17. ‘Coming off Country’: The unthinkable process of Indigenous urbanisation from remote Australia

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Preface

This paper is a summarised account of a plenary talk delivered at the First International Conference on Urbanisation in the Arctic. The conference and days around it were a remarkable and stimulating intellectual experience, particularly given many of my academic ‘idols’ were present. Equally pleasing was the presence of ministers of the Greenlandic Government and the major of Iqaluit. All were open to discussing the difficult (‘taboo’ as it became labelled during the course of the conference) issue of population movements towards large towns and away from small villages where more traditional lives have been, and continue to be, played out.

The intention of my talk, composed well before I landed (after two failed attempts incorporating an unexpected trip 280 km north of the Arctic Circle) on Greenlandic soil, was to highlight similarities in the issues and challenges facing Greenland and the Northern Territory of Australia as both grapple with tumultuous transitions in their Indigenous settlement demographics and in the structure of their economies. Having now visited Greenland, the similarities are starker than I had ever imagined and are by no means limited to Indigenous issues. So strong are the resemblances I can now confidently employ my oft used (tongue-in-cheek but nevertheless pertinent) catchcry that “Greenland is the Northern Territory with snow” or (alternatively) that “The Northern Territory is Greenland with red dust”. My time in Greenland was life changing on many levels both professionally and personally and I wish to thank my hosts Klaus Georg Hansen (and his wife and children) and Rasmus Ole Rasmussen (the font of all knowledge!) who’s giving of time and intellect made my visit so special.

Introduction

Yesterday I was stopped by a group of school students in the Nuuk mall who were surveying people about what is important to the future happiness of the Greenlandic population. The questions included whether staying on the land is more important than evolving into a modern economy and what urbanisation would mean for culture, traditional life and overall happiness. The parallels to my country are amazing because today I want to explore the tenuous and delicate issue of the changing settlement patterns of Indigenous people in the remote Northern Territory of Australia to propose what this means for policy. The proposition behind my talk is that Indigenous people in developed nations around the globe, and including in the Arctic Circle, have been ‘coming off country’ and will increasingly do so. Of course the big difference between our nations is that nearly all Greenlanders are Indigenous while in our country just 2 % of the population are Indigenous. Nevertheless, in the remote areas, which are the subject of today’s talk, up to 90 % of the population at individual settlements are Indigenous.

At the same time there is reluctance amongst the general society and policy makers to countenance the phenomenon of urbanisation, even to the extent that there can be found elements of ‘anti-urbanisation’ in the discourse, rhetoric, programs and policies of Indigenous affairs. In my talk today I want to firstly discuss trends in the settlement dynamics of Indigenous people of the Northern Territory of Australia and then present you with four key drivers which may already, but are more likely to be in the future, driving higher rates of urbanisation for Indigenous people in the Northern Territory than we see today. Finally, I will discuss what this might mean in a more practical sense - for policy making and for the individuals whose lives are changed through the decision to migrate.
An overview of Australia and the Northern Territory

But first a little bit about where I am from. Yes, it’s the big place with the kangaroos. To give you a sense of the scale of Australia, the UK fits into its land mass 59 times and Greenland fits in 2.5 times. To drive from the East Coast to West Coast can take around 6 days. Where I live in Darwin it takes 1 hour to fly to East Timor but over 4 hours to fly to Sydney. We have population of just 23 million and consequently a low population density of just 2.7 persons per sq. kilometre. Only your nation (Greenland), Norfolk Island, The Falkland Islands, Mongolia and Namibia have lower population densities. Outside of the heavily concentrated (by Australian standards) eastern coastal strip which only stretches inland 150km, density is at less than one person per square kilometre. We have five State’s and two Territories under our Federal system of government, as represented by the border lines (Figure 1). I am from the Northern Territory of Australia which is the most sparsely settled jurisdiction. We have a population of just 230,000, one third of who are Indigenous. Colloquially we call ourselves ‘Territorians’ and, yes, we are quite territorial.

