William Cooper began the formation of the Australian Aborigines League (which, while active earlier, did not take on a formal structure until 1936 (Haebich 1988: 269; Markus 1988: 11; Attwood 2003: 32)). In 1938, the sesquicentenary of the arrival of the First Fleet, the Australian Aborigines League and the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association staged what many refer to as the first large-scale Indigenous political protest in Sydney. Entitled the ‘Day of Mourning’, this protest is often referenced as the beginning of the contemporary political movement to ‘change the date’ of Australia Day from January 26th to something more ‘culturally inclusive’ (see for example Purtill 2017).

---

22 Whether or not the Indigenous people were classified as ‘fauna’, a myth which has endured for decades, recently became a matter of public debate. There is no evidence that this was ever the case, however the claim continues to be made by politicians, media personalities and even academics today (see Das 2018).

23 In 2017 Fremantle City Council staged the first ‘culturally inclusive’ Australia Day-inspired celebration not held on January 26th, which was both preceded and followed by significant public and political backlash. I attended this event (entitled ‘One Day’) on January 28th 2017, which featured prominent Indigenous musicians, family activities and a number of rallying speeches.
Prior to 1900 in Western Australia, addressing Aboriginal disadvantage was an issue which politicians generally put in the ‘too hard basket’ (Bolton 1981: 125). Calls for reform from ‘do-gooders and troublemakers’ in the white middle class were ignored, while urges from rural pressure groups to increase measures of control of Aboriginal people were usually actioned accordingly (Bolton 1981: 125). Increasingly, Indigenous protest movements grew in Western Australia from the 1920s onwards (gaining traction in the wake of the Oombulgurri massacre in the East Kimberley in 1927) (Haebich 1988: 267).24 There were several notable voices of protest within the Western Australian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community alike, including missionaries Rodolphe Schenk, Mary Bennett and Ernest Gribble. The reach of these early campaigners was limited, however they engaged in democratic protest and employed methods such as writing letters to newspapers, pressure group action and, sometimes, union action (Haebich 1988: 269; Milnes 2005: 64).25 Like Attwood, Haebich describes an assimilationist undercurrent to these protest movements: ‘the[ir] aims…were essentially citizenship and assimilation into the wider community’ (1988: 269).

The Assimilation Era in Western Australia, 1930s the 1960s

By the 1930s, Neville had garnered enough of a reputation that his policy influence (chiefly his strict absorptionist views) expanded to several other States, and into the Federal policy arena (Haebich 1988: 156; 255). In 1936, following the Moseley Report (see Haebich 1988: 324 - 344; Milnes 2005: 58 - 60), the Native Administration Act 1936 (WA) (also known as the Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1936 (WA)) was passed.26 Many of the reforms within this Act were designed to achieve Neville’s ‘long-range plan’ for ‘breeding out’ Aboriginal people through strict marriage controls and the separation of ‘full bloods’ and ‘half-castes’ (Milnes 2005: 62). The amendments included the transition from the Aborigines Department and the Chief Protector of Aborigines to the Department of Native Affairs and the Commissioner

24 Randolph Stow fictionalised this event as the ‘Onmalmeri’ massacre in his 1958 classic novel, To the Islands. Haebich (1988: 267) describes the political implications of the ‘Onmalmeri’ massacre for the Aborigines Department in Western Australia, in what is not the only case of the fictionalised term filtering into academic literature (see Neumann 1998: 57).

25 Milnes argues, however, that this engagement with the press had limitations. They were often misquoted and/or chastised in replies that were subsequently given greater prominence by the conservative press (2005: 64).

26 Announced in 1934 after growing public concern of the treatment of Aboriginal employees (particularly on pastoral stations), the Moseley Royal Commission was assigned to ‘investigate, report and advise upon matters in relation to the condition and treatment of Aborigines’ (Haebich 1988: 326). The Commission was also partly called to address public concern regarding the spread of leprosy (Davidson, cited in Jebb 2002: 153).
of Native Affairs respectively (Native Administration Act 1936 (WA) s. 2); provisions to allow the Commissioner to become the legal guardian of all Aboriginal people up to the age of twenty-one (raised from sixteen) (Native Administration Act 1936 (WA) s. 8); and afforded the Commissioner the right to object to any marriage between ‘natives’ (Native Administration Act 1936 (WA) s. 45). Importantly, it also consolidated the idea that Aboriginal children could be removed from their home regardless of whether they had suitable guardians or not: effectively, making all Aboriginal persons under the age of twenty-one wards of the State, and allowing Neville and the Department of Native Affairs more leverage in their placement (Colbung 1979: 101; Haebich 1988: 351). From that age onwards, anyone categorised as a ‘quarter-caste’ or less was prohibited from associating with or marrying someone deemed a ‘native’ (those with full-blood status). These individuals were now forced into the white community and continuing a connection with their traditional law and culture was an act punishable by law. Thus, the administrative policies of the State during this period encouraged (often, by force) both cultural and biological assimilation.

While the Government did not officially adopt the policy of biological absorption, the 1936 Act nevertheless gave Neville the necessary powers for its implementation (Haebich 1988: 349).

By 1940, Neville had retired after ‘only limited success in implementing the policy of biological absorption’ (Haebich 1988: 352). The advent of World War Two had seen some changes in the lives of Aboriginal people living in Western Australia. Although several other pieces of legislation, such as the Native Administration Act 1905 - 1940 (WA)\(^{27}\) further restricted the movement of Aboriginal people around the State (largely resulting from the perceived danger of the spread of leprosy), the six thousand registered Aboriginal veterans, once returned were given the right to vote under the Electoral (War-Time) Act 1940 (Cth).\(^{28}\) The willingness of Aboriginal people to participate in both World Wars presented a challenge to those not in favour of equal civil rights: how was it that an Aboriginal Western Australian could defend their country in war, yet not enjoy a drink with their fellow soldiers upon return?

\(^{27}\) Not to be confused with the previous Native Administration Act 1936 (WA). The second, enacted in 1941, also goes by the name Native Administration Act Amendment Act 1941 (WA).

\(^{28}\) Sourced from the Federal Register of Legislation on 18/03/2019. For the latest information on Australian Government law, see https://www.legislation.gov.au.
Public opinion, helped by the war which followed Pearl Harbour, when Australia’s background came under scrutiny, no doubt prompted the [Western Australian] government to re-examine some of the basic principles governing Aboriginal administration (Berndt 1969: 39).

In 1944 *The Native (Citizenship Rights) Act 1944* (WA) was introduced, which legislated to grant full citizenship rights to Aboriginal people under certain conditions. In one of the most ostentatious displays of assimilatory policy, the conditions on Aboriginal people being considered citizens under the Western Australian State included being adult, literate, hard-working and maintaining no further ties to ‘tribal’ associations. As Bolton glibly describes the scenario, “prove yourself to be brave, truthful and honest,’ said the Blue Fairy to the wooden puppet Pinocchio, ‘and some day you will be a real boy” (Collodi, cited in Bolton 1981: 151). Policy adjustments aligning with the broader assimilation policy were occurring on other fronts, such as the institution of compulsory schooling for Aboriginal children from 1948 onwards. Nationally, since the 1930s A. P. Elkin’s calls for a ‘positive policy’ had begun to influence both Commonwealth Government and a myriad of Aboriginal campaigners to shift focus from the earlier protectionist and segregationist ideas towards policies based on assimilation, adaption and development (Attwood 2003: 101). As was the case in Western Australia, the focus of this period shifted to rest largely on ‘half-castes’ and others of mixed descent. This was in recognition of the fact that the racial categories assigned to Aboriginal people by the state affected their political and social entitlements (Fletcher 1992: 3). Attwood describes the shift towards assimilation as influenced by ‘a growing focus on a rapidly increasing number of ‘half-castes’, those people who continued to be regarded as a different racial category from ‘Aborigines’...these campaigners increasingly turned their attention to ‘half-castes’ and began to demand for them the rights other Australians enjoyed (2003: 101).

The enactment of the *Native Welfare Act 1954* (WA) accelerated progress towards these aims, repealing many of the clauses in the original 1905 Act and the 1936 amendments. The name of the Department was changed to the Department of Native Welfare (headed by the Commissioner of Native Welfare), and a number of the provisions relating to the forced movement of Aboriginal people were removed. Aboriginal men who had served in the
armed forces were, under some conditions, granted exceptions from the provisions of the Act. Legislative reform during this period was heavily influenced by the appointment of Stan Middleton to the position of Commissioner of Native Affairs (Host et al. 2009: 206; see also Lapham 2016):

He implemented the ongoing policy of assimilation but worked hard for the restoration of Aboriginal civil rights, and, during his tenure, much discriminatory legislation was dismantled.

This period also saw a historical event oft-cited by my participants when discussing the State Government’s previous ill-conceived policy decisions: the sale of Moola Bulla station. In response to continued instances of cattle-killing in the State’s north, and in the context of the Government’s movement towards the establishment of native reserves following the Roth Report’s recommendations, three stations were combined in 1911 to create the State’s largest Aboriginal pastoral station. The station, it was hoped, would provide a haven for Aboriginal people in the East Kimberley (drawing them away from other stations and thus, the cattle), as well as act as a training ground for prospective Aboriginal workers (Rowley 1970: 263; Green 1995: 72; ). Livestock was to be raised for food and income, rendering the station largely self-sufficient. By many accounts the endeavour was a success, and it remained so until the State Government’s decision to divest the property in 1954. Moola Bulla was bought by a pastoralist from Queensland. In his annual report as Native Welfare Commissioner in 1955, Middleton articulated a number of reasons behind the sale of the station, including the difficulty and potential embarrassment inherent in overseeing a site in which concupiscent station hands and young women cohabited and the challenge of recruiting and retaining ‘dual-purpose’ white staff to oversee the native labour (Western Australian Government 1955: 12). Irrespective of the merits of these arguments, the outcome of the sale was ‘unfortunate’ for the Aboriginal people who had called Moola Bulla home (Bolton 1981: 154). The new owners had promised to look after the interests of the Aboriginal population (or, at least, so the Government asserted, see Western Australian Government 1955: 12), however shortly following the handover Aboriginal residents were quickly evicted. An embarrassed Native Welfare Department promptly issued vehicles to the area and dispersed the evictees, with very little follow-up support, throughout northern towns such as Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek (Commonwealth of Australia 1997: 111; Alannah
A viable case can be made that many of the social problems experienced by remote and rural communities in this part of the Kimberley today emanate from this one event.

The *Native Welfare Act 1963* (WA) removed yet more of the protectionist conditions imposed on Aboriginal people across the State. The Commissioner of Native Affairs was no longer the guardian of all Aboriginal children in the State, and Aboriginal people were no longer restricted by the ‘leprosy line’ that had previously kept the northern and southern Aboriginal populations separate. The same child welfare and criminal code legislation now applied to Aboriginal people: this could be understood as progress towards equality, if viewed through the lens of the ‘legal equality’ described by Sanders (2009: 7). Perhaps most importantly, there were murmurings of the possibility of achieving equal wages for Aboriginal workers, though the amendments stopped short of legislating for this. The 1967 referendum granted Aboriginal people full citizenship rights, allowed them to be enumerated in the census, and, for the first time on such a large scale, allowed the Federal Government to legislate Indigenous affairs policy. Many milestones of the doctrine of assimilation had been achieved, though an equal (if not larger) number had not.

A tension that emerges if equality is considered the primary principle governing Indigenous affairs policy is revealed by the perception, though, that achieving socio-economic equality could eradicate Indigenous social, historical and cultural distinctiveness (Sanders 2009: 7). This concern is still a prominent feature in Australian public (and anthropological) discourse, and is discussed in detail in later chapters.

The final alternative principle is difference and diversity, and the 1970s saw the dawn of a new era self-determination era governed by these principles. The post-war campaign for Indigenous rights was typified by a new political organisation, the Council for Aboriginal Rights, and was dominated by ‘whites, and their conceptions of race, history and rights’ (Attwood 2003: 136). One of the prominent methods employed during this period rested on the assumption that the general public did not understand the plight of Indigenous people: and, therefore, ‘getting the public to know the truth’ would see the struggle for Indigenous rights triumph (2003: 140 - 141). Indeed, prominent activist Shirley Andrews once
commented that the struggle was equivalent to ‘kicking the “white” population and trying to arouse a spark of decent feeling’ (Andrews, cited in Attwood 2003: 140).

Several participants echoed the sentiment that the general public had limited knowledge of both the historical and contemporary situation facing Indigenous Australians. On the historical situation in the Kimberley, Bishop Christopher Saunders of the Catholic Diocese of Broome said:

That’s really the heart of it. We’ve gotta understand the history of this country. We have got no idea exactly what happened, you know? When the Duracks and the McDonalds, and all the famous pastoralists moved into the Kimberley and set up their kingdoms and grass castles, what effect did that have [on] the people on the ground? That’s not written about. Well...and if it is...it’s more often dismissed than anything else (Bishop Christopher Saunders, pers.comm., March 2017).

I asked a number of participants whether they believed that the challenges regarding the sustainability and viability of remote Aboriginal communities would be an issue debated in the (then upcoming) 2017 Western Australian election. Historically, it is unusual for issues within Indigenous affairs to have an impact on the outcome of Australian elections, and most participants conceded this; then head of the Regional Services Reform Unit, Grahame Searle, said that he would be shocked if the State’s remote communities were one of the big election issues, commenting for most people, ‘it’s just not relevant’ (Grahame Searle, pers.comm., October 2016).

**The Collision of Three Movements: Equal Wages, Citizenship and Welfare**

Ideas regarding achieving citizenship rights, equality and the Federal Government control of Indigenous affairs were not seen as intuitively linked until the 1950s. This was a crucial turning point, as it led to a political movement which pushed for a shift towards Federal control, overthrowing racial discrimination and granting citizenship for Indigenous people which was seen by campaigners as a set of reforms that naturally belonged together, and should be achieved through constitutional change (Attwood 2003: 164). The 1960s was a

---

‘crucial decade’ for Aboriginal political participation (Fletcher 1992: 1), in which equal wages were granted to Aboriginal stockmen (first in the Northern Territory following a protracted struggle, and shortly thereafter in Western Australia). It also saw the referendum which led to two changes in the Commonwealth of Australia constitution:

- It deleted the italicised passage from Section 51 (xxvi) which prohibited the Federal Parliament from making laws relating to ‘people of any race, other than the aboriginal race,’ granting the right to intervene in State Indigenous affairs policy, and;

- Removed section 127 which excluded ‘Aboriginal natives’ for being counted ‘when reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth.’

These changes effectively granted equal civil rights to Indigenous Australians (if more symbolically than practically, see Attwood & Markus 1998; Rowse 2017; 225-226) and paved the way for the Federal Government to legislate for and fund Indigenous affairs policy Australia-wide, rather than just in its Territories. These events were seen as major achievements in the Indigenous rights movement, and fit snugly into the overarching assimilatory paradigms common at the time. They were also, however, significantly influenced by international developments, as an international recognition of the plight of Indigenous people (and of their distinctive rights) was growing: ‘foreign criticism, or fear of it, not only encouraged reform but actually led Australia to make policy changes’ (Attwood 2003: 171).30

In the early 1960s it could be argued that the conceptualisation of Aboriginality in Australian public discourse was still inextricably tied to the concept of a ‘traditional’ Aboriginal identity. As Attwood (2003: 316) articulates it, ‘in the context of a much greater push for aboriginal [sic] rights, it was both possible and necessary to articulate an indigenous or aboriginal identity...and a particular form of Aboriginality at that.’ By emphasising

---

30 Haebich argues that a ‘world opinion’ of Australia’s treatment of its Indigenous population had been established significantly earlier, in the 1920s, following the establishment of the League of Nations. Several other international organisations, such as the Association for the Protection of Native Races and the Aborigines Friends’ Association, sent recommendations that reached the Western Australian Government during this period (Haebich 1988: 255 - 256).
traditional culture, and therefore its ‘otherness’, Aboriginal discourse establishes itself firmly in opposition to the dominant culture (Ariss 1988: 136). The performance of this specific type of Aboriginality was determined (and demanded) by settler Australia. Historically, the ‘authentic’ Aboriginal person in Australia has been seen and validated (by colonial governments, the discipline of anthropology, and thus the general public) on the basis of their appearance of being ‘traditional’. The view of Australia’s Aboriginal people throughout much of our history has stemmed from paradigms inherent in international scholarship, in which indigenous ‘culture’ was seen as something that could, and would, be lost if contact with the superior white culture exceeded a certain level.31 Berndt commented on this development in 1969, ‘lately a new interest in traditional Aboriginal culture seems to have been developing and a new respect for it, even though cynics might say that tolerance comes more easily now, when so much of it has already disappeared’ (Berndt 1969: 18).

For this reason, it follows that for the Indigenous rights movement to have the best chance of success, those activists and leaders in settled Australia ought to borrow elements of what was perceived to be ‘traditional’ culture, and ensure they were seen to possess the same attributes. As Attwood comments, ‘as they forged a sense of Aboriginality rooted in an ideal of aboriginal [sic] culture situated in Northern Australia, they identified themselves with these other peoples’ land...they embraced the meanings attributed to Aboriginal lands in remote Australia by anthropology and more popular Australian discourses’ (2003: pp. 320 - 321). As a result, the fight for land rights and other Aboriginal activist causes in Australia’s settled centres were often based around Yirrkala, the Gurindji and other significant (and northern or central Australian) rights frontiers. It could be argued that this approach is still in use today, perhaps typified by the continued use of the Yolngu word ‘Makarrata’ (or ‘coming together after a struggle’) to describe the ambitions of Indigenous leaders at the forefront of current political discussions regarding Indigenous constitutional recognition.

The movement towards the recognition of Indigenous rights to land, in a Western Australian context, began in the Kimberley. Legislative amendments in 1963 removed the Commissioner of Native Welfare as the custodian of all Aboriginal Children, removed restrictions on movement associated with the leprosy line and brought Aboriginal offenders

---

31 For a case study of what impact these ideas had on one specific Aboriginal group, see Host et al. (2009: 15 - 35).
in line with all other Western Australians with regards to the criminal code and child welfare legislation; importantly, however, it made no change to the rationing system in place on pastoral stations, and, though there was growing public support, no efforts were made to introduce an equal wages scheme (Milnes 2005: 76 - 77; Host et al. 2009: 206 - 207). Jebb similarly argues that the subject of equal wages was ‘carefully avoided’ at a legislative level throughout the 1950s and early 1960s (2002: 205). From the 1920s until the early 1950s, then, a number of factors drove the undermining of pre-settlement modes of living for Aboriginal people in the Kimberley, and reinforced the pastoral model, which remained pervasive until the 1960s. These included continued aggressive pastoral expansion, the pastoral stations’ provision of rations, clothing and especially tobacco, and the Kimberley leprosy campaign.

By the early 1960s, there was a change in official mindset which led to ‘full blood’ Indigenous people being included in the Australia-wide assimilation project (as Rowse argues, the relative significance of ‘blood’ and ‘culture’ waxed and waned, but Departments had by this time learnt that behaviour could not be predicted solely on the degree of an individual’s Indigenous descent). Labour shortages in key pastoral areas in the north of Western Australia, in part, helped to bolster a growing movement towards equal wages for Aboriginal stockmen (see Smith 2006: 248). Increases in the scale of social welfare payments were also rolled out (Rowse 2017: 230 - 234). These measures contributed to the process of dismantling the pastoral station system, without providing any institutional alternative for those forced to leave the stations. This was furthered by the introduction of aged pensions, the widespread sale of depreciating pastoral stations in the mid-1960s and the removal of Aboriginal children from stations to missions or ‘hostels’, among other factors. Thus, even before the equal wages decision came into effect, Aboriginal people were experiencing the centralising force of these new policy decisions, increasingly encouraged off station land and towards the larger towns. The timing of this centralisation is crucial to Jebb’s (2002: 3) argument that the literature surrounding the equal wages decision often focuses too much on the singular ‘equal wages decision’ event, and ignores the evidence that these processes had already begun. This view, which she terms the ‘eviction after wages’ theme, underestimates Aboriginal agency and fails to take into account the period’s changing socio-economic circumstances (Jebb 2002: 3). Others too note that some centralising policies were implemented prior to the equal wages case, however all acknowledge that the equal wages decision was the single largest factor in the mass migration of Aboriginal people in northern

After the decision was implemented (a three-year grace period was offered to allow pastoral workers to transition), many Aboriginal workers and their families experienced a sudden and forceful eviction from stations. The centralisation of so many dispossessed groups into larger regional towns across Western Australia, and the resulting social dysfunction, led to a strong desire among many to return to their ‘traditional’ country: a process occurring simultaneously in other states and Territories (see for example, various accounts throughout Peterson & Myers 2015). Thus Yu (cited in Bunbury 2002: 142) argues that the mass migration resulting from the equal wages case was, in large part, responsible for the ensuing outstation movement that led to the proliferation of remote communities in Western Australia’s north today. According to Jebb, ‘the financial costs of providing adequate support for a dispossessed population of Aboriginal people were never realistically addressed or contemplated by governments’ (2002: 296) (see also Sutton 2009: 68).

The decentralisation of Indigenous groups throughout Australia, which occurred from the 1960s onwards, was a defining feature of the self-determination era. The rise of the self-determination paradigm, influenced by international factors such as the American Civil Rights movement and the growing interest of multilateral groups such as the United Nations (see Dodson 1994) and by drastic domestic reforms initiated by the Whitlam Government, brought with it a space in which the issue of Indigenous rights could finally be prioritised. The movements that resulted, including land rights and native title, were an expression of the Australian state’s most large-scale granting of particular rights and interests (in land and other areas) to Indigenous people.

The Self-Determination Era in Western Australia, 1970s the 2000s

The use of the term ‘self-determination’ in the Australian Indigenous affairs lexicon emerged in the mid 1960’s alongside growing criticisms of Australia’s ‘coercive and ineffective’ assimilationist policies (Rowse 2017: 264). After a lengthy policy history principally

---

32 As Rowse (2017: 264) notes, the term ‘self-determination’ briefly emerged in 1925 when the news media had used it to describe the program of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA).
concerned with centralising ‘full-blood’ Aboriginal populations into missions or reserves, the self-determination era saw governments actively support the return of Indigenous individuals and families to more remote areas of the continent, often (but not always) in line with traditional affiliations. The importance of various international influences throughout this period are also important to consider (see later in the chapter; as well as Attwood 2003; Kowal 2015a: 131).

Various interpretations about the emergence and significance of the decentralisation process and the resulting establishment of remote Indigenous communities have arisen as part of the growing public debate of past decades. It has been argued that outstations can be viewed as ‘one of the clearest manifestations of self-determination’ (Peterson & Myers 2015: 4). This positioning of outstations as a symbolic ‘rallying point’ for supporters of Indigenous rights is likely one of the reasons the Western Australian Government’s proposal to close them was met with such resistance (Peterson & Myers 2015: 4). It is important to remember, however, that outstations have existed in a variety of forms since as early as the first decade of the twentieth century (Edwards 2016: 30). In a useful formulation for reconciling this difference, Brooks & Plant (2015: 121 - 134) divide the outstation movement into two phases; the mission era (pre 1970s), and the self-determination era (post 1970s). They argue that a minimalistic description of both phases could be, ‘[a movement] involving a person or group that wants to be able to live, if not full-time at least part-time, at or near a place remembered from or associated with the past’. A complex array of factors saw the development of the ‘outstation’ concept as it is usually referred to today: missionaries encouraged decentralisation; the demise of the long-held pastoral model, largely due to equal wages movement; a desire to protect against mining and prospecting; the level of social dysfunction in some larger communities; the advent of welfare, among others (Myers & Peterson 2016: 6 - 9). All of these factors had come into play, albeit in varying levels of intensity across different areas, prior to the beginning of the ‘outstation proper’ movement.

The outstation proper movement is generally conceived to have begun with the election of the Federal Whitlam Labor Government in 1972. The determination of the first land rights case was handed down in April 1971, and is often referred to as ‘the Gove Case’. The Yolngu people of North-east Arnhem Land had brought their case in opposition to a proposed

bauxite mine which threatened to cause harm to a number of sacred and significant sites in their area. Though Justice Blackburn ruled that the Yolngu did have a system of law and custom relating to their land, this system was not applicable under Australian law and therefore could not be recognised (Milirrpum & Others vs. Nabalco Pty Ltd & the Commonwealth of Australia (1971) 17 FLR 141). In response to the a speech by then Prime Minister, William McMahon, on Australia Day 1972, the ‘Aboriginal tent embassy’ (an occupation of Indigenous people in protest of the lack of advancement of land rights legislation) was established on the lawns outside Parliament House; Peterson & Myers (2015: 9) suggested this could be termed ‘the ultimate outstation’.34

The Whitlam Government was thus elected in December of 1972 with a mandate to legislate for Aboriginal land titles (Rowse 2017: 296), and established a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Land Rights in 1973. This Royal Commission was a ‘major proximate stimulus for the establishment of outstations’ (Meehan & Jones, cited in Peterson & Myers 2015: 10). With the principle of choice now being the dominant paradigm in Indigenous affairs, coupled with the complimentary policy platform of self-determination (and, perhaps more importantly, the provision of funds to support Indigenous people’s choice to return to country), the first outstations (of the outstation proper movement) began to appear in the Northern Territory in the early 1970s (Peterson & Myers 2016: 10). Meanwhile in Western Australia, the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act (1972) (WA) was introduced, alongside the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA). The Native Welfare Department was abolished and an Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority was established largely in its place (Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act 1972, s. 7). Importantly, the Act also established the Aboriginal Lands Trust (ALT) (Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act 1972, s. 20). Initially, the Act was intended to vest exclusive rights in all mineral and resource wealth on Aboriginal reserves to the ALT; after a drawn-out political quarrel, however, the legislation was watered-down and many of the potential functions of the new Planning Authority were divested to existing Government Departments (Bolton 1981: 167). With Whitlam on the scene, and considering the political difficulties of confronting the already powerful resource, mineral and land industry bodies in the State, the Planning Authority was merged with the Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1974 (Bolton 1981: 168).

34 See also Attwood (2003: 307, 341 - 349).
In the mid-1980s, mining and pastoral lobbies in the State enlisted the Brian Burke-led State Government to bolster a continued campaign against land rights (Rowse 2017: 300). The Western Australian Chamber of Mines ran a powerful advertisement campaign, throughout which it was argued that the aspirations of Aboriginal people with respect to land rights were detrimental to the national interest (Mickler 1998: 219). One TV advertisement, for example, depicted a pair of black hands building brick wall across the State of Western Australia, as if to wall off a large portion of it (namely, the resource-rich north) from the rest of the State’s citizens. Concurrently in 1984, the *Aboriginal Land Inquiry Report* (the Seaman Inquiry) was presented to the Western Australian Government. This report was the result of over twelve months of examining submissions from interested parties, and made a number of recommendations to Government regarding the most appropriate form of tenure over lands reserved for the use and benefit of Aboriginal people. Seaman’s report and associated discussion papers concluded that Aboriginal people in Western Australia had not been treated equally before the law historically, arguing that Aboriginal people and organisations were left disadvantaged and their organisations with pressing financial need; he recommended provisions granting Aboriginal people significant powers of negotiation as a redress to their lack of economic power (including the right of Aboriginal people to veto any unamenable mining venture on Aboriginal land) (Seaman 1984; see also Rowse 2017; 330). The Burke Government did not enact Seaman’s recommendations. In 1986, the Federal Hawke-led Labour Government abandoned attempts to institute national land-rights legislation. It was clear that both State and Federal Labor Governments were unwilling to legislate for land rights in the face of significant industry and political opposition.

There were arguments made throughout this period that the policy enacted in the burgeoning era of self-determination was not far removed from assimilatory policy of previous decades. While this may have been true of those centralised groups living in urban areas of Western Australia, the situation was quite different in remote areas (Fletcher 1992: 5). Nevertheless, she argues, there are always ‘accumulated residual effects to policies’ in either the general community or in administrative structures (1992: 5). To exemplify this, Fletcher points to both the high incarceration rates of Aboriginal people in the State, and, importantly, the continued efforts to relocate Aboriginal communities well after the official

---

35 See also Libby (1989) for an analysis of the groups and interests that lobbied against land rights in Western Australia throughout the 1980s.
assimilation policy had been abandoned (1992: 5). After more than 150 years of overt Government exclusion of Aboriginal people from the political process, the ability of Aboriginal groups to influence policy processes, especially in comparison to other citizens, was (and perhaps remains) thoroughly impeded. Parliamentary representation is one form of political participation, but Australia is also a federalist system with numerous institutions which ‘provide citizens with an assortment of routes to influence government (Fletcher 1992: 6). There are many complexities of Australia’s federalist system of Government, in which powers and responsibilities are divided between three ‘layers’ or ‘levels’. Fletcher notes that there is a tendency of Australian commentators to see the policy process as hierarchical: in actuality, however, the process is borne of a diversity of actors, interactions, and intergovernmental relations (1992: ix; 25 - 39). Citing Galligan and Uhr, she points to a system of ‘shared and overlapping powers, rather than a co-ordinated one of governments with separate and distinct powers (Fletcher 1992: 25). The central tenet of these responsibilities is the delivery of services and implementation of services individuals and groups throughout the country.

As of the early 1990s, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) acted as the central administrative body overseeing the administration of Indigenous affairs policy in Australia. ATSIC combined a number of executive and representative functions present in earlier bodies such as the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Aboriginal Development Commission. ATSIC’s objectives were as follows (Pratt & Bennett 2004):

. Advise governments at all levels on Indigenous issues

. Advocate the recognition of Indigenous rights on behalf of Indigenous peoples regionally, nationally and internationally, and

. Deliver and monitor some of the Commonwealth government’s Indigenous programs and services

ATSIC’s representative structure was based on a number of regional councils, each appointing one member to a national board. This regional base, which in theory promoted local input and decision-making, was articulated to me as ATSIC’s greatest strength (Fred
Chaney, pers.comm., April 2018). In Western Australia, ASTIC oversaw the delivery of two Commonwealth programs to remote Aboriginal communities: the Community Development Employment Project Scheme (CDEP), which provided income to remote residents, and the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP), which was responsible for providing housing and other infrastructure. Thus the Federal Government, in large part, remained financially responsible for the provision of services in remote areas around the country, including in Western Australia, until the abolition of ATSIC in 2004 (discussed in the conclusion of this chapter). The void left by ATSIC has never completely been filled, and has paved the way for the incremental withdrawal of Federal funding from multiple areas of remote Aboriginal service delivery.

One tangible measure of the impact of the self-determination era are the tracts of land ‘given back’ to Indigenous Australians under various forms of tenure. Writing in 2007, primarily to engage with what he termed the ‘high-profile public policy debate’ regarding the relationship between Indigenous land and economic development, Altman, Buchanan & Larsen (2007: 1) highlight the peculiar lack of any single comprehensive map that outlines Indigenous land holdings across all jurisdictions (suggesting the complexities of differing land rights and native title legislation across both State and Federal jurisdictions as a probable cause).\(^\text{36}\) Despite this shortfall, they argue that the term the ‘Indigenous estate’ has grown over the (then) past decade within Indigenous policy circles to encapsulate all Indigenous landholdings on a national scale (2007: 2).\(^\text{37}\) Taylor notes that outside the mining towns and main service centres, the population living throughout remote and very remote Australia is overwhelmingly Indigenous (2006: 5). Indigenous people, they therefore argue, dominate the vast majority of Australia’s land mass (though, as Altman, Buchanan & Larsen point out, ‘this institutional dominance is held within a context of significant marginality and socioeconomic disadvantage’ (2007: 4)).

The Australian Statistical Geography Standard’s five ‘remoteness areas’ are used to classify social, demographic and geographical data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This same structure is frequently used by anthropologists and other analysts. Taylor argues the

\(^{36}\) This is the case, Altman, Buchanan & Larsen argue, despite the existence of institutions in Australia such as the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC) and the National Native Title Tribunal (NNTT).

\(^{37}\) For further reading on the Indigenous estate, see ILC (1997); Altman & Pollack (2001); Lane (2005).
term ‘remote’ denotes, ‘a distinction in social and economic geography between closely settled areas and sparsely settled areas, with economic development and service provision severely impeded in the latter by force of relative locational disadvantage, low accessibility, and a specialisation of economic activity’ (2006: 31). The five remoteness categories are ‘major cities’, ‘inner regional’, ‘outer regional’, ‘remote’ and ‘very remote’, and are measured (as Taylor suggests) on the residents relative remoteness and access to services (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018a).

A number of key aspects of the demography and population distribution of Indigenous Australians have changed since Altman (self-admittedly, crudely) estimated the Indigenous estate in 2007 (based on recently-released 2006 census data). He was correct in supporting Pollack’s (2001:30) prediction that, ‘the Indigenous estate would be likely to increase significantly in size over the next decade, particularly as a result of determinations of native title and the development of ILUAs [Indigenous Land Use Agreements] under the NTA’ (Altman 2007: 9). In 2016, 649,171 individuals identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (an increase of about 30% from 455,030 in 2006). The ABS estimates that the net undercount rate for Indigenous Australians in this Census was 17.5% (equivalent to 137,750 individuals). This would put the number of individuals identifying as Indigenous at roughly 750,000 (and about 3.3% of the Australian population). This represents a 19% increase from 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018b; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018c; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018d). 38

Figure 4: Indigenous Identification by Remoteness Area in Western Australia (ABS, 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABS Remoteness Area</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Not Stated</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>% Rate of Indigenous Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Remote</td>
<td>19,239</td>
<td>38,749</td>
<td>9,375</td>
<td>67,353</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>9,665</td>
<td>64,299</td>
<td>9,644</td>
<td>83,602</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer Regional</td>
<td>10,419</td>
<td>157,458</td>
<td>15,302</td>
<td>183,178</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Regional</td>
<td>5,821</td>
<td>194,519</td>
<td>16,702</td>
<td>217,037</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Cities</td>
<td>30,242</td>
<td>1,777,672</td>
<td>108,929</td>
<td>1,916,847</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

38 The ABS recommends that the estimates of the Indigenous population be interpreted with ‘a degree of caution’, see Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018d).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>W.A. Total</th>
<th>Australia Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>75,978</td>
<td>649,171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,237,541</td>
<td>21,341,231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>160,891</td>
<td>1,411,491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,474,410</td>
<td>23,401,892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In sum, both the number of individuals who identify as Indigenous, and, up until recently, the number of those choosing to live in remote and very remote parts of Australia, appear to be increasing. 39

A substantial proportion of the Indigenous population, many more than of the non-Indigenous population, live in remote and regional areas. This is particularly the case in Western Australia. As public and political support for the self-made and managed model of remote Aboriginal community has waned, the expectations of government service delivery of residents has not. This is the context in which the remote community closure debate developed.

**Indigenous Affairs Policy in a New Era**

Tensions between the Commonwealth and State Governments, particularly with regards to the funding, management and delivery of services, have always been a feature of Australian political affairs. Thus the debates regarding the Federal Government withdrawal of funding for essential and municipal services, and more recently, housing, for remote Indigenous communities, should not be viewed as an unusual political event. To provide an example from another jurisdiction: after the Northern Territory was granted self-governance in 1978, responsibility for outstation services was divided amongst two jurisdictions. The new Territory Government was responsible for funding and managing services to Indigenous ‘townships’, of which there were about 70, while the Commonwealth retained responsibility for ‘smaller communities’ or ‘outstations’, of which there were closer to 500 (Peterson & Myers 2016: 13).40 This funding system remained in operation until 2007, when the Commonwealth handed back responsibility to the Territory for these smaller communities (along with $20 million dollars annually to fund them). In a Western Australian context, this

---

39 This continual increase in numbers, according to Taylor, is due to a combination of high natural increase, improved enumeration (see Dungey & Hunter 2003), increased self-identification and a growing pool of potential identifiers due to the expansionary effects of intermarriage (see also Gray 1997; 1998).
40 Peterson & Myers (2016: 13) argue that this terminology was confusing as ‘outstation’ in fact encompassed a wide array of settlement types, many substantially older and larger than is implied by its current usage.
same tension has been a hallmark of Federal-State relations, particularly in the past three decades and particularly with regards to Western Australia’s large number of remote communities (see, for example, Sexton 1996: Muir 1999: Robbins 2000).

Accounts of when the most recent paradigm shift in Indigenous affairs occurred differ, though most pinpoint the Federal Howard Government’s 2004 abolition of ATSIC as the harbinger (Sanders 2008: 187-202, see also Sullivan 2011: 1; Kowal 2015a: 160; Peterson & Myers 2016: 193, among others). At this time, Howard defended his Government’s decision by claiming that ‘the experiment in elected representation for Indigenous people has been a failure’ (cited in Peterson & Myers, 2016: 193). The year 2007 saw both the Northern Territory Emergency Response, which gave the Commonwealth sweeping powers to intervene in the lives of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory (facilitated by a suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth)), and the transferral of direct Commonwealth funding for remote communities to the Northern Territory Government. These policy shifts occurred in tandem with (or perhaps, because of) a growing public and political debate about such communities.

Returning briefly to historical policy antecedents, there is a parallel between the equal wages decision and the Western Australian Government’s proposal to close a significant number of the State’s remote communities: both events are characterised by a lack of substantive government planning for the socio-economic and demographic changes they had the potential to create. Thus, the very real fear existed that large-scale closures of remote communities without adequate preparation to address issues such as homelessness could potentially lead to similar outcomes to those that eventuated fifty years ago.

The framing of community closures with reference to the equal wages case was a common response throughout my interviews. Western Australian Labor Senator and Yawuru man Patrick Dodson provided perhaps the most descriptive account:

And then the response of industry, the pastoral industry, and the Governments...well, people were just dumped in towns. Social securities became a benign measure that was thought to be the way to solve the problem. No one was trained, no one was given jobs, no one was given a degree of respect.
And the decimation caused to Aboriginal people...[it was] huge. Alcohol...all the worst things happened. Alcohol and family breakups and authority structures, knowledge lost...I saw that. And my thing is, are we gonna repeat this? Is this what’s gonna happen? Are we just gonna bring people from some distant location, plonk them into a major town...into a Geraldton or somewhere, create a ghetto in those places where those people are going to be subjected to social attitudes and behaviours that are gonna be intolerant?

They’re gonna find themselves having miserable lives, because they’re totally in an alien world. You know? (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., March 2017).

**Indigenous Rights in a Contemporary Context**

In some respects, it could be argued that the same pan-Aboriginal identity that emerged in political discourses throughout earlier years of the Indigenous rights movement remains today. However, the broad decentralisation seen throughout the 1970s (and onwards), the advent of native title in the 1990s, and the influence of the international push towards a recognition of Indigenous groups, I would argue, have led to a rising recognition of 'Aboriginal' Australia as consisting of multiple smaller, dispersed, and bounded groups. Especially as a response to native title, Sullivan (2011: 6) argues that Aboriginal groups in Australia ‘have devoted two decades or more to constructing the boundaries of their various cultures.’ One somewhat predictable outcome of the native title era has been that many of these groups, in the pursuit of establishing their homogeneity, have instead ended up in a state of internal conflict. As Sullivan (2011: 6) points out, this conflict in turn breeds more scepticism of their minority rights (this is the 'bedrock of minority rights scepticism'). Many would argue that this is indeed the case; contemporary Aboriginal leaders who speak out against what many believe is the ‘unified Aboriginal opinion’ have presented a challenge to white Australia’s understanding of Aboriginal identity.

---

41 Indicated perhaps, by the term ‘first nations’, which is commonly used to denote Indigenous groups in a number of countries.
Kowal discusses this theme with reference to the self-determination era. This time period, and related concepts such as self-management and community control, depended on the presupposition that Indigenous communities had some form of unified (or at least consensual) 'view' that could be determined through proper consultation (2015a: 163). This analysis rests on the idea of the ‘authentic Indigenous voice’. Drawing on Povinelli (2002), Kowal (2015a: 122 - 129) argues that the authentic Indigenous voice, as perceived by non-Indigenous Australians, denotes unique cultural knowledge and, until recently, has remained relatively free of challenge in public discourses. Kowal argues that the breakdown of this ‘fantasy’ is largely due to the rise in prominence of Indigenous intellectuals such as Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton, who have often disagreed ideologically with what one might consider the ‘mainstream’ Indigenous view (2015a: 163).

Former Liberal Senator for Western Australia Chris Back felt compelled to mention this, and the double standard he perceived to be inherent within it, when I interviewed him in 2016:

What’s interesting Jasmin, is that within the European community...we can all have a decent stoush about something and no one says ‘the European community’s breaking down.’ But as soon as you get Aboriginal people with a difference of opinion, somehow or another, it all seems to be, ‘oh well you know, they can't sing off the same sheet of music.’ Well...neither can we.

It never ceases to surprise me that when you get a range of opinions by a range of Aboriginal people, the mainstream media or the European community says ‘why can’t the Aboriginal people get their story together.’ Well, we can’t! (pers.comm., October 2016).

There are a number of features of the historical Indigenous rights movement with which parallels can be drawn today, and there remains scope for the recognition of uniquely-Indigenous rights to be broadened in the future. At this point, I would like to pose another question: given the recent emergence of policies and debates that are thematically reminiscent of bygone eras in Indigenous affairs, and given the uncertainty regarding the progress of contemporary Indigenous rights movements including constitutional recognition and treaties, have the core issues at the heart of Indigenous affairs
administration in Australia really changed? To quote Ronald Berndt in 1969, in a statement more or less applicable today:

It is quite true that conditions are better: opportunities exist today that would have been almost unthinkable in the immediate past. But this is not saying that there is not a great deal to do - in terms of increased educational opportunities, socio-economic advancement, more direct aid, the eradication of discriminatory practices, and so forth. In a way, the present situation presents problems that, again, were not even considered, or that people were unaware of, a few years ago (1969: 36).

While the above challenges elucidated by Berndt do indeed have a legislative component, there are also human dimensions to pursuing, for example, the eradication of discriminatory practices. Understanding the disparity in outcomes between Australia’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations (and indeed, answering the question as to whether Indigenous collectives have the ‘right’ to live in particular ways) is not possible without examining public opinion and the influences exerted on it. One primary force of influence over public opinion is the media, and this is the focus of the following chapter.
Chapter Three
Contrasting Values and How the News Media can Influence Them

In Australia, Aboriginal people who not so long ago were represented as newly emancipated and enfranchised, struggling proudly through their own institutions to march towards a new dawn both modern and exotic, are now represented as culpable by their own aberrant behaviour of the appalling conditions that, despite the good will and considerable expense of the public, they persist in perpetuating (Sullivan, 2011: 74).

When the remote community closure debate was garnering significant media attention, I had a conversation with an acquaintance. This acquaintance, I knew, had very little knowledge about the issues surrounding remote Aboriginal lifestyles in Western Australia, but were by no means an unreasonable or unmeasured person. In response to some of my comments about the potential community closures, that acquaintance said, ‘but doesn’t the Government have to close the communities because of all of the child sexual abuse?’ My curiosity regarding the impact the mainstream media coverage of the issue was having on the opinions of the public began to grow. John McBain, the head of the Western Australian chapter of the activist group ANTaR, framed his answer to my question about the media coverage of this issue around his local bowling club, nestled in an affluent area of Perth. His measure of the quality of journalism these days, he said, is based on the reactions he hears at the club after the six o’clock news bulletin. Of the reactions to the media coverage of the prospect of remote community closures, he said, ‘it’s racist, and it’s ignorant, and it’s uninformed’ (John McBain, pers.comm., March 2017).

