

**Slow withdrawal as managed retreat: Dismantling and rebuilding an Indigenous housing sector**

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### **Disclosure of competing interests statement**

No financial interest or benefit has arisen from the direct applications of this research. Liam Grealy is employed by Menzies School of Health Research which is contracted by the NT Government to conduct an independent evaluation of its ‘Healthy Homes’ remote housing maintenance program. That role has not influenced the findings of this research.

### **Biographical note**

Liam Grealy is a settler scholar living on Larrakia Country in northern Australia. He is employed as research fellow in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney and as senior research officer at Menzies School of Health Research. At the University of Sydney, Grealy works in the Housing for Health Incubator, where his research examines housing and infrastructure policy in regional and remote Australia and southeast Louisiana. At Menzies, Grealy is evaluating the NT Government’s Healthy Homes program.

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## **Slow withdrawal as managed retreat: Dismantling and rebuilding an Indigenous housing sector**

### **Abstract**

Managed retreat is [part of the ~~the~~ planners' analytical toolkit](#) [discourse](#). It considers that human displacements driven by climate change will be more just if they are strategically managed by well-resourced authorities. [In contrast to the contradistinction](#) [But in the opposition](#) this discourse establishes between the status quo of ad hoc displacement and planned relocation, managed retreat disregards [other](#) policies [by other names](#) that similarly encourage migration from places the state deems unviable. This article argues that *slow withdrawal as managed retreat* offers a framework for understanding policies that facilitate the [reduction or discontinuation](#) [withdrawal](#) of services that [settler colonial late-liberal](#) states formerly delivered to particular contexts. It does so through historical analysis of state support for housing and essential services infrastructure at Indigenous homelands and remote communities in the Northern Territory of Australia. Slow withdrawal as managed retreat emphasises the geographically differentiated character of state investment, highlights the reconfiguration of obligations for service provision between different levels of government, and considers whether and how 'abandonment' is appropriate [“land back” policy vacation](#) [on behalf of advancing](#) Indigenous sovereignty. The article examines how the settler state withdraws specific supports while remaining present, and it considers the process of slow withdrawal as managed retreat in relation to contemporary demands for greater community control of Indigenous housing.

**Keywords:** managed retreat; withdrawal; organised abandonment; housing; infrastructure; policy; homelands; remote communities

## 1. Dismantling an Indigenous community-controlled housing sector

A visitor to a remote Indigenous community in the Northern Territory of Australia might distinguish it from a homeland by the presence of a clinic, shop, school, or non-Indigenous workforce. But such institutional investment is not guaranteed in remote Indigenous communities and large homelands can appear like small remote communities, with similar infrastructural amenities. Despite the empirical resemblance and shared remoteness from service centres, the [governmental](#) distinction between remote communities and homelands is important, fracturing state policy and funding. [The category ‘remote community’ is both geographic and governmental, determined by the relative distance of communities to service centres- and policy histories that have formalised relationships between colonial settlements, missions, and Aboriginal reserves and more recent Australian Government investment.](#) Homelands, also known as outstations, are the outcome of the homelands movement that began in the late 1960s; are typically situated on their inhabitants’ ancestral country and often as satellite settlements to remote communities or towns; and are testament to the resistance and endurance of First Nations Indigenous peoples in settler colonial Australia (Peterson and Myers 2016).[typically small communities located on their residents’ ancestral country, positioned as satellite settlements to prescribed remote communities.](#)

[In this article, I argue that the consolidation of the governmental distinction between remote communities and homelands is part of a larger project of the state’s slow withdrawal from historical obligations to support remote Indigenous livelihoods.](#)

In the Northern Territory, there are 73 prescribed remote communities and approximately 600 [homelands](#) (Northern Territory Government 2020). [Drawing on the state policy archive, I suggest that the distinction between remote communities and homelands has effected the cumulative withdrawal of support for homelands, but- also- that a similar process is](#)

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underway for remote communities in the Northern Territory. The latter are the outcome of the homelands or outstations movement that began in the 1970s; are typically situated on their inhabitants' ancestral country and often as satellite settlements to remote communities or towns; and are testament to the resistance and endurance of Indigenous people in settler colonial Australia (Peterson and Myers 2016). In this article, I argue that the consolidation of the distinction between remote communities and homelands is part of a larger project of the state's slow withdrawal from historical obligations to support remote Indigenous livelihoods. By framing this slow withdrawal as a process of managed retreat, I emphasise the geographically differentiated character of state investment, highlight the reconfiguration of obligations for service provision between among different levels of government, and consider whether and how state 'abandonment' is appropriate "land back" policy advancing vacation on behalf of Indigenous sovereignty.

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In June 2007, the Australian Government announced the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response*. Better known as 'The Intervention', this suite of legislative and policy reforms was justified under the guise of protecting Indigenous children from sexual abuse. The government selectively misappropriated recommendations from the *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle "Little Children are Sacred"* report to expeditiously implement new regimes governing specified Aboriginal communities in relation to remote leasing, housing and infrastructure funding, social security payments, and alcohol sale and consumption, among other things (Wild and Anderson 2007; Howard-Wagner 2012). However, the Intervention also followed a lesser known review of the Community Housing and Infrastructure Programme (CHIP). The report *Living in a Sunburnt Country* (Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2007) identified a lack of regulation of housing standards in remote communities, inadequate maintenance services due to ad hoc funding, and inconsistent financial and operational oversight by some Indigenous Community Housing

Commented [A5]: What was the objective of the "Intervention"?

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Organisations (ICHOs). At the time, ICHOs were usually small organisations administered through local councils that did not own or lease houses but were responsible for housing management (Eringa et al. 2008). The report recommended that the state should assume responsibility for remote housing and ‘[continue the shift away from building housing on “on country” outstations and homelands](#)’ (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2007, 23). Under the Intervention, this report bolstered support for the Australian Government’s compulsory acquisition of five-year township leases for 64 Aboriginal communities. Funding for new houses and infrastructure became contingent on traditional owners agreeing to longer-term leasing arrangements, which by the end of the compulsory five-year leases had resulted in 40-, 80- and 99-year leases of remote communities to the Australian Government, typically sub-leased to the NT Government (Terrill 2015). [Daisy Yarmirr described that the ‘NTG stole all the communities off us, they were our houses, and all of a sudden they belonged to Territory Housing and we are totally reliant on government’ \(APONT 2015, 25\).](#)

The process to dismantle an Indigenous community-controlled housing sector was deliberate and agreed upon by the Australian and NT Governments. While classically paternalistic in its commitment to the ‘normalisation’ of housing tenure and tenancy management (Sullivan 2011), the funding provided for remote housing and infrastructure was atypical of the broader trajectory of [contemporary late-liberal governments in settler colonial nation states](#) towards the reduction of investment in social housing and in particular [in remote Indigenous communities](#) (Agrawal and Zoe 2021; Habibis 2013; Strommer and Osborne 2015). The *Memorandum of Understanding Between the Australian Government and the Northern Territory Government Indigenous Housing, Accommodation and Related Services September 2007* (hereafter MoU) outlined housing and infrastructure funding following the Intervention. Housing repairs and upgrades required the transfer of existing assets from communities ‘to publicly owned Territory Housing on the completion of the repairs and

**Commented [A12]:** Why this term? Is this specific to Australia? A brief definition in the sentence would be useful. ... “late-liberal governments which represent....”

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upgrades' (clause 19). The MoU outlined \$414.2 million in new Australian Government funding for construction, repairs, and upgrades of housing in 73 remote Aboriginal communities under the subsequently announced Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP). The funding was contingent on the basis that the Northern Territory Government:

- take over responsibility for the delivery of services to outstations; and
- take on responsibility for the provision of services to town camps', among other things- (clause 5).

The MoU was explicit in withdrawing direct responsibility of the Australian Government for Indigenous housing, municipal, and essential services infrastructure (clause 6), and it proscribed the use of Commonwealth funding for constructing houses on homelands (outstations) (clause 17). Dismantling the Indigenous community-controlled housing sector was an explicit goal: 'Both governments agree that the funding will facilitate the transition from Indigenous community-controlled housing to a public housing model' (clause 9) (Porter 2009).

Three points should be emphasised from this swiftly summarised policy history. First, the reforms effectively established the withdrawal of Australian Government support for homelands. Some Commonwealth funding for homelands would continue to be provided to the NT Government but this could not be used to construct new houses. Second, the reforms obliged the NT Government to directly manage housing in remote Indigenous communities.

This required the creation invention of a public housing bureaucracy and ongoing Australian and NT Government funding for remote housing. Third, while the distinction between remote Indigenous communities and homelands preceded the Intervention, the MoU consolidated a major difference in their governance. On the one hand, remote communities and town camps at Alice Springs were coerced to exchange relative infrastructural

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**Commented [A15R14]:** I included these as bullet points because this was their original form in that document. I have changed this form and revised the sentence.

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**Commented [A17R16]:** Added link to reference in bibliography for consistency with other hyperlinks.

**Commented [A18]:** Creation?

**Commented [A19]:** Which remote communities?

**Commented [A20R19]:** A majority of the 73 described above, over a period of about two to seven years. The key point here is less which specific remote communities than the distinction drawn between remote communities and homelands, in terms of ongoing access to funding for housing and essential services infrastructure.

sovereignty via for long-term leases for and housing and infrastructure funding. In 2012, Chief Executive Officer of Tangentyere Council, Walter Shaw, described the ‘multi-generational [40-year] lease’ as ‘the lesser of two evils’ as compared to the compulsory acquisition of communities under the Intervention (Community Affairs Legislation Committee 2012) states, and in 2016 6, Shaw argues that Tangentyere Council Tangentyere and the town camps believe the public housing management of town camps needs to end in favour of a community housing model that both empowers and cares for the welfare of residents’ (Public Accounts Committee 2016, 27). Unlike this compromise forced upon remote community residents whereby housing and infrastructure funding could be accessed in exchange for leases. On the other hand, homelands funding was severely curtailed, congruent with a broader policy imperative for ‘normalisation’ that prioritised demographic centralisation and formalised tenancies in remote communities (Sullivan 2011; Howey 2014; Habibis 2013).

This article repurposes the planning discourse of ‘managed retreat’ to characterise the state’s slow withdrawal of support for remote Indigenous livelihoods. It offers a detailed history of the documentary infrastructures of settler colonial governance – exchanges of letters, memoranda of understanding, leases, funding agreements, and program regulations – because, Aas Ford (2012) notes, ‘describing and evaluating relationships between settler and Indigenous governance is an inescapably empirical project’ (10). Of course, prioritising the materials of the state archive and of contemporary policy making produces a partial history of slow withdrawal, which would benefit from further scholarship prioritising describing the role of Indigenous communities in influencing and resisting state policy platforms. However, the approach taken by this article Such empiricism empirical analysis is necessary for understanding how the bureaucratic and legal mechanisms by which states practically reframe and reform relations with Indigenous people in remote communities. In this vein, I

suggest characterisations of these historical dynamics via large-scale abstraction — late- or neoliberalism, the extractivist state, and so on — while recognisable and sometimes useful registers for critical scholarship, can also obfuscate empirical policy shifts and policy contradictions. Eschewing recognisable critique in such terms through focused attention to

the empirical-metamorphic details of metamorphic institutions, policy assemblages, and their effects is necessary for imagining alternative administrative arrangements that prioritise Indigenous sovereignty, including those managed exclusively by First Nations peoples.

In the following section, I develop *slow withdrawal as managed retreat* as a conceptual framework for understanding shifting state commitments to remote community and homelands housing. This concept attends to how various state authorities have sought to reconfigure jurisdictions and redistribute obligations, including the Australian Government's disavowal of historical obligations to support homelands and its disinterest in the ongoing management of remote community housing. Following this introduction's overview of the Intervention reforms, the third section provides a history of the present of homelands governance<sup>2</sup> to demonstrate the bureaucratic work of drawing and reproducing the distinction between homelands and remote communities, and to set-up the claim that a managed retreat from remote communities is also currently underway. I develop this claim in the fourth section<sup>3</sup> through consideration of contemporary remote housing policies, and with attention to the relationship between the Commonwealth-Australian and NT Governments. I suggest that attention to processes of state withdrawal encourages our consideration of the related potential to decolonise social housing in remote communities, alongside the risks of discontinued state provisioning. The article concludes by presenting the potential of managed retreat as the re-formation of an Indigenous community housing sector.

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**Commented [A23]:** I prefer metamorphic to the suggested 'changing' for its connotations of change via force. If you think this must be changed to 'changing' then that's OK with me.

**Commented [A24]:** This claim needs to be tempered and appropriately reconsidered. It may be a bit contradictory. Should a critical reader really believe that the state can prioritize Indigenous sovereignty. Perhaps reformulate.

**Commented [A25R24]:** Reformulated as suggested with a clarifying clause. I am not intending to say that a state would prioritize Indigenous sovereignty, or that this is how Indigenous sovereignty would be achieved. The article makes two points related to this interpretation, aiming to provide a critical reader with a history of the present that shows how the state has both facilitated and undermined First Nations peoples' endeavours to live on country. 1. That, from the state's perspective, Indigenous sovereignty can also reduce government responsibility and expenditure, and 2. The terminology of Aboriginal community control has been recently integrated in government discourse.

## 2. Slow withdrawal as managed retreat

Managed retreat is part of the planner's analytical toolkit~~is a recent planners' discourse~~

used to distinguish forms of state-subsidised relocation from unfunded and

unplanned~~informal~~ migrations driven by climate change. For Siders et al. (2019),

We propose a reconceptualization of retreat as a suite of adaptation options that are both strategic and managed. Strategy integrates retreat into long-term development goals and identifies why retreat should occur and, in doing so, influences where and when. Management addresses how retreat is executed. (761)

In this way, managed retreat characterises relocation as not a failure to adapt but an adaptation strategy (Bettini 2014), and as a pragmatic response to slow climate disaster and the 'anticipatory ruination' wrought by developmentalist policies in vulnerable geographies (Paprocki 2018). The emphasis of this discourse is on proactive, coherent, and just interventions in response to projected scenarios where contemporary livelihoods appear increasingly unviable in present contexts, and climate-induced displacement appears

likely~~inevitable~~

Critical scholarship has argued that managed retreat can operate as both a tool and threat for marginalised communities (Pérez and Tomaselli 2021; Henrique and Tschakert 2021), whose relative vulnerability is often entrenched by the oscillating intervention and absence of governments (Amoako 2016), with no guarantees that planned relocations will be either participatory or just (Bronen and Cochrane 2021; Yarina et al. 2019). State departments

have appropriated the managed retreat~~discourse~~ to access federal funds and subsume specific Indigenous planning rationales and aims into bureaucratic efforts to produc~~ing~~ 'a scalable model for managed retreat policy' (Jessee 2022, 277). Such~~while~~ relocation projects have also been influenced by the prerogatives of for-profit developers and philanthropic aid programs to the detriment of racialised and minoritised communities~~racial~~

**Commented [A26]:** Reformulated based on my suggestion in the abstract.

**Commented [A27]:** Changed as requested.

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**Commented [A29R28]:** Revised to unfunded and unplanned.

**Commented [A30]:** It may be helpful to engage with indigenous writers work about this claim and idea.

**Commented [A31R30]:** Following our emails I have included additional content focused on Indigenous responses to various government policies. E.g. Walter Shaw in the introduction, Hilda Mosby in the following paragraph, Garriwin Gumana below, 'Pitjantjatjara person' re the Blanchard report, Tobias Nganbe, Daisy Yarmirr, etc.

**Commented [A32]:** What discourse?

**Commented [A33R32]:** Clarified.

[minority households and heritage](#) (Aidoo 2021). Such dynamics indicate the ongoing dividend derived by settler colonial states from the territorial dispossession of Indigenous people, pursued under the benign framing of transformative adaptation [deemed](#) necessary to confront environmental hazards. Similarly, Indigenous involvement in participatory planning for remote Australian housing and infrastructure projects is neither guaranteed nor uncomplicated (Moran 2004), with bureaucrats, construction firms, and researchers standing to gain from the [perennial](#) reproduction of perceived Indigenous dysfunction and the related justification to intervene (Lea 2012).

**Commented [A34]:** You may use terms like “racialized communities” or groups or “racialized and minoritized/oppressed”, not racial minorities which naturalizes race and communities as somehow in the minority rather than emphasize how processes of creating “minority” identities happen.

**Commented [A35]:** There are too many run on sentences like this. Please review with the aim of simplifying and making more succinct.

