

# Local Governments and Indigenous Interests in Australia's Northern Territory

W. Sanders

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# LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND INDIGENOUS INTERESTS IN AUSTRALIA'S NORTHERN TERRITORY

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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

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|       |  |
|-------|--|
| ABS   | Australian Bureau of Statistics                    |
| ANU   | The Australian National University                 |
| CAEPR | Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research     |
| CDEP  | Community Development Employment Projects (scheme) |

## ABSTRACT

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Australia's Northern Territory has three categories of local government referred to as municipal, community government and association councils. This paper explores the historical development of these three categories of local governing body since Northern Territory self-government in 1978. Through more contemporary demographic analysis, and some minor spatial analysis, the paper also explores the different relationships of these three types of local governments to Indigenous interests. Two important pieces of background information are that roughly one-quarter of the Northern Territory's population of 200,000 is Aboriginal and that outside the major urban areas this proportion is much higher still. A later section of the paper looks at the contrasting financial positions of these three types of local government in the Northern Territory and relates this to the very different service roles they play for Indigenous people in remote areas and others.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Australia's Northern Territory currently has 63 local governing bodies divided into three categories referred to as municipal, community government and association councils. In the first section of this paper, I give a brief history of the development of these categories and the changing numbers of local governing bodies within them since Territory self-government in 1978. The next four sections of the paper provide more contemporary demographic and spatial analysis. The focus of the demographic analysis is on population size and on proportions of Indigenous people in the populations of local governments, organised by category. The argument is that Indigenous populations range from minority residential interests in urban areas with municipal councils to clear majority interests in the constituencies of many community government and association councils. Demography provides the basic framework for relationships between local governments and Indigenous interests in the Northern Territory. I also provide some basic explanation of the very different land areas among the municipal and community government councils. Later in the paper I examine the finances of these 63 local governing bodies, comparing budget sizes relative to population and also revenue sources. Community government and association councils have much higher revenues per capita than do municipalities. This can be related to the relative lack of other service providers in remote areas and hence the tendency for community government and association councils to be involved in a broader range of services than municipalities.

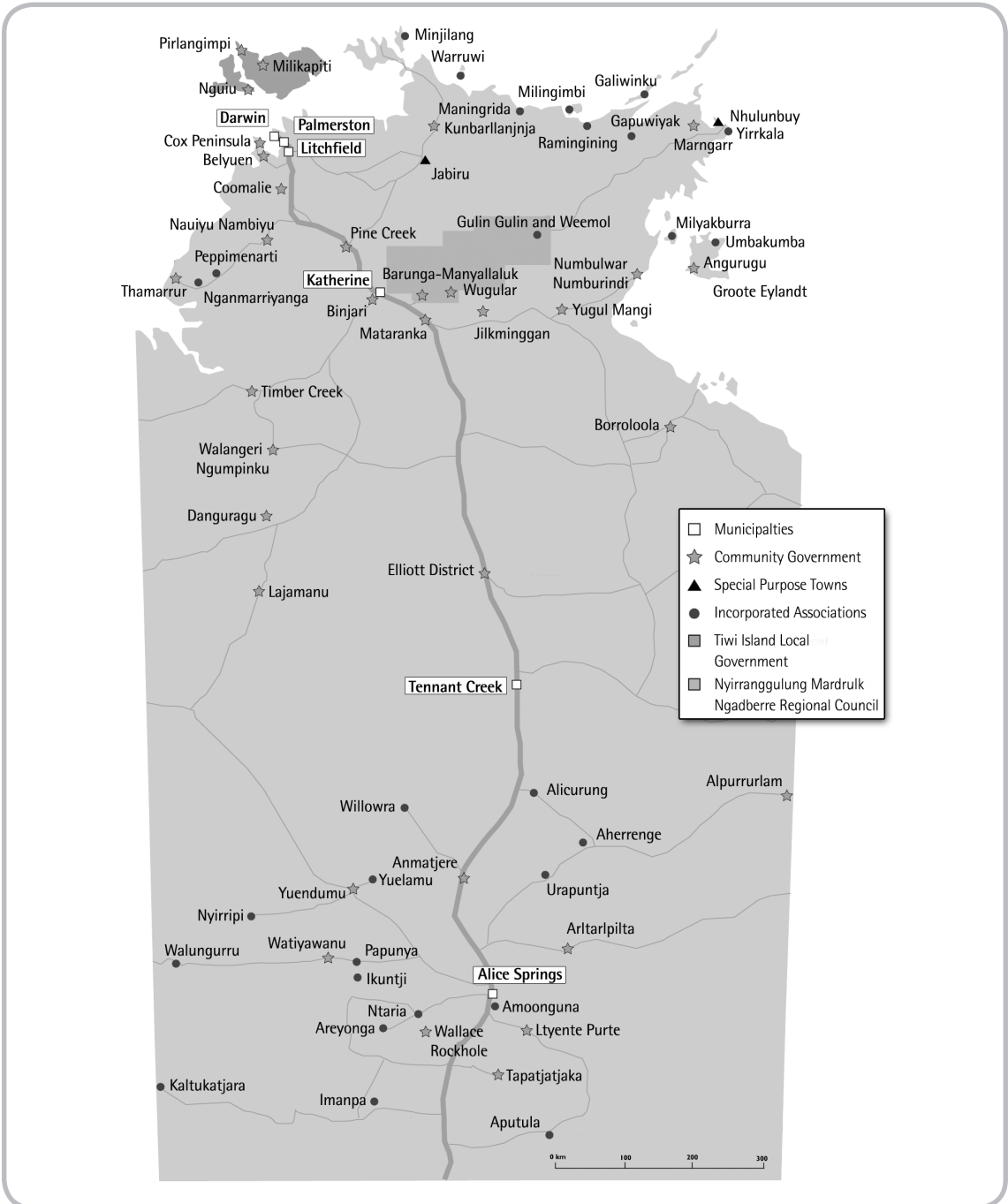
The dominant theme of this paper is difference and contrast among the local governments of the Northern Territory in their relationships to Indigenous interests. From a larger Australian perspective, it is unusual to focus on Indigenous interests in analysing local governments. This focus reflects the fact that over one-quarter of the Territory's population of 200,000 is Indigenous, compared to less than 4 per cent in any other Australian State or Territory. It also reflects the fact that, through the land rights processes of the last 30 years, an increasing proportion of land in the Northern Territory has been recognised as Aboriginal-owned. About 45 per cent of the Northern Territory's land area is now so recognised, while only 7.9 per cent is incorporated into local government areas. These larger facts about the Northern Territory population and land base need to be appreciated as we proceed to focus in more detail on the range of relationships between Indigenous interests and the Northern Territory's 63 local governing bodies.