In this chapter I focus on one particular vehicle through which values regarding remote Aboriginal people are reflected, constituted and reproduced: the media. The mainstream media can be a powerful institution, and has played as much of a role, both historically and contemporarily, in both Indigenous affairs policy debates and the Indigenous rights movement. Below, I analyse the media coverage of the remote community closure debate (and how my participants responded to it). I do this with the aim of unpacking the complex relationship between media representations, public opinion, and public policy, and exposing
how the fundamental tensions inherent in the Australian polity that I reference throughout play out in public discourses.

The mainstream media tends to be characterised by sensationalism and a lack of detailed analysis, which can lead to complex issues emerging as public crises. A vexed situation arises, however, when there are genuine findings of social dysfunction (including abuse) and crisis-like concern may be warranted. To what extent do media portrayals of such dysfunction generate discussion, and to what extent does this lead to social change? There are numerous detailed ethnographic accounts of social dysfunction in remote communities (see, for example, Purtill 2017). Such accounts have the scope to place this dysfunction within a broad historical context, and certainly represent a contribution to public and academic debate regarding genuine and concerning issues inherent in some remote Aboriginal communities (Peterson & Merlan 2014: 88 - 89). These types of accounts, though, do not generally disseminate to the general public. For the majority of the Australian population, the news media they consume are the only texts regarding the complex social issues in remote communities they regularly encounter. Whether or not the issues in remote communities denote a ‘crisis’ has been the subject of much anthropological debate, and will be reviewed in greater depth in Chapter Five. I certainly do not suggest that concerns associated with violence and abuse are not genuine, or that these issues do not play a large role in the lives of the residents of some remote communities. The violence and dysfunction in remote communities is indicative of normal human responses to intergenerational trauma (Weatherburn, cited in Frost 2014: 96). My central concern here is that the simple characterisations of Indigenous communities routinely found in the mass media reporting of issues of dysfunction (which lack specificity in relation to the level of complexity of such social issues), generate and perpetuate ideas that are largely (or even wholly) unhelpful. In this chapter I focus on what the media representations of residents living remotely throughout the remote community closure debate contributed to the public debate regarding remote Indigeneity more broadly.

The news media is ‘embedded in a configuration of institutions…includ[ing] a community of news organisations from which journalists derive a sense of ‘what’s news now’, and

---

42 This citation refers to Tadhgh Purtill’s 2017 monograph The Dystopia in the Desert, as opposed to works by the journalist James Purtill who is also referred to throughout this thesis.
government agencies upon which journalists depend for their raw materials’ (Fishman 1981: 98). McCallum (2007: 13) argues that many of the public crises in Indigenous affairs that arise in the media can be understood as orchestrated political campaigns with clearly-articulated arguments for political or legislative change. Drawing on recent analyses from the fields of anthropology, discourse analysis and media studies in Australia, I argue that media representations throughout the remote community closure debate were broadly reflective of the contrasting perspectives on the issue of the viability and sustainability of remote Aboriginal communities I discussed in the previous chapters. A strong theme throughout, however, was the representation of remote Indigenous residents as abnormal, threatening to social norms and in some way deficient. This media representation occurred simultaneously to a narrative of social dysfunction in remote communities articulated by some Government representatives, and may go some way to explaining why many in the general public struggle to see the value in remote Indigenous communities.

Pioneer in cultural studies Stuart Hall was an advocate of what he called the (then) ‘new view’ of analysing media representations. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s understanding of discourse, he argued that representation is not a passive process by which real ‘things’ are portrayed through a platform like the media. This, he argues, would imply that there is a fixed meaning of that ‘thing’. In actuality, ‘reality’ is just a series of interpretations. Nothing has a fixed meaning until it is represented, and therefore the process of representation is, in and of itself, constitutive (Hall et al. 2013: 3). Fforde et al. (2013: 163) also adopt this approach, arguing that discourse is both constitutive and productive.

[Discourse] is a social action which frames and constrains understanding, but that is also productive of knowledge and social relationships (Culler, cited in Fforde et al. 2013: 163).

Specifically of the news media, Lester (1980: 984) argues that ‘news is a product of reality-making activities, and not simply reality-describing ones.’ This process, of course, is inherently complex. As Cohen & Young (1981: 12) note, ‘the media neither simply supply information and entertainment, nor do they mechanically implant attitudes in the heads of their recipients.’
Importantly, Hall (2010: 72; 2013) argues that the way in which people understand the world around them derives from the way they see that world represented. This becomes particularly evident when discussing representations of those who are visibly different. Lester (1980: 985) cites Hall as one scholar who has shown ‘that political ideologies and historical circumstances form an inferential structure for selecting and interpreting events’. Therefore, media representations of Aboriginal people (particularly remote Aboriginal people) in Australia both influence and are influenced by public opinion, and are tied to Australia’s unique political and historical context as a post-settler society.

The stories told about Indigenous people are often the sole point of reference non-Indigenous Australians have. Bearing in mind that only about three percent of the Australian population is Indigenous, many non-Indigenous Australians have simply had little-to-no lived experience with Indigenous people (Sullivan 2011: 7). Against this dearth of understanding, media portrayals of Aboriginal people can fill the void. Media representations of Aboriginal people are told by specific actors and framed in a specific way. As Langton argues, ‘they [are] stories told by former colonists’ (1993: 33). Langton adds that it is not just the news media: ‘in film...there is a dense history of racist, distorted and often offensive representation of Aboriginal people’ (1993: 24).

In Western Australia, Mickler (1998) gives an account of the way in which stories told about Indigenous people can lead to judicial or legislative change, even if these stories are not based on evidence. In doing so, he points to broader contextual narratives that sit behind news media coverage, and, focusing on one in particular (the ‘myth’ of ‘Aboriginal privilege), he describes a similar set of tensions regarding the notion of ‘equality’ inherent in liberal democratic states as do I. Mickler analyses another instance of what could be termed a moral panic (or, in Mickler’s (1998: 53) words a ‘civil emergency’). In the early 1990s in metropolitan Perth, Western Australia, a debate raged about the controversial police practice of pursuing stolen vehicles at high-speeds in suburban areas (Mickler 1998: 52). Simultaneously, fear about youth crime, specifically burglaries and violent assaults, grew amidst claims of its radical increase by ‘demagogic media commentators, drum-beating politicians and [the] police’ (1998: 52). Based on crime statistics and a review of news media

---

43 See also Halloran et al. (1970); Cohen & Young (1972); Phillips (1973), among others.
44 Interestingly, in 2019 this is still a hot topic of debate in Western Australia.
headlines at the time, Mickler (1998: 19 - 51) concludes that the growing public fear was far less reflective of a genuine increase in crime (youth crime rates were not increasing) than a proliferation of headlines targeting Aboriginal youth as a socially-deviant group. The episode culminated in a 30,000-strong protest on the steps of the Western Australian Parliament calling for harsher criminal penalties: measures which were swiftly instituted in a complete rejection of recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody released just three months previously. Much of the discourse throughout this period, Mickler argues, focussed on a perceived unfairness inherent in Indigenous Australians being treated differently (i.e. enjoying certain privileges) to the rest of the population. The ‘fallacy’ of our contemporary political populism, Mickler (1998: 17) says, is the ‘pitting [of] Indigenous rights against the interests of ‘ordinary Australians’.

One way of gauging public opinion about a specific topic is through an analysis of media texts. McCallum (2007: 2) argues that studying media texts is one way of ‘knowing’ public opinion about complex social issues, as well as understanding the interplay between ‘local talk’, mediated representations and government policy. Analysing the period of the 2000s (throughout which the NTER occurred), McCallum shows how Indigenous Australians continue to be represented in the media as an underlying societal risk, and that parts of the Australian media have actively pursued a political agenda through the construction of ‘mediated public crises’ (McCallum 2007: 1). McCallum draws on British sociologist Stanley Cohen’s theoretical framework concerning ‘moral panics’ (Cohen 1972), which can be used to conceptualise human behaviour throughout major policy events such as the Intervention. According to Cohen, a moral panic occurs when:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates (Cohen 1972:9).

45 See McCallum’s previous work (2003; 2005; 2007).
Essentially, a moral panic can be defined as any circumstance in which an actor (often those in political power and often in conjunction with the mass media) defines a condition or a group as a threat to social values. The effect is that this condition or these groups are then vilified and thus marginalised in the popular imagination. Cohen’s moral panic framework was intended to be adjusted over time to suit different contexts and socioeconomic conditions; there are therefore few limits to its applicability. The public debate (including the statements given by Government Ministers and the contribution of journalists from mass-media outlets like New Corp’s *The Australian* newspaper) in recent decades has represented Aboriginal people living in remote communities as increasingly violent, and therefore as a threat to societal values (McCallum 2007: 4; 12). In 2007 the Federal Government introduced a set of broad legislative changes to law enforcement and the provision of welfare, among other things, in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory in response to allegations of rampant child abuse (this event is colloquially known as ‘the Intervention’, and also as the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER)). There is no doubt that the NTER constituted a moral panic (see McCallum 2007 4; Cowlishaw 2014: 37, among others), and I argue that the same can be said of the remote community closure debate.

Another way of interpreting the way in which Aboriginal people are represented in modern Australia is through the lens of deficit discourse, the term given to the type of ‘talk’ about Indigenous people that consistently defines them in terms of what they lack. It describes a mode of thinking that ‘frames Aboriginal identity in a narrative of negativity, deficiency and disempowerment’ (Fforde et al. 2013: 162). Indigenous deficit has framed the history of cultural relations since colonisation. Defining characteristics were and, arguably still are, described in unambiguously-loaded language that primarily identifies Aboriginal people in terms of what they lack (Dodson, cited in Fforde et al 2013: 164).

**Conceptualisations of Aboriginality in terms of racial theories based on blood quotient, coupled with notions of the ‘noble savage’ and the tenets of biological determinism, formed the basis of deeply pervasive (and persistent) concepts of**
‘authenticity’ wherein some people are designated as ‘less Aboriginal’, ‘less real’ or ‘less valid’ than others (Fforde et al. 2013: 164).

In sum, media studies have concluded that news reporting overwhelmingly constructs Indigenous Australians as a threat to societal norms (McCallum, Waller & Meadows 2012:103), and reinforces negative representations of Indigenous people as defined by what they lack. It is self-evident that given such negative representations, and given the marginalised position Indigenous Australians occupy within the contemporary Australian state, their ability to influence public policy is likely to be constrained. Schön & Rein define ‘intractable policy disputes’ as those issues in which actors narrate firmly-held agendas with the intention of influencing the news media and, therefore, policy outcomes (cited in McCallum, Waller & Meadows 2012: 103). Intractable policy disputes are ‘enduring and seldom resolved’, and, according to McCallum, Waller & Meadows, this may account for the lack of outcomes in the fields of Indigenous health and education. McCallum, Waller & Meadows (2012: 103) identify a body of literature that examines the lack of efficacy of marginalised groups in the debates surrounding such intractable policy issues, which highlights the limited access of Indigenous Australians to the ‘formal channels of influence’ among policy-makers compared to more established interest groups (such as mining companies, see Maddison 2009). This leads, they argue, to an Indigenous reliance on news media to promote their concerns and attempts to influence policy-makers.

They depend on mass media to relay their demands; public pressure is their only source of power (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer, cited in McCallum, Waller & Meadows 2012: 103).

In theory, the rise of social media should have led to unprecedented opportunities for participation in policy decision-making (Dreher, McCallum & Waller 2016: 24). Indigenous people across the world have pioneered innovative uses of social media for global connectivity and the assertion of Indigenous rights.47 Use of social media throughout the

---

46 For broader discussions of the persistence of these racial characteristics in the discourse surrounding Indigenous affairs, see Prout & Howitt (2009); Korte (2014); Kowal (2015b); among others.
47 See, for example, the Zapatistas campaign in Mexico, which was extremely successful in attracting mainstream international media attention through the use of digital media (Martinez-Torres, cited in Dreher, McCallum & Waller 2016).
remote community closure debate, particularly by the activist group SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA garnered wide-spread public support in opposition to the proposed community closures. Such was the power of this campaign that demonstrations against the Barnett Government’s proposal were held both across the country and across the world in cities such as Berlin and London. As ‘Heather’, a federal politician who chose not to be identified, explained to me:

I haven’t ever seen such a speedy response on an Aboriginal issue by Aboriginal communities, you know, collectively across Australia. The mobilisation was tremendous. Sitting in [a community] and watching older ladies sit on an IPad, tweeting and using Facebook was phenomenal (‘Heather’, pers.comm., August 2016).

Indigenous Use of Social Media in the Remote Community Closure Debate

The original SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA webpage was set up in 2014 by Sam Cook, a Nyikina woman from the Kimberley (then living in Brisbane). In March 2015, shortly after Tony Abbott made his public statement describing Aboriginal people living in remote communities as having made a ‘lifestyle choice’, Nelson Bieundurry wrote a Facebook post calling for action in response. Nelson is from Wangkatjungka (also called Christmas Creek), a remote community in the Kimberley just over one hundred kilometres south-east of Fitzroy Crossing.\(^{48}\) In it, he said:

Hmmm, maybe the best question to ask is this, do we even give a shit about what’s happening to us now?? Because the truth is...if you’re a blackfulla and you live in the Kimberley...in one way or another...this is going to affect you.\(^{49}\)

Broome local Mitch Torres responded to this Facebook post suggesting an organised movement be created to coordinate protests around Western Australia. It was at this point

\(^{48}\) Data relating to the specific locations of remote communities throughout was sourced from a Department of Aboriginal Affairs dataset, which was publically available at the onset of this course of research. Given the Departmental structures of the Western Australian Government has changed (and, as such, so have their respective websites), I have been unable to relocate the original source. Comparable maps and data sets are now available from the website of the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage, see <https://www.dplh.wa.gov.au>

\(^{49}\) See Clarke 2015 for an overview of the origins of the SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA movement and direct quotes (see also Dreher, McCallum & Waller 2016: 32 - 33).
that Torres, along with a small group of Kimberley women, liaised with Sam Cook and began to use the SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA webpage as a vehicle to mobilize support. Within several days, a national day of action was held in which an estimated 25,000 people marched around the country. By the middle of 2015, the campaign had collected an array of media releases from supporting organisations including the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, the Australian Council of Trade Unions\(^\text{50}\) and the New Zealand-based Maori Party (SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA 2015), as well as all Western Australian land councils. Australian celebrities, musicians and media personalities posted photos of themselves holding placards pledging their support to Western Australia’s remote communities, including Hugh Jackman, Guy Pearce, Russell Crowe, and the Veronicas. Politicians and activists from around the country also pledged their support, including (then) Senator Christine Milne and the Mabo family. International contributors included Violent Femmes bassist Brian Ritchie, philosopher and political activist Dr. Cornel West and academic and activist Angela Davis. As of October 2017, the original SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA Facebook page was still ‘liked’ by just over seventy-one thousand people. A number of subsidiary pages were still in existence, including Sosblakaustralia Los Angeles and Berlin Solidarity.\(^\text{51}\) This campaign was an example of innovative Indigenous use of digital media to create, coordinate and maintain a grass-roots campaign that was particularly successful in disseminating an opposing view on a policy issue of great importance to those impacted (see Dreher, McCallum & Waller 2016).

The activist campaigns in response to the Barnett Government’s proposal utilised language common to Indigenous rights discourses and the paradigm of self-determination in Australia. The heading on the SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA web page reads ‘to support all Aboriginal communities in Australia to remain in their homelands and on country & enable them to determine their own futures.’\(^\text{52}\) Much of responding discourse, however, pointed out that these activist groups had failed to either understand or adequately convey the fundamental challenges of resourcing remote communities. In response to a four-thousand strong protest in the centre of Melbourne, the Herald Sun newspaper published an

---

\(^{50}\) I attended a rally in Perth in April 2015, in which representatives from a number of unions relevant to the maintenance of essential services publically declared their support for the communities, and claimed that they would refuse to intervene if the Government instructed them to shut down critical power or water infrastructure (Field notes 2015: 246).

\(^{51}\) The original Facebook page is searchable under the name ‘stop the forced closure of Aboriginal communities in Australia’. Alternatively, all of the various pages can be found by searching the #SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA hashtag.

\(^{52}\) View this web page at <www.sosblakaustralia.com>.
article on the 10th of April entitled ‘Selfish Rabble Shut City’ (Hurley & Whinnett 2015). Former head of the Regional Services Reform Unit, Grahame Searle, said this:

You know, I had this journalist in London talk to me about how horrific it was that we couldn’t provide services to our remote communities. I had to explain to him that the distance from Perth to Kalumburu was the same distance as London to Moscow return, to put it into context (pers.comm., October 2016).

Dreher, McCallum & Waller (2016) discuss two Indigenous-led campaigns which, through the use of digital media, have attempted to influence policy decisions in Australia. The first is the SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA campaign discussed above. The second is the Recognise campaign, which promotes constitutional recognition of Australia’s Indigenous groups. Their article explores whether these new media channels actually facilitate greater Indigenous participation in policy discussions, or whether they are simply ‘empty signifiers’ (Jenkins & Carpentier, cited in Dreher, McCallum & Waller 2016: 26). The two case studies are contrasted throughout; as described above, the SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA campaign was community-led, whereas the Recognise campaign was a government-funded, top-down campaign. Dreher, McCallum & Waller conclude that although new media technologies can provide greater scope for Indigenous voices to be heard, there are other barriers to practical participation such as the difficulties inherent in forming alliances with mainstream media outlets. They also argue that the past decades have seen a narrowing selection of some amplified Indigenous voices (2016: 34). In other words, the challenge for increasing Indigenous participation in policy decisions is not so much a lack of opportunity to express an opinion, but rather the lack of being heard by those in positions of influence.

Another recent Indigenous-led campaign that garnered a significant following across social media platforms, but struggled to gain access to mainstream Australian media outlets (although more airtime was offered by some major international media outlets, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation) was Clinton Pryor’s Walk for Justice.

53 The online title of this article is ‘Commuters Endure Nightmare Trip Home after City Protest’. I am unable to discern whether this was the original title of the digital article or whether it was changed after a number of commentators took exception to the phrase ‘selfish rabble’.
Clinton Pryor is an Aboriginal man from Perth who, in 2016, decided to walk from Matagarup (Heirisson Island) to Canberra to address the Prime Minister about the challenges he perceived faced Indigenous people, one of which was the proposed community closures. Matagarup is a place of great significance: for Clinton personally, for the broader Noongar community in Perth and as a site in which a number of clashes between activists and the state have played out. By April 2015, the SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA campaign (as well as campaigns run by other activist groups such as ANTaR), had increased pressure on the Western Australian Government to back down. Matagarup, traditionally a women’s birthing ground and located close to the Perth central business district, became an unofficial protest site for those opposed to the proposed community closures. The site also served as a make-shift homeless shelter, with the Noongar community of protesters offering protection and some supplies to those living rough in Perth. In a series of raids across several months, police and the City of Perth made their disapproval of the community occupation of Matagarup clear (O’Connor 2015; Arrests as Police Remove Tents at Perth’s Heirisson Island Aboriginal Protest 2015). While Colin Barnett was publically placating remote Indigenous residents by affirming that there would be ‘no bulldozers’ descending on remote communities and that no one would be forcibly removed from their land, those occupying Matagarup were forcibly removed from the island by mounted and riot police (Arrests as Police Remove Tents at Perth’s Heirisson Island Aboriginal Protest 2015). The irony of this was not lost on some domestic and international media commentators.

It was in this context that Clinton Pryor decided to embark on his walk to Canberra. Clinton explained this to me as we sat on Matagarup in August 2016:

...then it was announced all over the news, and that’s when I realised ‘oh no, the Government’s gonna close Indigenous communities down.’ Something needed to be done, so I got up from my house and I ran to the island and set up my tent. I

---

54 It was explained to me by John McBain, the Western Australian representative of ANTaR, that the acronym had initially stood for Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation. The full name, he said, was dropped several years ago (John McBain, pers.comm., March 2017). ANTaR’s campaign website still features a page dedicated to the proposed Western Australian remote community closures, see <https://antar.org.au/campaigns/wa-community-closures>.

55 See, for example, a news report on Te Karere, a New Zealand news and current affairs program broadcast in the Māori language, available from: <https://www.youtube.com>.
didn’t realise that I had family that was already here protesting for the homeless (Clinton Pryor, pers.comm., August 2016).

From the north-eastern shore of Matagarup the new $1.7 billion-dollar Perth stadium complex is visible, and in 2016 when I met with Clinton it was mid-way through construction. Matagarup at the time was not widely used (aside from the occasional jogger), as the City of Perth had been quite successful in discouraging the Noongar community from camping on it. The signage and other public infrastructure on the island were falling into disrepair, and the car park (which was blocked to traffic by bollards erected by the City of Perth) was overgrown. My overall impression of the island was a distinct feeling of neglect. Given this, it was difficult not to empathise with Clinton when he pointed to the stadium and said ‘I mean we don’t even need that bloody thing over there’ (pers.comm., August 2016). The massive infrastructure spending of the Barnett Government, especially when positioned against the backdrop of constant assertions that the State Government could not afford to fund essential and municipal services to remote communities, formed the centrepiece of my conversation with Clinton. What the State decides to allocate money towards, of course, is a matter of priorities, which is dependent on what is considered to be of value and what is not. Clinton argued:

It got me really angry to see that this Government wants to close Indigenous communities when it’s this Government’s fault putting the State in debt in the first place by building all this stuff around the city (pers.comm., August 2016).

When Clinton set off on his walk just nine days later, he had a small team behind him. As he walked from town to town, he met with Indigenous Elders and offered to incorporate their concerns into the message he would deliver to Canberra. His journey was shaped by certain events, such as witnessing the funeral of Elijah Doughty in Kalgoorlie, and, as a result, by the time he neared Canberra the breadth of his campaign had broadened significantly.56

---

56Elijah Doughty was a fourteen year-old boy from Kalgoorlie who was killed when he was knocked off the motorbike he was riding by a 56 year-old man, who was chasing him in a four-wheel drive vehicle. The man alleged that the bike Elijah was riding had been stolen from his property. This event came at a time of already-strained relations between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations of Kalgoorlie, which erupted into a violent riot when it was announced that the 56 year-old man would not be charged with murder, but manslaughter. The activist Facebook page the ‘Aboriginal Tent Embassy’ were able to gain some mainstream media attention by posting screenshots of deleted Facebook posts by Kalgoorlie locals seemingly encouraging
Although the campaign did have a webpage, the majority of Clinton’s support was garnered via social media. A Facebook page titled ‘Clinton’s Walk for Justice’ provided information and updates about his walk and, as of October 2017, had just over thirty-thousand ‘likes’. A Facebook group titled ‘Clinton’s Walk for Justice Supporters Group’ gained over seventeen-hundred members, and the campaign retained an active presence on Twitter. Clinton successfully raised over seventy-thousand dollars through the use of multiple crowd-funding websites, and possibly more through the sale of branded merchandise. Clinton’s walk received some mainstream media attention throughout (mainly by the state-funded SBS and ABC) and featured in a significant number of local newspapers across the country. Along the way, Clinton began to refer to himself as the ‘Spirit Walker.’ When he arrived in Canberra on September 3rd 2017, almost one year after he departed, the event was covered by a number of news outlets such as The Huffington Post, The Guardian and The Canberra Times. However despite successfully soliciting meetings with the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Opposition leader Bill Shorten, the Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove, and others, the journey failed to make the nightly television news in Perth on any of the mainstream media channels aside from SBS and the ABC (which both provided relatively short reports). 

Interestingly, Clinton’s walk seemed to generate more international than domestic attention. Clinton featured in a diverse range of media platforms, including American-based business magazine Fast Company, British newspapers The Independent and The Daily Mail, and The New York Times. Perhaps most significantly, the British Broadcasting Corporation world news provided ongoing coverage of the latter part of his journey, which included several live interviews broadcast to an estimated forty million viewers. McCallum, Waller & Meadows (2012) have recently argued that the success of an Indigenous campaign’s ‘incursion’ into public policy debates rest on its ability to negotiate engagements with the mainstream media. For this, a key media strategy is necessary (2012: 105). It is likely that the violence against Aboriginal child ‘thieves’ (with some calling for them to be ‘culled’ or ‘run off the road’, Purtill 2016). In July 2017, the man was found not guilty of manslaughter, and instead convicted of the lesser charge of dangerous driving occasioning death. He was sentenced to three years in prison, and paroled in March 2018 after serving nineteen months.

57 The webpage can be found at <https://www.clintonswalkforjustice.org/>.
58 There was much broader coverage in online and print news media about Clinton’s arrival. See, for example, Evans (2017); Clinton Pryor Finishes Year-long Walk for Aboriginal Justice (2017).
lack of such a strategy is the primary reason for the lack of mainstream domestic media coverage of Clinton’s walk. Clinton is now seeking an audience with the Queen.

Another vehicle through which marginalised Australians can seek to have their voices heard is the Australian Human Rights Commission. Established in 1986, one of its many functions is to seek to resolve perceived breaches of human rights under Federal laws. One of the most recent high-profile cases came after The Australian newspaper published a cartoon by satirist Bill Leak in August 2016.\(^{59}\) Published just after the ABC’s Four Corner’s report into the treatment of children\(^{60}\) at the Northern Territory’s Don Dale Youth Detention Centre (which spurred the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, tabled in Parliament in 2017), the cartoon depicted a police officer confronting an Aboriginal man about the behaviour of the man’s son, saying ‘you’ll have to sit down and talk to your son about personal responsibility.’ The Aboriginal man, barefooted and holding a can of beer, replies ‘yeah righto…what’s his name then?’ The cartoon exemplifies many of the stereotypical characterisations of remote Indigenous men: that is, lazy, drunken, and displaying a lack of personal responsibility regarding the behaviour of their children. The immediate response to the cartoon from politicians, Indigenous leaders, land councils and other commentators, was largely negative (ABC Radio Melbourne 2016). Others soon voiced their support for Leak and the sentiment expressed in the cartoon, including then Western Australian Police Commissioner Karl O’Callaghan, who argued the cartoon was an ‘accurate reflection’ of what police are confronted with in some Aboriginal communities (Laschon 2016).

Several months later, it was made public that both Leak and The Australian newspaper were under investigation by the Australian Human Rights Commission for the cartoon allegedly having breached clause 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) (Cth). Section 18C makes it unlawful to act in such a way that is likely to ‘offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate’ on the basis of ‘race, colour, or national or ethnic origin’. It is immediately followed by section 18D, which lays out exceptions including for artistic works, fair and accurate reporting and

---

\(^{59}\) The cartoon was published on August 4\(^{th}\), which is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Day. Given Leak’s style, this was probably not a coincidence.

\(^{60}\) As of 2016, just over half of all youth in detention around Australia were Indigenous. Indigenous youth aged between ten and seventeen were twenty-six times more likely to be in detention than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2016).
academic or scientific endeavour. When the main complainant’s identity was revealed as twenty-five year old Melissa Dinnison from Perth, *The Australian* newspaper published a number of articles which focussed, in particular, on her background, lifestyle and motivations (see, for example, Burrell & Laurie 2016). Dinnison is an acquaintance of mine, and, though I was not aware that she was the complainant until after it became public knowledge, we have since shared a number of conversations about her case. She is also a participant in this course of research. Many of *The Australian*’s articles, it appeared, sought to raise questions regarding whether Dinnison could in fact have been offended by the cartoon, emphasising her light skin, her gender and the fact that she lived in a capital city. After months of such media attention, which included journalists from *The Australian* visiting Dinnison’s parent’s property in a rural part of Perth, gaining access to her private Facebook page and publishing her comments, and investigating the background of her partner while the pair were studying abroad in Germany, Dinnison dropped her complaint.

Leak responded to the withdrawal of her complaint with another cartoon, this time aimed specifically at Dinnison. In it, an Aboriginal person is depicted holding the travel section of a newspaper with the headline ‘An Aborigine in Germany: by Melissa Dinnison’, and saying out loud ‘she says “I’m too scared to go home.” The same Aboriginal child who appeared in the first Leak cartoon sits next to them, and replies ‘I know just how she feels.’

The cartoons and the subsequent Human Rights Commission complaint were part of a larger political dialogue which has boiled over several times in recent years: whether the *Racial Discrimination Act (1975) (Cth)* should be amended to exclude, or change, section 18C (see Triggs 2018: 135 - 169). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse this issue in depth, but suffice to say that the conservative media, including Bill Leak and others at *The Australian* newspaper, were vocal supporters of this change and have put significant pressure on the Federal Coalition Government to introduce it. The most recent incident, in March 2017, came following the shock death of Bill Leak at the age of sixty-one.

---

61 One of the articles identified a particular aspect about her parent’s home, which had previously been reported in the local media. Whether deliberate or not, it is my opinion that this offered enough information for anyone to potentially locate where her parents lived, and lends credibility to her later claim that she and her family felt threatened.
Three interviewees referred to the Bill Leak cartoon in our interviews. The first, Former Senator for Western Australia Chris Back, used the cartoon as part of their discussion regarding the need not to ‘pussyfoot’ around the social dysfunction in remote communities. They also spoke of the media backlash Western Australian Police Commissioner Karl O’Callaghan experienced after supporting Leak, and concluded that the Australian community must address the dysfunction instead of shooting the messenger (Chris Back, pers.comm., October 2016). The second participant, Federal Senator for Western Australia Linda Reynolds, spoke similarly. She too framed the issue around the negative reaction Leak had received, with the underlying argument being that the issues of social dysfunction, including the perceived lack of personal responsibility taken by Aboriginal people, needed to be addressed. This participant also mentioned the Police Commissioner O’Callaghan:

> It’s not only sad what it says about freedom of speech here, but also the fact is that it took the WA Police Commissioner to come out and say, ‘actually, this is a situation my police officers face all the time.’

> And you look at the evidence, I mean, it’s true. You know, there are more and more Indigenous kids now in permanent care than ever before...and that’s because the government authorities have found that their parents are not fit. So, as much as people don’t like that cartoon, it reflects a reality of many Indigenous communities. And that’s appalling...but what are we doing about it? We’re pontificating about a cartoon (Linda Reynolds, pers.comm., October 2016).

The third participant took the opposite standpoint, labelling the conservative commentators in the field of Indigenous affairs media discourse as ‘the Bill Leaks’ and calling the cartoon ‘utterly deplorable’ (James Back, pers.comm., December 2016).

Media representations of Indigenous people in Australia (particularly those that live in remote areas), though, both reflect and are constitutive of certain colonial ‘truths’. Much of this ‘talk’ about Indigenous people frames them in terms of what they lack, and often prescribes them a certain number of stereotypical traits: namely, that they are poor, violent

---

62 The phrase ‘shooting the messenger’ is my summary of what the participant said and is not indicative of their exact words.
and, at worst, frequent abusers of children. Given that most non-Indigenous people have very little personal experience with Indigenous people, this discursive formation has the capacity to have a profound impact on public opinion. If there is an agenda behind the production of this type of content purporting it educates the public for the purpose of promoting positive social change, then, I argue these results are not being achieved.

A News Frame Analysis of the Remote Community Closure Debate

The remote community closure debate attracted a significant amount of mainstream media attention, chiefly during the period between November 2014 and June 2015. The Barnett Government’s proposal to close some remote communities was featured across all mainstream television networks, most prominently on the ABC and SBS, and similarly featured in articles from many major newspapers across Australia. To my knowledge, there has been little research conducted into the discourse employed throughout the debate; there have, however, been a number of studies into the discourse surrounding the NTER (see McCallum 2007; Macoun 2011; Proudfoot & Habibis 2015; Roffée 2016), and I have used these to frame my own approach.

Over the course of this debate, I actively put myself in the position of a member of the public that consumed news media for information regarding the progress of the potential community closures. I spent time searching online for relevant media reports, and took note of those that I was alerted to through social (or other media) platforms. Of the fifty-nine print, online and television stories I collected over the past three years, the breakdown of outlets is as follows: the ABC had twenty print and online newspaper articles, two television programs and one radio feature; The Australian newspaper had seven print and online articles; The Guardian Australia online had eight articles; The West Australian had two online news articles; Perth Now online news had two; WA Today had one article; the local newspaper The Examiner had one; SBS had six news articles and television broadcasts spread across SBS proper, and its derivative the National Indigenous Television (NITV); and the National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS) had five online articles relating to its radio broadcasts.
Figure 5: News Media Collected Regarding the Remote Community Closure Debate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Print/Online</th>
<th>Television</th>
<th>Radio</th>
<th>Date Bracket</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13/11/2014 – 02/12/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Australian Newspaper</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>08/11/2014 – 26/02/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Guardian</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>27/11/2014 – 29/05/2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The West Australian</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>30/03/2015 – 22/02/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perth Now</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>05/04/2017 – 01/08/2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WA Today</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24/11/2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Examiner</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>01/03/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Special Broadcasting Service</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13/04/2015 – 06/10/2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Drawing on McCallum (2007), I use a news framing analysis to examine the ways in which remote community residents are represented, and the issues that are raised, in a selection of the news media I consumed throughout the remote community closure debate. News frame analysis provides a useful methodology for identifying the dominant and contested frames inherent in media discourse (see Gamson & Modigliani 1989; Reese 2003, 2007; McCallum & Blood 2006, cited in McCallum 2007: 3).

---

63 There are a number of other articles, stories and media texts I collected that do not neatly fit into any one category, such as media releases from activist groups and Aboriginal representative organisations, and, as such, I have removed them from this analysis.
Frames are understood to be the ‘organising principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world’ (Reese 2003: 11, cited in McCallum 2007: 3).

This section is not intended to offer an exhaustive catalogue of each piece of news media relating to the remote community closure debate, but is instead intended to highlight some of the general themes common to media discourses regarding Indigenous affairs issues in Australia. In order to capture the broadest set of views, I chose to focus on two media outlets which are often cited as occupying the media space on opposite sides of the political spectrum: the ABC (print and online) and The Australian newspaper (print and online). I ranked the articles by these two outlets chronologically, and removed several articles in which the closures were not the sole focus.64 This left me with six articles from The Australian and six from the ABC. Given the limitations of this chapter, I chose to cut this back to five articles from each source (I used my discretion to discard the least relevant article from each).

McCallum, drawing on the work of other discourse analysts focused on Indigenous Australia, suggests that Australian journalists regularly use the following frames to guide the way in which they construct Aboriginal people: as a threat to the existing order, a source of conflict, or problematic; authentic Australians, a source of pride, vulnerable to yet available for cultural appropriation; privileged compared to non-Aboriginal Australians; Indigenous health as a failure; Australia’s shame; victims of the failure of the Australian welfare state; and non-Aboriginal Australia as simultaneously racist and tolerant.65 The two frames most relevant to the remote community closure debate (and were therefore most apparent in the articles I analysed) were: Aboriginal residents as a threat to the existing order, and as Australia’s shame. These issues mirror those that were present within the public debate surrounding the validity of the potential remote community closures, and in what was articulated by my participants.

64 Such as those concerned with former Western Australian Member for Tangey, Dennis Jensen, who controversially contributed to public debate by labelling remote Aboriginal residents ‘noble savages’ (see Henderson (2016) from the ABC and Burrell (2016) from The Australian), and those relating to the debate surrounding the Bill Leak cartoon discussed above (see Laschon 2016).

65 I have changed the wording of several of these frames slightly for greater clarity, though not so much that the meaning has been altered.
Figure 6: News Media Used in News Frame Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</th>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>The Australian</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'Aboriginal Community Reforms Unveiled; Small Out-stations to Lose Services’ (Parke 2016).</td>
<td>14/07/2016</td>
<td>'Remote Communities Offered Hope by Colin Barnett’s Road Map’ (Pearson 2015).</td>
<td>09/05/2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remote Aboriginal Residents as a Threat; a Source of Conflict; Problematic...

This frame is analogous to some of the constructions of Aboriginal people already discussed; perhaps most fittingly, dysfunction in remote communities as a ‘mediated public crisis’ (see McCallum 2007). As it does throughout most news reporting on Indigenous issues, the specific type of dysfunction noted varies and is often poorly-defined and contextualised. The use of this frame was far more evident throughout the articles in *The Australian* (present in all five articles). This finding is supported by that of McCallum (2007: 6), who found that *The Australian* featured stories regarding Indigenous violence over three times more frequently than its nearest rivals in the lead-up to the NTER. One article in particular, which centres on Aboriginal youth suicide in remote communities, makes use of alarmist language (words such as ‘epidemic’, ‘urgent action, ‘growing/rising crisis’ are repeated throughout) (Burrell & Robinson 2014). In another, it is argued that the State Government’s Regional
Services Reform Unit’s *Roadmap* report (not yet released at the time of this article’s writing) ‘uncompromisingly puts the safety and well-being of children and families at the forefront’, and ends by calling for governments to be hard-headed about what is required to make these communities economically and socially viable (implying, presumably, that they are not currently viable) (Pearson 2015). Another article from *The Australian*, published just prior to the media onslaught of the issue of remote community closures, describes youth suicide, domestic violence, child neglect and alcohol abuse in remote communities (Kohlbacher 2014). In the articles by the *ABC*, the only instances in which this frame was explicit were within quotes from either Colin Barnett, Tony Abbott or some Indigenous leaders and residents, or in reference to the previous closure of Oombulgurri, a remote community in the Kimberley in which allegations of child sexual abuse were substantiated.

...as Australia’s Shame

This frame too was more evident in *The Australian*. Undoubtedly the best example was the article published on the 8th of November 2014: just before Colin Barnett began to speak publicly about his proposal to close up to 150 communities. The title is ‘a Nation Shamed when Child Sees Suicide as the Solution’ (Burrell & Robinson 2014). Throughout, both the Federal and Western Australian Governments are tacitly accused of mishandling the issue of Indigenous youth suicides, through phrases such as ‘the Western Australian Government has been accused of gross complacency’ and ‘community leaders...are labelling the State Government’s response to the [issue] ‘pathetic”’. The only example of this frame that I discerned within the *ABC* articles was in a November 2014 article that quoted Colin Barnett himself labelling the purportedly high levels of ‘abuse and neglect of children’ as a ‘disgrace to the State’ (Perpitch & Vidot 2014).

The two frames were evident across all ten articles, with the frame which constructed remote Aboriginal people as a threat to social norms the most frequently-used. Overall, it could be argued that the articles from the *ABC* placed more significance on the voices of Aboriginal leaders (as indicated by the article’s titles, three of which were prefaced or postfaced by ‘Aboriginal/Indigenous leader says’), though one *Australian* article was written by Noel Pearson (himself an Indigenous leader and a frequent contributor to *The*
A different theme that emerged throughout my analysis, and is at the heart of the remote community closure debate more broadly, was that of the unviability and unsustainability of remote Aboriginal communities. Politicians and commentators such as Colin Barnett and Tony Abbott were regularly quoted expressing this sentiment, especially in articles that described the initial proposal to close communities or Abbott’s subsequent ‘lifestyle choices’ comments. For example:

Mr Abbott said he was focused on the practical impacts of living in remote settlements on access to schooling, jobs and services. ‘I was making the pretty obvious point that you or I are free to live where we choose...but inevitably there are some limits to what we can reasonably expect of the taxpayer when it comes to supporting these choices’ (Abbott, cited in Griffiths 2015).

A lot of communities were very productive and in the long term you could see a sustainable future for them, but in a number of the others they were very questionable (The State Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Peter Collier, cited in Kagi 2015).

Given many non-Indigenous Australians have never been to a remote community and have very limited knowledge of them, the consistent use of this frame may have proved persuasive. In the media coverage, as in Member’s speeches in Parliament during this same period, the terms ‘unviable’ and ‘unsustainable’ were not clearly defined. Were these terms principally financial in nature? That is to say, Western Australia’s remote communities are unviable because they are unable to generate enough money to sustain themselves without relying on Government subsidies? Or are such communities unviable in a more universal sense? Perhaps, too small to attract adequate service provision and too far away to be serviced by other regional centres? If so, which services are most important? Policing? Drug and alcohol rehabilitation services? Education? Waste management?
When I had the opportunity, I asked Colin Barnett to explain exactly what those terms meant to him, and how he saw remote Aboriginal communities to be ‘unviable’. His response did little to clarify:


I will return to the differing interpretations of ‘viability’ in subsequent chapters.

This issue also generated a great deal of international media attention. Activist groups, human rights forums and universities from around the world demanded the Western Australian Government rethink its decision to close some remote Aboriginal communities. In a 2014 blog published by the International Law Review, for example, the actions of the Western Australian Government were labelled an ‘international human rights violation.’

If the current situation in Western Australia is allowed to unfold uninhibited by the international community, it will be one more dark and terrible stain in the world history book about the treatment of indigenous populations...Western Australia must divert from the path on which it is currently set. Otherwise, in the very near future, Australia will be responsible for perpetuating another lifelong legacy of pain and suffering (Dial 2015).66

In 2015 the French edition of The Huffington Post featured an article by anthropologist Martin Préaud, in which eighteen academics and other interested parties signalled their support for the campaign against the community closures, calling on all Australian Governments to ‘urgently review their policies in relation to Indigenous peoples, to respect their basic human rights and to engage in real dialogue with them, their organisations and their institutions’ (Préaud & Glowczewski 2015). They argue that while the proposed community closures no doubt represent a ‘political act’ of the Federal Government’s agenda to shift the financial burden for essential and municipal services to the State Government, the social implications must not be ignored. They express concern that the Australian public

---

66 The phrase ‘lifelong legacy of pain and suffering’ is quoted by Dial from Julia Gillard’s apology to victims of forced adoptions in 2013.
may be reluctant to hold the government to account, arguing that Australia’s specific brand of racism lies in that the vast majority of the population is neither ‘racist’ nor ‘entirely unprejudiced.’ This ‘middle ground of uncertainty’ of public opinion is created and reinforced by distance (both physical and intellectual) between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population (Préaud & Glowczewski 2015). They conclude by arguing there are multiple complex and contrasting opinions in Australia about the extent of the ‘value’ of remote Aboriginal communities.

The issue of the foreclosure of remote indigenous communities has created a very visible strain between these two areas - on the one hand this middle majority understand that there is some importance to the land in indigenous culture, and on the other they are very unsure if this is something that the state (and by extension their tax contributions) should be paying for (Préaud & Glowczewski 2015).

In a subsequent publication, Préaud (2016) argues that the State had failed to address the concerns of remote community residents and other respondent parties in the RSRU’s Roadmap: ‘behind the title of the roadmap lies the abandonment by the State of almost all isolated communities’.

**Participant Data and the Media**

Although I did not begin this project believing that the media attention afforded to the remote community closure debate would be an area of focus, I found that asking my participants what had stood out to them about the nature of the media coverage was a valuable tool in delineating some of their perspectives and generating further discussion. Their perspectives varied greatly, and I found that, perhaps unsurprisingly, my participants read and rationalised the media coverage in personal and distinctive ways. Below are the results of a thematic analysis of the responses from the thirty-seven participants who responded to this line of questioning with a discussion of their recollections of the news media.

I asked them:
After the initial announcement pertaining to the remote community closures in 2014, there was a great deal of mainstream media coverage of this issue. What do you remember about the nature of this media coverage?

I myself, in reflecting on the same question I was asking my interviewees, found that my memories of the media attention centred on reports of social dysfunction and excerpts of speeches made by Barnett. At the time, I worried about the broad brush with which all remote Aboriginal communities were being painted by the reports of child sexual abuse, and the overall lack of specificity in the media’s reporting, and I therefore recalled the coverage in negative terms. Some participants had similar recollections to myself:

Anger. Frustration. Opposition. A good kick in the head to the Aboriginal population who live in and around these communities (Glenn Sterle, pers.comm., October 2016).

