Housing in Darwin: Policies and their Results

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Monograph
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The study is written with a particular group of readers in mind: the participants in the process of making housing policy for Darwin. Though they are also the sources of most of the information on which the study is based, few if any of them will have listened to the same range of informants as were available to me; and perhaps also these informants were more communicative with an outsider than they can afford to be with one another. The policy-making community in Darwin is a remarkably open and accessible group, but inhibitions and distortions based on functional responsibilities and departmental loyalties are bound to be present even in such a small and relaxed community. If an outsider, an academic, can serve as a facilitator of communication (accurate communication, it is to be hoped) thus helping participants towards greater understanding of each other's roles, then the project will have been worthwhile.

It was certainly satisfying, thanks in no small part to Peter Loveday, Field Director of the North Australia Research Unit (NARU) of the Australian National University, and to the other members of the NARU staff. Of these, although all were helpful and supportive, I must make special mention of Deborah Wade-Marshall and Colleen Pyne who took a particular interest in the project and gave me valuable help and advice.
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Responsibility for all comments and opinions expressed is my own, and I am to blame for errors, though several of my informants have done their best and have saved me from blunders in earlier drafts. Thanks again to all who helped.

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>CBD</td>
<td>Central Business District</td>
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<td>Darwin Reconstruction Commission</td>
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<td>NARU</td>
<td>North Australia Research Unit</td>
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<td>NT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
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<td>Northern Territory Home Purchase Assistance Scheme</td>
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<td>Northern Territory Public Service</td>
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<td>PDA</td>
<td>Palmerston Development Authority</td>
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Chapter One

POLICIES AND THEIR BACKGROUND

Darwin has a pleasant tropical climate. In the autumn, winter and spring it is dry, in the summer it is wet. The temperature in the shade in the middle of the day rarely goes above 33°C, and on most nights it falls by at least 10 degrees. There are sea breezes. About all you need to be comfortably housed in Darwin is a roof over your head, some privacy, electricity and plumbing. Unfortunately, because of the way the city has been planned and built, you also need a car and a considerable income to pay the rent or the mortgage payments for the sorts of housing which the market and the government provide. Houses, blocks of land and the layout of suburbs are remarkably similar to what one sees in the outer, newer, less affluent suburbs of the southern cities. The population has grown steadily and faster than in any of the other capital cities since Cyclone Tracy in 1974. The demand for housing, to buy or to rent, has been unabated, at least until very recently, which suggests that there are plenty of people sufficiently satisfied with the housing available in Darwin to be willing to pay prices which were estimated in 1984 to be about 20 to 30 per cent above the going rates for comparable accommodation in, say, Adelaide or Brisbane.

Both political parties endorse the main outlines of the Territory's housing and land development policies for Darwin, the essence of which is to encourage families to buy their homes. The Housing Commission builds houses in Darwin to rent in the first instance but to sell to the occupants as soon as they can afford to buy, and terms are lenient. The Lands Department sees to it that fully-developed residential land, in blocks of 800 sq. metres or larger, becomes available in Darwin or its satellite, Palmerston, at a pace carefully regulated to keep prices down to about $17,500 (mid-1984) or the equivalent, as time and inflation dictate. For Darwin these are the essential housing policies of the Northern Territory government, and about them there is little controversy.

However, the eligibility rules and the timing of changes in mortgage finance terms and conditions, have certainly caused controversy, even to the point of militant industrial action by government employees, the largest category in the Darwin work force. When, how and why the relevant decisions were made is the main subject of this study, though it is also concerned with the physical and social effects, the visible and the not-so-visible consequences of the main policies and the decisions made in the course of
administering them over a ten year period since the cyclone.

Before Tracy there were an estimated 12,456 dwellings in Darwin, of which two-thirds (8,384) were houses and the rest were 'other' dwellings (flats, caravans, etc.) (Australian Housing Research Council, 1983). Only 540 houses survived the cyclone with less than 10 per cent damage, while approximately 4,900 houses suffered 60 per cent or more damage. Of an estimated total of 2,325 self-contained flats, 40 per cent were rendered uninhabitable. Probably 70 per cent of the estimated 1,700 caravans were destroyed.

The remarkable thing is the speed of reconstruction and the degree of satisfaction expressed by residents. The Housing Commission, which owned only about 14 per cent of Darwin's houses in 1974, completed its restoration program by May 1979. In addition to repairing those of its dwellings which could be repaired, the Housing Commission built 790 new houses and flats between Tracy (24 December 1974) and the end of June 1978. By far the larger public enterprise was the Darwin Reconstruction Commission which built or rebuilt housing for government employees and the armed forces, as well as assisting other categories. It finished its program two years ahead of schedule in December 1978, having built 360 armed forces dwellings and 1,812 new houses and 141 new flats as well as rebuilding 425 houses and 128 flats for government employees.

It was the private sector, however, which did the lion's share. Initially there were to be very strict controls on what could be built and where, but by May 1975 the Reconstruction Commission, under pressure from residents and from property owners who had been evacuated but wanted to return as soon as possible, cleared the way by relaxing the original stringent town planning and building code requirements. Private building of new houses and flats, and rebuilding of existing ones went ahead rapidly. Before Tracy, 5,100 to 5,200 of Darwin's houses, most of the flats and practically all of the caravans were privately owned, or about 62 per cent of the total stock of dwellings. Estimates of new private construction and restoration after Tracy are very rough, but approximately 2,000 private houses and/or flats had been restored by the end of June 1978, and approximately 2,000 new private houses/flats had been built. The proportion of houses to flats is estimated to have been 85 per cent houses, 15 per cent flats.

By June 1978, three and a half years after Tracy, Darwin's population was back to its pre-cyclone level, estimated at 48,000. The evacuation immediately after the cyclone had reduced it to 11,000. What is more, a degree of satisfaction was reported by the people who had been there
before the cyclone and had settled themselves there again. Responses to a survey questionnaire in 1981 showed that '...for people still living in Darwin, accommodation was perceived as being marginally improved, whilst the reverse was the situation for people who had left Darwin' (Australian Housing Research Council 1983, para 4:8.) Though the population had risen again to its former numbers by mid 1978, the housing stock was barely as large as it had been before Tracy. Even a year later, in mid-1979, the Australian Housing Research Council's study estimates that there were 11,000 rebuilt, reconstructed or undamaged houses and flats in Darwin, whereas there had been an estimated 12,642 dwellings (including 1,700 caravans) occupied at the time of the cyclone. There was a housing shortage, and as the population continued to grow this shortage persisted into the 1980s.

1 July 1978 brought self-government to the Northern Territory. Housing was high on the list of public demands. The Memorandum of Understanding in respect of Financial Arrangements between the Commonwealth and a self-governing Northern Territory, sent by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser to Paul Everingham (Majority Leader in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly) and dated 28 June 1978, provided that 'The Northern Territory will be eligible for specific revenue grants in respect of all relevant programs for which the Commonwealth now provides section 96 specific purpose revenue grants to the States, under terms and conditions similar to those that apply to such grants to the States...' and the same principles were to be applied also to capital assistance in the areas of housing, dwellings for pensioners, roads, urban public transport, water resource assessment and natural disaster relief. However, the special needs of the Territory were also to be taken into consideration in settling the financial formulae. 'Staff housing', meaning housing owned by the Commonwealth and rented to those Commonwealth government employees who were to become Northern Territory government employees would be transferred to the Territory, at a price of $19,000 per dwelling repayable to the Commonwealth over 53 years from the date of transfer at an interest rate of 5 per cent per annum, an obviously favourable rate from the Territory's point of view, and one which would enable it to continue renting accommodation to its employees, transferred from the Commonwealth's employment, at the sort of concessional rents they had been used to. The assets of the Northern Territory Housing Commission were transferred to the NT government, which assumed responsibility also for its liabilities, i.e. loans and debt repayment. Finally, the Memorandum of Understanding recorded that 'The Commonwealth agrees to negotiate a Housing Agreement with the Northern Territory along the same lines as the Commonwealth/State Housing Agreement. In other words, the Commonwealth proposes that
the terms, conditions and arrangements in resect of the funding of welfare housing in the Territory would be analogous to those for the States'.

It is to be remembered that in 1976 the Fraser government had drawn up with the states a Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement which directed State Housing Commissions to charge their tenants 'market rents' instead of cost-based rents. The difference, and the implications of the change were controversial, and when the Hawke Labor Government came to power in 1983 the policy was reversed and the cost-based rent principle was restored. The 1983 change was seen as enabling states to offer rental housing cheaply to other tenants besides those who, through low income, qualify for state-paid rental rebates, in other words to go into competition with private-sector providers of rental accommodation and force down their rents if necessary. In effect, however, it is doubtful whether the differences were as dramatic as this implies. Housing Commissions had already been moved toward market rents for those tenants not receiving rebates. The private sector middle-income rental market in many areas of Australia became somewhat over supplied after 1976 with the result that market rentals were generally increasing less rapidly than the Consumer Price Index, or hardly increasing at all in some areas, so there was a convergence of the two types of rent calculation. The long-term implications of the change back to cost-rental under the Hawke government remain to be seen and will depend on inflationary trends. A long period of price stability would neutralize the effect. An inflationary period would give public tenants the benefit of lower housing construction costs when their dwellings were first built.

The 1976 Fraser amendments to the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement were part of a generally conservative emphasis on policies favouring home ownership as against tenancy. These preferences were shared by the Everingham government in the Northern Territory. It is also true to say that the Labor Party in the Northern Territory, just like the leaders of the Federal Labor Party, consistently express themselves as strongly supporting the principle of home ownership, so that it is difficult to distinguish, at the level of political beliefs and rhetoric, between the parties on this central issue of housing policy. However, the performance of state governments do differ, and discernible party differences in housing policy do appear when comparing Labor and non-Labor state regimes. As there has been, as yet, no Labor government of the Northern Territory, it is difficult to anticipate, on the basis of what its leaders say, whether a distinctively pro-rental policy is likely to emerge under such a government, or whether the pro-ownership emphasis will continue.
Since self-government, the Territory government has made significant housing policy decisions, particularly on land development, mortgage interest rates, home purchase conditions, and tenancy conditions for government employees. The details of these decisions and their effects will be discussed in later chapters. Briefly, and without explanation at this point, the most important policy decisions affecting housing in Darwin appear to have been

: The Northern Territory Home Purchase Assistance Scheme, which came into effect on 1 October 1979.

: The decision to build Palmerston, probably taken within the government in 1979, though the Palmerston Development Authority was not established until 1982.


: The Transfer to Purchase Scheme, which came into effect in 1981.

: The abolition of separate waiting lists for government employees and members of the general public in 1981.


: The increase in government employees' mortgage interest rates gradually to reach the higher rates at which loan funds are available to the general public under the Home Purchase Assistance Scheme. To apply to government employees applying after 1984. Announced 14 August 1984.


: The tenancy transfer policy announcement, August 1984.

