

Right Now – Human Rights in Australia

Opinion

What happens when a remote Aboriginal community in Western Australia is 'closed'?

BY ROSE CARNES



In November last year, WA Premier Colin Barnett revealed a [plan](#) to close as many as 150 of the state's 274 remote Aboriginal communities. Prime Minister Tony Abbott has since backed this, referring to remote Aboriginal communities as a "lifestyle choice" in controversial comments he made last week.

Premier Barnett has admitted that the closures will “[cause great distress](#)” but says that he must shut down the communities because the Federal Government will no longer fund essential services – like power, water, health and education – and the WA Government cannot meet those costs on its own.

What happens when a remote community is closed?

The phenomenon of closing an Aboriginal community is not new to Western Australia. [Oombulgurri](#), north of Kununurra, was closed down in 2011 when the state government deemed it to no longer be viable. This followed a [coronial inquiry in 2008](#) that found high levels of suicide, domestic violence, sexual abuse and alcoholism. It was noted as an indictment on Aboriginal Affairs in Western Australia. Subsequently, rather than address the issues with the community, the community was closed.

Amnesty International described the forced evictions that took place from [Oombulgurri](#). “Although many refused to leave, WA Government closed the health clinic, school, police station, shop, and shut off the town’s power and water.” Houses that remained were bulldozed so that people could not return to them.

The issue of closure was first raised in the Western Australian Parliament on September 24, 2014 when the Minister for Housing Bill Marmion spoke about the withdrawal of funds by the Federal Government. [Hansard records](#) that he recommended a thorough assessment for an infrastructure package for communities to meet minimum standards in basic necessities such as sanitation and clean water. There has, as yet, been no audit by either the state or federal government.

Is this a form of forced eviction as defined by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights?

The [Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights \(2014\)](#) points out that the following four elements, separately or combined, define a forced eviction:

1. *A permanent or temporary removal from housing, land or both.*

There is no indication that people will be able to return to their homes or their country. For Aboriginal people, country is identity, spirituality, purpose and law and has been so for tens of thousands of years. There is an [obligation](#) to care for country and it is well documented by many academics and

health professionals that people's health and wellbeing are directly and immediately [impacted](#) by being forcibly removed from country and that this trauma is [intergenerational](#).

[Bringing Them Home](#) comprehensively documents the harm that occurs when non-Indigenous policies and removal of people from country are imposed. Many people are still finding their links to country after these old policies, only to face the horror of re-traumatisation by new policies. Community Elders are noting that they have not been involved in any discussions or consultations about the closures.

2. The removal is carried out against the will of the occupants, with or without the use of force.

While guns and riot gear may not be employed in the removal of people from country, it is still forced. The force used is much more insidious. The 2015 [Closing the Gap Report](#) reveals that the circumstances of many of Australia's Indigenous Peoples are either stagnant or going backwards. Housing, health and education outcomes, as well as life expectancy, remain far behind that of non-Indigenous citizens on the same measures.

Seeing Aboriginal people as some kind of social experiment, or childlike and in need of protection by benevolent all knowing non-Indigenous policies, creates situations such as that of Oombulgurri and the communities facing closure now. Patrick Dodson, the Father of Reconciliation, asks [the direct question](#) that non-Indigenous Australia needs to answer not only in words, but also in actions:

Does Australia want to have a relationship with Aboriginal people, or does it not? Or does it simply want to improve the management and control systems over the lives of Aboriginal people? That's the seminal issue.

3. It can be carried out without the provision of proper alternative housing and relocation, adequate compensation and/or access to productive land, when appropriate.

[Hayes](#) ominously foreshadowed much of what is now occurring when she stated in regard to the [National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing](#) (which involved Aboriginal communities signing their land over to government in exchange for housing) that "the only obvious gain at this stage appears to be to the State and Federal government, who again have control over Indigenous homelands."

Anecdotal evidence from community members and people living in remote areas suggest that no extra houses are planned to be built in the larger regional towns. The state government has yet to identify plans for rehousing the displaced, forcibly removed community members.

Compensation is a thorny issue in Australia. While there seems to be no difficulty in compensating for land taken from businesses to build roads or public infrastructure, this same kind of compensation is not provided to Aboriginal communities as a matter of course. It does not appear to have been offered as of yet in WA.

4. It is carried out without the possibility of challenging either the decision or the process of eviction, without due process and disregarding the State's national and international obligations.

There is no avenue for appeal or challenge, despite numerous appeals to logic, common sense and ethical obligations by prominent commentators from both sides of politics, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The Hon Fred Chaney says it could be [catastrophic](#) for Aboriginal peoples. The Prime Minister's adviser Warren Mundine says it is a form of [apartheid](#). There has been no due process, just the threat of withdrawal of funds and services, with communities unsure of whether or not they are going to be targeted.

