

**Speech to the 2007 National Indigenous Housing Conference
Alice Springs, 26th October 2007**

William Tilmouth, Executive Director, Tangentyere Council.

Australia has a 30 year history of community housing ownership and management by Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people. Whilst high levels of overcrowding and poor health remain, the progress from tin sheds, car bodies, humpies and creek beds of the 1960's, towards environmentally healthy culturally responsive housing and tenancy management practises of today can't be underestimated. A product of the era of self determination, this period was preceded by a much longer period of direct management by government and church. The events of the past 12 months by this current Commonwealth government have wound back the clock to these early days of assimilation, subjugation and complete control by the State.

This year throughout the Northern Territory, what began as a debate about the benefits of private home ownership on Aboriginal land, has steam rolled into a complete dismantling of all forms of collective housing ownership and management, and a systematic abandonment of all notions of community involvement by Aboriginal people over their own lives.

The solution by this Commonwealth government to high levels of overcrowding in remote Northern Territory communities and Town Camp Communities is not to build more housing and infrastructure to the level enjoyed by the rest of the country, but to seize title to all housing and control of all housing management services from community organisations. According to Minister Mal Brough, the state of housing in remote communities and town camps is not the result of 10 years of declining funding, but because of poor tenancy management policies of Indigenous Housing Organisations, who should not be allowing 15 to 20 people to live in a house.

The experience of Tangentyere Council in this process, was one where despite holding secure title to 18 parcels of land with over 200 houses, and operating a nationally recognised housing management programme, Town Camp Housing Associations were given an ultimatum; surrender all title and control of their housing to the NT government for 99 years, to be managed as mainstream public housing, or risk a direct takeover by the Commonwealth. Despite a \$60 million dollar coercion and intense political pressure, town campers rejected the offer. In March the Minister gave a guarantee that he would respect their final decision. Yet, in August Brough pushed a Bill through parliament that has now given the Commonwealth absolute power to seize all town camp land and housing, without compensation.

At some point the belief that it is good public policy to exclude people from any form of involvement in the management of their housing, must surely cease. Vast improvements do need to be made to the way housing is delivered and managed in Aboriginal communities, but the answer is not to turn your back on everything and anyone who has anything to do with the past 30 years, back to the discrimination of ‘salt and pepper’ public housing policies of the 1950’s. What we hope for is a recognition by both governments of the national and international trend away from socially dysfunctional, bureaucratic public housing managed by the State, towards a diverse community owned and managed affordable housing sector responsive to local needs, with true partnerships between Aboriginal organisations, government and the private sector.

Today, there are 18 separate Town Camp communities throughout Alice Springs, with 204 houses. There is a permanent population of 2000, with an estimated additional 1000 people visiting from remote Central Australian communities at any one time. Each tenant is a member of a Housing Association which holds a lease in perpetuity over the land. Tangentyere Council is a peak service delivery organisation established in the early 1980’s by Town Campers, and is made up of members of each of all 18 Housing Associations.

Each Town Camp comprises a largely distinct Aboriginal community based along language and kinship lines. The majority of Town Camps have Arrente residents, many of whom are traditional owners, or descendants of traditional owners of Alice Springs and its immediate surrounds. Some town camps have residents belonging to other language groups, who have moved to Alice Springs over a period of time for various reasons. Managing these different family groups and kinship relationships is an important and complex part of managing the housing programme.

Before the town camps gained tenure in the 1970s and 80s, people lived in car bodies, humpies, tin sheds and creek beds throughout Alice Springs, without access to proper housing, or to essential services such as running water, sewerage or electricity. While there has been an undeniable improvement in town camp conditions since these times, the living standards of town camp residents remain unacceptably low. Overcrowded housing, substance abuse and poor levels of education and health are common.

In March 2007, the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, announced that the Australian Government would commit \$60 million dollars to turn the Town Camp Communities in Alice Springs into “normal suburbs”. Town campers were to be ‘normalised’, with money for building up to 80 new houses and replacing the power, water, sewerage, street lighting and road network across the 16 town camp communities with secure tenure.

The key condition was that the Housing Associations must sublease all houses on their town camps **unconditionally** to the Northern Territory government for 99 years. There was to be no ongoing involvement of any sort by the Housing Associations or Tangentyere Council. Further, a decision was required within one month or the \$60 million would be redirected elsewhere.