Australian Indigenous people number around 580,000 with a quarter of these living in remote and discrete Indigenous settlements – represented by the black dots in Figure 2. Actually, although this map doesn’t show it, at the national scale most Indigenous people in Australia live in the major cities, and increasingly so. In the Northern Territory things are different with about 30% of the population identifying as Indigenous and 70% of these currently living remotely. My talk today is focused on places represented by the black dots and the people that live in them. These are what are known as discrete Indigenous communities and you can see the concentration in remote NT. These are some of the most distant, smallest and remote settlements in Australia. Demographically their populations are extremely young, at 23 years median age, with life expectancies of around 62 years for men and 69 years for women, a gap of 14 years and 12 years respectively in comparison to at-birth life expectancies for non-Indigenous people.

Indigenous representations

The original Australians living in remote parts of the country are often portrayed and represented as the ‘real’ indigenous people of the Nation (Figure 3). The perception is that most still maintain strong links with and between their ancestral lands and cultural practices. At Illulissat a few days ago a Danish person living in Nuuk told me “This is the real Greenland.” I asked her why and she said “Because there are sledge dogs, hunting and icebergs.” We are similar. The attachment of remote living Indigenous people in Australia to land is seen as inextricably related to their health and well-
being, with the notion of healthy communities requiring of people to living ‘on country’ (on their ancestral lands). In addition, Australian Indigenous cultures are portrayed as commodifiable on the basis of art, cultural practices like dances, ‘bush tucker’ and ancestral stories which are the means by which culture and language have been passed down through generations. These sorts of images adorn almost every marketing campaign by tourism organisations in Australia, and especially in the Northern Territory.

But of course there are counter images to the mythologised view portrayed in tourism marketing paraphernalia. Images like those in Figure 4 regularly appear in the media as being indicative of the more everyday experience. I want to emphasise though that there are great diversities in living conditions and levels of community harmony across communities. Nevertheless, most of the communities we saw as the black dots on the prior map are those into which people were rounded up and forced to settle by missionaries and others. People were ‘overseen’ and put through a forced programs of assimilation. Babies were extracted from their mothers in order to provide a lifetime of moral and spiritual rectitude. So began the long history of pain and trauma.
The ‘anti-urbanisation’ paradigm

We could spend the rest of the conference discussing and debating why these images persist in the face of decades of expenditure and policies to rectify things. While the Nation is, on the one hand, disgraced by it, on the other hand we find ourselves questioning why, when we have spent decades and billions of dollars trying to fix things, there appears to have been little in the way of improvements in the majority of measures of socio-economic status and wellbeing.

This long and complicated history, which again varies widely between settlements, helps explain current policy stances which overwhelmingly focus on bringing about change in situ. The precept is that people’s lives can be changed by investing heavily into remote communities on the expectation that people will continue to live at these and that better outcomes can be derived at these locations. Such policies and programs were devised on the basis that remote communities ARE the places where people do and will want to live in future, that they ‘belong’ there for health and wellbeing reasons, that economic opportunities exist, AND that feedback loops from any developments in educational attainments or labour force participation will not change people’s desires to stay ‘on country’.

Collectively these paradigms in support of little or no change to existing settlement patterns manifest in the construction of policy and government programs. The language behind these emphasises things like ‘real jobs’ and ‘mainstreaming’ with a view to making these places like any town in Australia. Demographers too tend to favour the status quo in terms of their projections about future Indigenous settlement distributions. Most projections, for example, have a zero net interstate migration parameter setting in the modelling. In other words, they see migration to and from other States and Territories as having a zero net impact on Indigenous settlement patterns in remote areas into the future.

A perfect example is the Northern Territory and Australian Government’s Working Future policy which seeks to establish a hubs and spokes model for service delivery to Indigenous communities centred around 20 or so “growth towns”; some of which aren’t growing at all and the smallest of which has around 200 residents (Figure 5). The idea is to have their levels of infrastructure and services equal to those of any other town in Australia with a population of similar size. Most agree that it is overt economic rationalism (note: while I was in Greenland a new Northern Territory Govern-
ment was elected and they subsequently abandoned the Working Future policy). Controversially the policy ceases funding for new infrastructure at outstations, a tacit acknowledgement that it is just not feasible to build houses, schools and roads at places occupied for parts of the year by as little as two people.

