

G Shaw OAM –
Speech to the Commonwealth Grants Commission
History of the Alice Springs Aboriginal Town Camp movement,
the town camper's struggle for independence
& the formation of Tangentyere Council.
Alice Springs 12 October 2006

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen. My name is Geoff Shaw. I am an order of Australian medal, a Vietnam veteran having served in Borneo, Malaya and two tours of Vietnam war. I was one of a few that lead the town camp struggle in the 1960s and founded the Tangentyere Council. I was the General Manager of the council for over two decades and now serving my third term as Chairman of the Council.

Bob Beadman invited me to address you today on the history of the Alice Springs Aboriginal town camp movement, the town camper's struggle for independence and the formation of Tangentyere Council.

Town Camps have always been a feature in Alice Springs, even before the Town was gazetted in the 1880s. Town Camps are a result of Aboriginal people being dispossessed of their traditional lands by the invasion and occupation of non-Aboriginal settlers. Although initially accepted as convenient ration distribution points and labour camps, as the town grew in the 1900s, the official policy was to rid the town of their presence. But the camps survived, initially by resisting policy and avoiding measures set up to assimilate them. Such measures included at least four official roundups and forced evacuations of town campers to bush settlements between the years of 1929 and 1960, and the declaration of the town as an area prohibited to Aboriginal people from 1928-64.

One reason for the failure to eradicate the camps was the inconsistency of regulations brought into force; some regulations had the direct effect of drawing Aboriginal people into town, rather than the reverse. In particular, the practice of removing Aboriginal children of mixed origin from Aboriginal families and placing them in the Bungalow, an institution in Alice Springs, served to draw families into town. Aboriginal people were also attracted into town because the settlements and missions established to hold them out bush from the 1940s to the 1960s were badly managed, overcrowded, underfunded and destructive to Aboriginal cultural values.

The following slides show the living conditions of Town Campers in the early 60's - (3 slides).

Despite the fact that town camps were blitzed with Welfare, Health, Police Department and Town Management raids, and the establishment of a new settlement, Amooinguna, in 1960 and the final forced muster of town campers, Town Camps remained. The Aboriginal struggle throughout Australia began to change in the 1960s and 1970s, with the 1967 Constitutional Referendum, the new Whitlam Labor Government, and a commitment to justice, land rights and self-determination for Aboriginal people. The town camp land hearings although abruptly terminated by Fraser's Liberal-Country Party interim government at the end of 1975, went a long way toward establishing the legitimacy of these claims.

With the advent of a more progressive attitude towards Aboriginal people in the 1970s, the Alice Springs town camp struggle changed from resistance, to actively asserting our right to exist as legitimate communities. This change led to the development of camps as permanent and serviced communities, and the establishment of our own representative and resource organisation, Tangentyere Council; 'tangentyere' being an Arrernte word meaning 'all speaking together'. In 1974 Tangentyere received its first seeding grant of \$70,000 to assist Town Campers gain land, shelter, services, transport, fire-wood and garbage collective. This grant was approved by Bob Beadman then working for DAA and now the Chairman of NT Grant Commission. In 1976 the first Town Camps leases were granted - one included Mt. Nancy where I live, my grandchildren are fifth generation Town Campers. The other camp was Anthepe where another funding member and long time advocate for improving living conditions, my grandfather E Rubuntja lived until his recent passing.

In 1977 Tangentyere Council was officially recognised as an Incorporated organization. Since this period, the town camp struggle has been a movement for independence and control - for self-determination.

From 1975- 1986, fifteen Special purposes leases were granted to Town Camps and the NT Department of Transport and Works finally agreed to install water meters, despite a continued reluctance to servicing.

It was by no means an easy time being an Aboriginal person fighting for justice, improved living conditions and the right to lead our own lives. Just when we thought we had made significant progress and a difference to the lives and living conditions of our people, the NT Government in 1987 resolved to phase out funding to Tangentyere and then in 1988 the connection of power and water to new houses on Town Camps came to halt. It wasn't until 1988 when (then) Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Gerry Hand, announced the "Town Camp" Housing Infrastructure Program. It was also in 1988 that the sixteenth 'Special Purpose Lease' was granted to Karnte Housing Association

My old Grandfather W Rubuntja once said “we got lost in the welfare days. ... then we started Tangentyere Council. We picked up people out of the drain. We asked for Traditional Land from NT Government.” This really summarises the poor living conditions and our fight for justice.

Today we have 18 Town Camps situated in and around Alice Springs. The following **slide** outlines the Town camps around Alice Springs. The locations are depicted in Olive Green. 16 Camps have special purpose leases and two still have no security of tenure, and no permanent infrastructure - residents of the latter two camps live in Tin Sheds with no running water or power.

All town Camps are separately incorporated autonomous bodies. Each has its own governing committees that I will talk more on later.