With such a large commitment of money, the Housing Associations were willing to consider all options, but wanted to be sure of maintaining meaningful input into the management of their housing and their communities. They wanted to ensure that principles of environmental health and culturally appropriate tenancy management that they currently enjoyed were maintained. For his part the Minister refused to negotiate, making statements that he *'would no longer allow public funds to be spent on privately owned land'*...an extraordinary statement for a government that pours money into private nursing homes, hospitals and schools. One of Broughs senior advisors was more frank, clarifying that *'what you need to understand, is that the Minister will not accept any form of community input into the management of their housing, ... whatsoever.'*

There was substantial publicity given to this offer, particularly here in Alice Springs, and an incredible amount of political pressure from both the NT and Commonwealth Governments. The town camps were and are urgently in need of additional housing and substantial upgrade to their essential services infrastructure.

On 18th May, the Housing Association representatives making up Tangentyere Executive voted to reject the Minister's offer.

The Housing Associations' decision was based on two main concerns:

1. They didn't want to lose their land, which had been hard fought for by the grandfathers and grandmothers of many present day residents, and on which several generations of families had been born
2. They wanted to maintain a strong ongoing role in the management of their housing

Acceptance of the governments conditions meant that they would be put in a position of total dependence on the decisions made by the government, and future governments for the next 99 years. This would create dependency, not responsibility. It would signal an

end to self determination and a return to the assimilation policies of the 1940's and 1950's. Assimilation reduces you to always asking 'who am I, where do I come from' its' that whole thing of losing track of who you are. Well Minister ... Town Campers have never lost that ... and they never will!

The preferred housing management model being insisted upon by the Commonwealth was that of Territory Housing, the NT government public housing authority. Management by Territory Housing was a key condition in Broughs offer, slotting in with the Commonwealth Governments policy of 'mainstreaming' all Indigenous services.

What both governments failed to comprehend however, are the sentiments many town campers have towards Territory Housing as a public housing provider. Many Town Camp residents at some stage in their life have been either evicted by Territory Housing, or have abandoned their Territory Housing tenancy in the face of imminent eviction. Reasons for eviction have ranged from cooking a kangaroo in your backyard, non payment of bills incorrectly charged for items of wear and tear, or just living next door to a neighbour intolerant of visiting bush relatives. The estimated average length of a tenancy in the public housing system for a family from a remote or Town Camp community is about 3 months.

This model only functions in Alice Springs, because there is a community housing buffer, known as the town camps that absorbs most people when they are evicted from Territory Housing. Alice Springs would be in shock if the Town Camp communities ceased to absorb and tuck out of site the town's homelessness crisis.

Given his insistence, it was astounding when in a media release on the 26th July Mal Brough referred to the 'abysmal record the states and territories have in managing public and community housing'. How is it possible for a person to come out with such a statement, yet continue to insist all Aboriginal community housing be managed by public housing authorities he has so little faith in?

This is all about ideology, collective ownership and control and its all about race. This debate, or lack of it is not evidence based, has nothing to do with reducing overcrowding, nothing to do with improving the management of community housing, and nothing to do with improving the health of Aboriginal people.

Tangentyere is developing a model for housing on Town Camp communities that attempts to meet best practice in community housing. This model will give Aboriginal people a strong ongoing say in the management of their housing, include government, the social housing sector and the private sector, allow for affordable rental *and* private home ownership, and build capacity for Aboriginal people in the sustainability of their housing.

This model is based on a framework of three main components:

1. A **repairs and maintenance** programme with its prime focus to improve the health of residents through environmental health principles.
2. A **tenancy management** programme that recognizes, and supports cultural imperatives and lifestyles.
3. A **governance system** that allows town camp residents to maintain control over their housing policy.

These principles are based on sustainability and recognition of the need to manage and meet the needs of people as well as managing and maintaining assets.

Tangentyere's housing model proposes the setting up of a **not for profit company** to manage its housing programme, that includes on its board representatives from the Town Camp Housing Associations, the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments, and industry experts in areas such as social housing, environmental health, legal or property development. This structure would ensure the company remained focused on

the needs of tenants, provide transparency for government over use of public funds, and guarantee stability, professionalism and continuity in the quality of its service delivery.

It would still require substantial government funding, particularly until the back log of housing needs are largely met. Over time however, its aim would be to become less, rather than more dependent on government. With the capacity to charge rents at a level to leverage Commonwealth Rent Assistance, the company would aim to borrow against its enhanced rental income to directly contribute to its housing construction and upgrade costs.

The model will aim to foster a greater sense of ownership, and control by tenants over their house and living environment. One such example would be through the proposed rental scheme, whereby 50% of rental collection from residents is quarantined for repairs and future upgrades to that residents house. The remainder is spent on communal Housing Association expenses, such as insurance premiums, community facilities and parks.