**Commented [A36R35]:** I have sought to do this throughout the article.

Where planned relocations occur, loss is inherent to transitions that involve the [evacuation/vacation](#) of places and dismantling of communities (Elliot 2018; Barnett et al. 2016). This is especially true for Indigenous people for whom place attachment is fundamental to collective cultural and spiritual identities and for whom climate-induced managed retreat is but the latest in a series of displacements (McMichael and Katonivualiku 2020; Memmott and Go-Sam 2016). [Indigenous people often live in locations that are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change, as an effect of water-based cultural beliefs and practices and prior](#) forms of settler colonial dispossession, [and water-based cultural beliefs and practices](#) [mean](#) [Indigenous people often live in locations vulnerable to climate change](#) and thus become the [principal](#) subjects of managed retreat policies (Suliman et al. 2019). [Scholarship that examines managed retreat and policy](#) [Managed retreat scholarship and policy](#)

**Commented [A37]:** Vacation has a very passive meaning. Try another word.

**Commented [A38]:** Have resulted in?

**Commented [A39R38]:**

**Commented [A40]:** Scholarship that emphasizes managed retreat and policy?

**Commented [A41R40]:** Revised as suggested.

McMichael 2019; Park et al. 2021).<sup>1</sup> As Masig Island resident, Hilda Mosby, states, ‘We’re doing everything we can to stay where we are’ (in Park et al. 2021).<sup>2</sup>

My appropriation of managed retreat applies to two subjects of retreat: first, Indigenous residents leaving remote communities, whether or not supported by a managed retreat policy framework;<sup>3</sup> second, governments, as these withdraw from providing services necessary for remote residents to remain on country. The latter is this article’s chief

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<sup>1</sup> Greater consideration is needed from Australian state and territory governments of both climate adaptation strategies and managed retreat planning to arid contexts in remote Australia (Graham 2020). Arid areas are not disappearing through sea-level rise and inundation but are subject to water scarcity and increasingly severe temperatures (Allam and Evershed 2019; Grealy and Lea 2021a). Such areas will continue to be inhabited by First Nations people, and governments must support Indigenous community-controlled organisations to develop policies that accommodate forms of climate-induced temporary and permanent migration, in relation to the time-scales of both scientific projections and everyday experience (McMichael and Katonivualiku 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Greater consideration is needed from Australian state and territory governments of both climate adaptation strategies and managed retreat planning to arid contexts in remote Australia (Graham 2020). Arid areas are not disappearing through sea-level rise and inundation but are subject to water scarcity and increasingly severe temperatures (Allam and Evershed 2019; Grealy and Lea 2021a). Such areas will continue to be inhabited by First Nations people, and governments must support Indigenous community-controlled organisations to develop policies that accommodate forms of climate-induced temporary and permanent migration, in relation to the time-scales of both scientific projections and everyday experience (McMichael and Katonivualiku 2020).

focus, though ~~it a briefly engagement~~ with the relevance of outmigration from remote communities ~~is provided~~ because managed retreat is likely to become a standard framework for governing such mobility in Australia. For both subjects, I consider managed retreat in a way that conflicts with the positivist tendency of dominant planning and policy analysis to focus on governmental interventions using this, or ~~a similar, a~~ nomenclature ~~that are, and~~ explicitly aimed at planned relocation (see Dundon and Abkowitz 2021). Instead, I suggest ~~that analysis of~~ managed retreat ~~policy can be found operating under various names and implemented with diverse should involve attention paid imd. go by other names and operate according to other prerogatives. This means that analysis of managed retreat should include attention to~~ policies that are variously explicit in their goals for retreat, but which nonetheless intend or effect that outcome.

In the first instance, this includes policies that incentivise migration from certain geographies through the redirection and redistribution of government resources. In the Northern Territory, an example is the former ‘Territory Growth Towns’ strategy, under which the NT Government reoriented its remote service delivery through the creation of 20 ‘service hubs’ and alongside the amalgamation of 60 Indigenous community councils into 8 shire councils (Howard-Wagner and Kelly 2011). Memmott and Go-Sam (2016) question whether this centralisation strategy sought to bolster state attempts at behavioural modification, while Markham and Doran (2015) write that ‘Implicit in the allocation of service hubs was the expectation that service centralization would result in population growth via migration from communities in their hinterland’ (114). ~~As with planned relocation programs that have failed to acknowledge past injustices and climate risks (Nash et al. 2018), embrace deliberation, and nurture obligations to human and more-than-human others (Henrique and Tschakert 2021), this approach was pursued despite many remote residents’ desires to remain on country (Habibis 2013). Yolgnu painter and activist Dr~~

**Commented [A42]:** Revised to clarify the key point that not all managed retreat policies use this language, or even primarily intend such an outcome, even while they might effect it.

**Commented [A43R42]:** Revised as suggested.

**Commented [A44]:** Reformulate this phrase. It is unclear. Maybe “can operate using other dispositions or terms that are equally harmful”

**Commented [A45]:** What does this mean? Is it the same policy but with different aims yet have the same consequences? This is wholly unclear.

Gawirrin Gumana (2009) argued forcefully in relation to against this suite of policies following the Intervention: that ‘Government, if you don’t help our homelands, and try to starve me from my land, I tell you, you can kill me first … I will not lose my culture and my tribe to your games like a bird moving from place to place’ –, including in the face of increasing climate risks (Nash et al. 2018). In this sense, Demographic policy encouraging residents of very remote settlements to centralise and sedenterise in regional centres, through the superior provision of infrastructure in those places, can underpin a situation that displaces residents, not by relocating them but by ‘[leaving] communities in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable’ (Nixon 2011, 19). This can also be understood as is a policy of managed retreat.

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**Commented [A47R46]:** Revised for clarity

This article is centrally concerned with managed retreat as the coherence of various policies – a ‘policy ecology’ in Tess Lea’s (2020) terms – that underpin state withdrawal from former obligations. Gilmore’s (2009) writing on ‘organised abandonment’ and the ‘antistate state’, developed with regard to late-liberal state reforms in the United States, offers conceptual overlap with slow withdrawal as managed retreat that is helpful for elucidating the specificity of the latter concept, below. Gilmore (2009) describes that the US has witnessed the expansion of ‘a view that certain capacities of the state are obstacles to development, and thus should be shrunken or otherwise debilitated from playing a role in everyday economic and social life’ (43). But, despite this, ‘we are faced with the ascendance of antistate state actors: people and parties who gain state power by denouncing state power’, with associated public spending increases in sectors such as prisons and policing (Gilmore 2020). Despite ‘small-state’ rhetoric, this is a form of governance by redistribution; the state ‘doesn’t get cheaper, and it doesn’t, in the aggregate, shrink’ (Gilmore and Gilmore 2016, 145). We could use Gilmore’s work to frame, for example, competitive tendering processes established within Australian state and territory public

**Commented [A48]:** You’re trying to express a process by using how it does not occur (negative affirmation) instead of explaining what occurs. It is confusing to the reader.

**Commented [A49R48]:** Revised in later paragraph as this point has been moved up.

**Commented [A50]:** Can also be seen as

**Commented [A51R50]:** Revised as suggested.

**Commented [A52]:** Page number?

**Commented [A53R52]:** Added

**Commented [A54]:** Perhaps this section could come before and then you explain how it is happening under various guises and in ways that are still harmful and cumulative.

**Commented [A55R54]:** I significantly revised this section and reordered it below based on feedback received by a reviewer in the first round of revisions. I have moved it back up in the section as you suggest, to set up the paragraph on slow withdrawal as managed retreat.

housing and social welfare programs, employed to contract-manage private companies and the non-profit sector, or the 'shadow state' (Wolch in Gilmore 2009). From a certain altitude, Organised abandonment might be a reasonable diagnosis of the shift in urban social housing management in numerous Australian jurisdictions, from public housing models to a diversified state-subsidised social housing sector, including increased welfare conditionality and competition amongst service providers. However, in the Northern Territory in particular, the application of organised abandonment would misconstrue the state's continuing role in remote housing provision. Rather than the death of public housing, across the past 15 years, a remote public housing sector has been established and expanded (Porter 2009; Grealy 2021).

This article develops *Slow withdrawal as managed retreat* as a framework for critical analyses to identify the policies involved in impacts of state funding and service provision reconfiguration and their effects. In doing so, it highlights three features of policy. First, the framework concept emphasises that policies effecting state withdrawal can be emphasise how withdrawal and in particular where the withdrawal is also organised circumscribed by geographic designations. That is, the state can withdraw from a particular place, or category of place, rather than simply a generalised historical responsibility (for example, devolving the provision of higher education to private companies). Second, it the concept highlights that the state does not always name its withdrawal as managed retreat in recognisable terms. Policy-led retreat, which can also occur by stealth, misdirection, and obligation-shifting. Third, as with all policy, it is important to recognise that the extent to which the implementation and outcomes of specific policies might be 'managed', or controlled, is limited. Even where the intent of policy is relatively coherent, a resulting

**Commented [A56]:** Is this different from the rightwing idea of the shadow state? How?

**Commented [A57R56]:** Yes, but I do not think engaging with that distinction adds much of value to this paper. I have removed the reference so that this question of difference is not prompted for a reader.

**Commented [A58]:** ?

**Commented [A59]:** Try to use fewer negative terms to describe, and just state what is happening.

**Commented [A60R59]:** I have aimed here to set up an opposition between the two sentences. The first sentence suggests there is a dominant way of thinking about contemporary state support, or its lack, in relation to public housing, in comparison to historical investment. The second sentence states in positive terms that what has happened in the Northern Territory is inconsistent with this, with the establishment and expansion of a remote public housing system.

**Commented [A61]:** Source? How has this process unfolded? Cumulatively?

**Commented [A62R61]:** This statement is summarising what is otherwise described in detail in the article. The Intervention essentially created a public housing system. I have added a relevant source.

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**Commented [A63]:** Reword that enable more concrete understanding.

**Commented [A64R63]:** I have revised simply to generalised to hopefully increase clarity. I believe this distinction is clear.

**Commented [A65]:** Reword, break up.

**Commented [A66R65]:** As suggested.

Thus withdrawal of funding or services may be partial is not necessarily total, and geographically inconsistent. Fourth, What I am suggesting can be understood as that slow withdrawal as managed retreat Nor do such policies does not necessarily imply the actual movement of people, who may remain voluntarily immobile; it can be the state that retreats. In this way, a managed retreat policy ecology can underpin a situation that displaces residents, not by relocating them but by '[leaving] communities in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable' (Nixon 2011, 19). In the Northern Territory, slow withdrawal as managed retreat has It can occurred through the accrual of policies and governmental rearrangements over time rather than as a deliberate shift indicative of any coherent underlying ideology. As I develop it below, slow withdrawal as managed retreat is a framework for identifying the velocity and orientation of state support relative to prior commitments, of policies by many names operating to various prerogatives, and for assessing their combined material impacts.

**Commented [A67]:** You're trying to express a process by using how it does not occur (negative affirmation) instead of explaining what occurs. It is confusing to the reader.

**Commented [A68R67]:** I have sought to revise this paragraph using more affirmative language.

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This article uses I use managed retreat to frame the slow, cumulative withdrawal of state support to remote residents, in relation to housing and infrastructure in particular, for the following reasons. First, drawing on its conventional application as a planner's discourse, managed retreat highlights the geographic components of state policy, including the increasing significance of climate change to infrastructural decision-making (Dundon and Abkowitz 2021). Policies are not simply matters of state attention or abandonment, but enact the reterritorialisation and redefinition of jurisdictions to which resources are distributed. In what follows, the distinction between homelands and remote communities is central.

**Commented [A69]:** This paragraph seems to provide a way in which manage retreat happens but it is confusing and imprecise. Please have a topic sentence that helps the reader follow and then list/enumerate how managed retreat happens along various dimensions of policy. Maybe offer a typology of how it happens that explain the various modes, processes and effects.

**Commented [A70R69]:** I have restructured and rewritten this paragraph.

**Commented [A71]:** 'slow and adaptive/cumulative manner in which state withdrawal is occurring?

**Commented [A72R71]:** Revised. I was trying to use slow withdrawal as it is the key concept for the paper. Cumulative is a useful addition.

**Commented [A73]:** And redefinition?

**Commented [A74R73]:** Added as suggested

Second, slow withdrawal shares with Gilmore's (2007) approach a commitment to detailed analysis of how states reconfigure obligations and redistribute resources, including through

agreements between levels of government. In contrast to how the language of abandonment is often employed to infer state absence, Gilmore examines how an antistate state has fostered a rhetoric of state contraction to disguise the erosion of welfare and expansion of state-spending on incarceration and policing. In contrast, the slow withdrawal as managed retreat characterising Australian governments' approaches to homelands and remote communities has consistently maintained a public rhetoric of the state's commitment to 'close the gap' on Indigenous disadvantage, even as withdrawals are consolidated through government 'buck-passing' ~~or reconfiguration~~ through agreement-making. The settler colonial state has not disappeared from remote housing provision in Australia, or straightforwardly devolved its responsibilities, even as it has reconfigured its role.

Third, the characterisation of abandonment can infer not only that the state has withdrawn from performing a function, but that it rightfully performed that function. [However, the withdrawal of a harmful presence can constitute freedom as much as abandonment.](#) In settler colonial contexts where Indigenous peoples have asserted various forms of nationhood [throughout long periods of illegitimate state intervention](#), the withdrawal of the state may also be a central goal, and even a requirement, of First Nations self-government (Cornell 2015). [Rather than abandonment, state withdrawal from Indigenous communities can help to constitute various freedoms, from state policing and administrative governance, and for sovereign decision-making](#) [so on. Thus slow withdrawal as managed retreat highlights both the mechanics of how former obligations are reconfigured, and what might come to take their place. These three points – the geography of withdrawal; state reconfiguration; and withdrawal as opportunity for Indigenous sovereignty – are considered in the following sections.](#)

### 3. Contested responsibility for homelands housing and infrastructure

**Commented [A75]:** This needs some more detail and explanation. Freedom from what? Maybe use indigenous interpretations. The idea of 'freedom spaces' or a more appropriate indigenous term might help elucidate this and how this contradiction on the one happen leads to how freedom can be exercised, but also that the abandonment has occurred after a process of deep change that leaves indigenous communities in a worse position that seems to suggest the state is needed to correct or improve the situation that they have indeed created.

**Commented [A76R75]:** I have restructured this paragraph and provided examples of the freedoms which might emerge.

Managed retreat policies subsidise livelihoods in particular geographies. In central and northern Australia, this has involved the withdrawal of support for homelands and inconsistent support for remote community housing. This section provides a history of the present of homelands governance to consider a particular iteration of slow withdrawal as managed retreat. I argue that managed retreat is the de facto policy of the Australian Government for housing in remote Indigenous communities. However it is one implemented over a long period, and through multiple policy rearrangements, in which homelands have thus far been subject to the most significant withdrawals. Examining this policy history as slow withdrawal as managed retreat allows us to consider both what is being withdrawn, [how this happens cumulatively](#), and what continuing role governments play in remote housing and infrastructure provision.

[Figure 1. Discrete Indigenous communities, Australian Geographical classification remoteness structure. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Commonwealth of Australia 2007.]

In the Northern Territory, there are 18 gazetted towns, [and](#) 73 prescribed remote Indigenous communities, [and approximately 600 homelands](#) (Figure 1). Comprising 18 per cent of Australia's land mass, the Northern Territory has a population of only 246,000 people, of whom about 30 percent are Indigenous, as compared with 3.3 percent of the Australian population as a whole (ABS 2018). [The category 'remote community' is both geographic and governmental, determined by the relative distance of communities to service centres, and policy histories that have formalised relationships between colonial settlements, missions, and Aboriginal reserves and more recent Australian Government investment. Homelands, also known as outstations, are typically small communities located on their residents' ancestral country, positioned as satellite settlements to prescribed remote communities.](#) The important Blanchard Report (Commonwealth of Australia 1987) defined

**Commented [A77]:** Maybe insert, "how it happens progressively...and"

**Commented [A78R77]:** Added

**Commented [A79]:** I think these two definitions should be in the introduction

‘homeland centres/outstations’ as ‘small decentralised communities of close kin, established by the movement of Aboriginal people to land of social, cultural and economic significance to them’ (xiii). [As an unnamed anonymised ‘Pitjantjatjara person’ quoted in the Blanchard report states, ‘We want to live in our own place, Aborigines only … This is our place. Our fathers and grandfathers hunted here’ \(Commonwealth of Australia 1987, xxxv; Figure 2\).](#) Altman (2013) identifies some of the empirical diversity of homelands by suggesting that most ‘are populated by small family groups, but some number more than a hundred people. Some are occupied year-round, others seasonally or rarely … The key commonality is that their residents have made a determined choice to actively engage with their land’ (77). Myers and Peterson (2016) frame outstations as ‘life projects’, to emphasise the pursuit by Indigenous people on homelands of both independence from the state and market and the pursuit of place-based knowledge and obligations. The NT Government (2021) [estimates suggests](#) that ‘In the 2018-19 financial year, 386 Homelands (out of approximately 600) were funded under various grant programs, with approximately 6,000 to 7,000 residents occupying 1,402 dwellings benefiting from funding’ (3).