## HISTORY

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At self-government in 1978, the Northern Territory had just four local governments in its major urban areas of Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine and Tennant Creek. The *Local Government Act 1978*, passed by the new Legislative Assembly, provided for two types of local government in the future—municipal councils and community government councils. Municipal councils would be similar to the existing four local governments. Community government councils could be more varied however, with different electoral arrangements and, potentially at least, a somewhat broader range of functions. Community government

Fig. 1. Local governing bodies, Northern Territory, 2003-04



Source: Adapted from Northern Territory Local Government Grants Commission 2003-04 Annual Report (Northern Territory Government 2004a: 44).

councils were intended for smaller communities in outlying areas of the Territory, which could be either discrete Indigenous communities or open towns with more racially mixed populations.

During the 1980s two new municipalities were established on the outskirts of Darwin and a special-purpose town council was established in the newly emerging, mining and tourism town of Jabiru. Also 14 communities took up the community government option, five in open towns and nine in discrete Indigenous communities. Most of these new community government schemes were small, single locality, contiguous area incorporations. But one, Yugul Mangi established in 1988, involved eight non-contiguous land areas and their associated discrete Indigenous communities.

One other development of the late 1980s was recognition of both community government councils and some other organisations delivering local government-type services outside formally-incorporated local government areas for the purposes of distributing funds through the Northern Territory Grants Commission. This meant that both the community government councils and these other organisations, known as 'association councils', could qualify for both Commonwealth and Northern Territory local government funding.

During the 1990s another 18 community government schemes were established, mainly in discrete Indigenous communities, but also two in open towns. One scheme of particular interest was Anmatjere, established in 1993. At first, it incorporated nine small discrete Indigenous living areas, three on a large central piece of Aboriginal-owned land and six on small outlying excisions from pastoral leases. In 1995, the open, roadside town of Ti Tree, in the middle of the large block of Aboriginal-owned land, was added. Hence, Anmatjere was not only a multi-locality council, like Yugul Mangi, but also one which mixed discrete Indigenous community and open town interests.

By the year 2000 the Northern Territory had 68 recognised local governing bodies, six municipalities, 32 community government councils, 29 association councils and one special purpose town council. Since then, numbers have decreased slightly due to a local government regionalisation policy pursued by the Northern Territory Government, both under the Country Liberal Party government which lost office in 2001 and under the Labor government since. In 2001, three community government councils on the Tiwi Islands were replaced by a single larger one, the Tiwi Island Local Government. In 2003, two community government councils and one association council to the east of Katherine combined to become one larger community government council, the Nyirranggulung Mardrulk Ngadberre Regional Council. As well, one new community government council, Thamurrur, was formed at Port Keats or Wadeye 300 kilometres south west of Darwin, replacing a former association council. One association council, at Willowra in northern central Australia, also had its recognition as a local governing body revoked in 2003. This leaves the Northern Territory in 2006 with 63 recognised local governing bodies comprising six municipalities, 30 community government councils, 26 association councils and one special purpose town council.

**Table 1. Populations and areas of local governments in major urban areas, Northern Territory, 2001**

|               | Population | Proportion<br>Indigenous (%) | Area<br>(sq kms) |
|---------------|------------|------------------------------|------------------|
| Darwin        | 72,142     | 08                           | 144              |
| Palmerston    | 20,788     | 11                           | 56               |
| Litchfield    | 16,086     | 06                           | 3,100            |
| Alice Springs | 28,178     | 15                           | 327              |
| Katherine     | 10,032     | 19                           | 528              |
| Tennant Creek | 3,286      | 36                           | 25               |

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

## DEMOGRAPHIC AND SPATIAL ANALYSIS

In the following three sections of this paper I give some demographic and spatial analysis of these 63 local governing bodies in the Northern Territory. I look first at the urban areas with municipal local governments, where Indigenous people are a minority residential interest. I also briefly mention four special-purpose, mining and tourism urban areas of which only one, Jabiru, has a fully-recognised local governing body. I then look at the community government and association councils in which Indigenous people tend to be (though are not always) a majority. The map (Fig. 1) accompanying this paper is adapted from that used by the Northern Territory Grants Commission in its 2003–04 Annual Report (Northern Territory Government 2004a: 44). This shows 69 local governing bodies, as it includes the special purpose mining town of Nhulunbuy, as well as Jabiru, and it also still shows both Willowra and the constituent elements of the two regional amalgamations since 2001. The discussion and tables to follow, however, focus on the currently recognised 63 local governing bodies.

For data relating to the urban areas I use Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) population figures from the 2001 Census. These figures cover people present in an area at census time, including visitors. Outside the urban areas ABS census geography does not correspond so well with local governing bodies. So for the community government and association councils, I use service population figures collected through annual returns from local governing bodies by the Northern Territory Grants Commission. These figures, which are used by the Commission in calculating the allocation of funds to local governing bodies, similarly include some allowance for visitors as well as residents. They also include allowances for small populations in tiny outlying localities, referred to as outstations, as well as the populations of the larger localities identified on the map. Outstations have in the past often been serviced by separate organisations from community government and association councils, called outstation resource agencies, but in recent times the number of these separate organisations has been lessening.