In addition to the housing schemes promoted by the NT government, there are numerous other housing schemes operating in Darwin such as those of the Commonwealth government for the defence forces and for civilian public servants in various Commonwealth departments. As well, there are schemes run for their own employees by banks, insurance
companies and some commercial and industrial enterprises. There is also a significant scheme of special housing for Aboriginal people in urban and urban fringe reserves such as Bagot Reserve which is more or less in the middle of Darwin, on the seaward side of the airport. Aboriginal households are also, of course, among those who qualify for housing under the Northern Territory Housing Commission's various housing (tenancy and ownership) schemes. Although a full account of housing policy in Darwin would necessarily deal with all the schemes referred to here, the present study has been confined to the NT government's principal schemes and especially those administered by NTHC. Police housing has also been omitted from this account: its terms and conditions are distinct from those which apply to other public employees. There are separate schemes for Australia Post and Telecom personnel and formerly for railway employees, but these have also been left out. A further study to explore some of the differences among the various schemes and the apparent anomalies these differences produce would be worthwhile but has been beyond the scope of this study.
Chapter Two

RENTAL POLICY

One of the obvious and enduring reasons for the existence of a body such as the Northern Territory Housing Commission (NTHC) is to provide rental accommodation to households at the low end of the income scale. Paradoxically, NTHC is also called upon to provide rental accommodation as well to new arrivals in Darwin who are high up in the income scale, who come to take up government appointments or executive positions in government-fostered enterprises. The Commission serves such a variety of purposes, not all of them easily reconciled, that it must have some difficulty in knowing, from time to time, where its most urgent duty lies. At times, for example, NTHC has been urged by government to give priority to its effort to sell its houses to those of its tenants able to buy; but note the heels of that directive has come a somewhat countervailing directive to encourage the private sector home building industry. The Commission has been criticised sometimes for not building houses of high enough quality and workmanship; at other times for providing houses that are too good, with chrome-plated brass taps when plastic would do.

Such is the fate of public housing authorities in most parts of the world: but the one function no one wants to take away from them is that of providing so-called welfare rental housing. It is often a relief and a morale-booster to staff in such authorities when their role is extended and diversified well beyond that minimum level.

Unfortunately, however, an emphasis on selling homes reduces the rental stock at the Housing Commission's disposal, and raises the possibility that waiting times for households in desperate need of accommodation will become unacceptably long. It is to the credit of NTHC, the Territory government, and the Commonwealth which supplies the funds, that the NTHC had shorter waiting periods in 1984 than Housing Commissions in the southern states.

There is also an awareness within the NTHC that too short a waiting period will expose the Territory to the possibility that people in need of welfare accommodation will migrate to the Territory specifically for that reason: it is suspected, within the staff of NTHC, that this has in fact happened from time to time. Though it could have its own very positive side-effects, this result is generally viewed as a bad thing. Besides, the Commonwealth, which can regulate the money tap, would be unlikely to allow a very much wider discrepancy between waiting times for public
housing in the Territory and in the states: the states would quickly put political pressure on the Commonwealth if what they see as favoured treatment to the Territory becomes a provocation to them. A twelve-month waiting period in the Territory is about the best the NTHC can aspire to and has sometimes achieved. The waiting period in southern states is often considerably higher, though a precise comparative figure is difficult to determine. In New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, waiting times as long as forty months have often occurred, though urgent cases can be handled more swiftly. The shorter waiting period in the Northern Territory is a remarkable achievement when one remembers that ten years ago the cyclone wiped out most of Darwin's housing stock.

Ten years ago the housing problem in Darwin was one of shortages. Demand exceeded supply, so that private landlords could charge very high rents. Government employees who got housing from the Housing Commission got it at a subsidised low rent. If there was no Housing Commission home for them on arrival they could go out to the private rental market, and the government would pay whatever difference there was between the low rent they would have had to pay in a Commission house, and the higher rent charged by the private landlord. This made government tenants highly desirable tenants, because landlords could charge almost whatever they liked. This also pushed up the rents charged to those tenants on the open market who had to fend for themselves without rental assistance.

The Commonwealth-Territory Housing Agreements, revised at three-year intervals, although not made public, are in terms substantially similar to those between the Commonwealth and the states. The 1976 revision put pressure on the State Housing Commissions to charge market rents. As NTHC moved in this direction it reduced the gap-filling subsidy paid to government employees waiting for Commission homes, and somewhat reduced the disadvantage faced by non-government employees renting in the private market.

On the other hand, the policy also put extra pressure on NTHC to provide rental rebates to those who qualify for them because of the low household income.

Until recently, government employees seeking rental accommodation in the Territory were in a privileged position. While the Commonwealth administered the Territory, until 1978, there was a separate government employees' housing scheme, or 'staff housing' scheme as it was commonly called. Houses of a superior quality were built on piers or columns, one storey above the ground. There are great advantages in this form of construction, given the Darwin climate. The houses catch the breeze, the
space beneath the house is cool and dry and available as a children's play area, entertainment area or activity centre as well as a place to park a car and store household odds and ends. More important is the fact that houses built flat on the ground act as heat banks, whereas an elevated house cools down rapidly in the evening. Elevated houses cost more to build, but how much of this extra cost is due to the problems of construction and how much is due to the room size and refinements allowed to staff tenants and included in the specifications of Darwin’s staff houses, is a moot point. Be that as it may, government employees were, and were seen to be, privileged tenants of houses (and flats) built at public expense. Their rents were low, and in no case were they more than one quarter of the salary of the principal earner in the household. In most cases rents were well below that level.

After self-government in 1978, as we have noted already, the Commonwealth transferred some of its housing stock to the Territory, and the NTHC took over the administration of the staff housing scheme. NTHC continued to run it as a separate scheme quite distinct from its provision of rental housing for members of the general public. However, the Territory's affairs were now in the hands of an elected government responsible to the whole electorate, and privileged housing for government employees was bound to become an issue, particularly as the party in power espoused free enterprise principles. It was to be expected that, little by little, the gap would be reduced. As we have already seen, the Commonwealth government's market rent policy, expressed in the 1976 revision of the Housing Agreement, was also a factor reducing the rental advantage previously enjoyed by public tenants, including government employees. However, there were other privileges which also attracted attention, notably waiting times for allocation of housing. Government employees went on one waiting list and their applications were promptly dealt with. The general public went on another list, and their needs were met after a considerably longer wait.

In 1979, it was decided in principle that there should be only one waiting list and that this should be put into effect from 30 June 1981. This did not automatically mean the end of privileged access for government employees, who might still be allowed to jump the queue if their services were essential and they could not be hired unless housing were provided. However, it did mean that each government employee's application had to be weighed against the claims of others at the top of the waiting list, with urgent needs or long waiting times behind them.

Also involved in this change was an end to double standards in housing quality. Under the staff housing scheme,
housing for government employees was more spacious than general public housing. For example, staff couples without children were allowed to rent three bedroom houses, whereas general public applicants were allowed a two bedroom house, at most, for a childless couple or a single parent with one child. These differences no longer applied after 30 June 1981.

Next on the list of privileges to come under review was the single government employees' access to public rental housing. Single members of the general public, other than pensioners and single parents receiving supporting parents' allowances, were ineligible for Housing Commission rental accommodation. The Commonwealth-State Housing Agreements, and the Commonwealth Northern Territory agreement which conforms with the others, did not provide funds for housing for single applicants, though how long this would continue to be true was unclear, since the most recent revision of the Agreements, in 1984, specifies that allocation is to be without discrimination on grounds of race, sex, marital status, etc., in line with the equal opportunity and human rights philosophies of the current national government, shared in the main also by the opposition. The anomaly was, however, that until 14 August 1984 single government employees in the Northern Territory were eligible for public rental housing.

In August 1984, the NT government announced that this privilege would cease, and that single government employees will have to compete for rental accommodation on the open market. There are exceptions: for example, police have free accommodation provided as a term of their industrial award; single teachers and other single government employees in remote locations are provided with rental housing. Nevertheless, the loss of this privilege has been protested against most strongly, particularly by the NT Teachers Federation, and negotiations were still proceeding on this dispute in October 1984.

A part of the reason for the trouble in August and September 1984 was that the government's decision had to be made in a hurry. It was not intended to take effect until January 1985, but the Cabinet submission was leaked to the press. Once it had been publicised the government thought it had no option but to bring the decision into effect immediately, since it would have had an immediate effect on people's housing plans and on developers' decisions. So it went ahead. That caused an outcry from all those whose privileged interest rates were affected, or who were looking forward to obtaining such privileges.

Many of those who have an interest in the protest are relatively high income earners, and their skills, though
highly valuable, are no longer as scarce as they once were - teachers, for example, though certain subject specialists are still in short supply. The protest therefore, has to make its way against a general public perception that the complainants are fairly well off compared with some others in the community. An obvious way to broaden the base for any campaign against the decision of August 1984 is to seek access for all single applicants to public housing. Already, in New South Wales and South Australia the public housing authorities allow single applicants to be placed on their waiting lists, in line with anti-discrimination legislation in those states. Commonwealth legislation in 1984 (the Sex Discrimination Act) will, it is generally believed, soon have the effect of forcing a similar non-discriminatory approach in other states and Territories, since it may, depending on judicial decisions still to come, have the effect of overriding state laws.

Even if single applicants are made eligible for public housing there are questions of priority to be settled, and this becomes an administrative, discretionary matter. How does one, in good faith and conscience, weigh up the relative merit of claims when judging between families, including single-parent families, and single persons without dependents? A further edge is given to this difficult question by the fact that single government employees, particularly the teachers and office personnel, include a high proportion of women and the removal of their access to public-rental housing is interpreted as a reversion to sexist discrimination. That perception is confirmed by the pro-family rhetoric and beliefs of some of the adherents, supporters and even members of the governing party in the Northern Territory. The politics of the issue are obviously complicated, but a formula will be found, perhaps even a rule of thumb which makes no attempt to settle the philosophical issue of equity between family and non-family households - a formula such as that one in every ten tenancies allocated should go to a single applicant without dependents. Administrators are obviously more at ease when they can apply a simple rule which has been sanctioned by their political superiors.

An unexpected, pro-tenant initiative was announced in August 1984 by the then Minister for Housing and Local Government, Mrs N Padgham-Purich. Tenants in Housing Commission houses would in future be allowed to transfer to houses or flats which they prefer to the ones originally allocated to them. Previously the only transfers were transfers to purchase, or tenant transfers on account of increases in household size, as for example when a second child was born and the parent(s) applied for a three-bedroom house. The Minister's intention was that in the future tenants could shift to areas and dwellings that suited them
better than their first location. This could add greatly to tenants' satisfaction with life in Housing Commission housing, enabling for example shorter journeys to work, school or shopping, or proximity to friends or family members. Within the Housing Commission's staff there was an expectation both that there would be added work if substantial numbers of tenants began a game of musical chairs, and that there would be long-term advantages in having more contented clients. However, detailed regulations for eligibility to transfer were still being drafted in October 1984, and there was a strong possibility that the Minister's intention might be watered down in the process of implementation. There might have to be a long waiting period, for example.

In the main, the impact of both Territory and Commonwealth policies is to favour ownership over tenancy. This is not likely to change, but in spite of that, adjustments are possible within the rental policies and each such adjustment tends to favour one group or other, and very often marginally disadvantages someone else. It is not possible to satisfy everyone, but a policy move which dissatisfies a highly visible, militant minority such as single government employees is unlikely to last.
Chapter Three

SALES POLICY AND MORTGAGE INTEREST RATES

As already indicated, the Housing Commission has been directed to do its best to sell houses to its tenants, and since very favourable mortgage interest rates have been available to its tenants, especially those of them who are government employees, selling the houses should not have been difficult. So advantageous has it been to buy the Commission's houses, that it may well seem an achievement on the Commission's part to have kept a stock of rental housing sufficiently large to keep waiting times relatively short.