The communities would have reacted in a way that was...almost crawling into their shell. That’s the human side of this, because people get shame quickly. And if you’ve got all of this negative attention to do with the negative aspects of living in a community, people go ‘why are they picking on us?’ (George Walley, pers.comm., August 2016).

Well, it was quite negative and stigmatising towards remote Indigenous communities and that was problematic in and of itself (Louise Pratt, pers.comm., October 2016).

I remember certain people getting media coverage because they were saying quite inflammatory things. Karl O’Callaghan, the Police Commissioner, he was talking about children having STDs (Sarah George, pers.comm., October 2016).

My recollection of the media at that time was that the Government was just going to shut them [the communities] down, and that was that (James Back, pers.comm., December 2016).
[Jayne Weepers]: What do I remember? Well I remember the Premier and I remember a series of extremely deficit-based reports. So all we heard about W.A. communities was those that were really in strife.

[Jasmin Korte]: Yeah there was a lot of that, discussions of child abuse and-

[Jayne Weepers]: Lots of child abuse, so very resonant of the Intervention stuff from here...from an outside W.A. perspective, it reeked of just political opportunism (Jayne Weepers, pers.comm., February 2017).

I found quite quickly, though, that the memories of others centred instead on footage of the Indigenous (and broader Australian public’s) opposition to the suggested community closures.

[I had just explained my own recollections, which were largely negative]...well I heard more of the positive stuff. Only because I was listening for the most positive stuff I suppose...and that was the argument for retaining those communities. That’s what I mean by positive (Bob Southwell, pers.comm., July 2016).

I think there was a lot of grass-roots reaction. If I remember correctly, I’m thinking to myself ‘Barnett has opened his mouth just too much...and now he’s going to have to sure up his defences. And the more they kick him in the shins, the more he’s gonna try and pretend that he was right in the first place, you know?’ So I remember the media, generally speaking, not being supportive of the Government at all, but being supportive of Aboriginal communities. That seemed to me to be how I read it (Bishop Christopher Saunders, pers.comm., March 2017).

I suppose it was the rallies that were going off around the world, for me (Robin Chapple, pers.comm., October 2016).
Just how on-board it seemed a lot of Australians were. There were lots and lots of rallies, people were quite upset, and there was a lot of stuff trending on social media about it (Melissa Dinnison, pers.comm., December 2016).

Some participants clearly remembered both of the above facets of the media attention, speaking of the fear, anger or suffering the issue had caused but also the sense of solidarity generated from the coverage of the rallies. Western Australian Labor Senator Patrick Dodson gave this response when he was asked what stood out to him:

Oh I think it was people’s fear that this would create stolen generations, and this was another social intervention of the order of what happened to kids when they were taken away. This was gonna displace people, disconnect them, and create social outcomes that no one could see much good in….and the Eastern people [people living in the Eastern States of Australia] got up and protested about this.

People may not have understood everything, but they knew that people’s rights were being denied. And that was something that they felt very strongly about. So, they protested and let people know that they didn’t think this was right (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., March 2017).

It was difficult not to come away from these discussions with the feeling that the debate had been, from the outset, extremely polarised. In fact, the word ‘polarising’ was used several times by participants to describe the media debate on the issue. Echoing Préaud & Glowczewski (2015), one person commented that there was a vocal minority on either side, with most of those with a more moderate opinion actively withdrawing from the debate (Sarah George, pers.comm., October 2016). Another argued:

Well I found that it was a facile discussion, you know? At every level, from the progressives...or the people who wanted to close the communities, it was awful. It was all stuff around child abuse. The other side [were] wanting this romantic notion that Aboriginal people should be left alone and the solution was the status quo (Howard Pedersen, pers.comm., March 2017).
Linda Reynolds, Federal Liberal Senator for Western Australia, felt the same way but used the word ‘binary’ (Linda Reynolds, pers.comm., October 2016). She went on to characterise the debate as a ‘lost opportunity’ because of the fact that it was quickly politicised.

Some people only emphasised aspects of the media coverage relating to a particular event, such as Tony Abbott’s ‘lifestyle choices’ comment (Sue Lines, pers.comm., October 2016). Terry Redman, former State Minister for Regional Development, discussed the media attention alongside Colin Barnett’s initial comments, arguing that it broke the trust between remote Aboriginal communities and the Government and that this took months to overcome (Terry Redman, pers.comm., June 2017). A number of people mentioned social media, mostly with regards to its use in garnering support for the anti-community closure activism. Of those that specifically mentioned new media technologies (as opposed to the older print or television media), most framed their discussion around the speed at which social media allows information to be disseminated (Robin Chapple, pers.comm., October 2016; ‘Heather’, pers.comm., August 2016).

Only one person used the word ‘balanced’ to describe the media attention (Helen Morton, pers.comm., November 2016). In terms of a political divide, those who were associated with the Liberal or National Parties certainly seemed to be more supportive of Colin Barnett’s initial comments, and several felt disappointed that the conversation, as they saw it, had been ‘shut down.’ Whether or not this represents a genuine ideological difference, or whether those participants were more inclined to appear supportive of the Barnett Government because of their political affiliation, I am not sure.

Some had no particular recollections, and for those participants, comments like the ones below were common:  

I remember it being a bit of a blow-up at the time, as it rightly should have been. But there hasn’t been anything about it for a while, I wouldn’t have thought?

---

67 In the interest of avoiding embarrassment, I have chosen not to identify the participants who made these comments.
The lack of specificity in these memories belied the hopes of some other participants: a common theme was to argue that although the media attention had caused some anxiety amongst the Aboriginal population, the issue was at least now in the public eye. Some participants felt as though this was a way of getting the ‘issue’ out there (the ‘issue’ usually being either the dysfunction in remote communities or the lack of government accountability for the challenges facing remote communities). In these comments there appeared to be an assumption that the ‘issue’ being ‘out there’ may lead to positive change. Among these participants, comments such as ‘I think it was good to draw attention to the problems’ were relatively common.

The opposite was also true. That is, the media attention was characterised by some as just a ‘passing phase’. Those that made this characterization, it seemed, believed that no substantial change would come of it. One participant, for example, made the comment, ‘like all of these sorts of things, it’s a flash in the pan, and everybody jumps around for a while but nobody actually picks it up and takes it to the next level’ (Kado Muir, pers.comm., January 2017). Comments along these lines were often followed by discussions of how little interrogation of the issues occurs within the mainstream media. One participant categorised the debate as ‘fairly typical’ of the Western media: that is, failing to really analyse the issues, or, as they put it, ‘failing to properly test the ‘truths’ that the Government talked about’ (‘Brett’, pers.comm., February 2017). Another participant said the aspect that stood out most to her was the lack of coverage of the detail of how any potential community closures would be carried out (Krista McMeekan, pers.comm., April 2017).68 Terms such as ‘headline-hunting’ (Fred Chaney, pers.comm., December 2016), ‘sensationalist’ (‘Brett’, pers.comm., February 2017) and ‘populist’ (Grahame Searle, pers.comm., October 2016) were used. These sorts of ideas could possibly all be categorised as part of a broader theme: that of a general wariness of the media. Former Pilbara pastoral boss Jack Webber, and his wife Bev Webber, who were interviewed together, articulated this distrust:

[The media] put their own interpretation on things and don’t always bloody tell the truth. As I say, I don’t entirely trust the media. I like to sort things out and

---

68 Although, given the lack of specificity in Barnett’s original comments and subsequent statements by the Government, this may not have been the fault of the media outlets who reported on them.
you know, sift things out for myself sorta business (Jack Webber, pers.comm., November 2016).

The idea that the powerful are those that control the dissemination of knowledge was implicit in much of what participants said. Head of ANTaR W.A. John McBain argued ‘well you know, the victors write the history, and modern media is still doing that (John McBain, pers.comm., March 2017). Continuing with the theme of power, he then commented:

You know, can you imagine being a male or a female leader in one of those communities? When they [the media] are perpetrating that shit?

You know, and then people say ‘how come the leaders in the communities don’t have authority anymore?’ Right? (John McBain, pers.comm., March 2017).

One participant described the mobilisation of the anti-community closures activism as a case of the ‘bully being bullied back’,69 commenting that ‘people weren’t prepared to watch the Government, someone in power, use its force unreasonably [against] those who had no power’ (Wayne Bergman, pers.comm., March 2017).

Several years on, it was clear that my participants (and myself) held different recollections of the media attention throughout the remote community closure debate, and had made different value judgements with regards to whether the representations of Aboriginal communities were overwhelmingly negative or positive. Extended discussion revealed that most held a nuanced perspective of the themes within the news media (and the community response to it), and had rationalised these themes in complex and highly personal ways. Like the news frames embedded in the media coverage of the issue, many participants held multiple and sometimes competing perspectives. This is perhaps not surprising, as the types of people with whom I sought an interview generally had at least a peripheral understanding of the complexities of the relationship between the State and its remote Indigenous communities. Many, too, had their own personal experiences with which they could relate to the media coverage. Like myself, it seemed my participants had used their knowledge and experience to sieve through the content in the media coverage of the remote community.

---

69 This is a direct quote of the phrase used by the participant.
closure debate: resulting in the broad spread of perspectives I encountered throughout this research. Nevertheless, many had similar concerns regarding the way in which certain representations of remote communities, principally those relating to social dysfunction, may influence public opinion.

Much literature exists regarding the use of media texts to influence public opinion about the efficacy of public policy, or, conversely, the role of media discourses in defining future policy paths. Sociological literature from the 1970s, for example, examined the discourse in media texts that defined and constructed social ‘problems’ (such as Cohen 1972, mentioned above; see also Cohen & Young 1973). More recent research provides a range of nuanced examinations of the media’s role in identifying policy problems, influencing solution and disseminating outcomes (Davis 2007; Koch-Baumgartner & Voltmer 2010, cited in McCallum, Waller & Meadows 2012: 102). The news media provides a platform for policy debates to play out; Indigenous groups and individuals, however, struggle to have their points of view represented due to their relative lack of influence (as opposed to other corporate, state or social interests). As has been argued by McCallum (2007: 13), many of the public crises arising in the media (particularly by conservative media outlets such as The Australian newspaper) can be understood as orchestrated political campaigns with clearly-articulated arguments for political or legislative change in the Indigenous affairs policy space. I similarly argue there were certainly elements of this clear political agenda throughout the media coverage of the remote community closure debate. Debates played out in the media about remote Aboriginal people, identity and lifestyles are not new but have grown in intensity over the past two decades.

This chapter has focused on the way in which Aboriginal people are portrayed by the media and has considered the influence this has may have on public opinion. As I argue throughout this thesis, however, the debates surrounding remote Indigenous lifestyles are centred on a much deeper and more ingrained tension than plays out in the news media. News media representations and discourses are reflective of these deeper narratives. As Mickler (1998: 13) argues of the myth of Aboriginal ‘privilege’ common in news media representations in Western Australia in the 1990s:
Accusations of privilege and exception to the rules carry enormous weight within a liberal democratic society...alleging sections of society to be privileged citizens or groups is routinely serious in a polity whose founding logic is that of equality but whose fabric is fraught with inequalities.

Central to the public and political discourse regarding remote Aboriginal communities is the issue of who is responsible for funding them. In the following chapter, I analyse one narrative regarding why some remote Aboriginal communities should close: an economic rationality based on the high cost of service delivery and the State Government’s inability to foot the bill. I chart the perspectives of my participants to illustrate the varied ways in which they conceptualised the issue of funding responsibilities. I begin with those participants at the one end of the scale, who believe strongly that governments (on all levels) have a responsibility to fund remote Indigenous living. The reasons articulated for this responsibility were varied; from a historical responsibility to right past wrongs, to the Aboriginal population’s status as ‘citizens’, to offsetting costs to the public health system. I also analyse the contributions of those participants that articulated this responsibility less strongly, and emphasised instead that remote communities are either too expensive or too difficult to adequately service. In many of these cases, a tacit question underlay the conversation: not of whether the Government could service remote communities, but whether they should.

Given the prominence of the terms ‘viability’ and ‘sustainability’ in the State Government’s articulation of the challenges facing remote Aboriginal communities, one of the questions I commonly posed to my participants was thus:

Do you think Western Australia’s remote communities, as they now stand, are viable? Sustainable?

A common response, predictably, was ‘well, it depends on what you mean by the terms ‘viable’ and ‘sustainable’”. Many participants noted that if we were to take the terms from an economics perspective, the answer (for many of the communities) would be ‘no’. The problem is, of course, that not everyone believes that a community must be financially-profitable to produce a good, and that the terms viable and sustainable can denote more
than just economic growth and stability. As I discuss in the next chapter, different individuals place varying levels of importance on particular community functions, and thus a myriad of different understandings of what is ‘valuable’ lies at the heart of this issue.
What is remote, and who is remote to what? (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., March 2017).

It’s not the people’s fault, it’s actually the Government’s fault for spending forty billion dollars on infrastructure and things that the city don’t need, and putting the State in debt. They’re taking this debt situation out on the Indigenous communities to close ‘em down and that’s why I got angry. That’s why I came down here to protest because it’s not right! (Clinton Pryor, pers.comm., August 2016).

‘Remote’ is a concept linked with the Australian imagination, recurrently featuring in historical and contemporary art, literature and political discourse. Remote Australia is often conceptualised as a place of extremes, from a harsh and rugged climate to a place of socio-cultural crisis (Marsh, Porter & Walker 2012: 9). Contrary to the reality that the remotest eighty-five percent of Australia’s land mass contributes largely to the nation’s wealth, from mining to agriculture, it is often seen as ‘an economic wasteland, a place of market failure and extreme poverty (even a ‘failed state’) (Marsh, Porter & Walker 2012: 9). From a demographic point of view, Taylor argues that references to ‘remote’ areas are long-standing in Australian regional analysis (2006: 31). As Senator Patrick Dodson pointed out, the concept of ‘remoteness’ is, of course, relative (see also Altman 2018b: 337). The inherent ‘remoteness’ of most discrete Indigenous communities in Australia was a core component in the remote community closure debate, and presents the most obvious challenge in how to deliver services to them. To what extent, and in what ways does Australia ‘value’ remote Indigeneity? And how is this ‘value’ determined? At the heart of this question is whether or not the benefits promoted or goods produced by remote communities outweigh the challenges inherent in funding them.

---

Throughout the 1970s, as the prospect of self-made and managed remote Aboriginal communities gained social and political traction, public debate grappled with how to place a remote Aboriginal lifestyle into the framework of a mainstream Australian existence. The Federal Government provided support, both ideologically and financially, for the homelands movement throughout the 1970s and well into the subsequent decades. Bill Gray, the last Secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the inaugural CEO of ATSIC, explained to me:

The policy in those early days, from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs as it was then established, was to support quite overtly the homeland movement and the initiatives being taken by people to establish themselves on their land (Bill Gray, pers.comm., February 2017).

By way of the provision of financial support, the Federal Government can be seen to have supported a movement towards the decentralisation of the Indigenous population in Australia. The paradigm shift that saw the abolition of Indigenous-specific institutions such as ATSIC and a broad normalisation of Indigenous affairs policy began in the 2000s. At around the same time, the Federal Government support for remote communities began to wane, both ideologically and with regards to the provision of funding for essential, municipal and other services. A central pillar of the new paradigm appears to be centralisation, as opposed to decentralisation. As Peterson (2016: 175) has argued, the 2000s saw a large-scale conservative attack on the guiding principles of previous decades, as articulated by a number of commentators such as Helen Hughes. In their view, he says, ‘all that was required was getting the economic incentives right, including withdrawing support for the ambiguously described homeland communities to encourage people into the urban centres’ Peterson (2016: 175).

In September 2014, the Federal Government announced it had reached a ‘historic agreement’ with a number of States, including Western Australia. This announcement came following the expiration of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery (NPA

---

71 Helen Hughes was an Australian economist who, in the latter part of her life, focussed on the issue of development in remote Indigenous communities (see, for example, her monograph Lands of Shame published in 2007).
RSD) in June 2014. The new agreement essentially divested the funding responsibility for essential and municipal services to the respective State Governments after a period of guaranteed funding (in Western Australia, this equated to $90 million dollars to expire in June 2016). In a media release regarding this new agreement, Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion commented ‘the delivery of municipal and essential services, including supply of power and water and the management of infrastructure, is a state and local government responsibility’ (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2014). Constitutionally, this is indeed the case, as was noted by several of my participants. There was a clear view among many of those I interviewed, however, that the Federal Government should not be allowed to entirely withdraw from their funding responsibilities (in many cases, citing the historical Federal Government precedent for supporting homelands and outstations). From the beginning of the remote community closure debate, when the former Premier gave public comment regarding the potential community closures, two rationales were given as to why. The first and perhaps most clearly articulated was an inability on the part of the State Government to fund remote communities in the absence of Federal support. It is this rationality I analyse in this Chapter.

The concept of government rationality (that is, the narratives about and justifications of the methods of governance provided to citizens by Governments, see Savage 2013; 2017, among others) stems from the field of governmentality. This field was largely developed by French sociologist Michele Foucault in the 1970s and 1980s (see Foucault 2008) as a way of conceptualising the growing pervasiveness of neoliberal forms of governance. As Shore & Wright (2011: 3) argue, government policy reflects the rationality and assumptions prevalent at the time of its creation. They note, however, that this by no means suggests that the ideologies that ‘create and sustain’ policy agendas remain static over time; policies migrate into new contexts and settings, change as those governing rationalities and assumptions change, and often taken on a ‘life of their own’ that have consequences beyond the initial intentions (2011: 3). Political narratives, as argued by Dillon & Westbury (2019: 3), are crucial in persuading citizens that a policy intervention is legitimate and well-intentioned.

The NPA RSD commenced in January 2009. An evaluation (National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery Evaluation 2013) was undertaken in 2013, in which mixed results were reported.

---

72 The NPA RSD commenced in January 2009. An evaluation (National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery Evaluation 2013) was undertaken in 2013, in which mixed results were reported.
Neoclassical economics dictates that individuals make rational decisions regarding consumption (and other aspects of behaviour) on the basis of profit maximisation and efficiency: an assumption which has become increasingly pervasive over the past century. On the topic of the microeconomic rationality of households, Ortiz (2005: 63) argues that social science disciplines such as anthropology and sociology do not deny that economic decisions can sometimes be rationally reasoned, but argue against the universality of profit or utility maximisation as the sole driver in economic decision-making. On a more macro-scale, with regards to government and bureaucratic decision-making, Alexander (2005: 455) argues that ‘the privileging of economic transactions [has reached] the extent that the economic sphere not only appears to be autonomous, but also is frequently portrayed as subsuming social life and sometimes even the environment’. Neoliberalism, according to Foucault, mandated an expansion of economic ways of thinking that represented an ‘extension of the economy to the entire social field’ (2008: 242). As such, contemporarily, it is widely assumed that economic rationality is the only acceptable means of justification for decision-making in the formation of policy. In this chapter, I analyse the ways in which participants articulated their views regarding the funding of remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, and examine the economic rationalisations used by both my participants and by varying levels of government throughout the course of the remote community closure debate.

It is likely that the State Government’s lack of transparency with regards to who would cover the budgetary shortfall following June 2016 (when Federal funding for essential and municipal services was to be withdrawn) compounded the sense of anxiety and urgency amongst Aboriginal and activist groups. An update was not made publically available until one month prior to this cut-off date, at which time the State Government committed to funding essential and municipal services for a further twelve-month period (June 2016 through to June 2017) (Western Australian Government 2016). This commitment was made relatively quietly.73 Jon Altman, speaking on the National Indigenous Radio Service after this commitment, criticised the lack of transparency surrounding the State Government’s funding plan (National Indigenous Radio Service 2016). He also argued that viability of

---

73 The State committed to providing another year of funding in the State budget that was handed down in May 2016. There was such little discussion surrounding this commitment that I was initially unable to locate it, and spoke to a number of journalists who were similarly bemused by the apparent dearth of information about this decision.
remote communities would continue to be in question as long as the State Government refused to commit to longer-term funding solutions, noting that a five-to-ten year outlook was necessary.

To suggest to communities that they can just work on developing service delivery mechanisms that are efficient and effective, when one has such short-term funding cycles and such a high level of insecurity about the future, is really very counter-productive (National Indigenous Radio Service 2016).

One State missing from the new ‘historic agreement’ was South Australia, who continued to receive Federal funding for some time afterward. Robin Chapple, State Greens Member of the Legislative Council, spoke to South Australia’s ability to negotiate:

Now interestingly enough, South Australia argued that you can’t take the money off us, and they’ve kept it. You know, so, you have one State that, instead of actually coming out in an attack scenario, basically went back and negotiated and they get to keep their money (Robin Chapple, pers.comm., October 2016).

This was also mentioned by James Back, Former principal of Rawa Community School:

And obviously, you know, the Premier in South Australia said very, very similar things, but using a completely different language and strategy. So it’s been really interesting watching what’s happened in South Australia versus what’s happened here (James Back, pers.comm., December 2016).

The ‘similar language’ that this participant identified is apparent when one analyses the period immediately after the Federal withdrawal of funding. The then South Australian Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation, Ian Hunter, argued that the State Government could not afford to provide services for communities across the vast Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands. Therefore, a withdrawal of Federal funding would be tantamount to their closure (‘SA Government warns Indigenous communities could close without Federal funding’ 2014). The South Australian Government was later persuaded to accept a $15 million dollar deal to assume funding responsibility of the remote
communities outside of the APY Lands (with an estimated population of around 1500), with the Federal Government continuing to fund the APY Lands ‘for the time being’ (Whiting & Gage 2015). It is possible that the differing legal statuses of remote communities in Western Australia and South Australia also impacted the way in which the respective State Governments acted and the outcomes they achieved. Unlike South Australia, Western Australia does not have statutory land rights legislation, and there are other legislative and tenure-related differences between the States. One potentially positive outcome of the remote community closure debate in Western Australia (as identified by James Back, Former principal of Rawa Community School), is that while South Australia may continue along a similar path of defunding and broad centralization of remote communities, any attempts to do so by Western Australia, at least, will now come under significant scrutiny from national and global players (James Back, pers.comm., December 2016).

When I interviewed Ben Wyatt, the then newly-appointed Western Australian State Treasurer and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in May 2017, he explained how the former State Government’s acceptance of the $90 million dollar deal still ‘agitated’ him. He also commented that, while there are significant challenges involved in getting the Federal Government to recommit to a space that it has vacated, it continued to be a point of contention that would be readdressed in the future (Ben Wyatt, pers.comm., May 2017; see Chapter Six).

**The Regional Services Reform Unit**

In May 2015 the State Government announced the Regional Services Reform, a regional reform agenda to be actioned by the Regional Services Reform Unit (RSRU). The Government press maintained that these more recent reform announcements simply provided more detail to the comments made by Barnett the previous year, which were largely misunderstood by the Opposition and the general public. Others, however, saw this reforms package as an ‘about-face’, prompting headlines like: ‘Colin Barnett Pulls Back on Community Closures’ (Laurie & Taylor 2015); ‘WA’s Smallest Communities Face Forward after Forced Closure Backflip’ (Young 2015). When asked whether this was indeed the case, Barnett conceded only that his earlier comments were ‘a bit bald’ (Laurie & Taylor 2015).
The RSRU’s website says that the unit was established to ‘improve the lives of Aboriginal people in regional and remote Western Australia’, as part of a process of ‘long-term, systemic change (Regional Services Reform 2017d). The website goes on to specify three main foci:

1. Improved living conditions that enable families to prosper and don’t hold them back.
2. Supporting families to build their skills, and overcome any barriers to doing so, through improved service redesign and delivery.
3. Education, employment and housing opportunities, and support for families to take them up.

According to this description, then, the RSRU is tasked with improving the delivery of a broad array of services to remote community residents. Inherent in the unit’s value statement is a strong focus on building Indigenous capacity: making remote-living Aboriginal families more resilient and Aboriginal communities stronger. There are five ‘principles’ that underpin the reform agenda. These values demonstrate an attempt to adhere to and prioritise several assumed rights of individuals and families common to liberal democratic states, including the right of children to be protected from harm and to access adequate education, the right of individuals to access stable employment, and the right of communities to be adequately serviced by the Government to whom they pay taxes. Ostensibly, the reform unit also intends to assert the special right of Indigenous people to maintain a connection with their country and culture.

1. Every child lives in a safe environment that nurtures early childhood development.
2. Every child receives an education to equip them to make life choices.
3. All adults can access training and employment or other purposeful occupation.
4. Aboriginal people can maintain links to country, culture and kin.
5. Aboriginal people living remotely have certainty about the State Government’s framework for investing in remote communities.
Government statements and descriptions about the RSRU, since its launch, have ubiquitously focused on its ‘long-term’ agenda; the phrase ‘long-term’ is used twice on the website’s ‘about’ page of just 250 words. In order for this ‘long-term’ focus to have salience, an understanding of the history of the State (and broader Australia’s) short-term policy approach is required.

**Funding Instability and Haphazard Policy**

Funding instability has long caused anxiety amongst remote community residents, and could be seen to have undermined the future sustainability of remote communities. The 1987 ‘Blanchard Report’ (*Return to Country: the Aboriginal Homelands Movement in Australia*), noted ‘homeland communities are going to need to be provided with adequate levels of facilities and services if they are to have a secure long term future’ (HRSCAA 1987: 63). The report also argued that these facilities and services must be a part of a broader, long-term policy approach that, if successful, would likely offset the future costs of welfare and development programs in regional areas (HRSCAA 1987: 46). Altman et. al (2008: 8) argue that while a range of initiatives to promote benefits to Indigenous people living in remote communities have been successful, what continues to be lacking is this long-term policy strategy to underpin them. Describing this lack of policy as the ‘outstations/homelands policy vacuum’, they essentially argue that the range of benefits remote communities could offer to both Indigenous people and the broader Australian community are continually undermined by the piecemeal way in which Indigenous affairs policy is administered on a State and Federal level. They end their discussion by appealing for a rigorous analysis of the (then) current trends in Indigenous affairs, on the basis of the potential long-term financial offsets. At the time of their writing, the trend towards the Federal Government’s withdrawal of funding was beginning to become apparent:

> The precautionary principle must be exercised and that the cost/benefits of outstations/homelands to all stakeholders, but most immediately to outstation/homeland residents, need to be comprehensively assessed. The direct and opportunity costs to both Indigenous people and the nation of bad policy-making in this area could be massive, so risk minimisation suggests that this process is undertaken properly (Altman et. al 2008: 10).
To my knowledge, this assessment has not occurred in the intervening years since 2008.\textsuperscript{74} Had it, perhaps the Barnett Government would have approached the idea of closing up to 150 communities more cautiously. In a sense, the Regional Services Reform Unit could be seen as a state-specific attempt to achieve this goal; it is possible that the outcome of its investigations into Western Australia’s remote communities will be put to good use in framing future policy.\textsuperscript{75} In April 2017, which marked the thirty-year anniversary of the release of the Blanchard Report, Altman re-examined the trends in remote community service delivery and offered one explanation as to why such policy has remained haphazard and incomplete:

Indeed, a large part of the reason why both the Commonwealth and the NT government have failed to develop sensible policies for homelands and homelanders since the 1970s is that these places find no ready niche in their governmental or bureaucratic machinery, in part because this machinery is tuned only to thinking about stable places and populations and not about tiny remote places with highly-mobile populations (2017: 9).

The RSRU Roadmap notes that the Western Australian Government, as well as other State, Territory and Federal Governments, have spent many years grappling with ‘how to enable Aboriginal people to succeed’ (2016: 10). It also comments that, while investment and services are increasing, there is little evidence of significant long-term change in the socio-economic outcomes of remote community residents (2016: 10). It quotes other government reviews and presents several reasons for this lack of progress, including a lack of coordination across bureaucratic departments leading to both over and under-servicing; State-wide programs that are not effectively translated into the ‘place-based services’ that could make a real difference; funding and outcomes that too stringently adhere to particular episodes or events, lacking the flexibility to be tailored to individual and families’ needs and circumstances; and that community input on the design and implementation of services is

\textsuperscript{74} Altman (2017: 10) argues that his proposal was never given any serious consideration.
\textsuperscript{75} In August 2017, the Western Australian Government handed down a Service Priority Review as part of their broad analysis into the functions of the public sector. This report confirmed that the Regional Services Reform Unit would continue, acting from within the newly-amalgamated Department of Communities (Western Australian Government 2017). This will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.
rare (Regional Services Reform Unit 2016: 10 - 11). These issues are similar to those noted in many other government reports across Australia, a trend which has appeared not to vary substantially in decades. From this perspective, it seems that the only real consistency in policy regarding remote service delivery has been a persistent inconsistency. Government policy regarding remote Indigenous communities at both a State and Federal level has suffered from a severe lack of consistency, and it is likely that this has impacted the ability of remote community residents to address issues of sustainability in their communities. The issue of inconsistent policy application is also noted in the Western Australian Education and Health Standing Committee’s Where From? Where To? A Discussion Paper on Remote Aboriginal Communities (2007) report, which lists a variety of additional reports and materials that support this finding.

Federal Member for the Western Australian electorate of Hasluck and first Indigenous Federal Member of the House of Representatives Ken Wyatt identified that, from the outset of the self-determination era, the government had not always been clear in explaining their future commitment to service delivery to remote Indigenous residents. This lack of clarification has, in part, led to an expectation that the government would play a larger role in on-going service delivery than it was perhaps prepared to play.

[Ken Wyatt]: And so there are some parallel discussions that have to be had. I think our failure as a State Government, and certainly as the Commonwealth...we did sit down following the people receiving ninety-nine year leases, and people who moved out on the homeland movement, [and explain] that there were certain things that the Government would consider, in terms of getting people to hubs, or to larger places for health, education, law and order issues.

...but we didn’t talk about the fact that governments could not afford to provide infrastructure that you would expect to find in a larger community in the way that people in a very small community wanted.

[Jasmin Korte]: So you think the Government didn’t clarify that well enough.

[Ken Wyatt]: No, I don’t think we did. Otherwise we wouldn’t have this...
[Jasmin Korte]: Expectation?

[Ken Wyatt]: Issue, and expectation now. That’s both Commonwealth and State. (pers.comm., December 2016).

A number of other participants similarly argued that the Government, whether Commonwealth or State, had provided the initial infrastructure and encouragement but had not adequately clarified what remote Indigenous residents could expect with regards to future support.

Paul Lane (Director of think-tank The Kimberley Institute), as part of a broader point regarding the notion that many outstations created during the homelands movement were never considered to be viable by Aboriginal people, commented:

The issue which clouds this in many respects is they’re able to throw up these outstations that they say are being sustained, but are not viable...were by and large those that were created during the ATSIC period and were artificial constructs in terms of their infrastructure. Should never have been built there.

People tended to opportunistically say, ‘well, if there’s a house available, I'll have one.’ But didn't have any genuine aspiration to remove themselves to live in those. Happy to do it, thought it was nice to be able to do it, but weren’t embedded into the notion of having them there. So someone comes along and says ‘would you like a beach house?’

‘Yeah, sure.’

‘Do you want to live there permanently?’

‘No. Have no interest in that.’ (Paul Lane, pers.comm., March 2017).
Former State Premier Colin Barnett expressed a similar sentiment when discussing the lack of continued Federal funding for remote communities:

Well, they built houses out in the middle of the desert. Said ‘there you go, there’s a house. Good luck’ (Colin Barnett, pers.comm., April 2017).

Given that this perception exists, it is reasonable to question the process that led to such seemingly poorly-designed infrastructure and resource delivery policies. When a state is considering the design and implementation of policy, it is commonplace to conduct consultation with the individuals and groups whom such policy will impact. Sometimes, consultants are also engaged to provide specific reports that might come to be used in the formulation of policy (see Stewart & Strathern 2005; Purtill 2017: 251 - 252). A core component of the governance of Indigenous affairs since the self-determination era has been consultation with the Indigenous population: so much so that the term itself is now a seemingly ubiquitous component across documents or statements regarding Indigenous policy. The website of the Regional Services Reform dedicated a section under the title ‘consultation’, and in it, stressed that ‘effective consultation is a significant component of regional services reform’ (Regional Services Reform 2017).

Unfortunately, the term ‘consultation’ essentially only implies that Indigenous people have been made aware of policy changes that may occur. In 2004, around the time in which most scholars recognise the paradigm shift, the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination was established within the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. It was promised that this office would have several new functions that would deal with a number of long-standing complaints about the delivery of Indigenous affairs policy by Aboriginal people (Sullivan 2011: 34). One of these complaints was:

---

76 A quick Google search highlights just how many Federal Departments have held Indigenous affairs responsibilities since the demolition of ATSIC in 2004. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs was dissolved in 2006, and Indigenous affairs functions were taken over by the newly-established Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, which was subsequently dissolved in 2007. The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs was then in existence until 2013, when it too was dissolved. Since 2013, Indigenous affairs functions have been assumed by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Since mid-2017 in Western Australia, Aboriginal affairs policy has been delivered by the Department of Premier and Cabinet according to a similar ‘whole of government’ model.
The number and frequency of government functionaries who come to consult them about their development needs in a piecemeal way and apparently with no reference to their colleagues who have come before or who work in different departments (Sullivan 2011: 34).

The frustration felt after continued consultative efforts is sometimes termed ‘consultation fatigue’, a phenomenon identified by Senator Louise Pratt as common in some remote Western Australian communities (Louise Pratt, pers.comm., October 2016). ‘Heather’, a Federal politician who chose not to be identified, agreed, commenting ‘people feel like they’ve been consulted to death, so it has to be meaningful (‘Heather’, pers.comm., August 2016). Sullivan (2011) demonstrates convincingly that recent attempts to resolve this complaint have been unsuccessful. The National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Council of Australian Governments 2009), for example, does not provide an adequate remedy to this issue. Sullivan (2011: 108) points to the ‘Indigenous Engagement Principle’, which, despite its promising name in fact only commits governments to ‘being transparent regarding the role and level of Indigenous engagement along a continuum from information sharing to decision-making’ (cited in Sullivan, 2011: 108). Essentially, government officials need only be transparent about how much or how little impact Indigenous people and groups will have on the final design of policy.

...government officials should be honest about consultations that only involve telling people what is going to happen, and they should not give them the impression that they are involved in decision making. The level of engagement as a result is likely to be disengaged (Sullivan 2011: 108).

Roughly a quarter of interviewees had an opinion regarding the consultation process (or lack thereof) employed throughout the remote community closure debate. There were three general themes. First, some participants stressed the general importance of a consultative approach in policy decision-making. As ‘consultation’ is a well-established term in the lexicon of social policy issues, these responses are not surprising. For example, discussing the origins of this consultative approach in the context of the events surrounding the Yirrkala Bark Petition in the early 1960s (throughout which time he worked as a government consultant), Bill Gray said that there was then a growing recognition that
there ‘ought to be...a government capacity to, in a sense, act as ‘go-between’ the Aboriginal people and the government and its agencies’ (Bill Gray, pers.comm., February 2017). In a discussion following the March 2017 Labor election win, Senator Patrick Dodson told me it was imperative that the incoming Government would make sure that there was consultation with the people before they unilaterally decided to move people out of communities, in order to improve their bottom line (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., March 2017). Kowal (2015: 6) argues that, like ‘self-determination’, ‘community consultation’ is a concept developed in response to Indigenous critiques of Western development and research (paralleling shifts in the international development context). These key concepts, she argues, distinguish those who seek to improve circumstances in remote Aboriginal Australia from those that came before: the missionaries (the soul-savers) and the assimilationists (those that sought to absorb the Aboriginal population into the ‘White’ one) (2015: 6 - 7).

When asked about whether they thought the Regional Services Reform Unit would deliver the outcomes it hoped to, Alannah MacTiernan (now State Minister for Regional Development) said:

> It really depends on the degree to which Aboriginal people are deeply engaged in the process. Not just being consulted with, but actually driving the outcomes.

> I think it’s got to be far more than consultation. I mean I just think consultation is not an adequate concept. It’s got to be actual engagement in the decision-making because just consultation, you know, it’s become quite a meaningless concept (Alannah MacTiernan, pers.comm., July 2016).

Second, others, such as the Federal Member for the electorate of Brand, Madeleine King, stressed their frustration at the lack of consultation prior to the announcements regarding the proposed community closures.

> [Madeleine King]: You can’t just...[participant laughs] say words like ‘unsustainable’ and ‘not viable’ and not consult with these people about what is a good way for that community to get the most out of the funding that is being provided. Because there was no consultation on this.
[Jasmin Korte]: There has been now.

[Madeleine King]: Now, but not when it was announced (Madeleine King, pers.comm., December 2016).

In response to a question regarding their initial response to the announcements about the potential community closures, ‘Heather’ told me that she had felt distressed, in large part because she knew that the Aboriginal residents of such communities would be distressed. She then told me that her distress ‘border[ed] on outrage that the Government could do something without consultation, without knowing the disruption that it would have [and] knowing how important remote communities and outstations are across Australia (‘Heather’, pers.comm., August 2016).

Third, many participants either cast aspersions on, or lauded the success of (often depending on what side of politics they were aligned with) the then Liberal State Government’s consultation agenda as part of the Regional Services Reform (2015 - 2017). Of those that were critical of the State’s consultation agenda, many made the point that there were some who had not had a voice in the process: often implying that the State had been selective in identifying which perspectives to consider.

[Jasmin Korte]: So speaking of that, the Regional Services Reform, which is what the initial proposal to close communities sort of rolled into in the end has been conducting a lot of consultation over the past sixteen- seventeen months, I believe?

[Bishop Christopher Saunders]: So I’m told, there’s a lot of people that haven’t been consulted though (Bishop Christopher Saunders, pers.comm., March 2017).

Later in the interview, Bishop Saunders discussed the ways in which he believed those tasked with consulting the Indigenous community could potentially manipulate the outcome. For example, when discussing a particular State Government report, he said:
Bishop Christopher Saunders] I think it’s a bureaucratic-driven document, that’s not based on grass-roots, and they need to have people who can sit down and talk to people. I mean, the bureaucratic approach is to go and say ‘listen, would you do you think it’d be a good idea if you had this and this and this?’ and the average Aboriginal person goes ‘yeah, tick, done that,’ you know? Tick three boxes there.

That’s not consultation (pers.comm., March 2017).

He went on to describe these types of approaches as ‘false, inappropriate and inadequate means of consultation...[they] are just ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions, you know? Not even multiple choice (pers.comm., March 2017).

Wayne Bergman, CEO of KRED Enterprises and a community leader in the Kimberley, made this comment regarding the Regional Services Reform’s consultation process: ‘they have been hand-picking who to engage with. They haven’t engaged with me. So they’ve been shopping around for a political solution’ (Wayne Bergman, pers.comm., March 2017). State Greens Member Robin Chapple argued that the consultation process had been rushed and devoid of meaningful engagement:

I mean, if I was Aboriginal Minister, well even me as an individual, I’d go out and sit down for two or three days with the community and have a conversation...the government fails to do that.

We asked the question in Parliament, how many communities have you visited and explained the process or had consultation with? And they managed to visit five communities in one day in the Kimberley. So that was literally, ‘hello, I’m from that Depart-gone’. (Robin Chapple, pers.comm., October 2016).

Chapple later made the distinction between the concepts of ‘consultation’ and ‘conversation’. Consultation, he said, implied a top down approach and could be seen as simply informing Indigenous people of what was to occur. Conversation, conversely, facilitates direct Indigenous participation in the decision-making process.

77 I have also heard this distinction expressed with the term ‘collaboration’ replacing ‘conversation.’
‘Heather’ was particularly scathing of the State’s consultation agenda:

They’ve said they’ve gone out and consulted, they haven’t really.

They’ve had the Kimberley group and the Pilbara group, and those people...talking to them is different to going out and talking to communities. The comments that I particularly heard from the Kimberley was that the groups didn’t meet that often and the word I heard is that they don’t feel like they’ve been consulted adequately. The bottom line the community’s saying is just because you’ve spoken to that group it doesn’t mean you’ve consulted us (‘Heather’, pers.comm., August 2016).

Community consultation, then, is a concept thoroughly embedded in the Australian Indigenous affairs discourse and practice. This likely emerged in response to critiques of previous community development practices in which there was a paucity of Indigenous input in the design of programs and services. Therefore, emphasising a consultative approach acts to distinguish those who are committed to achieving positive outcomes in Indigenous affairs now from those that were associated with what are perceived to be earlier, more rudimentary techniques. Despite what I believe is often a genuine political intent to consult with Indigenous people about issues that will affect their lives; despite numerous reports into understanding the challenges in remote service delivery and a solid scholarly and governmental literature base recommending the government take a long-term approach; and despite evidence of the many benefits associated with investing and increasing sustainability within remote communities, though, Government policy at both a State and Federal level continues to be haphazard and piecemeal.

Value and Equality in Western Societies

It is not possible to deconstruct the issue of whether or not remote Indigenous communities should be maintained without addressing disadvantage. What effect does allowances made for distance and remoteness have on this issue? Is it possible to ever really ‘close the gap’ in remote Indigenous communities, by virtue of the immense challenges involved in delivering not only adequate, but quality services to those areas? The National Homelands Policy
employed throughout the ATSIC period included a recognition that, in order for Indigenous people to enjoy the right to live remotely, the services they received would never equal those received in other parts of the country, particularly in metropolitan areas (Altman 2017: 10). With regards to closing the gap, Altman (2017: 10; 2018: 346 - 347) recently argued that homelands will always be ‘deeply problematic’ places because ‘gaps, as measured by standard social indications, will be impossible to eliminate in homelands’. As the following discussion will show, ‘closing the gap’ is problematic in more way than just one.

‘Closing the gap’ has become a common catchcry of policy discussions within Indigenous affairs in recent decades. Conceptualisations of this policy vary, however due to its emergence around the same time as the paradigm shift in the late 2000s, it should be seen as thoroughly embedded in the new framework of policies aimed at normalisation. Referencing the liberal democratic underpinnings of our Western society, ‘closing the gap’ can be seen as a straightforward policy incarnation of ‘levelling’ Indigenous people: bringing them up to the same level of socioeconomic achievement enjoyed by broader Australian society. Kowal (2015: 35) says, ‘the imperative to do this draws on a historically and culturally specific set of beliefs and norms...that takes freedom and happiness as its goals.’ The fundamental liberal doctrine holds that individuals are the basic units of society and the role of the State is to protect and progress individual fulfilment. The state, however, can also be seen as an impediment to individual freedoms, and therefore the major tensions within liberalism revolve around how much involvement the State should have in the lives of individuals. On classic liberalism, Mill (1859: 59 - 60) argues:

The struggle between liberty and authority is the most conspicuous feature in the portions of history with which we are earliest familiar...by liberty [what] was meant [was] protection against the tyranny of political rulers.

Their power was regarded as necessary, but also as highly dangerous...the aim, therefore, of patriots was to set limits to the power which the ruler should be suffered to exercise over the community; and this limitation was what they meant by liberty.
From this perspective, ‘equality’ can be seen to mean equal protection for all individuals from the overreaches and excesses of the state. In answering the fundamental question of to what extent broader Australian society ‘values’ remote Indigeneity, the concept of equality is paramount. Drawing on the work of French social anthropologist Dumont, Robbins (1994: 30 - 37; 55) argues that in Western societies, equality is deferential to individualism, and the concept of equality is only applicable to the relationship between individuals and the state (as opposed to relationships between individuals). Western individualism is structured by a valuation of difference over similarity (1994: 31), inasmuch as one of the core dignities of man inherent in the liberal doctrine is the right of the individual subject to differentiate itself from others (Lukes, cited in Robbins 1994: 32). Thus, the only way in which broad equality can truly be expressed in a Western sense is as the equal ability of the individual to assert difference.