Figure 5 – The Working Future policy of the (then) Northern Territory Government

The case for urbanisation

Having provided the macro-view of how others might see the situation for remote living Indigenous Territorians I would like to present an alternative perspective, held by myself and my colleagues. We have a different outlook on how populations behave in remote areas, including Indigenous populations. It’s based on what we call the 8D’s of remote demography. It is founded on the principle that most assumptions embedded in the analysis of population behaviours and change are predicated on demographic models which are difficult to defend in their application to remote places. We argue that in remote Australia we find fundamentally different types of population systems which need to be understood for effective policy to be forthcoming. Our theory about how remote places work brings together what we have learnt from studies in the NT, as well as comparing ourselves with other remote places in your jurisdictions. We call this theory “Beyond Periphery” and, not surprisingly, the role of migration (both short term and residential) in changing remote populations is emphasised.

In essence, the 8 D’s of Remote Demography argues that remote populations beyond the periphery are very “D like” – dynamic, delicate, different, dependent, and so on as you see in Figure 6. This applies not just to their populations but also to the ways in which populations influence resource, labour and capital flows to and from, as well as within remote jurisdictions. We propose that just small changes to such flows can manifest in big demographic change in future years. For example, the general consensus is that remote Indigenous communities are largely similar in their population compositions and diversity is simple a reflection of the extremes in population characteristics between Indigenous and other Territorians. We also emphasise there is great diversity between Indigenous settlements themselves. Figure 7 is an attempt at classifying such diversity based on census data. We see some are older and more mobile communities, some have a female dominated workforce, and so on.
What I am suggesting is that the 8Ds are good lenses through which we should re-consider established paradigms around Indigenous demographic futures, and in particular around the role that migration will play in changing these. I wasn’t clever enough to devise a succinct statement to summarise what I mean by this so instead I stole this one you see here by the International Organisation for Migration which encapsulates my argument well. That is, in all our expenditure on programs and policies to keep people ‘on country’ there is a crowding-out of the voices of those who have and who will in the future vote with their feet to ‘come off country’. And the 8D’s tell us that it only takes minor redistributions for major changes to eventuate. For the rest of my talk today I want to provide some reasoning behind this proposition.

As background it is important at this point to distinguish between mobility, which is a temporary absence from home, and migration; a choice to reside elsewhere on a long-term basis. The two are interrelated on many levels of course. The literature on Indigenous populations in remote areas of Australia focuses heavily on the former (mobility) but very little on the latter (migration and its impacts). Mobility is seen as being driven by the need to visit friends and relatives, participate in cultural activities, access services and ‘do bad things’ like drinking alcohol (consequently, because alcohol is banned at most communities they are described as ‘dry’ communities). I find the lack of willingness to consider the role of migration in the future of Indigenous settlements in the Northern Territory disturbing given ongoing investments into these.

Demographers find it very hard to parametise and model population movements into and around remote settlements, and this makes our job of advising policy makers and others about the future very difficult. Indeed the residential migration of Indigenous people to and from remote areas of the Northern Territory is very much absent from the extant literature and research. Instead, the focus has been firmly on temporary mobility. Temporary mobility creates a constantly churning population and is posited as being centred on discrete communities and regional centres. It may occur across officious borders and may be unknown and unplanned in its spatial realms. Movements are denoted as occurring regularly and featuring a return to these ‘home’ communities. Research on Indigenous migration invariably focuses on this sub-set of population movements and is depicted in similar ways to the diagram here.

For too long, indigenous peoples have been depicted as static and unchanging communities. This mistake has arisen from studies that treat indigenous people separately and as distinct from questions of the “modern” world.

It is time that this blind spot be corrected.

(International Organisation for Migration, 2008)
I want to propose there are four key areas for re-conceptualising the role of residential migration in bringing about the further urbanisation of remote Indigenous populations of the NT. These are:

1. Humans are human;

2. The influence of women;

3. The urbanisation enablers (especially education);

and

4. Technology uptake.

You will notice that the search for jobs is not amongst the themes. At the moment participation rates in the labour force for Indigenous people in the NT are extremely low in both urban and remote areas. There is no evidence of employment helping to drive migration to towns and cities and perhaps this is one area where we differ from the Arctic experience.