Purchasing is expensive in any city, and even in Darwin where subsidised mortgages are more widely available than elsewhere in Australia, there are inevitably many households who are unable to afford to buy. There are, of course, also households who prefer not to buy for a variety of other reasons, such as their intention to move on later, or because they are keeping a house-purchase going outside the Territory, or because they simply do not want the bother of being their own landlords.

Purchasing is expensive to begin with. Not only do you need a $5,000 deposit to qualify for a mortgage, but there are other expenses which mean that one usually cannot begin with less than $10,000, and one often needs a second mortgage. Why should anyone put themselves to this expense? If the reason is capital gain it is undoubtedly a strong attraction though there may be cheaper ways of getting it. With $2,000 one can enter the stock market. However people are uncertain of themselves and their competence to make safe investments in the stock market, whereas most consider themselves competent not only to choose a house that will keep its value, but also to add to its value by their own efforts. Home ownership is something of a cult in Australia. It is undoubtedly the most common way for Australians to acquire capital of their own, a form of saving, often involving hardship, which Australians from the 1940s onwards have adopted with enthusiasm, prompted in that direction by government policies of loan assistance and tax exemption (for discussion of the pro-ownership, anti-rental bias of government policies see Kemeny 1983).

The NT Home Purchase Assistance Scheme came into effect on 1 October 1979. It made home loans available to virtually anyone at 4 per cent mortgage interest initially, rising by half per cent annual increments. There was still the need for a deposit, initially $1,000, but raised to $5,000 in 1981, and this must have discouraged some. In the years
since the scheme has been in operation the proportion of owners to tenants in the Territory has risen very little. It is still about 30 per cent owners to 70 per cent tenants in the Territory, compared with the reverse proportion in the southern states, but to what extent it simply reflects a younger and more transient population is difficult to tell.

In order to encourage home ownership, the Territory government has tried to keep the price of developed house blocks low. At the same time, however, it has been necessary to allow a profit incentive for land development enterprises. The fact that prices for developed blocks have risen less than the cost of living between 1980 and 1984 is a result of a variety of factors. It may indicate both success in turning off a sufficient quantity to keep up with, or slightly ahead of demand. It may also indicate that profits have been kept in check, though not reduced below a level sufficient to attract land developers.

The price of an average block in a new suburb had increased by only 6 per cent between 1980 and 1984. This is partly because the latest group of suburbs to come on the market, the Palmerston suburbs, are farther away from Darwin than were the northern suburbs which were being released in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, other reasons were important also: more economical standards in engineering headworks; economical standards in land use; careful timing of the release of new land to avoid short-term shortages or gluts; speedy transformation of broad acres into fully serviced land ready for sale to owner-builders. This last factor is vital to the profitability of land-development enterprises. If there are long delays owing to poor decision-making by government authorities, land developers may be bankrupted. They cannot afford to have their capital tied up for long periods before sales. The bankruptcy of one of Darwin's leading contractors was a strong reminder of this risk in 1982. Speedy decision-making since then has contributed to the ability of developers to make profits without charging exorbitant mark-ups.

The government indirectly subsidises the private buyer of serviced land. It does this by undertaking to buy back developed blocks which the developers find difficultly in selling. Thus the price the developers receive for these less attractive blocks is supported - i.e. kept higher than the market would otherwise decree, and this in theory enables the developers to sell the more attractive blocks at a somewhat lower price than they would otherwise charge to cover losses on unattractive blocks. Private buyers buy the premium block. The Housing Commission is mainly interested in low and medium priced blocks though it buys a small share of the best land as well. What neither the Housing Commission nor the private buyer nor the speculative builder
wants may be bought by the Lands Department and held for future sale.

Direct Lands Department buy-back only applies to a few blocks – only 10 or 20 per cent over all at the most. There is a higher proportion bought back among the first blocks a developer turns off. This is to give the developer a cash flow and enough funds to go on with so that investment in land preparation will proceed rapidly.

On the whole, the conclusion is unavoidable that private home buyers are being encouraged and subsidised by the Housing Commission's practice of buying a reasonably high proportion of sites which would not be private buyers' first choices, and by the Lands Department's buy-back policies.

The prices of the best blocks are kept lower than they would otherwise be by the Housing Commission's frugality. The Housing Commission is looking for blocks at around the $17,000 mark, a little below or a little above; it seldom makes a bid for blocks for which the developer wants $20,000 or more. It is not quite true to say that the Housing Commission stays right out of the upper end of the market, for occasionally it is required to build 'executive homes' and will seek appropriate sites for them. However, private buyers with money to spend and an eye to capital gains can take their pick without much risk of the Housing Commission bidding against them.

From 15 August 1984 onwards, Northern Territory Public Servants were to have a less privileged access to housing than they previously had. Formerly, public servants below a certain level could get housing loans at 6.75 per cent interest, and those whose salaries were above that level got housing loans at 9.75 per cent interest. By government's decision of 14 August 1984, as we have already seen, this privilege was to be withdrawn. The rate of interest for public servants' housing loans was to rise, over a period of years, to the same rate (currently 11.5 per cent) as that for first home buyers under the concessional NT Home Purchase Assistance Scheme. The sudden announcement and the lack of consultation, plus the loss of a privilege, caused the Public Service Association to take industrial action. Work bans were applied in the Taxation Office and the Registrar General's Department, both of them well calculated to cause inconvenience to the public. The work bans lasted for three weeks, and were only ended when the government decided, on the advice of the Public Service Commissioner, to take disciplinary action against the officers concerned. That brought the stoppage to an end. In the course of negotiating a resumption of work it was agreed that a ceiling of 8 per cent interest would be conceded to the officers whose salaries were below a certain level. Compared with
home buyers seeking loans on the open market, and paying interest rates of 13 to 16 per cent, Northern Territory Public Servants are still well off, and in any case the increase from their present low interest rates will only be applied gradually: 0.25 per cent increase in the first year, and 0.5 per cent increase each year thereafter until the ceiling is reached, or five years to reach the new maximum. There is also a 'sunset' period so that current public servants who apply can qualify for privileged rates in the interim, until 31 December 1986. Employees recruited after 15 August 1984 are not eligible. Private sector lending institutions will now be solely involved in providing the mortgage money for government employees recruited after 15 August 1984. This is a further feature of the decision to bring the government employees' home purchase conditions into line with those available to the general public. The effect of this, from the Treasury's point of view, is to free $10 million of loan funds which were previously locked into the staff housing loan scheme. Under the previous form of the scheme it was mainly Housing Commission homes which were being bought by their government employee occupants, and all that was needed was a book entry and the setting up of an account into which the purchaser made his or her payments, instead of paying rent. From now on, newly recruited government employees who purchase homes will be dealing with banks, insurance companies, building societies, credit unions and the like.

In 1981 the transfer-to-purchase option was introduced. Previously a staff housing scheme tenant or general public tenant was allowed to buy only the house that had been allotted to him or her in the first place. Because, for staff, mortgage loan terms were extremely favourable, this meant that they had a choice of either cheap money to buy the house they were in, or expensive money to buy a house on the open market. The typical staff response was, of course, to buy the house they were in and add to it as their families grew or as rising incomes enabled them to afford extra space, swimming pools. The houses which the Housing Commission found least difficulty in selling were the elevated staff houses with three, or less often four bedrooms.

Under the transfer-to-purchase scheme, tenants could buy either the house they were in or else one of a limited number of other, similar houses which might be available from the Housing Commission. Such transfers, however, are only occasionally possible in the direction of better locations because houses in better locations are the very ones which are unlikely to fall vacant. Transfers to newly-built Housing Commission houses in 'raw' or more distant new suburbs could, however, be arranged, and this suited some tenants intending to use their option to purchase.
The transfer-to-purchase scheme was introduced to encourage tenants to buy. If they saw a good house either new or empty, or about to be vacated — usually an elevated NTPS house — they could apply to transfer to it and begin to purchase it right away. Their period in their previous house was credited to them as waiting time, so that they did not have to go back to the bottom of the waiting list in order to get into the new house. And since NTHC is allowed to sell only to its tenants, not to the general public (so as not to put it into direct, subsidised and discouraging competition with private builders) a transfer-to-purchase applicant was still regarded nominally and momentarily as a tenant in the new house, even though purchase payments began immediately.

Mortgage portability, introduced in 1984, is a scheme with considerable potential for changing the urban scene and the freedom of choice of home purchases. Typically, until 1984, a government employee who was buying the house assigned to him or her was 'land-locked'. The extremely favourable mortgage deal was available once, and for one specific house, normally the one originally allocated. The new mortgage portability option, however, has suddenly changed this predicament. It means that a lot of people who previously would not move because to do so would mean losing their privileged, low-interest-rate mortgage loans, are now free to move either to bigger, more expensive houses if their families or their incomes have become larger, or to smaller, but often more convenient and luxurious town-houses, if their families have grown up and moved away. There will be, quite quickly, many people looking for these sorts of housing.

Another consequence is that some of the intense capitalisation of housing sites in older suburbs will not necessarily be repeated in newer suburbs. When a household can afford a swimming pool or a rumpus room, for example, they may not need to crowd it into the block they own, but may look for another house with more space around it, or with the features they want already installed.

Mortgage portability can be used to build or to buy any house or unit available on the private market. It is available to shift from the NTHC house which a tenant is purchasing to another NTHC house. The scheme was developed as a means of stimulating private sector building activity. There are conditions attached. The person who seeks transfer must sell his/her own house and apply all of the equity to the new house. The NTHC mortgage cannot be larger than the previous one. Escalation of interest rates applies as soon as transfer occurs, even though the previous mortgage may have been at a fixed low interest rate. Can a person
sell their house to the NTHC, in order to make a shift? Generally speaking, no. Only in exceptional cases, in order to meet some sort of crisis, will NTHC buy back the house. Buying back is rare, partly because houses are often overcapitalised. Since government employees were formerly 'land-locked', i.e. compelled by the non-transferability of their very favourable mortgages to remain in the house they first began to purchase, they were inclined to add a lot of extras, such as swimming pools and extra rooms. This both gives Darwin's housing a polyglot appearance and produces houses that are difficult to sell.

The price at which an occupant can buy his/her house is set by the Valuer General (VG). VG prices are conservative. In the past, when house prices were rising fast, the VG's valuations were usually several months behind the rising market. But even now, when prices are relatively stable, VG valuations are still favourable to the purchaser largely because the VG bases the valuation on what the Housing Commission built in the first place, not on the enhanced value resulting from the occupant's improvements. For instance if the occupant has added a carport, that is not reflected in the VG's valuation, on the grounds that the occupant, after all, has paid for it himself/herself and should not have to pay for it again. However, a carport costing $600 may add, say $1,000 to the market value of a house, and other improvements likewise. These 'windfall' additions to value are not included in the VG's valuation. Neither are the environmental improvements which occur as a new suburb matures. The public appropriation of the benefits of a 'betterment factor', though an established principle in other jurisdictions, has not been adopted in the Northern Territory.

To conclude this brief discussion of policies concerning purchase of government-built houses, and purchase of private sector homes by government employees and the general public, it would be fair to say that the Northern Territory, in common with all other Australian jurisdictions but to an even more generous extent than the rest, goes as far as it can to assist the purchaser. There may be further forms of assistance yet to be tried, but there can be no doubt of the government's commitment to the idea of home ownership, to judge by the policy decisions of the recent past.
Chapter Four

SINGLE PEOPLE, AGED AND OTHER SPECIAL CATEGORIES

Government housing policy, both in the Territory and at the Commonwealth level, has been directed toward housing nuclear families in single family houses on suburban blocks of land. Single parent families also get consideration. Old age pensioners in need of housing assistance are the subject of special programs. Aboriginal people's requirements are given some attention. Limited provision is made to meet the special needs of persons suffering from certain forms of disability. Housing is provided for single, able bodied persons without dependents when they are government employees in remote locations, or are eligible for housing in a few remaining government-assisted shelter programs for homeless men, youths and women. Most single people are expected to find accommodation in the open market or with their families without recourse to government housing assistance.