In forcibly removing people from their country, what is being effectively closed is identity – the ability to meet cultural obligations to country and community, a place to build wellbeing. We know this; there are no excuses for not knowing it.

There are no benefits for Aboriginal peoples and their communities. It is hard to identify a way in which the removal of identity can close any kind of gap.

And what are we left with?

Money ([the alleged reason the closures are proposed](#)) will not be saved. [Aboriginal leaders](#) claim that the cost of closure of remote communities is higher than the cost of addressing issues they face. This is because of the social chaos and impact on social indicators of health that will ensue when people lose connection to country.

An Australia that will, in the future, be judged harshly for its racism – and rightly so. As Patrick Dodson told us in 2013 at the [Annual ANU Lecture](#):

Whatever differences we have between us as societies we need today to find the collective courage to negotiate our way through them, to mutually agreed outcomes. True justice may never be arrived at, but what we may achieve might give us peace and mutual respect. After more than 200 years, we Aboriginal people are due at least that respect and courtesy. It does not seem much to ask.

Respect and courtesy – not that much to ask.

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Rose Carnes has been the Discipline Co-ordinator for Aboriginal Studies at University of Notre Dame Fremantle. This role included teaching into this area of study. Her current position is as a Research Fellow with the Centre for Rural, Regional Law and Justice at Deakin University in Geelong.

Feature image: Michael Coghlan/[Flickr](#)

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trevor • 10 months ago

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Self determination, self funding, develop skills sets to improve communities, consolidation reduction in the number of communities, more activity less boredom, less alcohol etc etc.

I have no objections to people living on the land according to their cultural heritage but they shouldn't accept taxpayers continually funding their lifestyle choices.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ▸



Graham • 10 months ago

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It's the Real People that need to evict. The time is now. The Europeans can feel the arrows ripping

through their rib cages already. How we try to show these people the right way to survival is by respect for yourself that leads to understanding others. We were divined Stewart's by the Almighty Creator for a reason, and that was to teach you how that living in harmony with nature is the One and Only way. So get on board and think amnesty then forgive to get the feeling of guilt out of your minds, we forgave you, we were warned of your coming to North America and we still accepted and that was before we were promised everlasting life, that because everyone is promised everlasting life and all you have to do is to take Jesus Christ as your Saviour from your lips, Jesus Christ is my saviour with all my heart, and we're done here and to keep yourself in Jesus name by forgiving those that trespassed against you, pray to God through Jesus Christ, Our Saviour, and give thanks because your faith in God tells you so that He will welcome you, me, and everyone that does so. He promised that we that do so will not suffer and receive everlasting life at His side forever and ever in Heaven, the Holy Place of Paradise the He the Almighty God has prepared for us. Amen. Thank Tou Lord of Lords, God Almighty, Amen.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Kelly • a year ago



When introducing this issue to my school students, they identified there are other communities filled with people who do not 'actively contribute' to society through employment and have high abuse and drug use and expect others to pay for their 'lifestyle choices' yet they are not in danger of closure. They quickly acknowledged these communities were predominately white. I am not teaching about prejudice, the government is doing this for me. Even my young students identified the need for self determination as a solution.

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Eli • 2 years ago



I've read quite a few articles on the subject of communities, but so far I yet to see a single quote from anyone who actually lives in one of the communities being discussed.

We've got comment from Fred Chaney, who lives in Perth, Patrick Dodson who lives in Broome, Warren Mundine who lives in NSW and various politicians who live in nice houses somewhere. What we don't seem to have is comments from the people themselves who live in these communities. In such a debate, shouldn't their opinions take precedence?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Rose Carnes ➔ Fli • 2 years ago





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Eli this is very true - it is important for voices to be heard. That is part of the whole problem - people speaking 'for' others. Even when people do speak - as some did on the 4 Corners program last week, they are drowned out by the perspective of those editing the stories. "white noise" drowns out the very voices most needed to be heard.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Jane • 2 years ago

These people are being removed from their land to enable access for mining companies, and uranium mining. Removing the people removes 'the problem' of native title, heritage sites etc. The only way money comes into this issue is the massive amount of it that will be made by a few wealthy people and the resulting environmental vandalism will be out of sight and will creep far into the future, poisoning land and water. This proposed 'removal' is very cynical and very ruthless and the perpetrators should be seen for what they are - deceiving bullies, and worse.

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Rose Carnes ➔ Jane • 2 years ago

It is interesting Jane that there is now a uranium mine where Oombulgurri used to be....