From the late 1960s, Australian Government policy shifted from assimilation to Aboriginal self-determination (Habibis et al. 2019). Self-determination involved a significant emphasis on returning to country, through the establishment of land rights under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (ALRA) and support of the emerging homelands movement (Altman 2017). Over 50 per cent of the Northern Territory is Aboriginal land granted to traditional owners as inalienable freehold title under the ALRA, and administered by land councils. In its own way, the homelands movement was a form of collective retreat from the institutions and contexts of protectionism and assimilation, including former missions and reserves. [Rather than a step backward, this was retreat as refuge, resistance, and return \(Koslov 2016\).](#) [Supported by grants issued by the Commonwealth Departments](#)

**Commented [A80]:** What was the response of indigenous communities to these major reports in general and the definitions in particular.

**Commented [A81R80]:** I have included a relevant statement from the report that was already included as Figure 2. I have searched through historical newspaper archives (via Factiva) and the work of relevant scholars who have undertaken work on this history (Jon Altman, Sean Kerins, Greg Marks) but have not been able to find useful specific content to satisfy this particular request. I have sought to include indicative responses by Indigenous people to various policies throughout the article. Elsewhere I have acknowledged the limits of the evidence base.

**Commented [A82]:** Maybe this is the typology you can use (as indicated above)?

**Commented [A83R82]:** I don’t think this needs to be incorporated into the above paragraph because my emphasis there is on government slow withdrawal through policy frameworks, or the key features of those policies. At this historical moment, and unlike the following decades, Commonwealth government policy sought to support Indigenous people to move onto homelands in the NT.

of Aboriginal Affairs, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), and new Indigenous corporations, housing associations, and homelands resource centres, housing and essential services infrastructures were often built on country from which First Nations people had been forcibly removed generations before.

**Commented [A84]:** Land?>

**Commented [A85R84]:** Country is the usual Aboriginal terminology for land over which there is an ancestral claim and which is of cultural significance.

Historical policy arrangements laid the foundation for subsequent geographies of slow withdrawal and contemporary contestation over responsibility for homelands. On 1 July 1978, the Commonwealth devolved self-government to the Northern Territory, transferring powers to the NT Government, with exceptions related to uranium mining, national parks, and Aboriginal affairs (see Appendix A [1978] in Commonwealth Grants Commission 1981, 74). The division of responsibilities for remote communities and homelands was determined through the unusual mechanism of an exchange of letters between the Commonwealth Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Fred Chaney and the NT Chief Minister Paul Everingham. A letter authored by Chaney to Everingham, dated 27 June 1979, outlined the transfer of finances to the Northern Territory to manage Commonwealth programs for municipal and local government services in Aboriginal communities. Despite this transfer of operational responsibilities for ~~at the time, 42~~ remote communities, Chaney outlined that the Australian Government would retain responsibility for policy, planning, and coordination in Aboriginal Affairs. In addition, the NT Government would play no decision-making or funding role in homelands with Chaney (1979) stating that ‘:

~~For a number of reasons, I would not at this stage wish to consider the transfer to your~~

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~~Government of funds used for grants in support of the small communities (“outstations” or “homeland centers”) on Aboriginal land and on pastoral properties. In my view, [homelands]these are not townships where residents might expect to have municipal services provided’ (Chaney 1979, 2).~~

Chaney outlined his intention to retain control of the Commonwealth's program of direct grants to NT Aboriginal housing associations for remote housing construction and maintenance. However, clarity of service provision at homelands was blurred from the beginning of Northern Territory territorial self-government in the Northern Territory. 'I acknowledge', wrote Chaney, 'that, because of the transfer of the essential services functions, your [NT] Government already has a vital role to play in these communities, essentially in relation to the provision of water supplies' (3).

The NT Chief Minister was underwhelmed by this arrangement. In a letter dated 20 July 1979 Everingham outlined the NT Government's acceptance of resources to fund and administer municipal and local government services in remote communities. Regarding homelands, Everingham expressed his disappointment at the decision of the Australian Government to maintain an operational role. He outlined that

Homeland centres on Aboriginal land are invariably closely associated with one of the main centres for which the N.T. Government has been given these additional functional responsibilities and indeed some of them have elected to come under the community government umbrella of these larger communities....

I believe that the only proper approach is for us not to distinguish between groups in this new transfer of powers. ([Everingham 1979](#), 2)

Everingham recognised that the distinction made by the Commonwealth between remote communities and homelands was an artificial one, complicated by the expectation that the NT Government would supply essential services to both [place contexts](#). Further, Everingham's comments highlighted the porous distinction between two categories of place – remote communities and homelands – underpinned by the mobility of residents [and infrastructural provision](#), [and for which governmental jurisdictions were difficult to settle](#), [Theis question of jurisdictional responsibility for specific communities was difficult to](#)

**Commented [A86]:** Reword or add detail. Beginning of the functioning of the government...

**Commented [A87R86]:** Revised as suggested.

determine including because, whereby the provision of housing and infrastructure to a homeland could effectively transform it into a remote community with subsequent funding implications.

**Commented [A88]:** Footnote on the implications of this

**Commented [A89R88]:** I've rewritten this section to highlight the main point about jurisdictional responsibility. The question of funding flows on from such designations, and is central to the article discussion in general.

[Figure 2. Extract from the Blanchard Report (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, xxxv).]

In 1987, the publication of the Blanchard (1987) Report served a public legitimisation function for homelands, recognising residents' ongoing commitments to such settlements (Figure 2), the positive social and spiritual benefits they provided, and setting expectations for ongoing policy recognition (Altman 2017; Palmer 2016). The Report's recommendations included that all permanent homelands be provided with adequate water infrastructure, that the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs undertake a survey of housing needs on homelands, and that government funds be directed to homelands resource centres (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, xxiv-xxv). However, it also identified that because homelands were governed by Commonwealth, state, and territory policies, the 'diversity of support agencies has resulted in some confusion due largely to the lack of clarity of responsibilities and the extent of support they will direct to the homelands movement over and above other functional responsibilities' (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, 39).

[Figure 2. Extract from the Blanchard Report (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, xxxv).]

At the time, the policy objective of the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) regarding homelands was: 'To enable Aboriginals, who wish to do so, to establish and maintain small communities on their own land, or on land to which they have a right of occupation, where they are free to follow a lifestyle of their choice' (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, 40). However, the Blanchard Report highlighted that this policy's objective

would not necessarily be achieved through the partial devolution of responsibility to the NT Government. While

An important aspect of the [\[DAA1\]](#) [\[Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs\]](#) policies on homeland centres is that it does not want to replicate the centralised communities in terms of facilities and services ... This differs, to some extent, from the Department's approach to the provision of essential services to homelands communities where it argues that State and Territory governments have a responsibility to provide homeland centres "with a level of facilities equal to that provided to other sections of the community in a manner which is appropriate to their needs". (42)

**Commented [A90]:** This can be abbreviated earlier

This question about the 'level' of infrastructural amenity that homelands require or deserve, relative to remote and urban communities, and government responsibility for meeting that level, has remained [unresolved for governments](#) [contested](#) since the formation of homeland settlements.

The Blanchard Report provided the example of ablution facilities to demonstrate the ambiguity over infrastructural obligations at homelands in the 1980s. 'Housing or shelter in homeland centres is usually fairly basic', the report states, 'Where homeland centre housing has been provided it is often in the form of small galvanised lock-up sheds with concrete floors and no services such as cooking facilities, ablution facilities or electricity' (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, 180). But neither the NT Government responsibility for essential services nor the Commonwealth conception of reasonable standards for homelands shelters clarified 'who is responsible?' for the provision of ablutions (43). In its submission to the Standing Committee, the NT Government expressed frustration over the non-specification of services it was expected to provide at homelands (53). At the time, both the NT Housing Commission and the Commonwealth Aboriginal Development Commission

provided funding for homelands housing, however within the Australian Government there was confusion over the role of the Commission and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs regarding their respective obligations (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, 183-184).

Others have written more comprehensive histories of homelands governance (see Myers and Peterson 2016; Marks 2015; Altman 2017). Suffice to say here that while the homelands movement continued through the 1980s and early 1990s, these issues of inter-governmental responsibility remained unresolved. Governmental rearrangements have been the norm across this period, with Perche (2018) noting~~describing~~ that since the Australian Government assumed responsibility for the portfolio following the 1967 Referendum, Indigenous Affairs has ‘been subjected to 10 different structures and overseen by 21 different ministers’ (S20). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) that was established in 1990 ~~and~~ following the abolition of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, managed homelands through its National Homelands Policy, and distributed~~ding~~ funds to homelands resource agencies through the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP) and the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme (Kerins 2009; Palmer 2016). After developing more stringent funding guidelines for proposed homelands, ATSIC was itself abolished in 2004. In 2005 the Commonwealth Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Amanda Vanstone, questioned the desirability and viability of providing amenities beyond basic services at homelands (Eastley 2005; Morphy 2016), echoing the tenor of the influential Reeves Report (1998), which had already instigated debate about land rights and homelands’ economic viability~~and ‘closure’~~. Such comments signalled the wider dissipation of political support for homelands under Prime Minister John Howard’s neoconservative Australian Government (1996-2007), and the political pursuit of what Farbotko (2010) has characterised as a process of ‘wishful sinking’. Following the abolition of ATSIC, CHIP was administered by Australian Government departments and ‘a

moratorium was placed on CHIP funding in respect of *any* new housing and infrastructure on outstations and homelands, including existing outstations' (Marks 2015, 48). This

moratoriumpolicy, already a form of slow withdrawal as managed retreat, was formalised in the MoU of 2007.

[Table 1 Figure 3. An historical overview of slow withdrawal as managed retreat]<sup>3</sup>

As in settler colonial nation states elsewhere with similar histories of frontier violence, confinement of Indigenous people to missions and reservations, and fluctuating government support for self-management (Strakosch 2019), homelands funding for housing and essential services infrastructure has never been adequate relative to need. Across time, even as absolute funding has increased, so too have standards associated with infrastructural provision: a house today does not resemble a house built in the 1980s, when the provision of sharedwashingfacilitiesablutions could be debatedbydifferentdepartmentscontested as either a matter of housing or essential services infrastructure (Figure 3). Nor have the funding roles played by the Australian and NT Governments ever been fully separated – the settler state is neither singular initspolicyobjectives nor settled intermsofpolicy continuity. Nonetheless, broadly, up until 2007, it was the Australian Government that was

<sup>3</sup> Table 1 provides an historical overview of events described in this article, related to the policy ecology effecting government slow withdrawal from homelands and remote communities. This is intended as a reference for readers, rather than as a comprehensive representation of state policy history, and it would be effectively complemented by scholarship centred on Indigenous community responses to state policies and institutional reconfigurations.

**Commented [A91]:** How was it this? It is not self-evident.

**Commented [A92R91]:** Substituted moratorium for policy to increase continuity between sentences. The moratorium on new housing and infrastructure as indicative of the withdrawal of state support for new infrastructure in homelands.

**Commented [A93]:** Maybe a table showing the timeline of these policy changes/reformations/shifts would be helpful to the reader.

**Commented [A94R93]:** I have worked through the article carefully and prepared a table that provides an overview of relevant policies and events relevant to this history.

**Commented [A95]:** Use a different word for reader to understand.

**Commented [A96]:** Is it that different departments are in conflict about whose responsibility it is? This is not clear.

**Commented [A97R96]:** Revised as suggested.

**Commented [A98]:** Meaning?

**Commented [A99R98]:** Explained more literally.

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chiefly responsible for funding housing and infrastructure on homelands. The 2007 MoU was a fundamental reconfiguration of this relationship, with the NT Government compelled to accept Commonwealth funding for remote communities despite restrictions on homelands spending. The reconfiguration of land tenure through the compulsory acquisition of remote community leases and the associated direction of funds to larger remote communities effectively privatised assets on homelands, with housing the property of traditional owners or a land trust if located on Aboriginal land (Kerins 2009).

[Figure 3. A house at a homeland in Central Australia](#)

At the Australian Government level, Marks (2015) identifies the importance of the 2008 *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* (NIRA), established by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), as a homelands policy by another name. ‘Priority for enhanced infrastructural support and service provision should be to larger and more economically sustainable communities’, the *NIRA* clarified. The NIRA committed governments to ‘Facilitating voluntary mobility by individuals and families to areas where better education and job opportunities exist, with higher standards of services’ (COAG 2009; Marks 2015).

[Marks’ original analysis bolsters my argument above about the This is an instance of establishment of slow withdrawal as managed retreat without establishing this as an explicit](#)  
policy position. This is true even as the Australian Government committed in 2012 under the ‘Stronger Futures’ policy to provide the NT Government with \$206 million over ten years for homelands essential and municipal services (Commonwealth of Australia 2012). Three years later, in the 2015 Commonwealth budget, this was converted to a one-off payment of \$155 million to the NT Government to take ‘full fiscal responsibility for the servicing of homelands’, cashing out from the 10-year funding agreement (NT Government 2020, 1; Schubert 2015). [Slow withdrawal highlights the way that ratcheting up the attrition of](#)

funding over time ~~gradually~~ exacerbates the difficulties associated with remaining on country.<sup>5</sup> It involves increasing ~~and the~~ pressure on residents to move elsewhere for adequate housing, despite the advantages homelands offer to cultural continuity and wellbeing. In this way, ongoing funding can feature within a policy ecology of slow withdrawal that is both strategic and managed, through reductions, increased conditionality, and shortened time-frames.

**Commented [A100]:** Another run on sentence

**Commented [A101R100]:** Revised.

Across this period, the Australian Government has effectively withdrawn support for NT homelands. Following the 2007 MoU, the provision of ‘walk-away money’ in 2012 (cashed out in 2015) consolidated this arrangement, with no contemporary agreement guaranteeing future Australian Government contributions to NT homelands. As it stands, the Northern Territory Homelands Program contributes grant funding towards services for eligible homelands, however funding eligibility depends on the presence of safe and secure housing. This is difficult to access where a recent review of homelands policy acknowledged that ‘the majority of housing stock was originally constructed by the Commonwealth Government over 30 years ago, and that current Homelands housing stock is in poor repair’ (NT Government 2020, 23; Centre for Appropriate Technology 2016). The NT Government has not itself funded the construction of new housing on homelands, due to both the capital costs involved and because the logic of remote leasing has saturated governmental practice. In sum, no new assets are provided without leases that clearly establish liability for ongoing maintenance, and no leases will be sought by either the Australian or NT governments for homelands, where the legacy of historical assets and inattention to them establishes unappealing inheritances. With a housing lease comes the status of landlord and the obligation to maintain housing to levels specified by the *Residential Tenancies Act 1999* (NT) – levels the NT Government has struggled to meet elsewhere ([Grealy 2021](#)). The decision to not build new houses on homelands has been an explicit policy since its 2015

‘Homelands – A Shared Responsibility’ policy, which stated that ‘The Northern Territory Government has no immediate plans to build new houses on homelands or establish new homelands’ (2).

[Figure 34. A house at a homeland in Central Australia.]

In 2018, the NT Government sought submissions for an independent review of the Homelands Policy and Programs, commissioning the *Review of the Homelands Policy* the following year. Among the themes identified by the Review were a lack of clarity and transparency in homelands policies and service provision, and the requirement for new housing and upgrades to existing stock (NTG 2020). In its initial response to the Review, the NT Government (2020) committed to establishing a new body involving Aboriginal land councils and the Australian Government ‘to engage and co-design a long-term vision for homelands, including a holistic Homelands Policy framework’. It is too soon to tell whether such an authority might counter Davis’s assessment that ‘the right to self-determination has been eviscerated from the lexicon of Australian politics’ (Davis 2015, 10). On the matter of new homelands housing, the NT Government acknowledged its ongoing maintenance obligations but did not engage with the question of new construction (Garrick 2021).

Today, the ambiguity and contestation over responsibilities for homelands housing and essential services infrastructure continues. Following the NT Government’s response to the Review, then NT Minister for Remote Housing Chansey Paech authored a letter to his ~~then~~ Commonwealth counterpart, the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt. Noting ‘the urgent need for new housing’, Paech suggested that either the *National Agreement for Remote Housing Northern Territory* be amended to include new housing for homelands or, alternately, a new national agreement for homelands housing be established. In response to

the *Review*, the Australian Government was definitive: ‘State and territory governments are responsible for housing’, said a spokesperson for Minister Wyatt (Garrick 2021). In NT parliament, Paech claimed that ‘The responsibility for new houses on homelands still sits with the Australian government’, while a spokesperson for Minister Wyatt responded that the ‘NT government remains responsible for housing, including on homelands’ (Ashton 2021). While the willingness of either government to fund homelands housing or infrastructure has converged in the direction of shared withdrawal, the failure to clarify government obligations remains a four decade-old inheritance.