My technique in the analysis is to rank order Councils within the three categorical groups in relation to a variable under discussion, such as population size or proportion Indigenous population. I also sometimes sub-group councils within the three categories, leading to what I refer to as 'panels' within tables. The aim of this grouping and ordering is to allow various comparisons to be made both within and across the three categories of local governing bodies. One consequence of this technique is that the ordering of the names of local governments changes between tables. While this may not be easy for readers unfamiliar with Northern Territory geography and the names of its local governing bodies, the accompanying map will hopefully assist in making the analysis reasonably clear.

## INDIGENOUS MINORITIES IN URBAN AREAS

Table 1 presents populations, Indigenous proportions of those populations and areas for local governments in major urban areas of the Northern Territory. The top panel of three local governments represents the larger Darwin metropolitan area, with Darwin and Palmerston covering fairly small urban land areas and Litchfield a larger rural/urban fringe. Taken together these three municipal local governments account for just over 100,000 people, or about half the Northern Territory population. It is also notable that the Indigenous proportions of the populations of these three municipal local government areas are low, between 6 and 11 per cent. Indigenous communities in the Darwin local government areas are small minorities within their total populations.

The next panel of three municipal local governments in Table 1 represents the Territory's other major urban areas, of Alice Springs, Katherine and Tennant Creek. It is notable here that as the populations of these urban centres decrease, the Indigenous proportions of those populations increase. Hence while Alice Springs has 15 per cent of its population of 28,000 identifying as Indigenous, Tennant Creek has 36 per cent of its population of just over 3,000 so identifying, while Katherine occupies a middle position both in terms of total population and Indigenous proportion of that population. It is also notable that none of these urban local governments incorporates a large land area, with Tennant Creek having by far the smallest incorporated area.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect of the Indigenous presence in Alice Springs, Katherine and Tennant Creek, which can not be read from Table 1, is that they all have significant numbers of Aboriginal towns camps, plus active Indigenous community organisations representing and servicing those camps, the Tangentyere, Kalano and Julalikari councils respectively. To some extent these town camp organisations are relied on by these three local governments for Indigenous servicing tasks which the local governments themselves would have trouble undertaking. In recognition of this Tangentyere, Kalano and Julalikari all receive funding under the Northern Territory Government's Local Government Grants Program in a sub-program referred to as 'Minor Communities/Aboriginal Urban Living Areas' (Northern Territory Government 2004b: 10).

Under this sub-program, three Darwin-based organisations have in the past also been funded for the provision of local government-type services to small discrete Indigenous communities within the Darwin

**Table 2. Populations and areas of Northern Territory special purpose towns, 2001**

|           | Population | Proportion<br>Indigenous (%) | Proportion<br>Visitor (%) | Area (sq kms) |
|-----------|------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| Jabiru    | 1,775      | 13                           | 41                        | 13            |
| Nhulunbuy | 3,804      | 07                           | 12                        | 7             |
| Alyangula | 972        | 12                           | 09                        | 3             |
| Yulara    | 2,527      | 02                           | 56                        | 103           |

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001.

metropolitan area, but none of these organisations has had a major profile in Darwin local politics. In 2005, Aboriginal Urban Living Areas funding for Darwin was directed to a single new organisation, but only time will tell whether this organisation can develop a presence in Darwin local politics anything like that of Tangentyere in Alice Springs, Kalano in Katherine, or Julalikari in Tennant Creek. The demography of the Darwin area alone probably militates against such a presence.

Table 2 presents populations and areas for the Northern Territory's four special purpose towns, the mining towns of Nhulunbuy and Alyangula, the mining and tourism town of Jabiru and the tourism town of Yulara near Uluru. Only Jabiru among these four has a fully-recognised local government though, as noted above, Nhulunbuy also appears on the Northern Territory Grants Commission's map. The Nhulunbuy Corporation is separately incorporated from the town's mining company and does receive minor local government funding from the Northern Territory Government. However, its members are appointed, rather than elected, and the mining company has some influence over those appointments. At Alyangula on Groote Eylandt, the mining company provides town services direct and there is no separately incorporated organisation which could, even partly, be regarded as a local governing body. At Yulara, on the other hand, there was the beginnings of a separately incorporated town council when it was owned by the Northern Territory Government in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but this was abolished in 1997 when the resort was sold to a hotel chain.

All these special purpose towns are relatively small, with total populations in the 2001 census under 4,000, even including a very large proportion of visitors in the cases of Jabiru and Yulara (See Table 2). In relation to Indigenous interests, it is notable that the Indigenous proportion of the populations in these towns is also small. In 2001, Jabiru had 13 per cent and Alyangula 12 per cent, while Nhulunbuy had 7 per cent and Yulara only 2 per cent Indigenous residents. Alyangula, Nhulunbuy and Yulara each have discrete Indigenous communities only a few kilometres from them, and the Indigenous residential presence in the towns themselves is rather restricted. There is, in a sense, a managed separation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous living areas in these regions.

