Enforced Commensuration and the Bureaucratic Invention of Household Energy Insecurity

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ABSTRACT: *Power doesn't come for free, but who should pay the cost? On the Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in northwest South Australia, Aṉangu households have not historically been billed for domestic energy consumption. The state government ~~is currently changing~~has recently introduced ~~its approach to~~ a prepayment regime, ostensibly to curb supply costs. Yet extending the norms of customer payment for domestic energy requires significant administrative labour, with limited potential to recoup costs through billing. This article asks: why is enforced commensuration preferable to the status quo? It describes the invention of household energy insecurity via policy reform, including the establishment of a 'compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure' of customer policies, contracts, tariffs, and concessions designed to mitigate the harms produced by the introduction of prepayment. With the status quo deemed untenable and the transition to mainstreaming customer payment apparently inevitable, the article examines how geography and race operate as organising principles for the limits of difference among citizens under late liberal government in remote Australia.*

KEY WORDS: bureaucracy, prepayment meters, energy poverty, remote communities, settler colonialism

Introduction

Originally scheduled for July 1, 2021, the introduction of a user pays system for household energy provision across the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands was deferred by one year.~~,~~ The~~a~~ delay ~~which~~ acknowledged that the proposed reforms would negatively impact Anangu households' energy security. Variously employing economic and environmental sustainability justifications, the reforms are nonetheless framed as necessary and inevitable, with the previous status quo of free electricity for remote Aboriginal householders deemed no longer tenable. Congruent with policy efforts across Australia in recent decades to 'normalise' remote Indigenous communities (Sullivan 2013) – by securing land tenure, clarifying infrastructural ownership and leasing, instituting formal tenancy arrangements, and so on – the apparent intention is that energy services in remote Aboriginal communities in South Australia are made commensurate with kindred remote contexts.

However, even as the reforms have proceeded, government authorities have made considerable efforts to mitigate the harms they are expected to produce. Alongside new billing processes, the transition has involve~~d~~s the installation of prepayment hardware and a raft of new regulatory frameworks and administrative systems concerning contracts, tariffs, concessions, and exemptions. Significant bureaucratic labour has been expended on the creation of customers from whom, given various forms of retail subsidisation, the state is only likely to recoup a small proportion of energy generation costs. Given this labour, and the ~~unlikelihood~~ improbability of cost recovery, why is enforced commensuration preferable to the status quo?

Drawing on fieldwork and participation in public consultation processes, this article employs ~~detailed~~ close textual analysis of the policy artefacts underpinning APY Lands household

energy reforms, analysing their justifications, administrative intersections, and bureaucratic entailments. Scholarship on prepayment energy regimes typically adopts the position of retrospective critique, drawing on user accounts of the quotidian impacts of new technologies (Baptista 2015), how residents adopt, reject, and redeploy them (Guma et al. 2022), and the social relations produced in informal and collective housing arrangements (von Schnitzler 2016; Destrée 2021). In contrast, this ~~article~~ research has sought to describe~~s~~ the regulatory and policy frameworks governing the introduction of prepayment as these have been~~are being~~ published, consulted on, and revised. In part, this reflects ~~a (perhaps naïve) optimism concerning~~ an attempt to influence~~n (unsuccessful) attempt to undermine~~ the progress of this reform and to engage with parties working to mitigate its potential harms. ~~.~~ Academic analysis contemporaneous to policy making and implementation also~~Doing so~~ highlights the vitality of the state, the interaction of government authorities, and the iterative and ad hoc nature of policy making. Thus I have been~~am~~ less concerned with the specific technology of the prepaid meter than with the invention and content of administrative arrangements governing prepayment, including bureaucracy's capacity to incorporate critical feedback as impetus for further bureaucratic solution-making. By focusing on the neglected administrative labours, another common explanation is troubled: settler colonial administrations may be introducing 'neoliberal' technologies of the self by installing a user pays system, but there is no withdrawal of the state or reduction of costs. Rather, in the geographically raced tactics of ongoing occupation, a reconfigured paternalism is in play.

In published documents and public consultation, the introduction of payment for household energy consumption has been made to appear inevitable to both reform proponents and critics, because the status quo – the continued non-payment for energy services by remote Aboriginal householders – is so exceptional. However, while the reforms universalise householder

payment for energy use, they do not efface Indigenous difference from these regulatory frameworks and bureaucratic systems. This article considers how difference is reinscribed through the production of a *compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure* that attempts to mitigate the harmful impacts brought about through the reforms. This includes the exclusion of remote communities from the National Energy Market; the proposed universal application of concessions to remote Aboriginal households; and the particular application of prepayment in remote Aboriginal communities, in distinction from other remote South Australian towns. Through the introduction of a parallelism that reinforces disparity, the reforms illustrate the forms of Indigenous difference that late liberal settler governments are willing to recognise and those it no longer deems acceptable.

Reforming Power on the APY Lands

The APY Lands is a region in northwest South Australia, abutting the Northern Territory and Western Australia borders. A large portion of the APY Lands was formerly the South Australian government's North-West Aboriginal Reserve, with traditional owners eventually granted inalienable freehold title under the *Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Rights Act 1981* (SA). Today, an official population of 2,333~~2382276~~ residents fluctuates seasonally, up to approximately 3000 people, of whom ~~83~~88.5~~.6~~ per cent are Indigenous (ABS 2021~~16~~). The 2021~~16~~ Australian Census recorded the median weekly personal income for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on~~in~~ the APY Lands aged 15 years and over as $296~~283~~ – or $15,392~~14,716~~ per year – compared to the equivalent~~Australian~~ measures of $805~~662~~ and $41,860 across the Australian population~~34,424~~ (ABS 2021~~16~~). Low incomes compromise the energy security of APY Lands households, and increase exposure to the various harms of regular disconnections, related to pre-existing medical conditions, heat stress, inadequate energy for cooking and hygiene, and economic stress and anxiety (Flaherty et al. 2020;

SACOSS 2021). In Aboriginal communities in central Australia, these impacts are further exacerbated by disproportionately high energy costs due to extreme weather, the high cost of goods and services, poor quality housing, fixed high energy use appliances, and crowding (Lea et al. 2021). Communities on the APY Lands are categorised by the Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) as 'very remote', with Kalka in the western APY Lands about 700 kilometres by (mostly dirt) road from the closest town of Alice Springs (Figure 1). The significance of domestic energy security is underlined by the region's ominous climate projections. In January 2020, APY Lands communities experienced between 25 and 28 days with a heat index above 32°C, with similar results for adjacent months (Lea et al. 2021).

[Figure 1]

The APY Lands energy reforms in the name of managing electricity consumption and payment are a long time coming, and follow research by Bushlight (McKenzie 2013), of the Centre for Appropriate Technology, into householders' experiences of prepayment meters and power cards, amid concerns about rising electricity costs and environmental impact. As APY General Manager Richard King has noted, the reforms have 'been in the works for a couple of years' and their expected behaviour modifications are 'something that Anangu will learn over time' (in Aeria and Gooch 2021). Explanations for the reforms reflect what is widely known as managing 'the energy trilemma' – finding a balance between security, affordability, and sustainability – and typically cite both the cost of generating electricity in remote communities and the environmental impact of its production. For instance, a 2010 report on the *Future Management of Off-Grid Remote Electricity Services* (PriceWaterhouse Coopers 2010)

concluded that ‘The current situation of providing electricity supplies for free is clearly unsustainable in terms of costs for Government’ (127).

The use of prepayment meters for residential electricity has been widespread in social housing across the border from the APY Lands, having featured in the Northern Territory (NT) since the mid-1990s (Longden et al. 2021). In such scenarios, a prepayment meter is installed at a premises that displays a customer’s account balance. Prepayment meter technology has changed over time, and in remote Australia residents historically purchased power cards of various denominations to insert into AMPY wide and narrow mouth meters to top up household credit (Figure 2). Using today’s e-token smart meters, householders purchase credit at various retail outlets using a meter ID, or by phone or online, which is directly applied to their meter. If credit is expended, a small amount of ‘emergency’ credit becomes available as customer debt. Following a disconnection – usually termed ‘self-disconnection’ by retailers and governments or ‘involuntary self-disconnection’ by critics – emergency credit must be repaid to reconnect to the network. Prepayment meters thus mediate between the affordances provided by household appliances and wider infrastructural networks, scripting expectations for energy use and financial management for householders, even where such scripts have been shown elsewhere to be contestable through tinkering and other illicit work-arounds (von Schnitzler 2013; 2016).

[Figure 2]

Prepayment has produced deleterious results for householders in the NT, as in other contexts where prepayment meters have targeted low-income people (von Schnitzler 2013; Sharma 2003). Nonetheless, on-the-ground research into prepayment arrangements at Alice Springs

town camps found ‘a high degree of user satisfaction with pre-payment meters and preferences for [prepayment] over conventional billing processes’ (McKenzie 2013, 3). This was despite high rates of disconnection; access issues with obtaining power cards; a relationship between crowding and increased electricity costs; and residents adapting food purchasing practices due to disconnections. Such findings regarding energy conservation and thermal comfort compensation strategies by householders are typical of research on energy insecurity or fuel poverty and prepayment more broadly (Middlemiss 2017; Hernández 2016; QCOSS 2014; Sharma 2003). More recently, Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation studied data from NT energy retailer Jacana Energy on prepayment meter disconnections and their duration for the towns of Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek, and Alice Springs (Klerck 2021). Tangentyere Council’s analysis showed that across 2019-2020, prepayment meters in those towns disconnected on average 46.8 times for an average duration of between 5.2 and 6.7 hours on each occasion. Over three months, 91 per cent of prepayment meters at Alice Springs town camps disconnected, on 13.6 occasions for an average incident of 6 hours and 42 minutes (Klerck 2021, 5). Responses to such findings, including submissions to current reviews in South Australia, typically recommend a range of bureaucratic and program reforms, such as improving administrative arrangements for tracking disconnections, increased access to power cards, targeted energy-efficiency education programs, increased access to rebates and concessions, and housing refurbishments. No report recommends increasing bureaucratic labour as the solution, yet this is the hidden entailment on offer.

In South Australia, the Remote Areas Energy Supplies (RAES) Scheme is administered by the Department of Energy and Mining (DEM) and services approximately 1,500 off-grid network customers across 10 townships (under the RAES State/Independent Scheme) and 15 Aboriginal communities (under the RAES Aboriginal Communities Scheme, including APY

Lands communities). The APY Lands is characterised as an off-grid energy network, with a Central Power House at Umuwa, and smaller power stations at Pipalyatjara (also servicing Kalka), and at Murpatja (also servicing Kanpi and Nyapari) (DEM 2021b). As an off-grid network, APY Lands energy sits outside Australia's National Electricity Market and its associated regulatory framework. In this context, Cowell Electric Supply Pty Ltd is licensed under the RAES Scheme to provide generation, distribution, and retail electricity services (DEM 2021). In turn, Cowell Electric is subsidised by the SA government to provide tariffs to RAES customers at parity with on-grid pricing (ESCOSA 2021).