1. Humans are human

Figure 8 really does sum up and emphasise that things are not static in the remote parts of the Northern Territory. We are fortunate that our most recent Census data has just become available a couple of weeks ago (we have one only every 5 years) and the latest data shows
that the long term trends observed for the past 30 years are continuing. Quite simply, a diminishing proportion of remote living Indigenous Territorians are choosing to live in remote settlements, in spite of continued expenditure to encourage them to do so.

So looking first at the discrete communities themselves, I have put around 80 of these into clusters: small (population between 200 and 500), medium (population 500-999) and large (population 1,000 and over) settlements. Large communities are continuing to trend upwards in terms of their overall share, medium are fluctuating somewhat and small are actually increasing their share slightly. But the biggest story is the significant reduction over time in people choosing to live in settlements of less than 200 residents. These include the outstations or homelands which are seen as archetypal in the relationship to land and country because these were and are located on traditional lands, unlike most of the discrete communities which were established by colonial powers established. Likewise, the long term trend is migration towards the urban centres of Darwin and Alice Springs, as well as towns, which are largely non-Indigenous service centres.

![Figure 8](image)

**Figure 8 – Long term trends in Indigenous settlement patterns in the NT (share of total Indigenous population by clusters of settlements)**

In reality this chart could represent any population in any developed nation as they transition from an agrarian to industrialised or globalised economy. The history of human settlement systems is reflective of these sorts of trends and I argue that we should not expect Indigenous people to behave any differently over the long-term. It is human behaviour to progressively gather in larger sized settlements. Consequently, this chart does not support the proposition that attachments to land are and will act as barriers to Indigenous Territorians behaving, in a migration sense, as other populations have behaved. The fundamental behaviour is a long standing history of urbanisation. This distinction is itself delicate and difficult because of the entrenched, romanticised and mythologised views about remote living Indigenous people which are entrenched in our national psyche and indeed embedded in most research on Indigenous migration and mobility in the Australia context.

2. The influence of women

Now we have examined the recent history of urbanisation in the NT I want to talk about three other factors which I believe will speed up its rates. The first is the role of women in changing societies. Literature from amongst you here today speaks of the demographic effects of women either being motivated by or driven to seek a life outside of their traditional communities.
This is particularly the case when there is emerging success in improving rates and levels of educational achievements, while another body of research documents the push factors including violence, disharmony and living conditions. During the 1990’s a bunch of researchers began to explore the causes and consequences of the substantial out migration of Indigenous women from small villages, Alaska, northern Europe and the Aboriginal nations in Canada. They first focused on regions where they could see the demographic ‘footprint’ of these migration flows – a female deficit in the form of increased and relatively high sex ratios (or diminished or low proportions of women). Lawrence Hamilton and Carole Seyfrit labelled the phenomenon as “female flight”.

Studies in the field point to these sorts of reasons for women choosing to migrate out of small remote Indigenous communities:

- Girls plan for an education future… “It’s [education] a girl thing” (Hamilton and Seyfrit – Alaska)
- Escaping violence at home communities (Petrov – Canada)
- Higher educational achievement > school (Alaska, Canada)
- Securing skilled jobs - men take intermittent blue collar work (Rasmussen, Greenland)
- Non-traditional activities are male focused (for example, in mining or skidoo riding)

In essence, these are combination of pull factors, like the desire to obtain education or a career, and push factors such as escaping social dysfunction. It’s not hard to imagine the downstream impacts of just a few women leaving small and remote communities. Young women, if they do not return, take future births with them and therefore diminish opportunities for fertility to contribute to population change and renewal at the source community.

Given this, I wanted to examine whether there is any evidence of female flight from remote Indigenous communities in the NT. First let’s look at the left chart (Figure 9). Looking at sex ratios and age structures during the past 25 years we see a rather dramatic decline in the proportion of females in the population in larger communities, but, in contradiction to female flight in other nations, an increase in small communities of less than 500. The evidence here then is rather mixed.