The previous section is section has described outlined the slow withdrawal of government support as managed retreat that has taken place in Aboriginal homelands across recent decades as a form of managed retreat. From the emergence of the homelands movement until today, there has been ambiguity and contestation over the relative administrative and funding responsibilities of the Commonwealth and NT Governments. While continuing to fund remote community housing and infrastructure, critical reports and the abolition of ATSIC allowed the Commonwealth Government to establish conditions proscribing excluding the expenditure of Commonwealth funding by the NT Government on new housing at homelands. Thus while homelands have not typically been subject to coercive new leasing obligations legitimated by the Intervention, policies hasve essentially withdrawn support for new housing infrastructural support on the grounds that this is consolidated in larger remote communities.

#### 4. Remote housing and a return to community control

The previous section outlined the slow withdrawal as managed retreat that has taken place in Aboriginal homelands across recent decades. In this section, I want to suggest that the is phenomenon of slow withdrawal as managed retreat is also occurring for remote

**Commented [A102]:** What is this term? Is this new? You cannot introduce a new term. Hence it is important to establish a typology upfront.

**Commented [A103R102]:** It is not a new term. The shared was simply to signify that Commonwealth and NT policy has converged in a way that it had not previously been so aligned. I have rewritten the paragraph above where you suggest typology is required.

**Commented [A104]:** You need a concluding paragraph summarising what this section has achieved and how it advances or illustrates your argument more succinctly.

**Commented [A105R104]:** Paragraph added.

communities [showing a continuing tendency in the state's approach](#). Consider the funding situation on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in the remote northwest of the state of South Australia. As in the Northern Territory, remote housing construction was previously funded in South Australia (2008-2018) by the Australian Government under the *National Partnership Agreement for Remote Indigenous Housing* (NPARIH). While at the conclusion of NPARIH the NT Government was awarded \$550 million for remote housing across five years, equivalent funding in South Australia has decreased and become more conditional. Following NPARIH, the Australian Government provided South Australia with a one-time payment of \$35 million for remote community housing. This funding cannot be used to expand housing stock in remote communities, but can only replace derelict houses. The Commonwealth has indicated this is the final funding tranche it will provide for remote housing in South Australia, deeming this a responsibility of state governments.

The retreat of the Australian Government from its prior support of remote community housing in South Australia, as well as in Western Australia and Queensland, is illustrative of what could unfold in the Northern Territory. But the slow withdrawal of state support for social housing in remote communities is not a straightforward phenomenon to demonstrate for the Northern Territory, because this jurisdiction is now exceptional among Australian states and territories. Australia in the past 15 years shares with other contemporary states an increased conditionality in the provision of social services, including social housing (Nash et al. 2017). However, unlike most jurisdictions, the Northern Territory has since 2007 been subject to significant government investment in public housing. Prior to the conclusion of NPARIH, the NT Government committed \$1.1 billion to remote community housing across ten years until 2027. On 30 March 2019 the NT and Australian Governments established the *National Partnership for Remote Housing Northern Territory* (NPRHNT), providing Commonwealth funding of \$550 million to the NT Government to construct ~~another~~ 1950

bedrooms, equivalent to 650 three-bedroom houses. However, the length of this agreement is telling. Ostensibly running from 2018 to 2023 but not actually established until 2019, the agreement shortens the period for which the NT Government can rely on Commonwealth support. From a housing program management perspective, this undermines asset planning and tenders for construction, maintenance, and tenancy services contracts. The shift from a 10 to a five year agreement is a process of ‘temporal enclosure’ that constrains remote infrastructural planning timelines in relation to an implied threat of further Australian Government withdrawal (Jaramillo and Carmona 2022). With no guarantees of funding beyond the agreement, and given that other Australian jurisdictions have been advised they will no longer receive Commonwealth remote housing funding, the NT Government could reasonably question what arrangement will exist from 2023.

With parallels to the reterritorialisation of funding as a tactic of retreat described in the previous section, the Australian Government is withdrawing from its prior obligation to fund housing in remote Indigenous communities across Australian jurisdictions. This has been reframed as a state and territory government responsibility, with funding for Northern Territory housing either a special case or a policy anachronism on a shared trajectory. Despite this withdrawal from former obligations, the shift in most Australian jurisdictions from public housing to a community housing sector means the Australian Government continues to fund social housing by various indirect means. As at March 2022, there were 11 community housing providers in the NT registered under the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH), four of these Indigenous community housing providers. Unlike public housing managed directly by state and territory governments, community housing providers as public benevolent institutions can access various tax concessions and financial subsidies, low-cost finance through the National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation (NHFIC), and Commonwealth Rent Assistance as a non-taxable income

supplement to eligible residents. The broader context of the NT is that its economy is heavily subsidised by the Commonwealth, including through the redistribution of the Australian Government's Goods and Services Tax (GST) and via a principle of 'fiscal equalisation' that recognises the difficulty of providing services to a small population spread across a large territory with high health and social service needs (Commonwealth Grants Commission 2014). Thus NT Government budget allocations to housing in remote Indigenous communities are already indirectly funded by the Commonwealth's recognition of that need.

To return to an earlier point, the reconfigurations of remote community housing policy analysed in this article prompt reflection on the appropriate ongoing presence and provisioning of the state in this role. Put in the favoured terms of contemporary academic discourse, what could the decolonisation of remote NT housing actually look like? (Tuck and Yang 2012; [Crabtree 2013](#)). Similarly, how might we distinguish between abandonment and an appropriate state withdrawal, including on behalf of expanding Indigenous self-government? In practical terms, how can the state's retreat from Indigenous housing be managed to the advantage of building an Indigenous community-controlled housing sector?

It is theoretically possible that, despite the Australian Government's apparent withdrawal via a shortened funding agreement for remote housing, the NT Government could discontinue its current remote housing obligations. Recall the Northern Territory leasing arrangement described above, under which the Australian Government compulsorily acquired five-year leases to remote communities and then compelled traditional owners to sign long-term leases in exchange for housing and infrastructure funding. In most cases, leases held by the Australian Government have been sub-leased to the NT Government for five years. Most of these sub-leases are due to expire in June 2023, at which point the NT Government could

disengage from its role as the landlord of remote housing. If it did so, with only four registered Indigenous community housing providers in the NT, it is not realistic that by 2023 a community housing sector resembling other Australian jurisdictions could fulfil the functions currently undertaken by the NT Government. It is possible that in a small number of remote communities, where traditional owners have specific income streams, a housing sub-lease will be assumed by a registered community housing provider, creating a patchwork of state and Indigenous community-controlled housing. But this is likely to be a piecemeal and medium-term shift. The NT Government has committed remote housing spending until 2027 and, more generally, governments are typically more willing to curtail spending and service arrangements than dismantle whole programs.

State management of remote community housing is neither natural nor inevitable, as the Intervention history and its implications for former ICHOs described above makes clear. A proper examination of decolonising remote Indigenous housing in the Northern Territory is beyond the scope of this article (see [Crabtree 2013](#)). However, it deserves consideration here because concurrent to this reconfiguration of Australian and NT Government obligations for remote housing has been the re-emergence of a self-determination discourse, specifically in terms of the ‘community control’ of Indigenous housing in the Northern Territory. This is a demand consistently made by traditional owners and Indigenous community-controlled organisations in contexts such as Aboriginal housing and health fora ([APONT 2015](#)); as [Tobias Nganbe](#) states, ‘People need to understand who Aboriginal people are, and how they can do things for themselves’ ([APONT 2015, 20](#)). However, this discourse of Indigenous community control of housing, [but it](#) has also proliferated most recently *within* government departments and policy. For example, the NT Government’s (2022) current \$1.1 billion ‘Our Community, Our Future, Our Homes’ remote housing program specifies among its key aims, ‘local decision making and engagement with communities’ and ‘developing

**Commented [A106]:** Who does it serve for government to use this discourse? I think it is worthwhile to be a little more critical of government reports in particular about this.

**Commented [A107R106]:** I think the irony of this language use by government is probably clear to readers without me making a general point about how it might be mobilised in bad faith to the detriment of First Nations people. For me, such a point grants disproportionate significance to the policy artefact, including by exaggerating the importance of policy names, which is a tendency of policy studies that I am trying to work against in this article. The following sentence acknowledges ‘the record of harms associated with state housing and related policies’.

Aboriginal Business Enterprises'. The increased emphasis on Indigenous community control of remote housing is important given the record of harms associated with state housing and related policies (Habibis et al. 2019; Grealy and Lea 2021b). Yet, the details of this transition to an alternative Indigenous housing sector, which will itself require administrative technologies that resemble features of the existing bureaucracy, are rarely interrogated, including the continuing role, if any, played by the state.

There are various instruments through which the NT Government, the continuing landlord of public housing in most remote communities, claims to be expanding community control of housing and, in doing so, revising its role. These include the NT Government's 'Local Decision Making' policy, which claims it 'will partner with Aboriginal communities to assist the transition of government services and programs to community control'; a Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy guided by Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT's 'Partnership Principles (APONT 2017); and the prioritisation of Aboriginal Business Enterprises (ABEs) and Indigenous community-controlled organisations by select tender for services contracts under the Healthy Homes remote housing maintenance program. The NT Government's (2022b) 'Local Decision Making' policy provides an example of policy aimed at creating better political relationships (Strakosch 2019). The policy aims to devolve decision making power to remote communities, claiming it 'will partner with Aboriginal communities to assist the transition of government services and programs to community control', including service delivery for 'housing; local government; education, training and jobs; health; children and families; and law and justice'. A local decision making agreement has been established between Anindilyakwa Land Council (ALC) and the NT Government for the Groote Archipelago, including a Housing Implementation Plan that outlines the transition to ALC and the Anindilyakwa Housing Aboriginal Corporation of responsibilities for housing (Groote Archipelago 2018). This development of local decision making

**Commented [A108]:** Will it? Or is there a different configuration that indigenous groups have considered along communal lines that is not in line with the Weberian understanding of governance. See my point about this in your introduction. A bit more critical outlook and examination is required.

**Commented [A109R108]:** I think this is a very interesting issue and I would be glad if my article prompted further thinking and debate about what this could look like. For me, it is not that there is no possibility of some communal housing arrangement that excludes the features and technologies of bureaucratic organisation. But it is not the case that any existing vision for an alternative arrangement for Aboriginal management of remote community housing will be entirely free from bureaucratic infrastructures, nor that this vision has been promoted by Aboriginal communities in the NT. The continuation of Commonwealth or NT funding of remote housing depends on a bureaucracy, even if this is curtailed to a certain level and different forms of collective or cultural decision-making are prioritised at the community level. My contention that how community control of housing is managed is rarely interrogated is made because it is usually presumed by settler/ally scholars in Australia that somehow housing will be managed without the banal requirements of insurance, repairs and maintenance programs, a mainstream construction sector, essential services provision, and so on. This position also usually presumes that the desire for community control includes the disappearance of administrative features such as tenancy agreements, and other mechanisms for managing conflict between people, which is empirically not the case for Aboriginal organisations involved in housing management in the NT. Much discourse on this transition simply presumes that some coherent remote community will desire to manage housing on its own, disregarding all the usual dynamics, differences, and conflicts we would expect in any non-Indigenous community which would make this challenging. Scaled up from the individual community, any version of self-governance is likely to include the participation of Aboriginal land councils and/or an Aboriginal housing authority, or a similar representative institution, all of which are required to conduct typical administrative labours and engage with state bureaucracies. Most importantly, I don't think this argument is appropriately made here and I have acknowledged that a ...

**Commented [A110]:** Are policies the true way to consider that people would have more 'community' or 'democratic control' of their lands?

I don't think so. Elsewhere I have written about litigation undertaken by remote community residents to sue the government for its failure as landlord. Outside of legal responses, there are obviously other means that remote tenants and their allies have resisted state control of their housing and its legitimacy. However, this article is focused on state policy discourse.

**Commented [A111]:** Are policies the true way to consider that people would have more 'community' or 'democratic control' of their lands?

**Commented [A112R111]:**

agreements is guided by the Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy and the Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APONT, 2017) 'Partnership Principles'. Similarly, under 'Healthy Homes', the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities program for remote housing maintenance and tenancy services, service contracts have typically been advertised as select or multi-select tenders to Aboriginal Business Enterprises (ABEs) or Indigenous community controlled organisations, to increase Indigenous control and the proportion of Indigenous employment in housing management. This aim is supported by the NT Government's Aboriginal Business Enterprise Development Unit.

Considered together, these policies contribute to a policy ecology contributing to the retreat of the NT Government from various operational roles in remote housing provision.

Such policies claiming to expand Indigenous control of remote housing in the Northern Territory compete with the bureaucratic legacies of new public management reforms in Australia – including administrative decentralisation and complicated financing pathways and compliance requirements (Moran and Porter 2014) – and thus limit the potential for sovereign decision-making.

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Strakosch (2019) argues that unlike other settler colonial contexts, Australia's unwillingness to recognise First Nations people through legal mechanisms, such as treaties, means bureaucracy 'has been the frontline of colonisation' (116). In Australia, and Indigenous people are thus understood as the legitimate objects of state policy intervention, according to the basic features of 'settler unilateralism, sovereign performance and problematisation of Indigenous life' (116). In contrast, Canada has paired self-government with common social housing goals in ways that have been precluded by the guardianship approach of recent Australian policy in Indigenous affairs (Walker and Barcham 2010; Habibis 2013), though housing in Canada's north faces similar affordability, adequacy, and suitability challenges (Agrawal and Zoe 2021). The reforms in Australia do not undermine the highly bureaucratic

**Commented [A113]:** Another run on sentence.

and contract-based relationship between Indigenous community-controlled organisations or Aboriginal Business Enterprises and the NT Government, nor the fragmentation of autonomy over service delivery in remote communities. This differs significantly from the emphasis on ‘government to government’ compacting arrangements in the US, in part legitimised by the *Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act* 1975 and the block grant funding arrangements it enables (Hendrix et al. 2019; Strommer and Osborne 2015). [Shifting to Indigenous control of remote housing in the NT will not necessarily undo the bureaucratic legacies of new public management reforms, which have promoted administrative decentralisation concentration and complicated financing pathways and compliance requirements \(Moran and Porter 2014\).](#)

Were the community housing sector to expand in the Northern Territory and, if in doing so the management of public housing stock transferred to registered Indigenous community housing providers, the NT Government is also unlikely to disappear from this governmental assemblage. In the short-term, in most communities it will retain its functions related to the design, award, and superintendence of housing services contracts. The Australian Government, too, is likely to remain involved, through the regulation of the community housing sector and via funding of community housing providers. Neither of these functions are inevitably adopted by the NT or Australian Governments. Yet, such details are rarely considered in political rhetoric on the importance of increasing community control in Indigenous housing. Nor is consideration given to the relative success of contemporary attempts to build the Indigenous community housing sector and whether ABEs or Indigenous community-controlled organisations necessarily desire to adopt all the functions currently performed by the NT Government. When tenders for housing maintenance services contracts fail to receive any applications from ABEs or Indigenous community-controlled organisations, the point might be made that further investment in Indigenous business

development is required in particular regions, or that contracts are simply under-costed. However, where Indigenous organisations deliberately choose not to tender for tenancy management services contracts, because the assumption of the role of housing manager can have detrimental implications for Indigenous employees charged with managing the tenancies of their kin in small communities, the complexity of devolving control is evident.

Such complexity is inevitable and should not be understood as an argument against the expansion of Indigenous community control of remote housing. Specifically, the Central Land Council's unpublished proposal for a new Aboriginal housing model and statutory authority for central Australia deserves greater consideration. However, two issues are important for framing slow withdrawal as managed retreat in relation to the future of NT remote community housing. First, there is a severe shortage of detailed data on the condition of most assets in remote communities, including housing in particular housing and reticulated infrastructure and reticulated infrastructure in remote communities. The desire to assess the condition of assets – to fulfil the fantasy of seeing like a state (Scott 1998) – is repeated in government discourse on remote housing but it is an ideal yet to be achieved. For the devolution of remote housing to Indigenous community control, this should signal a major concern. In short, what is the condition, and therefore the related liability, of the housing and intersecting infrastructures that Indigenous organisations might inherit? Will it be possible to insure buildings that the NT Government currently self-insures? What repair and refurbishment obligations are Indigenous organisations likely to assume, as the outcome of long-term under-funding of and inattention to maintenance requirements? Clarifying the condition of assets-housing should be a minimum requirement for determining the real cost of providing housing services, going forward, and thus the required funding needed from Australian and NT Governments to subsidise remote housing management in contexts where rental revenue cannot be expected to cover housing costs.