In some parts of Australia such as Darwin there are above-average concentrations of young single people either employed, seeking employment, or receiving some form of welfare benefit. The work-force of Darwin probably includes more single people than that of any other city of comparable size in Australia. In the Territory as a whole transiency is the norm, yet in the making of housing policy an attitude persists which treats transiency as almost equivalent to vagrancy. 'Drifters' should be encouraged to settle down, marry, raise children and buy a house - so goes the prevailing prejudice. However, there have been a few departures from orthodoxy.

In 1978, when self-government began in the Northern Territory, the Commonwealth Accommodation and Catering Service (CACS) sought to transfer four hostels which it owned and operated in the Territory. Two of them are in Darwin, one at Parap called the Ross Smith Hostel, one at the Esplanade in Darwin's downtown, now called the Lameroo Lodge. The NT government wanted to sell these hostels, in which case they might have been redeveloped as flats, or offices, or demolished. In the meantime the CACS continued to operate them on an interim basis. Within the Housing Commission there was a view based on experience with the Darwin population and its housing needs, that hostel accommodation is essential. A Cabinet submission was prepared, proposing that the Territory government, through the Housing Commission, acquire these hostels and lease them to private enterprise operators. This was done in 1980. The two in Darwin are operated by a firm called TATAC, and they pay a
return to the Territory's revenue which represents interest on the purchase price from the Commonwealth. Costs of operation and maintenance of the hostels is fully covered. Unfortunately, from the point of view of fairness to TATAC, another hostel owned by the government, the former nurses' quarters at the old hospital site on Myilly Point, is leased to YY Enterprises, a joint venture of the YMCA and YWCA, on very favourable, subsidised terms. In other words, TATAC is required to make a profit, while its competitor, YY Enterprises uses government funds to undercut TATAC efforts. However, from a social point of view, housing for transients and others is provided at reasonable rates by all three of these hostels, and more such hostels would be needed to meet the high level of demand, especially in the dry season.

There is a chronic shortage of accommodation for single people coming to Darwin in search of work. The existing youth hostel allows nobody to stay longer than two weeks. There are shelters run by St Vincent de Paul Society and The Salvation Army, and these are full every night. The Coalition of Low Income Earners runs a hostel or boarding house which can accommodate 19 people, and which charges $30 per week, compared with $45 which is the usual charge at the bottom end of the commercial boarding-house, guest-house or lodge market. There is no caravan park or camping ground in the inner city area, and bus service to outlying areas such as Nightcliff or Tiwi is infrequent. There seems never to be enough cheap accommodation for single people. The standard of buildings could be lower than what is currently being provided, without discouraging demand. One disincentive to investors is that during the wet season transients leave the Top End. Hostel occupancy rates build up again in the dry season. Of course, it is in part a political question whether the community and the government would like to see this sort of demand encouraged or discouraged.

If attractive low-cost rental housing for single, transient people is known to be available, Darwin will attract them from other parts of the country. They are considered by some Darwin citizens to bring various social problems with them. The group of squatters who took over the old hospital site for a while in 1984 are an example of the sort of people who make it difficult to promote the cause of affordable low-income housing. At first this group offered to pay one third of their dole cheques towards the cost of electricity and so on. However, after a while their attitude hardened and they were unwilling to pay anything. The group of 25 would have had a combined dole income of $2,000 per week.

The Commonwealth State Housing Agreement of 1984 required that State Housing Commissions administer the allocation of housing without discrimination on grounds of
race, sex, age, marital status. However, it also allowed the State Commission to set their own priorities in allocating housing. The result was that although New South Wales and South Australia allowed young single people to apply for Commission housing and put their names on the waiting lists, other people generally got the houses.

The NT Housing Commission approved at its meeting on 10 October 1984 a new policy for housing single people. However, at the end of October this policy had still to be approved by the Minister and Cabinet. Cabinet was known to have reservations. In the background was strong pro-family feeling on the part of politically significant elements in the Territory.

Single people other than government employees, people in de facto relationships, or groups of single people wishing to share a house, even those with steady jobs and references from previous landlords, often find it difficult to get rental houses in Darwin, as elsewhere in Australia. Real estate agents and owners are suspicious of them. The bond money and rent-in-advance requirements make this sort of arrangement even more difficult for newly-arrived work-seekers on the dole. Darwin Institute of Technology students are also in difficulty. There is an Institute residence, but students are allowed only one year in the residence and after that must find their own accommodation. Many courses are for four years.

The shortage of housing for low income people is even more acute in the smaller and more remote settlements in the Northern Territory, and it is bad, as well, in Alice Springs, Katherine and Tennant Creek.

The prevailing prejudice against housing assistance for people in the categories just described seems to be based more on social preferences than on economic calculation. It is far from clear that recipients of the dole and other forms of welfare allowance are net dependents locally, or a non-contributing element in the local economy. The contribution of transient workers to the economy is clearly considerable, and the all-up cost of supporting them with community services of various kinds is probably lower by a wide margin than the costs for more permanently settled workers with dependent children. There are economic questions here which require further study, the outcome of which might be an offset to the prevailing social prejudice.

A circumstance which may hamper the development of housing assistance policies for low income single people is the fact that in Darwin, for example, there is at present no shortage of suitable rental accommodation for single people at a price. In other words, if a person arrives in the city
with a job already arranged, or with plenty of cash he or she can look up the classified advertisements in the local paper, pick and choose from dozens of available flats, and be housed within two days. Landlords who have an oversupply of such accommodation on their hands would no doubt be reluctant to see policies promoted by the Northern Territory government which would reduce in any way such demand as there is for what they have to offer. The fact that the lower end of their market is made up of desperate people paying very high proportions of their funds for accommodation is just one of the hard facts of life, if one accepts a 'dry' economic point of view which is strong in Northern Territory politics, quite apart from direct influence of landlords on members of the governing party.

While on the subject of facts of life, one of these is that single people find partners. Housing Commissions have gone through several stages in getting used to this. A single parent on low income and with dependent children qualifies for Commission housing. What then happens when this person finds a partner?

Relations with tenants used to be soured by snooping to see whether, for example, a man moves in with a single woman with a child or children, who qualifies for a Housing Commission house because of her children, and who receives rental rebate because of her low income, which may be only the supporting mother's pension. The Northern Territory Housing Commission has avoided putting itself in the position of snooper by having a sensible policy that a tenant is entitled to have a boarder, and in that case the rental rebate is reduced by $10 per week. If a non-dependent child lives with the tenant, the rebate is reduced by $5 per week. That these Housing Commission policies get tacit government support is a tribute to common sense pragmatism standing firm against countervailing ideology and interest group pressure. The entitlement to take a boarder applies to male as well as female tenants.

On the other hand, the Housing Commission has held the line against renting to single people other than single government employees, and its resistance has even extended to single people in groups who are willing to undertake a joint tenancy, or to nominate one of their number as head-tenant, with the others paying shares of the rent.

The unwillingness of the NTHC to provide for groups of single people results in some cases of hardship. When Pam O'Neill was member of the Legislative Assembly for Fannie Bay she had a household consisting of three women, two of them sisters, all unmarried, who had lived together as one household for a long time. They were not yet at the age to qualify for the pension. Their incomes were low. They
were, however, ineligible for a Commission house because they were single. If each of them had applied jointly with a man they could have had three houses. De facto relationships are acknowledged by the Housing Commission. But, as it happened, these three women had no intention of living in any other way than they did.

Given that Darwin's population includes a high proportion of single young people, and, that three and four bedroom houses are the policy-makers' preferred form of house construction, one would expect that share-house tenancy would be a natural and easy way to bring demand and supply together - but not in Housing Commission houses, or at least not with the Housing Commission's open consent.

Special housing for the aged is increasingly common, as urban family patterns change. In Darwin, as in other Australian cities, the Housing Commission has taken a lead in providing accommodation for pensioners, including those who are single, and whose incomes are low enough to qualify. Social workers generally advise housing authorities to avoid segregating the disabled and the aged from other groups in the community, and the Housing Commission is trying to follow this policy. For example, in Malak, a northern suburb of Darwin, where a small number of units for aged and disabled persons has been built close to shops and in the midst of a community of all ages, the Commission has been praised for not segregating these aged persons from others.

On the other hand, the Housing Commission is involved in a multiple-unit housing development near Mindil Beach for retirees, including some pensioners. It is an attractive development in a most attractive setting not far from the Botanic Gardens. The Housing Commission was considering introducing a variety of other sorts of accommodation in the area, in order to vary the mixture of people. However, when the pensioner residents were consulted, they did not want this change to take place. Clearly, one policy does not suit every client, and a variety of options needs to be provided. The Mindil Beach, Gardens Hill development is a special case, with a number of complications. Government money was spent on headworks in quantities appropriate to a prestige development, and there is no doubt that what the private developers have built is an up-market retirement village. The Housing Commission's pensioner accommodation unfortunately, instead of being intermingled at random throughout the development, is to be physically and visually segregated from the rest. It is concentrated at the front, at the lower edge of the site, the design of the units is different, and landscaping will be used to separate it from the rest of the development. One sees here an example of real estate dynamics, 'protection of property values' as it is called, which is familiar in all parts of the country,
though Housing Commissions usually try to resist it, some more successfully than others.

The same dynamics occur in relation to granny flats in R1 residential zones. Again, the prevailing view among social workers and those concerned with the health of the aged is that when it is possible for them to occupy self-contained premises on the property owned by younger family members, this can lead to a happier, healthier life for them and also to some help for the younger family in caring for children, the garden, security when away from home, and so on. On the other side of the argument, however, neighbouring households may fear an erosion of standards of amenity and decline in the value of their property. A granny flat becomes just a flat when granny is no more. In Darwin, granny flats are under consideration, but it is probably safe to predict that they will not occur on Housing Commission properties in R1 zones until well after they have become commonplace on private property in the inner city and inner suburban areas. The Housing Commission is in too vulnerable a position to be first in the field. On the other hand, the Planning Authority recently approved a zoning code amendment to the Darwin plan, allowing duplex redevelopment in R1 zones. This would be one way to accomplish somewhat the same result, though at costs which would be considerable because of the standards required.

Of all the Housing Commission's various roles, the least contested is its welfare housing landlord role, and yet in the Northern Territory as in other parts of Australia the efforts of the Housing Commission to fulfill this role in an imaginative and magnanimous way are forever being constrained by political pressures, community attitudes, or the Housing Commission's own prudent caution induced by past experience and by anticipation of censure if it becomes too generous. Turning losers into winners, though supported in ethical theory and religion, is seldom popular in a competitive society.
Chapter Five

LAND USE ISSUES

When people buy or rent housing what they pay for is a box of living space and a location. What the box is like, what it is made of or how it is divided up, whether it is cool enough, how big it is and so on, is of great concern to the occupants, and government policies and regulations have vital effects on all of these attributes of housing. But where the dwelling is, how it is placed in relation to its neighbours, what you see from its windows, and how far and by what means you go to work, shops, school or to the bright lights of town, or the beach, the bush or playing fields, all these aspects of location influence a person's judgement of whether a particular dwelling is a good place to live. Government decisions play a vital part in determining the location of housing, and location is, for many people, more important than the contents of the box.