**Table 3. Areas, establishment dates and service populations of community government councils, Northern Territory**

|  | Population | Proportion<br>Indigenous (%) | Area<br>(sq kms) | Year<br>Established |
|--|------------|------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Indigenous population 90%+</b>      |            |                              |                  |                     |
| <i>Population &gt; 1,200</i>           |            |                              |                  |                     |
| Thamarrur                              | 2,537      | 95                           | 3,450            | 2003                |
| Tiwi Islands                           | 2,467      | 97                           | 2,115            | 2001                |
| Yugul Mangi <sup>a</sup>               | 1,573      | 95                           | 26,353           | 1988                |
| Yuendumu                               | 1,555      | 97                           | 22,142           | 1993                |
| Kunbarllanjnja                         | 1,477      | 95                           | 530              | 1995                |
| Anmatjere                              | 1,475      | 96                           | 3,631            | 1993                |
| Nyirranggulung                         | 1,380      | 97                           | 28,700           | 2003                |
| Numbulwar                              | 1,207      | 98                           | 4,500            | 1989                |
| <i>Population &lt;1,000</i>            |            |                              |                  |                     |
| Lajamanu                               | 939        | 96                           | 7,313            | 1980                |
| Angurugu                               | 859        | 95                           | 2                | 1982                |
| Ltyentye Purte                         | 599        | 95                           | 1,242            | 1994                |
| Walangeri Ngumpinku                    | 473        | 97                           | 386              | 1995                |
| Marn Garr                              | 309        | 90                           | 3                | 1993                |
| Tapatjatjaka                           | 297        | 93                           | 12               | 1996                |
| Jilkminggan                            | 273        | 98                           | 6                | 1995                |
| Arltarlpilta                           | 271        | 99                           | 12               | 1997                |
| Binjari                                | 263        | 100                          | 3                | 1995                |
| Belyuen                                | 259        | 96                           | 4                | 1992                |
| Watiyawanu                             | 249        | 93                           | 78               | 1994                |
| Wallace Rockhole                       | 163        | 99                           | 4                | 1986                |
| <b>Indigenous population &lt;90%</b>   |            |                              |                  |                     |
| <i>Discrete Indigenous communities</i> |            |                              |                  |                     |
| Dagaragu                               | 743        | 89                           | 43               | 1988                |
| Alpurrurulam                           | 714        | 89                           | 428              | 1996                |
| Naiyu Nambiyu                          | 503        | 87                           | 43               | 1988                |
| <i>Small open towns</i>                |            |                              |                  |                     |
| Elliot                                 | 559        | 87                           | 3                | 1985                |
| Borroloola                             | 914        | 82                           | 11               | 1987                |
| Timber Creek                           | 306        | 65                           | 16               | 1992                |
| Mataranka                              | 414        | 30                           | 3                | 1985                |
| Pine Creek                             | 532        | 28                           | 400              | 1987                |
| Coomalie                               | 1,707      | 27                           | 1,500            | 1987                |
| Cox Peninsula                          | 315        | 08                           | 6                | 1995                |

Note: a. Yugul Mangi originally covered 12,269 square kilometres, but this was more than doubled in 2003 when the council was dismissed and the scheme underwent major amendment.

Source: Northern Territory Government 2004a and supplementary information supplied by Northern Territory Grants Commission.

## COMMUNITY GOVERNMENT COUNCILS: SMALL OPEN TOWNS AND DISCRETE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

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Table 3 presents areas, years of establishment and populations for community government councils. The populations are three-year rolling average service populations, which, as noted above, also include some allowance for outstations and (to a lesser extent) visitors. The top panel of 20 councils in Table 3 includes all councils with 90 per cent or more Indigenous population, rank ordered by population size. With the exception of Anmatjere discussed above, these community government schemes can all be classified as operating in discrete Indigenous communities, where non-Indigenous people can generally only take up residence through employment in some servicing role.

At the top of Table 3, with the biggest populations, are a number of community governments which have been relatively recently established, or re-established, as part of the Northern Territory Government's push towards larger more regional schemes. First is Thamarrur, which in 2003 not only replaced an existing association council, but also an outstation resource agency. Thamarrur, and the Tiwi Island Local Government formed in 2001, are the only community governments with populations of over 2,000. Below these are six community government councils with populations between 1,200 and 1,600, three of which, Anmatjere, Yugul Mangi and Nyirrangulung, have already been mentioned as products of the Northern Territory Government's developing multi-locality or regionalisation ideas for community government councils since the late 1980s. The other three, Yuendumu, Kunbarllanjnja and Numbulwar, can be thought of as fairly large, centralised Indigenous communities which were the product of the earlier assimilation or mission era in Indigenous affairs, but which now service a more decentralised population in outstations as well. Three of this group of six, Nyirrangulung, Yuendumu and Yugul Mangi, now incorporate very large land areas. In Yugul Mangi's case, this was the product of the council being dismissed in 2003 and amendments to the scheme being developed which consolidated its land area into one large contiguous block roughly twice the size of the original eight non-contiguous blocks. In Nyirrangulung, the large land area incorporated is also the product of recent regionalisation thinking, though Yuendumu stands as a somewhat different and earlier example of incorporating a large land area in Aboriginal ownership.

At the bottom of this top panel of Table 3 are 12 community government schemes which operate in single discrete Indigenous communities, plus associated outstations, with populations of less than 1,000. The argument of the recent regionalisation policy is that these populations are too small to sustain viable community government councils. However, as argued elsewhere, small Indigenous communities may still wish to maintain their separate local government status for a variety of reasons (Sanders 2005). These community government councils in less populous, single Indigenous communities generally incorporate very small land areas. However, there are a couple, like Lajamu and Ltyentye Purte, which even early on incorporated somewhat larger areas.