While electricity provision under the RAES Scheme costs about 75 cents per kWh, residential customers outside of Aboriginal communities pay the subsidised rate of about 34 cents per kWh (DEM 2021, 3). This subsidisation is an outcome of an Australian government obligation to provide essential services to citizens at comparable standards and rates wherever they are located, thus recognising the failure of National Energy Market principles and the need for public subsidy in remote contexts (Baird 2001). In Aboriginal communities serviced by the RAES Scheme, this recognition has resulted in a situation where *electricity is free*. The attempt to foreclose this exception from household energy payment is emblematic of the staggered and archipelagic application of settler laws and regulations across Indigenous Country. Policies are often geographically circumscribed in their application, internally fragmented, and patch-worked together. And the legacies of yesteryear's policies haunt the present, demanding contemporary explanation or remedy (Lea 2021).

In this exceptional situation of the absence of a price mechanism for household electricity, commentators suggest that householders have little incentive to curb energy consumption and, as such, 'electricity is generally conceived of as a free public good' (McKenzie 2013, 10).

That electricity could be claimed and contested as a public good, but also one only provided for free by government to a particular collective among the citizenry, provides a basis for bureaucratic reforms that chip away at the 'relative autonomy' of remote Aboriginal communities while simultaneously claiming to provide social security protections (Morphy and Morphy 2013). Neither the policy legacy nor the contemporary reforms ground the exception to payment in ontological models of Indigenous alterity (Vincent 2017), or in fatuous claims about remote Aboriginal people's inability or unwillingness to embrace the affordances of mainstream housing (see Lea and Pholeros 2009). Rather, the historical situation and the present reforms represent competing approaches of liberal government managing the jurisdiction of the market, by establishing its limits or mitigating its impact based on geographic and racialised differences. The historical situation and present reforms differ in their prioritisation of commitments to the separation or assimilation of remote Aboriginal communities (Mazel 2009), encapsulating liberal multiculturalism's 'conflicting impulses' to maintain cultural difference and to eliminate inequality (Kowal 2008, 338). The invention of a *compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure*, described below, signals the ongoing ambivalence of late liberal government to embrace the wholesale extension of market principles throughout social life (Burchell 1991).

As recently as 2014, politicians remained cautious about removing the exceptional non-payment status of remote Indigenous communities, with Opposition Spokesperson for Energy, Economic and Regional Development Martin Hamilton-Smith stating that 'one has to be mindful, particularly in the Pit (Pitjantjatjara) lands, of a family's capacity to pay' (in Brooks 2014). Five years on, badged as the 'Future Sustainability Program', SA's Department of Energy and Mining (DEM) proposed remote energy reforms with a three stage process. These included: the installation of smart meters across buildings serviced by the RAES Scheme; the

introduction of new payment options; and the introduction of electricity charging for APY Lands residents. In short, with non-payment deemed no longer tenable, the reforms proposed to constitute remote Aboriginal households in South Australia as energy services customers, 'shifting the burden for social commensuration from the place it is generated (liberalism) to the place it operates on' (Povinelli 2001, 330). This invention of prepayment represents a technopolitics typical of late liberalism's desire to sculpt citizenship into a project of active responsibility (Rose 2000), while upholding liberalism's proclivity to govern 'because of the market', rather than 'for the market' as under neoliberalism, even where this involves the extension of customer norms (Foucault 2008, 121). The installation of prepaid meters on the APY Lands establishes Aṉangu householders as customer-citizens with attendant entitlements and obligations. As customers, APY Lands residents undergo a process of governmental commensuration, where the exceptional status of non-payment for energy services is transformed to become a question of not *if*, but *how much* they should pay, and by what means (Espeland and Stevens 1998).

Apologetic Policy, Inevitability, and Insatiable Reform

Essential services in South Australia are regulated by the Essential Services Commission of South Australia (ESCOSA). In March 2021, ESCOSA responded to DEM's proposed reforms by releasing an Issues Paper related to a review of the 'Prepayment Meter System Code' (hereafter the 'Code'), which regulates 'the operation of prepayment systems in the electricity and gas market and provide[s] minimum consumer protections for customers' (ESCOSA 2021, 1). Following the introduction of the *National Energy Retail Law (South Australia) Act* (2011), the Code has only regulated prepayment systems in small-scale and off-grid networks not captured by the National Energy Customer Framework (NECF). While off-grid energy networks sit outside Australia's National Energy Market, they are licensed by ESCOSA under

the RAES Scheme and customers should be afforded ‘similar consumer protections to consumers of on-grid energy licensees’ (ESCOSA 2019, 4). This includes obligations related to customer supply contracts, dispute resolution procedures, supply obligations, customer service obligations, billing disputes, and disconnection and restoration of supply.

ESCOSA’s Issues Paper identified the benefits typically attributed to prepayment systems for consumers: greater payment flexibility; debt avoidance; and fewer administrative charges (O’Sullivan et al. 2011; Sharma 2003). It also identified consumer risks, such as: more frequent disconnections; higher energy costs, due to the inability to exploit time-of-use tariffs; customer involvement in monitoring consumption; and inadequate information from retailers about purchasing credit, reconnection, emergency credit, and fees and tariffs (ESCOSA 2021). However, this benefits and risks comparison, as with Bushlight’s framing of residents’ preference for prepayment, compared prepayment with postpayment arrangements. In this Issues Paper, and throughout the submissions responding to it, the proposed reforms are never compared with the advantages of the existing situation: *free energy* for remote Aboriginal households.

Conscious of undermining access to domestic electricity in remote communities, ESCOSA gave significant consideration to existing and potential consumer protections. It highlighted that under the Code ‘a retailer [must] obtain explicit informed consent from a customer prior to entering into a prepayment arrangement’ (ESCOSA 2021, 14). Retailers are also obliged to ensure other consumer protections, such as identifying every instance, and the duration, of a customer’s self-disconnection. The retailer should be able to identify customer payment difficulties, according to a threshold of self-disconnection of longer than 240 minutes three or more times over three months (ESCOSA 2021, 12). In such an instance, the retailer is obliged

to contact the customer ‘to provide information about State Government assistance programs; information on independent financial and other relevant counselling services; and to offer for the removal (or rendering non-operational) of the prepayment meter’ (DEM 2021, 15).

In July 2021, in line with the Future Sustainability Program, the South Australian Department for Energy and Mining (DEM) also published an Issues Paper proposing to make prepayment the ‘default payment method’ in the off-grid energy networks serviced by the RAES Scheme. Like Bushlight and ESCOSA, DEM (2021) identified that ‘It is rare, if not unique, in Australia for the State to fully subsidise electricity usage’ and emphasised issues related to this subsidisation, including high energy consumption, the absence of a price signal, and the environmental impact of diesel consumption (3). DEM described anticipated results of the transition, including reductions in diesel use, emissions, demand of kWhs, and the need for new assets, and local employment. No modelling was provided for the proposed reduction in household energy consumption or for job creation, and the KPIs that ESCOSA will employ to assess the impact of prepayment on Cowell Electric customers ~~once it is introduced~~ will not extend to these original policy justifications (personal communication). Nonetheless, DEM anticipates that the reforms will reduce diesel use by 450,000 litres and cut emissions by 1.2m kilograms per year (2021, 5). As a point of comparison for alternative reforms, a SA government press release describes that the $9m upgrade to the Central Power House at Umuwa, installing three megawatts of solar photovoltaic panels and one megawatt of battery storage, is likely to generate 4.4GWh of electricity per year, or approximately 40 per cent of total power required on that network (van Holst Pellekaan 2020), with an estimated reduction in diesel consumption of 1m litres per year (the Central Power House network uses about

2.8m litres per annum, DEM 2021b). In other words, demand side reforms appear to offer less impactful environmental benefits in this context than infrastructural upgrades.[1]

Both DEM and ESCOSA are almost apologetic in framing the introduction of prepayment meters as both inevitable and difficult. DEM claimed that 'The decision to introduce charging was *not taken lightly* as it is understood that the impact of this additional cost will impact on the welfare of community members' (emphasis added, DEM 2021c, 1). Their descriptions characterise the work of government authorities as attempting to mitigate the harms caused by reforms that the sitting government has itself chosen to implement. This is exemplary of the larger function of Indigenous social policy in settler colonial contexts, partially ameliorating the inequality it has created rather than dismantling the conditions of its formations (Lea 2020). ~~At present,~~ Ccustomers in RAES State/Independent Scheme communities who are charged for electricity have the choice to pay by pre- or postpayment. However, DEM's Issues Paper presented prepayment for all customers in remote Aboriginal communities as the only practical payment option – highlighting the absence of a door-do-door mail service and APY Lands telecommunications infrastructure as impediments to post-payment billing (DEM 2021, 4). DEM also proposed that for Aboriginal communities 'customer consent will not be

[1] While it is beyond the scope of this article, further applied research is needed on the promise of solar technologies, at both the household and community levels, to strengthen energy security and even promote energy sovereignty in remote communities on the APY Lands and elsewhere. As with all 'new' technologies, the potential of solar technologies to mitigate existing energy challenges is contingent on the infrastructural legacies that any new installation must contend with, such as the capacity and condition of existing electrical grids, and the desire and funding for ongoing maintenance.

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required for the payment method and the customer will not have the option to opt out of [prepayment]' (DEM 2021, 13). This arrangement was assured by the SA Government through an amendment to the *Electricity (General) (Payment Condition) Variation Regulations 2021* passed on December 9, 2021, requiring the regulator ESCOSA to impose a condition on Cowell Electric so that it 'only sell electricity to prescribed customers using a prepayment meter system' (Figure 3). This constitutes an inequitable, and potentially discriminatory, distinction made among RAES customers, whereby customers in Aboriginal communities serviced by the RAES Scheme (the prescribed customers) do not have the right to consent to prepayment, nor the option to leave that arrangement for postpayment.

[Figure 3]

Demonstrating the perceived inevitability of reform once it was outlined, the regulatory amendment was passed prior to the conclusion of ESCOSA's (2021b) 'Off-grid Energy Consumer Protection Framework Review', which commenced in November 2021 and is scheduled to run until December 2022. DEM nonetheless framed the reforms as a foregone conclusion: 'As of 1 July 2022, the South Australian Government will introduce charging for electricity to the residents of communities in the APY Lands, Yalata and Oak Valley' (DEM 2021c, 1). Aiming to mitigate the negative impacts for remote householders, DEM (2021c) drafted a Pre-Payment Customer Protection Policy for Cowell Electric customers on the RAES scheme, which along with the Future Sustainability education program, 'have been put in place to ensure communities are ready for the introduction of electricity charging' (DEM 2021c, 1). The acknowledgment of the 'not taken lightly' decision infers the well-known outcomes of prepayment regimes in other Australian jurisdictions, and policy recognition that the reforms will generate a widespread situation of 'living prepaid', under which temporary

access to services is punctuated by frequent disconnections (von Schnitzler 2016, 6). Applying South Australia's Prepayment Meter System Code to the impact of prepayment on disconnections in Alice Springs town camps described above, almost all customers would be designated as experiencing payment difficulties, and moved onto postpayment meters with financial concessions.