**Commented [A114]: ?**

**Commented [A115]:** Why refer to these as assets as opposed to land? Why adopt the narrative or jargon of the settler and not that of how indigenous communities refer to them?

I have substituted assets with housing for simplicity. I use this terminology because this is the terminology that Aboriginal land councils, and specific Aboriginal corporations, are required to use in relation to any negotiated changeover arrangement for maintenance responsibilities of housing and infrastructural assets and associated liabilities.

I am not referring to land here. In the NT, any transition in responsibility for housing management will have no bearing on legal relations to land, which are governed by the ALRA and native title law, depending on the specific context. That law, for the most part, precludes land being used as a commodity as we would usually understand it anyway, i.e. alienated as specific lots, traded, developed, etc. The same goes for establishing a housing market. Where I refer to assets, housing is the chief focus of this article given its significance to everyday life and wellbeing, but there are numerous assets that a leaseholder (i.e., the NT Government or an Aboriginal corporation) would be responsible for under a remote community lease, many of which currently have individual leases related to current government access and maintenance rights and responsibilities, where these are located on Aboriginal land. This includes things like bore wells, water towers, generators, sewerage ponds, some reticulated infrastructure, etc.

I recognise that there is a dominant strain in critical academic analyses to frame relations between First Nations peoples and land in terms of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. Personally, I don't consider it appropriate for me to do that work, as a settler scholar with limited expertise in those issues. As this article tries to demonstrate, my interest is with the roles of settler governments in relation to infrastructure provision. Because this concerns boring topics like policy, leasing, insurance liability, and so on, I believe this is given insufficient attention, in particular by settler scholars. However, it is necessary that critical analyses engage with the details of legal and policy regimes related to assets in remote communities, which requires using various those settler vocabularies. My point in this section is that governments are keen to offload liabilities related to remote housing, and that the cost of providing and servicing such assets needs to be more deeply considered so that Aboriginal community control is properly funded.

**Commented [A116]:** Why refer to these as assets as opposed to land? Why adopt the narrative or jargon of the settler and not that of how indigenous communities refer to them?

**Commented [A117R116]:**

**Commented [A118]:** This paragraph is a bit unsettling as it refers to land/assets in the way that settlers do rather than how indigenous communities might repurpose these 'assets' in a more communal and decommodified way.

**Commented [A119R118]:** I have responded to this criticism below.

Framing this challenge – the transition of assets housing and other remote community infrastructure to Indigenous community control following appropriate condition assessment and under agreements guaranteeing long-term funding arrangements – is the second issue of the temporality of agreement-making described in this article. In short, at what rate and in what order might the slow withdrawal as managed retreat of the state from remote housing operations (if not the wholesale withdrawal of state funding) occur? Under what leasing arrangements and with what funded programs in place will the NT Government be able to establish the next funding agreement with the Australian Government, which has already expressed its disinterest in funding remote housing throughout Australian jurisdictions? In this way, if the NT Government is genuinely committed to building the Indigenous community housing sector in order to transition decision-making powers and operational management operations to Indigenous control, it remains is unclear how long there is to pursue this process while it is governed by the unpredictable assured of guarantee length of agreements established between the Commonwealth and NT Government Australian Government fundings. Further consideration is thus required about the What is the staging and velocity of a desirable state withdrawal and transfer to Indigenous community control.

This section has considered how the framework of slow withdrawal as managed retreat can be used to understand policies governing remote community housing in the Northern Territory, despite significant government spending on social housing in remote Indigenous communities across the past fifteen years. I have described the expansion of the community housing sector in the Northern Territory, and the emergence of NT Government policy rhetoric on Indigenous community control, as signalling attempts by the NT Government to withdraw from certain service provision functions in remote housing. In doing so, I suggest

that greater consideration must be given to the terms and velocity by which any exchange of control of housing takes place. This is necessary to ensure that what is represented as Indigenous sovereignty over remote housing conforms to the desires of remote community residents and their representative institutions, and that the infrastructural inheritances of state withdrawal are emancipatory rather than costly expensive liabilities. ~~when the situation is also governed by the unpredictable length of agreements established between the Commonwealth and NT Governments?~~ If the NT Government is committed to building the Indigenous community housing sector to hand over decision making and operations, how long does it have to pursue this process?

**Commented [A120]:**

## 5. Building an Indigenous community-controlled housing sector, again

In this moment, it is politically compelling to demand greater Indigenous control of remote community housing. It is more difficult to ensure that such control is not a ruse for the state's disavowal of unwanted funding and service obligations, enacted through the language of self-determination (Durie 1998). We might examine how closely emergent policy arrangements embracing such rhetoric correspond to the frameworks that facilitated either of the homelands movement or the Intervention, with regard to Indigenous stakeholders' priorities, participation, and autonomy in decision-making about remote housing.

Considering the transition to Indigenous control over remote housing, it is reasonable to argue that decisions regarding institutional structures, program arrangements, house designs, rent regimes, maintenance methodologies, and so on, cannot be made in advance of establishing meaningful (statutory or otherwise) arrangements for First Nations peoples' control over decision-making itself. ~~But to avoid an institutional and policy vacuum in the wake of the state's retreat, such consideration should already be underway, including by the recently established National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Association, Aboriginal land councils, and peak bodies.~~ Building an Indigenous community-controlled

**Commented [A121]:** Wouldn't this be desirable in some way so it allows communities to do what they please as opposed to depending on a specific policy regime or approach that comes from outside the community.

**Commented [A122R121]:** I don't think so, though it is a question worthy of further debate elsewhere. Homelands is the comparison case here. Residents have relative autonomy but have ultimately spent more than a decade calling on the government for greater funding, while the government has shown no interest having since vacated certain of its responsibilities. This statement is essentially one made to peak bodies and land councils, with whom I have worked, to ensure they provide effective representation for the remote community residents they represent.

housing sector in the Northern Territory is a complex socio-political, but also legal and administrative, project. The histories described are necessary to understand the legal and policy inheritances that govern the present – both what must be undone and what can be saved.

This article has developed the concept of slow withdrawal as managed retreat to highlight the geographic aspects of state withdrawal, the rearrangement of priorities within and between\_among levels of government, and the opportunities presented by the state's disinclination to continue to provide funding or operational services in certain contexts.

Appropriating and developing the concept of managed retreat in this way may provide a framework for analyses of oscillating state support in other contexts, including via policy responses to climate change that do not register as explicit programs of adaptation or planned relocation. I have shown that managed retreats from prior obligations by states are not necessarily declared, but might be identified instead through the combined effects of a policy assemblage or ecology (Lea 2020). The settler colonial state is a constant presence in remote Indigenous Australia and its withdrawals are typically metamorphic rather than wholesale abdications. As Moreton-Robinson (2015) notes, maintaining Australia as a 'white possession' requires ongoing political and policy work by settler governments. Knowing this, and pursuing the development of an Indigenous community-controlled housing sector, it is imperative that obligations are transferred to Indigenous community-controlled organisations on favourable terms determined by them, and guaranteed for long periods, lest they inherit the products of state neglect.

**Commented [A123]:** I also have not seen where the state refers at all to climate change as a rationale for disinvestment.

**Commented [A124R123]:** Revised.

**Commented [A125]:** These terms must be decided by these communities based on their own governing structures. Think and consider this point.

**Commented [A126R125]:** I agree with this. Have added an explicit clause.

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## Slow withdrawal as managed retreat: Dismantling and rebuilding an Indigenous housing sector

### Abstract

Managed retreat is part of the planners' analytical toolkit. It considers that human displacements driven by climate change will be more just if they are strategically managed by well-resourced authorities. In contrast to the contradistinction this discourse establishes between the status quo of ad hoc displacement and planned relocation, managed retreat disregards other policies that similarly encourage migration from places the state deems unviable. This article argues that *slow withdrawal as managed retreat* offers a framework for understanding policies that facilitate the reduction or discontinuation of services that settler colonial states formerly delivered to particular contexts. It does so through historical analysis of state support for housing and essential services infrastructure at Indigenous homelands and remote communities in the Northern Territory of Australia. Slow withdrawal as managed retreat emphasises the geographically differentiated character of state investment, highlights the reconfiguration of obligations for service provision between different levels of government, and considers whether and how 'abandonment' is appropriate 'land back' policy advancing Indigenous sovereignty. The article examines how the settler state withdraws specific supports while remaining present, and it considers the process of slow withdrawal as managed retreat in relation to contemporary demands for greater community control of Indigenous housing.

**Keywords:** managed retreat; withdrawal; organised abandonment; housing; infrastructure; policy; homelands; remote communities

## **1. Dismantling an Indigenous community-controlled housing sector**

A visitor to a remote Indigenous community in the Northern Territory of Australia might distinguish it from a homeland by the presence of a clinic, shop, school, or non-Indigenous workforce. But such institutional investment is not guaranteed in remote Indigenous communities and large homelands can appear like small remote communities, with similar infrastructural amenities. Despite the empirical resemblance and shared remoteness from service centres, the distinction between remote communities and homelands is important, fracturing state policy and funding. The category ‘remote community’ is both geographic and governmental, determined by the relative distance of communities to service centres and policy histories that have formalised relationships between colonial settlements, missions, and Aboriginal reserves. Homelands, also known as outstations, are the outcome of the homelands movement that began in the late 1960s; are typically situated on their inhabitants’ ancestral country and often as satellite settlements to remote communities or towns; and are testament to the resistance and endurance of First Nations peoples in settler colonial Australia (Peterson and Myers 2016).

In this article, I argue that the consolidation of the governmental distinction between remote communities and homelands is part of a larger project of the state’s slow withdrawal from historical obligations to support remote Indigenous livelihoods. In the Northern Territory, there are 73 prescribed remote communities and approximately 600 homelands (Northern Territory Government 2020). Drawing on the state policy archive, I suggest that the distinction between remote communities and homelands has effected the cumulative withdrawal of support for homelands, but also that a similar process is underway for remote communities in the Northern Territory. By framing this slow withdrawal as a process of managed retreat, I emphasise the geographically differentiated character of state investment, highlight the reconfiguration of obligations for service provision among different levels of

government, and consider whether and how state ‘abandonment’ is appropriate ‘land back’ policy advancing Indigenous sovereignty.

In June 2007, the Australian Government announced the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response*. Better known as ‘The Intervention’, this suite of legislative and policy reforms was justified under the guise of protecting Indigenous children from sexual abuse. The government selectively misappropriated recommendations from the *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle “Little Children are Sacred”* report to expeditiously implement new regimes governing specified Aboriginal communities in relation to remote leasing, housing and infrastructure funding, social security payments, and alcohol sale and consumption, among other things (Wild and Anderson 2007; Howard-Wagner 2012).

However, the Intervention also followed a lesser known review of the Community Housing and Infrastructure Programme (CHIP). The report *Living in a Sunburnt Country* (Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2007) identified a lack of regulation of housing standards in remote communities, inadequate maintenance services due to ad hoc funding, and inconsistent financial and operational oversight by some Indigenous Community Housing Organisations (ICHOs). At the time, ICHOs were usually small organisations administered through local councils that did not own or lease houses but were responsible for housing management (Eringa et al. 2008). The report recommended that the state should assume responsibility for remote housing and ‘continue the shift away from building housing on “on country” outstations and homelands’ (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2007, 23). Under the Intervention, this report bolstered support for the Australian Government’s compulsory acquisition of five-year township leases for 64 Aboriginal communities. Funding for new houses and infrastructure became contingent on traditional owners agreeing to longer-term leasing arrangements, which by the end of the compulsory five-year leases had resulted in 40-, 80- and 99-year leases of remote communities to the Australian Government, typically

sub-leased to the NT Government (Terrill 2015). Daisy Yarmirr described that the ‘NTG stole all the communities off us, they were our houses, and all of a sudden they belonged to Territory Housing and we are totally reliant on government’ (APONT 2015, 25).

The process to dismantle an Indigenous community-controlled housing sector was deliberate and agreed upon by the Australian and NT Governments. While classically paternalistic in its commitment to the ‘normalisation’ of housing tenure and tenancy management (Sullivan 2011), the funding provided for remote housing and infrastructure was atypical of the broader trajectory of contemporary governments in settler colonial nation states towards the reduction of investment in social housing and in particular in remote Indigenous communities (Agrawal and Zoe 2021; Habibis 2013; Strommer and Osborne 2015). The *Memorandum of Understanding Between the Australian Government and the Northern Territory Government Indigenous Housing, Accommodation and Related Services September 2007* (hereafter MoU) outlined housing and infrastructure funding following the Intervention. Housing repairs and upgrades required the transfer of existing assets from communities ‘to publicly owned Territory Housing on the completion of the repairs and upgrades’ (clause 19). The MoU outlined \$414.2 million in new Australian Government funding for construction, repairs, and upgrades of housing in 73 remote Aboriginal communities under the subsequently announced Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP). The funding was contingent on the basis that the Northern Territory Government: ‘take over responsibility for the delivery of services to outstations’, among other things (clause 5). The MoU was explicit in withdrawing direct responsibility of the Australian Government for Indigenous housing, municipal, and essential services infrastructure (clause 6), and it proscribed the use of Commonwealth funding for constructing houses on homelands (outstations) (clause 17). Dismantling the Indigenous community-controlled housing sector was an explicit goal: ‘Both governments agree that the

funding will facilitate the transition from Indigenous community-controlled housing to a public housing model' (clause 9) (Porter 2009).

Three points should be emphasised from this swiftly summarised policy history. First, the reforms effectively established the withdrawal of Australian Government support for homelands. Some Commonwealth funding for homelands would continue to be provided to the NT Government but this could not be used to construct new houses. Second, the reforms obliged the NT Government to directly manage housing in remote Indigenous communities. This required the creation of a public housing bureaucracy and ongoing Australian and NT Government funding for remote housing. Third, while the distinction between remote Indigenous communities and homelands preceded the Intervention, the MoU consolidated a major difference in their governance. On the one hand, remote communities and town camps at Alice Springs were coerced to exchange relative infrastructural sovereignty via long-term leases for housing and infrastructure funding. In 2012, Chief Executive Officer of Tangentyere Council, Walter Shaw, described the 'multi-generational [40-year] lease' as 'the lesser of two evils' as compared to the compulsory acquisition of communities under the Intervention (Community Affairs Legislation Committee 2012), and in 2016 argued that Tangentyere Council 'believe the public housing management of town camps needs to end in favour of a community housing model that both empowers and cares for the welfare of residents' (Public Accounts Committee 2016, 27). Unlike this compromise forced upon remote community residents, homelands funding was severely curtailed, congruent with a broader policy imperative for 'normalisation' that prioritised demographic centralisation and formalised tenancies in remote communities (Sullivan 2011; Howey 2014; Habibis 2013).

This article repurposes the planning discourse of 'managed retreat' to characterise the state's slow withdrawal of support for remote Indigenous livelihoods. It offers a detailed history of

the documentary infrastructures of settler colonial governance – exchanges of letters, memoranda of understanding, leases, funding agreements, and program regulations. As Ford (2012) notes, ‘describing and evaluating relationships between settler and Indigenous governance is an inescapably empirical project’ (10). Of course, prioritising the materials of the state archive produces a partial history of slow withdrawal, which would benefit from further scholarship describing the role of Indigenous communities in influencing and resisting state policy platforms. However, the approach taken by this article is necessary for understanding the bureaucratic and legal mechanisms by which states practically reframe and reform relations with Indigenous people in remote communities. In this vein, I suggest characterisations of these historical dynamics via large-scale abstraction – late- or neoliberalism, the extractivist state, and so on – while recognisable and sometimes useful registers for critical scholarship, can also obfuscate empirical policy shifts and policy contradictions. Eschewing recognisable critique in such terms through focused attention to the empirical details of metamorphic institutions, policy assemblages, and their effects is necessary for imagining alternative administrative arrangements that prioritise Indigenous sovereignty, including those managed exclusively by First Nations peoples.