**Table 4. Populations of association council areas, Northern Territory, 2002–05**

|                | Population | Proportion Indigenous |
|----------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Maningrida     | 2,359      | 0.96                  |
| Galiwinku      | 1,835      | 0.97                  |
| Gapuwiyak      | 1,151      | 0.97                  |
| Milingimbi     | 1,071      | 0.97                  |
| Yirrkala       | 1,057      | 0.97                  |
| Urapuntja      | 968        | 0.96                  |
| Ramingining    | 756        | 0.97                  |
| Ntaria         | 632        | 0.95                  |
| Umbakumba      | 552        | 0.98                  |
| Aherrenge      | 541        | 0.95                  |
| Ali Curung     | 483        | 0.96                  |
| Nganmarriyanga | 461        | 0.94                  |
| Walungurru     | 454        | 0.92                  |
| Papunya        | 390        | 0.90                  |
| Warruwi        | 388        | 0.99                  |
| Kaltukatjara   | 380        | 0.93                  |
| Nyirripi       | 317        | 0.95                  |
| Amoonguna      | 297        | 1.00                  |
| Yuelamu        | 295        | 0.96                  |
| Minjilang      | 255        | 0.95                  |
| Peppimenarti   | 235        | 0.97                  |
| Areyonga       | 234        | 0.96                  |
| Aputula        | 228        | 0.90                  |
| Milyakburra    | 217        | 0.95                  |
| Imanpa         | 189        | 0.95                  |
| Ikuntji        | 146        | 0.93                  |

Source: Northern Territory Government 2004a.

These larger areas of incorporation in community government schemes like Lajamanu, Yuendumu and even Yugul Mangi are not yet reflected in the Northern Territory Grants Commission map of 2003–04. This map has only begun to show incorporated land areas with the recent establishment of the Tiwi Island Local Government and the Nyirranggulung Mardrulk Ngadberre Regional Council. Apart from these two shaded areas, local governing bodies are just shown on the Grants Commission map as points corresponding to service centres (see map).

The bottom panel of Table 3 comprises ten community government councils with less than 90 per cent of their resident population Indigenous, rank ordered not by population size but by the proportion of their population that is Indigenous. This is intended to show the diversity of such councils and essentially divides them into two groups. At the top of this panel are three community government councils (Dagaragu, Alpururulam and Nauiyu Nambiyu) which, like those in the top panel of Table 3, essentially incorporate discrete Indigenous communities. From Elliot down, however, there are seven small open towns, where non-Indigenous people can take up residence which is not just service-employment-related and can acquire accommodation through market processes. The proportion of Indigenous people in these open towns varies greatly, from almost as high as in discrete Indigenous communities to almost as low as in the Darwin metropolitan area. While the open towns are very varied among themselves, due to their open residential nature they can, as a group, still be distinguished from the discrete Indigenous communities. Most open town community government schemes cover quite small land areas and populations, with Coomalie at Batchelor within commuting distance from Darwin being the only one which approaches the size of the new regional community governments.

In terms of land area covered, the 30 community government schemes incorporate approximately 103,000 square kilometres. Three schemes account for three-quarters of this area and another seven for most of the rest. In total community government schemes cover 7.6 per cent of the total Northern Territory land area of 1.35 million square kilometres. Municipal schemes cover just 0.3 per cent of the land area, so the vast majority of the Territory is still unincorporated in local government schemes.

## **ASSOCIATION COUNCILS AND DISCRETE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

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Table 4 lists the Northern Territory's 26 association councils ordered by total population size. It does not give land areas as these councils do not have jurisdiction over land. These are essentially incorporated organisations which pursue the common purposes of their members, however designated. Nor does Table 4 give a year of establishment for the association councils, as this is not part of the Northern Territory Grants Commission database from which this table is drawn. However, it would be reasonable to suggest that most of these associations were incorporated in the 1970s when Commonwealth government policies in Indigenous affairs were encouraging the development of incorporated associations for the conduct of Indigenous community affairs and the receipt of public moneys (Loveday 1989; Mowbray 1986). A few may, however, be new incorporations of the 1980s and 1990s.

In terms of population, it is notable that all these association councils have populations which are above 90 per cent Indigenous. All are essentially single discrete Indigenous communities, some with associated outstations. Only one of these 26 association councils, Maningrida, has a service population above 2,000, making it a possible candidate for the Northern Territory Government's regionalisation policy. However, Maningrida has a very successful, long-standing outstation resource agency, the Bawinanga Aboriginal

**Table 5. Revenues of municipal councils and Jabiru, Northern Territory, 2003–04**

|               | Total<br>revenue<br>\$000s | Rates and<br>annual<br>charges<br>(%) | User fees,<br>charges<br>and sales<br>(%) | Grants and<br>subsidies<br>(%) | Revenue<br>per capita<br>(\$) |
|---------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Jabiru        | 2,570                      | 59.1                                  | 13.4                                      | 17.0                           | 1,448                         |
| Tennant Creek | 2,773                      | 55.7                                  | 2.7                                       | 33.1                           | 844                           |
| Darwin        | 51,642                     | 63.3                                  | 1.3                                       | 14.7                           | 716                           |
| Palmerston    | 13,249                     | 64.9                                  | 0.6                                       | 24.6                           | 637                           |
| Alice Springs | 17,423                     | 66.6                                  | 0.9                                       | 25.7                           | 618                           |
| Katherine     | 6,169                      | 43.3                                  | 6.4                                       | 35.7                           | 615                           |
| Litchfield    | 7,073                      | 47.6                                  | 0.0                                       | 45.8                           | 440                           |

Source: Financial data supplied by Northern Territory Grants Commission.

Corporation, which also provides services to people in town. The case for regionalisation is clearly harder to argue when existing organisations, like Bawinanga, are successful.

Four association councils, all in east Arnhem Land, have service populations of over 1,000. The community government option has not generally been taken up in this region, except ironically by one very small population grouping at Marngarr (see map and Table 3). Five of the 26 association councils have service populations of between 500 and 1,000 and 16 have service populations below 500. This compares to 9 and 12 of the 30 community government councils respectively. Hence, association councils have, on average, slightly smaller service populations than community government councils, but equally there are large numbers of both with very small service populations.<sup>2</sup>

These population figures mean that, with the Northern Territory Government's regionalisation policy, there are only a couple of candidates from among the association councils which might form regional community government councils on their own, or with associated outstation resource agencies. The vast majority of these association councils will be encouraged into some form of multi-locational cooperation or amalgamation, either with each other or with smaller community government councils which are also being encouraged in this direction.

## FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

Tables 5–7 give the revenues of the Northern Territory's 63 local governing bodies in 2003–04. In their groupings these tables build on, but are slightly different from, those used in Tables 1–4. Table 5 draws together the six municipal councils from Table 1 and the one special-purpose town with full local government from Table 2. Table 6 slightly regroups the community government councils in the two panels of Table 3,

putting Nauiyu Nambiyu, Dagaragu and Alpurrurulam up with the other councils for discrete Indigenous communities and leaving just the seven councils for mixed open towns in its bottom panel. Table 7 follows Table 4 in covering the association councils. As well as total revenues, Tables 5–7 give proportions of those revenues coming from, first, rates and annual charges, second, user fees, charges and sales, and, third, grants and subsidies. These tables also, in their right hand columns give a revenue per capita figure, based on the population figures of earlier tables. It is by this revenue per capita figure that the local governing bodies are rank ordered within their groups in Tables 5–7.

Comparing the right hand column of Tables 5–7 it can be seen that community government and association councils in discrete Indigenous communities received (and hence also spent) far more revenue per capita in 2003–04 than did municipal councils in urban areas or community government councils in mixed open towns. Whereas municipal councils had revenues of between \$440 and \$1,448 per capita and community government councils in mixed open towns had revenues ranging from \$980 to \$1,644 per capita, the range for local governing bodies in discrete Indigenous communities was much higher. Among association councils in Table 7 the range was from \$1,113 up to \$17,918 per capita, while among community government councils in the top panel of Table 6 the range was from \$2,260 up to \$16,197.

Instead of focusing on ranges, we could calculate mean revenues per capita in Tables 5–7. This yields figures of \$760 per capita for municipal councils, \$1,226 per capita for community government councils in open mixed towns, \$6,978 per capita for community government councils in discrete Aboriginal communities and \$5,912 per capita for association councils.

This difference in revenue per capita can be related to the paucity of other service providers in outlying areas of the Northern Territory and the tendency for local governing bodies in these areas to take on a larger range of service provision functions than in urban areas. The prime examples of this are for local governing bodies in these areas to run stores, for food, fuel or other supplies, and to run quite extensive employment programs, such as the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme. The asterisks in Tables 6 and 7 indicate councils that ran CDEPs in 2003–04 and it can be readily seen that they are well represented in the tops of these tables where revenue per capita is high. By contrast, at the bottom of these tables, no council with revenue per capita of less than \$2,800 had a CDEP.

Another way to see these financial differences between local governing bodies is to focus on the proportions of their revenues coming from rates and annual charges compared to other sources. Municipal local governments in the Northern Territory relied on rates and charges for between 43.3 and 66.6 per cent of their revenue in 2003–04, a mean reliance of around 57 per cent. Community government councils in mixed open towns derived between 3.6 and 28.4 per cent of their revenue from rates and annual charges, a mean of around 11 per cent. Community government and association councils in discrete Indigenous communities, on the other hand, often derived no revenue from rates and annual charges at all, though a small number raised a tiny proportion of revenue in this way, usually as a 'poll tax'.

**Table 6. Revenues of community government councils, Northern Territory, 2003–04**

|                         | Total Revenue | Rates and annual charges (%) | User Fees, charges and sales (%) | Grants and subsidies (%) | Revenue per capita (\$) |
|-------------------------|---------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| Naiyu Nambiyu*          | 8,147         | 1.8                          | 43.7                             | 44.6                     | 16,197                  |
| Tapajatjaka*            | 4,462         | 0.0                          | 40.5                             | 56.6                     | 15,993                  |
| Ltyentye Purte*         | 7,867         | 0.0                          | 44.9                             | 48.3                     | 13,134                  |
| Angurugu*               | 10,397        | 0.5                          | 1.8                              | 70.1                     | 12,104                  |
| Nyirranggulung*         | 14,650        | 0.6                          | 3.4                              | 48.4                     | 10,616                  |
| Artarpilta*             | 2,178         | 0.9                          | 4.5                              | 84.9                     | 8,037                   |
| Jilkminggan*            | 2,081         | 10.1                         | 6.8                              | 81.5                     | 7,623                   |
| Walangeri Ngumpinku*    | 3,598         | 0.0                          | 28.1                             | 70.3                     | 7,607                   |
| Tiwi Islands*           | 15,485        | 4.9                          | 10.4                             | 76.0                     | 6,277                   |
| Binjari                 | 1,639         | 6.8                          | 38.6                             | 53.2                     | 6,232                   |
| Numbulwar*              | 6,869         | 0.0                          | 60.0                             | 39.1                     | 5,691                   |
| Kunbarllanjinja*        | 8,006         | 0.4                          | 36.5                             | 45.6                     | 5,420                   |
| Belyuen                 | 1,386         | 1.4                          | 11.0                             | 75.9                     | 5,351                   |
| Dagarugu*               | 3,956         | 2.6                          | 20.4                             | 71.3                     | 5,324                   |
| Thamarrur*              | 13,016        | 3.0                          | 9.2                              | 70.4                     | 5,130                   |
| Yugul Mangi*            | 7,379         | 0.0                          | 15.5                             | 82.2                     | 4,691                   |
| Mangarr                 | 1,307         | 5.1                          | 7.3                              | 83.4                     | 4,230                   |
| Watiyawanu              | 1,001         | 0.0                          | 11.6                             | 81.9                     | 4,020                   |
| Alpurrurulam            | 2,713         | 0.0                          | 19.4                             | 70.1                     | 3,800                   |
| Wallace Rockhole        | 612           | 2.1                          | 25.8                             | 59.3                     | 3,755                   |
| Lajamanu*               | 3,303         | 0.0                          | 12.4                             | 77.3                     | 3,518                   |
| Yuendumu*               | 5,407         | 0.0                          | 12.5                             | 83.8                     | 3,477                   |
| Anmatjere               | 3,333         | 0.0                          | 5.1                              | 85.2                     | 2,260                   |
| <i>Small Open Towns</i> |               |                              |                                  |                          |                         |
| Timber Creek            | 503           | 3.6                          | 17.3                             | 80.3                     | 1,644                   |
| Elliot                  | 827           | 6.5                          | 10.4                             | 63.1                     | 1,479                   |
| Pine Creek              | 667           | 7.2                          | 4.5                              | 82.0                     | 1,254                   |
| Borroloola              | 1,048         | 6.1                          | 10.9                             | 73.3                     | 1,147                   |
| Mataranka               | 433           | 5.3                          | 6.5                              | 63.1                     | 1,046                   |
| Cox Peninsula           | 326           | 19.6                         | 1.2                              | 64.4                     | 1,035                   |
| Coomalie                | 1,673         | 28.4                         | 0.5                              | 65.7                     | 980                     |