In Darwin, the government's options are constrained by the landform, a peninsula with the original town at its tip and a hinterland that is flat and partly low-lying, swampy, a breeding ground for mosquitoes and biting midges, and subject to tidal storm surge. After Cyclone Tracy, there seemed to be a possibility of reconsidering the location of residential suburbs, but in the rush to get the city re-established those options were rejected. Existing plans for the future shape of the city were resumed and proceeded with.

The strategic decision to locate residential suburbs north of the airport was made in the 1950s and had become a fact by the 1960s. The decision that further development should be by way of satellite towns at considerable distances from the city centre was no doubt forming in the minds of certain influential decision-makers in Darwin and Canberra in the 1960s, and was to become a fait accompli when it was decided to go ahead with the city of Palmerston, 25 kilometres down the Stuart Highway from Darwin's city centre. The Darwin Regional Structure Plan issued by the NT Department of Lands in 1984 pointed to another future satellite town on the Middle Arm Peninsula. As the strategic Plan document explains:

The location of the new town (approximately 35 kilometres south of the Darwin CBD) is likely to provide some additional cost penalties. Public and (more particularly) private transport will probably be more expensive with the linear development recommended in this plan than if
Darwin were able to be more compact, but planning must often trade-off conflicting interests. The proposed new town is well located to be efficiently serviced with water and electricity and its drainage is relatively good. Furthermore, land constraints within the Darwin Region are such that there are few alternative locations for development of a new town.

There are very substantial headworks costs inherent in the establishment of a new town. The process to be followed is not one of a shift in development to the town by (say) the early 1990s. Rather, economic and market conditions will dictate the future development of Darwin, resulting in a steady infill of population in existing areas. The timing of the development of the new town will be determined by market forces, including the rate of population growth and availability of land rather than by the Structure Plan itself.

While flexibility is the theory, the experience with Palmerston suggests that once the commitment to a new town is made other policies must be bent to make a success of it and to justify the investment in headworks. When Palmerston was first proposed, people commenting on it were sceptical. The Cities Commission, in the Whitlam era, had proposed other ideas, mostly aimed at consolidating Darwin, reducing its spread and increasing residential density. Some of its suggestions depended on the Defence Department relinquishing some of its extensive holdings in the heart of the city and on its fringes, and the Cities Commission was no match for Defence when the time for decisions came: indeed after the overthrow of the Whitlam government in 1975 the Cities Commission's proposals, and those of its related Canberra planning agencies quickly lost all support.

In spite of the high initial cost of new headworks, there are strong market and political forces which make it easier to develop a new town than to consolidate an existing one.

It is cheaper to build single dwellings on newly developed land, recently converted from broad acres, rather than to fill in blank spaces in already developed areas, because the price of blocks for sale in older areas is higher than in new subdivisions. However, the real private costs of spreading Darwin out over a wide, sparsely settled area are not included in the calculation. For example, the cost of petrol, tyres and vehicle maintenance used in running back and forth to work, or to major shopping centres, is not adequately reflected in the low price of land in Palmerston. Nor is the wear and tear on main roads
between Palmerston and the city. These costs are paid for little by little over a long time, and are not paid for when the decision is made to create a satellite city, or by the agencies that make the decision. To them such costs are 'externalities'.

Obtaining government funds for headworks is a political exercise in which a successful organisation such as the Department of Lands excels. Once the funds have been secured, benefits flow in several directions. The Department's officers, and those of related agencies such as Transport and Works, are kept intensely busy, moving large sums of money and deploying large numbers of subordinate personnel. Contractors involved in construction are kept profitably employed. Subcontractors are happy. Above all, the development companies are kept busy, those of them that are successful in tendering for the right to prepare blocks of land for sale, with the roads, public open space, shopping centre and school sites, the drainage works and so on.

A large coalition of interests can be mustered behind a new town scheme. However, in the Palmerston case, because the land to be used was already Crown land, one of the obvious groups of potential beneficiaries were not among the supporters of such a policy, namely sitting owners of freehold broad acres. Melbourne's suburban development in the 1970s gives us examples of profits made quickly when such land changes hands. Darwin has, to the credit of those involved, not seen profit-making on anything like that scale. While certain privately-owned holdings would gain in value because of strategic location in relation to Palmerston, the fact is that even greater potential profits to sitting owners would have been available if an alternative policy of consolidating Darwin closer to the CBD had been followed.

People were sceptical about Palmerston because they thought it would be unattractive. It was a way off, down the track, in the bush, flat, with not much to see, nothing to do once you got there, and a dreadfully long way back to town if you wanted to visit friends or have an evening out, not to mention the hazards of the breathalizer on the long drive home to Palmerston again. But by late 1984 scepticism had been replaced by suprised recognition that the project, in its own terms, was becoming a success.

In October 1984 the initial impression made by Driver, the first of the eight Palmerston suburbs, where the Housing Commission had built most of the houses, was suprisingly pleasant for a new suburb. The trees, both those which had been planted along the roadways, and those which had been preserved within the allotments, are a redeeming feature.
Some of the occupants had made pleasant gardens in a short space of time. The Palmerston Development Authority does not plant or water the verges, and only a few of these had been planted with grass. The trees, however, are watered by drips which were installed before tree-planting took place. The houses are of various shapes, heights, sizes, colours and materials, so that there is no danger of monotony - if anything, almost too much of a mixture - but, certainly, no signs of bureaucratic dictation to the varied tastes of potential householders. Of course, it is the Housing Commission which has either specified the design or accepted it by buying it, so what is reflected in the street-scape in Driver is the Housing Commission's idea of the public's taste. The effect is more pleasing than critics had predicted. Criticism has shifted, and now raises questions about the cost of tree-planting and watering. However, criticism has become less vehement and is giving way to increasing acknowledgement of apparent success.

At first the Palmerston Development Authority (PDA) did not particularly want the Housing Commission to be a major house builder. The intention was that owner-builders would predominate, and that a high class of homes would be established. In the first few months, however, it became apparent both that owner-builders were likely to build fairly ordinary homes, kit homes or whatever, and that the Housing Commission was building a fairly diverse variety of homes, and mixing its styles in such a way that it was not giving a 'Housing Commission look' to the areas where it built. The Palmerston Development Authority became more enthusiastic and began to welcome the Housing Commission, to such an extent that, by October 1984, of the 2,000 people in Palmerston, most of them, almost all of them in fact, were Housing Commission tenants or were in process of buying their homes from the Housing Commission.

There have been complaints about poor workmanship, but only from a very small proportion of occupants of Housing Commission homes. Part of the publicity given to this question is probably due to the fact that the complainants included a person who was seeking election as the mayor of Palmerston.

The apparent success of Palmerston is perhaps mainly due to the fact that the first 2,000 or more people are there, and that certain neighbourhood amenities are seen to exist and to work. There are schools, shops, a tavern, and playgrounds galore. There are trees and pleasant if unspectacular views across parklands and a golf course. The decision was made to provide for storm water drainage by leaving wide, shallow run-off spaces where the shape of the land would require them to be placed, and these grassy, mowed open spaces are attractive to the eye and, one hopes,
safe. Perhaps the Palmerston Development Authority's biggest success was its planting of trees along the roads before the building blocks had been fully developed, and thus getting as much as two years of growth up before the land went on sale. Critics said the saplings would all be knocked over by bulldozers and trucks as work proceeded. The General Manager of the Authority reports that there has been only a 10 per cent loss of these plantings, and such small losses are not expensive to replace, even with advanced trees, which of course cost more than the tiny ones.

The fact that Palmerston was ever proposed was no doubt the result of a prior decision, deeply entrenched in planning policy not only in Darwin but in most of Australia, namely that urban building blocks should be of approximately 800 sq. metres. The alleged devotion of Australians to 'quarter acre blocks' is legendary. One wonders to what extent it is an expression of consumer preference and to what extent an example of 'cultural hegemony', or the capture of public taste by the interests which determine what is available. All of Darwin's suburbs have blocks which are 800 sq. metres or larger, most of them occupied by three bedroom bungalows. Blocks of flats, when they are built, generally have to conform in size and shape to this dominant urban landform; though here and there the planners have provided special precincts for multiple dwellings on less constraining sites.

As a piece of pure speculation, imagine what Darwin might have been like if the quarter acre block had never been the norm. One can picture it as a harbour-side city, closely settled, magnificently built with the town life and the street life of a city, not that of a dormitory suburb endlessly repeated.

However, very few if any of those involved in the policy-making process seem to think that Darwin buyers want blocks of anything less than 800 sq. metres. In fact in Darwin the prevailing view is that humid tropical conditions dictate larger, not smaller land allotments.

The Palmerston Development Authority says it is willing to look at 600 sq. metre blocks in R1 zones, but in practice it does not happen. When a developer puts land up for sale, purchasers show a distinct preference for larger blocks. Anything under 800 sq. metres will not be sold. One developer had blocks of less than 800 sq. metres unsold for a while, and had to alter the subdivision plan to increase lot sizes. The PDA now says that it, the Authority, has no objection to smaller lots, but the NT Housing Commission, which buys back unsold lots, will not consider lots smaller than the 800 sq. metres. This sets the minimum size because the
private purchaser is unlikely to accept a lot size smaller than the Housing Commission's minimum.

And one can understand why NTHC would be reluctant to be the first to accept 600 sq. metre blocks. These would be hard to sell to their occupants, would therefore remain part of the permanent rental stock and would acquire a social stigma from which Housing Commission tenants in general would suffer indefinitely, the very thing NTHC tries to overcome. Yet someone has to make the first move if medium density is to happen and more economical use is to be made of expensive headworks. In this respect the planners and developers responsible for Palmerston's suburban designs have a few minor innovations to their credit.

Palmerston's Town Plan is completely different from Darwin's. Permitted and prohibited land uses in each type of zone are few: most uses are by consent. This gives the Authority the power to deal with each application on its merits, and the result should be both more variety in what is built and a more economical use of land. The Palmerston plan allows narrower streets than would be allowed in Darwin. On the other hand, building set-backs are greater in Palmerston.

The planning process involves, as a first step, the preparation by the Authority of an outline plan for each suburb. On the outline plan, the Authority notes the number of persons who are to be housed in single houses, medium density and high density accommodation in each neighbourhood. The developers bid for the opportunity to develop a neighbourhood. They offer to pay a premium for land and the size of the premium offered will generally determine which bid is accepted. Once their offer has been accepted the developers prepare a detailed plan and submit it to the Authority. When this detailed plan has been approved, it governs what happens from then on. Developers are free to decide on the internal road plan and the provision of public open space, subject to approval by the Authority and to compliance with the requirement of the outline plan. Where the school goes has been determined on the outline plan, but whether the area has a park or a golf course, and what shape the lots will be, depends on what is proposed by the developer.

The developers, however, tend either to be cautious from the start or to be wary after having their unconventional ideas knocked back. Although the Palmerston Development Authority claims that it will accept economical house and land packages, including the notion of 600 sq. metre blocks, in fact no such developments have yet happened in R1 zones. This is because the developers whose proposals they accept are conservative and they calculate that the
market is for 800 sq. metre blocks, so that is what they propose. A scheme for 20 detached houses, some of which were sited on lot boundaries, was put up to the Palmerston Development Authority by a builder (Kern) and a firm of architects, Moor Linklater Perumal Pty Ltd, but this was turned down, or at least postponed. The Board of PDA was a new Board at the time, and this was an indication of their attitude, though it may change as community attitudes change.