What then, is the role of the state in institutionalising this difference? As Robbins (1994: 33) identifies, several ‘standards’ of equality exist in the Western tradition, each with corresponding policy mechanisms for the state to institute in the pursuit of their achievement. For example, ontological equality holds that all individuals are born equal (commonly expressed as ‘individuals are all equal before God’, or ‘individuals are all naturally equal’, et cetera). This type of equality is often at the basis of human rights discourses. Equality of outcome is a far more problematic standard of equality. In order to achieve equality of outcome, levelling (i.e. making people actually equal in concrete terms) would be necessary (Robbins 1994: 33). The standard of equality of outcome is strong in Australia, relative to other Western democracies such as the United States, and levelling occurs in a number of ways: institutionalised redistribution of income, for example (through tiered income tax, the provision of public services, et cetera). Some strains of liberal thought (Robbins 1994: 33) points to ‘relatively liberal’ and ‘reactionary libertarian’) reject the notion of ‘enforcing equality’ out of hand, arguing it can lead to ‘dull uniformity’ and is, essentially, an attack on individual freedoms (see also Flew 1981; Spiegelberg 1986). To return to Sanders’s conceptualisation of the competing principles in Indigenous affairs, the principle of ‘choice’ fits neatly into this liberal framework (in that the principle of choice can justify some level of inequality, as long as this difference is seen to be the result of an

78 Despite these levelling measures, the wealth gap in Australia is growing (see, for example, Saunders, Bradbury & Wong 2016).
informed, responsible collective decision on the part of the individual (Sanders 2009: 8). On the principle of equality, recall that Sanders identifies the sub-principles of legal equality, socio-economic equality and equality of opportunity (citing Bennett’s example, 1999: 2). His conceptualisation of socio-economic equality is similar to the equality of outcome as described by Robbins (1994: 33). Flew (1981) argues that equality of outcome flies in the face of liberalism in the sense that it ‘threatens [sic] to deny free reign to autonomy, privacy and self-development’ (cited in Robbins 1994: 33). Equality of outcome denies individualistic notions of the right to differ, which is a fundamental tenet of liberal thought. Could this tension be part of the misapprehension that levelling Indigenous people in a socio-economic sense (achieving socio-economic equality or equality of outcome) may eradicate Indigenous distinctiveness (see Sanders 2009: 7; Kowal 2015: 39, Dillon & Westbury 2019: 3)? It is clear that many of the current tensions inherent in public, political and scholarly debates regarding the direction of Indigenous affairs policy in Australia are built on the foundations of similar tensions within liberal democratic thought. Negotiations with regards to what is meant by ‘equality’ still appear unresolved in Australia, a situation which is not unique: as Robbins (1994: 56) says, ‘what the West lacks, from the point of view of the analysis presented here, is a coherent application of the value of equality’.

If we are to accept the arguments listed above, the elements of liberal thought inherent in Australia’s Western tradition dictate that the individual struggles to conceptualise equality in relation to other individuals, instead understanding it to relate to its relationship with the state. That is to say, Australian individuals struggle to view ‘equality’ outside of the lens of their (or other’s) relationship with the state. In analysing the data collected from my participants, I would argue that this trend is best seen in the responses to my questions related to the provision of funding in remote Aboriginal communities. Questions I commonly asked included:

---

79 I recognise that Sanders’s analysis rests mostly on the level of the group, as opposed to the individual. For the purpose of this discussion, however, I believe the overlap is sufficient.

80 Robbins points to some (then) contemporary postmodern literature which strives to resolve these negotiations, particularly with regards to the West’s responsibility to ‘otherness’ (see White 1991). While I do not have the scope to address these developments here, I suggest that despite the greater scholarly focus on these issues since the 1990s, they remain contested.
It has been argued that the catalyst for this debate was the issue of funding for essential and municipal services to remote communities. Would you agree with that proposition?

Who do you believe should be responsible for providing funding to remote communities? The State or Federal Government? Someone else?

The vast majority of my participants answered with either the State or Federal Government, or a combination of the two. One trend I noticed from the outset was my participants’ tendency to frame their response around a perceived ‘responsibility’ of the state to support remote communities on the basis of either, firstly, the history of injustices perpetrated against Indigenous Australians by the state, and secondly, the responsibility of the state to support remote Indigenous people’s ‘lifestyles’ on the basis of their citizenship or their unique rights as Indigenous people. As I noted earlier, at different times in Australian history, either Indigenous peoples’ ‘sameness’ on the basis of their equal rights (their ontological equality) or their ‘difference’ (borne out of their unique position as Australia’s only Indigenous population) have been emphasised by the Indigenous rights movement. Of my thirty-nine participants, twenty-seven framed their responses around one (or both) of these perspectives. In the case of a further eight, I either did not gain enough data to clarify their position or the participant straddled both categories so closely that their position remained unclear. Each of those I interviewed had varied and carefully-considered views on how remote Aboriginal communities should and do interact with the rest of the country, and I have taken care not to be simplistic in my characterisation of their perspectives; reductionism, however, is a necessary component of thematic analysis.

Below are some excerpts from those participants who clearly articulated the government’s responsibility to fund remote Aboriginal communities on the basis of Indigenous Australians’ civil rights, and the perceived historical injustices perpetrated against them by the state:

---

81 This word has clearly been problematised by Tony Abbott’s comment that remote Indigenous residents desire to live on country is a ‘lifestyle choice’. In the interviews I conducted, a number of my participants actively hedged their comments when they inadvertently used the word.
There’s always a value in helping people live where they want to live. Especially a group of people that’ve been challenged by us, as settling forces. You know, why wouldn’t you put in a bit of effort to that? (Madeleine King, pers.comm., December 2016).

Now Mr. Barnett might be surprised to know that Aboriginal people are actually citizens of this country. We’re not still at the day where they’re counted as flora and fauna, they are counted as Australian citizens. As real people. And if these were white communities, white towns, where the Government was proposing to withdraw, in a de facto way, basic services…the whole country would be outraged (John McBain, pers.comm., March 2017).

I just found it really appalling that certain groups in Australia could be treated so differently to the rest of the population. It really scares me that people are apathetic towards that, and think that’s fine because it’s just that group of people, like they don’t need to have the same rights as everyone else…everyone needs to have the same set of rights. And you know that the Government wouldn’t move people white Australians from their suburbs even if it was, you know, hypothetically a dysfunctional suburb…they wouldn’t say ‘well we’ll just close the suburb down’ or ‘just relocate people’ (Sarah George, pers.comm., October 2016).

I think it’s the responsibility of the States, and the Federal Government in terms of conventional budgetary distribution to service all people in Australia in exactly the same way (Robin Chapple, pers.comm., October 2016).

Some participants went further than pointing to historical injustices, emphasising the ongoing, often intergenerational structural impediments to Indigenous development.

People were forced into welfare dependency economies and not allowed to access the full market economy. And the evidence for that, it still prevails today, is that there are severe restrictions and limitations on Aboriginal people being able to engage in commercial activity on their traditional lands (Kado Muir, pers.comm., January 2017).
Another common theme was the identification of a lack of understanding, respect or appreciation for remote Indigenous culture and the benefits that remote communities promote. It was the opinion of many of my participants that, if the non-financial ‘goods’ produced by remote communities are discounted, then of course they seem to present insurmountable funding challenges. If these goods are taken into consideration, however, then remote Indigenous communities can be seen as an investment, which require funding but produce unique products that are of benefit to Indigenous residents and Australians more broadly. The particular ‘goods’ produced by remote communities, according to my participants and some scholars, will be canvassed more extensively in the following chapter, however I provide several examples below to illustrate this theme:

I don’t know whether there’s a full appreciation of the significance of Indigenous peoples living on their country. If you look at the work for the dole scheme, it’s a good example of that. It’s typical of ‘well, they don’t do work out there, there’s no labour market or jobs, so they’ve got to work for the social benefit that we provide.’

In fact there is a lot of work that people do. You know, they teach language, they teach people about their country. They teach how to care for the country, those sorts of things. They pass on language, they pass on knowledge that’s unique, that no one else has got. (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., March 2017).

This participant also made this comment later, when we were discussing what Australian taxpayers may be willing to sacrifice in order to see remote communities continue to be funded:

They’re discussions that need to be had. But they’re only had if you have a sense of the value of the people, and the value of what it is that they contribute in the longer term...to the rest of our society (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., March 2017).

Another participant said this in response to the proposed community closures:
Do we have, after two hundred and thirty years, as a society...Western Australia, or Australia, do we have a complete lack of respect for an understanding of Aboriginal culture? And when I look at announcements from Colin Barnett like that, or other people, I have to say yes. We have a complete lack of respect and understanding (John McBain, pers.comm., March 2017).

In teasing out this theme, a number of participants also made this same argument in purely financial terms. Among them was an understanding that living in remote communities, chiefly the smaller ones, provided residents with significant psychological and health benefits. While I believe most participants were referring to the intangible benefits promoted by facilitating a continued connection to culture and country, there is some evidence to suggest that small remote communities do provide Aboriginal people with improved health outcomes (Morice 1976; Burgess et al. 2005; Education and Health Standing Committee 2007: 62 - 66; McDermott et al. 2008; Senior et al. 2018; among others). The fundamental contradiction, as I have noted before, in the Barnett Government’s proposal to close up to 150 communities was that it was the smallest, most remote communities which presented the biggest challenges to service delivery that were targeted. This would align with an overarching policy doctrine that encourages centralisation and normalisation. However, the Barnett Government often cited instances of social dysfunction as their primary consideration (as opposed to financial concerns). The majority of such social dysfunction occurs in town camps and larger communities (the very place that many remote community residents would be expected to ‘centralise’ to, were closures of smaller communities to occur, see Education and Health Standing Committee 2008: 37 - 39). There is therefore a credible economic argument that closing smaller communities would not only come with a moral and social cost, but also a high economic one. Higher rates of ‘social dysfunction’, lower health outcomes, not to mention increased pressure on the often already-stretched services in such towns, are all likely.

I didn’t see that the closing down of those communities and moving them to larger communities was going to be economically viable. There was no demonstration that was that possible. It was just ‘they’re costing a lot of money therefore we’re gonna close them down.
You know, we’re going to try and save this [gestures to the right], but actually it’s going to cost us this [gestures to the left] to do this. Didn’t hear that bit [gesturing to the left] (Bob Southwell, pers.comm., July 2016).

It is also possible that the focus on smaller remote communities was indicative of, as Altman frames it, ‘particular forms of culture and tradition [being] perceived to be strongest among homelands people’ (2018: 346). If the concern was that certain types of social dysfunction were in some way related to Aboriginal culture or tradition, or a remote iteration of such, it follows that the smallest, remotest communities would represent the most concentrated exemplification of this problem.

Only a few comments made by my participants emphasised the cost and difficulty of servicing remote communities to the exclusion of the benefits they promote. The participants that made these comments were usually those that emphasised social dysfunction at other times throughout our interviews, particularly relating to child abuse (though this is not exclusively the case, there were some participants who clearly supported funding remote communities who also discussed the perceived inherent child abuse). Generally, these same participants also emphasised the role of the state to deliver services to Aboriginal people, but used this theme to argue that the smallest remote communities are unviable and unsustainable precisely because of the challenges involved in doing so. The issue of scale was a common theme.

And so it wasn’t ever about money, but it was about us saying that if we wanted people to have a proper community, then they needed to have proper streets and proper sewage and proper electricity, and proper everything. And you can’t do that with every single remote community up there that’s got perhaps ten people living in it. And they only live in it on seasonal occasions. And equally, we can’t put a teacher into a community of ten or fifteen people either. (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., November 2016).

In answering a question relating to their reaction to Colin Barnett’s initial comments, another participant said:
I could understand them, by taking a step back and looking at a number of responsibilities that adults and governments have got. And I would say the prime responsibility is to the wellbeing of children, their safety, their welfare, their adequacy of nutrition, and their education.

A question I asked myself when I visited small communities [was] how adequately could governments and community members attend to the wellbeing of children? And I think you need a certain critical mass before you can, economically and financially, afford of justify the sort of services you need. Health, education, law and order, et cetera.

I could readily understand what Barnett’s motivation would be in making the point that where a community is so small as to be non-viable, in terms of providing that support, then the logical sequence would be to try and bring groups together till you got to a size where the role of the community members themselves and governments who support them uh could provide those levels (Chris Back, pers.comm., October 2016).

With some participants, it was difficult to have a discussion regarding the economics of service delivery without the conversation including what they perhaps perceived to be parallel social issues. When discussing the scale of remote communities, Colin Barnett said:

I recognise that some people might like to live in small - well, they’re largely family groupings. That’s not unacceptable to me, that’s fine. But they do need to have access to education and health. And they do need to be accessible to services like policing, health, child protection, alcohol and drug rehabilitation and treatment, and so on.

And you know, the practical reality of delivering that to these widely-scattered communities in remote areas, many of them in the Kimberley, are cut off by floods for months in the year. You know, let’s get real. (Colin Barnett, pers.comm., April 2017).
The two competing narratives of government rationality behind the State’s push to close remote Indigenous communities were often articulated simultaneously. Returning to when I asked Colin Barnett to explain what he meant when the said that many remote communities are ‘unviable’, and whether this was primarily related to social or economic outcomes, he responded:


The conflation between genuine challenges in service delivery (and genuine concern over some instances of ‘social dysfunction’ and low socio-economic outcomes), pathologises the very concept of remote Indigeneity in Australia. This concern is summarised concisely by Altman (2015):

The argument put forward by Premier Colin Barnett is that the WA Government cannot afford to deliver services to such remote places because of diseconomies of small scale; more recently he has suggested these communities might also be unsafe, pandering to forms of moral panic that were successfully deployed during the Northern Territory intervention: small, remote, tradition-oriented places are, ipso facto, potentially dangerous.

I discuss the issue of the pathologisation of remote Indigenous culture and the use of child sexual abuse as a form of government rationality for intervention in the following chapter. What is important here, though, is that the ‘two competing narratives’ to which I have pointed were not always expressed in a mutually-exclusive way.

**The Economics of Service Delivery**

The lack of statutory land rights legislation in Western Australia, differing layers of native title recognition, unequal distribution of mining royalties and duplication of service delivery
vehicles all complicate the economics of service delivery in remote communities in Western Australia. In addition, the layering of State, Federal and local government policies, sometimes contradicting one another, prove challenging to coordinate. At the core of the Barnett Government’s initial announcements was the issue of funding for essential and municipal services to remote communities. When considering the broader ‘viability’ and ‘sustainability’ of communities, however, there are other services to consider: employment, healthcare, education, policing, et cetera. While I do not have the capacity to canvass each of these issues in depth, I discuss one example of an experimental policy measure aimed at promoting sustainability in remote communities below (see Jordan 2016 for a more robust review).

The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme has been, in one form or another, central to Australian Indigenous affairs policy for the past four decades. The CDEP was essentially a work-for-the dole program, but at its initial conception, it was hoped that it would provide much more than just income to Indigenous participants. The scheme was conceptualised as having the potential to alleviate concerns regarding the high level of Indigenous unemployment and the social implications of direct cash payments to remote Indigenous residents (Jordan 2016: 219 - 220), and aimed to facilitate a strong, functional and sustainable socio-cultural and economic base for Indigenous communities (Altman, Gray & Levitus 2005: vii). Later, it also aimed to increase individual access to, and participation in the mainstream labour market. The CDEP peaked in around 2005, with a total of nearly three hundred CDEP schemes with over thirty-five thousand participants, costing roughly five hundred million dollars (Jordan 2016; 229 - 230). The demise of the CDEP in 2015 (bearing in mind that the scheme had been waning for a number of years prior to this) can be seen as occurring in parallel with the recent trends of mainstreaming and the movement away from Indigenous-specific programs in Indigenous affairs policy. Many of the criticisms of the CDEP, particularly during the period in which the scheme was slowed and finally phased out, related to concerns about passive welfare and a lack of mutual obligation.

H. C. Coombs is widely regarded as one of the central figures in the development of Indigenous-specific institutions and programs throughout the self-determination era, and Rowse (2012: 178 - 179) argues that the CDEP represented the clearest iteration of his influence (see also Sanders 2014). The CDEP initially gave Aboriginal community
organisations a ‘degree of autonomy’, and provided them with guaranteed funding, which they used to employ community members part time for roughly the equivalent of welfare payments (Sanders 2014: 5). Initial reviews, such as the Blanchard Report (1987) and the earlier Report of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Program (or the Miller Report) (1985) recommended that the CDEP be rolled out more broadly. By the late 1980s, the CDEP had expanded out of remote Australia into regional and urban areas, and to include non-Indigenous participants.

By the early 2000s the CDEP was the topic of increasing public debate. In 2005, a Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) review found that there was evidence that CDEP participants had higher incomes than those who were unemployed; of positive employment and training outcomes; that participants were more likely to participate in customary activities than those employed in the mainstream labour market, as the CDEP allowed for a combination of participation in customary and market labours; and that the CDEP scheme could be conceptualised as representing an ‘intermediate zone’ between welfare and mainstream employment (Altman, Gray & Levitus 2005: viii). It was also noted that, for all the recent focus on ‘mutual obligation’, the CDEP (as a program whereby Indigenous Australians essentially worked for their welfare payments) could in fact be interpreted as a good example of such. The main criticisms levelled at the CDEP involved the following: that it did not provide ‘real jobs’; that it was not an efficient intermediary between welfare and mainstream employment as few participants went on to engage with the mainstream labour force; that it allowed participants to remain, essentially, on welfare (or within their ‘comfort zone’); and that governments could use the scheme as a way of cost-shifting (largely because categorising CDEP participants as ‘employed’ significantly reduced unemployment figures in regional and remote areas (Altman, Gray & Levitus 2005: 1; Altman 2007: 2). From 2004 (when ATSIC was abolished), the CDEP was subject to a number of reviews which resulted in withdrawing the scheme from urban areas, bringing CDEP participants more into line with general job-seekers through the Howard Government’s employment provider, the Job Network; and changing the funding system to ‘competitive, multiyear contracts’ (Sanders 2014: 7). By 2009, CDEP participants were no

---

82 As Jordan (2016: 221) notes, however, there were other reports that recommended caution in the further expansion of the CDEP.
longer categorised as ‘employed’ and were almost entirely equivalent to other work-for-the-dole recipients. As Sanders (2014: 7) argues:

...new participants would no longer be employed by their CDEP provider, but rather would be Newstart Allowance recipients within the social security system while undertaking CDEP activities. CDEP was slowly being converted from a very distinctive Indigenous-specific program to a remote-area version of the general Work-for-the-Dole program introduced in 1997.

While the CDEP was being scaled back on all fronts, some recipients (called ‘grandfathered participants’) were guaranteed CDEP wages until 2011 (later extended to 2017) (Jordan 2016: 234 - 235). In 2013, the Gillard Government brought together several parallel schemes, including the CDEP, to be replaced by the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP). This scheme was not an Indigenous-specific program, although the majority of participants were Indigenous (Jordan 2016: 236). In 2014 the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion announced that the RJCP had been a disaster, and in 2015 the RJCP was renamed the Community Development Program (CDP). In December 2016, the CAEPR released a topical issue (Jordan & Fowkes 2016) criticising the Government’s CDP scheme which made headlines (James 2016). Jordan & Fowkes (2016) & Altman (2016) argued that the increased work requirements had led many participants to receive penalties which were being applied unfairly. To complicate things, participants were required to liaise with Centrelink, a task which ranged from implausible to impossible in some remote areas (and was clearly articulated by one of my participants as a major issue facing their community, (Alex Knight, pers.comm., May 2016)). Scullion responded, arguing:

It is disappointing that public debate is being dominated by urban academics like Dr Jordan whose professional experience is limited to being an academic in east coast universities (cited in James 2016).

Successive reviews of the CDP have led to sustained negative media attention, particularly by state broadcaster the ABC. Across just a few months of 2018 alone, the ABC online published a number of articles with headlines such as ‘work for the dole CDP scheme a costly failure that’s hurting people: report’ (Brennan 2018), ‘remote work-for-the-dole
scheme has ‘devastating’ impact on Indigenous people, say participants’ (Joyner 2018) and ‘Indigenous communities slapped with more fines under Government work-for-the-dole scheme, data shows’ (Conifer, Kesper & McKinnon 2018).

A recent CAEPR research monograph tracks the expansion and contraction of the CDEP (Jordan 2016: 219 - 241) and concludes that while the CDEP was problematic on a number of levels, overall it was ‘better than welfare’. While (largely) conservative scholars and commentators praised the gradual dismantling of the CDEP (see, for example, Hudson 2008), Altman described it as ‘the single most destructive decision in Indigenous affairs policy that I have witnessed in 30 years of research and involvement in Aboriginal communities, alongside the decision to abolish ATSIC in 2004’ (2007: 1).

Despite decades of experimental policy aimed at providing an economic base for remote Indigenous communities, and the advent of new income flows such as royalties paid to native title bodies, questions still remain as to how to decrease the reliance of remote Indigenous communities on the government sector. Possibly the most comprehensive, and certainly the most cited, proposal to resolve this tension is Altman’s hybrid economy model (see Altman 2005a; 2005b). Put simply, the hybrid economy Altman envisages for remote communities involves three interdependent sectors: the market economy, the non-market (or state-funded economy) and the customary economy. Altman also defines four ‘cross-cutting cleavages’ between these three sectors which account for their ‘linkages and interdependences’. When Altman first introduced his model in the early 2000s, the dilemma he identified as most pressing was how to grow both the market and customary sectors, as the state sector was assumed to have peaked (see Buchanan 2016: 15). Underpinning the hybrid economy model is the recognition of the production of ‘goods’ not recognised in traditional monetary terms. As Buchanan notes, Altman argues that the ‘failure of formal economics to measure non-monetary productive activities [is] due to their being seen as ‘antithetical to the capitalist and market ideology’ (Altman, cited in Buchanan 2016: 20). Some forms of production, such as Indigenous art, are encompassed within both the market and customary sectors. While the terms ‘non-monetary productive activities’ in Buchanan’s analysis refer to the subsistence and/or customary sector, it follows that this definition could be broadened to include other things ‘produced’ within remote Indigenous communities, such as the transmission of customary knowledge and ‘traditionally’-based wildlife
management. Altman’s hybrid economy model, then, could be seen to encompass those non-monetary ‘products’ identified by many of my participants as severely lacking in recognition and respect by the wider Australian public and policy-makers. These non-monetary goods, it stands, are more difficult to ascribe value to given the contemporary pervasiveness of neoclassical economic thought, which dictates that the only ‘value’ of a good is the sum of its economic worth. There have been several critiques of Altman’s model, however these generally concede that some form of economic hybridity such as that described by Altman is the only possible economic basis for most of Australia’s remote Indigenous communities (see Sanders 2016).

**Perspectives on the Sustainability of Remote Communities in Western Australia**

The Regional Services Reform Unit that was established after the initial debate surrounding the possible remote community closures, in the opinion of many of my participants, has made a contribution. The main contribution rests on its broad analysis of the population size, demographics of and services supplied to remote communities. There is abundant evidence that prior to the establishment of the Unit and its investigation, there were questions regarding whether services were being delivered as effectively as they could be. A 2015 Auditor General’s report, for example, which audited the State Department of Housing’s delivery of power, water and wastewater repair and maintenance to selected remote communities (through the Remote Area Essential Services Program) found that the eligibility criteria for the Program had not been revisited since 2008. As a result, it conceded, the Department of Housing did not know if the right communities were being included in the program; some communities may have been receiving services that they were no longer entitled to, and others may in fact be entitled to receive services but were not (Office of the Auditor General 2015: 5). It also concluded that ‘improved planning, information sharing and coordinating by the various service delivery entities’ would improve efficiency at a number of levels (Office of the Auditor General 2015: 7).

---

83 This report, as well as others regarding remote service delivery in Western Australia, highlighted the poor drinking water quality in a number of remote communities. This issue was also noted by several of my participants (Sue Lines, pers.comm., October 2016; Robin Chapple, pers.comm., October 2016; Helen Morton, pers.comm., November 2016; Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., March 2017) and remains a significant issue.
The RSRU’s report, Resilient Families, Strong Communities (referred to from here as the ‘Roadmap’) suggests that pursuing elements of the hub and orbit model is the most efficient way to service Western Australia’s remote communities. Under the heading ‘the challenge in remote communities’, the report first outlines that the 274 remote communities in the State are home to about 12,000 residents. By contrast, it adds, in Queensland there are only 18 remote communities that house 20,000 residents. The reader is presumably encouraged to conclude that fewer, larger population centres are able to be more efficiently serviced than more numerous, smaller remote communities. The RSRU estimates that about 9,000 of Western Australia’s remote community residents live in communities in either the Pilbara or the Kimberley (with the remaining 3,000 residing in the Goldfields and the Mid-West). These figures change somewhat depending on what is categorised as a remote Aboriginal community. Some reports, and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs data set include town-based reserves (or ‘town camps’) such as Bilgungurr located roughly five kilometres from Broome (Education and Health Standing Committee 2007; Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2017). Correctly, the Roadmap highlights the vast differences in geographical location (and therefore distance to markets), living conditions, tenure arrangements and collective histories among the State’s remote communities. Under the heading ‘the challenge’, the Roadmap argues that despite ‘high and increasing’ levels of expenditure into closing the gap in life expectancy and health and educational outcomes between remote Aboriginal residents and their city-dwelling counterparts, the progress has been slow. It specifically cites employment figures, year twelve completion rates, household occupancy and levels of diabetes, cardiovascular disease and kidney disease. Inefficiencies at the bureaucratic level, a chronic lack of quality infrastructure and the lack of long-term certainty of programs and policy are also cited as issues to be addressed.

The Roadmap is quite a broad document. As former head of the RSRU Grahame Searle described to me, it was intended to be ‘a step along a process…it was basically outlining a government position so that when we went to consult with communities we weren’t doing it with a blank sheet of paper (Grahame Searle, pers.comm., October 2016). This broadness

---

84 Before describing the perspectives of participants regarding the Roadmap, I should note that I was quite surprised by how many politicians (on both sides of government) had not read this report. A common response was ‘I’ve heard of the report/I’m aware of it but I haven’t read it/haven’t gone over it in detail.’
was interpreted in a number of ways by my participants, most commonly that it was somewhat of a ‘blank slate’ that could be used to justify any political agenda.

[Jasmin Korte]: And what was your assessment of that [the Roadmap]?

[Sue Lines, Federal Senator for Western Australia]: Well I just thought it could serve a political purpose. Because it either says a lot depending on one way of reading it or it says very little. It is very broad...it’s a broad-brush paper and doesn’t really commit to much at all. So I think it’s a dangerous piece of paper in the hands of Colin Barnett, who hasn’t moved away from closing communities, to the best of my knowledge. I think that it justifies closing them (Sue Lines, pers.comm., October 2016).

This same interpretation was expressed in various ways, such as: ‘I think the Roadmap stuff was really trying to justify a way in which to achieve the objective (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., March 2017); an ‘entirely predictable document’ (Bishop Christopher Saunders, pers.comm., March 2017); and ‘when you actually look at the Roadmap in detail, the message [that communities will be closed] is still there...but we’re sugar-coating it (Robin Chapple, pers.comm., October 2016).

Though there were a few, there were others who gave a more positive assessment, such as former Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Fred Chaney:

I think it’s superior to any current statement of the Commonwealth Government in terms of remote communities, in that it acknowledges some very important things that I see as realities...and includes a pretty realistic assessment of the challenges of delivery of services and so on. [Although] it doesn’t have a statutory framework around it, so it’s really no more than a statement of political and administrative good intent (Fred Chaney, pers.comm., December 2016).

A number of those I interviewed saw the Roadmap as ’just another report’; a recent iteration of the long-standing trend of spending money on Indigenous affairs without the guarantee of an outcome.
Broadly, inefficiencies at the bureaucratic level was a theme mentioned by a number of my participants. Some were sympathetic to the idea that while the public perception was that inordinate amounts of money were spent on remote communities, much of it may not be reaching remote community residents themselves. Federal Senator for Western Australia Glenn Sterle, for example, made this comment in response to a question about the funding structure of remote service delivery:

    I’ve always said this, you know, if you could take off the third, fourth, fifth pairs of hands, and that’s whether they’re white or black, it doesn’t matter, it’s amazing the dollar could go quite far (Glenn Sterle, pers.comm., October 2016).

And again, later in the conversation:

    [Jasmin Korte]: It’s about where is that money going, and how are we still not achieving the outcomes that we want?

    [Glenn Sterle]: Jasmin it goes back to my original statement, get all the grubby hands off. Get the grubby hands off, black and white, and you know what? That money could do a lot of good. It could go a lot further. I did suggest that to a Minister once. You would have thought I’d asked for the Minister’s personal bank details, but anyway. There you go (Glenn Sterle, pers.comm., October 2016).

Former Pilbara pastoral boss Jack Webber and his wife Bev had this to say regarding how remote communities should be funded:

    [Jack Webber]: I find it hard to answer, Jasmin, cause I think there’s millions of dollars thrown away-

    [Bev Webber]: Yes, there has been.
[Jack Webber]: -which is achieving nothing. And you know, it worries me...and I don't honestly know. I think we should listen to what the Elders want, to be able to spend the money more wisely.

[Jasmin Korte]: Yes. Well I think a lot of people have said that it’s not necessarily that we should spend less money, it’s just that we should work out exactly where that money’s going-

[Jack Webber]: We should work out-

[Bev Webber]: Where it’s going, yeah. I don’t know, how many times do you see in the paper, or hear on the news where the person that was in charge has been taking all the money themselves. I mean and then the blackfellas have got nothing.

[Jack Webber]: That's right!

[Bev Webber]: Yeah. And that is something that I jump up and down about, and go 'oh for god's sake, where's the bloody money going to.' They keep handing it out and they don't get it! (Jack Webber; Bev Webber, pers.comm., November 2016).

When discussing the amount of money being spent in communities, another person said this:

But again, how is that money being spent? Is it being spent by having seven bureaucrats employed while the local community is unemployed? (Sue Lines, pers.comm., October 2016).

That so many of my participants (including those in government) expressed concern over firstly, where the millions of dollars within the Indigenous affairs budget is being spent, and secondly, why it seemingly has not led to improved outcomes in remote communities, lends weight to the idea that this is likely a broader concern across the Australian public. As has
been shown, however, without consistent, considered and long-term policy addressing the unique challenges within remote communities, it is reasonable to expect that many more millions may be spent without achieving the desired outcomes. The only other specifically Western Australian report that rivals the Roadmap with regards to its scope that I am aware of was presented to the Parliament in 2007 by the Education and Health Standing Committee. Its terms of reference included an analysis of ‘successful initiatives’ in remote Aboriginal communities, and paid particular attention to the cost and benefits of, and model utilised to develop, such initiatives. In contrast to the perceived centralising underpinnings of the Roadmap, this report found that:

There is little available evidence to demonstrate the benefits of recentralisation from small to large remote Aboriginal communities; and there is some evidence to the contrary, particularly in relation to health outcomes (Education and Health Standing Committee 2007: 72).

It went on to recommend that research into the future viability of small remote communities (informed by residents of these and other remote communities) should be obtained before ‘the state embarks on a program that is premised upon a view within State Government agencies that many of the small remote communities are unsustainable (Department of Water, cited in Education and Health Standing Committee 2007: 72). The following year, in 2008, Colin Barnett was elected Premier of Western Australia.

The remoteness of many of the discrete Aboriginal communities presents enormous challenges for service delivery. While some participants emphasised these difficulties, many more framed their responses with regards to the state’s (Federal, State or local Government) responsibility to find a way to deliver services in spite of them. The most common reasoning for this involved a perceived historical responsibility to right past wrongs, or a responsibility borne out of the rights of remote community residents (owing to both their rights as citizens and their unique rights as Indigenous people). Throughout my interviews, the Western tradition of conceptualising ‘equality’ with regards to the individual’s rights before the state was evident, lending support to the continued presence of these liberalist themes.
Scholarly opinions on the way in which contemporary Australian society can recognise our collective colonial past while progressing forward to an inclusive future are many (see, for example, Sullivan’s (2011: 16 - 17) ‘consolidated approach’ which includes an acceptance among Australians that settlers and immigrants also partake of the Aboriginal experience, as they reside in ‘an Aboriginal social and physical landscape’). This is a common theme in popular discourse, and has been evident in recent discussions regarding changing the date of Australia Day. As Robbins notes, perhaps what the West can learn from societies that place paramount value on equality is to be more relational, and to consider other individuals not just with regards to what they are owed by the state, but what they are owed by each other (1994: 56).

These sorts of discussions are not new. In what is often cited as the first organised Indigenous opposition to Australia Day, the Aborigines’ Progressive Association staged a protest meeting on the same day (termed by the APA ‘The Day of Mourning’) in 1938 (see Bennett 1991:5; Attwood 2003: 195, among others). Indigenous disquiet regarding the celebration of Australian nationalism on the 26th of January has subsequently been raised in various ways across various platforms, the most recent iterations including a number of local councils opting to hold Australia Day celebrations on other dates. Fremantle Council, for example, has now held two successful ‘One Day’ celebrations on the 28th of January (both of which I attended), attracting roughly thirty thousand people.
Chapter Five
Government Rationality and Social Dysfunction:
The Second of Two Competing Narratives

The Culture Wars

In recent years a new genre has emerged: messianic tomes that aim to provide the defining discursive frame and policy prescription to solve Australia’s deep and troubling Aboriginal problem, especially in remote regions (Altman 2011).

...a series of debates [are] occurring simultaneously in two arenas: in public attention to the circumstances of Aboriginal people living in areas of Australia described as ‘remote’, and in scholarly disagreement among anthropologists over how we should interpret and respond to these circumstances (Hinkson 2010: 1).

As my discussion of the shifts in Indigenous affairs policy and the relationship between media representations of Indigenous people and public opinion in Chapters Two and Three have shown, debates regarding the viability, sustainability and value of remote Indigeneity in Australia are not new. In recent times, remote Indigeneity has featured heavily in public and political debates, which, I argue, has led to a pathologising of remote Indigenous culture. In this chapter I analyse these debates, and suggest ways in which the emerging essentialised representation of remote Indigenous people played into the second of the two competing narratives given for the proposed closure of remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia: the ostensibly excessive levels of social dysfunction, including at worst, high instances of child sexual abuse.

To what extent the consequences of social dysfunction are being felt in remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia, and whether this constitutes a ‘crisis’, has been one of a central theme in the anthropological literature of the past two decades. Before I canvass this issue, I would suggest, as Beckett (1984: 179) does, that what anthropology can contribute to the public conversation of social dysfunction in remote communities is an understanding of its centrality in social and cultural terms. On the topic of alcohol abuse, Beckett says this contribution is the kind that anthropologists should be making, even if it is only one ‘part of a total understanding’.
Sanders has recently posed a framework which may be instructive in understanding the impetus behind contemporary shifts in Indigenous affairs policy, and the public debates that have surrounded them. First, that the period from the election of the Whitlam Government to the turn of the millennium (1972 - 2000) was characterised by experimental policy that tended towards the creation of Indigenous-specific institutions, programs and structures (2014: 3 - 6). Second, that the period from the turn of the millennium to the present has been characterised by experimental policy tending towards welfare reform, contractualism and normalisation (2014: 6 - 10). The disbanding of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) during this latter period are two examples of the decline in Government support for Indigenous-specific institutions and the push to normalise those that remain (Sanders 2014: 7). This second period, Sanders argues, has largely been influenced by academic Noel Pearson and his associated Indigenous-affairs think-tank the Cape York Institute. A direct example of this influence can be seen in one of the legislative aspects of the Northern Territory Intervention, the introduction of income management regimes (Sanders 2014: 8; see also Cowlishaw 2010: 43 - 60).

Intense public and political debates have accompanied these events. In recent decades, certainly since the mid-to-late nineties, public policy debates regarding remote Indigenous communities have grown in ferocity and become increasingly polarised. Anthropologists engaged with the debate as they worked to both interpret and respond to the public interest in this issue, often ‘mobilising historical narrative’ of concepts such as ‘Aboriginal society’ (see Rowse 2013). Historiographical issues, as such, became politicised (Rowse 2013: 136).

Here, I first analyse what has been labelled by some as the ‘culture wars’ debate. As in the remote community closure debate, some of this broader debate has focussed on the financial viability, funding instability and economic security of remote communities. The focus of this chapter, however, is another facet: social dysfunction and the ways in which it has been historiographically and contemporarily conceptualised.

86 These two periods could also be conceptualised as two ‘generational revolutions’, occurring 30 years apart: one moving to the left and one to the right (see Sanders 2008).
Discussions regarding both the value of and challenges inherent in remote community life have been framed in numerous ways with a number of subtle differences over the past several decades. To exemplify this, I briefly return to Sanders’s discussion of the tension between legal and socio-economic equality (see Chapter Two). Sanders identifies this tension as one which has attracted ‘many debates’ (2009: 7). Essentially, prioritising the achievement of legal equality can be seen as inadequately dealing with Indigenous Australians’ contemporary disadvantage; if Indigenous people (and communities) are truly ‘equal’ under all types of Australian law, then how can Indigenous-specific legislation and institutions be put in place to address this disadvantage? On the other hand, if socio-economic equality is prioritised over legal equality, disadvantage may be addressed but, in tending towards normalisation, how much of that which is distinctively Indigenous will be eroded in the process? Kowal (2015) discusses a very similar tension. In her analysis of white anti-racists in Australia, she argues that the early Indigenous rights movement prioritised achieving equality on the basis of sameness (based on broad politically-driven acknowledgements of the supposed obsolescence of Indigenous culture). As Indigenous civil rights were won, the focus of the wording used changed from equal treatment to special treatment on the basis of difference (2015: 113). Again, this shift in focus raises some important questions. One that Kowal poses is:

If some aspects of Indigenous distinctiveness are related to inequality, then when we close the gap and make Indigenous people statistically equal to non-Indigenous people, could we be making them less Indigenous? (2015: 39).

Related to this is Kowal’s conceptualisation of ‘remedial difference’ (2015: 31 - 42). Remedial difference is difference that can be remedied, or ‘brought into the norm’ (Kowal 2015: 39). Indigenous people are different from non-Indigenous people: but not so different that they are beyond the reach of interventionary efforts (including the contemporary policy effort to ‘close the gap’). Difference, Kowal argues, can be seen from two distinct perspectives: sanitised difference, and unsanitised difference (2015: 38). Beginning with a discussion of the postcolonial lens of orientalism (most popularly articulated by Said 1978), Kowal explains how difference can be essentialised in two ways. The first, ‘unsanitised’ difference, relates to those aspects of Indigenous culture that most non-Indigenous people would see as ‘bad’: ‘inappropriate’ use of public space, vandalism, youth delinquency, poor diet, overcrowding
and the like (including, at worst, domestic abuse and child sexual abuse). Conversely, ‘sanitised’ difference are those aspects that are seen as ‘good’: hunting and tracking abilities, art, language, connections to culture, country and kin and the like. According to Kowal, white anti-racist (and perhaps more broadly, the majority of non-Indigenous Australians’) beliefs about Indigenous disadvantage hinge on the idea that it will be possible to eliminate unsanitised difference without also eroding sanitised difference (2015: 38).

What emerges from this discussion is a state of affairs whereby Australia’s Indigenous minority is expected to enact a certain type of difference: to perform a specific type of Indigeneity authorised and legitimised by the state. The Australian settler state ‘tolerates’ this type of difference, whilst simultaneously trying to eradicate other, more ‘repugnant’ forms (see Povinelli 2002). Thus, as Altman (2018: 346) notes, commentators of Indigenous affairs such as Amanda Vanstone (former Australian Liberal Senator, who presided over the abolition of ATSIC) can decry remote Indigenous communities as ‘cultural museums’ while declaring that Aboriginal art is ‘Australia’s greatest cultural gift to the world’ (seemingly unaware that a high proportion of such art is sourced from remote communities). As I argue in the following chapter, there is a great deal of good-will amongst those that administer and interact with Indigenous affairs policy in Australia. With the Indigenous community in this particular, peculiar position, however, and the overarching liberal state grappling with which aspects of it to either legitimise or delegitimise, it can be difficult to know where and how to direct this good will. Abuse and violence do occur in remote Aboriginal communities at a frequency higher than that of the rest of Australia, and yet it is clear from the perspectives of my participants that their outright closure is not the solution. As Fisher (2012: 182) asks in relation to his study of Aboriginal ‘long-grassers’ in Darwin, ‘in the face of the real violence and despair confronting many who live in the long grass...how does one respect and value the agency and the alterity of long-grass campers while also responding to what one feels to be an ethical duty of care - a strongly felt need to look after one’s countrymen and kin?’ Similarly, Povinelli (1999: 637) asks, ‘how do[es] a person and a community distinguish between...good forms of (in)tolerance and bad forms of (in)tolerance? Between social justice and social discrimination?’
Austin-Broos’s (2011) monograph describes a similar tension implicit in the debate about remote communities. This debate, she notes, both preceded and followed the Northern Territory Intervention: ‘a debate that began in earnest in the 1990s and continues to this day’ (2011: xix). Her reading of the debate is thus: the commentators involved can be categorised into two broad camps, the ‘anti-separatists’ (2011: 79 - 105) and those that ‘defend the homelands’ (2011: 106 - 134). First, a wave of right-wing think-tanks, political commentators and a few anthropologists have emphasised the ills of remote living and the inequality it so often denotes, while largely ignoring the cultural value of doing so. On the other side of the debate, most anthropologists who have engaged professionally with Indigenous Australians sought to emphasise the importance and value of cultural difference, and, as such, have largely ignored the marked inequality experienced by remote community residents. While Austin-Broos’s description of the debate has been criticised for its over-dichotomisation (among other criticisms, see Altman 2011; Rowse 2011), this lens is useful to highlight the polarisation of values regarding social dysfunction in remote Aboriginal communities, a topic I seek to address in this chapter.

Selected Features of the Debate

Historically, there have been a number of incidents within Indigenous affairs policy space that have triggered intensified discussion. One of these events was the Reeves review (also known as the Reeves report). Under the Howard Government, lawyer John Reeves was commissioned to produce a review of the Northern Territory Land Rights Act in 1997. Entitled Building on Land Rights for the Next Generation: Report of the Review of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976, the report was released in August 1998. It lists a number of recommended changes to the Act, designed to address what Reeves saw as its 'negative results': disputes about land ownership and a lack of effective Aboriginal control (Mowbray 1999: 10). These significant changes included decentralising the large land council authorities to a number of smaller ‘regional’ land councils; establishing a new central body, the Northern Territory Aboriginal Council, to oversee these smaller councils; and abolishing the permit system that requires prior permission when accessing Aboriginal land. The responses to the report varied. In Austin-Broos’s view, the Reeves report was ‘instructive as an example of anti-separatism’ (2011: 88). According to Howson (2000: 21) (who Austin-Broos similarly labelled an ‘anti-separatist’), the Reeves Report was the first
document to challenge the Coombsian doctrine of the past three decades, which posited remote community life as the surest means to achieve Aboriginal self-determination. Writing shortly after the release of the report, Morphy (1999: 14) argued that ‘Reeves’ explicit objective is to change the purposes of the Land Rights Act from granting Aboriginal people land rights to being an instrument to facilitate development…[he aims] to achieve this by reducing the size and power of the existing Land Councils and changing the concept of the traditional owner.’ The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) released a research monograph in 1999 that presents a number of cross-disciplinary perspectives on the Reeves report, the majority of which Rowse categorises as negative, and of aiming to inform Reeves of ‘where he went wrong’ (Altman, Morphy & Rowse 1999: 10). If there was something to thank Reeves for, he comments, it is for challenging any ‘intellectual complacency’ that had developed among those that support the fundamental principles of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976 (NT).