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Editor • 2 years ago

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darren • 2 years ago

If there is a community that is not doing well due to all different types of violence, even rape, mainly brought on by alcohol, which was introduced by white man anyway, something has to be done. But chasing them out of their land and into more populated lands is just going to create the same problem but on a larger scale somewhere else down the line, How can the government possibly think this will solve the problem, a pathetic band aid solution, so many negative near future issues will arise. We need more councilors and teachers not police and legislation.

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Rose Carnes → darren • 2 years ago



And there are also examples where local people have taken the bull by the horns and turned things around or built sustainable businesses. Fitzroy Crossing is one example and there are communities in the Kimberley where environmental land care is an employing business.

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Sam hall • 2 years ago



What then happens to the towns that have to adapt to accommodate community people. we already see the problems when they may visit towns for funerals and the alcoholism and violence erupts. People who live in town need to get back to country, they do not care for the same things that white people see as importantly. They need their land. There is such a long way till the government can "close the gap" and why try. All we need is basic education and training on everyday useful tasks. You cannot expect people to be moved from that way of living into even a small country town and be placed in a house and be expected to conform. It brings alcoholism, crime, drug problems and violence. Liquor restrictions in remote Kimberley towns don't really do anything and there is nothing for these people to do. The connection is lost and drinking becomes priority. It just brings violence to towns and splits people. White people may then look racist because they don't like this transient behaviour. Families are huge and families stay around for a while. The policing is too small and government agencies rules are tied by menial rules in these towns.

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Rose Carnes → Sam hall • 2 years ago



Sam - I sometimes say that the biggest gap is that one between whitefellas ears... not thinking through the actions/reactions of 'good ideas'. so much harm done in the name of 'protection'.

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Editor • 2 years ago



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Christopher Arthur • 2 years ago



one would think looking at the USA and the results of our treatment of Native Americans would give



One would think looking at the US and the results of our treatment of Native Americans would give you a pretty good idea what the implications of closing Aboriginal communities will be. You can't rip people from their homes and lifestyle, especially those who are so tied to the landscape as traditional people are, and expect them to live, let alone thrive, some where else. You might as well line them up and shoot them, because culturally that is what you've just done. Takes longer and is less bloody, but just as effective as a machine gun.

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Eleanor • 2 years ago



A hard and complex question, but what gives a group of people a right to expect to stay in one place; not work; not participate in the economy or country and expect others to pay for that decision? I don't necessarily accept there is a strong connection to country for a majority of indigenous people born into these communities. Rather, I think there is a good deal of apathy and fear of joining the mainstream community or perhaps having to step up and accept responsibility for one's children and life. Politically incorrect, but would I wonder if the bleeding hearts would accept their own children maintaining the standard of life, disease, addiction, crime, vice and lack of education that characterises these communities and then demanding that they stay put while others foot the bill.

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Rose Carnes → Eleanor • 2 years ago



I guess, if we are talking about rights, it is also pertinent to ponder what gives a group of people a right to move original inhabitants of country somewhere else because it is convenient for those doing the moving?

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Lisa Winn → Eleanor • 2 years ago



Eleanor what gives anyone the right to demand that the Aboriginal people change their traditional way of living and join mainstream society.

The land you live on

The economy you speak of

The work you deem nessecary

All of it is only possible because Australia was stolen from these people.

To claim you cannot afford to maintain these communities is A lie.

Use some of the money from the oil, uranium, gemstones, you steal from the traditional

custodians of the Aboriginals great southern land

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Dr Janelle Trees • 2 years ago

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Thank you for the intelligent commentary. Aboriginal people who choose to live remotely on their country (and it is their country, whether that is acknowledged by the Australian state or not) provide a deeply-rooted backbone to the continent, culturally and spiritually that is not valued, not comprehended, by the people making these egregious decisions.

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Rose Carnes → Dr Janelle Trees • 2 years ago

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Thank you so much for this response Janelle... it means a lot. I think that the heart of the matter still hasn't been addressed or alluded to ie the nature of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Pat Dodson makes a good point when he asks if non-Indigenous Australians want a relationship or if it is merely control over people that is what is sought.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



dorothy • 2 years ago

— | 🚩

Leaving indigenous people on their land is their right. The problems is helping finance this on some reasonable basis. Also ensuring the children are safe and have the skills and education to be free to leave the communities and work in or away from country if and when they wish to do so.

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Chris Grundy • 2 years ago

— | 🚩

i am so sorry as a white Australian that we treat our brothers and sisters in this way it is all the way of life they have understood for all their lives leave them on the land that they have a great connection with Chris Grundy