Educational work would need to be done to persuade the public of the need for more intensive use of expensive government headworks. Only then (or perhaps not even then) would the public come to accept smaller blocks of land and 'merchant housing' or whole subdivisions planned together so that the siting of each house, its shape and size is determined in advance rather than left to the individual owner-builder. Projects of this kind have reached advanced stages of planning in other parts of Australia, but the majority have been abandoned or modified to conform with the quarter acre norm. Meanwhile, however, style-setting higher income households have been moving back into inner suburbs of major cities to gentrify and redevelop houses on tiny plots of land left behind by nineteenth century developers. This trend, together with the spread of town house and home unit developments, may presage a different norm for the twenty-first century.

As it happens, the developers who were successful in winning land development contracts at Palmerston two and three years earlier were unsuccessful in 1984, and a new lot of developers won the 1984 contracts. PDA and NTHC were having to work with developers who had no recent experience of Housing Commission preferences. On the other hand, the new contractors had some fresh ideas and this could be of benefit both to the Housing Commission and to the eventual residents in the new neighbourhoods.

Reduced lot sizes and zero lot lines would make possible terrace housing or town houses on individual titles. This would obviate the need for corporate bodies to manage the collective concerns of strata title holders in multiple unit dwellings. These are necessary when there is some substantial asset such as a swimming pool which is owned in common, but should not be necessary for the management of most medium density housing. It is planning requirements which have forced corporate arrangements on people in Australian cities such as Darwin. Two-thirds of the world's housing is built with party walls, but this form of housing has generally been looked down upon here. It is difficult to imagine it becoming highly popular in the short run in Darwin, where the prevailing belief is that terrace housing means hot, congested living and that the more space
you have around your dwelling the more comfortable you are. Whether that is indisputable, or just a reflection of the failure so far of architects and builders to develop party-wall houses that work in the tropics, or to copy them from other hot, humid cities remains a moot point.

Even if the terrace housing option should be ruled out, there are probably economical house and land packages which can be designed and which do suit Darwin's tropical climate. NTHC is interested in new patterns of subdivision for medium density housing which will allow all the ground-space to be individually-owned and will obviate the need for corporate bodies. The Housing Commission dislikes being a member of corporate bodies. When some parts of a town-house or flats development are not sold, and the Housing Commission remains part-owner, the other members of the body corporate tend to put pressure on the Housing Commission to supply the management within the body corporate, and put pressure on NTHC to pay for improvements, as it is assumed to have easy access to funds. The Commonwealth Department of Housing and Construction has recently been experimenting with More Affordable Housing villages in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney, in which these land use ideas have been incorporated. Zero setbacks can also be allowed, provided that the placement of buildings on all blocks is controlled. NTHC is interested in promoting the application of these ideas in the Territory as a way of making more economical use of urban land and headworks.

In the longer-established areas of Darwin medium and higher density living seems bound to happen, though it has to make its way against prejudices. Among the older generation of planners, policy-makers and influential citizens there is a conventional opinion that living in flats is somehow unAustralian. Pride is taken in the fact that Darwin was not planned on the basis of examples from other tropical cities. Comparisons are dismissed on one ground or another. If Hawaii has high-rise living that is because the population there can afford air-conditioning and does not object to it, whereas in Northern Australia, air-conditioning is, they contend, not necessary, and besides it is expensive, noisy and unhealthy. If beautiful Greek coastal and island towns are built along narrow, climbing streets and with several households in each building, closely ringed around a bay, beach or quay, that is fine for Greece, but not good enough for Australia. The fact that Greeks are the largest ethnic group in Darwin makes no difference in this context. The Greek contributions to multiple-unit housing in Darwin are referred to contemptuously as 'those Greek shoe boxes in Nightcliff', with no allowance made for the fact that the sites were laid out by Australian government planners in a form which virtually insured a shoe box design for any flats that could be built.
And when Australian government authorities tried their hand at designing high density accommodation for single persons and small households, what they produced was the Kurringal flats at Fannie Bay, which have been rather unfairly held up to scorn ever since, though in recent times the Housing Commission has upgraded them and landscaped them to the point where the criticisms are quite wide of the mark and the reality is as pleasant as could be hoped for, given that the buildings themselves were designed and built in the 1950s, are needlessly monotonous in form, and offer too little isolation from neighbours' noise. Kurringal makes up for many of its faults by providing some of the finest views in Darwin and easy access to the beach and shops.

Conservative planners in Darwin like to point out that flats, other than simple, one or two-storey flat buildings, have not 'taken off' in Australia. The occupancy and sales rates for high rise apartments are said to be low. There are two recent examples in the central business district of Darwin, one of which, Marrakai apartments, is said to be selling reasonably well but the other, Raffles Plaza apartments, is said to have been difficult to sell at a profit.

Other, less conservative planners are interested in the possibilities for well-designed medium density city living offered by habitat-style developments, where apartments are well separated visually and aurally. Other urban forms which attract the more adventurous include canal developments, one of which is under construction at Frances Bay, close to the city. Cluster housing developments have had a mixed reception. One of them, near Lee Point Road, failed to sell soon enough and its builder, who was at the time the President of the Master Builders' Association, went bankrupt. The houses were large and were built for a market which had emerged at the time but which other builders were able to serve more quickly.

Whatever may have been the mixture of failures and success in the past, the less conservative planners considered that redevelopment, closer settlement near the city centre, and town house developments in both new and older suburbs would be more common in the future. An important factor which would influence these trends would be the effect of raising the mortgage interest rates for government employees. Until 1984 those government employees who were Housing Commission tenants and who wished to purchase a home had the choice of either buying their own or another Housing Commission house at a very favourable mortgage interest rate or else going into the open market, choosing what they wanted and paying normal rates of interest for it. It is hardly surprising that most of them settled for the suburban three or four bedroom houses on quarter-acre blocks which were what the Housing Commission had to offer. This ex-
pressed merely their preference for cheap money, not necessarily their taste in housing. As the rise in government employee mortgage interest rates is gradually phased in, these home-buyers may well be induced to buy or build for themselves a more varied style of housing. The attractions of being close to the city and enjoying views and parks and gardens of the older inner city suburbs might then, in a higher proportion of cases, tilt the scales toward townhouses and other forms of medium density dwelling.

There are public as well as private costs to be faced as redevelopment and infill development increases population density in inner suburbs. Parking spaces are scarce. Overcrowding of streets by kerb-side night-time parking is the reason given for the rejection of applications for more medium density developments near Fannie Bay. At Stuart Park, another inner suburb where there appear to be good prospects for higher density, headworks, particularly sewer pipes, are said to be inadequate to support more population and would need to be replaced at high cost. Nevertheless, the cost of improving these needed facilities in inner suburbs would not be as great as the cost, properly computed, of building and living in a new city 35 kilometres down the track. One planner estimates that about 70,000 more people could be housed in the older areas of Darwin, fairly close to the central business district. Parts of the city which are likely to attract higher density residential development include Parap and Larrakeyah. As well, the canal-style residential blocks in Frances Bay could, if properly planned and zoned, accommodate a considerable population. The opening up of a third city down the Stuart Highway from Palmerston as envisaged in the Darwin Structure Plan ought to be postponed as long as possible, in the opinion of the less conservative planners. This would enable closer settlement within Darwin to take place, along with the development of Palmerston, and would, in their opinion, lead to a more interesting, lively city life. However, the land use patterns which have already been established, and the social and political preferences which support them, will make such developments difficult.
Chapter Six

COORDINATION AND LEADERSHIP

Coordination in government policy-making is not necessarily a good thing. Too much of it can be a recipe for dull, meaningless, static policies, the lowest common denominator of interdepartmental agreement. Yet, especially at the implementation stage, policy benefits from prior interdepartmental consultation, compromise and consensus. In the absence of a modicum of coordination, typical foul-ups happen: newly paved streets are ripped up to put in the sewer pipes; a new housing estate fills up with people but there is no way to transport them economically to work, school, shops or the bright lights.

In most parts of Australia, urban development in general, and housing policy in particular, give us examples of both kinds of failure, of too much and too little coordination. In Victoria, Jean Holmes (1980) finds, after studying the period of eighty years since federation that only in the late 1960s and 1970s was there a coherent State policy for urban development and even then it was baulked at the administrative level by the stubborn independence of multiple statutory authorities each with its own jurisdiction and interests to defend. In Sydney as Martin Painter (1981) has shown, there were again too many agencies and little coordination, though occasionally one strong special purpose authority would gain enough power to coerce or ignore others.

Sometimes the ascendancy of the agency would result in decisions for change; mostly it led to decisions for no change, which is also a policy of a sort, though not often a satisfactory one. Coordination for positive action is a rarity in the recent history of urban and housing policy-making in Australia.

Much has been written about the strength and success of the South Australian Housing Trust at various times since the 1950s. Certainly some things have gone right in South Australia in the development of city services, in land use management and in providing in some locations a balanced supply of public and private housing for sale and, for rent. And certainly the SA Housing Trust and the Ministers who gave it support deserve credit for part of this success. Other departments also share the credit. Needless to say, there have also been lapses and failures, confusion and competition among agencies and stalemate as a result. That Adelaide in particular, and a few of its suburbs and satellites, and a few of the country centres give an impression of being pleasant places to live and work is perhaps partly the result of successful policy, carried out in
a coordinated fashion, and partly the result of geographic
good fortune and small populations growing at not too rapid
rates.

In the early stages of interviewing departmental
officers and officers of statutory authorities in Darwin it
appeared that there were problems of coordination or the
lack of it in planning and carrying out housing policy
and urban land development. The impression given was that
consultation among the responsible officers of the
separate authorities and departments occurred later in the
process than it ought to, or did not occur at all. Developing
new suburbs or redeveloping established ones are
complex projects involving a need for consultation and
coordinated action by at least the road construction
authority, road traffic authority, public transport
authority, the Housing Commission, the Lands Department, the
providers of education, health services and community welfare
services, land development and building contractors,
providers of finance, local government and community groups,
to name just the obvious ones and in no particular order of
priority. If one of the government agencies is the
initiator, there is a need for prompt response from the
others. Delay can increase costs and risks for all
participants.

When agencies have power to act independently they may
negotiate with each other on a one-to-one basis, which takes
time, or in an inter-agency committee, which will usually
frustrate the participants, and may be incapable of taking a
final decision without referring matters back to the
agencies or up to the Cabinet. The whole process tends to
move at the pace of the slowest agency. As well, each tends
to avoid upsetting the others by avoiding plans which the
others would see as unconventional or threatening. Land use
patterns and housing designs are dominated by what is
familiar in the experience of most participants rather than
by landforms, the climate, the structure and mobility of the
population or other local conditions.