Note: \* These councils ran CDEPs in 2003–04.

Source: Financial data supplied by Northern Territory Grants Commission

The big revenue source for community government and association councils in discrete Indigenous communities was grants and subsidies, usually from agencies at other levels of government. Scanning the second column from the right in Tables 6 and 7, there are many instances in which these councils relied on grants and subsidies for 70 or 80 per cent of their revenue. In the instances where reliance dropped below these levels, it was because revenue from user fees, charges and sales was significant. These latter are the councils which were running stores of one sort or another, as well as receiving grants and subsidies for programs like CDEP. This is certainly the case with Tapatjaka, Ltyentye Purte and Nauiyu Nambiyu, which were three of the community government councils in discrete Indigenous communities with the highest revenue per capita.<sup>3</sup> Each derived over 40 per cent of that revenue from user fees, charges and sales.

One other noteworthy aspect of Tables 6 and 7 is the very wide range in revenues per capita among association and community government councils in discrete Indigenous communities, from not much greater than the municipal councils up to \$15,000 or more. Higher revenues can be explained by a lack of other service providers, and hence councils being involved in the delivery of services such as stores and employment programs, while lower revenues can often be explained by the presence of other service providers in an area. Here I will discuss just two examples of lower revenue.

The first example is Maningrida Council, which among the association councils in 2003–04 had the second lowest revenue per capita of just \$1,523. This is because, as noted previously, there is a major and very successful outstation resource agency in the area, the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation. Bawinanga runs a large CDEP, as well as number of other enterprises both in outstations and in Maningrida township (Altman and Johnston 2000; Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation 2004). If Bawinanga's revenue in 2003–04 of \$22.642 million was added to Maningrida Council's revenue of \$3.593 million, then the combined revenue of the two organisations would amount to \$11,121 per capita for residents of the region. This is closer to the level of revenue per capita that one would expect of a local governing body in a discrete Indigenous community carrying out a broader range of servicing functions.

The second example of low revenue per capita is the Anmatjere Community Government Council. As noted previously this Council is an interesting mix of open town and discrete Aboriginal community interests. While based in the open roadside town of Ti Tree, Anmatjere also services nine outlying Indigenous living areas. Having worked with this Council for the last two years, I now have some appreciation of why it has a fairly low revenue per capita. First, Ti Tree has both a conventional roadhouse and an art gallery/café store run by non-Indigenous business interests. So Anmatjere is not involved in stores. Second, in 2003–04 Anmatjere did not have a CDEP. Indigenous people in the area at that time utilised CDEPs run by a number of other organisations, including one or two separate community organisations in the outlying wards which had continued to exist and be active after Anmatjere's formation in 1993. Anmatjere obtained a CDEP of its own in 2005 and has since also taken on CDEP scheme administration for two of its outlying wards. Hence, I would anticipate a significant rise in Anmatjere's revenue per capita from 2005–06.

**Table 7. Revenues of association councils, Northern Territory, 2003–04**

|                 | Total<br>revenue<br>\$000s | Rates and<br>annual<br>charges (%) | User fees,<br>charges and<br>sales (%) | Grants and<br>subsidies<br>(%) | Revenue<br>per capita<br>(\$) |
|-----------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Ikuntji         | 2,616                      | 0.0                                | 4.8                                    | 78.1                           | 17,918                        |
| Minjilang       | 3,053                      | 1.4                                | 6.6                                    | 63.5                           | 11,973                        |
| Imanpa*         | 2,017                      | 0.0                                | 14.2                                   | 69.3                           | 10,672                        |
| Umbakumba*      | 5,436                      | 0.8                                | 11.3                                   | 64.1                           | 9,848                         |
| Yirrkala*       | 10,174                     | 1.0                                | 21.0                                   | 48.8                           | 9,652                         |
| Aputula*        | 1,911                      | 0.0                                | 13.2                                   | 72.1                           | 8,382                         |
| Milyakburra*    | 1,589                      | 0.0                                | 54.3                                   | 39.5                           | 7,323                         |
| Warruwi         | 2,698                      | 0.9                                | 9.6                                    | 65.7                           | 6,954                         |
| Nganmarrinyanga | 3,142                      | 1.8                                | 61.7                                   | 19.9                           | 6,816                         |
| Amoonguna       | 1,966                      | 1.9                                | 22.6                                   | 62.6                           | 6,620                         |
| Kaltukatjara    | 2,083                      | 7.2                                | 8.8                                    | 68.4                           | 5,951                         |
| Ali Curung*     | 2,874                      | 0.0                                | 4.6                                    | 89.2                           | 5,950                         |
| Papunya*        | 2,314                      | 0.0                                | 5.9                                    | 95.4                           | 5,933                         |
| Peppimenarti    | 1,350                      | 3.9                                | 13.0                                   | 53.6                           | 5,745                         |
| Yuelamu*        | 1,589                      | 0.0                                | 7.6                                    | 85.3                           | 5,386                         |
| Galiwinku*      | 8,051                      | 0.0                                | 21.1                                   | 70.3                           | 4,387                         |
| Gapuwiyak*      | 3,501                      | 0.0                                | 3.0                                    | 73.3                           | 3,042                         |
| Walungurru      | 1,334                      | 0.0                                | 9.2                                    | 74.4                           | 2,938                         |
| Areyonga        | 675                        | 0.0                                | 21.2                                   | 64.6                           | 2,885                         |
| Milingimbi*     | 3,053                      | 0.0                                | 18.0                                   | 68.8                           | 2,851                         |
| Ntaria*         | 1,793                      | 0.0                                | 10.7                                   | 74.7                           | 2,837                         |
| Aherrenge       | 1,405                      | 0.0                                | 22.6                                   | 69.3                           | 2,597                         |
| Nyirripi        | 731                        | 0.0                                | 14.2                                   | 67.2                           | 2,306                         |
| Ramingining     | 1,588                      | 0.1                                | 22.7                                   | 57.6                           | 2,101                         |
| Maningrida      | 3,593                      | 0.0                                | 15.5                                   | 72.6                           | 1,523                         |
| Urapuntja       | 1,077                      | 0.0                                | 20.4                                   | 79.8                           | 1,113                         |