Though legislatively the report never gained much traction, its importance for this discussion lies in that it is earmarked as largely reflective of those commentators that sought to highlight ‘inequality’ as the major hallmark of remote Aboriginal disadvantage Austin-Broos (2011: 88). Whether or not this report was a decisive turning point in the debate, or simply a contribution to it is a matter of opinion, however, the report certainly garnered the attention of both those who did and did not wish to emphasise social dysfunctional and poor socio-economic outcomes in remote Aboriginal communities.

By the early 2000s, concerns regarding Aboriginal disadvantage in some remote Aboriginal communities had become increasingly public. In Western Australia, an inquiry into institutional responses to family violence and child abuse was prompted by a coronial inquest into the death of a fifteen year-old girl at the Swan Valley Noongar Community in Lockridge in 1999. The coroner had stated that the girl’s story was not unique, and that the ‘sexual abuse of children is endemic in Aboriginal communities throughout Western Australia’ (Western Australian Government 2002: i). The community in question was not remote, in fact it was located within the Perth metropolitan area: the inquiry, however, is reflective of a growing Governmental (and public) interest in the causes and responses to social dysfunction within discrete Aboriginal settlements in Australia. Titled in full *Putting the Picture Together: Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family*
Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities (the Gordon Inquiry), the final report canvassed a range of interrelated issues including the rate of reported instances of family violence, domestic violence and sexual abuse, and adequacy of recent responses by the (then) seven Government Departments responsible for investigating and addressing them. The inquiry made almost 200 findings and recommendations, establishing that overall ‘the current service system is not able to adequately address the escalating rates of family violence and child abuse’ (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2002: xxvi).

The Western Australian Government’s response, entitled Putting People First (2002), was tabled in Parliament in 2002. In both the Gordon Inquiry and the Government’s response, there is a recognition of the need for ‘collaboration’ and ‘partnership’ with Indigenous communities. The most significant aspects of the Government response entailed increases in funding and the complexity of service delivery, including:

1. Increased levels of policing.
2. Increased capacity to the statutory agencies who could intervene in cases of child abuse and family violence.

These, among other measures, amounted to a promised $66.5 million dollars over four years to ‘address gaps in Government agency service delivery to address key issues raised by the Gordon Inquiry’ (Western Australian Government 2002: ii). Committing to working with Aboriginal communities (through ATSIC, which then acted as a regional representative body throughout urban and remote parts of the State), and in a discourse that would be echoed by Colin Barnett just over a decade later, the response asserted that the State Government had a ‘clear responsibility for statutory and immediate responses when child abuse and family violence occurs or where there is a risk to individuals in communities’ (Western Australian Government 2002: ii). This increased capacity (and therefore cost) of service delivery to address social dysfunction in Aboriginal communities around the State would later become important, as one of Premier Barnett’s central assertions in 2014 was that the cost of protecting women and children in remote communities was so prohibitively expensive that it rendered these communities unviable.
There were a number of other reports during this period, including the Robertson Report (chaired by Boni Roberson of the Women’s Task Force on Violence in Queensland) which cited a range of causes for this disadvantage, including discriminatory government policy, substandard living conditions, service delivery failures and welfare (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence 2000). It also explicitly addressed the issue of the lack of government intervention on the perceived basis that there is something essentially 'Aboriginal' about such poor outcomes:

The very public implosion of Indigenous Communities can no longer be hidden or excused as being ‘the Aboriginal way’. Such thinking is a serious indictment that must be challenged and rejected (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence 2000: xiii).

This is one feature of the debate that has garnered much anthropological attention in the past two decades: the ‘pathologisation’ of Aboriginal culture. While the 1980s and 1990s saw much discussion centering on Indigenous disadvantage, the ‘social dysfunction’ that is perceived to accompany it is a relatively newly-constructed lens. Austin-Broos links this recent development in the way in which Indigenous people have been viewed to the much earlier ideas of savagery and barbarism inherent in nineteenth century discourses (2011: 51). The deviant behaviour focussed on now is child sexual abuse and other forms of social dysfunction, and, increasingly throughout past decades, media portrayals of residents in remote communities ‘commonly identified their specificity only as pathology’ (2011: 51). Others have broadly agreed. In discussing the violence of racism, Atkinson & Woods comment, ‘then there is the introduction of the new ‘truths’ about the target groups...they are stupid, lazy, dirty, promiscuous and so on’ (2008: 8). Former Coalition Ministers of Indigenous affairs, Amanda Vanstone and Peter Howson (who, through his contributions to Quadrant Magazine and the Bennelong Society has become a vocal commentator on such issues) have been central figures in the process of pathologising Aboriginal disadvantage: ‘Howson turned the focus into Aboriginal pathology’ (Austin-Broos 2011: 90).

---

87 Quadrant Magazine is an Australian journal that publishes short essays and stories relating to contemporary and historical social issues. It is often cited as being on the conservative or 'right-wing' side of politics. The Bennelong Society is a similarly conservative Australian think-tank dedicated to researching issues related to Indigenous affairs.

The Prime Minister…[now has] an opportunity to admit that the Coombsian policies of the last thirty years now have been seen as an abject failure…the Policies comprise a bundle which included land rights; the rhetoric of black suffering and white guilt; the promotion of Aborigines as perpetual victims…the support for self-determination in international fora; and the encouragement of Aboriginal separatism as a constant theme in Australian political discourse (Howson 2000: 23).

This characterisation of Indigenous culture has been common on the conservative side of government (see Kowal 2015: 160). In 2006, just prior to the Intervention (NTER), former Prime Minister (then Minister for Health) Tony Abbott described Australia’s ‘naïve idealisation of communal life’ as one of the biggest barriers to the betterment of Aboriginal people (cited in Kowal 2015: 160). Cowlishaw has commented:

Let me say here that an entrenched pathology is not characteristic of the remote Indigenous communities I am familiar with…however, I have long seen the term pathology as appropriate to describe the relationship between the state and the local communities, and this condition have been exacerbated by the Intervention (2010: 50).

As Cowlishaw notes, like most trends in political and public debate regarding Indigenous affairs in Australia, the pathologisation of certain aspects of Indigenous culture is not without precedent. Though then targeted at the population of ‘half-castes’ living in the broader community, as opposed to contemporary remote Indigenous communities, A. P. Elkin argued in 1947:

Thus, in every aspect of life, the Coloured Folk are made to feel that they belong to a lower caste...an attempt is made to justify this is various ways: that they are not educated; not clean; not normal; not steady at work; cannot “hold their
drink”, and live in undesirable conditions. *All this is true in many cases* (Elkin, in Neville 1947: 14, emphasis added).

In line with his assimilationist views, Neville (1947: 14 - 15) suggested that the cause of these undesirable aspects of Indigenous people’s lay in ‘our’ (presumably, the government and broader Australian population of the day) prejudices and assumptions. His recommendations for alleviating them, however, are not entirely dissimilar to recommendations still proffered today: ‘enforcing through the same channels as in the case of our own white folk’...improved housing, cleanliness, increased school attendance, orderly behaviour, and engagement in the political process. Thus, the differential and often changing focus on the acceptable type of Indigenous difference, versus the unacceptable one, has a long historical precedent in the Australian nation state. There is much good will amongst those that seek to alleviate Indigenous disadvantage, but obfuscation arising from fundamentally different understandings of the concept of equality mars the way in which this should be achieved.

**Differing Viewpoints in the Post Self-Determination Era**

It is one thing to note the views discussed above; it is another entirely to argue that such views have had an impact on policy outcomes. Similarly, it must be appreciated that Australian Indigenous affairs policy has always been influenced by particularly powerful or vocal actors at certain times. Particular commentators, too, have been heavily embedded in the public, political and scholarly debates that surround such policy: take anthropologists A. R. Radcliffe-Brown or A. P. Elkin, for example (see Gray 2007: 62 - 76). Noel Pearson, Peter Sutton and Marcia Langton are three major public commentators who scholars have identified as having been influential on Indigenous affairs policy, or the debates that have emerged in conjunction with it, in recent decades (see Austin-Broos 2011: 79 - 105; Peterson 2010: 257; Povinelli 2010: 18; Kowal 2015: 159 - 164, among numerous others).

Noel Pearson, an Indigenous leader, lawyer and public in from Cape York, published his paper *Our Right to Take Responsibility* in 2000. Pearson argued that alcoholism and substance abuse are both prevalent within and entirely detrimental to Aboriginal communities, and added another pervasive influence: welfare dependency. Pearson argues
that ‘there is no responsibility and reciprocity built into our present artificial economy, which is based on passive welfare (money for nothing)’ (2000: 5). His pronouncement of ‘real economies’ (that is, a hunter-gatherer economy, a market economy, et cetera) versus ‘unreal economies’ (those based on welfare) has been critiqued by Martin (2001), Rowse (2002; 2013) and Altman (2005), among others (see Lamatoa 2009: 41). Sanders (2014: 6) argues that Pearson’s stance is not in opposition to self-determination; rather, he seeks to question the slowly-emerging consequences of the equal rights movement. Pearson contends that ‘after we became citizens with equal rights and equal pay, we lost our place in the real economy’ (cited in Sanders 2014: 6), and argues that the solution is the restoration of ‘traditional values of responsibility...the right to self-determination is ultimately the right to take responsibility’ (Pearson 2000: 5).

An experienced land rights consultant and linguistic anthropologist, Peter Sutton delivered his Berndt Foundation Biennial lecture entitled The Politics of Suffering in 2001. This was published first in the journal Anthropological Forum, and later reformulated into a book published in 2009. Sutton was critical of previous anthropological discussions of remote Indigenous communities, and argued strongly that the violence and suffering in such communities needed to be addressed. His primary concern was to seek an explanation as to why, after decades of ‘liberal’ policies guided by self-determination, indicators showed that the situation was worsening for remote Aboriginal people. Sutton (2009) argued that a ‘liberal consensus’, beginning in universities but extending beyond them into public debate, had attributed the violence and social dysfunction within remote communities to ingrained histories of marginalisation and dispossession. Sutton instead sought to specify the matter, according to Austin-Broos, ‘in terms of Aboriginal culture at odds with mainstream mores or modern individualism’ (2011: 92). Sutton concludes there are three reasons these social issues have become so prevalent: first, a failure to put in place new institutions after the disintegration of the mission system; second, a heavy reliance on alcohol; thirdly, an inherited framework of gender relations, ego formation and anger management in Indigenous communities (Sutton 2009). These issues, Sutton argues, are perpetuated through child-rearing and socialisation (2009: 7).

Anthropologist and chair of Indigenous Studies at Melbourne University, Marcia Langton, elaborated on Pearson’s analysis when she delivered the Dr Charles Perkin’s Oration at the
University of Sydney the year after he did (Langton 2002). Aboriginal poverty, according to Langton, is based on the Aboriginal experience of marginalisation, which is an aspect of global capitalism (Langton 2002). Austin-Broos argues that Langton’s ‘theme’ was poverty, not cultural difference, and she was primarily focused on the economic dimensions of remote communities; ‘like Pearson, she argued that Aboriginal groups should pursue capital investments beyond their immediate locales, implying, like Reeves, different uses for NT [Northern Territory] land rights royalties’ (2011: 20; 96). Langton has argued:

Land justice was the outstanding issue for Indigenous Australians in the twentieth century, and rightly so. But justice, when it did come for a lucky few with a cultural repertoire that would convince the judiciary, came with a price tag - the loss of opportunities to develop economically and modernise Aboriginal institutions that were no longer effective (Langton, cited in Sutton 2009: v).

The opposing side of the debate encompasses those that can be seen to be ‘separatists’, in favour of the promotion of land rights, self-determination and the continuing existence of remote Indigenous communities. Collectively, they have been referred to: the ‘homeland defenders’ (Austin-Broos 2011); those involved in ‘the culture cult’ (Sandall, cited in Altman 2011); or perhaps the ‘bleeding hearts’, according to one of my participants (Jack Webber, pers.comm., November 2016). In Austin-Broos’s conceptualisation of the debate, the writings of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) and its resident scholars lie at the centre of this group, and constitute a rough ideological mode of thought as well as a collection of individuals with a ‘discernible tenor in support of homelands and outstation life’ (Austin-Broos 2011: 24). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, CAEPR provided both a continuous review of and resource for Indigenous-specific institutions such as the ATSIC, and government policies such as the CDEP (discussed in further detail below).89

Economic anthropologist Jon Altman was the founding director of CAEPR, and remained so from 1990 - 2010. His primary focus throughout the course of this association has been the

---

88 Rowse (2011) criticises Austin-Broos for not adequately defining the term ‘separatist’. I would argue that in this context, such ‘separatism’ entails the defence of and support for separate political, economic and social policies and institutions for the benefit of promoting Indigenous self-determination and self-reliance.

89 It is, of course, important to note that like those categorised as ‘anti-separatists’, CAEPR contributors hold varied (and sometimes conflicting) views, and that these views have changed over time.
Economic viability and sustainability of remote communities, consolidating in his formulation of the ‘hybrid economy’ model (Altman 2005a; 2005b). As Austin-Broos points out, his position has always been that such communities will continue to require significant Federal Government investment for the foreseeable future (2011: 107). Though only associated with CAEPR as an occasional contributor, Austin-Broos also characterises Tim Rowse as on this side of the debate. Rowse’s academic focus has centred on the historical interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia, Australian Indigenous affairs policy, and the Indigenous sector (see Rowse 1992; 2002; 2013; 2017), and his 2002 monograph reviews a decade’s worth of CAEPR writings. Austin-Broos argues that CAEPR writers largely understood ‘inequality’ as a misinterpretation of cultural difference:

On this view [sic], motivations to remain remote were not due to past state intervention or to current government support that provided incentives to stay; neither was the central issue of a lack of market capacities. Rather, loyalty to kin, locality, language group and the like were the pre-eminent factors. People chose to be remote and within the bounds of a known culture - notwithstanding economic disadvantage (2011: 112, emphasis in original).

The contributors at the CAEPR are, of course, not one homogenous group, and there has been and continues to be disagreement among them. The publications produced by the centre, too, generally focus on specific economic or demographic issues with particular case studies. If we are to broadly generalise, however, one overarching view of CAEPR writers over the period Austin-Broos (2011) analyses appears to have been that government investment (with the Indigenous sector as the delivery vehicle) could correct the balance of inequality and disadvantage in remote communities.

With regards to the ‘homeland defenders’ in the remote community debate, Austin-Broos concludes by arguing that most were unwilling to acknowledge the distress in remote communities and the salience of poverty (2011: 130). She argues that the debate has been largely defined over the past several decades by two groups. First, a group of anthropologists, journalists and other ‘right-wing’ commentators whose almost exclusive focus on Aboriginal disadvantage has pathologised remote communities and, for the most part, ignored or dismissed the importance of cultural difference to their residents (2011: 79 -
Austin-Broos’s framing of the debate has attracted much criticism. Rowse (2011) argues that her account of the debate has two errors which ‘make it more self-serving than accurate’. First, that the two sides of the debate Austin-Broos elucidates are ‘poorly labelled’ and suffer from her desire to dichotomise a complex debate. Second, her reading of others’ work is often unsympathetic, ‘sloppily expressed’ and fails to identify a number of positions that they in fact share (Rowse 2011). These criticisms appear valid, especially given the relatively unflattering way in which Austin-Broos presents her colleagues’ work (including that of Rowse and Altman). Her description of the debate, while overly-dichotomised, does however serve to illuminate the polarising extents of those on the furthest fringes; some level of over-simplification is understandable if this is her aim.90

The Intervention (NTER) and the Remote Community Closure Debate

The Northern Territory Emergency Response (the ‘Intervention’) was one of the most significant events in the Australian state’s engagement with its Indigenous population of the early 2000s, and its imprint still looms large in the contemporary Indigenous affairs discourse. Amongst my participants, a commonly-expressed trope was the similarity between the media attention and policy environment throughout the remote community closure debate and the NTER. Both events, after all, occasioned a discourse regarding the ‘social dysfunction’ and unviability of, and emergency within, remote Indigenous communities. Both events (at least initially), included no consultative process with the communities in question.91

A number of events, some of which have similarities to the remote community closure debate in Western Australia, precipitated the NTER. In May 2006, the ABC Lateline program screened an interview with Alice Springs Crown Prosecutor, Nannette Rogers, which dealt

---

90 I chose not to make comment on some of the other aspects of Austin-Broos’s work, including her recommendations for tackling inequality, as a number of other writers have already done so (see Rowse: 2011; Kowal 2011; Altman 2011; among others).
91 See Altman & Hinkson (2007; 2010); Austin-Broos (2009: 238 - 250); Peterson & Myers (2016); Wright (2016: 102 - 130), among others, for varying accounts of and perspectives surrounding the Intervention.
with a number of issues relating to the abuse of children in remote Indigenous communities. In the words of Patricia Anderson, who co-authored the *Little Children are Sacred Report* (2007), the Lateline program caused a ‘media frenzy’: ‘suddenly, every newspaper and every television report contained graphic descriptions of the alleged family violence and child abuse, and governments were now under the kind of pressure they understand, and to which they react’ (Anderson 2015: 29). *The Little Children are Sacred Report*, released in June 2007, was the culmination of an investigation by the Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal children commissioned by the Northern Territory Government. The recommendations in the report suggested that the issue of child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory be treated as ‘an issue of urgent national significance’ by both the Territory and the Commonwealth Governments, and that both Governments commit to ‘genuine consultation with Aboriginal people in designing initiatives for Aboriginal communities’ (Wild & Anderson 2007). The NTER was the official Federal response to this report, though, as Anderson argues, very few of the ninety-seven recommendations of the report were followed. This process occurred in the lead up to the 2007 election campaign, and had bipartisan political support. Austin-Broos (2009: 239) commented on this bipartisanship, saying that “saving the children” was a position that allowed moral certainty for most.

One of my participants made a similar comment. In comparing the media attention surrounding the two policy events, Heather, a Member of Federal Parliament who chose to remain anonymous, argued that the pressure put on Parliamentarians throughout the remote community closure debate was similar to that throughout the NTER. To publically decry either event, she said, was seen as synonymous with saying ‘I don’t care about those kids’ (‘Heather’, pers.comm., August 2016). As previously described, Baird (2008: 291) argued that the child was invoked throughout this discussion as a form of discourse with which no one could disagree (a form of ‘child fundamentalism’). This could go some way towards explaining why the Intervention gained so much mainstream support from the Australian community (2008: 294; see also Proudfoot & Habibis 2015: 172), and could also explain some of the positive responses to the Barnett Government’s proposal to close communities.

Given the difficulty in finding solutions to continuing issues in the administration of Indigenous affairs policy, it seems self-evident that the all involved should resist the urge to
make value judgements about each other’s morality. As Povinelli (2010: 21 - 22) notes in discussing the aggressiveness of neoliberalism, ‘we get nowhere arguing whether this or that person did or didn’t care about Indigenous children or that this or that social welfare program was or was not a failure.’ In the following section, I embed this intractable policy dispute within contemporaneous Western Australian narratives, in order to provide a clearer understanding of the perspectives regarding social dysfunction expressed throughout the course of the debate.

‘Little boys and little girls have a right to be safe...we will not abandon those children.’

So, in that space of insecurity, you can’t grow and prosper. If you have a tree out on the coast here that’s getting blown by the wind, it’s going to be gnarled and twisted. It'll be strong, but it’s not going to put on a major flower show. (Kado Muir, pers.comm., January 2017).

As in the broader Australian context, the remote community closure debate had antecedents locally. This policy event occurred within a unique timeframe in Western Australia’s history. The State of Western Australia experienced a significant downturn in economic growth derived from the State’s largest ever mining boom, which peaked in around 2012 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017; Powell 2017). During the years of the boom, the State Liberal Party spearheaded a number of high-profile and large-scale construction projects, such as the development of Elizabeth Quay, the Perth Children’s Hospital and the new Perth stadium. Given the then Government’s assertion that the State could not afford to fund the previously Commonwealth-funded essential and municipal services to remote Aboriginal communities, on the surface, this excessive spending could be seen as a stark declaration of their priorities. Shortly after the change of Government in March 2017, the McGowan Labor Government announced a Commission of Inquiry into the Barnett Government’s spending on infrastructure projects around the State, including all of those listed above and a number of others (some in regional areas, such as Wanangkura Stadium in Port Hedland) (Western Australian Government 2017b). The outcome of this inquiry was handed down in February 2018, and found that ‘the former government’s poor governance culture, lack of financial

discipline and unsustainable spending decisions [were] the key factors behind the record debt and deficit created' (Western Australian Government 2018f).

There were several significant developments in Western Australian Aboriginal affairs policy under the Barnett Government. Around the same time as the emergence of the Government’s proposal to close remote communities, a bill entitled the Aboriginal Heritage Act Amendment Bill 2014 (WA) began to gain public attention. The bill's synopsis claims its intended purpose was to ‘amend the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA) in order to improve its efficiency and effectiveness whilst ensuring the continued and enhanced protection of Aboriginal heritage:’

The government is committed to protecting genuine Aboriginal heritage sites, but there is a backlog of sixteen thousand to nineteen thousand applications...probably ninety percent of those applications will involve no Aboriginal heritage at all. The Minister is proposing a system that will accelerate the process of assessing Aboriginal heritage sites. I think that is in everyone’s interests, rather than having delays over approvals in areas where there are no Aboriginal heritage sites (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 1889).

The Heritage Act has attracted continual criticism since its introduction in 1972, perhaps most notably following an attempt by the Traditional Owners of the Kimberley Noonkanbah pastoral lease to block the access of exploratory mining workers near a sacred site in 1979. The then-Western Australian Government dispatched police to remove the protestors, exposing the fragility of the heritage 'protections' the Act had promised (Mickler 1998: 203; Rowse 2017: 299). Thus, a number of activist and other interest groups saw the Barnett Government’s bill as an attempt to water-down what is already widely believed to be weak heritage legislation (see Ritter 2003 for a comprehensive critical review of the legislation). This issue led to the establishment of the Aboriginal Heritage Action Alliance (AHAA), and, like the remote community closure debate, roused widespread opposition among Aboriginal leaders, community groups, some politicians and the anthropological and

---

93 The full report is available in three volumes from <www.publicsector.wa.gov.au>.
archaeological community in Western Australia.95 The amendment bill was subsequently put on the backburner, and was not deemed to be a high enough priority to be introduced to Parliament prior to the March 2017 election. The incoming State Government introduced the ‘public sector renewal’ process in April 2017, in which other Departments subsumed the Department of Aboriginal Affairs’ functions. Aboriginal Lands Trust and Aboriginal heritage functions now fall under the new Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage (Western Australian Government 2017). The current government anticipates that this move will ensure the integrity of the State’s heritage legislation while also addressing the backlog of past claims. In 2018, the State Government announced a new review to the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA), arguing that they had received ‘strong feedback’ on the proposed amendment bill in 2014 that indicated that Aboriginal people had not been properly consulted, and the Minister (Ben Wyatt) was determined, this time, to hear the views of all of the stakeholders involved (Western Australian Government 2018g).

The Barnett Government also oversaw the passing of the Constitution Amendment (Recognition of Aboriginal People) Act 2015 (WA). Introduced by Indigenous Labor Member for Kimberley Josie Farrer, the Act amended the Constitution Act 1889 (WA). The amendments deleted the long-since obsolete section 42, which granted the Government certain powers when a date in 1893 was reached, or population of the State exceeded 60,000 people (excluding ‘aboriginal natives’), whichever came first. The Act also amended section 75, which defined the now defunct Aborigines Protection Board. A clause was also added to the bottom of the preamble, reading:

And whereas the Parliament resolves to acknowledge the Aboriginal people as the First People of Western Australia and traditional custodians of the land, the said Parliament seeks to effect a reconciliation with the Aboriginal people of Western Australia.

The Noongar native title claim, colloquially known as the Single Noongar Claim, was also a prominent feature of public debate in Western Australia during this period, and is discussed

95 The most fractious issue associated with these amendments proved to be the transferral of much of the responsibility of the Aboriginal Cultural Materials Committee to the CEO of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and the removal of the clause in section 28 which requires a specialist anthropologist to serve on the aforementioned Committee (Parliament of Western Australia 2014).
with regards to the various interpretations of it as a significant step in the process of treaty negotiations in Chapter Six.

From the beginning, the remote community closure debate included a great deal of discussion regarding social dysfunction in Western Australia’s remote communities. Indeed, as my interview with Colin Barnett indicated, social dysfunction was not only an aspect of, but the impetus for the debate that followed. Below, I examine the ways in which social dysfunction has featured throughout the remote community closure debate, beginning with an analysis of the Western Australian Hansard over the period from late 2014 to mid-2015 (some comments from the Federal Hansard are also canvassed). Throughout, I attempt to clarify the extent to which those in government originally emphasised the need for intervention based on such social dysfunction, and subsequently moved away from this overt rationalisation to instead emphasise the importance of working together, shared responsibilities and consultation with Aboriginal communities.

What follows is the order of events as I understand them to have occurred, based on my research. Irrespective of who initiated the interest in this issue within the Government, Premier Barnett first mentioned the prospect of closing remote communities at a child protection function in early November 2014 (Helen Morton, pers.comm., November 2016). On November 10th, Barnett was asked at a press conference to respond to an article that had been published in The Weekend Australian, which detailed the high levels of youth suicide in some remote Aboriginal communities. It argued:

Remote Australia is in the grip of a suicide epidemic that is taking the lives of children as young as eight years old, with Aboriginal towns in the Kimberley now suffering the highest rates of suicide in the world (Burrell & Robinson 2014).

Barnett raised the issue of remote Aboriginal communities and their future, suggesting that the number of communities will need to be ‘reduced’ (Laurie & Taylor 2015). On November 11th, an article entitled ‘WA Premier Colin Barnett flags closing remote sites’ was published in The Australian newspaper. It referenced both the article in the Weekend Australian, and Barnett’s subsequent comments, and centred on his position at the time that ‘link[ed] the
incidents of Indigenous youth suicide with remote access problems’ (Kohlbacher 2014). It was this article that brought the issue to public and political prominence, as the State opposition began their questioning of Mr. Barnett in Parliament the following day.

Then Shadow Treasurer and Shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Ben Wyatt, asked Barnett two questions during the ‘questions without notice’ section of the day’s proceedings (Wyatt, B. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8030). He asked Barnett to provide more detail on what basis he would select communities for closure, what resources he proposed would be put in place for those remote community residents who would find themselves displaced, and whether or not this dislocation may in fact create more social issues than already existed.

Barnett responded immediately with a comment regarding the Federal Government’s withdrawal of funding for essential and municipal services (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8030). He followed by explaining:

>This is a very complex and difficult issue for the Western Australian Government to handle and we have no option to handle it because the commonwealth [sic] has vacated the territory (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8030).

Almost immediately moving away from this discussion of the financial reasons behind his proposal, he followed with, ‘there are high rates of suicide, and people with poor education, poor health and no jobs (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8031).

The discussion continued after Wyatt’s supplementary question, which asked why the Premier had accepted the Federal Government’s withdrawal of funding without challenge. Though this latter question asked of Barnett primarily related to the issue of Commonwealth funding, multiple comments were made by Barnett regarding social dysfunction in remote communities.

---

96 The article cites Barnett as describing the impossibility of providing all communities with ‘essential services as well as policing, healthcare and education’ (Kohlbacher 2014).

97 At the time, Wyatt’s full Ministerial title was Shadow Treasurer, Shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs; Native Title; Cost of Living; Pilbara; Kimberley.
The smaller Aboriginal communities are simply not viable...and the social outcomes and the abuse and neglect of young children are a disgrace to this State (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8031).

Take some of the bigger communities such as Balgo for example. There has virtually been civil war in Balgo for the last three months - 150 Aboriginal people fighting among themselves. That is not acceptable (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8032).

The debate resumed the following day, on the 13\textsuperscript{th} of November 2014. Wyatt again asked the Premier to clarify which communities would be closed, and on what basis this decision would be made (Barnett, C. & Wyatt, B. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8126 - 8128). It was here that Barnett really began to emphasise the role social dysfunction had played in his decision to propose these community closures.

How many reports do we have to have? How many editorials? How many researched articles do we have to have and read before we actually deal with the situation? (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8126).

He again made reference to Balgo, elaborating on the ‘mini civil war’ that he believed had been occurring in the community. He pointedly remarked that this was not a ‘functional, good community’ for children to live in (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8126).

He then continued:

...how many more reports, editorials and researched articles do we need to see and read about low levels of health and education, unacceptably high levels of infant mortality, domestic violence, neglect and the sexual and physical abuse of children? How many more reports do opposition members need to read to realise that these communities are unsustainable and that what is happening in many of them must be addressed? That is the government’s responsibility (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8127).
He concluded with the following statement:

For everyone who is interested or has a role in this, I am foreshadowing that a number of communities are inevitably going to close. The number will be reduced. I just said we are probably talking about 100 at least...I do not have the answers and I do not suggest for a moment that this will be easy, but it is a great social challenge for our community and we have to work our way through it. The opposition can stay on that side of the chamber and throw rocks and be negative, or they can be a part of what is a *social need* in this State (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8127, my emphasis).

The debate resumed one week later on the 20th of November. By this time, Barnett had begun to move away from the use of the term ‘closure’ and was foreshadowing the position the Government was to arrive at the following year.

The State government will not be closing communities as such. The issue is: for which communities will we be able to continue to provide essential services? It will not restrict people going back to lands - it will not (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8554).

I am not going to wander around and target communities and tell them, ‘You will be closed.’ We will go through this carefully over the coming years (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8554).

This Thursday was also the date that Ken Travers, then Labor Legislative Council Member for the North Metropolitan introduced a motion to ‘express concern’ regarding Barnett’s proposal to close some remote communities (Travers, K. 2014, Legislative Council: 8444). Travers called on the Barnett Government to firstly, consult directly with communities and secondly, to recognise that the size and geographic remoteness of communities should not be the sole determinant in whether any future closures occurred. Travers made reference to a 2007 discussion paper entitled *Where From? Where To? A Discussion Paper on Remote Aboriginal Communities*, which found that there is little evidence to demonstrate the benefits of the centralisation of Aboriginal people; in fact, there is evidence to the contrary
The majority of the opposition Members’ contributions surrounded what they perceived as the unfair targeting of remote Aboriginal communities with regards to funding cuts, and some noted that this proposal could be considered racist (in the sense that other remote communities where the population is not predominantly Indigenous, but which still present challenges with regards to service delivery, were not being considered for closure).

Two themes emerge from the following excerpt from the response of then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Peter Collier. First, the dual rationalisation for intervention (on the basis of either economic or social need). Second, the tension between the Federal and State Governments with regards to specific parcels of funding for remote Indigenous affairs policy.

As the Premier said, it [the Federal withdrawal of funding] will lead to the closure of a number of those communities. That comment is based on - dare I say it - the exclusive economic front. From an economic perspective, if the State government does not pick up the tab, which it has been asked to do...these communities will close (Collier, P. 2014, Legislative Council: 8451).

Collier clarified shortly thereafter, however, that the economic perspective was not the only motivation the Government held. After explaining that funding was guaranteed for a further twelve months during which consultation would take place, Collier said:

...we will need to look at things first from an economic perspective; that is essential. We have been given this poison chalice, quite frankly, from the Federal government. It has said that it will cut the funding; that is the stark reality of the situation...however, I assure members that that will not be the sole or most significant reason for what will happen with remote communities throughout Western Australia. What must be taken into consideration is the sustainability of those communities (Collier, P. 2014, Legislative Council: 8452).

---

98 Travers’s motion was supported by the following members: Stephen Dawson, Labor Member for the Mining and Pastoral region; Dave Grills, National Party Member for the Mining and Pastoral Region; Robin Chapple, Greens Party Member for the Mining and Pastoral Region; and Alanna Clohesy, Labor Member for the East Metropolitan region. It was responded to by Peter Collier, then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, and Peter Katsambanis, then Liberal Member for the North Metropolitan Region.
Peter Katsambanis finished the conversation by again drawing attention to an assumed social crisis:

We are living through a crisis that is a national disgrace...the crisis that is the terrible educational outcomes in some areas that the minister [sic] spoke about; the crisis that is health outcomes in many areas; the crisis that is unsustainability, lack of employment opportunities, be they cultural or non-cultural employment opportunities; and generally some of the lawlessness that we see (Katsambanis, P. 2014, Legislative Council: 8454).

The response to Barnett’s proposal also gained some attention in the Federal Parliament. In the days and weeks following the initial announcements, then Member for Perth Alannah MacTiernan and then Labor Member for Fremantle Melissa Parke both expressed their concern on a number of fronts, including the lack of planning for those residents displaced (MacTiernan, A. (2014) House of Representatives: 13537 - 13538; Parke, M. (2014) House of Representatives: 13549 - 13550).99 There was also a robust debate in the Senate, largely between the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion, and three Senators from Western Australia: Labor Senator Sue Lines, Labor Senator Glenn Sterle and Former Liberal Senator Chris Back. The aspect of the debate that gained it the most national attention, however, was when then Prime Minister Tony Abbott offered his support for Colin Barnett by arguing that the taxpayers of Australia should not be expected to ‘subsidise the lifestyle choices’ of remote Indigenous residents (see Griffiths 2015; 7:30 2015; among others).

The fact that you had Tony Abbott say that these were ‘lifestyle choices’ is a fairly gratuitous thing to say to people whose cultural and social identities are tied up with these areas of land, in the main...I don’t think he had any appreciation of what the cultural and social drivers are for why people live where they live in the first place. I don’t think he had any idea about that (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., March 2017).

99 In 2017, MacTiernan was re-elected to State Parliament and became a Cabinet Minister in the new McGowan Government, holding the portfolios of Regional Development; Agriculture and Food; Jobs and Trade; Minister Assisting the Minister for State Development. Parke retired from politics in 2016.
In Western Australia the issue hit the headlines again just weeks later, after Colin Barnett used figures relating to instances of sexually-transmitted infections in children in Parliament as evidence for the purported sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities (see ‘Colin Barnett Links Closure of Remote Aboriginal Communities to Child Abuse’ 2015). After addressing a rally outside the Western Australian State Parliament that morning, in the day’s questions-without-notice proceedings, Barnett was asked by then Leader of the Opposition Mark McGowan about his intentions to close remote communities and whether any residents would be precluded from accessing their land. Barnett said:

I welcomed the Aboriginal protest group... I effectively said to the community groups outside Parliament House that if they were to put themselves in my shoes-

[Barnett was cut off by interjections]

Some of them listened. I have a responsibility, indeed, we all share a responsibility, to ensure that children go to school...I said that children - little girls and little boys-

[Barnett was again precluded from continuing by interjections]

I also made the point that little boys and little girls have a right to be safe. They have a right to have a protected childhood and to grow up as happy children...

Directed back to the issue of community closures, Barnett responded:

They will not be prevented from staying in their lands. Those communities - 273 of them - are not sustainable into the future. They cannot look anyone in the eye and guarantee the safety of little boys and girls (Barnett, C. (2015) Legislative Assembly: 1888).\(^{100}\)

\(^{100}\) Barnett’s identification of 273 (as opposed to 274) remote Aboriginal communities throughout this day’s Parliamentary debates appears to have been a lapse in memory, as the official figure has remained 274 throughout.
He continued, despite heavy interjections from a number of Members:

These 39 cases were in children aged from 10 to 14. We are seeing sexually transmitted diseases in children aged from 10 to 14. How many cases of gonorrhoea are there in the wider community? There are none—not a single case. If members opposite think that I as Premier or the Minister for Health as Deputy Premier will sit by and let those children be abused, they are so wrong. We will not do that. We will not abandon those children (Barnett, C. (2015) Legislative Assembly: 1889).

Nothing is going to change for months, perhaps years, but we will work progressively with those communities and we will make other investments to make those communities viable and sustainable, to protect children and to improve health and education. That might mean that, in 10 years, there are not 273 remote communities, but I pray to this day that there are safe and healthy children (Barnett, C. (2015) Legislative Assembly: 1889).

What is said in the Hansard transcripts from this time are indicative of the way in which ‘equality’ is conceived of as individuals’ varying rights before the state in liberal democratic states (Robbins 1994: 21 - 70), albeit in a rather confused manner, as Barnett pits certain ‘rights’ against others: Indigenous rights to self-determination versus the right of the child. Following this, the parliamentary debate became so heated that questions without notice was stopped early (but not before Ben Wyatt had been ejected from the chamber for continuously interjecting, and Rita Safiotti was asked to withdraw a comment where she labelled Barnett ‘a racist’). Member for Kimberley Josie Farrer, an Indigenous person herself (and whose electorate houses a substantial number of the remote communities in question) walked out of the chamber during the debate, seemingly in resistance to the narrative of social crisis and dysfunction articulated on the floor of Parliament.

This incident made national headlines and fuelled the growing public debate surrounding the issue (‘Colin Barnett Links Closure of Remote Aboriginal Communities to Child Abuse’ 2015). Several days later, Western Australian Police Commissioner Karl O’Callaghan spoke to
the media in support of Colin Barnett and his comments regarding sexual abuse, arguing that the issue is widespread across the Kimberley and that the police were powerless to stop it (O’Callaghan 2015). Responding specifically to the issue of under-reporting, Ben Wyatt argued (as he did in response to Barnett’s comments earlier that month) that O’Callaghan was essentially painting an entire culture as child abusers. He commented that underreporting happens across the board with regards to sexual abuse, as it is usually committed within families:

You don’t then blame the entire culture for that under-reporting and then expect cooperation from that culture (cited in Wahlquist 2015).

The Western Australian Government’s proposal in 2014 was significant because of the potential scale and scope of its planned community closures; it was not, however, the first time specific communities had been marked for closure in Western Australia. Oombulgurri was a community in the Kimberley region of Western Australia that was closed in 2011 following a coronial inquest that highlighted serious issues of sexual and physical abuse of children, substance abuse and high rates of suicide (particularly amongst youth). Oombulgurri was the name given to the community in 1973 (prior to this, it was the Anglican Forrest River Mission). Similar terminology was used in the public statements leading up to this closure; Oombulgurri, according to the Western Australian Government, was no longer ‘viable’ or ‘sustainable’ (Solonec 2014; Solonec & Seery 2015: 16).

As early as 2008, the community was singled out as a ‘priority’ community by the newly-elected Barnett Government and a number of measures including a total prohibition on alcohol were introduced. It is argued, however, that State Government’s failure to provide resources to assist residents with lingering alcoholism is just one example of their lack of practical steps to ensure the community’s longevity (Solonec & Seery 2015: 16). Eggington & Razi (2015: 27) point to the closure of Oombulgurri as an example of the consequences of a ‘top-down’, non-consultative approach; the social problems inherent in the community were not solved, but ‘shifted’. Many of the displaced residents gravitated towards larger regional towns (largely, in this case, to Wyndham). Eggington & Razi argue that if large-scale closures were to go ahead, it would represent ‘Oombulgurri on a wider scale’, and the impact will be ‘overwhelming’ (2015: 28). Solonec & Seery go further, arguing that many have
feared since 2011 that the closure of Oombulgurri would not remain an isolated incident, and rather signifies, ‘the beginning of a justification for the mass displacement of Indigenous people’ (2015: 19).

This is a federally-driven agenda that has been going on for some time. To claim that communities are dysfunctional because of sexual abuse against women and children is misleading. If abuse against Indigenous women and children in remote Indigenous communities is so well known to the police and government, then they must invest in services in those communities to counteract those experiences (Solonec 2015).

Senator Patrick Dodson, an Indigenous leader in the Kimberley, made this comment during our interview:

[Patrick Dodson]: I just ran into a bloke the other day from Oombulgurri.

[Jasmin Korte]: Oh?

[Patrick Dodson]: Where they’ve just closed the community…dropped people into Wyndham, Derby. This bloke bailed me up in the shop and he was pretty abusive. But I can understand that. He was frustrated. No one ever asked him about what he thought about closing his own town down, and kicking him out…he’s homeless. So you know, how is he going to get a house? So no one follows that up.

He’ll end up with the police, because he’ll be disruptive in the street and taken into custody. But totally alienated from where he’s had a sense of his place, and who he was. And angry. Now he’s angry (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., March 2017).

The debate as to whether the motivations behind the Barnett Government’s intentions to close 150 remote communities were purely based on the State’s finances, or whether they were driven by an urge to prevent harm to women and children (or, indeed, for some other
reason) proved a divisive topic throughout my data collection. Terry Redman, a member of the National Party and former State Minister for Regional Development, explained to me that when the Barnett Government had come to power in 2013, it was the then leader of the National Party Brendan Grylls who had put the issue of the viability of remote Aboriginal communities on the agenda (Terry Redman, pers.comm., June 2017). Others (usually on the other side of politics or otherwise not directly involved in government), argued that if there had been any forethought on the issue, it was minimal.

They were all, including the State people, from what I gather, all scrambling to try and make- including the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the State, to make some sense out of the Premier’s...what I think was a gaff! Or a brain burst, you know? (Bishop Christopher Saunders, pers.comm., March 2017).

[In discussing some of the contradictions inherent in Barnett’s original comments], I don’t think he had any understanding at all. I think he made some comments perhaps flippantly at the time...and being the nature of the Premier at the time, it very difficult to walk away from what he’d said. (Ben Wyatt, pers.comm., May 2017).

But I think that he just you know, was a bit of a loose cannon on the day and probably regrets saying what he said. (James Back, pers.comm., December 2016).

After significant and still-mounting public pressure, the Barnett Government announced in May 2015 that it was launching the Regional Services Reform. Just over one year later, in June 2016, the ‘Roadmap’ report was released. Of note is that there are few references to the social dysfunction claimed by the Barnett Government as so integral to this issue (Regional Services Reform Unit 2016). The closest reference is within the section headed ‘Supporting Families’ (2016:23 - 32). The opening tagline, ‘family support and involvement is the key determinate of later success’ orients the chapter around childhood development, and the first page largely discusses the role of government-funded service delivery (2016: 25). As well as sections regarding improvements to ‘place-based’ service delivery (differentiating service delivery based on regional and community needs, 2016: 26 - 27) and family and child-centred services (noting that very high rates of ‘developmental vulnerability’ exist amongst children
in regional and remote Aboriginal communities, 2016: 28 - 29), the section entitled ‘harm reduction’ focuses on minimising the harm from alcohol and illicit drugs on families and children (2016: 30 - 31). It reads:

A key inhibitor of family development in the Kimberley and Pilbara is the problematic use of alcohol, and use of illicit drugs. This use constrains the effectiveness of early childhood, education, health and other human services, and works to diminish family resilience. Alcohol and drug-related medical conditions are also major causes of avoidable deaths in custody (2016: 30).101

The section goes on to describe the State Government restrictions on the sale, possession and consumption of alcohol in some remote communities in the Kimberley and Pilbara. It pledges that the State Government will consult with any community that wishes to strengthen such restrictions, and will consider broadening such restrictions to a regional (rather than community-specific) level. Finally, the section pledges to continue to support the on-going Federal Government cashless welfare card trial in the East Kimberley, and the Federal Government’s intention to introduce a Compulsory Rent Deduction Scheme which would essentially quarantine rental payments by deducting them from participant’s accounts and automatically transferring them to the housing provider. There is no mention of child sexual abuse or sexually transmitted diseases in the report.

**Perspectives on Social Dysfunction**

The State Government’s position included the description of remote communities as having poor socio-economic outcomes, including health and education. I asked my participants the question, ‘if the prospect of closing communities were to be removed, what do you think are the sorts of solutions that should be pursued in order to see an improvement in these outcomes?’