In the following section, I develop *slow withdrawal as managed retreat* as a conceptual framework for understanding shifting state commitments to remote community and homelands housing. This concept attends to how various state authorities have sought to reconfigure jurisdictions and redistribute obligations, including the Australian Government’s disavowal of historical obligations to support homelands and its disinterest in the ongoing management of remote community housing. Following this introduction’s overview of the Intervention reforms, the third section provides a history of the present of homelands governance to demonstrate the bureaucratic work of drawing and reproducing the distinction between homelands and remote communities, and to set-up the claim that a managed retreat

from remote communities is also currently underway. I develop this claim in the fourth section through consideration of contemporary remote housing policies, and with attention to the relationship between the Australian and NT Governments. I suggest that attention to processes of state withdrawal encourages our consideration of the related potential to decolonise social housing in remote communities, alongside the risks of discontinued state provisioning. The article concludes by presenting the potential of managed retreat as the reformation of an Indigenous community housing sector.

## **2. Slow withdrawal as managed retreat**

Managed retreat is part of the planner's analytical toolkit, used to distinguish forms of state-subsidised relocation from unfunded and unplanned migrations driven by climate change.

For Siders et al. (2019),

We propose a reconceptualization of retreat as a suite of adaptation options that are both strategic and managed. Strategy integrates retreat into long-term development goals and identifies why retreat should occur and, in doing so, influences where and when. Management addresses how retreat is executed. (761)

In this way, managed retreat characterises relocation as not a failure to adapt but an adaptation strategy (Bettini 2014), and as a pragmatic response to slow climate disaster and the 'anticipatory ruination' wrought by developmentalist policies in vulnerable geographies (Paprocki 2018). The emphasis of this discourse is on proactive, coherent, and just interventions in response to projected scenarios where contemporary livelihoods appear increasingly unviable in present contexts, and climate-induced displacement appears likely.

Critical scholarship has argued that managed retreat can operate as both a tool and threat for marginalised communities (Pérez and Tomaselli 2021; Henrique and Tschakert 2021), whose relative vulnerability is often entrenched by the oscillating intervention and absence

of governments (Amoako 2016), with no guarantees that planned relocations will be either participatory or just (Bronen and Cochrane 2021; Yarina et al. 2019). State departments have appropriated the managed retreat discourse to access federal funds and subsume specific Indigenous planning rationales and aims into bureaucratic efforts, producing ‘a scalable model for managed retreat policy’ (Jessee 2022, 277). Such relocation projects have also been influenced by the prerogatives of for-profit developers and philanthropic aid programs to the detriment of racialised and minoritised communities (Aidoo 2021). Such dynamics indicate the ongoing dividend derived by settler colonial states from the territorial dispossession of Indigenous people, pursued under the benign framing of transformative adaptation deemed necessary to confront environmental hazards. Similarly, Indigenous involvement in participatory planning for remote Australian housing and infrastructure projects is neither guaranteed nor uncomplicated (Moran 2004), with bureaucrats, construction firms, and researchers standing to gain from the reproduction of perceived Indigenous dysfunction and the related justification to intervene (Lea 2012).

Where planned relocations occur, loss is inherent to transitions that involve the evacuation of places and dismantling of communities (Elliot 2018; Barnett et al. 2016). This is especially true for Indigenous people for whom place attachment is fundamental to collective cultural and spiritual identities and for whom climate-induced managed retreat is but the latest in a series of displacements (McMichael and Katonivualiku 2020; Memmott and Go-Sam 2016). Indigenous people often live in locations that are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change, as an effect of water-based cultural beliefs and practices and prior forms of settler colonial dispossession, and thus become the principal subjects of managed retreat policies (Suliman et al. 2019). Scholarship that examines managed retreat has predominantly attended to coastal or riverine contexts featuring rising sea levels and land-loss, such as in Pacific Islands societies (Farbotko 2010, 2012; Suliman et al. 2019),

Alaska (Shearer 2012), and at Isle de Jean Charles in Louisiana (Jessee 2020). In Australia, the habitability of some islands in the Torres Strait is threatened by sea level rise, with calls for relocation planning emerging alongside both sea wall fortification and Indigenous expressions of resistance, or ‘voluntary immobility’ (Farbotko and McMichael 2019). As Masig Island resident, Hilda Mosby, states, ‘We’re doing everything we can to stay where we are’ (in Park et al. 2021).<sup>1</sup>

My appropriation of managed retreat applies to two subjects of retreat: first, Indigenous residents leaving remote communities, whether or not supported by a managed retreat policy framework. Second, I consider governments, as these withdraw from providing services necessary for remote residents to remain on country. The latter is this article’s chief focus, though it briefly engages with the relevance of outmigration from remote communities because managed retreat is likely to become a standard framework for governing such mobility in Australia. For both subjects, I consider managed retreat in a way that conflicts with the positivist tendency of dominant planning and policy analysis to focus on governmental interventions using this or a similar nomenclature that are explicitly aimed at planned relocation (see Dundon and Abkowitz 2021). Instead, I suggest that analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> Greater consideration is needed of both climate adaptation strategies and managed retreat planning to arid contexts in remote Australia (Graham 2020). Arid areas are not disappearing through sea-level rise and inundation but are subject to water scarcity and increasingly severe temperatures (Allam and Evershed 2019; Grealy and Lea 2021a). Such areas will continue to be inhabited by First Nations people, and governments must support Indigenous community-controlled organisations to develop policies that accommodate forms of climate-induced temporary and permanent migration (McMichael and Katonivualiku 2020).

managed retreat should involve attention paid to policies that are variously explicit in their goals for retreat, but which nonetheless intend or effect that outcome.

In the first instance, this includes policies that incentivise migration from certain geographies through the redirection and redistribution of government resources. In the Northern Territory, an example is the former ‘Territory Growth Towns’ strategy, under which the NT Government reoriented its remote service delivery through the creation of 20 ‘service hubs’ and alongside the amalgamation of 60 Indigenous community councils into 8 shire councils (Howard-Wagner and Kelly 2011). Memmott and Go-Sam (2016) question whether this centralisation strategy sought to bolster state attempts at behavioural modification, while Markham and Doran (2015) write that ‘Implicit in the allocation of service hubs was the expectation that service centralization would result in population growth via migration from communities in their hinterland’ (114). As with planned relocation programs that have failed to acknowledge past injustices and climate risks (Nash et al. 2018), embrace deliberation, and nurture obligations to human and more-than-human others (Henrique and Tschakert 2021), this approach was pursued despite many remote residents’ desires to remain on country (Habibis 2013). Yolgnu painter and activist Dr Gawirrin Gumana (2009) argued forcefully against this suite of policies following the Intervention: ‘Government, if you don’t help our homelands, and try to starve me from my land, I tell you, you can kill me first … I will not lose my culture and my tribe to your games like a bird moving from place to place’. Demographic policy encouraging residents of very remote settlements to centralise and sedenterise in regional centres, through the superior provision of infrastructure in those places, can underpin a situation that displaces residents, not by relocating them but by ‘[leaving] communities in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable’ (Nixon 2011, 19). This can be understood as a policy of managed retreat.

This article is centrally concerned with managed retreat as the coherence of various policies – a ‘policy ecology’ in Tess Lea’s (2020) terms – that underpin state withdrawal from former obligations. Gilmore’s (2009) writing on ‘organised abandonment’ and the ‘antistate state’, developed with regard to late-liberal state reforms in the United States, offers conceptual overlap with slow withdrawal as managed retreat that is helpful for elucidating the specificity of the latter concept. Gilmore (2009) describes that the US has witnessed the expansion of ‘a view that certain capacities of the state are obstacles to development, and thus should be shrunken or otherwise debilitated from playing a role in everyday economic and social life’ (43). But, despite this, ‘we are faced with the ascendance of antistate state actors: people and parties who gain state power by denouncing state power’, with associated public spending increases in sectors such as prisons and policing (Gilmore 2020). Despite ‘small state’ rhetoric, this is a form of governance by redistribution; the state ‘doesn’t get cheaper, and it doesn’t, in the aggregate, shrink’ (Gilmore and Gilmore 2016, 145). We could use Gilmore’s work to frame, for example, competitive tendering processes established within Australian state and territory public housing and social welfare programs, employed to contract-manage private companies and the non-profit sector (Wolch in Gilmore 2009). Organised abandonment might be a reasonable diagnosis of the shift in urban social housing management in numerous Australian jurisdictions, from public housing models to a diversified state-subsidised social housing sector, including increased welfare conditionality and competition amongst service providers. However, in the Northern Territory in particular, the application of organised abandonment would misconstrue the state’s continuing role in remote housing provision. Rather than the death of public housing, across the past 15 years, a remote public housing sector has been established and expanded (Porter 2009).

*Slow withdrawal as managed retreat* is a framework for critical analyses to identify the policies involved in state funding and service provision reconfiguration and their effects. In doing so, it highlights three features of policy. First, the framework emphasises that policies effecting state withdrawal can be circumscribed by geographic designations. The state can withdraw from a particular place, or category of place, rather than a generalised historical responsibility (for example, devolving the provision of higher education to private companies). Second, it highlights that the state does not always name its managed retreat in recognisable terms. Policy-led retreat can also occur by stealth, misdirection, and obligation-shifting. Third, as with all policy, the extent to which the implementation and outcomes of specific policies might be ‘managed’, or controlled, is limited. Even where the intent of policy is relatively coherent, a resulting withdrawal of funding or services may be partial and geographically inconsistent. In the Northern Territory, slow withdrawal as managed retreat has occurred through the accrual of policies and governmental rearrangements over time rather than as a deliberate shift indicative of any coherent underlying ideology. As I develop it below, slow withdrawal as managed retreat is a framework for identifying the velocity and orientation of state support relative to prior commitments, of policies by many names operating to various prerogatives, and for assessing their combined material impacts.

I use managed retreat to frame the slow, cumulative withdrawal of state support to remote residents, in relation to housing and infrastructure in particular, for the following reasons. First, drawing on its conventional application as a planner’s discourse, managed retreat highlights the geographic components of state policy, including the increasing significance of climate change to infrastructural decision-making (Dundon and Abkowitz 2021). Policies are not simply matters of state attention or abandonment, but enact the reterritorialisation and redefinition of jurisdictions to which resources are distributed. In what follows, the distinction between homelands and remote communities is central.

Second, slow withdrawal shares with Gilmore's (2007) approach a commitment to detailed analysis of how states reconfigure obligations and redistribute resources, including through agreements between levels of government. In contrast to how the language of abandonment is often employed to infer state absence, Gilmore examines how an antistate state has fostered a rhetoric of state contraction to disguise the erosion of welfare and expansion of state-spending on incarceration and policing. In contrast, the slow withdrawal as managed retreat characterising Australian governments' approaches to homelands and remote communities has consistently maintained a public rhetoric of the state's commitment to 'close the gap' on Indigenous disadvantage, even as withdrawals are consolidated through government 'buck-passing' through agreement-making. The settler colonial state has not disappeared from remote housing provision in Australia, or straightforwardly devolved its responsibilities, even as it has reconfigured its role.

Third, the characterisation of abandonment can infer not only that the state has withdrawn from performing a function, but that it rightfully performed that function. In settler colonial contexts where Indigenous peoples have asserted various forms of nationhood throughout long periods of illegitimate state intervention, the withdrawal of the state may also be a central goal, and even a requirement, of First Nations self-government (Cornell 2015). Rather than abandonment, state withdrawal from Indigenous communities can help to constitute various freedoms, from state policing and administrative governance, and for sovereign decision-making. Thus slow withdrawal as managed retreat highlights both the mechanics of how former obligations are reconfigured, and what might come to take their place. These three points – the geography of withdrawal; state reconfiguration; and withdrawal as opportunity for Indigenous sovereignty – are considered in the following sections.

### **3. Contested responsibility for homelands housing and infrastructure**

Managed retreat policies subsidise livelihoods in particular geographies. In central and northern Australia, this has involved the withdrawal of support for homelands and inconsistent support for remote community housing. This section provides a history of the present of homelands governance to consider a particular iteration of slow withdrawal as managed retreat. I argue that managed retreat is the *de facto* policy of the Australian Government for housing in remote Indigenous communities. However it is one implemented over a long period, and through multiple policy rearrangements, in which homelands have thus far been subject to the most significant withdrawals. Examining this policy history as slow withdrawal as managed retreat allows us to consider both what is being withdrawn, how this happens cumulatively, and what continuing role governments play in remote housing and infrastructure provision.

[Figure 1. Discrete Indigenous communities, Australian Geographical classification remoteness structure. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Commonwealth of Australia 2007.]

In the Northern Territory, there are 18 gazetted towns, 73 prescribed remote Indigenous communities, and approximately 600 homelands (Figure 1). Comprising 18 per cent of Australia's land mass, the Northern Territory has a population of only 246,000 people, of whom about 30 percent are Indigenous, as compared with 3.3 percent of the Australian population as a whole (ABS 2018). The important Blanchard Report (Commonwealth of Australia 1987) defined 'homeland centres/outstations' as 'small decentralised communities of close kin, established by the movement of Aboriginal people to land of social, cultural and economic significance to them' (xiii). As an anonymised 'Pitjantjatjara person' quoted in the Blanchard report states, 'We want to live in our own place, Aborigines only ... This is

our place. Our fathers and grandfathers hunted here' (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, xxxv; Figure 2). Altman (2013) identifies some of the empirical diversity of homelands by suggesting that most 'are populated by small family groups, but some number more than a hundred people. Some are occupied year-round, others seasonally or rarely ... The key commonality is that their residents have made a determined choice to actively engage with their land' (77). Myers and Peterson (2016) frame outstations as 'life projects', to emphasise the pursuit by Indigenous people on homelands of both independence from the state and market and the pursuit of place-based knowledge and obligations. The NT Government (2021) estimates that 'In the 2018-19 financial year, 386 Homelands (out of approximately 600) were funded under various grant programs, with approximately 6,000 to 7,000 residents occupying 1,402 dwellings benefiting from funding' (3).

From the late 1960s, Australian Government policy shifted from assimilation to Aboriginal self-determination (Habibis et al. 2019). Self-determination involved a significant emphasis on returning to country, through the establishment of land rights under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (ALRA) and support of the emerging homelands movement (Altman 2017). Over 50 per cent of the Northern Territory is Aboriginal land granted to traditional owners as inalienable freehold title under the *ALRA*, and administered by land councils. In its own way, the homelands movement was a form of collective retreat from the institutions and contexts of protectionism and assimilation, including former missions and reserves. Rather than a step backward, this was retreat as refuge, resistance, and return (Koslov 2016). Supported by grants issued by the Commonwealth Departments of Aboriginal Affairs, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), and new Indigenous corporations, housing associations, and homelands resource centres, housing and essential services infrastructures were often built on country from which First Nations people had been forcibly removed generations before.

Historical policy arrangements laid the foundation for subsequent geographies of slow withdrawal and contemporary contestation over responsibility for homelands. On 1 July 1978, the Commonwealth devolved self-government to the Northern Territory, transferring powers to the NT Government, with exceptions related to uranium mining, national parks, and Aboriginal affairs (see Appendix A [1978] in Commonwealth Grants Commission 1981, 74). The division of responsibilities for remote communities and homelands was determined through the unusual mechanism of an exchange of letters between the Commonwealth Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Fred Chaney and the NT Chief Minister Paul Everingham. A letter authored by Chaney to Everingham, dated 27 June 1979, outlined the transfer of finances to the Northern Territory to manage Commonwealth programs for municipal and local government services in Aboriginal communities. Despite this transfer of operational responsibilities for, at the time, 42 remote communities, Chaney outlined that the Australian Government would retain responsibility for policy, planning, and coordination in Aboriginal Affairs. In addition, the NT Government would play no decision-making or funding role in homelands with Chaney (1979) stating that 'In my view, [homelands] are not townships where residents might expect to have municipal services provided' (2). Chaney outlined his intention to retain control of the Commonwealth's program of direct grants to NT Aboriginal housing associations for remote housing construction and maintenance. However, clarity of service provision at homelands was blurred from the beginning of territorial self-government in the Northern Territory. 'I acknowledge', wrote Chaney, 'that, because of the transfer of the essential services functions, your [NT] Government already has a vital role to play in these communities, essentially in relation to the provision of water supplies' (3).

The NT Chief Minister was underwhelmed by this arrangement. In a letter dated 20 July 1979 Everingham outlined the NT Government's acceptance of resources to fund and administer municipal and local government services in remote communities. Regarding homelands, Everingham expressed his disappointment at the decision of the Australian Government to maintain an operational role. He outlined that

Homeland centres on Aboriginal land are invariably closely associated with one of the main centres for which the N.T. Government has been given these additional functional responsibilities and indeed some of them have elected to come under the community government umbrella of these larger communities....

I believe that the only proper approach is for us not to distinguish between groups in this new transfer of powers. (Everingham 1979, 2)

Everingham recognised that the distinction made by the Commonwealth between remote communities and homelands was an artificial one, complicated by the expectation that the NT Government would supply essential services to both places. Further, Everingham's comments highlighted the porous distinction between two categories of place – remote communities and homelands – underpinned by the mobility of residents and infrastructural provision, whereby the provision of housing and infrastructure to a homeland could effectively transform it into a remote community.