The next **slides** show today’s Town Camp housing. (**Slides x 3**)

Despite an undeniable improvement in town camp conditions - from illegal squatters to land tenure, from humpies and bits of tin to houses - and official policy of self-determination, the right to control our own lives is still a right which town campers must constantly assert, and which is resisted and undermined by both Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments, and their bureaucracies.

Today across 18 Town camps we have 196 houses, 12 community facilities, 82 tin sheds, one Dry Camp and a permanent population of 1600 people. However Town Camps also play host to a number of visitors from bush communities and in times of major attractions to town, the population can swell to 3,500 people. However, based on our permanent residents, we have an unmet need of 225 bedrooms, 46 Houses that require demolishing and replacement. It is not uncommon that some houses support a population of 20-30 people at any one time.

Tangentyere Council is the resource agency serving all Town Camps and recognised as a multi-functional organisation. The Council receives 111 grants from 31 different funding bodies; an annual grant income of \$11 million. While this may sound like an incredible amount of money, when you take off a \$4 million CDEP program. For those that don't know CDEP is a program where Aboriginal people voluntarily give up their welfare payment for the dignity to work and train for the same money. The council also receives just under \$1.5m for their core administration and delivery of municipal services, and \$375,000 for the construction of new houses and renovations. The rest is left to deliver programs and services to 1800 people, repair and maintain 198 houses and deliver programs to some 19 remote communities.

On 11th November 2004, Tangentyere celebrated its 25th anniversary (**slide**). This was an appropriate time to honour our founding members and for Town campers and the staff of the Council to recognise the extraordinary efforts of survival. Since, then many of our founding members that were inspirational to the establishment of Town camps and the resource agency, have since passed away. It is my duty to acknowledge their determination.

85% of town campers speak one of the major Central Australian Aboriginal languages. Town camps are located according to language groups.

The internal planning of the camps also adheres to Aboriginal culture – camp planning constraints include the need to provide areas for different family groups, temporary accommodation for people who have to leave houses following a death, the need for visitor camping, ceremonial area and sacred site protection.

One of the primary reasons for our success is our governance structure which reflects the cultural values and beliefs of Town Camp residents. Tangentyere Council has a successful governance structure based on a model of proportional representation. **(Slide)** Each Town Camp has one equal voice. This has allowed the varied interests and language groups across the 18 Housing Associations to function effectively over 27 years to provide leadership and direction to the council

The Executive Council meets approximately once a month and on some occasions twice a month. The Executive Council covers constitutional matters, policies, procedures and business plans. Over the course of the 27 years the Tangentyere Executive have been creative in fulfilling a role that satisfies Aboriginal law and western administrative legislation and procedures.

An example of this is the uniqueness of the Tangentyere Collective Agreement that formally recognises and encourages the maintenance of Aboriginal culture through its provisions for:-

- Ceremonial leave
- Aboriginal language skills
- Knowledge of Aboriginal law of equal value to western Tertiary education.

Tangentyere operates on a centralised structure and rationalises the administrative costs to providing services to 18 separate Town Camps. **Slide.**

The strengths in the model are the economies of scale, reducing costs compared with running 18 independent communities, no service duplication and a strong coordination of service and program delivery. The weakness is services are stretched to meet the high level of need across 18 communities

Whilst the primary client base of the council is town camps residents, a number of our programs provide services to the broader Alice Springs Community and remote areas. These services aim to reduce pressure on Town Camps.

Today, Tangentyere Council employs 184 permanent staff, 70% indigenous. We are one of (if not the largest) indigenous employer in the country. In addition, we have 244 CDEP participants.

Tangentyere is arranged in 6 Divisions:

Housing & Environment Health	Youth & Family Services
CDEP	Human Services
Social Services	Finance

The following slides outline some of the service delivery programs. We will just run through the slides and leave some annual reports for anyone that may want to know more about the programs. (**Slides** x 10)

Tangentyere Council has also been recognized as a best practice organization for its one stop shop. Strategically positioned on site is a Centrelink office, a Westpac bank agency (that is highly subsidized by Tangentyere), a housing office and a financial counsellor. Aboriginal People vote with their feet. They will access services where they feel comfortable, respected and have a sense of belonging.

The Council also has an Enterprise wing, consisting of a Construction Company, Job Shop (Job Network Provider), Architecture Practice, Training Unit and Landscape Enterprise. Enterprises operate as charitable trust for the Council and profits directed back to the Camps.

You have heard me talk this morning on the struggle for independence, for self determination, for improved living conditions and access to services that non Indigenous Australians take for granted, and the establishment of our own resource agency, Tangentyere Council. It hasn't been an easy road travelled, and we know we can never become complacent. There is much uncertainty ahead for Town Campers, the commonwealth and the territory governments have plans for Town Camps that may not be consistent with our vision. Town Campers fought for special purpose leases, for proper living conditions, permanent infrastructure and the delivery of services and programs. The government can be assured that Town Campers will continue to fight for survival and living conditions to the standard of every Australian. The Town Campers struggle for Independence is far from complete!

Thank You.