101 2016 marked the twenty-five year anniversary of the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. It too marked alcohol abuse as a significant factor in the investigated deaths; however, it also pointed to numerous glaring deficiencies in the standard of care afforded to many of the deceased. Given that, in mid-2016 when the Roadmap was released, an inquiry into the death of twenty-two year old Ms. Dhu in South Hedland Police Station was on-going, I found this to be a curious statement. Ms. Dhu died after three days of significant pain, about which numerous officers and health professionals speculated was probably either faked or related to drug abuse. Ms. Dhu died shortly thereafter of sepsicaemia and pneumonia. In July 2017, Ms. Dhu’s family announced that they were launching legal action against the State of Western Australia.
Of the thirty-seven participants who responded, most did not refer specifically to issues associated with social dysfunction, and most did not raise issues of low socio-economic outcomes without being prompted to do so. A number of people did acknowledge that poor outcomes were indeed an issue, but largely blamed structural factors such as a lack of infrastructure and accountability by government or poor coordination of essential outreach programs. For example, in response to a question regarding how to address such issues, one participant commented:

More accountability from government...because a lot of services are delivered in a shot-gun approach- blast it out there, hoping that one of the pellets is going to hit the target (Kado Muir, pers.comm., January 2017).

There were a number of participants who outright declined to comment on methods by which low outcomes should be addressed, saying that they either did not know enough about the issues or, more commonly, that it should be the job of Aboriginal leaders to propose such solutions. This kind of deference to an Indigenous perspective is not uncommon amongst those that work within Indigenous affairs, and is a type of authority that has been referred to as the ‘authentic Indigenous voice’ (Kowal 2015: 119). Deferring to the authentic Indigenous voice can be seen as part of a performance of ‘whiteness’, and an attempt to be seen to be ‘doing good’ in the Indigenous affairs space in accordance with contemporary understandings of what is required to do so (Kowal 2015: ibid).

Of those who mentioned issues like child abuse, the vast majority did so from a position critical of the way in which remote communities had been painted by Barnett. When I asked whether one person thought the motivations behind the proposed community closures were economic, they commented: ‘Oh, absolutely. Look at the Northern Territory Intervention, I mean where are the rings of paedophiles?’ (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., January 2017). The majority of those that did mention child abuse then went on to draw comparisons with other areas or other institutions (Perth, largely non-Indigenous communities in the Wheatbelt, or the Catholic Church, for instance) in which child sexual abuse also occurred, ostensibly to emphasise that those were not exclusively Aboriginal issues.
Six of my participants heavily emphasised dysfunction in remote communities. Three of those had only peripheral knowledge of the current state of such communities, as they were speaking predominantly about their interactions with Indigenous people in the past. Of the initial announcements regarding potential community closures, Senator Patrick Dodson said:

So my concern had been ‘what do we have to do for these children to have a reasonable chance at living a good life?’ Because what we were doing at the moment wasn’t actually making it possible for many of these children to have a reasonable, good life. And that information had then been sent to me about the level of problems - sexual abuse in particular, from a national intelligence agency. And that’s coming from the Aboriginal and Indigenous Intelligence agency, as well. So there was mounting evidence that what we were doing wasn’t enough. We actually had to take this issue much, much more seriously.

And my sense of relief comes from the fact that it had been recognised by the Premier that it was a significant issue that needed urgent attention (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., November 2016).

The social dysfunction in question was usually child sexual abuse.

I’m on the board of my old school [the name of their old school], and we’ve got [a number of] Aboriginal girls, many from the Kimberley. And they’re fantastic! They want to be at the school, their family wants them to be there, but that separation is incredibly difficult for them because every time [they return to their communities] they keep getting pulled back. When they go back they’ve changed, but their family, that environment, hasn’t changed. And they come to our school, some having experienced terrible physically and sexually abuse, all these sorts [of things] that are very uncomfortable for us to talk about (Linda Reynolds, pers.comm., October 2016).

---

102 Two of these participants were previously pastoral bosses in the Pilbara and Kimberley, and the third was a policeman stationed in the Kimberley for a number of years.
Just before my comments, I’d received a report on the abuse of children in a number of communities. Horrific abuse. Repeated abuse of young girls. And boys, but principally young girls. As young as five, six seven...and there was suicides and the like (Colin Barnett, pers.comm., April 2017).

The emphasis by these participants, it seemed, was due to a need to address this issue which they perceived to constitute a crisis. Their comments are not unlike some within the anthropological academy, who have reported similar instances of abuse within the communities with which they are affiliated (see Sutton 2009). A 2009 Australian Crime Commission Report titled *A Picture of Criminality in Indigenous Communities* found that violence is endemic in many remote Indigenous communities nationally; underreporting and non-reporting of abuse is common; and that poor information sharing between service providers and government agencies results in an inadequate understanding of the extent and nature of child abuse (cited in Langton 2010: 110-111).\(^3\) Given that this is the case, there are enormous issues in determining the true extent of child abuse in remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia (or any other jurisdiction). Child sexual abuse certainly occurs in remote Indigenous communities, as it occurs across within all human populations, and may indeed occur more often due to entrenched social disadvantage experienced by remote Indigenous residents (Lievore, cited in Merlan 2010: 122). Such abuse is a real but relatively small part of a broader set of manifestations of ‘social dysfunction’ endemic to some communities. It seems the best way in which this abuse can be understood is as a consequence of disadvantage and historical social fragmentation, but, nevertheless, it remains important to emphasise that this does not necessarily occur in all remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia or, indeed, around the country.

**Addressing Social Dysfunction**

One recent example of a policy put in place to address social dysfunction in remote Aboriginal communities is the cashless welfare card (also known as the cashless debit card, or CDC). First introduced as part of the raft of measures implemented following the Intervention in 2007, the contemporary iteration of the policy was laid out in the Forrest Review into Employment and Training (Forrest 2014). This review, authored by mining

\(^3\) I was unable to locate the original report.
magnate Andrew ‘Twiggy’ Forrest, centred around ‘closing the gap’ (though phrased instead as ‘achieving parity’ or ‘ending the disparity’) between the socio-economic outcomes of non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. Operating slightly differently to the Basics Card used in the Northern Territory following the Intervention, the cashless debit card can be used in any retail store to purchase all items except those of a certain category. The review itself draws a distinction between the income management approach of the Basics card, which it argues, ‘is complex, it can be considered paternalistic and comes with a cost that renders it unsustainable and unsuitable for broader application’ (Forrest 2014: 27). The CDC is, instead, an ‘alternative that provides similar support for welfare recipients but includes them in the country’s mainstream banking and financial services system [and] will do much more to build financial literacy and independence’ (Forrest 2014: 27). Two trials of the CDC began in 2016 in Ceduna, South Australia and the East Kimberley. The recentness of the trial, and a number of other factors including the fact that there were other alcohol restrictions operating within the two trial areas concurrently, make it difficult to definitively draw conclusions on its effectiveness at this time. However, preliminary evaluations seem to indicate that the card has had little impact. According to one review, as many as seventy-seven percent of participants argued that the trial had no impact on alcohol and drug use and rates of gambling (Orima, cited in Hunt 2017: 1 - 2). In the 2017 Federal budget, the cashless debit card trials were continued and expanded to two new trial sites (see Department of Human Services 2017). The Government also announced it will trial drug-testing five thousand welfare recipients, and those that test positive will have their income quarantined and receive a cashless debit card.104

The cashless debit card proved to be another issue over which my interviewees expressed differing views. Of my participants, four independently raised this issue (I did not ask any direct questions about income management). As one of the clearest recent examples of both the return to paternalistically-driven policy on a Federal level, and the stark contrast in Federal policy approaches between the self-determination era and the more recent era of normalisation, my participants’ understanding of its salience is not surprising. One chose to focus on the cashless welfare card as an example of the decline in evidence-based policy (Fred Chaney, pers.comm., December 2016). Concurring with Hunt (2017), they emphasised that the majority of the reviews into the efficacy of income management concluded that it

104 It is worth noting that this drug testing trial was not specifically-targeted at Indigenous welfare recipients.
had not made a substantial difference. Another discussed the cashless debit card in detail, arguing that this iteration of the policy is superior to previous versions in that it is an ‘opt-out’ approach in which all remote community residents are subjected to the same initial restraints on their spending capabilities, that can be removed after a period of time if certain attributes are demonstrated and milestones are achieved (Helen Morton, pers.comm., November 2016). This is important, as there is evidence that income management can produce vastly different results depending on whether participants have voluntarily undertaken the regime or had it imposed upon them (Bray, cited in Hunt 2017: 1).

Photograph One: Discarded, Burnt and Bent Basics Card found in Broome, 2016. Photograph: J. Korte.

As Dillon & Westbury (2019: 4) argue, government policies are invariably associated with narratives that focus on problems assumed to arise from behaviours and actions detrimental to individuals, families and communities. With Indigenous policy, these include high levels of violence and substance abuse, poor school attendance, and so on. The risk, they argue, is
that the ‘sheer breadth of these issues leads to attitudes in the broader community that blame Indigenous citizens, and may ultimately emerge in racist sentiment’ (2019: 4). What has emerged quite clearly through an analysis of my interviews, the State and Federal Hansard and media reports throughout this period is that although the issue of a lack of opportunities (and therefore poor health, education and other socio-economic outcomes) and specific incidents of social dysfunction such as child abuse and youth suicide are in fact quite different issues, they are often discussed interchangeably in a way that may have the effect of branding all remote Indigenous residents as pathological. In a sense, it seemed as though a number of my participants (whether knowingly or unknowingly) had internalised the pathologisation of remote community residents that has been such a feature of the recent public debates.

The final point I make in this chapter relates to a criticism Rowse (2011) made of Austin-Broos’s conceptualisation of the ‘failed debate’. In questioning Austin-Broos’s reading of other writers in the field’s work, he commented:

> Had she read these authors more generously she might have inferred compassion...as real as her own. Knowing how and where to look when reading others’ writing is itself an ethical investment (Rowse 2011).

I noted earlier that there is much agreement over what the desired outcomes are in Australian Indigenous affairs policy. It is the methods by which these outcomes should be achieved that generally generates the most disagreement. My participants held vastly differing views on how to improve the outcomes for Western Australia’s remote Aboriginal community residents, but none, I believe, lacked in compassion and a real desire to see the end of the lived experience of poverty. Knowing where and how to look for this compassion is indeed important, otherwise the debate can easily descend into a protracted dispute about who really cares, and who does not.

> So, what do you do? Leave kids out there? Leave them to be abused, let them end up on drugs, alcohol, and dying in their thirties or suiciding? To me that’s not an option. So I know I was painted as the bad guy, but I think I’m the good guy.
While economic rationality is often seen as the only viable justification for the formation, manufacture and delivery of government policy, a second rationality was used throughout the course of the remote community closure debate: that of social dysfunction. Intervention (in this case, the closure of communities) was rationalised on the basis of a dire social need to protect children from abuse, be it sexual, violence or simply the lack of access to primary services such as health, education or policing. A final question that requires consideration is, how will remote communities in Western Australia exist into the future? Putting aside arguments relating to funding, economic viability and outcomes, what non-financial benefits can a remote lifestyle provide to remote community residents and to the broader Australian community? I address these questions in the following chapter, with reference to some of the scholarly literature that propose ideas. I also draw on my interviewees’ views, especially those who emphasised the value of making Western Australia’s remote communities sustainable into the future. After the Barnett Government’s landslide defeat in March 2017, Western Australia was abuzz with optimism. The sweeping Labor victory included the election of the State’s first Aboriginal Treasurer and first Aboriginal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. The incoming Government had promised that no remote Aboriginal communities would close (Ben Wyatt, pers.comm., May 2017), but, working within the same system of value, with the same intransigent contradictions across Australia’s political jurisdictions, would it ever be possible to overcome the intractability of an issue such as service delivery to the State’s remote communities?
Chapter Six
A Negotiated Coexistence:
The Emerging Third Narrative

We have all these sorts of challenges, in our nation. In this land that all of us share. White, black, yellow, red, whatever colour, we all share it (John McBain, pers.comm., March 2017).

I think it’s about looking at what our shared values are, as a dominant culture and a First Australian culture. And how does that impact policy and practice? So the principles of shared values, collaboration and co-design are imperative (James Back, pers.comm., December 2016).

The previous five chapters have focussed on the contrasting perspectives regarding remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia: in public opinion, in media portrayals, in policy directions, and as expressed by my participants who are all, in one way or another, engaged with such issues. Despite this complexity, one clear finding of the interviews that I conducted was that there is a surprising similarity in the good will, intent and desire for change across the political and ideological spectrum. A majority of those within the ‘politically informed and engaged citizenry’, it seems, recognise the need to better include Indigenous Australians within our national institutions, but the challenge is that the terms of those inclusive arrangements are unclear (see Dillon & Westbury 2019: 16). To articulate this prospective greater level of inclusion, many borrow language that was commonly used throughout the era of self-determination. This forms the basis of the third narrative discernible in many of the comments made by the participants of this research, and, indeed, in the broader public discourse about remote Aboriginal communities. There is a point of difference to the use of this language today, however, in that the narrative is not identical to that used throughout the self-determination era. That particular policy era has undergone over a decade of being widely discredited, alongside the introduction of resurgent paternalistic policies, largely at the Federal level. This narrative is one of a negotiated coexistence, and the manner in which it can be achieved.
In this chapter, I contextualise the current state of affairs by describing the changes that occurred in Western Australian Aboriginal affairs following the Liberal Party’s defeat in the 2017 State election. I note that these recent movements differ to those in the Indigenous affairs arena under the Barnett-led State Liberal Government. The central difference between these two Governments with respect to their management of remote Indigenous policy is that, unlike the former, the current State Government has clung to the narrative of the financial unviability of remote communities without simultaneously wielding the second, of social dysfunction. These recent developments bring into contrast the differing systems of value through which Australia’s Indigenous minority is approached in policy terms. Despite not having overhauled many of the existing institutions or processes within Aboriginal affairs, the Western Australian State Government appears more receptive to the desires of its Indigenous population than their forbearer. Significant progress, however, has yet to be achieved on the stated aims of many Indigenous affairs policy initiatives. Following Dillon & Westbury (2019; 3), I argue that the Australian state will be morally, economically and socially poorer if a settlement (viewed broadly, in the form of a treaty and/or constitutional recognition and the amelioration of Indigenous disadvantage) is not reached with its Indigenous minority. In this chapter I also analyse the work of some scholars who have suggested reasons why these policy issues become ‘intractable’ (see Schönb & Rein 1994; Dillon & Westbury 2007: 176; 207), and consider how this inherent intractability can be overcome.

When discussing issues that mar the lives of remote community residents (the disadvantaged position they occupy with regards to socio-economic indicators, difficulties in accessing services, poorly-maintained infrastructure, etcetera), one runs the risk of repeating language employed for decades by some academics, bureaucrats and the general public: fixing the ‘Aboriginal problem.’ As evidenced in previous chapters, recent decades have seen a broad problematisation of Aboriginal culture. From the point of view of many of those I interviewed, as well as many anthropologists who have engaged with Indigenous affairs policy, including myself, Australian Governments have the power to improve circumstances for remote Aboriginal communities through the application of well-designed

105 This kind of terminology is not unique to the Australian experience. See, for example, Newhouse & Belanger (2010).
and well-evidenced policy. In other words, if there is an ‘Aboriginal problem’, it is due to the failure of successive governments to meaningfully address Indigenous disadvantage. Speaking of equality before the law, Professor Lowitja O’Donoghue said in her 2008 Reconciliation Week address in Adelaide, ‘it is not so much about “fixing the Aboriginal problem”, as it is about fixing the white justice system.’

The change of government ushered in by the March 2017 State election cast further uncertainty over the future of remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia. The incoming McGowan Labor Government, with Aboriginal man Ben Wyatt as Treasurer and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, had offered a number of assurances while in opposition: that the Government had a responsibility to fund remote communities, that no remote communities would be forcibly closed, and that the former Government’s approach had been catastrophic for remote community residents and their relationship with the Government. A number of my participants, however, questioned the new Government’s capacity to maintain funding for remote communities given the Federal Government’s still strong refusal to renegotiate funding responsibilities. Prior to the March 2017 election, the Barnett-led Liberal Government has committed to fund Western Australia’s communities for at least one final year, as part of the 2016/17 State Budget (Western Australian Government 2016). In 2017, the State of Western Australia was facing a number of fiscal challenges in the wake of the mining construction boom, and regularly ranked the poorest in the nation according to a range of economic indicators (CommSec 2017).

With respect to the incoming Minister’s chances of success, Western Australian Senator Patrick Dodson made the following comment:

In opposition you can be brave and say a lot of things. I would hope that the Government seriously has a look at this. Ben Wyatt is Aboriginal Affairs Minister…but he’s also Treasurer, so he’ll have the conflicting dynamic of how to balance the books and create budgets that are sound for the State, and enable expenditure in an area where he may be getting criticism about the effectiveness of what those outlays are delivering.
So I don’t envy his position, but I think he’ll be open to the discussion about that (Patrick Dodson, pers.comm., March 2017).

Dodson’s point about how easy it is to criticise the government in opposition, but how difficult it can be to address the same issues once in office, was echoed by almost all of the participants I spoke to after the landslide Western Australia election in March 2017. Of course, whether or not the funds to support remote communities were to be located in upcoming State Government budgets was a matter of value: in theory, states have a fixed amount of money that they distribute to various government spending projects on the basis of what their citizens expect to receive. Whether or not it was politically viable (that is, whether or not the Western Australian public would accept) State Government funds being spent on the provision of essential and municipal services to remote Aboriginal communities, my participants felt, was an entirely separate matter. In a discussion of the fiscal equalisation under the Commonwealth Grants Commission’s distribution of funding to Australian States, Sullivan (2011: 114) cites Yu et al. (2008: 51) as arguing ‘if there are differences in fiscal outcomes...they reflect outcomes of the democratic process in states and territories not the consequences of differences in their capacity of afford to deliver services.’ Essentially, then, a prescribed amount of funding is distributed to States and Territories by the Commonwealth Government, and the manner in which that funding is distributed to support individual citizens is determined through a reflexive democratic relationship between those individuals and the Government. As Sullivan (2011: 114) goes on to argue, it is therefore correct to assume that the citizens of States and Territories around Australia have ‘decided not to adequately support development in remote areas’ and this must be recognised if change is to occur.

The First Aboriginal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs

My interview with Ben Wyatt, Western Australian Treasurer and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, in May 2017, largely centred on the ways in which the new Government could support and deliver services to remote communities in Western Australia. Early on in the discussion, he recognised that simply withdrawing services from (and effectively closing)
smaller communities would not translate to the budget saving that the previous Barnett-led Government had seemed to assume it would.

There was a concern that if there was a forced process of taking people off some of these communities, you’d effectively take people from very small communities in remote locations and put them into larger towns that don’t have the capacity at the moment to deal with their [existing] populations (Ben Wyatt, pers.comm., May 2017).

Wyatt then described the formation of the Regional Services Reform Unit as an attempt to ‘extricate the former Premier from the mess he’d created’; a sentiment echoed by many of my other participants. In this regard, I echo Altman et al. (2008: 10) who called for a comprehensive review of the direct and opportunity costs of policy intervention in remote Aboriginal communities. I suggest that the Regional Services Reform Unit, depending on the breadth and depth of their future analysis, could potentially perform this function. Even if the original formation of the unit was indeed a ‘smoke screen’ to shift attention away from the problematic way in which the former Premier handled the issue of potential community closures, as many of my participants suggested, under new leadership it may grow to deliver more substantial outcomes.

This interview took place in May 2017 (before any real announcements pertaining to reform in the Aboriginal affairs portfolio had been announced). When asked directly to offer an assessment of the work of the RSRU, Wyatt said the following:

Well they certainly gathered a lot of information...I think it did take a lot of that emotional heat out of the conversation, and so that’s a good thing. They have done a lot of work that will, in due course, come out in respect to the data collected. How that then goes forward in terms of the continuing reform process, well really is still subject to ‘wait and see’ (Ben Wyatt, pers.comm., May 2017).

Wyatt outlined some of the benefits and challenges of supporting remote communities. Firstly, he recognised that most remote communities have a complex history and are
themselves a result of previous government and non-government intervention. He recognised the importance of residents residing on country, and argued, as many others have done, that many of the smaller and more remote communities are places that families go to or have gone to escape the social dysfunction in larger towns (Ben Wyatt, pers.comm., May 2017).

The majority of my participants prophesised that the Regional Services Reform Unit would not continue under the new Government. One participant ended our interview by joking about how the former head of the Regional Services Reform would be looking for a new job. It became clear shortly after the election, however, that the unit would indeed continue. An interim report of the Service Priority Review (part of the broader Public Sector Renewal Project, discussed below) in August 2017 confirmed this fact. One identified aim of the review and subsequent structural government changes was ‘recognising community needs in designing and delivering services.’ Under this heading, the report confirmed:

Long lasting and systemic change is required to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people in regional and remote WA. The Panel notes the work of the regional services reform team, now placed within the new Department of Communities. The team is driving reforms in the delivery of housing, education, employment and human services (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2017a).

By way of future directions, the report names ‘place-based models of service delivery, cultural awareness training for public sector employees and increased recruitment of Aboriginal people in the public sector’ as strategies that would be pursued, and expressed ‘strong support’ for the continuation of the Regional Services Reform. Grahame Searle, former head of the RSRU, was appointed the head of the newly-amalgamated Department of Communities in January 2018.

Michael Dillon, a former CEO of the Indigenous Land Corporation with an extensive history of engagement with Indigenous affairs policy at a Federal level, was heavily involved in the Service Priority Review. This, according to Wyatt, would ensure that the administration of
Aboriginal affairs policy and service delivery to remote areas of the State did not get lost amongst the broader restructuring process.

[Ben Wyatt]: One of the reasons why I wanted Mike Dillon - I don’t know if you saw Mike Dillon is one of our reviewers?

[Jasmin Korte]: Yes.

[Ben Wyatt]: I wanted his kind of experience in this space, and on the review. I didn’t want the review to just be Government. I wanted a particular focus in Aboriginal affairs, and so I wanted Dillon on that (pers.comm., May 2017).

I left the interview without a great deal of detail regarding the State Government’s plans for service delivery reform, but it was clear that the issue, at the very least, was on the agenda.

**A Survey of Recent Government Documents**

In September and October 2017, the RSRU released several documents aiming to identify the issues and challenges involved with servicing and governing Western Australia’s remote communities. The first of these documents built on the previous Roadmap report (Regional Services Reform Unit 2016). Entitled ‘Key Insights from Consultation with Remote Aboriginal Communities in Western Australia’, it claimed to represent the ‘most extensive consultation process ever undertaken with remote communities in the state’ (Regional Services Reform Unit 2017a: 3).\(^{106}\) The report begins with an acknowledgement that Government has, historically and contemporarily, played a significant role in perpetuating the problem.

For decades, successive governments have failed to address the challenges effectively, despite often good intentions. *Government (in its broadest sense) is a major part of the problem* (Regional Services Reform Unit 2017a: 4, emphasis added).

\(^{106}\) Aside from, perhaps, *the Aboriginal Land Inquiry Report* (1984), often termed the Seaman Land Inquiry.
There is little doubt that establishing the exact number of residents and status of occupation of each of the 274 remote communities in Western Australia represents a logistical nightmare. This is evident throughout the report, which points to: forty communities that were found vacant upon the arrival of the RSRU team; twelve communities that could not be accessed due to impassable road conditions or a locked gate; sixty-five communities which the team believes are unoccupied and with whom no contact could be established; nine previously designated ‘communities’ that the team decided to omit from the report as they were deemed not to be permanent living areas (such as a school campus and agricultural enterprises); and two communities that refused to be involved in the consultation process due to their mistrust of government (Regional Services Reform Unit 2017a: 7). The RSRU concluded that the previous State Government data, which had depicted ninety communities as ‘not permanently occupied’, was incorrect, and that the figure was in fact closer to one hundred and thirty (2017a: 7). Perhaps the number of permanently-occupied remote communities in Western Australia has declined, which may suggest a level of adaptability on the part of the Indigenous population; as discussion of the withdrawal of funding and services grew, residents redistributed themselves to areas where they were surer of their future financial stability. Without baseline data to compare these findings to, however, it is difficult to establish whether this is the case. The overarching figure of ‘274’ remained, although the report acknowledges that the RSRU’s figures regarding the distribution of remote Aboriginal residents in Western Australia are a ‘best estimate’ (Regional Services Reform Unit 2017a: 6).

From what was said throughout the consultation process, the report drew out four ‘State-wide key themes’ which it argued should be considered to make up a ‘holistic view of what needs to change to improve life outcomes of Aboriginal people living in remote areas’ (2017a: 9). The first was cultural and community governance (2017a: 10 - 12). According to the RSRU, the importance of residents’ connection to country was raised at three-quarters of the meetings conducted, with community leaders stressing the importance of this connection on their social and emotional wellbeing.107 Another area raised frequently was the impact of

107 As previously mentioned, there is some evidence to suggest that residing in remote communities (as opposed to centralisation to larger regional towns) leads to some improved health outcomes (Morice 1976;
community administrative arrangements, with strong local administrative governance being cited as integral to the functioning of (particularly larger) communities. A number of residents perceived that funding and resources for local administrative services have gradually dried up, and that many communities have community officers fulfilling their roles either on a voluntary basis or as part of their logged CDP hours. Issues were also raised about the competency of community CEOs, some of which had reportedly been involved in the misappropriation of community funds. Communities with appropriately-funded, competent CEOs reported significantly better outcomes than those without. Whether or not these CEOs were Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, whether they are part of the communities they represent or not and whether they had the appropriate training or skills for the role was not touched on in the report, although it did later claim that members of community councils and prescribed bodies corporates\textsuperscript{108} routinely reported the difficulty of negotiating government policy and procedure with little to no training in the field. Finally, the report stressed that community leaders continue to highlight the importance of self-determination in community governance.

Communities want to partner with government to design solutions to the issues residents face. Community members also advocated for funding decisions to be made by the community with the support of government (2017a: 12).

The second key theme was remote living (2017a: 14 - 16). Over ninety percent of residents raised the challenges they perceived to be associated with living remotely, specifically with regards to essential and municipal service delivery (2017a: 14). Housing supply and maintenance was also raised by an overwhelming number of residents, and, to a lesser extent, the impact of the high cost of living. Community concerns relating to essential service delivery were reportedly usually focussed on access to water that is compliant with Australian Drinking Water Guidelines, and access to a reliable electricity supply. The Essential and Municipal Services Upgrade Program (EMSUP), committed to by the State

\textsuperscript{108} When a native title determination is made, the Native Title Act 1993 (NTA) dictates that the native title holders must establish a corporation called a prescribed bodies corporate to manage the land (and/or sea) rights and interests of the group (see Glaskin 2007; Cawthorn 2018).
Government in 2016, aims to eventually provide clean and reliable water and power to Aboriginal communities around the State, with individual households being metered and billed in turn (this is currently not the norm). The RSRU reported that while many residents were amenable to this process, they were concerned about ‘how [they] would pay the additional bills with, what they perceive, is an already high cost of living’ (2017a: 14). Communities reported that they were generally too under-funded to deliver the sorts of municipal services usually provided by local governments.

Earlier I discussed the implementation of the State Government’s Housing Management Agreements (HMA). In 2010, the Western Australian Government agreed to take over the responsibility of housing tenancy in communities that agreed to sign a HMA. To do so, they passed amendments to the Housing Act 1980 (WA) to allow the properties to be managed through Housing Management Agreements and placed properties under the supervision of the Department of Housing as ‘mainstream public housing tenancy agreements’, as opposed to their tenancies being governed by local Aboriginal corporations. During the period of uncertainty following the Barnett Government’s announcement that up to 150 communities may be closed, Eggington & Razi (2015: 28) expressed concern that the communities without HMAs were at the highest risk of closure. As of October 2017, seventy-six remote communities had negotiated a HMA with the State Government, and, of those, ‘many’ reported dissatisfaction with the service. Concerns about a perceived irregularity of visits by and general lack of accountability of service providers were raised, and a number of residents reported disappointment after signing a HMA and seeing little improvement to their existing housing or provision of new housing (2017a: 15). Funding for remote housing has been provided, in part, by the Federal Government under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Housing (Council of Australian Governments 2016), which expired in June 2018. It currently appears that no new on-going funding agreement will be made, and that housing is to become the latest area in which the Federal Government intends to withdraw funding support for remote communities. When I spoke to Ben Wyatt in May 2018, the Federal Government were still reluctant to come to the table with regards to negotiations about the future of that funding. When the National Partnership Agreement on

A breakdown of the projected outcomes of the Essential and Municipal Services Upgrade Program is available on the RSRU’s website, <https://regionalservicesreform.wa.gov.au>
Remote Housing expired at the end of June 2018, the Western Australian Government launched the ‘don’t walk away’ campaign urging the Federal Government to continue contributing to the cost of housing in remote communities. The campaigns website described the gradual and expanding Federal withdrawal of funding commitments:

Discontinuation of the National Partnership on Remote Housing will result in a reduction in funding to remote communities of around $120 million per year. The impact of this cessation is exacerbated by the Federal Government’s withdrawal in 2015 of investment in municipal and essential services in the State’s remote Aboriginal communities. That withdrawal was accompanied by a one-off payment of $90 million, which covered three years of service delivery and left a funding hole of nearly a billion dollars (Western Australian Government 2018h).

The website described the only offer from the Federal Government to date, a one-off payment of $60.9 million dollars, as ‘manifestly inadequate’ (Western Australian Government 2018h). In December 2018, the W.A. State Government accepted a $121 million dollar deal over two years (more than double the previous Federal offer). State Ministers insist that negotiations to secure a new long-term agreement between the State and Federal Government are ongoing.

Finally, the RSRU report asserted that with regards to the high cost of living, the message expressed by remote community residents was that the issue was not one of Aboriginality, but one of poverty (2017a: 16). Community leaders reported the cost of basic necessities like fresh fruit and vegetables were prohibitively expensive, leading to severe concerns for the health and wellbeing of their residents. Overall, residents were concerned about the introduction of additional cost of living pressures, as many felt as though they were barely able to afford those that they already had.

The third key theme was economic viability (2017a: 17 - 20). Central to the consultation conducted on this topic, the RSRU reported, was the issue of the complexity of land tenure. Additional concerns included access to jobs, employment opportunities, and enterprise and
business opportunities, particularly with regards to a perceived responsibility of government to generate more progress in this area.

Community leaders were clear that their preference was for community jobs to go to local residents first, and said that government and/or its contractors need to be more innovative and culturally appropriate in how they recruit and fill positions (Regional Services Reform Unit 2017a: 19).

The final State-wide theme was service delivery and provision (2017a: 21 - 23). In general, community leaders were critical of service design and a perceived lack of service accountability, and over half suggested an alternative way in which services could be delivered to or accessed by their residents (2017a: 22). Central concerns included the poor coverage of telecommunication services, difficulties in dealing with Centrelink, the need to travel long distances for healthcare, and the long distance travel required to access secondary education. Around the State, residents reportedly questioned the transparency of government contracts, believing that the amount of government expenditure was not equal to the value being added to their community. Finally, many community leaders called for structural changes to promote community-driven and place-based solutions, particularly with regards to preventative health programs (such as improving skills around parenting) and education programs for young people that meaningfully included language and culture.

As certain types of rationality are privileged over others, so too are certain sectors of the service delivery industry. Sullivan (2011: 48 - 66) argues that the Aboriginal community-controlled not-for-profit sector, or simply, the Indigenous sector, is undervalued and therefore underfunded, curtailing its ability to adequately provide services (even in an environment in which government services are often lacking). Due to the influence of new public management approaches to public policy, he argues, governments are unsure whether to conceive of Indigenous community organisations as reflective of a will to tackle social and economic issues on the local level, or simply as contractors to government who

---

110 Somewhat confusingly, this theme did not encompass the delivery of essential and municipal services (as these had already been discussed under the theme 'remote living') but instead what it termed ‘critical’ services such as education, health and telecommunications.
deliver services to Indigenous populations (2011: 49). Greater understanding that one of the ‘services’ the Indigenous sector provides is ‘its ability to constitute a uniquely Indigenous component of the nation as a whole, particularly at the local and regional levels’ must be facilitated (2011: 66). Indigenous organisations, depending on certain intra-organisational and contextual particularities, have the capacity to take on ‘state-like’ power in the delivery of services to Indigenous groups (see Fisher 2013). Discourse surrounding the need to facilitate a ‘greater Indigenous voice’ in the delivery of services to and governance of remote Aboriginal communities is ubiquitous across Government reports (such as the RSRU’s consultation report, described above). It was also a feature in almost every interview I conducted with my participants. A bolstered Indigenous sector, supplied with greater funding, would be one way of achieving this.\footnote{Sullivan adds that aside from material support, the efficiency of the sector could be increased by ‘more appropriate approaches to regulation, greater devolution of policy implementation to the sector and streamlined standardised reporting procedures’ (2011: 66).}

Overall, the insights presented in the RSRU’s consultation report align with those mentioned by a number of participants. The final pages of the report provide more detailed, regionally-based insights and these too are broadly aligned with the perspectives expressed by community leaders in those areas. Alex Knight, for example, who is a representative of the Ngaanyatjarra Council, discussed community dissatisfaction with the Community Development Program (CDP). Given the remoteness and unviability of the non-state sector in most of the communities on the Ngaanyatjarra lands, residents rely heavily on the CDP, but were finding liaising with Centrelink and other government agencies increasingly difficult (Alex Knight, pers.comm., May 2016; Regional Services Reform Unit 2017a: 36).

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the report ends by firstly highlighting the strong feeling of consultation fatigue expressed by remote community residents, then outlining the limitations of the consultation process and suggesting that the conversation must be continued. There was also an acknowledgement that the lack of coherency in past government policy had clearly resulted in a mistrust of government by some Aboriginal people, which had made ‘open and honest conversations’ difficult in some areas. Those communities that were heavily involved in the consultation process, the report reiterates,
expect the government to take their insights seriously and to partner with government to achieve the outcomes we all want.

The second set of documents released by the RSRU in October 2017 (in partnership with the Centre for Social Impact at the University of Western Australia), represented an attempt to systematically map government service expenditure and measure Indigenous outcomes by the State Government across the Kimberley and the Pilbara (Regional Services Reform Unit 2017b; Regional Services Reform Unit 2017c). According to these documents, the State Government mapped both wellbeing outcomes and government direct service provision expenditure in the two regions to ‘support structural solutions for regional service delivery’ (2017c: 3). Again, it is likely that the Government’s claim that this report represents the first analysis of direct government expenditure across all sub-regions of the Kimberley and Pilbara, considering all Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage areas, is correct.112 The report argues the data presented should be considered as a baseline for future analysis, as no corresponding data exists for previous years (2017b: ix; 2017c: 3). I refer to some of the figures from this report throughout the remainder of the chapter.

The full report of the Service Priority review was handed down in December 2017. It is large and broad-reaching document. Here I draw out the key recommendations that relate to the administration and service delivery of remote Aboriginal communities, with particular emphasis on the key themes that were also focussed on by those I interviewed.

The first principle that relates heavily to remote Aboriginal communities laid out in the report is the co-design of service provision (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2017b: 38-40). Quotes from two prominent community leaders (one from the East and one from the West Kimberley) punctuate the text, as if to confirm the input they have had. I have indicated elsewhere in this thesis that an overwhelming number of those I interviewed, across party lines and the ideological spectrum, stressed to me the importance of going

---

112 These Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage areas were adapted from the Productivity Commission’s Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2016). There were 150 measures, categorised into seven OID areas: Governance; Leadership and Culture; Early Childhood Development; Education and Training; Healthy Lives; Economic Participation; Home Environment; and Safe and Supportive Communities.
beyond mere consultation with remote community residents. They advocated for Aboriginal led, driven and managed solutions to the challenges of remote living and disadvantage. The document argues that:

A genuine partnership-based approach is a key aspect of co-design, clearly differentiating it from other methods of engagement including consultation, where time, resource and policy constraints impose boundaries on how and when community input is given (2017b: 38).

The report provides some caveats, however, recognising that true co-design is resource-intensive, time-consuming and much easier to support in theory than it is to implement in practice. The language in the report is clearly well-hedged within the 'shared' or 'mutual' responsibility discourse now common to Indigenous affairs in Australia. The report recognises that co-design requires a 'level of operational maturity and capability, risk acceptance and flexibility' that is not currently evident in the Western Australian public sector (2017b: 38). The need to build capacity in this area, both with regards to the public and community services sector is identified. The report does not go as far as to guarantee that the Government also intends to prioritise capacity-building among remote community leadership to ensure residents can fully engage in the design process.

One sentence in the report stood out to me above others:

The establishment of a formal, upgraded representative voice for Aboriginal people in the State, possibly at regional levels, is worthy of further consideration by the Government (2017b: 58).

This is a vague statement which could indicate the future establishment of as little as another advisory panel of regional leaders such as the Regional Services Reform Unit’s Strategic Advisory Council, or as much as a treaty and/or establishment of a constitutionally-enshrined Aboriginal representative voice in Parliament.
When I spoke with Ben Wyatt again in May 2018, he shared my intrigue regarding this statement.

[Jasmin Korte]: Okay, on the topic of representative bodies, I noted that in the final report of the Service Priority Review-

[Ben Wyatt]: Yes!

[Jasmin Korte]: -there was a comment about that. Are you able to elaborate on that at all?

[Ben Wyatt]: Yeah. And actually you’re the first person who’s asked me about that! Because it was, you know, in a really big report-

[Jasmin Korte]: Yes.

[Ben Wyatt]: ...and it wasn't a specific recommendation.

[Jasmin Korte]: Yeah, it was just a small little line.

[Ben Wyatt]: Yeah, I found that very interesting as well (pers.comm., May 2018).

The words ‘formal’ and ‘upgraded’ provide potential scope for the State to surpass the Federal Government’s progress in this regard, given the current Federal context in which it appears that enshrining an Indigenous voice in the constitution has stalled (discussed later in the chapter).

The Single Noongar Claim and its Negotiated Settlement

One avenue by which greater Aboriginal representation in self-governance on a State level has been pursued is within the Single Noongar Claim (now more commonly called the Noongar Settlement or Negotiated Noongar Settlement). In 2006 Justice Wilcox determined that native title continued to exist over the south-western corner of Western Australia, including the Perth metropolitan area (Bennell vs. State of Western Australia (2006) FCA 1243). In 2007, the State of Western Australia appealed Justice Wilcox’s decision, which was consequently set aside. Facing the prospect of another hearing before another Federal Court
judge, negotiations began in 2008 (the same year Barnett was elected) between the State of Western Australia and the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (SWALSC), who represent the Noongar claimants. Between 2008 and 2014, a number of consultative meetings established that the majority of the Noongar community were not interested in pursuing their native title case, and instead wished to pursue a mediated settlement, in effect ‘exchang[ing] their native title rights and interests for rights contained in Indigenous Land Use Agreements’ (SWALSC, cited in Palmer 2016).\textsuperscript{113} During these meetings, forty-four ‘named applicants’ were directed to sign the six ILUAs across the south-west of the State. Of these forty-four, five refused, leading two to subsequently seek an order from the High Court to prevent the National Native Title Tribunal from registering four of the ILUAs.\textsuperscript{114} In a shock decision handed down in February 2016, the court found that four of the six ILUAs did not comply with section 24CA of the NTA and therefore could not be registered (McGlade v Native Title Registrar (2017) FCAFC 10).

The dissenting applicants’ lawyers successfully argued that an ILUA cannot be registered if not all individuals who jointly comprise the relevant native title claimant group have signed it. The implications of this decision were far-reaching, as it not only had the potential to derail the settlement of the Noongar claim, but could also invalidate past, current and future ILUAs that have not been signed by all named applicants (including those that may have since died). The conflict exposed in this case draws attention to a small but vocal portion of the Noongar community that do not consider themselves to be represented by the SWALSC, and who have consistently fought against the Single Noongar Claim. Shortly after the shock ruling, Premier Barnett argued, ‘there is a very small number of Aboriginal people in that area who object to any settlement of native title, and they are frustrating it through the courts, but the settlement has been agreed, it has been signed, it will go ahead’ (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2017). In June 2017, the Native Title Amendment (Indigenous Land Use Agreements) Act 2017 (Cth) became law; this Act amended the NTA to clarify that not all members of the recognised native title claimant group need sign an ILUA in order for it to

\textsuperscript{113} An Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) is a voluntary and binding agreement made between a native title group and another party/parties, which sets out various regulations and restrictions with regards to the use of land and water.

\textsuperscript{114} The four individuals who challenged the registration of the ILUAs were two of the aforementioned named applicants, and two other Noongar people who were not named applicants.
be registered with the NNTT. In mid-October 2018, all six ILUAs associated with the Single Noongar Claim were registered with the NNTT (Western Australian Government 2018i).

Due to the Australian nation state’s complex reliance on both common and statute law (and Indigenous customary law, see Rowse 2002: 103 - 104), each native title determination adds a further layer of intricacy to the process of native title recognition: the Single Noongar claim, however, has the potential to set broader precedents. Owing to the robust representative mechanisms contained within the settlement, and the establishment of self-governance bodies, it can be argued that the Single Noongar Claim is, in fact, a prototype treaty between the various Noongar groups and the State Government of Western Australia (Hobbs & Williams 2018: 34 - 38). This was reflected in what several participants said. James Back, Former principal of Rawa Community School, for example, described the Single Noongar Claim as ‘laying a precedent for treaties’ (James Back, pers.comm., December 2016).

It also demonstrates the existence of the third narrative in practice in Western Australia prior to the election of the McGowan Labor Government in 2017. Seemingly, Barnett’s approach to Indigenous affairs issues were different in remote and urban Western Australia: while he was considering the withdrawal of services to remote community residents, he was laying the groundwork for a negotiated settlement in the South-west. In our discussion regarding the various State attempts at progressing treaty negotiations in 2018, Ben Wyatt argued:

It’s actually been happening without a narrative in W.A., and that is in respect to the Noongar settlement. That does effectively create a post-native title structure that represents the different Noongar groups.

But I think that hasn’t been seen or articulated by government within the context of a ‘representative body’ (Ben Wyatt, pers.comm., May 2018).115

115 Given the apparent intractability of treaty and representative body discussions at a Federal level (described in more detail later in the chapter), it is perhaps unsurprising that the Single Noongar Claim has progressed ‘without a narrative.’
Place-based Design of Service Delivery

The second theme of the Service Priority Review is place-based design of service delivery. This theme similarly emerged from my data; most participants argued that a ‘one-size fits all’ approach would not work, especially when government administration was conducted out of Canberra. The report identifies that place-based solutions allow policy to be tailored to the specific area in which it will be applied, which can allow for the broad differences in economic opportunities, demography and geography of Western Australia’s regions (2017b: 39; 52 - 54). The report is vague with regards to which geographical areas of the State, and which areas of policy these co-designed and place-based models will be implemented, however it adds ‘given the limited success of many initiatives and services directed or provided to Aboriginal people, there appears to be scope to make much greater use of such models in these particular contexts’ (2017b: 40).

With regards to direct government service delivery, the report discusses the need for the Western Australian Government to improve its digital capacities and ability to interact with individuals online. It recognises, however, that the on-going shift towards digital service delivery severely disadvantages those living in remote Aboriginal communities (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2017b: 48). On the advice of the RSRU, the report claims:

Telecommunication services, including mobile and internet coverage, are non-existent or unreliable in many remote Aboriginal communities, with residents often dependent on a single landline or payphone (which is often out of service). These impediments can have a significant impact on community life. Government services, therefore, need to be designed and delivered in ways that are accessible and fair, taking into account the challenging circumstances facing citizens in remote areas of Western Australia (2017b: 48).