Like DEM and ESCOSA's failure to genuinely entertain the option that no reforms should be pursued, responses to government consultation similarly bypassed the possibility of continuing non-payment to instead stress the differences in consumer protections provided to customers of on- and off-grid licensees (see SACOSS 2021). While stakeholder consultations sparked ESCOSA's 'Off-grid Energy Consumer Protection Framework Review', the sense of inevitability surrounding the reforms has had a narrowing effect for responses from community advocates (personal communication). The debate turned, first, on the benefits and harms of pre- and postpayment arrangements and, second, if prepayment was mandated, what customer protections should be guaranteed in remote communities. Whether because the reforms appeared a fait accompli (despite ongoing reviews), because non-payment for household energy services is so exceptional, or because Australian governments are compelled to perennially reinvent policy for the 'welfare' of Indigenous communities to authorise bureaucratic legitimacy and continuity (Lea 2012), no serious case was made to simply leave the existing arrangement alone. In the meantime, and while~~with~~ consultation processes were~~s still~~ open, the reforms ~~have~~ proceeded, with the installation of smart meters ~~having commenced~~commencing in Aboriginal communities serviced by the RAES Scheme in mid-2021, and the introduction of prepayment from July 2022 (Cowell Electric 2020; DEM 2021b).

The Compensatory Bureaucratic Infrastructure of Commensuration

The APY Lands prepayment reforms are clearly unjust by the normative terms of energy justice frameworks (Sovacool et al. 2017; United Nations 2020), with remote householders bearing the brunt of any economic or environmental gains (Büchs et al. 2011). They compromise the reliability of household energy distribution; procedurally proscribe the participation of remote householders as decision-makers for reforms and even as consenting consumers; and involve limited recognition of the cultural difference of some remote Indigenous livelihoods. Nonetheless, throughout this transition, the concerns expressed by social services and Indigenous organisations have been recognised by the government authorities pursuing and regulating the reforms. This recognition has involved the invention of a *compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure* led by various issues papers, reviews, and public consultations, and including a regulatory amendment, DEM's draft RAES/Cowell Electric Pre-Payment Customer Protection Policy, ESCOSA's draft schedule to Cowell's licence regarding minimum terms and conditions for prescribed customers, a revised written disclosure statement, a new Medical Heating and Cooling Concession policy, and, among other things, materials for community consultation and an energy education program.

Aware of the harms to remote householders of moving from free electricity to payment, while promoting prepayment over postpayment, DEM identified various measures to mitigate the risks of the new arrangement. This included plans for 'a three year engagement and education program including door-to-door energy education visits from trained local workers', 'a staged tariff introduction, starting at 10 cents per kWh and working toward standard RAES residential tariffs [of 34 cents kWh]'; the 'development of a prepayment customer protection policy which considers the special circumstances of new to payment customers'; and 'the application and accessibility of concessions for new to payment customers' (DEM 2021, 5). In

coordination with the Department of Human Services, this includes that ‘all prepayment customers in the relevant areas have the Energy Bill Concession applied directly to the smart meter on a fortnightly basis, administered through the retailer’ (DEM 2021, 18). That is, DEM proposeds that for all ‘new to payment customers’, which include all households in RAES Scheme Aboriginal communities, South Australia's energy bill concession should be applied in recognition of those customers’ relative limited capacity to afford energy costs.

These are compensatory mechanisms established within a process of enforced commensuration under which, in Povinelli’s (2008) words, ‘present tense modes of living and dying are transformed into future anterior modes of the proper life’ (511). There are obvious parallels with historical assimilationist policies, under which Indigenous people were expected to ‘attain the same manner of living as other Australians … enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes, loyalties as other Australians’ (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates 1961, 51). Unlike most assimilationist policies, Indigenous cultural difference and the superiority of settler Australian norms are not cited as reasons for the reforms, which instead employ the economic and environmental claims outlined above. Nonetheless, the commensuration process requires that exceptional non-paying householders are subjected to the otherwise universal Australian norms of customer payment for essential services. In this way, the withdrawal of life support for remote residents is implicitly framed as a necessary transition towards the good life of late liberalism (Povinelli 2008).

In the incorporation of the historical anomaly into contemporary policy frameworks, authorities recognise that those frameworks will have uneven effects – generating suffering that is ‘ordinary, chronic, acute, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, eventful and sublime’

(Povinelli 2008, 511). As such, the transition unfolds in accordance with principles of liberal governance whereby the assimilationist extension of the market is simultaneously mitigated by 'remedial' strategies recognising socioeconomic inequality (Kowal 2008, 341). The establishment of new policies and programs by DEM and ESCOSA demonstrate a biopolitical imperative to mitigate certain vulnerabilities to slow death, which have themselves been exposed to new pressures by establishing a user-pays system that undermines the relation between reliable household energy and good health. I suggest that these regulations and techniques can be characterised as *compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure*. Constructed by governmental authorities within a broader program of harmful social commensuration, this is an administrative network of policy and programs aiming to compensate the objectified population for the imposition of a government intervention. In contrast to LaDuke and Cowen's (2020) conception of 'alimentary infrastructures', as 'in its anti-colonial conception, life-giving and capable of sustaining not only the body, but the spirit and law as well' (252), the resources distributed by a compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure are accessible in exchange for, and in order to mitigate, exposure to harmful governmental reconfigurations. Scaled up, this concept may also provide a general characterisation of social welfare provided on the grounds of Indigeneity by settler colonial governments, especially where such administrative assemblages are established without the request or meaningful input of First Nations people or Indigenous community controlled organisations. Drawing on LaDuke and Cowen's (2020) claim that 'infrastructure is the *how* of settler colonialism' (245) and Spice's (2018) characterisation of 'invasive infrastructures', I suggest that this compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure consolidates the ongoing colonisation of remote Indigenous lifeworlds by administrative means.

In this reform program, significant faith is granted to the price mechanism to influence energy consumption behaviour, and to an education program's potential to shift consumers' behaviours to prioritise cost over need. While the reforms depend on the supposed necessity to convert exceptional non-paying householders into customers, the staged tariff and the default application of the energy concession significantly reduce the initial economic impact on householders. In this way, the (mitigated) risks and actual harms brought about by the current reforms are 'deflected to the horizon of good intentions' (Povinelli 2001, 328), justified by a hypothetical future in which customers have reduced their energy consumption and no longer require equivalent subsidy. This is despite the fact that most of the cost of energy production in RAES Aboriginal communities will continue to be subsidised by government. The situation in Alice Springs town camps is a good indicator of APY Lands householders' future, in which the policy-manufactured risk of a household debt crisis under a postpayment regime is avoided for the normalisation of energy insecurity under prepayment.

On the APY Lands, the transition to a user-pays energy regime has been~~is~~ represented as inevitable and as necessary to 'bring South Australia in line' with remote Aboriginal communities in other Australian jurisdictions (DEM 2021, 13). It is an enforced commensuration within which the most obvious alternative – maintaining the status quo – is an apparently unspeakable position from within the policy discourse. It is ultimately unclear exactly why the legacy of past policies cannot remain an acknowledged exception to the norm, where the norm is widely understood to generate predictable harms and demands the invention of extensive compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure. Rather than entertain the continuation of the status quo, significant governmental effort has been expended to address manufactured disconnections and required concessions. The extent of this labour considered against potential gains undermines any claim of economic rationalism. Taking DEM's concern

regarding environmental impact as expressed in good faith, then a reduction in household emissions might otherwise be achieved by solar upgrades to the remaining community power plants and/or retrofitting housing with insulation, passive cooling technologies, and energy efficient appliances. However, this reform program is typical of a larger tendency of settler governments to frame remote Indigenous householders in terms of deficit or pathology and thus as the appropriate object and scale of 'swivel chair remedy from a distance' (Lea 2012, 119). Recalibrating this scope, DEM's promotion of the economic and environmental gains anticipated by reducing diesel consumption for household energy production should be juxtaposed with the Australian Government's 18th largest budget expense: the subsidisation of diesel fuel for industries that do not use public roads and work in remote locations. Australian taxpayers pay $7.8bn annually to fund a fuel tax credit scheme that provides a rebate of 42.7c per litre to companies using diesel fuel, of which the mining industry has received 43 per cent of total funds since 2006 (Campbell et al. 2021).

Government is never so rational or singular to avoid such contradictions within and between departments and authorities. ESCOSA's bureaucratic inventions are in response to DEM's pursuit of the prepayment reform and constrained by the SA Government's regulatory amendment. A generous interpretation of DEM's reforms might suggest it can only pursue savings in the budgets it controls. Nevertheless, DEM's projected savings will be amply ~~subsumed in~~counteracted by ~~manifest as~~ additional ~~funding~~ expenditure and labour pressures on federal and state health departments as disconnections contribute to increased presentations to remote clinics and regional hospitals for heat stress and environmental health-related conditions (Flaherty et al. 2020; Hernández 2016). With such concerns highlighted by consultation, further policy developments have been made to mitigate the potential health impacts of the reforms, revising the definition of 'life support equipment' so that customers on

dialysis machines, ventilators, and other specified technologies will not be subject to the self-disconnection feature of the prepayment meter, provided they register with Cowell Electric (Figure 4, ESCOSA 2022). Established alongside this is the new Medical Heating and Cooling Concession, paid quarterly to registered customers with specified medical conditions that require mechanical heating or cooling to not severely exacerbate that condition. ESCOSA's (2022) most recent draft decision on Cowell's licence amendment to establish prepayment by default for prescribed customers is predominantly concerned with how customer protections for RAES Scheme Aboriginal communities customers can become more closely aligned with those of the Code and the National Energy Consumer Framework, on issues including accessibility of government materials, debt-accrual during protected periods, restrictions on debt recovery, transparency of reporting, and so on. ~~Despite these c~~Amid these multiplying compensatory attempts, the new regime ultimately displaces an arrangement that already provide~~d~~s the free electricity that support~~ed~~s householders to meet domestic health and social needs.

[Figure 4]

Conclusion

The prepayment reforms described in this article provide competing inscriptions of Indigenous difference within Australian settler state policy. The ~~current~~ arrangement that existed until July 1 2022, as the de facto result of legacy policy and infrastructure, recognise~~d~~s the cultural difference and relative autonomy of Indigenous livelihoods in this remote context as reasonable grounds for free household electricity. The RAES Scheme depends on a similar geographic distinction regarding remoteness in general, recognising that the principles of the National Energy Market are not applicable to remote off-grid networks and that state and

territory governments be compelled to provide equitable services to citizens' in those contexts. There are levels of nested protection within Australian domestic energy services governance. In South Australia, the universalising orientation and implications of the National Energy Market is circumscribed by the RAES Scheme. Prior to the Future Sustainability Program reforms, t~~T~~he RAES Scheme has itself been differentiated to exclude RAES Aboriginal Communities from customer payment obligations. Populations are distinguished by geography and the racialisation of remote communities and land tenure to establish protections from the application of National Energy Market principles, including the overarching logic of customer payments for utilities services.

This article has argued that the reforms do not eschew the recognition and production of difference by liberal governments, even while generalising the expectations of customer payment to establish remote householders as prepaid citizens. Nor are all such recognitions made to mitigate the harm of charging those with limited capacities to pay for domestic energy services. The Department of Energy and Mining~~DEM~~ has required an exception be made via regulatory amendment to exclude prepayment customers in remote Aboriginal communities from needing to provide informed consent and to remove the right to switch to postpayment – amendments not sought for customers in RAES State/Independent Scheme communities. Acknowledging different capacities to pay is the legible form of difference under these reforms, which otherwise pursue the enforced commensuration of remote community households with wider customer norms.