[Figure 2. Extract from the Blanchard Report (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, xxxv).]

In 1987, the publication of the Blanchard (1987) Report served a public legitimisation function for homelands, recognising residents' ongoing commitments to such settlements (Figure 2), the positive social and spiritual benefits they provided, and setting expectations for ongoing policy recognition (Altman 2017; Palmer 2016). The Report's recommendations included that all permanent homelands be provided with adequate water infrastructure, that

the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs undertake a survey of housing needs on homelands, and that government funds be directed to homelands resource centres (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, xxiv-xxv). However, it also identified that because homelands were governed by Commonwealth, state, and territory policies, the ‘diversity of support agencies has resulted in some confusion due largely to the lack of clarity of responsibilities and the extent of support they will direct to the homelands movement over and above other functional responsibilities’ (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, 39).

At the time, the policy objective of the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) regarding homelands was: ‘To enable Aboriginals, who wish to do so, to establish and maintain small communities on their own land, or on land to which they have a right of occupation, where they are free to follow a lifestyle of their choice’ (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, 40). However, the Blanchard Report highlighted that this policy’s objective would not necessarily be achieved through the partial devolution of responsibility to the NT Government. While

An important aspect of the [DAA] policies on homeland centres is that it does not want to replicate the centralised communities in terms of facilities and services ... This differs, to some extent, from the Department’s approach to the provision of essential services to homelands communities where it argues that State and Territory governments have a responsibility to provide homeland centres “with a level of facilities equal to that provided to other sections of the community in a manner which is appropriate to their needs”. (42)

This question about the ‘level’ of infrastructural amenity that homelands require or deserve relative to remote and urban communities, and government responsibility for meeting that level, has remained contested since the formation of homeland settlements.

The Blanchard Report provided the example of ablution facilities to demonstrate the ambiguity over infrastructural obligations at homelands in the 1980s. ‘Housing or shelter in homeland centres is usually fairly basic’, the report states, ‘Where homeland centre housing has been provided it is often in the form of small galvanised lock-up sheds with concrete floors and no services such as cooking facilities, ablution facilities or electricity’ (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, 180). But neither the NT Government responsibility for essential services nor the Commonwealth conception of reasonable standards for homelands shelters clarified ‘who is responsible?’ for the provision of ablutions (43). In its submission to the Standing Committee, the NT Government expressed frustration over the non-specification of services it was expected to provide at homelands (53). At the time, both the NT Housing Commission and the Commonwealth Aboriginal Development Commission provided funding for homelands housing, however within the Australian Government there was confusion over the role of the Commission and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs regarding their respective obligations (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, 183-184).

Others have written more comprehensive histories of homelands governance (see Myers and Peterson 2016; Marks 2015; Altman 2017). Suffice to say here that while the homelands movement continued through the 1980s and early 1990s, these issues of inter-governmental responsibility remained unresolved. Governmental rearrangements have been the norm across this period, with Perche (2018) noting that since the Australian Government assumed responsibility for the portfolio following the 1967 Referendum, Indigenous Affairs has ‘been subjected to 10 different structures and overseen by 21 different ministers’ (S20). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) that was established in 1990 following the abolition of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, managed homelands through its National Homelands Policy, and distributed funds to homelands resource agencies through the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP) and the

Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme (Kerins 2009; Palmer 2016). After developing more stringent funding guidelines for proposed homelands, ATSIC was itself abolished in 2004. In 2005 the Commonwealth Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Amanda Vanstone, questioned the desirability and viability of providing amenities beyond basic services at homelands (Eastley 2005; Morphy 2016), echoing the tenor of the influential Reeves Report (1998), which had already instigated debate about land rights and homelands' economic viability. Such comments signalled the wider dissipation of political support for homelands under Prime Minister John Howard's neoconservative Australian Government (1996-2007), and the political pursuit of what Farbotko (2010) has characterised as a process of 'wishful sinking'. Following the abolition of ATSIC, CHIP was administered by Australian Government departments and 'a moratorium was placed on CHIP funding in respect of *any* new housing and infrastructure on outstations and homelands, including existing outstations' (Marks 2015, 48). This moratorium, already a form of slow withdrawal as managed retreat, was formalised in the MoU of 2007.

[Table 1. An historical overview of slow withdrawal as managed retreat]<sup>2</sup>

As in settler colonial nation states elsewhere with similar histories of frontier violence, confinement of Indigenous people to missions and reservations, and fluctuating government support for self-management (Strakosch 2019), homelands funding for housing and essential services infrastructure has never been adequate relative to need. Across time, even as

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<sup>2</sup> Table 1 provides an overview of events described in this article. This is a reference for readers, rather than a comprehensive representation of state policy history, and it would be effectively complemented by scholarship centred on Indigenous community responses to state policies and institutional reconfigurations.

absolute funding has increased, so too have standards associated with infrastructural provision: a house today does not resemble a house built in the 1980s, when the provision of washing facilities could be debated by different departments as either a matter of housing or essential services infrastructure (Figure 3). Nor have the funding roles played by the Australian and NT Governments ever been fully separated – the settler state is neither singular in its policy objectives nor settled in terms of policy continuity. Nonetheless, broadly, up until 2007, it was the Australian Government that was chiefly responsible for funding housing and infrastructure on homelands. The 2007 MoU was a fundamental reconfiguration of this relationship, with the NT Government compelled to accept Commonwealth funding for remote communities despite restrictions on homelands spending. The reconfiguration of land tenure through the compulsory acquisition of remote community leases and the associated direction of funds to larger remote communities effectively privatised assets on homelands, with housing the property of traditional owners or a land trust if located on Aboriginal land (Kerins 2009).

At the Australian Government level, Marks (2015) identifies the importance of the 2008 *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* (NIRA), established by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), as a homelands policy by another name. ‘Priority for enhanced infrastructural support and service provision should be to larger and more economically sustainable communities’, the *NIRA* clarified. The NIRA committed governments to ‘Facilitating voluntary mobility by individuals and families to areas where better education and job opportunities exist, with higher standards of services’ (COAG 2009; Marks 2015). This is an instance of slow withdrawal as managed retreat without establishing this as an explicit policy position. This is true even as the Australian Government committed in 2012 under the ‘Stronger Futures’ policy to provide the NT Government with \$206 million over ten years for homelands essential and municipal services (Commonwealth of Australia

2012). Three years later, in the 2015 Commonwealth budget, this was converted to a one-off payment of \$155 million to the NT Government to take ‘full fiscal responsibility for the servicing of homelands’, cashing out from the 10-year funding agreement (NT Government 2020, 1; Schubert 2015). Slow withdrawal highlights the way that ratcheting up the attrition of funding over time exacerbates the difficulties associated with remaining on country. It involves increasing pressure on residents to move elsewhere for adequate housing, despite the advantages homelands offer to cultural continuity and wellbeing. In this way, ongoing funding can feature within a policy ecology of slow withdrawal that is both strategic and managed, through reductions, increased conditionality, and shortened time-frames.

Across this period, the Australian Government has effectively withdrawn support for NT homelands. Following the 2007 MoU, the provision of ‘walk-away money’ in 2012 (cashed out in 2015) consolidated this arrangement, with no contemporary agreement guaranteeing future Australian Government contributions to NT homelands. As it stands, the Northern Territory Homelands Program contributes grant funding towards services for eligible homelands, however funding eligibility depends on the presence of safe and secure housing. This is difficult to access where a recent review of homelands policy acknowledged that ‘the majority of housing stock was originally constructed by the Commonwealth Government over 30 years ago, and that current Homelands housing stock is in poor repair’ (NT Government 2020, 23; Centre for Appropriate Technology 2016). The NT Government has not itself funded the construction of new housing on homelands, due to both the capital costs involved and because the logic of remote leasing has saturated governmental practice. In sum, no new assets are provided without leases that clearly establish liability for ongoing maintenance, and no leases will be sought by either the Australian or NT governments for homelands, where the legacy of historical assets and inattention to them establishes unappealing inheritances. With a housing lease comes the status of landlord and the

obligation to maintain housing to levels specified by the *Residential Tenancies Act 1999* (NT) – levels the NT Government has struggled to meet elsewhere (Grealy 2021). The decision to not build new houses on homelands has been an explicit policy since its 2015 ‘Homelands – A Shared Responsibility’ policy, which stated that ‘The Northern Territory Government has no immediate plans to build new houses on homelands or establish new homelands’ (2).

[Figure 3. A house at a homeland in Central Australia.]

In 2018, the NT Government sought submissions for an independent review of the Homelands Policy and Programs, commissioning the *Review of the Homelands Policy* the following year. Among the themes identified by the Review were a lack of clarity and transparency in homelands policies and service provision, and the requirement for new housing and upgrades to existing stock (NTG 2020). In its initial response to the Review, the NT Government (2020) committed to establishing a new body involving Aboriginal land councils and the Australian Government ‘to engage and co-design a long-term vision for homelands, including a holistic Homelands Policy framework’. It is too soon to tell whether such an authority might counter Davis’s assessment that ‘the right to self-determination has been eviscerated from the lexicon of Australian politics’ (Davis 2015, 10). On the matter of new homelands housing, the NT Government acknowledged its ongoing maintenance obligations but did not engage with the question of new construction (Garrick 2021).

Today, the ambiguity and contestation over responsibilities for homelands housing and essential services infrastructure continues. Following the NT Government’s response to the Review, then NT Minister for Remote Housing Chansey Paech authored a letter to his Commonwealth counterpart, the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt. Noting

‘the urgent need for new housing’, Paech suggested that either the *National Agreement for Remote Housing Northern Territory* be amended to include new housing for homelands or, alternately, a new national agreement for homelands housing be established. In response to the *Review*, the Australian Government was definitive: ‘State and territory governments are responsible for housing’, said a spokesperson for Minister Wyatt (Garrick 2021). In NT parliament, Paech claimed that ‘The responsibility for new houses on homelands still sits with the Australian government’, while a spokesperson for Minister Wyatt responded that the ‘NT government remains responsible for housing, including on homelands’ (Ashton 2021). While the willingness of either government to fund homelands housing or infrastructure has converged in the direction of withdrawal, the failure to clarify government obligations remains a four decade-old inheritance.

This section has described the slow withdrawal of government support that has taken place in Aboriginal homelands across recent decades as a form of managed retreat. From the emergence of the homelands movement until today, there has been ambiguity and contestation over the relative administrative and funding responsibilities of the Commonwealth and NT Governments. While continuing to fund remote community housing and infrastructure, critical reports and the abolition of ATSIC allowed the Commonwealth Government to establish conditions proscribing the expenditure of Commonwealth funding by the NT Government on new housing at homelands. Thus while homelands have not typically been subject to coercive leasing obligations legitimated by the Intervention, policy has essentially withdrawn support for new housing on the grounds that this is consolidated in larger remote communities.

#### **4. Remote housing and a return to community control**

In this section, I want to suggest that the phenomenon of slow withdrawal as managed retreat is also occurring for remote communities, showing a continuing tendency in the state's approach. Consider the funding situation on the Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in the remote northwest of the state of South Australia. As in the Northern Territory, remote housing construction was previously funded in South Australia (2008-2018) by the Australian Government under the *National Partnership Agreement for Remote Indigenous Housing* (NPARIH). While at the conclusion of NPARIH the NT Government was awarded \$550 million for remote housing across five years, equivalent funding in South Australia has decreased and become more conditional. Following NPARIH, the Australian Government provided South Australia with a one-time payment of \$35 million for remote community housing. This funding cannot be used to expand housing stock in remote communities, but can only replace derelict houses. The Commonwealth has indicated this is the final funding tranche it will provide for remote housing in South Australia, deeming this a responsibility of state governments.

The retreat of the Australian Government from its prior support of remote community housing in South Australia, as well as in Western Australia and Queensland, is illustrative of what could unfold in the Northern Territory. But the slow withdrawal of state support for social housing in remote communities is not a straightforward phenomenon to demonstrate for the Northern Territory, because this jurisdiction is now exceptional among Australian states and territories. Australia in the past 15 years shares with other contemporary states an increased conditionality in the provision of social services, including social housing (Nash et al. 2017). However, unlike most jurisdictions, the Northern Territory has since 2007 been subject to significant government investment in public housing. Prior to the conclusion of NPARIH, the NT Government committed \$1.1 billion to remote community housing across ten years until 2027. On 30 March 2019 the NT and Australian Governments established the

*National Partnership for Remote Housing Northern Territory (NPRHNT), providing Commonwealth funding of \$550 million to the NT Government to construct 1950 bedrooms, equivalent to 650 three-bedroom houses. However, the length of this agreement is telling. Ostensibly running from 2018 to 2023 but not actually established until 2019, the agreement shortens the period for which the NT Government can rely on Commonwealth support. From a housing program management perspective, this undermines asset planning and tenders for construction, maintenance, and tenancy services contracts. The shift from a 10 to a five year agreement is a process of ‘temporal enclosure’ that constrains remote infrastructural planning timelines in relation to an implied threat of further Australian Government withdrawal (Jaramillo and Carmona 2022). With no guarantees of funding beyond the agreement, and given that other Australian jurisdictions have been advised they will no longer receive Commonwealth remote housing funding, the NT Government could reasonably question what arrangement will exist from 2023.*

With parallels to the reterritorialisation of funding as a tactic of retreat described in the previous section, the Australian Government is withdrawing from its prior obligation to fund housing in remote Indigenous communities across Australian jurisdictions. This has been reframed as a state and territory government responsibility, with funding for Northern Territory housing either a special case or a policy anachronism on a shared trajectory. Despite this withdrawal from former obligations, the shift in most Australian jurisdictions from public housing to a community housing sector means the Australian Government continues to fund social housing by various indirect means. As at March 2022, there were 11 community housing providers in the NT registered under the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH), four of these Indigenous community housing providers. Unlike public housing managed directly by state and territory governments, community housing providers as public benevolent institutions can access various tax concessions and

financial subsidies, low-cost finance through the National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation (NHFIC), and Commonwealth Rent Assistance as a non-taxable income supplement to eligible residents. The broader context of the NT is that its economy is heavily subsidised by the Commonwealth, including through the redistribution of the Australian Government's Goods and Services Tax (GST) and via a principle of 'fiscal equalisation' that recognises the difficulty of providing services to a small population spread across a large territory with high health and social service needs (Commonwealth Grants Commission 2014). Thus NT Government budget allocations to housing in remote Indigenous communities are already indirectly funded by the Commonwealth's recognition of that need.

To return to an earlier point, the reconfigurations of remote community housing policy analysed in this article prompt reflection on the appropriate ongoing presence and provisioning of the state in this role. Put in the favoured terms of contemporary academic discourse, what could the decolonisation of remote NT housing actually look like? (Tuck and Yang 2012). Similarly, how might we distinguish between abandonment and an appropriate state withdrawal, including on behalf of expanding Indigenous self-government? In practical terms, how can the state's retreat from Indigenous housing be managed to the advantage of building an Indigenous community-controlled housing sector?

It is theoretically possible that, despite the Australian Government's apparent withdrawal via a shortened funding agreement for remote housing, the NT Government could discontinue its current remote housing obligations. Recall the Northern Territory leasing arrangement described above, under which the Australian Government compulsorily acquired five-year leases to remote communities and then compelled traditional owners to sign long-term leases in exchange for housing and infrastructure funding. In most cases, leases held by the

Australian Government have been sub-leased to the NT Government for five years. Most of these sub-leases are due to expire in June 2023, at which point the NT Government could disengage from its role as the landlord of remote housing. If it did so, with only four registered Indigenous community housing providers in the NT, it is not realistic that by 2023 a community housing sector resembling other Australian jurisdictions could fulfil the functions currently undertaken by the NT Government. It is possible that in a small number of remote communities, where traditional owners have specific income streams, a housing sub-lease will be assumed by a registered community housing provider, creating a patchwork of state and Indigenous community-controlled housing. But this is likely to be a piecemeal and medium-term shift. The NT Government has committed remote housing spending until 2027 and, more generally, governments are typically more willing to curtail spending and service arrangements than dismantle whole programs.