A possible solution posited is what the report calls ‘multi-level integrated service delivery models’, which include a mixture of online, telephone and physical service centres.

---

116 The report cites that Aboriginal households in Central Australia are seventy-six percent less likely to have internet access than non-Indigenous households (Rennie et al., cited in Department of Premier and Cabinet 2017b: 48).
Recommendation four of the report is that online service delivery should be expanded to provide multiple channels for delivering transactional services, and a feasibility study into the implementation of a ‘whole-of-government multi-channel transactional service delivery model’ is suggested (2017b: 51). This issue is clearly having a significant impact on the lives of many remote community residents, as they themselves have expressed (and was expressed by a number of my interviewees). As such, I’m inclined to suggest it warrants more than the potential promise of a feasibility study.

Another theme is the lack of effective coordination between government departments (2017b: 55), also mentioned by a number of those that participated in this research. For example, Bishop Christopher Saunders discussed the advent of this siloism when he and I met in Broome:

[Bishop Christopher Saunders]: I was in one Aboriginal community one day. There were fourteen Government Departments, State, Federal, came in. Flew in and flew out. Fourteen aeroplanes! Right? I mean they weren’t all there at once, some came in the morning, some came in the afternoon, but that day.

[Jasmin Korte]: And people wonder where the money’s going and why it isn’t reaching the people on the ground!

[Bishop Christopher Saunders]: Yeah! That’s right, you know. They’d be coming with one person on board, or two, you know, on a six-seater aircraft. There was all the, you know, child protection, education, health, community health...

[Jasmin Korte]: Regional development, probably?

[Bishop Christopher Saunders]: Yeah, and juvenile justice, justice, police...we got to fourteen that day. Unbelievable. You know? And they all went away and no one would have talked to one another at all (pers.comm., March 2017).
The Service Priority Review report provided the following figures to outline the extent of the problem. First, that a 2013 expenditure review into services provided to Aboriginal youth around the State found that less than fifteen percent of services within its scope could demonstrate effectiveness (Department of Premier and Cabinet, cited in Department of Premier and Cabinet 2017b: 55). Second, a 2014 location-based review found that there was significant fragmentation in service delivery, with the 1400 residents of Roebourne receiving more than two hundred services from sixty-three individual government and non-government service providers (Department of Premier and Cabinet, cited in Department of Premier and Cabinet 2017b: 55). Third, that a Productivity Commission report found that the roughly four hundred residents of Jigalong received ninety different social and community services over the period of 2013 - 2014 (Productivity Commission, cited in Department of Premier and Cabinet 2017b: 55). The report then reiterates that the discussion in relation to the co-design of services and the potential to use place-based models of service provision is particularly relevant in regional contexts, and recommended that ‘system-wide coordination and reporting responsibilities’ for public sector operations in the regions be allocated to the regional development portfolio (2017b: 56).

Silos are typically tall and isolated, and, in the context of the siloism within the administration of Indigenous affairs in Australia, it is the tallness that is worthy of particular scrutiny (Sullivan 2011: 98). Another pertinent aspect of NPM approaches to public policy is the requirement for self-scrutiny, continuous evaluation and assessment and a hierarchical chain of authority. This ‘audit culture’ (see Strathern 2000) can be read as having altered both the structure and mechanics of bureaucracies, and the culture within them. The height of the chain of bureaucratic command, according to Sullivan (2011: 98), leads to greater opportunities for ‘ritualistic, inner-directed, Morris Dance behaviour’. Regionalisation of policy (and the introduction of ‘place-based’ policy solutions) would flatten this chain of command. When he wrote in 2011, Sullivan argued that making such structural changes was especially pertinent given the ‘significant challenges’ Aboriginal people were to face in the years ahead, particularly with regards to the divestment of funding responsibilities to State Governments and the changes to the (then CDEP), which I’ve referred to throughout.
A Reform Agenda

One participant, Paul Lane, argued that two major reforms were needed in Western Australian Indigenous affairs: the abolition of both the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Aboriginal Lands Trust. It would soon become apparent that one of these reforms would come to pass. As I sat in his office at The Kimberley Institute (a policy think-tank) in Broome during the week following the 2017 State election, I asked him whether he was hopeful about the prospect of change. Incoming Treasurer Ben Wyatt had just announced that the Department of Aboriginal affairs was set to undergo a number of reforms.

[Jasmin Korte]: What do you think the outcomes are gonna be? Ben Wyatt’s talked about ‘sweeping reforms’ in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Aboriginal affairs in general. He hasn’t been specific about anything, but...do you think there will be changes?

[Paul Lane]: If they do the things that they’ve promised to do, they will get rid of the Aboriginal Lands Trust, and that will be a good thing.

They will get rid of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and that will be a good thing.

Paul Lane followed up this comment a short while later:

[Paul Lane]: As to my confidence that they will bring in sweeping reforms, I will be astounded. But those two simple things would be huge steps in the Western Australian context (pers.comm., March 2017).

In April 2017, the State Government announced its ‘Public Service Renewal’ program, which promised to deliver a forty percent reduction in the size and scope of the public sector. As part of this initiative, the State Government’s forty-one departments were reduced to twenty-five. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs was abolished, with the majority of its functions being taken over by the Department of Premier and Cabinet (following the now
common ‘whole of government’ approach mandated by NPM approaches). Certain functions were also amalgamated into the Department of Lands, Planning and Heritage, and the Department of Communities.

A 1996 review of the Aboriginal Lands Trust found that the management of Aboriginal lands had been ineffective in the past, and that major reform was unavoidable (Aboriginal Lands Trust Review Team 1996). The review recommended that the ALT be closed in the upcoming decade, and that all lands then held by the trust be transferred to Aboriginal people throughout the state. Successive Governments have seemingly disregarded this recommendation, as the Aboriginal Lands Trust is still in operation (now housed in the Department of Lands, Planning and Heritage). In the 2018 Regional Services Reform report regarding insights gathered from community consultation, one of the key concerns raised under the theme ‘economic viability’ was the complexity of land tenure (Regional Services Reform Unit 2017a: 18). Such complexity was reported as being a ‘barrier to community development’. Community residents perceived that their pursuits of private home ownership were illegal, and, in many cases, this led to a lack of investment in infrastructure and lost economic development opportunities (Regional Services Reform Unit 2017a: 18).

A number [of remote community residents] expressed exasperation at how difficult and complex the processes are for changing tenure. Communities that have sought changes in tenure told us that the process itself can have a highly negative impact on relationships within the community, leading to fractured communities and disagreements within family groups (Regional Services Reform Unit 2017a: 18).

The report gave little away with regards to whether or not the future of the Aboriginal Lands Trust was in question. Changes to tenure arrangements, however, have been a central feature of the State Government’s reform agenda. In July 2017, Treasurer and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Ben Wyatt released a media statement regarding the reopening of a community store in Balgo (Western Australian Government 2017d). This media statement claimed the Government was offering a practical way in which changes to tenure arrangements could enhance the economic viability of remote communities. Reopening,
refurbishing and restocking the store would provide an income stream for the community of Balgo, in addition to providing fresh food and other goods to surrounding communities such as Mulan and Billiluna. The store is located on ALT land, and in order for it to reopen it was firstly leased to the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Cooperation, then subsequently subleased to a commercial partnership between the same Aboriginal corporation and Outback Stores (a company consisting of a group of retailers from large Australian supermarket chains and supported by Indigenous Business Australia). Outback Stores subsequently expanded operations after the NTER in 2007, and is now funded by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to help provide food security and local jobs in remote communities in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia. While this change in tenure arrangements will no doubt prove positive for the communities in the region, the on-going complexities associated with the Aboriginal Lands Trust estate remain. The July 2017 media statement foreshadowed further progress on this front, arguing, ‘ALT assets across the State are being either leased or divested in an effort to create sustainable economic opportunities through land reform’ (Western Australian Government 2017d).

In January 2018, the ABC broadcast a digital report, paired with a segment on the nightly news, regarding the State Government’s plan to normalise service delivery in town-based reserves around Western Australia (Parke 2018). Though not quite the complete abolishment of the Aboriginal Lands Trust as Lane suggested, the article hinted at major overhauls regarding land tenure arrangements in town-based reserves around the State: some of which are categorised as part of the State’s 274 ‘remote communities’. The article argued:

The complex land tenure arrangement means they fall into a strange no-man's land when it comes to government services, with residents essentially living under a separate regime of rights and responsibilities to the rest of the community.

The article quotes the then head of the RSRU Grahame Searle, and argues that a key priority is to normalise service delivery with the hope of improving living conditions the town-based reserves, ‘potentially even shifting the land tenure to integrate them into the regular
township’ (Parke 2018). The article was light on detail, but it asserts that a $20 million dollar ‘pilot program’ is underway across the Pilbara. The normalisation of town-based reserves has, as yet, not occurred. Following the successful litigation of a Central Australian Aboriginal group against the Northern Territory Government, the Western Australian Government may now face legal action from residents in the town-based reserve of Parnpajinya, new Newman, on the basis that they have not adequately provided services and maintained infrastructure (Feng 2019).

When I met with Ben Wyatt in 2017, we discussed potential reforms to land tenure. He said:

> There’s complications around tenure, the actual legal right for people to be where they are. And that’s an issue similarly in places like Halls Creek. Very limited freehold land, the prevalence of Aboriginal Lands Trust land...and this is an issue that I’m turning my mind to right now. How do we create a better land tenure system to support Aboriginal people?

When I spoke to Wyatt again in 2018, he acknowledged that this was one area in which the Government had encountered difficulty.

> [Jasmin Korte]: Aside from the issue with regards to Federal funding for remote housing, any other real sticking points that you’ve found frustrating?

> [Ben Wyatt]: Yeah, oh look, I’d like to get some tenure reform happening. Or, if not tenure reform, at least the issues around town reserves, issues around the Lands Trust estate.

> [Jasmin Korte]: Yes.

> [Ben Wyatt]: You know, those issues are harder.

> We’re having some success, but you’ve got to keep pushing on these things. You know? And there is always some constraint, somewhere around existing tenure.
And perhaps some nervousness as well, I must admit, from Aboriginal people around changing tenure. The ALT estate’s been there a long time, people know what it is and they’re comfortable with the protections being held by the ALT.

[Jasmin Korte]: Sure. I suppose they’ve learnt how to negotiate that space.

[Ben Wyatt]: Despite the inadequacies. Yeah. So it’s about bringing them on a journey as well (pers.comm., May 2018).

Tenure, today, is an issue inextricably intertwined with native title. Native title, in an Australian context, refers to the process by which certain Indigenous rights and interests in land and waters have been recognised under Australian law. Native title is a fluid process, in which existing benchmarks are continuously revised as new determinations are handed down (the most recent ‘landmark’ decision occurring in 2019, see Dillon 2019: 1). Many remote communities reside on parcels of land in which varying layers of native title rights have been granted; the form that ‘community closures’ would have taken in those areas, then, remains unclear.

The September 2017 State Budget, the first under the new Government, announced that the required $164 million dollars for essential and municipal services to remote Aboriginal communities would be secured under the Royalties for Regions fund, as part of a broader $4 billion dollar investment in services and infrastructure in regional Western Australia over the coming four years (Western Australian Government 2017e; Western Australian Government 2017f). In essence, this represented a move by the State Government to assume responsibility for funding the areas previously contributed by the Federal Government. Some of the $4 billion dollar investment represented additional funding (not previously spent on remote communities) targeting specific regions, with guaranteed funding to upgrade infrastructure, promote tourism, and improve and expand some services such as the Aboriginal Rangers Program (Western Australian Government 2017e; Western Australian Government 2017f; Western Australian Government 2018e).
The State Government has pursued several other specific agendas within Indigenous affairs, outside the broader workings of the Regional Services Reform. An analysis of the media statements released by the Government in the period since the 2017 election reveals a number of new measures and policies targeting a reduction in Indigenous disadvantage and righting perceived historical wrongs. In May 2017, for example, the Government announced that the personal files containing Aboriginal family information had been transferred from the Department for Child Protection and Family Support to the Aboriginal Family History Unit, then housed within the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Western Australian Government 2017c). This move, they argued, would allow Aboriginal Western Australians to better access their family history, and aligned with the recommendations of the Bringing Them Home Report (1997).

One of my interviewees raised an issue on which the State Government appears to be making some progress, that is, towards an Aboriginal procurement policy. When I met with Kado Muir in January 2017, a Federal Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP) had already been in effect for eighteen months. According to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, the IPP has three main parts: first, a target number of contracts need to be awarded to Indigenous businesses; second, a mandatory set-aside for remote contracts and contracts valued between $80,000 - $200,000, and third, minimum Indigenous participation requirements in contracts valued at or above $7.5m in certain industries (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet n.d.). As part of his response to my question regarding potential pathways to addressing Indigenous disadvantage in remote communities, Muir commented:

[Kado Muir]: The other issue that I think is going to change the shape of a lot of remote Aboriginal communities is the Indigenous Procurement Policy at a Federal level. And if you look at the core requirements of the policy, it’s either contracts up to two hundred thousand dollars, you go directly to Aboriginal organisations, or beyond that, you’re either in joint venture, or you’re employing a percentage of Aboriginal people in the program.
So I’m hoping the Federal Government resourcing this procurement policy will make a difference in how services are procured at the community level, and it would be great to see the State Government commit to...

[Jasmin Korte]: Something similar?

[Kado Muir]: An Indigenous Procurement Policy as well, yeah.

Muir explained to me how he believed the economics of remote service delivery, particularly with regards to employment, was a significant factor in the continuing disadvantage of remote Aboriginal residents.

Cause at the end of the day, a lot of this is all about money. You know, where the money flows, and who’s collecting it. And if the money’s not getting to where it needs to get, then you end up with all these problems (Kado Muir, pers.comm., January 2017).

Less than twelve months later, the McGowan Labor Government announced the State of Western Australia’s first Aboriginal Procurement Policy (Western Australian Government 2017g; see also Department of Premier and Cabinet 2017b: 73). From July 2018, all State Government Departments would be required to award one percent of contracts to registered Aboriginal businesses (a target that would increase to two percent in July 2019, and three percent in July 2020). A statement attributed to Treasurer and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Ben Wyatt read, ‘the results of this policy will be publically available and I would hope that over time it builds the capacity and capability of Aboriginal businesses around the State’ (Western Australian Government 2017g).117

Terry Redman offered me some similar reflections, having recently stepped back from the role of Minister for Regional Development after the March 2017 election loss.

117 In June 2019, the Western Australian Government announced that the mandated target of one percent for the first financial year was on track to be quadrupled, with over four percent of State Government contracts being awarded to registered Aboriginal businesses over the period from July to December 2019 (Western Australian Government 2019b).
The notion of moving from sort of head contractor back to having Aboriginal-based, performance-met, KPI businesses providing those services has to be a pathway to get employment in those areas. Government is the biggest employer in those communities, and government needs to walk the walk. So to me, that’s a part of the mix (Terry Redman, pers.comm., June 2017).

Redman also highlighted the necessity of having regionally-set targets, given the population of Aboriginal workers and businesses varies greatly across the State. In the RSRU’s Consultation report (2017a: 15), community residents reportedly agreed that successive State and Commonwealth Governments had gradually taken jobs away from communities, instead ‘aggregating work and contracting with larger organisations based in regional towns.’ This head-maintenance contractor model, they perceived, was severely limiting both local employment opportunities and the communities’ ability to coordinate and deliver services themselves (2017a: 15). Although not government-mandated, to this end the Regional Services Reform announced in January 2018 that the Department of Communities has established a panel of local builders to fulfil the North-West Aboriginal Housing Fund’s (NAHF) training and employment targets (Regional Services Reform 2018a). The NAHF is one of the initiatives laid out in the Roadmap report, which aims to increase employment and training opportunities as a pathway to ‘economic empowerment’ for Aboriginal people. The regional approach was touched on in the full report of the Service Priority review. It acknowledged:

Region-specific solutions may be needed when considering any changes to procurement processes. Solutions that specifically address procurement in the regions could include development of regional procurement hubs, which could be co-located with other government services (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2017b: 73).

A feature curiously lacking in the initial Barnett Government announcements regarding the potential closure of remote communities were services that would be provided for displaced residents. A common response was ‘major towns are already crowded, where are all the
people from the closed communities going to go?’ A lack of viable housing and short-stay accommodation, leading to homelessness for visitors, is already a significant issue in regional centres like Broome throughout Western Australia. In March 2019 the State Government announced the completion of the third short-stay accommodation facility in the State built to address this need (in Broome, with the former in Kalgoorlie and Derby). The State argued that those already existing facilities had provided ‘many thousands of bed nights and significantly reduced the number of people sleeping rough in the towns’ (Western Australian Government 2019a). When I spoke to Senator Dodson in 2017, however, he gave me the impression that he considered these temporary accommodation facilities to be something of a band aid solution. The Government’s response to the remote and regional housing shortage, he said, seemed to be to create short-stay accommodation facilities, not communities, with the intention that people will eventually be moved back into the mainstream housing market (pers.comm., March 2017). Of course, that assumes there are houses available to move into. The waiting list for a Homes West (public housing) house in Broome, he reminded me, ‘is bloody long’ (pers.comm., March 2017).

Other foci are apparent through an analysis of the State Government’s media statements over the period since the 2017 election. These include: investment in Aboriginal art and cultural programs (Western Australian Government 2018a), additional support programs to promote Aboriginal attendance in some of the remotest schools in the Kimberley (Western Australian Government 2018b), and across a number of centres in the Pilbara (Western Australian Government 2018c), and a twenty-million dollar contract to provide early intervention in-home support services to Aboriginal families, with the long-term goal of reducing the rates of Aboriginal children in state care (Western Australian Government 2018d). Sue Lines, Federal Labor Senator for Western Australia, raised this latter issue specifically, arguing that urgent intervention by the Western Australian Government was crucial:

---

118 While some of this investment package relates to Aboriginal arts projects in urban areas, nearly $40,000 has been awarded to a multimedia project that allows remote community residents to showcase their stories through the use of digital technology. It also includes close to $80,000 worth of investment that will benefit the art industries of Laverton, Leonora and surrounding communities. As previously discussed, investment in art and cultural centres can facilitate the growth of the customary sector of a remote community’s economy, lessening the long-term reliance on the government support.
[Sue Lines]: More recently [my focus has been] the number of Aboriginal children being taken at birth and being cared for in out of home care. The W.A. rate is sixteen percent higher than the national average, so there’s problems in W.A.

[Jasmin Korte]: Are there systemic issues that are leading to that?

[Sue Lines]: It stems from racism. That Aboriginal people are treated differently, in all of our systems, whether it’s the justice system or whether it’s child protection. Whatever system it is, Aboriginal people are judged more harshly and are focused on to a greater level than the non-Aboriginal population (pers.comm., October 2016).

The media statement announcing the successful tender of this contract explains that a consortium of four Noongar Aboriginal Community controlled organisations would provide the specialist care required, and were chosen through a process of ‘working closely with the Aboriginal community’ (Western Australian Government 2018d). The services are exclusively for the urban region, with no mention of similar services for Aboriginal families living in remote or regional areas. While the issue clearly needs to be addressed in the Perth metropolitan region (the area which likely contributes the highest percentage of children in care due to higher population numbers), other regions, particularly the Kimberley, are also in desperate need of support (Sue Lines, pers.comm., October 2016). Direct per capita Departmental expenditure from the Department of Child Protection and family support in the Kimberley and Pilbara in 2015 - 16 was $4377 and $3907 respectively. This is the fifth highest per capita service provision expenditure for any government department, behind the Department of Health, the Department of Education, the Housing Authority and the Department of Corrective Services (Regional Services Reform Unit 2017c). Indigenous children in the care of the Department of Child Protection and Family Support represented the following rate per thousand people: 18.15 in the West Kimberley; 20.35 in the Pilbara; and 23.90 in the East Kimberley 2017c: 39). I was unable to find corresponding figures

119 The four organisations are Ebenezer Home, Moorditj Koort, Coolabaroo Community Services and, taking the lead role, the Wungening Aboriginal Corporation (Western Australian Government 2018d).
pertaining to the rate of non-Indigenous children in care in those same regions, or similar figures for the Perth metropolitan region.

A Negotiated Coexistence

There is overlap between the State Government’s professed reform agenda and the suggestions for reform that have been put forward by scholars of Indigenous affairs. The two fundamental and interrelated barriers to improving Indigenous disadvantage pointed to by the literature are as follows: first, the complexity, often wasteful nature of and culture within government programs in the Indigenous affairs arena leads to ineffective implementation, short-term funding cycles and a lack of consistency (see Dillon & Westbury 2007: 50 - 83; 207 - 212; Sullivan 2011: 84 - 99; Moran 2016: 3; National Indigenous Radio Service 2016; Altman 2017; among others). Second, the lack of regional specificity stemming from the administration of Indigenous affairs policy from urban centres acts as a barrier to the voices of local Indigenous people being heard in the decision-making process (Sullivan 2011: 98 - 99; Moran 2016: 10 - 11; among others). These same issues were raised by an overwhelming number of those I interviewed. It would appear that despite the disparity in perspectives at a relatively surface level, a surprising number of politicians, bureaucrats, scholars and even activists agree on many of the fundamental pathways forward. These types of reforms, I argue, form part of a deeper narrative upon which my participants (and others) agree: that of a negotiated coexistence.

Nevertheless, tensions between the varying levels of Australian Governments continue, with the Federal Government seemingly running on a different trajectory to that of the Western Australian State Government (and away from the negotiating table). In late October 2017, for example, the Federal Government released a media statement responding to the Uluru Statement from the Heart. In response to the statement’s proposal of a constitutionally-enshrined Indigenous Advisory Council, they argued that they did ‘not believe such an addition to our national representative institutions is either desirable or capable of winning acceptance in a referendum’ (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2017). The Government also declared that Australia’s democracy is built on every citizen having equal civic rights, namely the right to vote in elections, and to stand for either House of
Parliament. The addition of a ‘constitutionally enshrined additional representative assembly for which only Indigenous Australians could vote for or serve in’, according to the Government, would contravene this fundamental democratic principle. It would also ‘inevitably’ lead to the assembly being seen as a ‘third chamber of Parliament’ (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2017). This response ignores the fact that prior to 1967 (and the amendment of section 51 and deletion of section 127), constitutionally-enshrined discrimination was a feature of the Australian democracy. It also ignores the multiple, layered understandings of the concept of equality, even within the relatively narrow area of liberal democratic thought. Responses from the Indigenous community were overwhelmingly negative. Phrases like ‘shock and heartbreak’ were widely-reported (Gordon 2017), and the manner in which the Government rejected the proposal was described as ‘a kick in the guts’ (Conifer et. al 2017) and ‘mean-spirited bastardry’ (Wahlquist 2017).

In 2011, Sullivan described what an Indigenous representative body might look like, and the Uluru Statement from the Heart envisaged something similar. A robust parliamentary joint committee, he argued, would provide a solution to the issues stemming from the poorly coordinated and over-centralised Commonwealth control of remote development (Sullivan 2011: 120). The model he proposed was a joint committee, reporting to both houses of Parliament and legislated to have defined functions. As there is no requirement that these committee members must be elected officials, Sullivan suggested that the executive of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples could comprise the committee in part or whole (2011: 121). He then suggested ‘more progressively still’, that a wholly-Indigenous committee, similar though broader in scope to that proposed by the Uluru Statement from the Heart, should be considered. He argued:

...an exclusively indigenous committee, with democratically-chosen representatives and all the power of parliamentarians, would be a strong innovative development in Australian constitutional arrangements for dealing with Aboriginal matters. It could evolve, effectively, into an Aboriginal chamber of Parliament, binding Indigenous people into the processes of Australian democracy while recognising their distinct needs (Sullivan 2011: 121).
Another example of the Federal return to paternalistic policy measures, and thus the bifurcation of ideological policy aims between the State and Federal layers of Government, is the Federal pursuit of the cashless debit card. Despite the criticisms that the policy ignores the evidence-based research (discussed in Chapter Four), in February 2018 the Federal Government began efforts to broaden the scope of the cashless debit card trial zones to encompass the rest of Australia. In the same month, the Close the Gap Steering Committee released a damning ten-year review of the Federal Government’s progress on the Close the Gap policy (Holland 2018). The review found that with regards to the Government’s aim to achieve health equality amongst Australia’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations by 2030, the Government had not yet achieved such parity and was unlikely to do so if the current course continued. Perhaps more damningly, the report argued that:

The Closing the Gap Strategy, a 25-year program, was effectively abandoned after five-years and so cannot be said to have been anything but partially implemented in itself. This is because the ‘architecture’ to support the Closing the Gap Strategy (national approach, national leadership, funding agreements) had unraveled [sic] by 2014 - 2015 (Holland 2018: 4).

Angry reactions from Indigenous community leaders, politicians and those engaged with the Indigenous health field were immediate (see Fitzpatrick 2018; Higgins & Connifer 2018; Morgan 2018). Western Australian Labor Senator Patrick Dodson, speaking to the media following the launch of the new report, expressed his frustration at the lack of change and achievement (cited in Morgan 2018). Speaking of prominent Australian footballer Michael Long, who in 2004 walked from Melbourne to Canberra to promote Indigenous issues, he said:

...[Michael Long] asked to be part of the solution. Now how long does it take for that to translate into policy? Into practice? Into delivering the kind of outcomes that we all want to see? (Patrick Dodson, cited in Morgan 2018).
In August 2018, after weeks of leadership speculation, the Federal Liberal Party spilled its leadership, installing Scott Morrison as the new Prime Minister and resulting in a number of portfolio changes. In the new Morrison-led Cabinet, Nigel Scullion remained Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs. To the disdain of some, Tony Abbott was appointed the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy on Indigenous Affairs. Following his appointment to the role, he hit the headlines both for ostensibly joking with a student in the remote community of Pukatja in South Australia by saying ‘thank you for putting up with the invasion’, and for suggesting that a police presence in remote community schools might increase rates of school attendance (see, for example, Dunlop 2018; Karvelas 2018). In January 2019, Nigel Scullion became the third Minister in a week to announce he would not recontest the upcoming election, essentially ending his political career.

This Chapter has canvassed the varying reform agendas recently pursued by the Western Australian Government, and described a third narrative in use in the discourse regarding Indigenous affairs policy issues today. This third narrative is one of a negotiated coexistence, and, while often employing similar language to that used throughout the self-determination era, is different in that there is a tangible recognition of the contemporary funding landscape throughout (one in which the Federal Government is no longer interested in providing the level of funding to support Indigenous residents living remotely as was the case in decades following the 1970s). It differs too, in that the era of normalisation relies heavily on a type of contractual individualism originating in Australia’s liberal democratic political framework but strengthened by the rise of new public management approaches to public policy. Mainstreaming of Government administration has led to a movement away from the formation and operation of Indigenous-specific institutions, and the movement towards Indigenous affairs policy machines housed within broader Government departments on both a State and Federal level. The narrative of negotiated coexistence is reflective of the fundamental tensions within the Australian state’s attempts to govern its Indigenous minority. There are many commonalities between the views expressed by those I interviewed, many of whom would consider themselves diametrically opposed to one another: the importance of Aboriginal voices being heard in the development of community

---

120 Tony Abbott was the Prime Minister that analogised remote community residence to a ‘lifestyle choice’ subsidised by Australian taxpayers.
programs (or co-design of services); the importance of place-based solutions and a shift away from the administration of Indigenous affairs from urban centres like Perth or Canberra; the importance of better designed service provision around the invariable remoteness of most of the State's remote communities; better coordination between government departments; and, overall, the failure of consecutive governments to address these challenges in a way that leads to better outcomes for the State's Aboriginal population. The Western Australian Government, now led by the Western Australian Labor Party, has continued to fund the Regional Services Reform Unit, now operating out of the recently-amalgamated Department of Communities. While there was a palpable feeling of hope within the Indigenous affairs realm following the landslide election in early 2017, and a number of policy steps have been taken to address some of the concerns highlighted by remote community residents throughout the former-Government’s consultation process, it may be years before their true impact can be analysed. It seems, however, that the State Government is currently more reflexive to the demands of its Indigenous minority than the Federal Government, with events such as the rejection of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and a number of damning reports on Federal Indigenous affairs policies spanning from income management to the Community Development Program to the Closing the Gap strategy. The new Government appears to have harnessed the first narrative well, arguing that the Federal Government ought not walk away from their previous funding commitments, and seemingly done so without rationalising policy decisions on the basis of social dysfunction, as was the case under the former Barnett-led Liberal Government. The politicisation of remote Indigeneity in the public sphere has compounded the political challenge of instituting policies that would improve service delivery to remote Aboriginal communities.

Apparently to augment the State Government’s narrative of reform, the following quote from the Henry Lawson poem ‘the Wanderer-Light’ began the final report to the Government of the Service Priority Review (tabled in December 2017):

Oh, my ways are strange ways and new ways and old ways,  
and deep ways and steep ways and high ways and low,  
I’m at home and at ease on a track that I know not,
Chaney (in Dillon & Westbury 2007: iv) points out that for those interested in Australian Indigenous affairs, it seems as though the only 'sustenance on offer' are the occasional and atypical improvements in specific, narrow areas such as health, employment and the reduction of violence. This demonstrates, he argues, that progress can be made, but overall they remain isolated examples. As Fletcher notes, the federation of Australia has a 'fragmented' system of Government (1992: xv). Despite the incremental progress of this State Government on some fronts, the administration of Indigenous affairs is a multi-layered and multi-sited process, and real structural or cultural change is unlikely unless it occurs across all levels of Australia’s federalist system. In the meantime, many Indigenous people in Western Australia continue to demonstrate agency in resolving these issues without Government assistance. What emerges from Indigenous people’s practice on the ground in remote communities, despite the intricate web of programs, policies and funding in which they must operate, is ‘surprisingly unpredictable, idiosyncratic and ad hoc, and often unexpectedly innovative’ (Moran 2016: 11). Indigenous people take opportunities when they present themselves, and adapt to the setbacks they endure. At the coalface, practice always outplays policy in the long run.

In February 2019, four years after the Australian Newspaper published the article reporting the high levels of Indigenous youth suicide that spurred the latest episode of public debate about remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia, another and all-together too-familiar article was published. Entitled ‘Trauma, Poverty Shaped Indigenous Youth Suicide Tragedies in Kimberley (Laurie & Taylor 2019)’, the article reported on the findings of a Western Australian coroner following a spate of suicides among Indigenous youth, highlighting Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), child sexual abuse, domestic violence and intergenerational trauma as contributing factors. In a manner reminiscent of and now seemingly indelible to narratives of Indigenous disadvantage in contemporary Australian discourse, the article ended by reinforcing the cyclical nature of the social problems that plague many remote Indigenous lifestyles, and offered no elucidation as to how this cycle might be broken. The point of departure from the situation four years prior lay in the Western Australian Government’s response to the issue; Premier McGowan, in
contrast to Premier Barnett, did not take the opportunity afforded by the media attention to cement a political agenda. Consequently, this article did not become the catalyst for another moral panic as its predecessor did in 2014. Several months later in May 2019, with little fanfare, the Western Australian State Government announced that it would accept all 86 recommendations of both the Coroner’s report and an Education and Health Standing Committee Inquiry (entitled Learnings from the Message Stick 2019) in the hope of finally lowering the unjustifiably high rate of Aboriginal youth suicide in remote parts of the State.
Chapter Seven
A Conclusion

When Western Australia Premier Colin Barnett stood before a crowd of child protection workers in 2014 and foreshadowed the potential closure of up to 150 of the State’s remote Aboriginal communities, he was likely unaware of the widespread effect his words would have. The announcement sent waves through the media, through Western Australia’s Parliament and through the remotest communities around the State, soon reaching Australia’s Federal Parliament, global media outlets, and eventually the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York. The prospect of community closures saw the rise of a near-unprecedented Indigenous-led social media campaign that incited activist rallies in New Zealand, and across the North American and European continents. Politicians, commentators, academics and Indigenous leaders weighed in on the public debate, while many remote community residents reported a palpable sense of anxiety. The pendulum of public opinion oscillated between debates regarding the role of taxpayer funds in ensuring the financial viability of remote living and reports of rampant child sexual abuse. Throughout this course of research, I spoke to many acquaintances who had a brother, sister, or cousin who had worked in a remote community: some of them parroted hearsay about drug and alcohol abuse, sexual abuse and domestic violence, while others venerated those Indigenous individuals, families and communities who had eschewed mainstream pressure to assimilate and created their own remote utopias. Many had little knowledge of the differences between discrete remote Indigenous communities, town-camps on the fringes of larger towns, or even large regional centres; more than once it emerged after a lengthy conversation that the ‘remote community’ in question was actually Port Hedland or Karratha. It may have been easy to assume that this distinct lack of understanding of the complexities of the State’s remote Aboriginal communities led to the ferocity of the debate. Strongly-cemented and vastly-contrasting perspectives could be heard too, however, from those heavily involved in and highly knowledgeable about the State’s remote communities.

Within the academy, the issue of remote community closures was absorbed into the wider, decades-old debate borne partly out of anthropologists’ efforts to conceptualise the increasing public attention afforded to the value and viability of remote communities. The
discourse was reflective and constitutive of a number of enduring themes in Indigenous affairs, while still thoroughly rooted in the current social and geopolitical context of the contemporary Australian settler state. This complex assemblage of interacting forces, I have termed the ‘remote community closure debate’, and this is what I have sought to analyse in this thesis.

My initial motivation for this course of research was twofold. First, I wanted to understand how and why a Government representative could announce the potential closure of up to 150 of the State’s remote Aboriginal communities: a proposition that, to me, seemed to be indicative of a radical departure from the policies advocating self-determination and self-management that had governed Indigenous affairs for the previous four decades. Second, I wanted to better understand the complexities at play within these types of policy debates in Australia. These complexities, I suspected, would account for the strongly-held and widely disparate views that I observed from the beginning of the remote community closure debate, and perhaps indicate why it is that Indigenous disadvantage remains so entrenched. In this thesis, then, I have examined what the differing perspectives on this proposal reveal about the values underpinning government policies towards Western Australia’s remote Aboriginal population.

In Chapter Two, I provided an overview of the historical shifts in Australian Indigenous affairs policy. Such policy has been continually transformed and revised over time, and complex interactions between varying state authorities have engendered the field with a tangible instability. Though often necessarily abstract, a number of scholars have endeavoured to chart these policy movements. It is, of course, impossible to accurately represent the scale and scope of Indigenous and non-Indigenous interactions across multiple settler colonies, and later, six States, two Territories and one Federal Government in any ‘schematic outline’, however, for the purpose of gaining a general understanding of the historical political processes at play I presented several.\(^\text{121}\) These approaches typically categorise Indigenous affairs policy into four (or sometimes five) ‘eras’: conflict and appropriation; protectionism, guardianship and segregation; assimilation and integration; self-determination and self-management; and finally, the new policy era that emerged and

\[^{121}\text{I borrowed the term ‘schematic outline’ from Sullivan (2011: 2).}\]
has been consolidated since the turn of the century, which many term ‘normalisation’. An interdependent Indigenous rights movement paralleled these policy shifts. This movement both shaped and was shaped by the predominant political and ideological paradigms of the day, with the most seismic shift occurring around the 1970s. Instead of Indigenous people demanding equal rights to their non-Indigenous counterparts based on their status as Australian citizens, unique or special rights were instead demanded on the basis of their status as a minority Indigenous population (a shift that could be conceptualised as moving from a ‘relational’ to a ‘criterial’ definition of Indigeneity (see Merlan 2009; 304 - 305; Trigger & Daly 2010: 46 - 47)). This shift reveals what is possibly the most fundamental tension inherent in the contemporary settler colonial Australian state’s attempts to locate and conceptualise its Indigenous population. Affording unique rights on the basis of Indigeneity necessitates the recognition of a level of difference; conversely, recognising an Indigenous citizen as ‘equal’ to their non-Indigenous counterpart necessitates, on some level, the erosion of this difference. Equality is central to the liberal democratic doctrine. The Australian state, guided by its liberalist underpinnings, is continually engaged in the process of negotiating the elimination of statistical inequality, on the one hand, and the maintenance of this essentialised difference on the other. The interdependency between the ideological themes that guide government policy and the Indigenous rights movement continues today, as is evident in contemporary Indigenous rights issues such as constitutional recognition and attempts to ‘close the gap’. In this chapter, I both established the broad shifts within Australian Indigenous affairs policy over the past two centuries and demonstrated that there are multiple competing themes that have continued to emerge throughout.

In Chapter Three, I analysed the complex relationship between public opinion, public policy and the media. To do so, I pointed to broader debates on a Federal level, and, in particular, the way in which media portrayals of remote Indigenous people have both constructed and been constructed by the contrasting perspectives on either side. Australia’s Indigenous minority represents less than three percent of the population. As such, many non-Indigenous Australians have little lived experience interacting with Indigenous people, rendering media representations powerfully formative. The way in which remote Indigenous communities were represented in the media throughout the remote community closure
debate had a number of parallels with media portrayals throughout the NTER; remote Indigenous people (particularly Indigenous men) were represented as an underlying societal risk, or a threat to societal values. Despite some ‘positive’ depictions of the average remote-dweller as a noble, ‘traditional’ warrior striving for the self-determined and self-made existence that past policy had promised, the more common portrayal was of a lazy, welfare-supported freeloader with substance abuse issues (at worst, perpetrating child sexual abuse). Both depictions were essentialised caricatures, and neither was helpful in broadening the Australian public’s understanding of the nuanced issues surrounding the State’s Aboriginal communities. Largely, the media portrayals throughout this period reinforced negative representations of Indigenous people as transgressors of societal norms. These representations provide fertile soil for governments to gain public support for policy decisions rationalised by narratives of social dysfunction.

There was a significant amount of media coverage afforded to the activist campaign against the proposed community closures, however recent literature questions whether activist-led social media campaigns, regardless of their reach, are able to concretely influence policy outcomes (Dreher, McCallum & Waller 2016: 24). Though it may seem counterintuitive given the rise of digital media platforms and the new channels of communication they open, the ability of the Indigenous population to influence public policy remains constrained. This is due, in large part, to the continued negative media representations and the marginalised position they already occupy within the contemporary Australian state. Indigenous affairs in Australia emerges from this discussion as a complex web of ‘intractable policy disputes’: those issues in which actors narrate firmly-held agendas with the intention of influencing the news media and, therefore, policy outcomes (Schön & Rein, cited in McCallum, Waller & Meadows 2012: 2013).

The economic viability and sustainability of remote communities, too, is an issue that has attracted a number of vastly contrasting perspectives. The Western Australian State Government rationalised the need to close remote Aboriginal communities on the basis of their financial unviability in the face of diminishing fiscal support from the Federal Government. In Chapter Four, I argued that the question at the heart of this issue is whether or not the benefits promoted by remote communities outweigh the challenges inherent in
funding them. This invariably depends on whether or not broader Australia ‘values’ remote Indigeneity (and how this ‘value’ is determined). Without a doubt, the remoteness of many discrete Aboriginal communities presents significant challenges for government service delivery (particularly in Western Australia, given its size). A number of participants emphasised these difficulties, however most framed their responses with regards to the (varying levels of) government’s responsibility to find a way to adequately deliver services in spite of them. I argue that Australia’s liberalist underpinnings guide the way in which government (and broader society) conceptualise ‘equality’ as individuals’ rights before the state, a tradition evident in contemporary public discourse and in the comments made by my participants. The recent paradigm shift away from self-determination and towards normalisation follows a global trend of settler-society governance in which a new form of liberalism has redefined the relationship between the individual and the state. This new ‘contract’, if you will, borne out of New Public Management approaches to public policy, entails a greater focus on the individual and encourages a certain type of bureaucratic culture and structure (including whole-of-government service delivery, the mainstreaming of government services and a focus on the paradigms of ‘shared’ or ‘mutual’ responsibility). Mainstreaming government services, in an Australian context, has led to a greater financial responsibility resting on the State Governments (Sullivan 2011), a trend that has been clearly demonstrated by the Federal Government’s gradual withdrawal of funding from a number of areas of remote service delivery.

These themes are evident within scholarly discourse, which I analyse in Chapter Five. Since the mid-to-late nineties, the debate has grown in intensity, become increasingly polarised, and focused with increasing scrutiny on the residents of remote Aboriginal communities. Anthropologists have engaged with this debate as they work to interpret and respond to this unprecedented public interest: an Australian iteration of what some have termed the ‘culture wars’ debate. The increasing amplification of the voices of several politically conservative commentators and some prominent anthropologists has led to an emphasis on the centrality of disadvantage of remote Indigenous communities. This rising focus on disadvantage contrasts sharply with the prominence of tropes regarding self-determination and self-management of the previous decades. While those within the academy have largely distinguished between the need to address genuine challenges associated with remote
service delivery, and the widely-reported issues of social dysfunction including the sexual abuse of children, this distinction is not as defined in the broader public discourse. This has led to a general pathologising of remote community residents, particularly men. That such barriers to service delivery are often discussed interchangeably with issues of social dysfunction is reflective of a number of things: the increasing ferocity of the public and political debate, the rise and amplification of specific, prominent conservative voices and media portrayals of remote Indigenous residents. My participants are broadly representative of the field in which this debate played out, and the conflation of these issues was apparent in some of their statements. It appeared to me that many, whether knowingly or unknowingly, had internalised the pathologisation of remote community residents.

The smaller Aboriginal communities are simply not viable. They cannot provide education. They cannot provide health. They cannot provide employment. They are not viable. And the social outcomes and the abuse and neglect of young children are a disgrace to this State (Barnett, C. 2014, Legislative Assembly: 8031).

In Chapters Four and Five, I analyse the two rationalities articulated by the State Government as to why such a vast number of Western Australia’s remote Aboriginal communities might be closed. Government rationalities, as seen from a governmentality perspective, are forms of ‘reasoned discourse’ about how to govern (as described by Savage 2013: 86, ways of ‘justifying’ governance). First, as is commonplace due to the influence of neoclassical economics, the closure of remote communities was rationalised in economic terms on the basis that the State Government did not have the means to replace the funding for essential and municipal services previously provided by the Federal Government. Second, an argument was also asserted which framed the State’s remote Aboriginal communities as sites of social transgression, most notably with regards to the widely-reported instances of child sexual abuse. These two rationalities were not necessarily mutually-exclusive; many of those I interviewed, in accounting for the Government’s behaviour, articulated one, both, or a combination of the two.

122 I am by no means implying that concerns regarding the sexual abuse of children are not genuine. Substantiated accusations should, of course, be investigated by appropriate means. What I emphasis here is the way in which child sexual abuse has seemingly become almost characteristic of ‘remote Aboriginal communities’ in the public discourse.
These first four chapters demonstrated the divarication of perspectives throughout the remote community closure debate, and that these perspectives were reflective of the contrasting values present in broader debates regarding Indigenous affairs policy. These contrasting perspectives were indicative of the lack of consensus that exists amongst the Australian population with regards to the ‘value’ of remote Indigenous communities in particular, and the concept of remote Indigeneity more broadly.