Under these reforms, the de facto acknowledgement of difference that has warranted free energy has been~~is~~ substituted for a regime of generalised energy provision subject to (mitigated) market principles. In the coming years, as temperatures increase and householders

are forced to endure the impact of this bureaucratic invention of household energy insecurity, they might wonder why such policies were introduced. To sense an insensitive state in this way (Grealy and Lea 2021), sweltering at home while the electricity is disconnected, is to experience the policy rearrangements of an insatiable bureaucracy that can't help but intervene and which must treat everyone the same, even as it doesn't.

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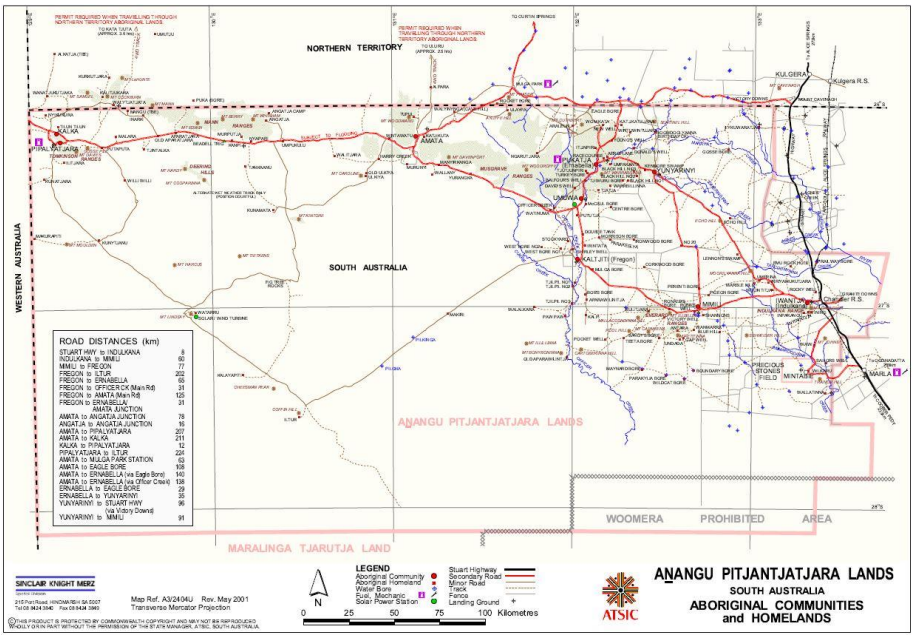
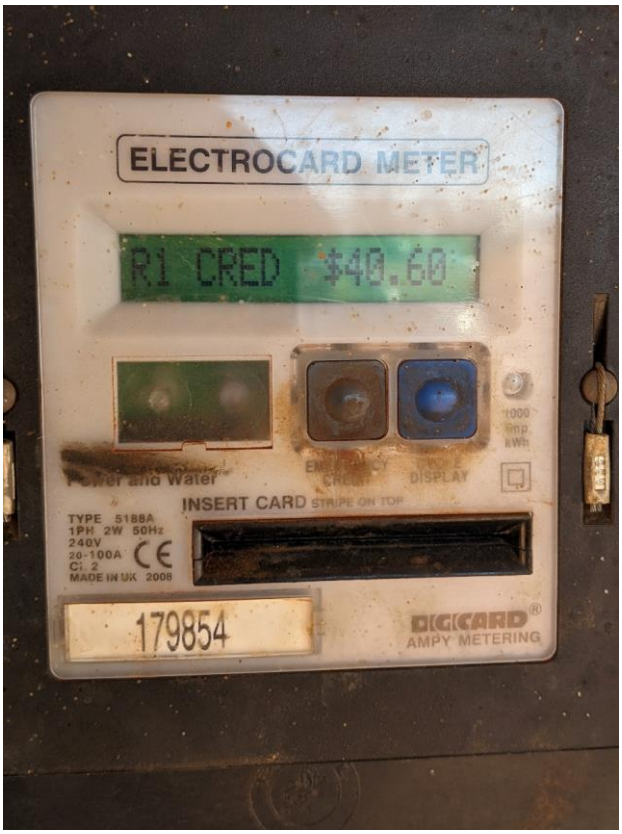
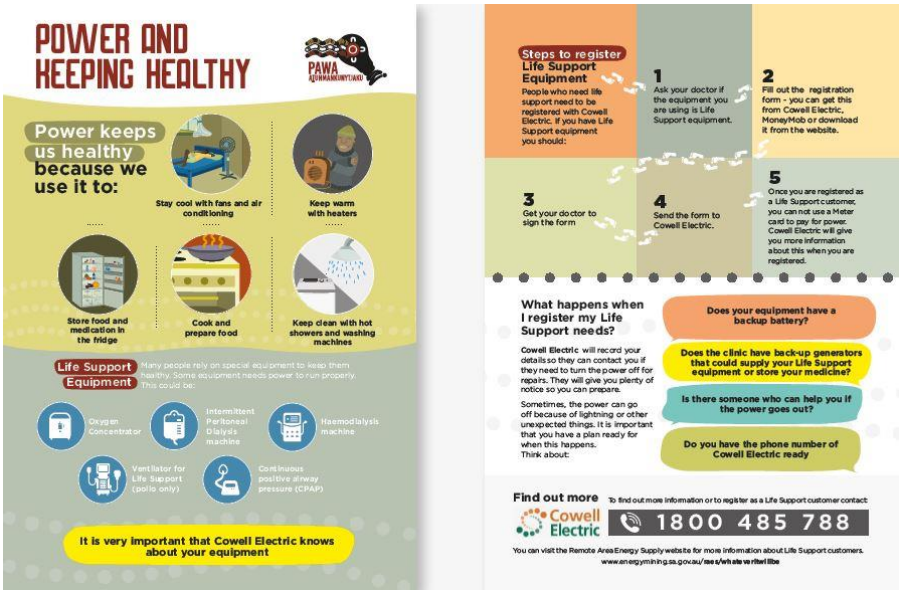


1. APY Lands



2. Prepaid power meter (old)

3. Location of prescribed customers. Copyright. ESCOSA (2022, 4)



4. Power and keeping healthy flyer

Enforced Commensuration and the Bureaucratic Invention of Household Energy Insecurity

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Enforced Commensuration and the Bureaucratic Invention of Household Energy Insecurity

ABSTRACT: *Power doesn't come for free, but who should pay the cost? On the Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in northwest South Australia, Aṉangu households have not historically been billed for domestic energy consumption. The state government has recently introduced a prepayment regime, ostensibly to curb supply costs. Yet extending the norms of customer payment for domestic energy requires significant administrative labour, with limited potential to recoup costs through billing. This article asks: why is enforced commensuration preferable to the status quo? It describes the invention of household energy insecurity via policy reform, including the establishment of a 'compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure' of customer policies, contracts, tariffs, and concessions designed to mitigate the harms produced by the introduction of prepayment. With the status quo deemed untenable and the transition to mainstreaming customer payment apparently inevitable, the article examines how geography and race operate as organising principles for the limits of difference among citizens under late liberal government in remote Australia.*

KEY WORDS: bureaucracy, prepayment meters, energy poverty, remote communities, settler colonialism

Introduction

Originally scheduled for July 1, 2021, the introduction of a user pays system for household energy provision across the Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands was deferred by one year. The delay acknowledged that the proposed reforms would negatively impact Aṉangu households' energy security. Variously employing economic and environmental sustainability justifications, the reforms are nonetheless framed as necessary and inevitable, with the previous status quo of free electricity for remote Aboriginal householders deemed no longer tenable. Congruent with policy efforts across Australia in recent decades to 'normalise' remote Indigenous communities (Sullivan 2013) – by securing land tenure, clarifying infrastructural ownership and leasing, instituting formal tenancy arrangements, and so on – the apparent intention is that energy services in remote Aboriginal communities in South Australia are made commensurate with kindred remote contexts.

However, even as the reforms have proceeded, government authorities have made considerable efforts to mitigate the harms they are expected to produce. Alongside new billing processes, the transition has involved the installation of prepayment hardware and a raft of new regulatory frameworks and administrative systems concerning contracts, tariffs, concessions, and exemptions. Significant bureaucratic labour has been expended on the creation of customers from whom, given various forms of retail subsidisation, the state is only likely to recoup a small proportion of energy generation costs. Given this labour, and the improbability of cost recovery, why is enforced commensuration preferable to the status quo?

Drawing on fieldwork and participation in public consultation processes, this article employs close textual analysis of the policy artefacts underpinning APY Lands household energy reforms, analysing their justifications, administrative intersections, and bureaucratic

entailments. Scholarship on prepayment energy regimes typically adopts the position of retrospective critique, drawing on user accounts of the quotidian impacts of new technologies (Baptista 2015), how residents adopt, reject, and redeploy them (Guma et al. 2022), and the social relations produced in informal and collective housing arrangements (von Schnitzler 2016; Destrée 2021). In contrast, this research has sought to describe the regulatory and policy frameworks governing the introduction of prepayment as these have been published, consulted on, and revised. In part, this reflects an attempt to influence the progress of this reform and to engage with parties working to mitigate its potential harms. Academic analysis contemporaneous to policy making and implementation also highlights the vitality of the state, the interaction of government authorities, and the iterative and ad hoc nature of policy making. Thus I have been less concerned with the specific technology of the prepaid meter than with the invention and content of administrative arrangements governing prepayment, including bureaucracy's capacity to incorporate critical feedback as impetus for further bureaucratic solution-making. By focusing on the neglected administrative labours, another common explanation is troubled: settler colonial administrations may be introducing 'neoliberal' technologies of the self by installing a user pays system, but there is no withdrawal of the state or reduction of costs. Rather, in the geographically raced tactics of ongoing occupation, a reconfigured paternalism is in play.

In published documents and public consultation, the introduction of payment for household energy consumption has been made to appear inevitable to both reform proponents and critics, because the status quo – the continued non-payment for energy services by remote Aboriginal householders – is so exceptional. However, while the reforms universalise householder payment for energy use, they do not efface Indigenous difference from these regulatory frameworks and bureaucratic systems. This article considers how difference is reinscribed

through the production of a *compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure* that attempts to mitigate the harmful impacts brought about through the reforms. This includes the exclusion of remote communities from the National Energy Market; the proposed universal application of concessions to remote Aboriginal households; and the particular application of prepayment in remote Aboriginal communities, in distinction from other remote South Australian towns. Through the introduction of a parallelism that reinforces disparity, the reforms illustrate the forms of Indigenous difference that late liberal settler governments are willing to recognise and those it no longer deems acceptable.

Reforming Power on the APY Lands

The APY Lands is a region in northwest South Australia, abutting the Northern Territory and Western Australia borders. A large portion of the APY Lands was formerly the South Australian government's North-West Aboriginal Reserve, with traditional owners eventually granted inalienable freehold title under the *Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Rights Act 1981* (SA). Today, an official population of 2,333 residents fluctuates seasonally, up to approximately 3000 people, of whom 88.5 per cent are Indigenous (ABS 2021). The 2021 Australian Census recorded the median weekly personal income for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the APY Lands aged 15 years and over as $296 – or $15,392 per year – compared to the equivalent measures of $805 and $41,860 across the Australian population (ABS 2021). Low incomes compromise the energy security of APY Lands households, and increase exposure to the various harms of regular disconnections, related to pre-existing medical conditions, heat stress, inadequate energy for cooking and hygiene, and economic stress and anxiety (Flaherty et al. 2020; SACOSS 2021). In Aboriginal communities in central Australia, these impacts are further exacerbated by disproportionately high energy costs due to extreme weather, the high cost of goods and services, poor quality housing, fixed high energy

use appliances, and crowding (Lea et al. 2021). Communities on the APY Lands are categorised by the Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) as 'very remote', with Kalka in the western APY Lands about 700 kilometres by (mostly dirt) road from the closest town of Alice Springs (Figure 1). The significance of domestic energy security is underlined by the region's ominous climate projections. In January 2020, APY Lands communities experienced between 25 and 28 days with a heat index above 32°C, with similar results for adjacent months (Lea et al. 2021).

[Figure 1]

The APY Lands energy reforms in the name of managing electricity consumption and payment are a long time coming, and follow research by Bushlight (McKenzie 2013), of the Centre for Appropriate Technology, into householders' experiences of prepayment meters and power cards, amid concerns about rising electricity costs and environmental impact. As APY General Manager Richard King has noted, the reforms have 'been in the works for a couple of years' and their expected behaviour modifications are 'something that Aṉangu will learn over time' (in Aeria and Gooch 2021). Explanations for the reforms reflect what is widely known as managing 'the energy trilemma' – finding a balance between security, affordability, and sustainability – and typically cite both the cost of generating electricity in remote communities and the environmental impact of its production. For instance, a 2010 report on the *Future Management of Off-Grid Remote Electricity Services* (PriceWaterhouse Coopers 2010) concluded that 'The current situation of providing electricity supplies for free is clearly unsustainable in terms of costs for Government' (127).

The use of prepayment meters for residential electricity has been widespread in social housing across the border from the APY Lands, having featured in the Northern Territory (NT) since the mid-1990s (Longden et al. 2021). In such scenarios, a prepayment meter is installed at a premises that displays a customer's account balance. Prepayment meter technology has changed over time, and in remote Australia residents historically purchased power cards of various denominations to insert into AMPY wide and narrow mouth meters to top up household credit (Figure 2). Using today's e-token smart meters, householders purchase credit at various retail outlets using a meter ID, or by phone or online, which is directly applied to their meter. If credit is expended, a small amount of 'emergency' credit becomes available as customer debt. Following a disconnection – usually termed 'self-disconnection' by retailers and governments or 'involuntary self-disconnection' by critics – emergency credit must be repaid to reconnect to the network. Prepayment meters thus mediate between the affordances provided by household appliances and wider infrastructural networks, scripting expectations for energy use and financial management for householders, even where such scripts have been shown elsewhere to be contestable through tinkering and other illicit work-arounds (von Schnitzler 2013; 2016).

[Figure 2]

Prepayment has produced deleterious results for householders in the NT, as in other contexts where prepayment meters have targeted low-income people (von Schnitzler 2013; Sharma 2003). Nonetheless, on-the-ground research into prepayment arrangements at Alice Springs town camps found 'a high degree of user satisfaction with pre-payment meters and preferences for [prepayment] over conventional billing processes' (McKenzie 2013, 3). This was despite high rates of disconnection; access issues with obtaining power cards; a relationship between

crowding and increased electricity costs; and residents adapting food purchasing practices due to disconnections. Such findings regarding energy conservation and thermal comfort compensation strategies by householders are typical of research on energy insecurity or fuel poverty and prepayment more broadly (Middlemiss 2017; Hernández 2016; QCOSS 2014; Sharma 2003). More recently, Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation studied data from NT energy retailer Jacana Energy on prepayment meter disconnections and their duration for the towns of Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek, and Alice Springs (Klerck 2021). Tangentyere Council's analysis showed that across 2019-2020, prepayment meters in those towns disconnected on average 46.8 times for an average duration of between 5.2 and 6.7 hours on each occasion. Over three months, 91 per cent of prepayment meters at Alice Springs town camps disconnected, on 13.6 occasions for an average incident of 6 hours and 42 minutes (Klerck 2021, 5). Responses to such findings, including submissions to current reviews in South Australia, typically recommend a range of bureaucratic and program reforms, such as improving administrative arrangements for tracking disconnections, increased access to power cards, targeted energy-efficiency education programs, increased access to rebates and concessions, and housing refurbishments. No report recommends increasing bureaucratic labour as the solution, yet this is the hidden entailment on offer.

In South Australia, the Remote Areas Energy Supplies (RAES) Scheme is administered by the Department of Energy and Mining (DEM) and services approximately 1,500 off-grid network customers across 10 townships (under the RAES State/Independent Scheme) and 15 Aboriginal communities (under the RAES Aboriginal Communities Scheme, including APY Lands communities). The APY Lands is characterised as an off-grid energy network, with a Central Power House at Umuwa, and smaller power stations at Pipalyatjara (also servicing Kalka), and at Murpatja (also servicing Kanpi and Nyapari) (DEM 2021b). As an off-grid

network, APY Lands energy sits outside Australia's National Electricity Market and its associated regulatory framework. In this context, Cowell Electric Supply Pty Ltd is licensed under the RAES Scheme to provide generation, distribution, and retail electricity services (DEM 2021). In turn, Cowell Electric is subsidised by the SA government to provide tariffs to RAES customers at parity with on-grid pricing (ESCOSA 2021).

While electricity provision under the RAES Scheme costs about 75 cents per kWh, residential customers outside of Aboriginal communities pay the subsidised rate of about 34 cents per kWh (DEM 2021, 3). This subsidisation is an outcome of an Australian government obligation to provide essential services to citizens at comparable standards and rates wherever they are located, thus recognising the failure of National Energy Market principles and the need for public subsidy in remote contexts (Baird 2001). In Aboriginal communities serviced by the RAES Scheme, this recognition has resulted in a situation where *electricity is free*. The attempt to foreclose this exception from household energy payment is emblematic of the staggered and archipelagic application of settler laws and regulations across Indigenous Country. Policies are often geographically circumscribed in their application, internally fragmented, and patch-worked together. And the legacies of yesteryear's policies haunt the present, demanding contemporary explanation or remedy (Lea 2021).

In this exceptional situation of the absence of a price mechanism for household electricity, commentators suggest that householders have little incentive to curb energy consumption and, as such, 'electricity is generally conceived of as a free public good' (McKenzie 2013, 10). That electricity could be claimed and contested as a public good, but also one only provided for free by government to a particular collective among the citizenry, provides a basis for bureaucratic reforms that chip away at the 'relative autonomy' of remote Aboriginal

communities while simultaneously claiming to provide social security protections (Morphy and Morphy 2013). Neither the policy legacy nor the contemporary reforms ground the exception to payment in ontological models of Indigenous alterity (Vincent 2017), or in fatuous claims about remote Aboriginal people's inability or unwillingness to embrace the affordances of mainstream housing (see Lea and Pholeros 2009). Rather, the historical situation and the present reforms represent competing approaches of liberal government managing the jurisdiction of the market, by establishing its limits or mitigating its impact based on geographic and racialised differences. The historical situation and present reforms differ in their prioritisation of commitments to the separation or assimilation of remote Aboriginal communities (Mazel 2009), encapsulating liberal multiculturalism's 'conflicting impulses' to maintain cultural difference and to eliminate inequality (Kowal 2008, 338). The invention of a *compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure*, described below, signals the ongoing ambivalence of late liberal government to embrace the wholesale extension of market principles throughout social life (Burchell 1991).

As recently as 2014, politicians remained cautious about removing the exceptional non-payment status of remote Indigenous communities, with Opposition Spokesperson for Energy, Economic and Regional Development Martin Hamilton-Smith stating that 'one has to be mindful, particularly in the Pit (Pitjantjatjara) lands, of a family's capacity to pay' (in Brooks 2014). Five years on, badged as the 'Future Sustainability Program', SA's Department of Energy and Mining (DEM) proposed remote energy reforms with a three stage process. These included: the installation of smart meters across buildings serviced by the RAES Scheme; the introduction of new payment options; and the introduction of electricity charging for APY Lands residents. In short, with non-payment deemed no longer tenable, the reforms proposed to constitute remote Aboriginal households in South Australia as energy services customers,

‘shifting the burden for social commensuration from the place it is generated (liberalism) to the place it operates on’ (Povinelli 2001, 330). This invention of prepayment represents a technopolitics typical of late liberalism’s desire to sculpt citizenship into a project of active responsibility (Rose 2000), while upholding liberalism’s proclivity to govern ‘because of the market’, rather than ‘for the market’ as under neoliberalism, even where this involves the extension of customer norms (Foucault 2008, 121). The installation of prepaid meters on the APY Lands establishes Aṉangu householders as customer-citizens with attendant entitlements and obligations. As customers, APY Lands residents undergo a process of governmental commensuration, where the exceptional status of non-payment for energy services is transformed to become a question of not *if*, but *how much* they should pay, and by what means (Espeland and Stevens 1998).

Apologetic Policy, Inevitability, and Insatiable Reform

Essential services in South Australia are regulated by the Essential Services Commission of South Australia (ESCOSA). In March 2021, ESCOSA responded to DEM’s proposed reforms by releasing an Issues Paper related to a review of the ‘Prepayment Meter System Code’ (hereafter the ‘Code’), which regulates ‘the operation of prepayment systems in the electricity and gas market and provide[s] minimum consumer protections for customers’ (ESCOSA 2021, 1). Following the introduction of the *National Energy Retail Law (South Australia) Act* (2011), the Code has only regulated prepayment systems in small-scale and off-grid networks not captured by the National Energy Customer Framework (NECF). While off-grid energy networks sit outside Australia’s National Energy Market, they are licensed by ESCOSA under the RAES Scheme and customers should be afforded ‘similar consumer protections to consumers of on-grid energy licensees’ (ESCOSA 2019, 4). This includes obligations related

to customer supply contracts, dispute resolution procedures, supply obligations, customer service obligations, billing disputes, and disconnection and restoration of supply.

ESCOSA's Issues Paper identified the benefits typically attributed to prepayment systems for consumers: greater payment flexibility; debt avoidance; and fewer administrative charges (O'Sullivan et al. 2011; Sharma 2003). It also identified consumer risks, such as: more frequent disconnections; higher energy costs, due to the inability to exploit time-of-use tariffs; customer involvement in monitoring consumption; and inadequate information from retailers about purchasing credit, reconnection, emergency credit, and fees and tariffs (ESCOSA 2021). However, this benefits and risks comparison, as with Bushlight's framing of residents' preference for prepayment, compared prepayment with postpayment arrangements. In this Issues Paper, and throughout the submissions responding to it, the proposed reforms are never compared with the advantages of the existing situation: *free energy* for remote Aboriginal households.

Conscious of undermining access to domestic electricity in remote communities, ESCOSA gave significant consideration to existing and potential consumer protections. It highlighted that under the Code 'a retailer [must] obtain explicit informed consent from a customer prior to entering into a prepayment arrangement' (ESCOSA 2021, 14). Retailers are also obliged to ensure other consumer protections, such as identifying every instance, and the duration, of a customer's self-disconnection. The retailer should be able to identify customer payment difficulties, according to a threshold of self-disconnection of longer than 240 minutes three or more times over three months (ESCOSA 2021, 12). In such an instance, the retailer is obliged to contact the customer 'to provide information about State Government assistance programs;

information on independent financial and other relevant counselling services; and to offer for the removal (or rendering non-operational) of the prepayment meter' (DEM 2021, 15).

In July 2021, in line with the Future Sustainability Program, the South Australian Department for Energy and Mining (DEM) also published an Issues Paper proposing to make prepayment the 'default payment method' in the off-grid energy networks serviced by the RAES Scheme. Like Bushlight and ESCOSA, DEM (2021) identified that 'It is rare, if not unique, in Australia for the State to fully subsidise electricity usage' and emphasised issues related to this subsidisation, including high energy consumption, the absence of a price signal, and the environmental impact of diesel consumption (3). DEM described anticipated results of the transition, including reductions in diesel use, emissions, demand of kWhs, and the need for new assets, and local employment. No modelling was provided for the proposed reduction in household energy consumption or for job creation, and the KPIs that ESCOSA will employ to assess the impact of prepayment on Cowell Electric customers will not extend to these original policy justifications (personal communication). Nonetheless, DEM anticipates that the reforms will reduce diesel use by 450,000 litres and cut emissions by 1.2m kilograms per year (2021, 5). As a point of comparison for alternative reforms, a SA government press release describes that the $9m upgrade to the Central Power House at Umuwa, installing three megawatts of solar photovoltaic panels and one megawatt of battery storage, is likely to generate 4.4GWh of electricity per year, or approximately 40 per cent of total power required on that network (van Holst Pellekaan 2020), with an estimated reduction in diesel consumption of 1m litres per year (the Central Power House network uses about 2.8m litres per annum, DEM 2021b). In other

words, demand side reforms appear to offer less impactful environmental benefits in this context than infrastructural upgrades.[1]

Both DEM and ESCOSA are almost apologetic in framing the introduction of prepayment meters as both inevitable and difficult. DEM claimed that 'The decision to introduce charging was *not taken lightly* as it is understood that the impact of this additional cost will impact on the welfare of community members' (emphasis added, DEM 2021c, 1). Their descriptions characterise the work of government authorities as attempting to mitigate the harms caused by reforms that the sitting government has itself chosen to implement. This is exemplary of the larger function of Indigenous social policy in settler colonial contexts, partially ameliorating the inequality it has created rather than dismantling the conditions of its formations (Lea 2020). Customers in RAES State/Independent Scheme communities who are charged for electricity have the choice to pay by pre- or postpayment. However, DEM's Issues Paper presented prepayment for all customers in remote Aboriginal communities as the only practical payment option – highlighting the absence of a door-do-door mail service and APY Lands telecommunications infrastructure as impediments to post-payment billing (DEM 2021, 4). DEM also proposed that for Aboriginal communities 'customer consent will not be

[1] While it is beyond the scope of this article, further applied research is needed on the promise of solar technologies, at both the household and community levels, to strengthen energy security and even promote energy sovereignty in remote communities on the APY Lands and elsewhere. As with all 'new' technologies, the potential of solar technologies to mitigate existing energy challenges is contingent on the infrastructural legacies that any new installation must contend with, such as the capacity and condition of existing electrical grids, and the desire and funding for ongoing maintenance.

required for the payment method and the customer will not have the option to opt out of [prepayment]' (DEM 2021, 13). This arrangement was assured by the SA Government through an amendment to the *Electricity (General) (Payment Condition) Variation Regulations 2021* passed on December 9, 2021, requiring the regulator ESCOSA to impose a condition on Cowell Electric so that it 'only sell electricity to prescribed customers using a prepayment meter system' (Figure 3). This constitutes an inequitable, and potentially discriminatory, distinction made among RAES customers, whereby customers in Aboriginal communities serviced by the RAES Scheme (the prescribed customers) do not have the right to consent to prepayment, nor the option to leave that arrangement for postpayment.

[Figure 3]

Demonstrating the perceived inevitability of reform once it was outlined, the regulatory amendment was passed prior to the conclusion of ESCOSA's (2021b) 'Off-grid Energy Consumer Protection Framework Review', which commenced in November 2021 and is scheduled to run until December 2022. DEM nonetheless framed the reforms as a foregone conclusion: 'As of 1 July 2022, the South Australian Government will introduce charging for electricity to the residents of communities in the APY Lands, Yalata and Oak Valley' (DEM 2021c, 1). Aiming to mitigate the negative impacts for remote householders, DEM (2021c) drafted a Pre-Payment Customer Protection Policy for Cowell Electric customers on the RAES scheme, which along with the Future Sustainability education program, 'have been put in place to ensure communities are ready for the introduction of electricity charging' (DEM 2021c, 1). The acknowledgment of the 'not taken lightly' decision infers the well-known outcomes of prepayment regimes in other Australian jurisdictions, and policy recognition that the reforms will generate a widespread situation of 'living prepaid', under which temporary

access to services is punctuated by frequent disconnections (von Schnitzler 2016, 6). Applying South Australia's Prepayment Meter System Code to the impact of prepayment on disconnections in Alice Springs town camps described above, almost all customers would be designated as experiencing payment difficulties, and moved onto postpayment meters with financial concessions.

Like DEM and ESCOSA's failure to genuinely entertain the option that no reforms should be pursued, responses to government consultation similarly bypassed the possibility of continuing non-payment to instead stress the differences in consumer protections provided to customers of on- and off-grid licensees (see SACOSS 2021). While stakeholder consultations sparked ESCOSA's 'Off-grid Energy Consumer Protection Framework Review', the sense of inevitability surrounding the reforms has had a narrowing effect for responses from community advocates (personal communication). The debate turned, first, on the benefits and harms of pre- and postpayment arrangements and, second, if prepayment was mandated, what customer protections should be guaranteed in remote communities. Whether because the reforms appeared a fait accompli (despite ongoing reviews), because non-payment for household energy services is so exceptional, or because Australian governments are compelled to perennially reinvent policy for the 'welfare' of Indigenous communities to authorise bureaucratic legitimacy and continuity (Lea 2012), no serious case was made to simply leave the existing arrangement alone. In the meantime, and while consultation processes were open, the reforms proceeded, with the installation of smart meters commencing in Aboriginal communities serviced by the RAES Scheme in mid-2021, and the introduction of prepayment from July 2022 (Cowell Electric 2020; DEM 2021b).

The Compensatory Bureaucratic Infrastructure of Commensuration

The APY Lands prepayment reforms are clearly unjust by the normative terms of energy justice frameworks (Sovacool et al. 2017; United Nations 2020), with remote householders bearing the brunt of any economic or environmental gains (Büchs et al. 2011). They compromise the reliability of household energy distribution; procedurally proscribe the participation of remote householders as decision-makers for reforms and even as consenting consumers; and involve limited recognition of the cultural difference of some remote Indigenous livelihoods. Nonetheless, throughout this transition, the concerns expressed by social services and Indigenous organisations have been recognised by the government authorities pursuing and regulating the reforms. This recognition has involved the invention of a *compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure* led by various issues papers, reviews, and public consultations, and including a regulatory amendment, DEM's draft RAES/Cowell Electric Pre-Payment Customer Protection Policy, ESCOSA's draft schedule to Cowell's licence regarding minimum terms and conditions for prescribed customers, a revised written disclosure statement, a new Medical Heating and Cooling Concession policy, and, among other things, materials for community consultation and an energy education program.

Aware of the harms to remote householders of moving from free electricity to payment, while promoting prepayment over postpayment, DEM identified various measures to mitigate the risks of the new arrangement. This included plans for 'a three year engagement and education program including door-to-door energy education visits from trained local workers', 'a staged tariff introduction, starting at 10 cents per kWh and working toward standard RAES residential tariffs [of 34 cents kWh]'; the 'development of a prepayment customer protection policy which considers the special circumstances of new to payment customers'; and 'the application and accessibility of concessions for new to payment customers' (DEM 2021, 5). In coordination with the Department of Human Services, this includes that 'all prepayment

customers in the relevant areas have the Energy Bill Concession applied directly to the smart meter on a fortnightly basis, administered through the retailer' (DEM 2021, 18). That is, DEM proposed that for all 'new to payment customers', which include all households in RAES Scheme Aboriginal communities, South Australia's energy bill concession should be applied in recognition of those customers' relative limited capacity to afford energy costs.

These are compensatory mechanisms established within a process of enforced commensuration under which, in Povinelli's (2008) words, 'present tense modes of living and dying are transformed into future anterior modes of the proper life' (511). There are obvious parallels with historical assimilationist policies, under which Indigenous people were expected to 'attain the same manner of living as other Australians … enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes, loyalties as other Australians' (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates 1961, 51). Unlike most assimilationist policies, Indigenous cultural difference and the superiority of settler Australian norms are not cited as reasons for the reforms, which instead employ the economic and environmental claims outlined above. Nonetheless, the commensuration process requires that exceptional non-paying householders are subjected to the otherwise universal Australian norms of customer payment for essential services. In this way, the withdrawal of life support for remote residents is implicitly framed as a necessary transition towards the good life of late liberalism (Povinelli 2008).

In the incorporation of the historical anomaly into contemporary policy frameworks, authorities recognise that those frameworks will have uneven effects – generating suffering that is 'ordinary, chronic, acute, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, eventful and sublime' (Povinelli 2008, 511). As such, the transition unfolds in accordance with principles of liberal

governance whereby the assimilationist extension of the market is simultaneously mitigated by 'remedial' strategies recognising socioeconomic inequality (Kowal 2008, 341). The establishment of new policies and programs by DEM and ESCOSA demonstrate a biopolitical imperative to mitigate certain vulnerabilities to slow death, which have themselves been exposed to new pressures by establishing a user-pays system that undermines the relation between reliable household energy and good health. I suggest that these regulations and techniques can be characterised as *compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure*. Constructed by governmental authorities within a broader program of harmful social commensuration, this is an administrative network of policy and programs aiming to compensate the objectified population for the imposition of a government intervention. In contrast to LaDuke and Cowen's (2020) conception of 'alimentary infrastructures', as 'in its anti-colonial conception, life-giving and capable of sustaining not only the body, but the spirit and law as well' (252), the resources distributed by a compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure are accessible in exchange for, and in order to mitigate, exposure to harmful governmental reconfigurations. Scaled up, this concept may also provide a general characterisation of social welfare provided on the grounds of Indigeneity by settler colonial governments, especially where such administrative assemblages are established without the request or meaningful input of First Nations people or Indigenous community controlled organisations. Drawing on LaDuke and Cowen's (2020) claim that 'infrastructure is the *how* of settler colonialism' (245) and Spice's (2018) characterisation of 'invasive infrastructures', I suggest that this compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure consolidates the ongoing colonisation of remote Indigenous lifeworlds by administrative means.

In this reform program, significant faith is granted to the price mechanism to influence energy consumption behaviour, and to an education program's potential to shift consumers'

behaviours to prioritise cost over need. While the reforms depend on the supposed necessity to convert exceptional non-paying householders into customers, the staged tariff and the default application of the energy concession significantly reduce the initial economic impact on householders. In this way, the (mitigated) risks and actual harms brought about by the current reforms are 'deflected to the horizon of good intentions' (Povinelli 2001, 328), justified by a hypothetical future in which customers have reduced their energy consumption and no longer require equivalent subsidy. This is despite the fact that most of the cost of energy production in RAES Aboriginal communities will continue to be subsidised by government. The situation in Alice Springs town camps is a good indicator of APY Lands householders' future, in which the policy-manufactured risk of a household debt crisis under a postpayment regime is avoided for the normalisation of energy insecurity under prepayment.

On the APY Lands, the transition to a user-pays energy regime has been represented as inevitable and as necessary to 'bring South Australia in line' with remote Aboriginal communities in other Australian jurisdictions (DEM 2021, 13). It is an enforced commensuration within which the most obvious alternative – maintaining the status quo – is an apparently unspeakable position from within the policy discourse. It is ultimately unclear exactly why the legacy of past policies cannot remain an acknowledged exception to the norm, where the norm is widely understood to generate predictable harms and demands the invention of extensive compensatory bureaucratic infrastructure. Rather than entertain the continuation of the status quo, significant governmental effort has been expended to address manufactured disconnections and required concessions. The extent of this labour considered against potential gains undermines any claim of economic rationalism. Taking DEM's concern regarding environmental impact as expressed in good faith, then a reduction in household emissions might otherwise be achieved by solar upgrades to the remaining community power

plants and/or retrofitting housing with insulation, passive cooling technologies, and energy efficient appliances. However, this reform program is typical of a larger tendency of settler governments to frame remote Indigenous householders in terms of deficit or pathology and thus as the appropriate object and scale of 'swivel chair remedy from a distance' (Lea 2012, 119). Recalibrating this scope, DEM's promotion of the economic and environmental gains anticipated by reducing diesel consumption for household energy production should be juxtaposed with the Australian Government's 18th largest budget expense: the subsidisation of diesel fuel for industries that do not use public roads and work in remote locations. Australian taxpayers pay $7.8bn annually to fund a fuel tax credit scheme that provides a rebate of 42.7c per litre to companies using diesel fuel, of which the mining industry has received 43 per cent of total funds since 2006 (Campbell et al. 2021).

Government is never so rational or singular to avoid such contradictions within and between departments and authorities. ESCOSA's bureaucratic inventions are in response to DEM's pursuit of the prepayment reform and constrained by the SA Government's regulatory amendment. A generous interpretation of DEM's reforms might suggest it can only pursue savings in the budgets it controls. Nevertheless, DEM's projected savings will be amply counteracted by additional expenditure and labour pressures on federal and state health departments as disconnections contribute to increased presentations to remote clinics and regional hospitals for heat stress and environmental health-related conditions (Flaherty et al. 2020; Hernández 2016). With such concerns highlighted by consultation, further policy developments have been made to mitigate the potential health impacts of the reforms, revising the definition of 'life support equipment' so that customers on dialysis machines, ventilators, and other specified technologies will not be subject to the self-disconnection feature of the prepayment meter, provided they register with Cowell Electric (Figure 4, ESCOSA 2022).

Established alongside this is the new Medical Heating and Cooling Concession, paid quarterly to registered customers with specified medical conditions that require mechanical heating or cooling to not severely exacerbate that condition. ESCOSA's (2022) most recent draft decision on Cowell's licence amendment to establish prepayment by default for prescribed customers is predominantly concerned with how customer protections for RAES Scheme Aboriginal communities customers can become more closely aligned with those of the Code and the National Energy Consumer Framework, on issues including accessibility of government materials, debt-accrual during protected periods, restrictions on debt recovery, transparency of reporting, and so on. Amid these multiplying compensatory attempts, the new regime ultimately displaces an arrangement that already provided the free electricity that supported householders to meet domestic health and social needs.

[Figure 4]

Conclusion

The prepayment reforms described in this article provide competing inscriptions of Indigenous difference within Australian settler state policy. The arrangement that existed until July 1 2022, as the de facto result of legacy policy and infrastructure, recognised the cultural difference and relative autonomy of Indigenous livelihoods in this remote context as reasonable grounds for free household electricity. The RAES Scheme depends on a similar geographic distinction regarding remoteness in general, recognising that the principles of the National Energy Market are not applicable to remote off-grid networks and that state and territory governments be compelled to provide equitable services to citizens' in those contexts. There are levels of nested protection within Australian domestic energy services governance. In South Australia, the universalising orientation and implications of the National Energy

Market is circumscribed by the RAES Scheme. Prior to the Future Sustainability Program reforms, the RAES Scheme has itself been differentiated to exclude RAES Aboriginal Communities from customer payment obligations. Populations are distinguished by geography and the racialisation of remote communities and land tenure to establish protections from the application of National Energy Market principles, including the overarching logic of customer payments for utilities services.

This article has argued that the reforms do not eschew the recognition and production of difference by liberal governments, even while generalising the expectations of customer payment to establish remote householders as prepaid citizens. Nor are all such recognitions made to mitigate the harm of charging those with limited capacities to pay for domestic energy services. The Department of Energy and Mining has required an exception be made via regulatory amendment to exclude prepayment customers in remote Aboriginal communities from needing to provide informed consent and to remove the right to switch to postpayment – amendments not sought for customers in RAES State/Independent Scheme communities. Acknowledging different capacities to pay is the legible form of difference under these reforms, which otherwise pursue the enforced commensuration of remote community households with wider customer norms.

Under these reforms, the de facto acknowledgement of difference that has warranted free energy has been substituted for a regime of generalised energy provision subject to (mitigated) market principles. In the coming years, as temperatures increase and householders are forced to endure the impact of this bureaucratic invention of household energy insecurity, they might wonder why such policies were introduced. To sense an insensitive state in this way (Grealy and Lea 2021), sweltering at home while the electricity is disconnected, is to experience the

policy rearrangements of an insatiable bureaucracy that can't help but intervene and which must treat everyone the same, even as it doesn't.

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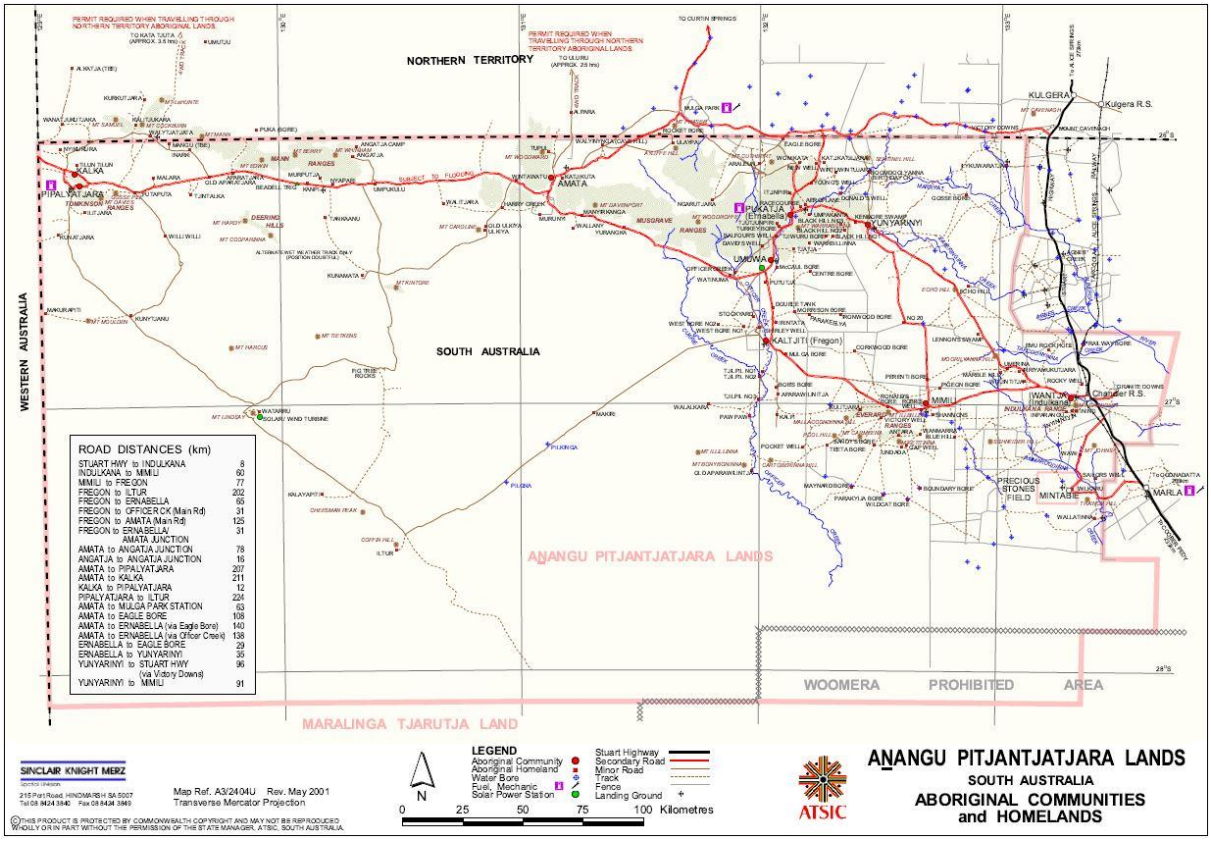
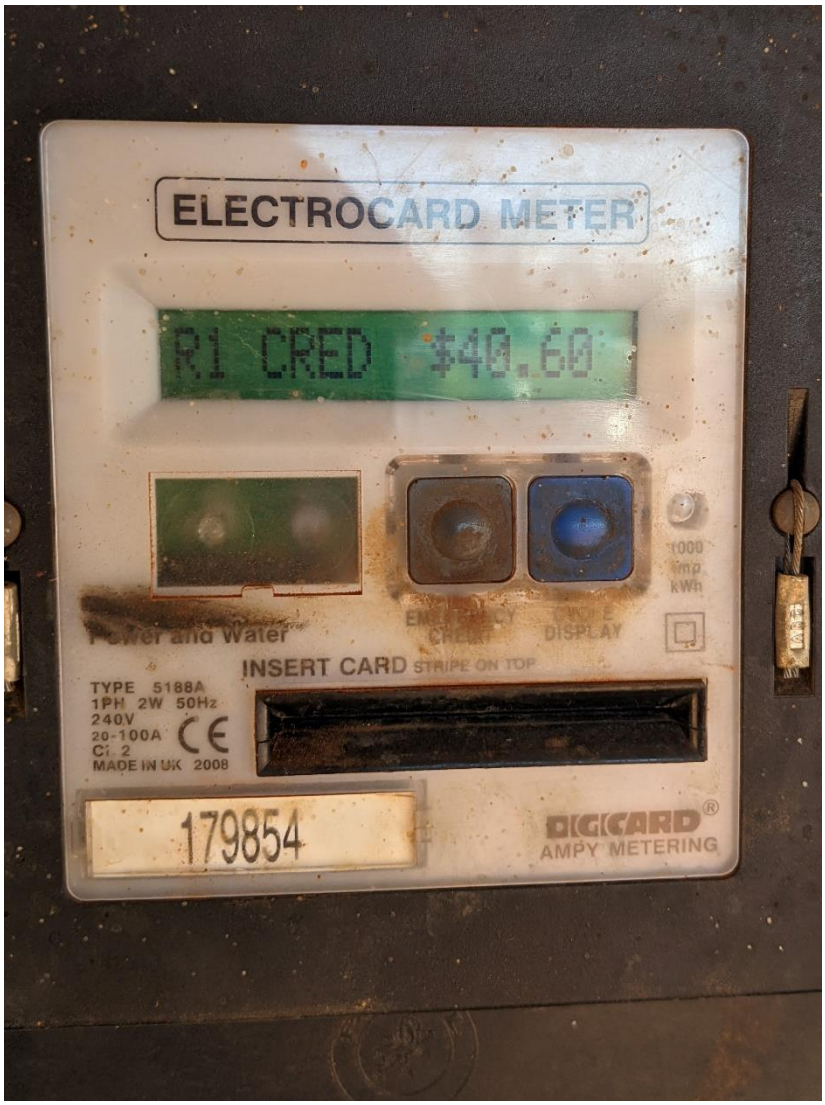
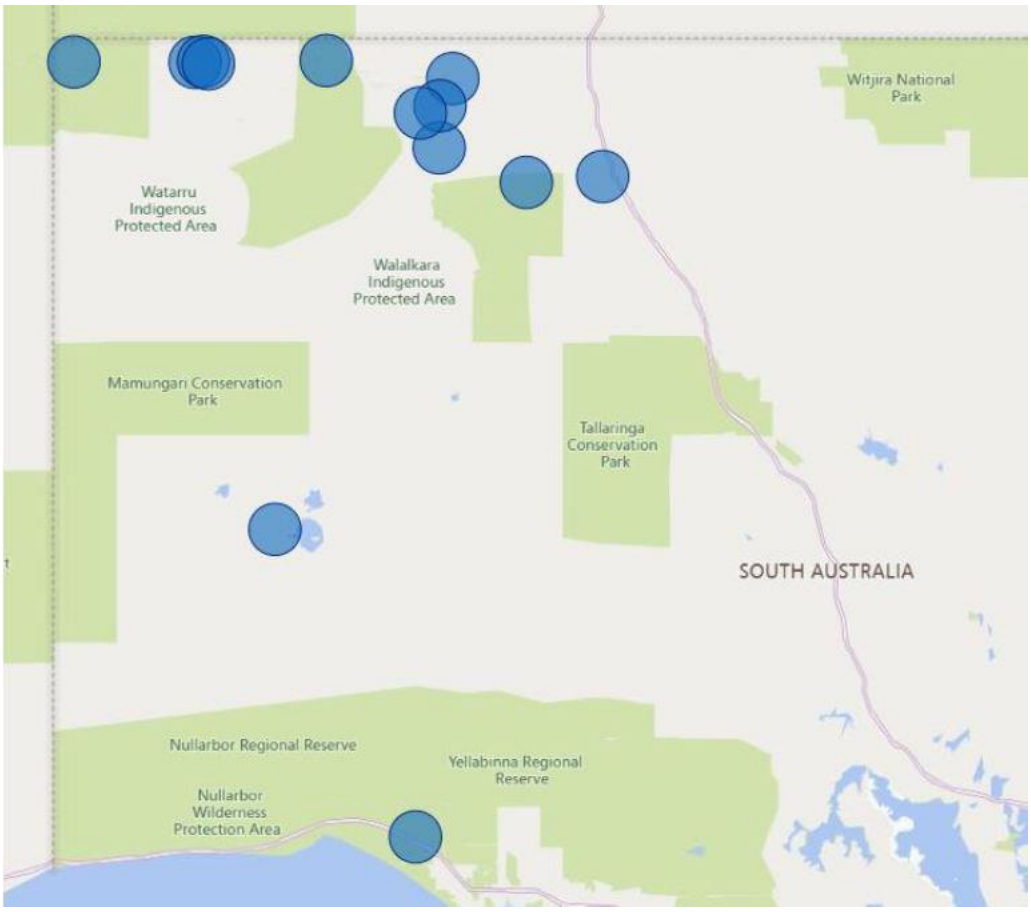


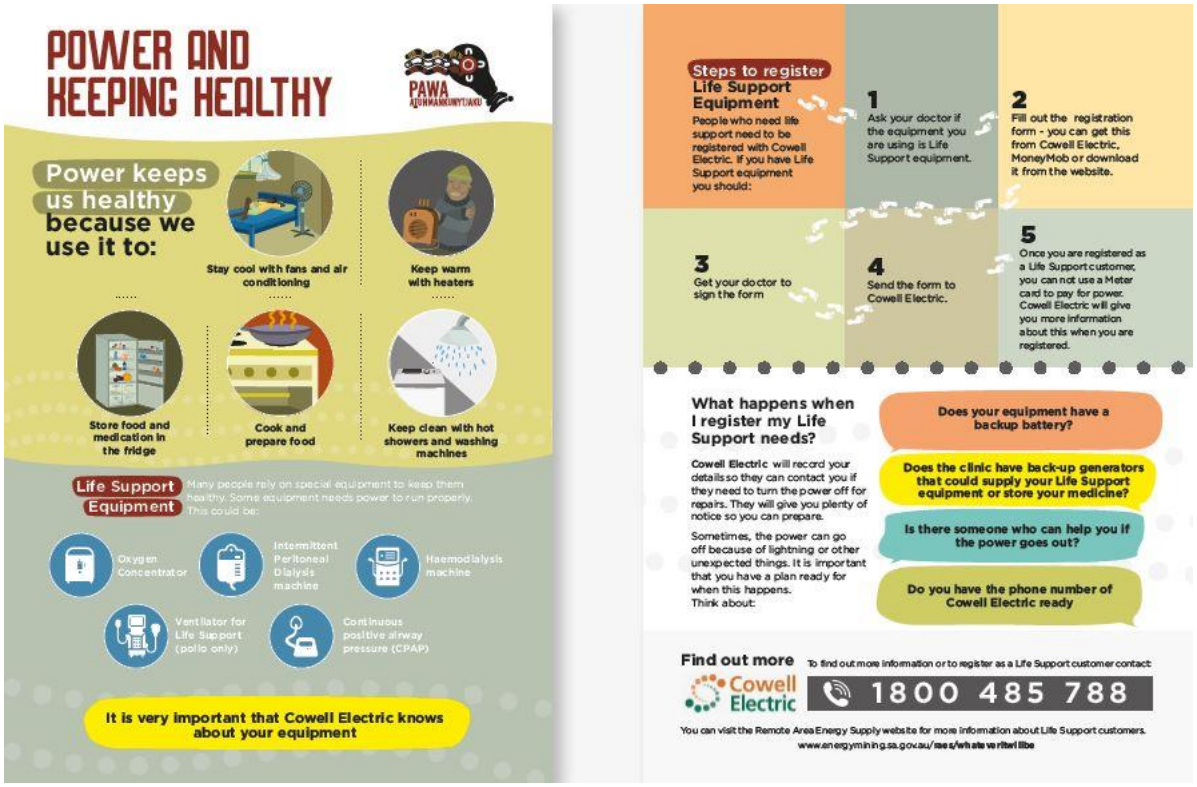
1. APY Lands



2. Prepaid power meter (old)



3. Location of prescribed customers. Copyright. ESCOSA (2022, 4)



4. Power and keeping healthy flyer

Figure 1. AP Lands Map

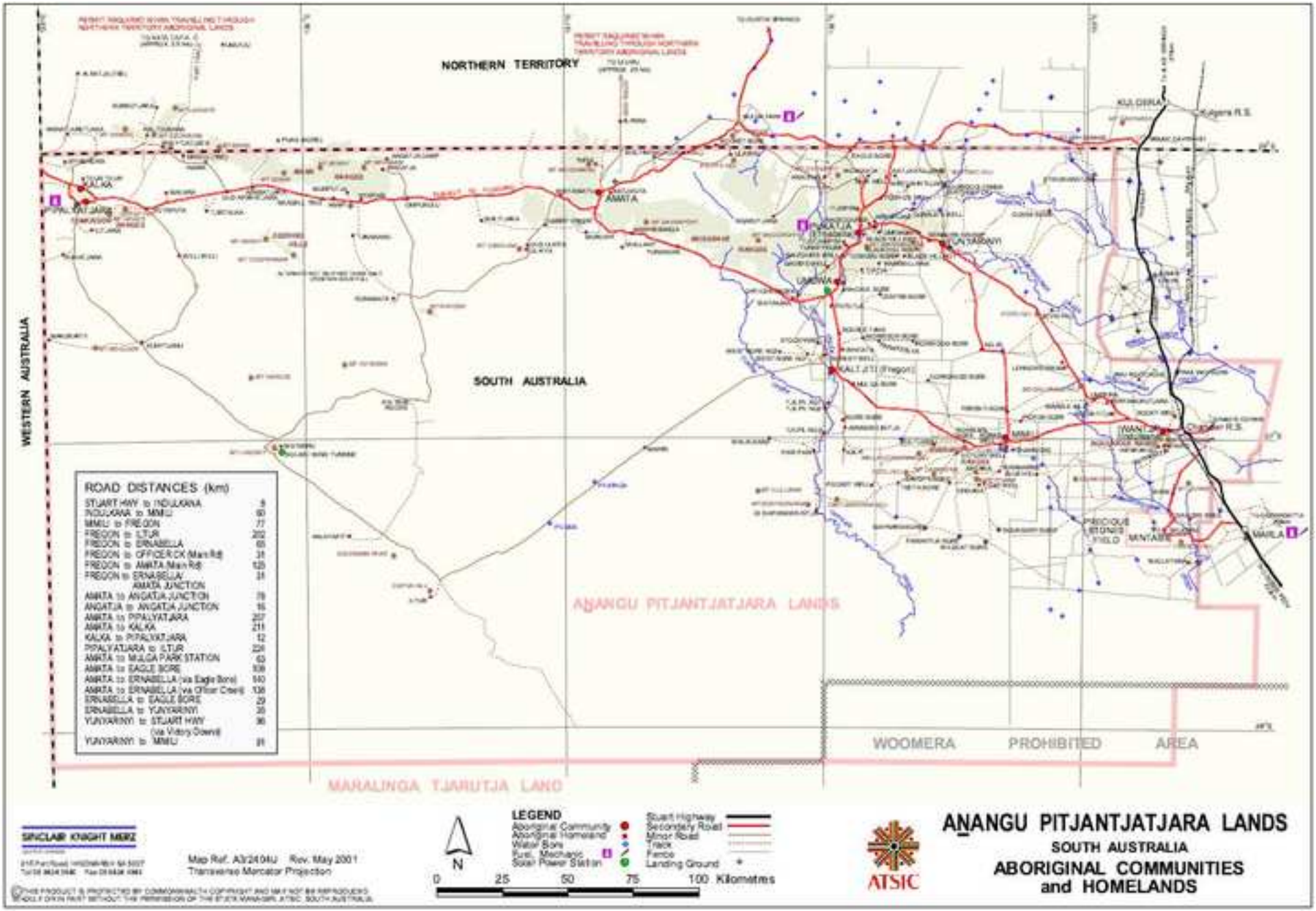


Figure 2. Prepaid meter

Figure 3. Location of prescribed customers

Figure 4. Life Support program flyer