The one thing of economic value that town campers have, and which the Commonwealth appears determined to take from them, is their land. Once worthless pieces of land on the fringes of Alice Springs, town camp communities today are valuable pieces of real estate, as the town has swollen around them. Town Camp Housing Associations would aim to maximise the development potential of this land, which could be subdivided and leased, or developed in partnership with either private sector developers or money lending institutions.

The 'social enterprise movement' provides another possible model for a successful partnership between Aboriginal housing providers, government and business. The model, which in the UK has produced up to 55,000 enterprises, brings together the growing trend towards philanthropy with the expertise of business and the community sector to invest in social projects. Last year Social Ventures Australia, Brisbane City Council and PricewaterhouseCoopers joined forces to provide funding, business skills

and mentoring to seven social enterprises that have as their main objective providing jobs rather than making a profit. Successful Aboriginal housing providers bring to the table over 30 years experience in running housing and environmental health programmes, with high levels of Indigenous employment.

Not for profit affordable housing companies similar in structure to that which Tangentyere is proposing are supported by the Commonwealth government, and most other state governments for the general population, just not for Aboriginal people. Total dependency on inappropriately designed public housing, that is expensive to maintain, provides no sense of ownership, and that the Commonwealth consider is managed abysmally by States and Territories is the only model that has been offered to Tangentyere Council by the Australian and Northern Territory government, as it is the only model that vests all control in government.

For most of the past 220 years, where and how Aboriginal people live has been the domain of others. Churches, governments and private interests have all had a role in this. There has been a struggle for space, and a struggle about who occupies certain spaces and how.

This has particularly been the case in relation to people living in Town Camp communities in Alice Springs. This is because these communities were not planned as 'proper' living spaces by either the government or the early missions. They have evolved as people camped around Alice Springs, sometimes on land that had cultural significance, sometimes to access services, sometimes because they had no where else to go. Without the Town Camps, homelessness in Alice Springs would be a real national emergency, with people pushed back to the car bodies, tin sheds, humpies and creek beds of 30 years ago.

Yet, the Town Camps are becoming increasingly overcrowded as more and more people move from remote communities into town. The long waiting lists for public housing, coupled with high rates of eviction mean that most people end up moving between Town Camps. The situation is urgent. We need to get past ideological barriers and work together to find innovative solutions.

What is so special about Aboriginal community control of housing, as opposed to State control? The issue is not about Aboriginal control, but community control, and applies equally to all Australian communities. Community groups are more attuned to the core issues facing their community, and if appropriately resourced and professionally organised have the flexibility to deal with these issues, because they belong to that community and understand it well. They are directly answerable to their grass roots. In contrast, large centralised public housing bureaucracies by their very nature struggle with flexibility and complex cultural diversity. For most Aboriginal communities the core housing related issue remains that of their appalling health, not whether or not they should be purchasing their house. Whether you can have a hot shower, or that you can get your toilet fixed, not 99 year leases or abolishing permit systems.

Conclusion

Before I finish, I want to mention some of the broader principles underlying our housing model proposal. I believe these are fundamental to the success of any actions to improve the situation of Aboriginal people and to increase our independence, wellbeing and autonomy.

- What we want is the same as everyone wants, a decent life for our families, some say in the matters that affect our lives, and a sense of hope for the future.
- We want to be at the table, talking with government, not being dictated to. We want to walk alongside others, not behind.
- What town campers want is the path to a better life. This means:
 - a functioning, healthy house

- equal access to education
- pathways to employment
- accessible health care
- functioning infrastructure
- a secure and safe environment to bring up their kids

We have to remember that if you want things to work, you have to involve the people who are affected. Otherwise it is destined to fail, and when it does we all suffer.

Thank you.

Addendum: This speech was delivered one month prior to the Federal election on 24 November 2007. The Howard Liberal government was resoundingly defeated at that election, and the swing against it was substantial in many areas. The swing against Howard in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory was especially significant. This was the first time that Aboriginal people had a chance to vote after the introduction of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, or the "Intervention" as it was first referred to and is still generally known as in the Territory.

The election of the Labor government has brought with it a greater degree of consultation with Aboriginal people. Tangentyere Council's proposed model for community housing as outlined briefly in this article has been put to Minister Macklin, the current Minister for Indigenous Affairs. As it is a model similar to that considered in the wider community housing sector as best practice in affordable housing combined with joint community/government/private management, it is hard to see why it would not be an option for Aboriginal housing. We hope for a response from the Minister in the near future.