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## The Disgrace of Western Australia's Treatment of Aboriginal People



The Western Australian government has commenced a program of closing down about half of the state's 274 remote communities. The program will, the Premier acknowledges, 'cause distress' to the more than 12,000 Aboriginal people who live there. Premier Colin Barnett cites the 'existing high rates of suicide, poor health and a lack of jobs' as well as the 'abuse and neglect of young children' as the reason for these measures. He says that the latter is 'a disgrace for the state'.

The Western Australian government is somehow managing to make this disgrace even worse. What is unclear about these extraordinary measures is how replacing one government disgrace with another provides any kind of solution to the endemic social problems of these communities. Sadly this act of institutional racism in pursuit of so-called economic outcomes is unsurprising. The signs are all around us that government, at all levels, has failed society in its metamorphosis from state to business.

### Background

The idea of dispensing with remote communities is not a new one. In 2005, Senator Amanda Vanstone then the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, declared that remote Indigenous communities were becoming 'cultural museums'. In an interview at the time, Senator Vanstone distinguished between homelands and townships, saying:

...I do feel very strongly that people who say, "oh, but look, they want to live a traditional lifestyle": how can you ask a kid who's two whether he or she wants to make that choice at two?

Our job is to make sure that when that kid's 20 he really does have a genuine choice about whether he wants to go to the city and learn to be a doctor, or a lawyer, or a plumber; or whether he wants to stay in his homelands.

And not giving him that choice, not having educational standards at that level, is consigning that kid to a cultural museum for the benefit of, you know, the chardonnay drinking commentators.

The upshot of Senator Vanstone's argument was that in the distribution of Commonwealth resources for infrastructure such as health and education, the government was unlikely to consider funding homelands in addition to townships.

A year later, the Bennelong Society ran a conference called 'Leaving Remote Communities'. The theme of this conference was that the only 'viable' option for Indigenous people was to leave remote communities where there were no jobs and no housing. This was followed in 2007 by Helen Hughes' book, 'Lands of Shame'. Consistent with Hughes' thinking and that of the Centre for Independent Studies, government policy was increasingly focused, for example, on limiting the application of communal land tenure

### About Me





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I lecture in land law at James Cook University and I write and think about the nature of

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and abolishing many Community Development Employment projects. In 2009, [Moran argued](#) against such 'simplistic solutions'. More recently, [Ken Parish has provided an overview](#) of this policy context as it plays out in the Northern Territory.

While these policies have occurred at the Commonwealth level, state governments have held their own in oppressing Indigenous Australians. For example, as recently as 1963 the [Queensland government violently dispossessed Aboriginal people](#) from their homes in Old Mapoon, burning the township to the ground so that Comalco could open its bauxite mine there.

It should be remembered also that while all states are opposed to native title, Western Australia arguably fought the hardest to prevent its application. It threw the book at the Commonwealth in its [High Court challenge](#) to the *Native Title Act* arguing, amongst other things, that its operation as a sovereign state had necessarily extinguished all native title. Such attitudes die hard.

## Rejecting dispossession

It is interesting to note the altered tenor of the Western Australian government's excuse for the present round of dispossession. In addition to the economic indicators cited in Senator Vanstone's arguments of a decade ago, now there is a focus on social indicators such as suicide and child neglect. Regardless of your preferred indicators of 'viability' of a community, there are a number of pressing reasons to reject the program of 'closing' these communities. In fact there are reasons for all Australians to actively oppose them.

First, arguing economics would put many more communities at risk than only Aboriginal communities. As [George Megalogenis wrote](#) following Senator Vanstone's comments, there are plenty of communities in Australia in which there is an alarming degree of welfare dependence. If the issue is truly an economic one, government needs to be consistent in withdrawing economic support for all 'non-viable' communities. In an alternative vein, [Jon Altman](#) has articulated the 'false binary' of the free market (or 'real economy') and welfare dependence. He argues that there is another way for Indigenous Australia.

Secondly, and related to the economic argument, is that displaced people need to go somewhere. This inevitably puts pressure on the communities into which these people are relocated. This requires not just basic infrastructure of jobs, housing, health services and education, but additional support for the displaced. The psychological and social impact must be factored in to infrastructure planning. This is all costly in bare economic terms even without factoring in the personal cost to the people who have been relocated from their homes.

Thirdly there is a question of appropriate checks on government power. Despite the rhetoric of 'mutual obligation' to the extent that governmental power is underwritten by a 'social contract', the contract involves citizens giving up a small degree of their absolute personal freedom in exchange for the protection of the state. It behoves the state to use its immense power in the interests of the citizens from whom it derives its very legitimacy. The state is not a business.