And if we examine the composition of the migrating cohort who used to live in remote communities but now live in urban centres (Figure 11) we see overwhelmingly there is a female biased sex ratio in the urbanising population. From age 45 years and up the sex ratio for urbanising migrants is consistently below 80 (males per 100 females) and falls as low as 38 at ages 60-64. While I have found no conclusive evidence of female flight taking hold in the NT to the extent it did in Alaska, sex ratios in large communities are clearly falling. A continuation of this trend will bring about the sorts of demographic footprints which were found in other nations.
3. The urbanisation enablers (especially education)

Moving now to the role of education in the urbanisation process in the NT. Education is recognised globally as a migration enabler. Quite simply the higher the level of education you possess the more opportunities are opened up. If you are living in a remote community such opportunities to obtain and apply education are limited.

Figure 12 shows the ratio of Indigenous women to men for those who have achieved certain levels of education in remote areas. For example, we see that 60% of all people living in remote NT in 2006 who had completed the final two years of high school (Years 11 and 12) were female, while 70% of those who had a post-school qualification were female and, similarly, 70% of those who had graduated at post-school levels with an advanced diploma level or above were female. On the one hand these data might suggest that women will contribute to their remote communities through their educational achievements, but on the other hand, the female dominance in the attainment data might also suggest we will see many of these migrate to urban areas to apply their education in a career or to further it. These may or may not be pre-cursors to a more widespread phenomenon but are certainly ‘female flight like’.
4. Technology adoption

The fourth theme in relation to Indigenous urbanisation in the NT is the role of technology uptake in changing individual's perceptions about space and their desires in relation to where to live. Prior to the last 5 years only satellite technology was available to access the Internet. This was slow and costly, and consequently out of reach for most residents. All of the literature on technology uptake (or the lack of it) by remote Indigenous people was very pessimistic, citing a lack of literacy and numeracy as well as the cost of access as key reasons for continuing low rates of uptake into the future. But during the past five years the Australian Government has rolled out broadband towers to even the most remote communities. This network, called Next G, provides very good coverage and data transfer speeds in comparison to pre-existing technologies. Figure 13 shows the coverage of the Next G broadband network in and around several very remote communities in a region called East Arnhem Land. The coverage is not only good in the communities but also outside of them over a relatively large distance.

Figure 13 – Next G coverage in and around remote East Arnhem Communities.

Source: Modified by author from Telstra, 2010.

Note: Darker shading indicates Voice, Picture, TV, Video & mobile broadband coverage. Lighter shading indicates an antenna is required to access mobile broadband. The remainder are areas where only satellite phone or internet is available.
Early research by Dyson and Brady on impacts from the rollout of the network was situated in North Queensland. They found that, despite warnings from the doomsayers about low levels of literacy and numeracy and the costs of mobile phones impeding progress, almost 60% of people owned and regularly used a mobile phone within three months of the switching on the Next G network. Rates were found to be much higher for young people at around 80% to 90%. These equate to the highest rates of uptake in the world.

The Next G network has been now rolled out to many communities in the NT. From a situation of almost no access to a reliable and affordable means of communicating with the outside world things have rapidly changed. A year or so ago I was lucky enough to escape the office and talk to people in a number of remote communities about what technologies they use in everyday life and how. It’s clear that mobile phones are used by the vast majority on a daily basis from the age of 8 or 9 up. Rates of everyday use are as high at 90% for young people. Even in communities where no Next G coverage is available the vast majority of people still have mobile phones for travel away and for music and other functions. I found that young people were accessing Internet chat rooms daily from their phones but didn’t realise they were using the Internet per se. They also help each other to compose SMS messages to ensure the grammar and sentence structure is suitable when they compose a message in English.

And right now all children are getting a wireless internet enabled laptop which is sturdy and dust proof (Figure 14). All schools now have relatively reliable Internet access and this is being used by some teachers to reward students who attend and work hard. Recently the NT Government announced it would fund free SMS and music downloads for children who attend school. There are now even dating web sites specifically for Indigenous people – the one we see here is called ‘Black Match’.