State management of remote community housing is neither natural nor inevitable, as the Intervention history and its implications for former ICHOs described above makes clear. A proper examination of decolonising remote Indigenous housing in the Northern Territory is beyond the scope of this article (see Crabtree 2013). However, it deserves consideration here because concurrent to this reconfiguration of Australian and NT Government obligations for remote housing has been the re-emergence of a self-determination discourse, specifically in terms of the ‘community control’ of Indigenous housing in the Northern Territory. This is a demand consistently made by traditional owners and Indigenous community-controlled organisations in contexts such as Aboriginal housing and health fora; as Tobias Nganbe states, ‘People need to understand who Aboriginal people are, and how they can do things for themselves’ (APONT 2015, 20). However, this discourse of Indigenous community control of housing has also proliferated most recently *within* government departments and policy. For example, the NT Government’s (2022) current \$1.1 billion ‘Our Community.

Our Future. Our Homes' remote housing program specifies among its key aims, 'local decision making and engagement with communities' and 'developing Aboriginal Business Enterprises'. The increased emphasis on Indigenous community control of remote housing is important given the record of harms associated with state housing and related policies (Habibis et al. 2019; Grealy and Lea 2021b). Yet, the details of this transition to an alternative Indigenous housing sector, which will itself require administrative technologies that resemble features of the existing bureaucracy, are rarely interrogated, including the continuing role, if any, played by the state.

There are various instruments through which the NT Government, the continuing landlord of public housing in most remote communities, claims to be expanding community control of housing and, in doing so, revising its role. These include the NT Government's 'Local Decision Making' policy, which claims it 'will partner with Aboriginal communities to assist the transition of government services and programs to community control'; a Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy guided by Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT's 'Partnership Principles (APONT 2017); and the prioritisation of Aboriginal Business Enterprises (ABEs) and Indigenous community-controlled organisations by select tender for services contracts under the Healthy Homes remote housing maintenance program. Considered together, these policies contribute to the retreat of the NT Government from various operational roles in remote housing provision.

Such policies claiming to expand Indigenous control of remote housing in the Northern Territory compete with the bureaucratic legacies of new public management reforms in Australia – including administrative decentralisation and complicated financing pathways and compliance requirements (Moran and Porter 2014) – and thus limit the potential for sovereign decision-making. Strakosch (2019) argues that unlike other settler colonial

contexts, Australia's unwillingness to recognise First Nations people through legal mechanisms such as treaties means bureaucracy 'has been the frontline of colonisation' (116). In Australia, Indigenous people are thus understood as the legitimate objects of state policy intervention, according to the basic features of 'settler unilateralism, sovereign performance and problematisation of Indigenous life' (116). In contrast, Canada has paired self-government with common social housing goals in ways that have been precluded by the guardianship approach of recent Australian policy in Indigenous affairs (Walker and Barcham 2010; Habibis 2013), though housing in Canada's north faces similar affordability, adequacy, and suitability challenges (Agrawal and Zoe 2021). The reforms in Australia do not undermine the highly bureaucratic and contract-based relationship between Indigenous community-controlled organisations or Aboriginal Business Enterprises and the NT Government, nor the fragmentation of autonomy over service delivery in remote communities. This differs significantly from the emphasis on 'government to government' compacting arrangements in the US, in part legitimated by the *Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act 1975* and the block grant funding arrangements it enables (Hendrix et al. 2019; Strommer and Osborne 2015).

Were the community housing sector to expand in the Northern Territory and, if in doing so the management of public housing stock transferred to registered Indigenous community housing providers, the NT Government is also unlikely to disappear from this governmental assemblage. In the short-term, in most communities it will retain its functions related to the design, award, and superintendence of housing services contracts. The Australian Government, too, is likely to remain involved, through the regulation of the community housing sector and via funding of community housing providers. Neither of these functions are inevitably adopted by the NT or Australian Governments. Yet, such details are rarely considered in political rhetoric on the importance of increasing community control in

Indigenous housing. Nor is consideration given to the relative success of contemporary attempts to build the Indigenous community housing sector and whether ABEs or Indigenous community-controlled organisations necessarily desire to adopt all the functions currently performed by the NT Government. When tenders for housing maintenance services contracts fail to receive any applications from ABEs or Indigenous community-controlled organisations, the point might be made that further investment in Indigenous business development is required in particular regions, or that contracts are simply under-costed. However, where Indigenous organisations deliberately choose not to tender for tenancy management services contracts, because the assumption of the role of housing manager can have detrimental implications for Indigenous employees charged with managing the tenancies of their kin in small communities, the complexity of devolving control is evident.

Such complexity is inevitable and should not be understood as an argument against the expansion of Indigenous community control of remote housing. Specifically, the Central Land Council's unpublished proposal for a new Aboriginal housing model and statutory authority for central Australia deserves greater consideration. However, two issues are important for framing slow withdrawal as managed retreat in relation to the future of NT remote community housing. First, there is a severe shortage of detailed data on the condition of most housing and reticulated infrastructure in remote communities. The desire to assess the condition of remote assets – to fulfil the fantasy of seeing like a state (Scott 1998) – is repeated in government discourse on remote housing but it is an ideal yet to be achieved. For the devolution of remote housing to Indigenous community control, this should signal a major concern. In short, what is the condition, and therefore the related liability, of the housing and intersecting infrastructures that Indigenous organisations might inherit? Will it be possible to insure buildings that the NT Government currently self-insures? What repair and refurbishment obligations are Indigenous organisations likely to assume, as the outcome

of long-term under-funding of and inattention to maintenance requirements? Clarifying the condition of housing should be a minimum requirement for determining the real cost of providing housing services, going forward, and thus the required funding needed from Australian and NT Governments to subsidise remote housing management in contexts where rental revenue cannot be expected to cover housing costs.

Framing this challenge – the transition of housing and other remote community infrastructure to Indigenous community control following appropriate condition assessment and under agreements guaranteeing long-term funding arrangements – is the second issue of the temporality of agreement-making described in this article. In short, at what rate and in what order might the slow withdrawal as managed retreat of the state from remote housing operations (if not the wholesale withdrawal of state funding) occur? Under what leasing arrangements and with what funded programs in place will the NT Government be able to establish the next funding agreement with the Australian Government, which has already expressed its disinterest in funding remote housing throughout Australian jurisdictions? If the NT Government is genuinely committed to building the Indigenous community housing sector in order to transition decision-making and operations to Indigenous control, it remains unclear how long there is to pursue this process while assured of Australian Government funding. Further consideration is thus required about the staging and velocity of a desirable state withdrawal and transfer to Indigenous community control.

This section has considered how the framework of slow withdrawal as managed retreat can be used to understand policies governing remote community housing in the Northern Territory, despite significant government spending on social housing in remote Indigenous communities across the past fifteen years. I have described the expansion of the community housing sector in the Northern Territory, and the emergence of NT Government policy

rhetoric on Indigenous community control, as signalling attempts by the NT Government to withdraw from certain service provision functions in remote housing. In doing so, I suggest that greater consideration must be given to the terms and velocity by which any exchange of control of housing takes place. This is necessary to ensure that what is represented as Indigenous sovereignty over remote housing conforms to the desires of remote community residents and their representative institutions, and that the infrastructural inheritances of state withdrawal are emancipatory rather than costly liabilities.

## **5. Building an Indigenous community-controlled housing sector, again**

In this moment, it is politically compelling to demand greater Indigenous control of remote community housing. It is more difficult to ensure that such control is not a ruse for the state's disavowal of unwanted funding and service obligations, enacted through the language of self-determination (Durie 1998). We might examine how closely emergent policy arrangements embracing such rhetoric correspond to the frameworks that facilitated either of the homelands movement or the Intervention, with regard to Indigenous stakeholders' priorities, participation, and autonomy in decision-making about remote housing.

Considering the transition to Indigenous control over remote housing, it is reasonable to argue that decisions regarding institutional structures, program arrangements, house designs, rent regimes, maintenance methodologies, and so on, cannot be made in advance of establishing meaningful (statutory or otherwise) arrangements for First Nations peoples' control over decision-making itself. But to avoid an institutional and policy vacuum in the wake of the state's retreat, such consideration should already be underway, including by the recently established National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Association, Aboriginal land councils, and peak bodies. Building an Indigenous community-controlled housing sector in the Northern Territory is a complex socio-political, but also legal and administrative, project. The histories described are necessary to understand the legal and

policy inheritances that govern the present – both what must be undone and what can be saved.

This article has developed the concept of slow withdrawal as managed retreat to highlight the geographic aspects of state withdrawal, the rearrangement of priorities within and among levels of government, and the opportunities presented by the state's disinclination to continue to provide funding or operational services in certain contexts. Appropriating and developing the concept of managed retreat in this way may provide a framework for analyses of oscillating state support in other contexts, including via policy responses that do not register as explicit programs of adaptation or planned relocation. I have shown that managed retreat from prior obligations by states are not necessarily declared, but might be identified instead through the combined effects of a policy assemblage or ecology (Lea 2020). The settler colonial state is a constant presence in remote Indigenous Australia and its withdrawals are typically metamorphic rather than wholesale abdications. As Moreton-Robinson (2015) notes, maintaining Australia as a 'white possession' requires ongoing political and policy work by settler governments. Knowing this, and pursuing the development of an Indigenous community-controlled housing sector, it is imperative that obligations are transferred to Indigenous community-controlled organisations on favourable terms determined by them, and guaranteed for long periods, lest they inherit the products of state neglect.

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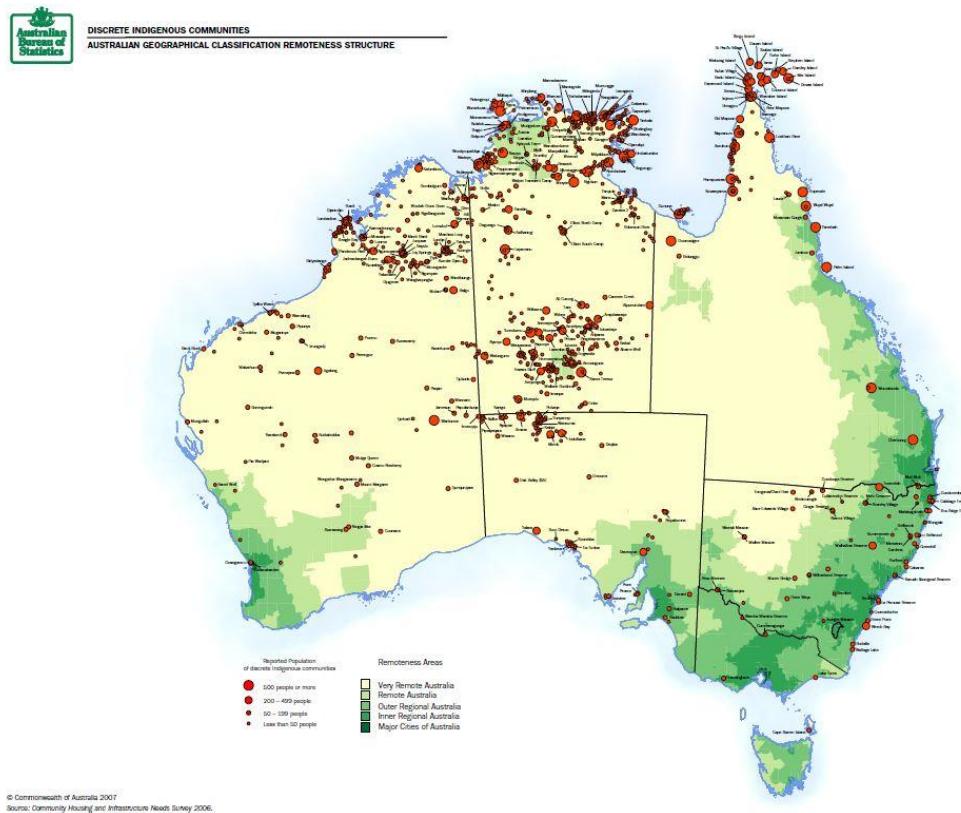
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[Figure 1. Discrete Indigenous communities, Australian Geographical classification remoteness structure. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Commonwealth of Australia 2007.]

I thought and thought about my country, and about asking for it . . . We want to live in our own place, Aborigines only . . . and look after all our places. We will stay here and fight for our country, and never let it go again . . . This is our place. Our fathers and grandfathers hunted here . . .

Statement by a Pitjantjatjara person about the desire to return to country.

[Figure 2. Extract from the Blanchard Report (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, xxxv).]



## **Highlights – Slow withdrawal as managed retreat: Dismantling and rebuilding an Indigenous housing sector**

Regarding the article submitted to *Geoforum*, ‘Slow withdrawal as managed retreat: Dismantling and rebuilding an Indigenous housing sector, I would like to highlight the following contributions.

The article:

- Appropriates managed retreat to theorise the slow withdrawal of government services
- Examines policy history distinguishing between remote communities and homelands
- Argues Australian states are managing a retreat from remote community housing
- Considers the potential of withdrawal for Indigenous sovereignty over remote housing

**Table 1. An historical overview of slow withdrawal as managed retreat**

Date	Description
1967	A successful referendum is held to change the constitution to count Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian population and to allow the Commonwealth (Cth) Government to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as for other citizens.
1960s-80s	From the late 1960s, instigating and then supported by legal and institutional reforms (below), Indigenous people begin to move back onto ancestral and other country, establishing homelands and outstations.
1976	The <i>Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976</i> (ALRA) is established, recognising traditional ownership and occupation of land by Aboriginal people and establishing inalienable freehold title in law.
1978	The Australian Cth Government devolves self-government to the Northern Territory (NT).
1979	An exchange of letters takes place between Cth Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Fred Chaney and NT Chief Minister Paul Everingham regarding responsibility for homelands funding and administration.
1987	The <i>Inquiry into the Aboriginal homelands movement in Australia</i> tables <i>Return to Country: the Aboriginal Homelands Movement in Australia</i> (the Blanchard Report), providing formal recognition of homelands and their significance.
1990	The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) is established as a Commonwealth statutory body.
1990	The Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP) delivers housing and infrastructure at remote communities and homelands.
1998	<i>Building on Land Rights for the Next Generation: Report of the Review of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976</i> (the Reeves Report) is published, calling for controversial reforms to the ALRA.
2004	ATSIC is abolished. CHIP is transferred to the Cth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA); a moratorium is placed on CHIP funding for new housing and infrastructure at homelands.
2007	The <i>Living in a Sunburnt Country: Findings of Review of the Community Housing and Infrastructure Programme (CHIP)</i> report is released in February, critical of CHIP and Indigenous community housing organisations.
2007	The <i>Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle 'Little Children are Sacred' Report</i> is released on 15 June, which is employed by the Cth Government to instigate the Intervention. The <i>National Emergency Response Act 2007</i> is passed in August, as part of a package of legislation introducing reforms to remote leasing, housing and infrastructure funding, social security payments, and alcohol sale and consumption, among other things.
2007	The <i>Memorandum of Understanding on Indigenous Housing, Accommodation, and Related Services</i> is signed by the Cth and NT Governments in September. The NT Government adopts 'responsibility for the delivery of services to outstations' from 1 July 2008.
2008	The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) establish the <i>National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA)</i> , which includes six 'Closing the Gap' targets.
2008	COAG sign the <i>National Partnership Agreement for Remote Indigenous Housing</i> (2008-2018) in November, guaranteeing Cth Government funding for remote community housing and infrastructure for the following decade.
2008	The NT Department of Housing, Local Governance and Regional Services is contracted by FaCSIA in December to provide property and tenancy services under 5-year leases in remote communities, established through the Intervention.
2009	The NT Government's 'A Working Future' policy focuses on developing 20 'growth towns' as central service hubs, aiming to 'set a new path for homelands and outstations'. NPARIH funding for new houses is directed to growth towns.
2012	The <i>Stronger Futures Northern Territory</i> legislation is passed, extending many measures established through the Intervention, including leases over remote communities.
2015	The Commonwealth Government makes a one-off payment of \$206m to the NT Government, which will take 'full fiscal responsibility for the servicing of homelands'.
2015	The NT Government's 'Homelands – A Shared Responsibility' policy is published, stating that it 'has no immediate plans to build houses on homelands or establish new homelands'.
2015	A new representative body, Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT), is formed.
2018	The NPARIH (by then the <i>National Partnership on Remote Housing</i> ) expires on 30 June.
2018-20	The NT Government undertakes its <i>Review of the Homelands Policy</i> .
2019	The NT Government is awarded \$550m by the Cth Government under the five-year <i>National Partnership Remote Housing Northern Territory (NPRHNT)</i> Agreement.
2020	The NT Government releases its Local Decision Making policy.
2021	An exchange of letters takes place between NT Minister for Remote Housing Chansey Paech and Cth Minister for Indigenous Housing Ken Wyatt regarding funding responsibility for new homelands housing.

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**Credit Author Statement – Slow withdrawal as managed retreat: Dismantling and rebuilding an Indigenous housing sector**

This is a sole-authored research article. All aspects of the research design, methodology, analysis, and writing have been undertaken by the author.