Increasingly however state power is used for the benefit of business or simply for power as an end in itself. The example of Old Mapoon illustrates the power of vested economic interests to the detriment of the citizen. The so-called [anti-bikie laws](#) in various states that criminalise free association, and the latest tranche of government surveillance powers likewise illustrate the inexorable extension of state power.

The structures of the law are designed to provide checks and balances on excesses of government (executive) power. Sadly however these are proving insufficient to stem the influence both of corporate interests and government-as-business in the making of law and policy. The role of government as protector of the people has been foregone, in favour of [demonisation of the 'leaners'](#) and facilitation of 'lifters'. This is an [individualistic ideology](#) that ignores the very nature of society as a collective. It also ignores that during our lives, each of us will be dependent for at least some period of time.

## Social justice

Finally, but possibly most importantly, is the issue of social justice. As the [Human Rights Commission](#) puts it:

A life of opportunity and dignity, free from discrimination and disadvantage,

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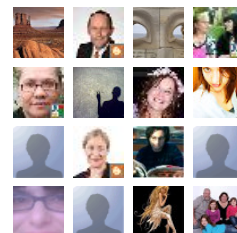
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should not be an ideal. It is, in fact, a basic human right - one that we all share in common. Social justice is about making sure that every Australian - Indigenous and non-Indigenous - has choices about how they live and the means to make those choices.

Social justice is grounded in the practical, day-to-day realities of life. It's about waking up in a house with running water and proper sanitation; offering one's children an education that helps them develop their potential and respect their culture. It is the prospect of satisfying employment and good health.

Social justice also means recognising the distinctive rights that Indigenous Australians hold as the original peoples of this land, including:

- the right to a distinct status and culture, which helps maintain and strengthen the identity and spiritual and cultural practices of Indigenous communities
- the right to self-determination, which is a process where Indigenous communities take control of their future and decide how they will address the issues facing them
- the right to land, which provides the spiritual and cultural basis of Indigenous communities.

While the program in Western Australia mentions housing and jobs, it fails to address the broader foundation of these principles of social justice. Importantly also, that the program affects Aboriginal people and [not society broadly, it is also racist](#). It is almost unthinkable that a similar policy would be implemented in non-Indigenous communities. It is undeniable that the suffering of people in these communities must be addressed in the interests of social justice. However shifting the people in these communities from their home does not address their suffering but compounds it.

### Pivot North

In September, the Joint Select Committee of Northern Australia tabled its final report: ['Pivot North: Inquiry into the Development of Northern Australia'](#). The report is part of a process to develop a white paper aimed at defining policy for 'realising the full economic potential of the north'. A recognised ['impediment' to development](#) is:

The small size of the population of Northern Australia, and its wide dispersal outside the handful of major centres, *exacerbated by the lack of participation by much of the Aboriginal community in the economy*, is perhaps the key impediment to be overcome. (p109) (emphasis added)

Jon Altman with colleague Francis Markham made a [submission to the Select Committee Inquiry](#). Their report shows that

lands of confirmed Indigenous land rights and native title legal interest total 48 per cent of the 3 million square kilometres of Northern Australia. This area could expand to nearly 76 per cent if native title was determined to exist for the spatial entirety of all currently registered claims.

Altman notes however that these findings were [not included in the Inquiry's report](#).

Without knowing the exact location of the remote communities to be closed, undoubtedly many will fall within the northern region. In terms of the goals of Pivot North, the Western Australian plan to close down remote communities could not come at a better time. (Queensland is conducting its own program to prompt loss of Indigenous tenures, through [new provisions for freeholding](#) and the debate on [Northern Territory tenures](#) has been going for some time.)

### Society suffers

This is not simply an issue for the 12,000 Aboriginal people who face losing their communities. It is an issue for all Australians, for two reasons. The government is disregarding legitimate constraints in its exercise of power against the vulnerable. The worth of the people in these communities is determined according to the government's determined economic indicators. The people who are the object of this policy are simply a cost to government. The measurement of humans as a cost centre is a dangerous development that devalues each one of us and leaves all of us vulnerable to government

excess.

Secondly the persistent failure of governments to deal with the ongoing sore of colonisation must be stopped. This is a question of equality and justice. Sweeping aside the suffering and social dislocation of Indigenous people is no answer to ongoing problems that exist particularly in remote communities. All of us are part of the solution to the institutional racism that continues to be practised in Australia. And that involves at the very least, calling out these community closures for the racist program it is.

*\*Image from <http://www.mapsofworld.com/australia/states/western-australia/western-australia-road-map.html>*

Posted by [Kate Galloway](#) at [12:11](#)

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