![Free laptops open up world to kids](image)

**Figure 14 – Examples of technology use in remote Indigenous communities**
The point about this leapfrogging in technology adoption is that the currently young generation is now seeing and interacting with the global world. We must expect this to influence their behaviours in relation to a range of areas including where they desire to live in the future. Technology adoption shows that people can act to change the direction of their own life without intervention from outside, if the right baseline conditions are established. There were, for example, no courses on ‘how to use a mobile phone’ run at communities. Technology adoption also emphasises to individuals that certain things are only available in other places: jobs, nightclubs, shops, a bigger partnering pool, universities, holiday experiences and so the list goes on. The more people experience and learn about these things, the more they will want to experience them.

Summary

And so, can we really expect future generations to want to remain ‘on country’ when the global world with all its opportunities calls them? I discussed these things with the boss of the Canadian Department of Indian and Northern Affairs a couple of years ago. She found great parallels between the Northern Territory and Canada’s experience in Indigenous Affairs, with the main difference being the earlier timing there. Canada too was previously wedded to policy and programs aimed at addressing disadvantage in situ by ‘closing the gaps’. They have now abandoned that language all together in recognition that it may do more harm than good by proposing that we (the industry of politicians, bureaucrats, academics and service providers), who work altruistically to improve things, simply condemn people to existing within an artificial non-economy, or as one commentator labelled them “outback ghettos”. Other than isolated pockets of activity there are no functioning economies ‘out there’, nor are there the means to generate them. Three decades of targeted fiscal pump-priming has demonstrated this.

In summary, it is my belief that the reluctance in policy circles to consider that settlement patterns could change is damaging to the prospects of those who do transition from remote to urban areas. This is because there are no policies or programs to help facilitate individuals transitioning. Consequently we see homelessness and public angst about what is reported as the ‘drift’ of people to Darwin and Alice Springs. In fact, as our research with homeless people in Darwin last year found, up to a third of the primary homeless can be considered as residents of Darwin.

I don’t have all the answers but I see the following as critical to addressing the paradox which the continuation of policies wedded to development in situ has created:

1. Developing information systems to inform and assist people about how to successfully transition from a remote to urban lifestyle: Obviously housing is a crucial issue but also things like work experience trials and the use of technology to deliver information on making the transition could be explored.

2. To cease to view ‘coming off country’ as an abandonment of culture and lands and instead promote it as a means of cultural-renewal and re-development: As an example, in one community I have visited there is only one person left alive who knows a special set of ceremonial dances and she is very old so cannot teach them to young people. To save that aspect of local culture the dances have been recorded on digital media under her instructions for future generations to access and learn.

3. Do not assume people want to or will always want to
live at communities: Programs such as the ‘Return to Country’ scheme which financially assists people to go back to their home communities are embedded with this notion. In fact, our research with homeless people in Darwin, for example, found that many people did not want to go back. Instead they considered themselves as residents of Darwin, even though they were homeless.

4. Place the issue in a broader context and learn from others: At the end of the day it will require a shift in policy paradigms to help enable people to transition from lives at communities to lives in larger centres and interstate. There is much to be learnt from the sorts of cross-fertilisations of ideas which are occurring through research collaborations and these should be encouraged at the policy maker level as well. Ultimately, a revisionist view of ‘where Indigenous people belong’ which is encompassing of the trend to urbanisation will save governments money and is more likely to deliver positive life courses for migrants and their families, as well as for those who choose to stay at communities.

5. Research and monitor changing patterns of urbanisation but also changing aspirations through the voices of youth: Represented in any statistic on migration are the lives of individuals. Too often this is forgotten. Individuals make complex decisions based on a range of factors. Aspirational factors are important and so is research which tracks changing attitudes and aspirations in the face of modernity and rapid technology adoption. The current young generation and the ones to follow will give the clearest signals about what might happen and how society can organise around new aspirations. This is because they are technology savvy. If our efforts remain focused on the long-held assumptions that people belong and want to be ‘out there’ we not only face the threat of misaligned policy settings but also the danger of continuing to impose damaging expectations on individuals. We deny their capacity and ability to seek out and obtain something new, to innovate and to progress, even though this is what ‘we’ are demanding through policies which focus on in situ progress.

Thank you for listening.