Note: \* These councils ran CDEPs in 2003–04.

The three percentages in the middle columns of Tables 5–7 often do not add to 100. Councils often have other revenue sources besides these three, such as interest income, profits or losses on the sale of assets, assets acquired without cost or below fair value and other current or capital revenue. However, these three categories are the major constant sources of revenue across councils and over time.

Source: Financial data supplied by Northern Territory Grants Commission.

## WHITHER MUTITJULU?

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When discussing the Northern Territory's special purpose urban centres back at the beginning of this paper, I noted that the mining and tourism towns of Nhulunbuy, Alyangula and Yulara all had discrete Indigenous communities nearby. These are Yirrkala, Angurugu and Mutitjulu respectively. However, only the first two of these appear on the Northern Territory Grants Commission map. Mutitjulu does not appear on the map, which may seem all the stranger given that it has been one of the most mentioned discrete Indigenous communities in the Australian media in recent times. Why is this?

Mutitjulu only emerged as a discrete Indigenous community in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is within a Commonwealth national park, which was returned to Aboriginal ownership and joint management in 1985 when the population of Mutitjulu was of the order of 150 people (Altman 1988: 106). This peculiar combination of circumstances led to Mutitjulu being seen as primarily falling within Commonwealth responsibility and being excluded from recognition as a local governing body by the Northern Territory Grants Commission in the late 1980s. This has remained the situation since, despite Mutitjulu's population growing in more recent years up towards 400 (Taylor 2001).

## CONCLUSION

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Local governments in Australia's Northern Territory have a variety of relationships with Indigenous interests based primarily on history and demography. In urban areas, Indigenous populations are minority residential interests within the jurisdictions of municipal councils. In more remote, discrete Indigenous communities, community government and association councils are numerically dominated by Indigenous populations. In between these two contrasting demographic poles are a few instances of more mixed populations and circumstances involving small open roadside towns. However, the vast majority of the Northern Territory's local governing bodies fall towards the ends of this demographic contrast.

Contrast can also be clearly seen in the finances of the Northern Territory's local governing bodies. Municipalities and community government councils in mixed open towns have relatively restricted service roles, and revenue streams which reflect this restriction based on rates and annual charges and some grants and subsidies. Community government and association councils in discrete Indigenous communities, on the other hand, typically take on a somewhat broader range of service roles and have revenue streams which reflect this, both in terms of total revenue per capita and revenue source. They rely far more heavily for their higher revenue flows per capita on grants and subsidies and, in some instances, on user fees, charges and sales.



Variety and contrast among local governing bodies is a well established theme in the general Australian local government literature (Power, Halligan & Wettenhall 1981). It is also an emerging theme in writing on Indigenous people and local governments Australia-wide (Sanders 1996). This paper develops that theme somewhat further in the case of Australia's Northern Territory. It has shown that there are local governments and Indigenous interests in various parts of the Northern Territory operating in very different and contrasting demographic, spatial and financial circumstances.

## AFTERWORD

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On 11 October 2006, The Northern Territory Minister for Local Government, Elliot McAdam, announced the latest local government reform 'blueprint'. The suggestion is now to move towards 'municipals and regional shires across the entire Northern Territory' by 1 July 2008. While the number of shires to sit alongside the urban municipalities has not been identified, the Minister did argue that 'a shire of less than 5,000 people would struggle to be sustainable in the long term' (McAdam 2006: 4-5). Hence, the number of shires envisaged is clearly drastically less than the 56 community government and association councils currently in existence and analysed in this paper. This plan is perhaps the boldest yet in the sequence of local government regionalisation reform proposals put forward by the Northern Territory Government. Not only would it increase the size of local governments by bringing together current organisations, it would also increase the diversity of interests within these organisations by bringing in settler interests, such as pastoralists and roadhouse owners, who are currently largely outside incorporated local government areas. If this reform agenda, or anything like it, is implemented, even in twice the time frame specified, the Northern Territory local government system and its relations to Indigenous interests will soon look very different from that analysed in this paper.

## NOTES

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1. There was an attempt made by the Northern Territory Government in the early 1980s to extend the town boundaries of Tennant Creek in reaction to an Aboriginal land claim process. This attempt was successfully challenged in the High Court (see Edmunds 1995: 31).
2. The mean population of the community government councils in Table 3 is 844, while that of the association councils in Table 4 is 606.
3. Ikuntji, the association council with the highest revenue per capita, appears to occupy that position largely because of its very small population base of just 146.

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