In Chapter Six, I shifted the focus away from the large disparity in these opinions, perspectives and values to focus on the common ground between them. This common ground, comprising of a genuine good will, broad agreement on the desired outcomes of Indigenous affairs policy and many similar sentiments to those expressed throughout the era of self-determination (albeit fundamentally altered given the contemporary socio-political context of Australia) forms the basis of a third discernible narrative: negotiated coexistence. Throughout the course of this research, the two most fundamental barriers to improving Indigenous disadvantage identified by the literature, by those that I interviewed, and by various government institutions were as follows. First, the complex, often wasteful nature of, and culture within, government programs in the Indigenous affairs arena leads to ineffective implementation, short-term funding cycles and a lack of consistency. Second, the lack of policy rooted in and contextualised for the specific target area, stemming from the administration of Indigenous affairs policy out of distant urban centres. Despite the disparity in perspectives at a relatively surface level, a surprising number of activists, politicians, bureaucrats and scholars agree that addressing these aforementioned issues would lead to better outcomes. Progress on achieving these cited outcomes, however, has been a slow march, as I demonstrate through an analysis of contemporary Indigenous affairs policy initiatives in this chapter. Tension between the varying layers of government continues, as is evident in the current state of affairs between the State Government of Western Australia and the Federal Government of Australia, who appear to be on divergent paths. While the State Government has made incremental (albeit cautious) steps towards implementing certain reforms, the Federal Government has presided over a swathe of reimagined paternalistic policies and has failed to make progress on many contemporary negotiations, particularly with regards to the issue of constitutional recognition of

Hinkson & Vincent (2018: 244) view the issues outlined within this thesis as another set of divergent developments. On the one hand, they argue, the new policy era (that they identify as being characterised by heightened government interference in Indigenous people’s lives), has led to a rise in the rate of incarceration amongst the Indigenous population and therefore, deepening social exclusion. On the other hand, the Government has sponsored and facilitated a movement towards Constitutional recognition of Indigenous people, promising ‘respectful inclusion of Indigenous peoples as a polity’. Fisher (2012: 72) frames this tension in another way, arguing that there is a ‘paradoxical conjoining of governmental efforts...to divest the state of responsibility for governmental praxis’ while simultaneously amplifying ‘police powers and new legal and territorial forms of social stratification’.

Northern Australia, he argues, has not escaped this articulation of ‘liberal and illiberal’. Nor, I argue, has Western Australia. Hinkson & Vincent argue these agendas have been pursued in tandem rather than in tension; I argue that the presence of these concurrent developments, like the divergence in the ideological impetus of the current State and Federal Governments, is reflective of the fundamental and on-going tensions in the way in which the Australian nation state governs its Indigenous minority.

Moran (2016: 178) has argued that Indigenous affairs policy in Australia operates in four ways: it purges, swings, mimics and contradicts. First, and most importantly here, it purges. That is to say, new policy typically serves to discredit that which came before it. That this is the case is evident when analysing speeches made by politicians at the outset of a policy shift. Citing Vanstone (2005), Sullivan (2011: 34) argues, for example, that the Howard era introduction of ‘normalising’ policies was founded on ‘a strong tendency among Government Ministers to reject what had gone before it as misguided, politically suspect, wasteful and corrupt.’ Mosse (2004: 658 - 661), too, argues that past policies in the development space are easily conceptualised as having failed. This conceptualisation functions to distinguish new policy from old policy. Future policy is therefore positioned in opposition to this past, failed policy; future policy cannot be ‘failed’ in the same way as it is
yet untested. If we accept that political opinions such as these filter down into public discourse, it is reasonable to assume that the broader Australian public is largely disaffected by what must appear like cyclically-failing policy. Prior to the dissolution of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the shift towards ‘normalisation’ and a rising scholarly and public debate revolved around remote Indigenous disadvantage, the values underlying policy decisions in Indigenous affairs and the corresponding discourse centred on self-determination and self-management; ‘choice’, if we are to return to Sanders’s ‘competing principles’ (2009; 2014). The era of self-determination was, in and of itself, a reaction to the previous era of assimilation which by the 1970s was assumed to have been a failure (due in large part to the influence of the international Indigenous rights movement and intellectuals such as C. D. Rowley & H. C. Coombs (Kowal 2008: 339). Bearing this in mind, and understanding the way in which the branding of past policy as a ‘failure’ functions to facilitate the introduction of new policy (Mosse 2004: 658 - 661; Sullivan 2011: 34; Moran 2016: 178), I suggest that the increasing centrality of remote Indigenous disadvantage in public and political debates over the past two decades has been part of a necessary (and to be expected) denouncement of the self-determination era.

The self-determination era ended, in the minds of many, with the abolition of ATSIC in 2004 (see, for example, Anderson 2007). This was reinforced by a swath of subsequent policies at a Federal level that some have termed ‘protectionist’, while others have described the new era of ‘normalising’ policies as indicative of a return to, or new iteration of, the assimilation era. Normalisation is part of a broader vein of new-age liberalism, common to settler colonial nations around the world (often termed ‘late’ or ‘advanced’ liberalism, or ‘third-way politics’). This political mantra saw the rise of the focus on a particular type of individual: one that shares a mutual responsibility with government to create a safer broader community (Giddens 1998; 2000; Pearson 2000; 2009: 253 - 257; Rose 2000; Kowal 2008: 342; Sullivan 2011: 76 - 77). Whole of government approaches, mainstreaming of government services, shared responsibility agreements and mutual obligations became commonplace, and are now firmly cemented in policy discourse and practice. The dust has now settled on the new era of Indigenous affairs policy in Australia.
Despite this shift, many of the key terms and much of the specific language employed throughout the self-determination era still features in Australian Indigenous affairs discourse. Notwithstanding its waning prominence as a policy construct, self-determination continues to represent the social practice through which Aboriginal people collectively organise (Anderson 2007: 138). Unwaveringly, politicians and activists continue to talk about the importance of bringing Indigenous voices to the table, the importance of consultation, and of Indigenous designed, led and managed solutions. I discussed examples of my participants’ use of these phrases in Chapters Three to Six. How is it, then, that the core practices in Indigenous affairs policy have shifted so vastly and so quickly away from employing these values? I would suggest some of the deep frustration felt by the Australian Indigenous community specifically, and the Australian public more generally, is because of this disconnect between the language used and the actual policies implemented.

Second, policy swings back and forth, with old policies being rebranded as new ones at intervals of several decades (Moran 2016: 178). That similar themes underlie the policies that come and go within Indigenous affairs is evident from my discussion in Chapter Two, and my analysis of scholars such as Sanders (2008; 2009; 2014). Given the ubiquity of the same competing principles and the vast historical archive of different approaches, it is unlikely that any truly ‘new’ policy directions will emerge in Australian Indigenous affairs (that do not incorporate some level of former approaches). Stability is undermined when policies and programs change with such rhythmic consistency.

Third, policy mimics. By this, Moran (2016: 179) means that policies that have proven successful in one specific area are often mainstreamed and standardised across other areas without due consideration of the differing historical and sociocultural circumstances. This outcome invariably becomes more common when the formulation of Indigenous affairs policy occurs in urban centres, far removed from the setting in which the policies will be implemented. The increased influence of New Public Management approaches, which advocate mainstreaming and vertical bureaucratic chains of command, has likely further exacerbated this trend.
Finally, policy contradicts. Policies overlap and duplications exist, and additionally, even the cited goals often contradict one another. As Moran (2016: 177; see also Fletcher 1992) reminds us, ‘Indigenous affairs’ is a labyrinth of policies, programs, government and non-government organisations, the Indigenous sector and private companies, all working towards the goal of ameliorating Indigenous disadvantage but differing vastly when it comes to their methods of doing so. Generally, programs are targeted at a population as opposed to an individual or household, which can result in a ‘confusing and often ineffective blended assemblage which pulls people in divergent directions simultaneously’ (2016: 181). There is a general consensus with regards to the outcomes that should be achieved in the realm of Indigenous affairs, and some of the methods that should be employed in order to achieve them (better and more specifically-targeted programs, the elimination of duplication across all sectors, local Indigenous voices being heard in the initial formation of policy and programs, for example). These are not new concepts, however, and have been tried and tested in various ways at various times, with little noticeable progress towards ameliorating Indigenous disadvantage overall.

Policies that few would term ‘bottom up’, such as the introduction of the cashless welfare card, have been rebranded as though they are of solely Indigenous origin. In (then) Prime Minister Turnbull’s annual Closing the Gap address for 2018, for example, he discussed the cashless debit card in terms of its success in those communities that had actively campaigned for it. The government, from this perspective, was simply enabling the introduction of a strategy for the reduction of disadvantage that had been designed and encouraged by Indigenous communities themselves. While there is no doubt that there are many Indigenous community members around Australia who have been open to trialling this and other income management strategies, support for its continual use and broader roll-out is far from uniform, constant or even bipartisan. Its underpinnings are broadly protectionist: recall Sanders’s (2009: 8) characterisation of the guardianship principle in Indigenous affairs as ‘entering public policy when, for one reason or another, governments believe that certain people within their jurisdictions are not competent judges of their own best interests’. That Indigenous people in the cashless welfare card trial zones cannot judge their own best interests in the eyes of the government could not be more clearly crystallised than with the quarantining of some of their incomes so that it is not spent on alcohol. There
are, however, those that have advocated for the cashless welfare card. So, is this characterisation of a particular policy still relevant if some Indigenous people themselves have championed it? The lack of place-based, locally-driven solutions is not only due to the administration of Indigenous affairs policy from urban centres. The ‘culture wars’ debate has seen the rise of a number of specific ‘authentic Indigenous voices’ (see Kowal 2015: 122 - 124), which are afforded far more influence over the direction of Indigenous affairs policy than others (Dreher, McCallum & Waller 2016: 26).

I put the following question to Ben Wyatt, State Treasurer and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs at the conclusion of our interview in May 2017:

Last question...a bit of an academic one. There’s been a lot of political, public and academic debate in the last decade about what people have called the ‘failure of the self-determination era.’ Do you think that the self-determination era is over? And if so, what do you think is going to replace it?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Wyatt framed his response around the Federal Government’s dissolution of ATSIC in 2004 (as others have done: see, for example Sullivan 2011: 1; Kowal 2015: 160; Peterson & Myers 2016: 193). As noted throughout, the self-determination era was characterised by, among other things, a proliferation of funding for and the emergence of Indigenous-specific institutions (ATSIC being perhaps the most prominent of these institutions). It is for this reason that many propose its dissolution as the event which marked the beginning of the new era of ‘normalisation’. ATSIC was also ideologically congruent with the era of self-determination because of the role it played as a vehicle for Indigenous voices to be heard within government decision-making processes. While Wyatt acknowledged that there were genuine issues with the leadership within ATSIC at the time, he was of the opinion that dismantling it without a replacement was comparable to ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’ (Ben Wyatt, pers.comm., May 2017).

Discussing future engagement with the State’s remote Aboriginal communities, he continued:
We do have an opportunity to create...a better mechanism for those voices to be heard. So in response to your academic question, and I guess [this] is a very high level response, but at the moment, I don’t think Aboriginal people feel as though there is a process to deliver self-determination on the key service areas of government (Ben Wyatt, pers.comm., May 2017).

The feedback from the Regional Services Reform Unit’s consultation process reinforced this perspective. On the topic of ‘leadership’ the RSRU’s report conveyed that ‘community leaders also highlighted the right to self-determination for their people...communities want to partner with government to design solutions to the issues residents face’ (Regional Services Reform 2017a; 12). Given the lack of achievement on the front of a constitutionally-enshrined Indigenous voice in Federal or State Parliament, and given the lack of any real replacement for the past functions performed by ATSIC: the ‘failure’ of the self-determination era appears to have less to do with the failure of such a concept to deliver the results that Indigenous Australians (and the broader community) were hoping to achieve, and more to do with an inability to achieve self-determination in the first place.

Of course, ‘self-determination’ can be measured in a multitude of ways (see, for example, Kowal 2008: 340). The fact that there are so many remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia is, in and of itself, a testament to the existence and profound influence of the paradigms of the era. But surely, the ‘self’ in ‘self-determination’ necessitates the centrality of Indigenous perspectives on the issue. Fundamentally, the formula by which the self-determination era should be measured should not be based on the existence of legislated vehicles by which Indigenous voices can participate in government decision-making processes, or by the number of remote communities scattered throughout the country, nor the number of Indigenous designed, led and managed programs. What should matter is whether Indigenous people themselves feel heard by those in positions of power. If this is the metric, judging by the perspectives of many participants, the self-determination era was indeed a failure.

There are contrasting values within the fractious Indigenous affairs arena that underlie the various positions individuals took throughout the remote community closure debate, and
continue to take on the issues relating to Australia’s remote Indigenous population. These contrasting values are largely reflective of the fundamental tensions inherent in the Australian nation state’s attempts to interact with and govern its Indigenous minority. Irrespective of these contrasting values, it is clear that there is surprising similarity in the intent and desire for change across the political and ideological spectrum. It may be possible to put this intent and desire for change down to those I interviewed engaging in the new narrative of negotiated coexistence. The similarities go further, however; it was both a moving and somewhat startling experience to hear those that I interviewed repeat similar phrases and tropes, despite their self-identified politically-adversarial perspectives. Perhaps it is the lived experience of being a politician, a policy-maker or an activist that makes it more difficult for one to see or acknowledge these convergences. Common ground, one would expect, is hard to glean when the individuals throughout the field identify so strongly with such polarising subjectivities. To return to Robbins’s (1994: 56) suggestion that the West could learn from societies that place paramount value on equality, perhaps we do indeed need to take a more relational approach to the production, administration and implementation of Indigenous affairs. Rather than simply conceptualising the viability and sustainability of remote communities with regards to what the government owes Indigenous groups and what Indigenous groups owe the government, the focus should be on what we, as individual Australians, owe each other. This approach would not simply entail the re-examination of what Indigenous people are owed by the (mostly) white bureaucrats who make decisions that will affect their lives, but also what those same (mostly) white bureaucrats owe each other. Similarly, what we scholars of Indigenous affairs owe each other, as the frustration at the lack of movement on ameliorating Indigenous disadvantage grows. As the old adage goes, we are all in this together. Surely by now we are tired of the infighting, the butting of heads and the false binaries that bifurcate us into ideological camps. After over two hundred years of getting it wrong, perhaps the key to getting it right is to eschew the (at times) overwhelming rhetoric of difference, both in policy direction and motivations, and focus on the clear mutual desire for change.
Appendix One: Timeline of Events

Often-cited ‘Eras’ of Indigenous Affairs Policy in Australia

1. Assertion of sovereignty - 1930s: Era of protectionism, guardianship and segregation (sometimes delineated into two eras, with the former titled ‘conflict and appropriation’).
2. 1930s - 1970s: Era of assimilation.

The Remote Community Closure Debate: A Selected Timeline

30th June, 2005
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) is abolished, heralding a new era in the administration of Indigenous affairs policy.

15th June, 2007
Release of the Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle 'Little Children are Sacred' report.

24th of June, 2007
Commencement of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), also termed 'the Intervention'.

September, 2014
Prime Minister Tony Abbott announces that the Federal Government was to withdraw funding for essential and municipal services to remote Indigenous communities.

8th November, 2014
Article regarding the high levels of remote Indigenous youth suicide published in the Weekend Australian newspaper.

10th November, 2014
Premier Barnett responds to the Weekend Australian’s article at a child protection function, flagging the potential closure of some remote Aboriginal communities.
11th November, 2014

A subsequent article was published in the Australian newspaper, featuring Premier Barnett’s comments.

12th November, 2014

The issue of the potential closure of remote Aboriginal communities is raised in State Parliament.

13th, 20th November, 2014

State Parliamentary debate continues.

17th, 18th November, 2014

Debate regarding potential closure of remote Aboriginal communities is raised in Federal Parliament.

10th March, 2015

Prime Minister Tony Abbott makes headlines by commenting that the Australian taxpayer should not have to subsidise the ‘lifestyle’ choices of remote community residents.

11th March, 2015

Nelson Bieundurry posts angry response to Abbott’s comments on Facebook, prompting a number of Indigenous women from the Kimberley to begin campaigning online under the banner of SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA

19th March, 2015

Premier Barnett addresses crowd of protesters outside of Parliament House in Perth, Western Australia, while concurrent rallies occur around the country.

1st May, 2015

Rallies continue across Australian cities and towns, with concurrent rallies occurring in Los Angeles, Berlin, Christchurch and London.

Mid-May, 2015

The Western Australian Government, seemingly in response to the mounting pressure of the rallies and the associated media scrutiny, launches the Regional Services Reform Unit.

14th July, 2016

The RSRU releases its first ‘Roadmap’ report.

11th March, 2017

A State election is held, in which the Barnett Government is defeated by the largest margin in Western Australian history.
28th April, 2017  The newly-elected government announces the ‘Machinery of Government’ changes, in which the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was to be abolished and its functions assumed by the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the newly-amalgamated Department of Communities.

29th August, 2017  The newly-elected State Government hands down an interim report of the Service Priority Review, which solidified assumptions that the RSRU would continue operations (from within the Department of Communities).

September & October, 2017  The RSRU releases several reports relating both to the outcome of its consultation agenda, and mapping service expenditure throughout regional Western Australia.

June 2018  The State Government launches the ‘Don’t Walk Away’ campaign to dissuade the Federal Government from withdrawing funding for remote housing.

8th December, 2018  The State Government reluctantly accepts a $121 million dollar one-off payment from the Commonwealth for remote housing, arguing negotiations for a new long-term funding agreement remain on the table.
Appendix Three: List of Participants

A Selected Personal and Professional History (Alphabetically, by Surname)

1. Back, Chris

Chris Back is a former Federal Liberal Senator for Western Australia. Originally from Perth, he worked as a veterinarian in various regional locations across Australia prior to entering Federal politics in 2009. He was the first veterinarian to serve in the Senate of the Federal Parliament. In late 2015 Back was involved in several debates on the floor of Parliament regarding the potential closure of Western Australia’s remote communities. Back explained to me that it was his history of interacting with Aboriginal people, particularly through growing up and later working in the rural Wheatbelt region of Western Australia, which had sustained his interest in the issue of the State’s remote communities. Chris Back is the Uncle of another participant, James Back (see below). Chris Back resigned from Parliament in July, 2017.

2. Back, James

James Back’s professional background is in the fields of education and health, having lived in the remote community of Punmu and worked extensively with the Martu community in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. In Punmu, he held various roles as a health practitioner and school teacher, and later became principal of Rawa Remote Community School. As Back told me, he is therefore ‘both personally and professionally invested in the Indigenous space, and attaining better outcomes and a more harmonious State.’ He has gone on to hold other roles within the realm of Indigenous affairs in Western Australia. James Back is the nephew of former Western Australian Liberal Senator, Chris Back.

3. Barnett, Colin

Colin Barnett served as Premier of Western Australia from 2008 to 2017, and was in office throughout the period in which debates surrounding potential remote community closures entered public debate. Holding a Masters in economics from the University of Western Australia, Barnett worked as a researcher, economist and lecturer prior to entering politics.
as a member of the Liberal Party in 1990. While in office, he served as Leader of the Opposition and held various front-bench portfolios, including the Treasury. Following the election defeat in March 2017 (which represented the most significant election loss in Western Australian history), Barnett resigned from Parliament in February 2018.

4. **Bergman, Wayne**

Wayne Bergmann is a Nyikina man from the West Kimberley, with traditional connections to Fitzroy River and Beagle Bay. He has spent his professional life in the Aboriginal affairs space, as he described to me, ‘advocating for the wellbeing of Kimberley Aboriginal people, and the recognition of their rights’. Having originally worked as a boiler maker, he subsequently gained qualifications in the fields of law and business. He has held numerous leadership positions across the Kimberley, including as CEO of the Kimberley Land Council, and is now the CEO of KRED Enterprises, the income-generation branch of the larger Ambooriny Burru Charitable Foundation.

5. **‘Brett’**

‘Brett’ is a Western Australian politician who chose not to release his identity.

6. **Chaney, Fred**

Fred Chaney AO is a former Liberal Member of both the Federal Senate and House of Representatives. Prior to entering politics, Chaney practiced law as a barrister and was involved with the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia for a number of years in the early 1970s. While in Parliament, he held several Ministerial positions including Minister for Aboriginal Affairs from 1978 - 1980. After retiring from politics in 1993, Chaney has worked within the field of Indigenous affairs policy in numerous capacities, including serving on the National Native Title Tribunal from 1994 - 2007 and as Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia from 2000 - 2005 (and later as a board member of Reconciliation WA). In 1997 he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia, and in 2014 was named the Senior Australian of the Year.
7. **Chapple, Robin**

Robin Chapple is a current sitting Member for the Mining and Pastoral Region in the Western Australian Legislative Council. He is a member of the Greens Western Australia, and is the Western Australian spokesperson for the party on Aboriginal issues (in addition to other issues such as climate change, mines and petroleum and waste management). Along with another participant, Sarah George (see below), Chapple has been heavily involved in the Greens's anti-community closures campaign, *Home is Heritage*. Originally from Britain, Chapple's roles in the fields of engineering and surveying led to him spending time in remote Indigenous communities, particularly in the Central Desert. Chapple told me that his perspective on this issue is borne out of his many years of working to understand and comprehend the relationship between Indigenous people and their country. He was first elected to Parliament in 2001.

8. **Collier, Peter**

Peter Collier is a current sitting Liberal Member of the Western Australian Legislative Council, representing the North Metropolitan region. Collier's professional background is in the field of education, having taught at various schools across the Perth metropolitan area. Entering politics in 2005, Collier was State Minister for Aboriginal Affairs from 2010 until the change of Government following the 2017 election. He is currently the State Shadow Minister for Housing and Disability Services.

9. **Dinnison, Melissa**

Melissa Dinnison is a woman of Wiradjuri descent from Perth, Western Australia. She holds a degree in political science and currently works in the public service in Western Australia. She has personal experience with intergenerational trauma, as her mother is a member of the Stolen Generations. Dinnison was one of the complainants in the Human Rights Commission case against the Australian Newspaper, following the cartoon regarding remote Aboriginal parenting published by satirist Bill Leak. Dinnison has recently begun a subsequent degree in the field of law.
10. **Dodson, Patrick (Pat)**

Patrick Dodson is a current sitting Federal Labor Senator for Western Australia. Dodson is a Yawuru man who lives in Broome in the West Kimberley region of Western Australia. Although he later left the priesthood, in 1975 Dodson was ordained as Australia’s first Aboriginal Catholic priest. He was the founding Chairman for the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation* (later *Reconciliation Australia*), and has played a significant role in facilitating land rights negotiations across the country through his work. Dodson was also a Commissioner for the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991). After joining the *Labor Party*, he was appointed to fill a casual vacancy in the Australian Senate in 2016, and retained his seat in the subsequent election.

11. **George, Sarah**

Working alongside Robin Chapple (see above), Sarah George is an activist who has been heavily involved in the *Western Australian Greens Party’s* anti-community closure campaign, *Home is Heritage*. George described herself to me as a campaigner for human rights, and said that what attracted her to the issue of remote community closures was that she perceived a certain unfairness in the way one group (Indigenous people) were being treated differently to the rest of the Australian population.

12. **Gray, Wilfred (Bill)**

Bill Gray is a former senior Australian public servant specialising in the area of Indigenous affairs. Through his role as a government official (his role was then called a ‘patrol officer’) in the Northern Territory, Gray witnessed the early days of the homelands movement firsthand from the 1960s onwards. Later, Gray worked as the Secretary of the Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs from 1988 - 1990, before becoming the inaugural CEO of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)* (from 1990 - 1991). He is now retired and lives in rural Australian Capital Territory.

13. **Graysmark, John**
John Graysmark was a former Australian policeman who worked in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Originally from Pinjarra, Western Australia (an area that has a comparatively high Aboriginal population to other areas of suburban Perth), Graysmark worked in the railway workshops in Midland before entering the police force in the early 1950s. He was stationed in Pinjarra and Mandurah before being transferred to Derby in 1958, and later worked in a number of offices across the Kimberley region (including Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing and Broome). In 1967 Graysmark was injured on the job, having both his legs broken as he attempted to control a riot. After retirement he resettled in Mandurah, south of Perth, Western Australia, where he had worked as a policeman decades earlier. Graysmark passed away suddenly in June, 2017 (just several months after I had interviewed him). An article published in the local paper following his funeral was entitled, ‘Mandurah Farewell’s the City’s First Policeman’.

14. ‘Heather’

‘Heather’ is a Western Australian politician who chose not to release her identity.

15. Keogh, Matt

Matt Keogh is the current sitting Federal Labor Member for Burt, an electorate covering the south-eastern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. Growing up in suburbs now within his Federal electorate, Keogh completed a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Law from Notre Dame University. After graduation, he worked in Government within the field of social policy at a State level, and went on to practice law for over a decade. In 2005 he became the youngest ever President of the Law Society of Western Australia. He was elected to Federal Parliament in 2016.

16. King, Madeleine

Madeleine King is the current sitting Federal Labor Member for the electorate of Brand, which covers a large swathe of Perth’s southern suburbs. At the onset of this course of research, King was my local member. King was born and grew up in the southern suburbs, which, incidentally, makes her the first representative of Brand who grew up within the
electorate. Prior to entering politics King practiced as a solicitor, and was also the COO of the \textit{Perth USAsia Centre} (a think-tank dedicated to strengthening the relationships between Australia, the United States of America and countries in the Asia-Pacific region). She was elected to Federal Parliament in 2016, and became a Labor front-bencher in June, 2018.

17. \textbf{Knight, Alex}

Alex Knight is the Manager of the Land and Culture Program at the Ngaanyatjarra Council, an Indigenous incorporated body representing the traditional owners of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands in eastern Western Australia, along the South Australian border. The council’s jurisdiction encompasses a number of remote communities, including Kiwirrkurra (sometimes referred to as ‘the remotest community in Australia’), Irrunytju and Warburton. Knight holds a Bachelor of Agricultural Sciences from the University of Adelaide and a Masters in Aboriginal Studies from the University of South Australia.

18. \textbf{Lane, Paul}

Paul Lane is a director of The Kimberley Institute: a think-tank located in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The Kimberley Institute is a not-for-profit organisation operating since 2008 that aims to assist and facilitate in undertaking and applying research and political engagement, and developing and applying policy. Lane has lived and worked in the Kimberley region for the past forty years, primarily within and on behalf of Aboriginal organisations.

19. \textbf{Lines, Sue}

Sue Lines is a current Federal Labor Senator for Western Australia. Lines told me she considered herself to have been politically-active for most of her adult life, having joined the Labor Party as a mature-aged student at university. Lines has been a member of trade union \textit{Uniting Voice} since the late 1980s, and was in the role of Assistant National Secretary prior to entering Parliament. She assumed office in 2013, and since 2016 has held the role of Deputy President of the Senate.
20. **MacTiernan, Alannah**

Alannah MacTiernan is the current Western Australian State Minister for Regional Development, as well as Agriculture and Food and Ports. MacTiernan told me that she had engaged with Aboriginal people from childhood, and, in high school, represented an organisation involved in promoting Indigenous self-determination. In the late 1970s she worked for the Federal Government in the field of Aboriginal employment. MacTiernan was a Member of the State Parliament from 1993 - 2010, and was involved in a number of large-scale infrastructure projects including the establishment of the Public Transport Authority. After serving one term as the Federal Member for Perth, MacTiernan returned to State politics in 2017 as a Member for the Legislative Council representing the North Metropolitan region, and was appointed a front-bench Minister in the newly-elected McGowan Labor Government.

21. **McBain, John**

John McBain is the Western Australian coordinator of activist group ANTaR (previously Australian’s for Native Title and Recognition). ANTaR's statement of purpose is 'to engage, educate and mobilise a broad community movement to advocate for justice, rights and respect for Australia's First Peoples.' In addition to this activism, McBain has associations with the Ngarluma area in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, and has previously worked for the Australian Government in the collection of census data in remote regions. He lives in Perth, Western Australia.

22. **McMeeken, Krista**

Krista McMeekan is a Noongar woman and practicing solicitor living and working in Perth, Western Australia. Originally from Esperance (a town on the south coast of Western Australia), McMeekan studied law at the University of Western Australia and was recently awarded the title of the Law Society of Western Australia’s Legal Practitioner of the Year. McMeekan is a council or board member of an array of different organisations relating to
promoting outcomes in the field of Indigenous affairs, including the Museum for Freedom & Tolerance (WA) and the Western Australian Aboriginal Advisory Council.

23. Morton, Helen

Helen Morton was a Western Australian politician in the peak of the remote community closure debate. Prior to entering politics, Morton was a practicing occupational therapist and an executive in the health field. Elected to the State’s Legislative Council as a representative of the East Metropolitan region in 2005, she served as Minister for Mental Health and Disability Services in 2010, and also gained the portfolio of Child Protection in 2013. Along with Terry Redman (then Minister for Regional Development), Morton was the initial Ministerial figurehead of the Barnett Government’s Regional Services Reform Unit. In March 2016, a Cabinet reshuffle saw Morton lose her portfolios. After serving as a backbencher for one year, she was not re-elected to the Legislative Council in the 2017 State election.

24. Muir, Kado

Kado Muir is an anthropologist, archaeologist, and activist from Leonora in the Goldfields region of Western Australia. He is a leader within the Ngalia community and one of the few remaining speakers of the Ngalia language. Muir’s professional qualifications were gained at the University of Western Australia and James Cook University, and he has published broadly on the topic of the sustainability of remote communities in Australia. In both the 2004 and 2010 Federal elections and the 2005 and 2013 State elections, Muir unsuccessfully stood as a candidate for the Greens Party. In 2016, he stood as a Senate candidate instead for the National party, but was unsuccessful. He is also an established artist, predominantly working with paint and prints.

25. Pedersen, Howard

Howard Pedersen has worked for Aboriginal community organisations and in government on Aboriginal development issues for four decades. In 1995 he co-authored the award winning book titled Jandamarra and the Bunuba Resistance. For the past eight years he has
been an advisor to the Yawuru Native Title Holders in Broome. He is currently employed as Principal Policy Advisor to Western Australia’s Treasurer and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Ben Wyatt.

26. **Pratt, Louise**

Louise Pratt is a current sitting Labor Senator for Western Australia. Pratt was born in a regional town in Western Australia, before moving to the eastern hills near Perth to attend high school. She holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Western Australia. Pratt worked in the offices of a number of State politicians prior to her election as a Member of the State Legislative Council in 2001, becoming the youngest woman ever to have done so. In 2007 Pratt resigned from State politics to run for the Federal Senate, and was elected shortly thereafter. After a brief departure from politics, she was re-elected to the Federal Senate in 2016, and is currently in the role of Shadow Assistant Minister for Universities.

27. **Pryor, Clinton**

Clinton Pryor is an Indigenous activist from Perth, Western Australia. He has ancestry from a number of Western Australian Aboriginal groups, including Wadjuk, Bellardong, Yamatji and Wongai. Pryor's activism gained public attention in 2016 when he embarked on a year-long ‘walk for justice’, in which he walked from Matagarup (Heirisson Island) in Perth to Canberra to raise awareness of the challenges facing Indigenous people in Western Australia. He was successful in gaining an audience with senior politicians and the Governor-General upon arrival, and was awarded the Anthony Mundine Courage Award at the National Indigenous Human Rights Awards the following year. Pryor remains active in communicating with his followers regarding issues of Indigenous rights across a number of online platforms.

28. **Redman, Terry**

Terry Redman is the current sitting State Member for the district of Warren-Blackwood, located in the far south region of Western Australia. Redman’s background is in the fields of agriculture and education (holding qualifications in both), and he was first elected to the
Legislative Assembly in 2005 as a member of the National Party of Australia (WA). Growing up in various regional locations around the State, he told me he had some knowledge of remote Aboriginal communities through this prior interaction and drew on that throughout his political career. He has previously held a number of Ministerial Portfolios, including Agriculture and Food, Correctional Services and, most pertinently, served as Minister for Regional Development from 2013 until the Government’s defeat in 2017. Along with Helen Morton and later, Andrea Mitchell (then Ministers for Child Protection), Redman was the initial Ministerial figurehead of the Barnett Government’s Regional Services Reform Unit.

29. **Reynolds, Linda**

Linda Reynolds is a current Federal Western Australian Liberal Senator. Prior to entering Parliament in 2014, Reynolds spent nearly thirty years in the Army Reserves in the rank of Brigadier. She engaged with State and Federal politics in a variety of roles throughout this period, eventually becoming Deputy Director of the Federal Liberal Party, and working as the Chief of Staff to former Federal Senator Chris Ellison. In 2011, she was awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross for ‘outstanding achievement as the Director of Army Strategic Reform Program coordination.’

30. **Saunders, Christopher**

Christopher Saunders is a Bishop of the Australian Roman Catholic Diocese of Broome. Originally from Victoria, Saunders was attracted to the prospect of working in Broome due, in large part, to the high Indigenous population of the area (telling me that he had joined the Broome Diocese ‘to work with Aboriginal people’). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s and after his ordination into the priesthood, Saunders resided at a number of missions across the Kimberley region (including Lombadina Mission and Kalumburu Mission), before settling in Broome. He has continued to be vocal on issues relating to the challenges Indigenous people face in the Kimberley region, including with regards to issue of the sustainability of remote communities.

31. **Searle, Grahame**
Grahame Searle is a senior public servant living and working in Perth, Western Australia. Originally from Victoria (where he gained a Bachelor of Business from Monash University), Searle moved to Perth in the late 1990s. He was the CEO of Landgate (or the Western Australian Land Information Authority) from 2004 - 2008, before becoming the Director General of the Department of Housing in 2008. Searle was then appointed the head of the then Barnett Government-led Regional Services Reform Unit, where he remained until 2017. Searle is currently the Director General of the newly-amalgamated Department of Communities (taking over the functions of the Department of Child Protection and Family Services, the Housing Authority, the Disability Services Commission, the Communities component of the Department of Local Government and Communities and the Regional Services Reform Unit).

Author’s note: just prior to the submission of this thesis, Grahame Searle resigned from the role of Director General of the Department of Communities. On how he performed in merging the various Departments from which the Department of Communities was amalgamated, State Minister for Community Services Simone McGurk said ‘bringing these components together and breaking down the many silos that existed for years was no easy feat, but Mr Searle used his extensive experience and skill to do just that’ (McGurk, S. 2018, Legislative Assembly: 5703).

32. **Southwell, Bob**

Bob Southwell is the former CEO of True Blue Dreaming, a not-for-profit organisation that provides mentoring support for young people growing up in remote and regional parts of Western Australia. Southwell’s background is in Human Resources, and he has worked in this capacity across a number of organisations within a diverse range of industries. True Blue Dreaming operates all over the state, including in several remote communities such as Looma. Southwell retired in 2018.

33. **Sterle, Glenn**

Glenn Sterle is a current sitting Federal Labor Senator for Western Australia. Originally from Melbourne, Sterle was raised in Langford, a suburb south of Perth. Sterle was a truck driver
for over a decade before accepting a position working within the *Transport Workers Union*. During his time as a ‘truckie’, as he calls it, he worked for a removalist company that transported Government equipment and furniture in the Pilbara and Kimberley regions, facilitating experiences with remote Aboriginal communities and their residents. He was elected to the Senate in 2004, and now serves as Shadow Assistant Minister for Road Safety. Sterle has used his platform as a Senator to further his connections with remote Aboriginal residents and learn more about the challenges they face in Western Australia.

34. **Walley, George**

George Walley is a Bindjareb Noongar leader living in Mandurah, Western Australia. Walley’s professional background includes primary school teaching and later university lecturing in Aboriginal education. He has taught in Perth, and also in regional and remote areas of the State including in the Kimberley region. Recently, Walley has worked in the health area, including as a counsellor within the field of Aboriginal drug and alcohol services. Walley also has an extensive history working in cultural awareness and education. His most recent venture is called *Mandoogoordap Dreaming*, which provides cultural tours in and around the Mandurah area.

35. **Webber, Bev & Webber, Jack**

Bev and Jack Webber are a couple who formerly managed pastoral stations in the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia. Jack was born in Victoria and comes from a farming background, before having spent some time in the police force and working as a professional rodeo rider. Bev was born in Perth and worked as a model prior to marrying Jack. From the early 1960s they managed several pastoral stations in the Pilbara and Kimberley, all of which had a number of Aboriginal workers. The couple therefore witnessed the period of rapid social change that occurred following events such as the equal wages case and the 1967 referendum. Later in life, Jack worked in the horse industry, teaching and lecturing at what is now Curtin University. Jack and Bev are now retired and live in Mandurah, south of Perth, Western Australia.
36. **Weepers, Jayne**

Jayne Weepers is the former Manager of Policy and Research at the *Central Land Council*, which represents and provides services to Aboriginal people and traditional owners in the southern part of the Northern Territory. Originally from Darwin, Weepers worked for a range of Non-Government Organisations focusing on environmental policy and advocacy prior to taking on her position at the Central Land Council, where she worked for eighteen years. Weepers holds a Masters in Politics and Policy from Deakin University, and has recently begun a PhD at the University of New South Wales.

37. **Wyatt, Benjamin (Ben)**

Ben Wyatt is the current Western Australian Treasurer and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. Wyatt grew up in Perth and spent time in various regional locations around the State as a child. After studying arts and law in Perth, Wyatt received a Masters in Science from the London School of Economics. He then worked as a barrister and a solicitor prior to entering politics as the Member for Victoria Park in 2006. Ben Wyatt is the son of former CEO of the Western Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Cedric Wyatt, and the cousin of current Federal Minister for Indigenous Health, Ken Wyatt.

38. **Wyatt, Ken**

Ken Wyatt is a current Federal Member for the Western Australian electorate of Hasluck, and holds the positions of Minister for Indigenous Health and Minister for Senior Australians and Aged Care. Wyatt is an Indigenous man of Noongar, Yamatji and Wongai descent, and is generally recognised as the first Indigenous Australian to be elected to the House of Representatives. Prior to entering politics, Wyatt served as a senior public servant in the fields of Aboriginal health and education (within the Western Australian Departments of Health and Education). Ken Wyatt is the cousin of current Western Australian State Treasurer and Minister for Indigenous Affairs Ben Wyatt.
Appendix Three: Outcome of the 2019 Federal Election

On Saturday the 18\textsuperscript{th} of May 2019, less than six weeks prior to the submission of this thesis, a Federal election was held.

In an outcome largely unforeseen by the Australian public (and the opinion polls that serve to quantify their views), the Scott Morrison-led Coalition Government was returned to power.

All sitting Members referred to throughout this thesis retained their seats.

The only exception was former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who lost his seat of Warringah to independent candidate Zali Steggall.

Bill Shorten stepped down as leader of the Australian Labor party on the 18\textsuperscript{th} of May, as soon as it became clear that Labor could not form a Government.

In the weeks following the election, the 46\textsuperscript{th} Parliament of Australia took shape as the incoming Government and Opposition selected their Cabinet and Shadow-Cabinet respectively.

Federal Member for Hasluck, Ken Wyatt, was selected as Minister for Indigenous Affairs: the first Indigenous person to hold the role, and the first Indigenous person ever to make up part of an Australian Federal Cabinet. Wyatt’s appointment was met with broad support from Indigenous groups (see Allam 2019). Questions remain, however, as to what progress he will make towards alleviating the intractability of the fundamental issues within the Indigenous Affairs portfolio (amongst the enormous expectations now placed on his shoulders).

Senator Pat Dodson, who would have been appointed Minister for Indigenous Affairs had Labor won the election, said that a Labor Government would have worked towards an
Australia with ‘greater social equity’. He also prophesised that the prospect of a referendum on the constitutional recognition of Indigenous people was now lost for the foreseeable future (Weber & Parke 2019).

Prior to the election, Shorten had made several significant promises in the field of Indigenous affairs, including the commitment to pursue said referendum and a constitutionally-enshrined Indigenous representative body and, importantly, the renegotiation of a long-term agreement to provide Federal funding for housing in Western Australia’s remote communities.
References

Books, Articles & Other Sources


Bolton, G. (1971), *A Fine Country to Starve In*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley.

(1981), ‘Black and White After 1897’ in C. T. Stannage (eds), *A New History of Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley.

(2008), *Land of Vision and Mirage: Western Australia since 1826*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley.


Haebich, A. (1988), *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900 - 1940*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley.


Host, J., Owen, C. & The South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, “It’s Still in my Heart, This is my Country”: The Single Noongar Claim History, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley.


Jacobs, P. (1990), Mister Neville: a Biography by Pat Jacobs, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle.


(2016), *Noongar People, Noongar Land: the Resilience of Aboriginal Culture in the South West of Western Australia*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Research Publications, Canberra.


**Unpublished Works**


**Government Publications and Websites**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence, the State of Queensland & Robertson, B. (2000), ‘The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence Report’, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, Brisbane, Available from: <http://www.indigenouschamber.org.au> [31/07/2017].


(2018b), 2016 Census: Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples QuickStats, Available from: <www.quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au> [01/10/2018].


(2018d), 3238.0.55.001 - Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2016, Available from: <www.abs.gov.au> [01/10/2018]


House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs (HRSCAA) (1990), Paper Presented at the *Brisbane Seminar*, Brisbane.

National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (1997), *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Commonwealth of Australia, Available from:


(2017c), *Transfer of Personal Files Strengthens Aboriginal Family History* [Media Statement], 26th May, Available from: <https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au> [26/05/2017].


(2017g), *Aboriginal Procurement Policy to Drive Aboriginal Entrepreneurship and Business Opportunities* [Media Statement], 19th December, Available from: <https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au> [05/02/2018].

(2018a), *$220,000 in Funding to Nurture WA Aboriginal Arts and Culture* [Media Statement], 30th January, Available from: <https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au> [05/02/2018].


Hansard


Western Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Assembly, 19th March 2015, pp. 1888 - 1890, (Colin Barnett, Premier; Mark McGowan, Leader of Opposition; Michelle
Roberts, Shadow Minister for Police; Paul Papalia, Shadow Minister for Corrective Services; Ben Wyatt, Shadow Treasurer & Shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs; John Quigley, Shadow Attorney-General & Rita Saffioti, Shadow Minister for Transport, Planning, Infrastructure and Finance).

Western Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Assembly, 12th September 2018, pg. 5703, (Simone McGurk, Minister for Community Services).

**Cases**


**Legislation and Bills**

**Commonwealth:**

*Electoral (War-Time) Act 1940* (Cth).


*Native Title Act 1993* (Cth).

*Native Title Amendment (Indigenous Land Use Agreements) Act 2017* (Cth).

**Western Australia:**

*Aborigines Protection Act 1886* (WA).

*The Aborigines Act 1897* (WA).

*Constitution Act 1889* (WA).

*The Aborigines Act 1905* (WA).

*Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1911* (WA).
Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1936 (WA), also known as the Native Administration Act 1936 (WA).

Native Administration Act 1905 - 1940 (WA), also known as Native Administration Act Amendment Act 1941 (WA).

Native (Citizenship Rights) Act 1944 (WA)


Native Welfare Act 1963 (WA).

Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act (1972) (WA).

Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA).

Aboriginal Heritage Act Amendment Bill 2014 (WA).

Constitution Amendment (Recognition of Aboriginal People) Act 2015 (WA).

Other States/Territories:

The Aborigines Protection Act 1890 (VIC).

The Aborigines Protection and Restriction on the Sale of Opium Act 1897 (QLD).

The Aborigines Protection Act 1909 (NSW).

The Aborigines Act 1910 (NT).

The Aborigines Act 1911 (SA).

The Aboriginals Ordinance 1911 (Cth, NT).

The Cape Barren Island Reserve Act 1912 (TAS).

News Reports, Television & Radio Programs, and Documentaries


285


7:30 (2015), Television Program, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Victoria, 11th March.

**Websites and Web-Based Documents of Featured Organisations**


**Artistic Works**


Lawson, H. (1905), ‘The Wander-Light’ in *When I was King and Other Verses*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney.