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'NORMALISING' ABORIGINAL HOUSING IN THE KIMBERLEY: CHALLENGES AT THE INTERFACE OF NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

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Series note

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'Normalising' Aboriginal housing in the Kimberley: challenges at the interface of new public management approaches

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Abstract

The abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the national government reform agenda of the mid-2000s brought about 'mainstreaming' of Indigenous programs and opened them up to new public management (NPM) principles. This paper discusses this change, particularly in relation to the implementation in the Kimberley region of Western Australia of mainstreamed agreements on remote Indigenous housing between the Australian Government and State and Territory governments. These have been designed to provide new housing and renovate existing housing in seriously overcrowded remote Aboriginal communities. These agreements shifted Australian Government funding and responsibility for housing from Indigenous community-controlled organisations to State governments. This paper explores the 'normalisation' or 'mainstreaming' of housing policy in this NPM environment, through a case study of the impact of this policy on one organisation, Marra Worra Worra (MWW), and its remote Kimberley communities.

Under these housing programs, MWW is one of six contractors engaged across the state by Western Australia's Housing Authority to manage housing in remote Aboriginal communities. Until recently it managed all aspects of housing including the maintenance of 474 community houses; from 2016 the contract for repairs and maintenance was given to a State-wide non-Indigenous contractor while MWW retains other property management services. In managing these programs, MWW is at the interface of tensions between Aboriginal cultural realities and the demands of an increasingly 'normalised' housing policy.

Keywords: Indigenous community organisations, Indigenous housing, Kimberley Aboriginal organisations, new public management, public value

Acknowledgments

Acronyms

ACA	Aboriginal Councils and Associations (Act)
ALT	Aboriginal Land Trust
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
ATSIS	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
CDP	Community Development Program
CHIP	Community Housing and Infrastructure Program
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
HMA	Housing Management Agreement
IT	information technology
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MWW	Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation
NPARIH Housing	National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous
NPM	New public management
NPRH	National Partnership Agreement on Remote Housing
STEP	Supported Tenancy Education Program
UAM	United Aborigines Mission
WA	Western Australia

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Introduction

In the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia (WA), during the Australian Government policy era of 'self-determination' which began in the early 1970s, Kimberley Aboriginal people established a number of significant Aboriginal organisations to represent their interests and provide services to their people. Marra Worra Worra (MWW) in Fitzroy Crossing is the oldest such organisation which provides housing, employment and other services to Aboriginal people in the Fitzroy Valley, West Kimberley. This paper explores how changes in Australian Government policies, especially Indigenous policy and housing policy, are affecting its operation and the housing service provided to its constituent communities. It will explore the social impact of 'normalising' (Sullivan 2011) or 'mainstreaming' housing policy in this new public management (NPM) environment, through a case study of the impact of this policy on MWW and its remote Kimberley communities. The paper is structured in the following way. First I describe the setting briefly; then I outline some background about the changes in Indigenous policy in the last 15 years, particularly in relation to housing, and explain how the policy of 'mainstreaming' has brought NPM approaches into the Indigenous housing policy space. I then discuss how this has affected Aboriginal communities and organisations in the Fitzroy Valley, and particularly their current housing provider, MWW. In doing this I contrast a NPM approach with a relational Public Value Management approach (O'Flynn 2007) to Indigenous housing.

The setting: the Fitzroy Valley, Kimberley region, Western Australia

The Kimberley region of Australia is a vast area in the north-west of the country, east from Broome, in WA. Generally considered 'remote', its dramatically beautiful tropical savannah landscape was colonised by European pastoralists in the late 1800s. This colonial expansion evoked violent confrontations over land and natural resources as Aboriginal people struggled to retain their livelihoods and ways of life in the face of the pastoral incursion. Eventually, pastoralists and Aboriginal people settled into a form of co-existence, as Aboriginal people were engaged as labour in the pastoral industry, and thereby continued to live on their traditional 'country' at least until the late 1960s; some were living on missions run by religious groups. However, the Pastoral Award 1969 brought an end to this situation, as pastoralists were required to pay award wages to their Aboriginal workers, rather than just rations. Soon after this, many

Kimberley Aboriginal people were forced off the pastoral stations and, like refugees, gathered at regional centres like Fitzroy Crossing (Thorburn 2011). In the Fitzroy Valley this event 'saw more than a thousand Aboriginal people displaced from surrounding cattle stations, their ancestral grounds, and forced to live in atrocious living circumstances on the fringes of Fitzroy Crossing' (Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation (MWW) 2016:8).

As a result of Aboriginal activism, many people now live back on country on 'Land Trust reserves excised from non-Aboriginal pastoral leases; and station and outstation settlements on Aboriginal-owned pastoral leases' (Morphy 2010:16). Others remain living in discrete 'communities' in and close to Fitzroy Crossing. Approximately 2,700–3,000 people live in the Fitzroy Valley, most in Fitzroy Crossing but others in some 43 communities varying in size from over 270 to less than 10 residents (Morphy 2010). The town of Fitzroy Crossing is situated on the massive Fitzroy River on the land of Bunuba people. It has become the urban service centre for five language groups from the surrounding Fitzroy Valley: the Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Wangkatjungka, Walmajarri and Nyikina peoples. Thus the Fitzroy Valley, as Morphy explains, '…is a cattle station landscape imposed on an underlying Aboriginal cultural and linguistic landscape' (Morphy 2010:14).

Australian Indigenous policy background

Soon after the forced relocation of Fitzroy Valley Aboriginal people into Fitzroy Crossing, Australian Government policy shifted from an essentially assimilationist policy approach to one of self-determination. This was in response to strong Aboriginal calls for such an approach throughout Australia. It is in this policy era that MWW was formed in the late 1970s.[1] While many would argue that this policy was merely self-management rather than genuine self-determination, it nevertheless enabled and supported the development of a diverse and vibrant indigenous sector (Rowse 2005) which advanced Indigenous rights in diverse areas from legal, health, housing, and community development. Self-determination was also later expressed through the creation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), a national body elected by Indigenous people, with some 35 elected regional councils across the nation. It had both advocacy and service delivery functions, and Aboriginal housing was among those. The housing program for remote areas, known as the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP), was a community sector program providing community-controlled housing at low rents

for Indigenous people through their own organisations. ATSIC also managed the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP), an alternative community employment program for Aboriginal people, using the equivalent of 'mainstream' income support payments to support part-time employment in community development initiatives.

However, by the mid-2000s, the Howard Government portrayed the national Indigenous policy era of 'self-determination' as having failed. Australian Government policy shifted to a 'mainstreaming' or 'normalising' approach. ATSIC was abolished and its programs moved to relevant 'mainstream' government departments. 'Normalising' had many connotations; its recent use was associated with the Northern Territory Emergency Response and policies such as income management (Altman 2007, Lovell 2016) but ideas of 'normalisation' go back much further in settler-colonial discourse, entailing settler superiority and framing settler lifeways as the 'norm', with the erasure of Aboriginal difference (Howard-Wagner & Kelly 2011). In the current context, normalising and mainstreaming also involved the development of a range of sectoral partnership agreements between the Australian Government and the States and Territories, of which remote Aboriginal housing was one (Habibis 2013, Sullivan 2011). Thus remote Aboriginal housing policy now sits within a broader Council of Australian Governments[2] (COAG) policy. This policy framework aims to 'Close the Gap' in Indigenous health, education and employment between Indigenous and other Australians (COAG 2007). Behind this shift was a view that Aboriginal people and their organisations were deficient, and an individualistic rather than community-based paradigm was now to underpin Indigenous policy. Individuals were to be shifted off 'passive welfare' and incorporated into the Australian economy (Howard-Wagner 2007). As Habibis notes, such an individualistic approach to tenancy management 'represents an experiment in culture change that has profound implications for Indigenous tenants' (Habibis 2013:771).

This mainstreaming policy meant that most Australian Government services to Indigenous people, previously provided through Aboriginal organisations, were no longer to be provided through them. When ATSIC was abolished, CHIP was initially maintained and transferred to the Australian Government Department of Families and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. But a negative review of CHIP in 2007 (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2007) led to its abolition in favour of a program to be implemented through States. This was intended to achieve standards of remote

Aboriginal housing management equivalent to those of State housing agencies (Habibis et al. 2016). As Sullivan (2016) explains, once ATSIC was abolished, in 2006 'Western Australia signed a bilateral agreement with the Australian Government on Indigenous Affairs. According to a state government discussion paper, the agreement sought to regularise housing, infrastructure and essential and municipal services' (Sullivan 2016:5) to something equivalent to services provided in urban WA. In doing so, it overturned many decades of policy whereby the Australian Government funded 'Aboriginal housing, local roads, water and electricity supplies, sanitation and community administration' (Sullivan 2016:1). This shift in responsibility was enforced by the new agreement that made the WA State Government accountable for meeting these standards of housing and other essential services.

With these changes in responsibility well underway, in late 2008 the new Labor Australian Government announced a 10-year National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH); it was one of a series of national partnership agreements between the Australian and the State governments that flowed from an overarching National Indigenous Reform Agreement (COAG 2008) between the Australian Government and the States and Territories. This was part of wider reform of Commonwealth/State funding arrangements under the *Federal Financial Relations Act 2009* (Sullivan 2011). This agreement effectively more fully implemented the new mainstreaming approach to Indigenous policy. It was followed in mid-2016 by a rather similar program for two years to end June 2018, called the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Housing (NPRH).

As part of the wider shift in Commonwealth-State relations and mainstreaming of Indigenous policy, longstanding Australian Government funding for municipal services in remote Aboriginal communities ended in late 2014 (Emerson 2014). The WA Government's subsequent response was to threaten closure of remote communities it considered too costly to service (Kagi 2014). After significant Aboriginal protests, in July 2016 the WA Government articulated its approach to providing services to the many remote Indigenous communities it was now responsible for, indicating clearly that its focus would be on the larger communities where education and employment opportunities were available (Government of Western Australia 2016). A change of government in WA in early 2017 has led to its Regional Reform Unit undertaking more research on service provision and outcomes across the Kimberley and other remote regions (Seivwright et al. 2017).

New public management in the Australian context

An important feature of the shift to 'mainstreaming' Indigenous policy was that it brought NPM ideas, by then becoming increasingly embedded in the Australian public sector, much more centrally into Indigenous policy. ATSIC had to a large degree shielded the sector from this until the mid-2000s. NPM began in Australia in the 1980s in what O'Flynn refers to as a 'bureaucratic' phase intended to improve corporate management; in the 1990s it shifted to what she calls a 'marketisation' phase, and it is this phase that was in full swing when Indigenous programs were 'mainstreamed'. This marketisation phase, 'rested on the creation of markets in the public sector and the use of contracts to define and govern relationships' (O'Flynn 2007: 355). It was heavily influenced by public choice theory, which sees governments as inevitably inefficient, and principal-agent theory, in which the principal (in this case government) has to create incentive conditions under which an agent (the contracted service provider) will meet the principal's goals. Thus NPM brought ideas of competition and efficiency into the Indigenous policy space. Central to this was the notion of setting targets and contracting service providers to undertake projects or programmes to achieve them as 'efficiently and effectively' as possible. In addition to bringing the market into public administration, NPM separated the policy and delivery roles, and policy makers engaged the delivery of services through new technologies like performance based contracts (O'Flynn 2007).

In Australia, the service providers favoured by such government tendering and contracting processes have often been large non-Indigenous private sector and not-for-profit organisations, in direct competition with the Indigenous community-controlled sector. Furthermore, in order to retain their roles and services, Aboriginal community organisations have had to conform to mainstream systems of management and accountability which take no account of their cultural contexts or their histories and origins as Aboriginal self-determination initiatives. Such systems ultimately enable government to regulate them (Colyer 2014, Sullivan 2009, 2015).

The National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH)

The implementation of NPARIH, was designed to provide new housing and renovate existing housing in seriously overcrowded remote Aboriginal communities (NPARIH Review 2008–13). It shifted Australian Government

funding and responsibility for housing and municipal and essential services away from Indigenous community-controlled organisations to State governments. But the NPARIH agreement came with strings attached. It required tenancy management and land tenure reforms, which in Western Australia were enacted through Aboriginal Housing Management Agreements (HMAs) negotiated between the WA Housing Authority and Aboriginal communities. In WA, most remote Aboriginal community housing is on Aboriginal Land Trust (ALT) land, so unlike in the Northern Territory, the State government did not need to take leases over Aboriginal land in order to provide housing (Habibis et al. 2016). However, the HMAs bring the Residential Tenancies Act of WA into full effect which requires 'regularised tenancy agreements' including 'paying rent at public housing settings, maintaining their homes to public housing standards and meeting obligations for good behaviour' (Habibis forthcoming). Thus the Australian Government was removing itself from management of remote Indigenous housing, but was setting terms for State policies that aligned with its broader approach to Indigenous affairs. That is, it was trying to force people away from small remote outstations into larger centres where services and housing were provided and essentially to 'normalise' Aboriginal people's behaviour.

But as Habibis points out, States did little to adapt mainstream expectations and approaches to the social and cultural realities of remote Aboriginal communities. In particular she notes some obvious differences between mainstream urban housing and these remote situations in which public housing authorities now had to operate. Among them: the absence of a housing market in remote communities; implications of collective land tenure and native title; very limited service infrastructure; the high costs of goods and services; the long travel distances on unsealed roads, with consequent stresses on staff; and the major challenges for repairs and maintenance of all these. Furthermore, the large multi-family households often found in remote communities create higher repair and maintenance costs and the mobility of people makes rent collection difficult; then there are low education levels, language and cultural differences and tenants with disability and other needs (Habibis forthcoming). Western Australia was unique in working through Indigenous community sector organisations and thus developing a hybrid model which went some way to recognising these differences. Under the NPARIH program some 56% of remote Aboriginal Housing in WA was managed by Indigenous and other community organisations (Habibis et al. 2016:42[3]); the rest is directly managed by the WA Housing Authority. Other jurisdictions also adapted the

mainstream model to greater or lesser degrees, using local government or other providers in some locations (Habibis et al. 2016[4]).

New housing provided by NPARIH (and more recently NPRH) is very welcome in the Kimberley, but the process of providing it in the Fitzroy Valley through non-Indigenous contractors did not maximise use of local Aboriginal labour. In some cases quality and siting issues mean sustainability of the housing is poor.[5] Thus maintenance costs will be high and housing will be less sustainable. Local Aboriginal people feel that this occurred because local knowledge and capacity is being overlooked.

Marra Worra Worra: housing service in the Kimberley

Marra Worra Worra (MWW) is one of five community organisations contracted by WA's Department of Housing to manage Aboriginal housing in six remote regions.[6] MWW's longstanding goal is to contribute to a sustainable future for the people of the Fitzroy Valley, and to 'create opportunities and culturally appropriate solutions that enables the Fitzroy Valley to be socially and economically independent' (MWW 2016: 12). Its present role reflects both continuity and change in its relationships with the various language groups of the Fitzroy Valley. MWW was formed in the period following the forced relocation of Aboriginal families off pastoral properties into Fitzroy Crossing. As they tried to return to their lands, and establish their futures as distinct 'communities' or outstations, increasingly these kinship groups needed to incorporate to receive government funds. As Thorburn records, 'Eventually as more and more communities began to incorporate, the number reached a critical mass where it became sensible to have a central body to manage some of the requirements of the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act (ACA Act)*'[7] (Thorburn 2011:91). Thus MWW was established to support these newly-formed community councils and enable them to meet their paperwork obligations under the ACA Act. As Thorburn explains, 'it thus allowed people to be based on outstations and to receive welfare entitlements, by providing a service of cashing social security cheques, as well as organising community chuck-in systems' (Thorburn 2011:91) that enabled individuals to make contributions for community power and other shared costs. Its focus was on non-Bunuba people trying to re-establish themselves on their country throughout the Valley. Thus, MWW's role by the early 1980s was to provide 'an overarching accounting service' supporting local council book-keepers, and managing

all the financial requirements of Australian and State government funding, whether through social security payments or other sources. Of course resource agencies like MWW did far more than this, helping Indigenous people negotiate their way through bureaucratic processes and supporting their cultural and political aspirations (Sullivan 1996).

The Bunuba people meanwhile remained on the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) reserve in Fitzroy Crossing. This was eventually leased to the Junjuwa Community Inc in 1978 (Thorburn 2011:93). Through the 1980s and early 1990s, Junjuwa Community Inc and the Bunuba Aboriginal Corporation each operated their own CDEP for Bunuba people. But after 1994, they came together under the Junjuwa Community. The CDEP Program at that time gave communities a great deal of autonomy to pursue their own priorities. MWW also had its own CDEP, but in July 2004 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS – which managed the ATSIC programs following ATSIC reform in 2003–04) determined that 'MWW was to become the major CDEP organisation for the Fitzroy Valley' (Thorburn 2011:100). Junjuwa's CDEP participants, and many others, were now to be under the control of MWW.

This meant that community councils that used to manage both housing and CDEP in the ATSIC period (1990s–2004/5) no longer did so, and MWW has (sometimes reluctantly) taken over control of these programs. Housing has been 'mainstreamed' (see above) and over a number of years and iterations CDEP has been significantly reformulated away from a community development program to become a jobs and welfare compliance program, now known as the Community Development Program (CDP) (Fowkes & Sanders 2015, 2016, Jordan et al. 2016) . The overall effect has been a centralising of control over housing and employment at MWW and increasingly tightly prescribed programs with little room for flexibility and synergy with each other compared to earlier years. Attempts to use CDP to develop small enterprises are now considerably more difficult due to the design of the program (Jordan et al. 2016).

In effect, MWW, an organisation originally established to help people move back on to country in the 1970s and 1980s, and assist their local organisations with finances, paperwork, and general support has now taken over most of their original functions, leaving them greatly diminished. MWW has grown substantially as a result. This has come about as Aboriginal people of the Fitzroy Valley struggled in the new mainstreaming policy context

to keep control of the programs in Aboriginal hands. At this time, many Fitzroy Valley Aboriginal people see MWW's role as strategically important to their ability to do this, as it has the capacity to manage these new programs in ways that satisfy current government funding contractual requirements. As one Community Council Chair said, 'They crippled us and we were lucky we had MWW as one organisation that could speak for us rather than individual communities speaking'.[8] By 'crippling' he was referring to the removal of housing and employment programs from community councils; but he acknowledged the strength of regional Aboriginal people together through MWW to at least keep the housing and employment programs in the Fitzroy Valley, as well as the advocacy capacity a larger organisation like MWW has with governments. MWW has, over the years, adopted a strong advocacy role as well as fulfilling its service delivery role. The result of all this is that the Aboriginal governance landscape of the Fitzroy Valley has been reshaped by the changing terms of government funding.

The contracted housing program

The MWW contract with the WA Housing Authority[9] is to provide property and tenancy management services to 476 properties in 27 communities in Fitzroy Crossing township and the Fitzroy Valley[10]. The contract typifies the performance contracting O'Flynn identifies as indicative of Australia's NPM approach. That is, contracts set out the the 'requirements, monitoring, reward and incentive systems' (O'Flynn 2007:356) which define the relationship between the principal (the WA Housing Authority) and the agent (MWW). As she says, competitive tendering has become common and 'Competition between bidders is intended to spur efficiency gains and cost saving for purchasers' (O'Flynn 2007:357). In this case, the contract between the WA Housing Authority and MWW has eight Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The first three relate to policies, procedures to follow, the use of the records management system and what housing inspection compliance entails. The next four relate to biannual housing inspections (every 182 days); occupation times of available vacated properties (21 days or less); rent collection occurring; and for accounts in debt, compliance with negotiated repayment arrangements. The final KPI relates to Aboriginal employment being at least 15%. All except the employment data has to be recorded and reported in a Housing Management System known as Habitat. One consequence of the use of this information technology (IT) system is that MWW has had considerable staff turnover as some of the previous staff, who were using a paper-based compliance system very successfully, did not have the IT skills or confidence to manage the Habitat System. MWW now has to attract

staff with a higher level of IT competence than was necessary before. On-the-job training is provided for those willing to learn and 87.5% of the 32 staff in the Housing Section of MWW are Indigenous, most of whom are from the Fitzroy Valley.

To meet the KPIs, the housing department below the management level has been re-organised into three teams each of which aligns with the three key housing KPIs: the Inspection Team carries out the inspections of all houses; the Maintenance Team deals with vacated houses and arranges incoming tenants; and the Rental Administration Team manages rental applications, rent assessments, and rent-related enquiries. A fourth team provides a Tenancy Support Service which is funded by the WA Government independently. These staff teams go out very frequently to communities to carry out their tasks, and while they are extremely respectful in the way they work with community members, they are expected to, and largely do, meet the KPIs set for them.

MWW compliance with the bi-annual property inspection regime is now high. Although it struggled to achieve this initially, it has maintained 100% completion of regular inspections since April 2016. Even in the wet season when some properties can't be accessed, the lowest level of compliance with the inspection schedule has been 93%. This is quite a remarkable level of achievement and depends on excellent monitoring of the property inspection schedule and persistence and determination to catch people at home and conduct the inspections. Extensive local knowledge of the communities and contacts that help staff know where people are undoubtedly assists. Completing one inspection may require several return visits to remote communities.

The work of the Maintenance Team is sometimes complicated. Once a house is vacated and MWW is informed by the tenant, MWW inspects the property and provides maintenance requirements to the WA Housing Authority. The Housing Authority in turn sends out a Work Order to its State-wide contractor for the house to be prepared for new tenants. Once the house is ready, MWW has 21 days to find a new tenant and get them into the house. However, sometimes tenants leave houses without informing MWW or MWW is not advised by the Housing Authority or the Head Contractor that vacated houses are ready for new tenants. To avoid these situations, MWW asks Community Councils to let them know if they become aware of a house becoming vacant. Or MWW staff may find out when vacated houses are ready for new tenants through their own channels. They then check formally and start organising for tenants to move in.

Thus, MWW has its own local systems that overcome problems in the formal process in the Kimberley context. Its connections to its communities, and the local and cultural knowledge its staff bring to their roles, smooths out what might otherwise be dysfunctional arrangements. Similarly MWW uses its own relationships with families and Community Councils in situations where a family is found 'squatting' in a vacant house, or a tenant or family member dies in a house. Cultural knowledge and sensitive approaches to relationships are critically important in managing such situations. The value MWW brings to these situations is invisible to the contract managers in the WA Government, yet essential to the effective implementation of the contract in the Kimberley. With contract reporting focusing on pre-specified tasks completed, this local systems knowledge MWW brings to bear on the achievement of those tasks finds no place in the reporting regime, and it is this absence that maintains this invisbility in the system.

MWW staff in the Rental Administration Team assist individuals with paperwork, such as rental applications, and meeting requirements for rent assessment. Rents are currently 25% of each tenants' gross income. A head tenant is responsible for each house, but each individual resident is charged rent. For people in employment this involves MWW staff obtaining their pay slips and calculating their average pay over a three month period, as much casual work has varying weekly income. As tenants move in and out of homes, regular rental assessment is required. This is a complex and costly system for the service delivery agency as Aboriginal people are often quite mobile, especially seasonally, and keeping track of tenancy payments is not easy. For people who are highly indebted, MWW asks no more than an additional $5 per week to be taken out of their account towards the debt repayment. They feel a strong obligation not to impoverish their own people. MWW would prefer a much simpler system of rent assessment and collection. They are considering support for a 'per house' rental amount and a Centrepay system of compulsory rental collection from tenants (an Australian Government housing review team suggestion). If appropriately structured, this could provide a sustainable level of income for ongoing repairs and maintenance.

Helping Aboriginal people understand their rights and responsibilities as tenants in community housing under the new arrangements is not always easy. One MWW team is dedicated specifically to providing special support to tenants who need it (e.g. aged, disabled) under the Supported Tenancy Education Program (STEP)[11]. This team is contracted to provide casework support to individual tenants and households referred

to them by the Housing management team. MWW staff help tenants manage issues that are causing problems, conflict or stress in their homes, e.g. when visitors stay too long, or there are too many of them, and they make no contribution to the household costs.

The resolution of these sorts of issues is where cultural knowledge and getting the culturally right people to give guidance to visitors can be very valuable, if not essential, to their resolution. Other problems may relate to issues such as too many dogs, and associated health problems. Here MWW can work in a culturally sensitive way with other service providers and deal with difficult issues in a coordinated way. MWW staff have the strong relationship with a tenant and with other service providers that enables them to do this. For MWW the goal is to help tenants stay where they want to, and to provide the necessary support and guidance to enable them to do so, rather than to apply mainstream housing rules in a rigid way.

A major national study undertaken of NPARIH tenancy management services (Habibis et al. 2015) argued that hybrid social housing models such as that employed by the WA Housing Authority with Indigenous service organisations like MWW are the most successful in delivery of tenancy management services that are knowledgeable, culturally competent, flexible and adaptable. MWW's work certainly demonstrates how an Indigenous organisation's cultural knowledge and extensive community relationships enables this housing system to work. In fact it is hard to imagine how it could be done by a non-Indigenous contractor from outside the Fitzroy Valley without the local and cultural knowledge and connections.[12] Furthermore, any 'surplus'[13] MWW derives from efficient management of the contract currently flows back into the community in the form of grants to various organisations, support for community events, or long term investments for the future needs of the community, rather than flowing out of the community.

Implications of State-wide contracting of the Repairs and Maintenance Contract

Since Habibis et al.'s 2015 study was undertaken, the contract previously held by MWW for housing repairs and maintenance was awarded to a Sydney and Fremantle-based private contractor, as a WA State-wide contract. Before that, MWW had its own company and used other local Aboriginal contractors wherever possible. Under the new system, MWW receives reports of maintenance required on the properties it manages and logs them on Habitat (the IT system mentioned above); then the WA Housing Authority raises work orders for its State-wide

contractor to undertake the work. The contractor in turn will raise work orders with local or Broome-based contractors (Broome is four hours' drive away from Fitzroy Crossing). The cost of such call outs, compared to having entirely local or even community-based people trained and able to manage many routine jobs, is hard to imagine.

Repairs and maintenance jobs for WA Housing Authority-managed properties are given an urgency rating: all the urgent jobs are classed as P2 (within 24 hours)[14]; P3 (48 hours or up to 10 days); or P4 (within 28 days). These urgency ratings are determined by the WA Housing Authority and generally relate to the level of risks and dangers to tenants. However, they do not take account of the particular circumstances of the remote Kimberley region. For example, despite the high temperatures in the Kimberley (regularly exceeding 35 degrees Celsius with over 70% humidity), things like 'broken ceiling fan' are categorised by the Housing Authority as P4, taking no account of the heat and humidity in this part of WA, and the age and frailty of some tenants. Under previous contractual arrangements, MWW was able to determine the urgency of repairs itself and get local contractors out quickly where jobs were urgent.

Once MWW has logged the required repairs and maintenance jobs on Habitat, their contractual responsibilities officially end. MWW's contract does not cover any monitoring or follow up of repairs or maintenance to ensure it is done satisfactorily (known as a 'post work order' inspection); nor is MWW informed when repairs they have logged have been completed. However, they are following up to check that jobs have been completed in the required timeframe[15]. This is to meet the responsibilities they feel towards their communities. In many cases the 'planned maintenance (P4)' in particular has not been done. None of this work is covered by the contract MWW has with the WA Housing Authority but MWW feels an obligation to community members to make sure repairs and maintenance they report is done. In this they act as advocates for the community members. When MWW controlled the repairs and maintenance contract they would be able to directly contract for the job and know which contractor was supposed to do which task and when. They no longer know this and so have no way of holding contractors to account for the quality of the work they do.[16]

Another consequence of losing the repairs and maintenance contract is that the only Aboriginal-owned plumbing business, which used to do a lot of work for MWW, initially reduced from eight Aboriginal staff to just the owner, and in August 2017 closed down. He found contracting with the new State-wide contractor was unviable for his business.[17] This has caused the business owner a great deal of stress, as he had invested in equipment and materials and carried a business debt which he has had difficulty servicing. This plumber was also keen to build local capacity for simple plumbing tasks among people at some of the more distant communities from Fitzroy Crossing, but he now has no way to do this.

Similarly MWW had established an independent (subsidiary) business: 'Fitzroy Contracting and Hire' in 2012. This company had been operating profitably for four years, employing between five and seven Aboriginal people to do basic maintenance (mainly carpentry work) for MWW. It had carried out between 1,100 and 1,200 jobs per year for four years. Like the plumber, they tried to negotiate with the State-wide contractor, but its contract conditions were unviable in Kimberley conditions. The result is that the State-wide contractor uses some local non-Indigenous contractors, but the service to communities has deteriorated significantly.

Reporting of repairs and maintenance problems is also dependent on MWW staff being seen regularly in the communities. People raise issues with them when they see them. If tenants do not have phones, or have no credit in their phones, or no phone service area, they have no way of reporting. Thus a system which depends on tenants initiating reports of repairs and maintenance by phone does not work in all cases, and many maintenance issues could cause significant risks for tenants if MWW staff were not frequently visible in the communities.

The challenges of this housing system

From the above it is clear that the operation of a NPM regime in Indigenous housing has led to results which are not creating the maximum benefits for Fitzroy Valley Aboriginal communities, or enabling Aboriginal organisations to deliver services that meet the broader goals of their clients. Indeed this approach has undermined a number of Aboriginal-controlled enterprises previously employing (and training) local Aboriginal repairs and maintenance staff. Thus the overall value created by this contract has reduced for the Aboriginal citizens of the Fitzroy Valley, even though MWW has performed successfully against the contract requirements and the perceived 'efficiencies' of the approach may be valued by the WA Government.

From a public value perspective, public managers have to pursue outcomes that their clients value, often in complex environments such as the remote Kimberley region. This requires public sector managers to have different sorts of relationships with the organisations that deliver services; a shift away from the characteristic NPM model of a principal-agent relationship and a tightly prescribed contract with narrowly defined deliverables, to a relationship which involves negotiating how partners delivering services will achieve outcomes that clients value. As Scott makes clear, public value 'directs us to use scarce resources for maximum public benefit' (Scott 2013:1) and to deal with complexity (O'Flynn 2007). Rather than just pursuing an externally defined – though essential – housing program, it is clear that MWW sees ways to achieve housing and other employment and business development outcomes simultaneously, but the contract arrangements, particularly relating to repairs and maintenance, fail to facilitate that. While in South Australia there is a shift in government rhetoric towards public value theory (Moore 2013), implying that services will be judged in terms of the value of the overall outcomes delivered to the public they are intended for (Government of South Australia n.d.), no such shift is occurring in WA where the government is holding firmly to the 'efficiencies' of the NPM approach.

The evidence above suggests that the way that remote Aboriginal housing policy is implemented in this NPM framework is to some degree undermining the broad targets of COAG and certainly is not supporting the goals of the Aboriginal citizens of the Fitzroy Valley. This is particularly so when housing policy is considered together with policy changes to the provision of municipal services and employment services which strongly favour Aboriginal people living in larger settlements. Since the 1970s the Fitzroy Valley's Aboriginal people have made very clear that their priorities are to remain on country and to live in small settlements which are quiet, and that enable them to maintain connection to country and to pass on cultural knowledge to future generations.

Clearly, the provision of new housing only in larger centres that are willing to sign a HMA does not align with the strong preferences of Kimberley people to live on country in small settlements. As Sullivan points out 'it is first necessary to deliver valued outcomes before we can say that public value has been created' (Sullivan 2015:19). There is such a mismatch in the outcomes sought by governments and those sought by Kimberley people in this regard, that achievement of government-determined outcomes, however effectively, is unlikely to deliver public value as viewed by that Aboriginal public. On the other

hand, both are wanting to develop a sustainable future for the Fitzroy Valley, but the current way of organising contracts is undermining the achievement of that shared goal.

Furthermore, looking over a longer time frame, MWW's role and relationships with the dispersed Community Councils of the Fitzroy Valley has been changed considerably. The relationship management issues that flow from this shift may be significant.[18] Aboriginal governance is dispersed and localised with a strong preference for a high degree of subsidiarity, but the NPM requirements have centralised decision-making. Additionally, MWW's initial role to empower and strengthen community organisations has shifted to a role of contracted service deliverer to Indigenous individuals. Yet these societies are not individualist but highly kin-based. As Habibis makes clear, 'From a neo-liberal perspective, self-determination is problematic because its emphasis on collective rights and recognition of cultural difference is antithetical to neo-liberalism's emphasis on individual self-responsibility and meritocratic achievement.'(Habibis forthcoming). MWW now sits at this interface between collective rights to self-determination and individualistic neo-liberalism, straddling it rather uncomfortably through the mechanism of NPM.

The separation of the contract for repairs and maintenance from the broader contract for property management services is a clear example of fragmentation, a feature of NPM that can, as O'Flynn (2007) notes, erode accountability and responsibility. This seems to be occurring here. MWW, due to its longstanding relationships and accountabilities to the communities of the Fitzroy Valley, feels a relational accountability to those communities in the housing repairs and maintenance area, even when it no longer has the resources and contract arrangements that would enable it to properly fulfil them. The contractor, based over 1,000 kilometres away from these communities, does not have the same relational accountabilities to them. In addition, processes are often as important as outcomes and it is clear the processes MWW uses are culturally respectful, in local Indigenous languages where necessary, appropriate for local Aboriginal people to understand, mostly face to face, and highly flexible and responsive.

It is very clear that the relational accountability approach which MWW staff, particularly the local staff, feel to the communities of the Fitzroy Valley is a strong driver for delivery of positive outcomes for the community members they serve. MWW's own legitimacy with those

communities depends on them being able to ensure the continued provision of safe, secure and affordable housing for people whether in town or in the remotest outstations. Cultural obligations to 'look after' people are strong. And MWW's informal but long-standing relationships with Community Councils are essential to their ability to do this work successfully. Evidently, MWW goes way beyond its contracted service responsibilities to make sure that services are delivered because its relational accountabilities demand that.

But it is frustrated at present that the multiple objectives it feels it could achieve if government relations were different are being inhibited. MWW believes that it has in the past, and could again in future, employ more local staff, support more local Aboriginal business, and achieve better results for the Fitzroy Valley communities if contracting accountability arrangements were changed to a more flexible, holistic and relational approach (Dwyer et al. 2014, Tenbensel et al. 2013). A public value approach to accountability that stresses pursuing multiple objectives (jobs, business development, housing, governance autonomy and local empowerment), a relational approach to achieving outcomes, where trust and legitimacy are central to their achievement, and performance is assessed by client satisfaction, would provide the flexibility and adaptability that might enable MWW to achieve both the WA Housing Authority's overall goals, and the goals of a more sustainable future for the people of the Fitzroy Valley.

Notes

1. The leaders of five tribes started meeting in the late 1970s to form a strong voice to government, and MWW was institutionalised in 1978.
2. COAG brings together the Australian Government and State and Territory jurisdictions as well as a representative of local government.
3. Calculated from figures provided by Habibis et al. 2016 in Table 11. Under NPRH it probably remains at a similar level, though data is not publicly available.
4. See Tables 9 and 10 in Habibis et al. 2016 for details.
5. E.g., in one community very close to a major river, houses have been built on new earth mounds 1–2 metres high, which are already beginning to erode away due to seasonal flooding. Older houses on stilts in the rest of the community are far better designed to deal with this regular occurrence. Thin metal fencing around houses is poor quality, easily damaged and already failing compared to older style cyclone fencing that is tough and lasting.
6. In Fitzroy Crossing some public housing is still managed by the WA Housing Authority directly through its Derby office, over 200 kilometres away.
7. This refers to the Commonwealth Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976.
8. However, MWW no longer has the contract for the repairs and maintenance aspect of housing management in the Fitzroy Valley, since the WA Housing Authority contracted a major non-Indigenous company to provide this service State-wide.
9. The contract of June 2016
10. Of the rest, some are directly serviced by the WA Housing Authority (e.g. Noonkanbah). Some are serviced from Halls Creek and others may not be serviced.
11. This is under a 'Partnership Contract' with the WA Government, under the Government's Delivery Community Services in Partnership Policy.
12. If it were tried, the costs would be borne by the Aboriginal people who did not comply with mainstream housing rules strictly applied.
13. MWW is a non-profit organisation so it does not declare profits; rather surplus which is not reinvested directly into the organisation is shared through donations to a range of local community organisations and events.
14. P1 is within 8 hours but this level is not used in remote areas, so all P1s in remote areas are given a P2 rating.
15. One team I went with to a community very close to Fitzroy Crossing found that 10 of 11 jobs logged for one community had not been completed within the required timeframe. They then had to undertake follow up with the WA Housing Authority to try to get them acted upon.
16. For example, when a door lock needed fixing the contractor replaced the door, but left the new door unpainted with no record that this painting now needed to be done to protect the new wooden door against the elements.
17. While willing to pay for long travel times for out of town contractors, they would not reimburse him adequately, particularly for higher costs of return visits to jobs, and he found their systems were too bureaucratic and difficult.
18. Of course Bunuba people remain part of the MWW Board and staff, but they no longer have discrete control over their own housing management.

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