The emergence of one dominant authority is the usual
answer to these problems. Then at least there is the
possibility of a final answer to the dilemmas of
development, an end to delay, a definite point of view, a
predictable bias. Even so, the dominant agency will tend to
keep its authority only if it anticipates where strong
objections may come from, and it will therefore tend by
self-censorship to exercise its power in the direction of
blunt, unobjectionable policies with a minimum of
unfamiliarity about them. In a place such as Darwin, where
many of the decision-makers learned their professional and
vocational skills in southern Australian cities, there is an
almost irresistible tendency to repeat southern patterns.
It would take very strong leadership indeed if this outcome
were to be avoided. It is a paradox that in young communities, with new frontiers to conquer and the appearance of unfettered opportunity, caution takes charge and people seek the security of familiar solutions even though they may be inappropriate to the surroundings. Fortunately, moments of boldness do occur, but symptoms of its frequent absence also abound. They include conventional, derivative, off-the-shelf designs producing replicas of southern city suburban environments in which some of the problems of tropical living appear to be aggravated and many of its opportunities are missed; three and four bedroom bungalows on 800 sq. metre blocks, built for nuclear families but eventually occupied by mixed households sharing them but frustrated by the lack of separate accommodation at prices they can afford; multiple-dwelling townhouse and apartment developments showing no sign of sensitivity to the local environment; rental scales skewed downwards in favour of government employees but upwards against renters not in government employment (a policy now no longer in force but only gradually being phased out); a central business district which dies at night, and suburban shopping centres which are thronged for a few hours and empty for the rest of the week; a harbour which is mainly seen across an industrial wasteland and is not yet the focus of a maritime city in touch with its neighbours, sharing the South East Asian region's dynamic economic growth.

Inter-agency Coordination

As well, however, there are some signs that leadership and coordination have occurred at critical moments in the past. There is Palmerston, which although it may not be everyone's cup of tea has plenty of vigour about it and some very good features which could have happened only under an authority with power to plan and to get the co-operation and consent of other authorities. Another piece of 'soft' evidence, the kind that comes from hearsay rather than observation of tangible facts, is that the Lands Department, its permanent head and senior officers, are said by other active participants in the housing policy field to have taken the leading role in many major decisions and to have been the de facto coordinators of urban development within the Territory's administration. However, such leadership is very much a matter of personalities and changes at the top, both in the Lands Department and in other agencies, could remove some of the Department's power. Also the relative strength of Ministers affects the ability of a Department to exercise leadership within the administration. When Mr Everingham was at the helm as Chief Minister other Ministers were of less significance. It remains to be seen whether that pattern will persist. Nevertheless, up to the late months of 1984 there was no doubting the Lands Department's ascendancy. For example, in the manoeuvering within the
public service over the Industrial Development Corporation's ambition to control its own housing as a part of the incentive packages it could offer to industrial investors, the Lands Department was able to 'knock them off' and retain authority for itself and the Housing Commission, which for most purpose it regards as one of its vassals.

There is a Joint Planning Group, an interdepartmental Committee of senior officials which is meant to coordinate land development policies and their implementation, but a strongly coordinated approach is not likely to emerge from discussion in the Joint Planning Group. It depends on there being a dominant authority, led by a strong personality. The Lands Department has been in that position within the Joint Planning Group most of the time. In the future it may be difficult for it to remain in that position, in view of the increasing challenge from local government, backed by the government's proclaimed policy in favour of decentralisation and devolution of authority. What remains uncertain, however, is whether this policy is merely rhetoric. In the meanwhile, Lands Department leadership in planning is acknowledged by the other authorities which provide components of the land - services - housing package, the physical basis of the urban community. In the Joint Planning Group, for example, the chair is occupied by the Director of the Planning and Development Division of the Department of Lands, the other members of the Group being officers representing the NT Electricity Commission, Telecom, and the Roads and Water Divisions of the Department of Transport and Works.

Next to be considered as a possible source of coordination is the Northern Territory Planning Authority. By title, it seems to be the body to which one would look for a comprehensive overview of all the components which the government and private sector must provide to produce an urban community; but in practice its role is much narrower than its title suggests. It is concerned with approval of applications for permission to build, and must decide whether these applications are consistent with existing zoning and building regulations. It comes into the planning process at a relatively late stage, after basic decisions have been taken by other public authorities and by private developers. Its views, however, cast a shadow before them. Other participants to some extent govern their actions by anticipating what the Planning Authority will or will not approve.

The Northern Territory Planning Authority is, by statute, independent of the various departments and their Ministers, and its members take some pride in having crossed swords with the Lands Department from time to time. However, when it needs staff resources for research or statistical support the NTPA is dependent on Lands Department personnel. Its independence therefore relies
very much on the knowledge and clout which the Authority members themselves, and in particular the Chairman, can bring to the task.

The Chairman considers that NTPA should have its own small staff so that it can serve as a check on the Lands Department and other proposers of development schemes. Although a provision for it to have its own staff was included in the original bill, this clause was later deleted by an amendment. As well, the NTPA has no budget and is unable to retain private sector planning consultants.

The NTPA has different membership in each region. There are three members including the Chairman who are Territory appointees and who sit as members of all eight regional authorities. The rest of the members in each region are local government representatives chosen by the Territory government from a list of nominees proposed by the local government Council or Councils in the region.

The NTPA has no direct input into decisions which determine what land will be developed, where, when and for what purpose. Once these decisions have been made (and the Lands Department plays a dominant part in them) the NTPA deals with applications for development and decides whether they conform or not to zoning and planning requirements. However, in some cases where the zoning has been decided in advance by the Department, it turns out to have been impractical in the NTPA's opinion, and NTPA will decide to give permission at variance with the Department's plan. Thus NTPA manages sometimes to affect what happens on the ground, even though it has little say at the outset. Undoubtedly, however, NTPA's long-standing preferences for wide road allowances, large blocks in R1 zones, separate gardens for housing units, limited numbers of one bedroom flats in any flat development and the like, have exerted a conservative influence on housing development in the Territory, and in Darwin in particular. Whether that has been to the ultimate benefit of the city is a matter of opinion. NTPA would argue that its preferences have been beneficial and have been supported by the solid citizenry (by which is usually meant the non-transient, property-owning householders) of the Northern Territory. Nevertheless, since the NTPA's mode of intervention is, by statutory necessity, a responsive rather than an initiating one, it can delay development but cannot make it happen. As is often the case when many agencies act together, there are many who can veto but few who have the acknowledged authority to lead, and NTPA is not one of the latter.

The Palmerston Development Authority is at once the prime developer, the local government pro tem and the Planning Authority for its area. It can therefore coordinate some of the functions which in other areas are in
the hands of separate, single purpose authorities. The so-called 'core team' within the PDA's staff takes the lead.

The core team plans what is to be provided, when, where and how. It consults with the providing authorities. Only at intervals, such as once a month, does the 'extended team' meet. It includes representatives of the service providing authorities, but policy is not discussed at these meetings. Information is passed on and decisions are endorsed. If it happens that there is a disagreement or deadlock between the core team and one of the service providers, it is taken to the Authority (meaning the Chairman and members) for decision. Even the suggestion that this be done is usually enough to lead to a resolution of the difficulty at a lower level. It has seldom been necessary to refer a dispute to the Authority for decision. The existence of this referee insures that coordination does occur.

Within PDA, coordination and efficiency are assisted by the fact that the core team and the whole staff are small in numbers. The National Capital Development Commission in Canberra, by way of contrast, is much larger. Admittedly it has broader functions, but it is not currently providing as many allotments as Palmerston does, and it has about ten times the staff. A recent deputation from the ACT Assembly visited Palmerston and compared what it saw very favourably with NCDC's work.

The Palmerston Development Authority in 1984 was in the third year of its five year life. It is scheduled to disappear in 1986, turning its functions over to local government authorities which are already taking shape. There were, by late 1984, 2,000 residents: 50,000 are planned for, but the rate at which land is developed and released will depend on demand.

The effort of the Lands Department and the government as a whole has been to promote Palmerston's development as the next urban nucleus in the Darwin region. However, the preferences of home-seekers push the city outwards in other directions as well. Humpty Doo is a case in point.

It competes directly with Palmerston as a home site, being only another 18 kilometres away from the city centre. Lands Department planners would like to postpone or even discourage its development as an urban nucleus for at least the next fifteen years, but they have not quite been able to do so, in view of the pressures exerted by the market. Land owners wish to subdivide and sell. Buyers looking for home sites they can afford, in the bush but near enough to a village, bid for any blocks that come up for sale. The Lands Department has been forced to put its money into Humpty Doo's urban improvements, as the following items from the Department's 1982/83 Annual Report indicate:
Humpty Doo Village Centre - Stage 2 Capital works 1982/83 - $ 931,240

Humpty Doo:

New works approved
- trunk reticulated sewer 930,000
- complete roadworks 100,000

Thus, even the strongest authority among the numerous government agencies involved is sometimes unable to do more than merely respond to outside pressures.

The Northern Territory Housing Commission might perhaps have been considered the ideal agency to occupy the coordinator's position among the agencies involved in housing policy, but at the staff level at least the prevailing perception is that it has been a follower rather than a leader. It has responded to initiatives taken higher up in the bureaucratic 'pecking order'. Sometimes it has not even been told until after major decisions have been made elsewhere in the system, or so members of staff believe. Perhaps, however, they are not in the perfect position to judge; Commission members, especially the Chairman, may be party to discussions which they are not at liberty to disclose even to their senior staff. Nevertheless, it does seem probable that the NTHC has been seen, at top bureaucratic levels, primarily as a policy-implementing agency rather than as a policy initiator.

NTHC nevertheless can influence land development design. It is one of the organisations which is required to be given an opportunity to comment before a land development is approved. However, it sometimes is unable to, or fails to take advantage of this opportunity, perhaps because the developing authority (e.g. the Palmerston Development Authority) wants comments at a certain time, but the NTHC is not ready to give them at that time. NTHC may not realise what the difficulties are with a particular subdivision until after it has been approved. It is at the stage when the Housing Commission wants to buy the land and build on it that some problems of design become apparent.

A second way in which NTHC can influence land use design is through the direct purchase of blocks. Since NTHC buys some and rejects others, the private developer comes to realise that some sorts of blocks suit Housing Commission needs and others do not. For example, NTHC does not buy 'battle axe' blocks, blocks to which access is by a long right of way which the owner or occupier seldom maintains, leaving the Housing Commission no alternative but to maintain it. NTHC has a '19-metre circle' standard. If a 19-metre circle can be fitted onto a block, any NTHC house design can be fitted onto the block allowing for the required setbacks. Blocks onto which a 19-metre circle
cannot be fitted can still be used, but a special design will be needed. Rules of thumb, or operating standards such as these come to be known by other participants in the process and exert an influence on what is proposed. In this way even an agency which plays a secondary role in the policy process can virtually veto certain possible lines of development, by anticipation on the part of others as to what it will insist on. Such rules of thumb or operating standards then tend to become part of the common folklore of the bureaucracy, and often survive in the minds of officers of other agencies long after the originating agency has changed its mind about them. Coordination then requires a dramatic assault on the folklore and on the assumed knowledge of officers who are at the far ends of communication networks.

Housing design standards and approaches adopted by the Housing Commission are perceived by other observers to have improved greatly in recent years. For example a multiple unit development at Malak is cited as evidence of excellent current work being done by the Commission, or in many cases being commissioned by NTHC from independent architects. There are still frequent criticisms also. Sometimes these reflect only ill-informed frustration on the part of persons not dealing directly with the real issues of financial constraints and Commonwealth State Housing agreement limitations. For example, it is said that the houses which NTHC builds on the ground on concrete slabs are too hot; but where is the extra money to build elevated houses to come from? The private builder, selling on the open market, can sometimes produce a more pleasing result, but is the price comparable? It may well be higher, with extras paid for at the beginning rather than added slowly over time. Coordination of policy and synchronising of service provision among a large number of participating government agencies and private enterprises sometimes is impeded by prejudices based on ignorance, misinformation or misunderstanding of the mission an agency is called upon to fulfill. Public sector agencies often are aware of the scorn with which they are regarded by private enterprise ideologues, and the necessary cooperation between private and public enterprise may be difficult to achieve for this reason. Prejudices tend to break down when cooperating agencies and enterprises get to know each other's problems better, but the housing field, especially in the Northern Territory, is plagued by high turn-over of public sector participants. Prejudices reassert themselves when customary interaction is interrupted by the appearance of strangers. Frontier cities are like that.

Another source of frustration is that trust is placed in information from a source close at hand, and information from an outside source is sometimes distrusted. For example, in the planning of the Sanderson suburb it was important that there should be close cooperation between the
Department of Education and all the other participants so that an appropriate number of high school places would be provided. The Education Department's projections, and those of other participating agencies, were at odds with the information which was available to community members and observers. People who knew how many Grade 7 pupils there were in the local primary schools, and who were tuned in to the parents' views about transporting pupils to high schools at a distance, were strongly convinced that a high school needed to be built in Sanderson from the start, but this was resisted sternly at the official and political levels until, at the last moment, election-time politics intervened and a high school was hastily built. The unwillingness of officials to recognise that their forecasts were badly based, bearing in mind social realities, owed something to the fact that the issue was promoted at the party political level, and information from opposition sources was distrusted. Since then, a Population Projections Group has been formed; it is an interdepartmental committee of officials who, having assessed likely development projects, prepare a set of projections which serve as a common basis for government planning. Needless to say, these figures can still be wrong, but at least they will be consistent, and there is a good chance, too, that they will be closer to being right because the bias of gung-ho development-minded agencies may be offset by scepticism from agencies with less to gain from growth.

Territory/Local Government Relations

Not only are people and agencies territorial in their behaviour, defending the boundaries of their jurisdictions, but this behaviour is intensified when dealing with another level of government, be it the commonwealth or local government. Take the latter example first: the Darwin City Council, proud of its role in the community, is keen to assert its independence of the Territory government, though anxious also to cooperate in every way that would advance the interests of its citizens as the Council perceives those interests. Territory government departments sometimes find themselves at odds with the Council.

The Council operates in an environment dominated by the newness and vigour of the Northern Territory government and is in friction with Territory authorities at several points which are vital to the orderly development of appropriate housing in the city. For example, the city council has maintained for a long time its stand in favour of 800 sq. metre blocks with single dwellings on them in R1 residential zones, and against erosion of those standards. The interest being served here is that of established owners, supported by a perception or assumption that in the long term the best sort of community is promoted by these standards. While these views are mirrored in important areas of the Territory
administration, there are as well individuals and even agencies within the Territory administration who see things from a different perspective, namely that of the under-housed, disadvantaged groups in the community. Of course, neither the City Council nor its staff are monolithic in their attitudes; pluralistic influences are exerted within the civic government and the local political processes which support it; but the typical situation until very recent times has been one in which the Territory government puts on pressure for certain changes and the city council resists. Coordination is maintained, but not without difficulty.

The potential friction between Territory and City is illustrated by the question of property taxes and the rates the City is allowed to charge. The Territory government, in its Housing Commission manifestation, is one of the City's principal ratepayers. As the City's administrators see it, the Housing Commission is a 'good citizen', is easy to deal with as a major property owner, pays its taxes and does not put undue pressure on Council over the setting of rates. On the other hand, the NT government, perhaps reflecting the Housing Commission's interest in the northern suburbs, is reluctant to give the Council the power to charge differential rates or even a minimum rate. The Council is required, under the Local Government Act, to apply a uniform rate on Unimproved Capital Value. Naturally this means high rates per block close to and within the Central Business District, because blocks are very valuable there. One thousand dollars per block per annum would not be unusual in inner suburbs. In the northern suburbs, on the other hand, less than two hundred dollars per block would not be unusual. If a minimum rate of, say, two hundred and fifty dollars were to be charged, it could affect a large number of Housing Commission properties. In any case, for understandable political reasons, Members of the Legislative Assembly have been resistant to suggestions from the Darwin City Council that the basis of rating be changed. Nevertheless, City administrators hoped that a change in the Act might be put through in 1984 or 1985 in time for the 1985-86 financial year.

Relations with the Lands Department, its Planning Division, and the NT Town Planning Authority, on the other hand, are not what Council would like them to be. Council has no planning powers. Although there are four aldermen on the NTPA panel which deals with Darwin, they are appointed to it in their own right. Council is not empowered to instruct them. If they disagree with the views of Council's majority they are free to do as they please. Council nominates six aldermen, from whom the NT government selects four for appointment. The Council is seeking devolution of planning powers, but this is being resisted. The government's policy is to move toward devolution and toward increasing the power of local government, but self-government in the Territory is still fairly new, and the
transfer of power to local government may take quite a while.

Another area in which devolution is sought is public health. Council inspectors do not at present enforce laws concerning food, garbage and sanitation as local government inspectors elsewhere in Australia generally do. The Council would like to appoint a senior public health officer in anticipation of a transfer of power over public health.

A third area in which devolution is sought is road construction and maintenance. The NT Department of Transport and Works still looks after six main roads running through Darwin. Darwin sought transfer of this responsibility to its own roads and engineering staff, but discussions broke down in the early months of 1984. The Department maintained that some of the other, smaller local governments in the Territory were not yet ready to handle responsibility for major roads running through their area. Unless responsibility could be transferred to all local governments, the Department was not in favour of transferring it to any of them, though it was not opposed to devolution 'in principle'. The result is that at present maintenance crews from both authorities, the Department and the Council, travel over each other's roads but do not stop to repair a fault that is the other's responsibility, and they may not even report such faults if they notice them. However, there is fairly good cooperation at officer level, even though Council has no representation in the Department's road maintenance planning processes.

In urban land development matters, there have been a few sensitive issues in the relations between the Council and the NT government. For example, the Myilly Point Development project, a multi-million dollar complex of hotels and villas associated with the reorganized Mindil Beach Casino, was all planned and announced before consultation at a formal level took place between the Council and the government authorities handling the matter. This is perhaps understandable. The government would naturally want to keep the project secret until it was ready to make the announcement. Nevertheless, the project, if it goes ahead, will have an enormous impact on Council's activities and services; consultation will have to be intense to make up for the lack of it at an earlier stage.

In connection with the Trade Development Zone proposal, Darwin City Council wants to have the city's boundaries extended to include the land where the Trade Development Zone is to be located. This land is between the city's present boundaries and Palmerston. The NT government recently conducted a study of the Darwin rural area with a view to deciding what sort of local government it should have. Many of the people living in the country south and east of Darwin would rather not have any local government at all, and thus
avoid paying rates. This is holding up the proposal to incorporate some sort of rural municipality. If there is no rural municipality capable of servicing the Trade Development Zone, then the remaining options would be to leave it in an unincorporated no-man's land, incorporate it as a separate entity on its own, add it to Darwin or add it to Palmerston. Darwin has already put forward its claim, but no decision had yet been made in late 1984.

In spite of the fact that there are several unresolved issues on which the City Council and various government authorities disagree, relations between the city and the Territory are generally good, and such friction as occurs is no more than one would expect, a normal part of intergovernmental relations. From the examples given it will be apparent that a shift is under way from an earlier phase when the Territory led and the City sometimes reluctantly followed, to a new phase in which the City has ideas and projects of its own, and administrative officers ready and willing to take on new responsibilities. The implications of this for future housing policy may be quite profound; however, at the stage reached by late 1984 it was still, on the whole, correct to regard the Territory government and its agencies as the leaders and the probable source of coordinating initiatives if these were to succeed at all. What will be interesting to watch will be the capacity of some Councils to control those of their members who are appointed to the various regional panels of the Northern Territory Planning Authority. Since they have the numbers on these panels, a united stand by local councillors and a dogged assertion of NTPA's authority to veto a development by refusing planning permission could lead to a different balance of power from that of recent years when the Lands Department has been dominant.

Local governments, which have majorities of members on the various panels of the Town Planning Authority, generally want large lot sizes, wide road allowances and the like. The Lands Department points out that the government is already subsidising the cost of developed land, and that these preferences on the part of Council members inevitably cost money which someone else has to find, not local governments. If Councils insist on very low density requirements, the government could threaten to withdraw the subsidy, in order to bring home to them the cost of what they are doing. In effect they are trying to impose their wishes at government expense or at the expense of home buyers.

Nevertheless it is government policy to encourage devolution in planning and to give the local councils greater authority. It will be a struggle for the Lands Department to exercise a countervailing influence in future. It will depend on personalities.
Looking next at the interaction between the governments of the Territory and the Commonwealth we find many points at which housing policy can be jeopardised by a failure of co-ordination, but also examples of energetic leadership. Of the latter, the outstanding instance must be the work of the Darwin Reconstruction Commission (DRC) between early 1975 and the completion of its mission in 1977. The DRC did not do the whole job of reconstruction on its own; on the contrary, it was responsible for a minority of the restored and new dwellings in that period; but it undoubtedly gave an urgency to the project which set the pace for the others, and it had undoubted ascendency in the administrative politics of reconstruction because it had funds and the ear of the Commonwealth government, in spite of the occasional sparks flying between General Stretton, its director, and most of the authorities involved in Canberra.

Intransigence on the part of Commonwealth authorities would be well illustrated by the Defence Department's firm grip on the land it holds in Darwin. Other authorities, both within the Commonwealth family of agencies (e.g. the Cities Commission) and in the Territory's administration, would have liked to prise Larrakeyah out of Defence's grip, or the airport, or the sites of its communication facilities to the north of Palmerston, or the navy's signals site in Winnellie. In 1984 there were apparently quite hopeful negotiations in progress for the transfer of land at the end of Bombing Road from the Commonwealth to the Territory, with a view to its development for housing and other civilian purposes, a sign that the Defence Department is not immovable; but this was an exceptional case. In general, Defence has held on to its own, knowing that there is budget resistance to buying new land for defence purposes, so that the Department has slim chances of replacing any land that it gives up.

Despite this intransigence, Defence has been a cooperative and helpful ally of the Territory government on several issues, and has contributed its share to at least some of the physical infrastructure and social development of Darwin. But for its interest in the airport, and in meteorological and other defence related services for the Top End, Darwin and the Northern Territory as a whole would have been less well served than they have been. The high quality of armed services housing at the RAAF base for example, though it may cause some envy, nevertheless sets a standard for the rest of the community to aspire to. City services are notably better in these areas than in nearby civilian streets. Garbage collection, for example, happens at an ungodly hour in Narrows Road but at a civilised hour when people are already awake on Bellara Street next to it but inside the RAAF lines. This reflects perhaps the armed services' ability to lobby city hall in their own interest,
or perhaps the willing cooperation of city hall with a useful and helpful group of residents. The Housing Commission also cooperates with the armed services. If a service person retires and decides to stay in Darwin, he and his family (or she and her family, if that is the case) can apply to the Housing Commission for housing when they have to leave their services accommodation, and will be placed at or near the top of the list, with all their time as residents in Darwin credited to them as waiting time for the allocation of housing, on the ground that their service to the community entitles them to this consideration - a policy which could well be defended, but for which it would be difficult to find parallels in the civilian community.

Perhaps the most sensitive and vital of the Territory's interactions with Commonwealth authorities are with the Treasury and the Department of Finance. The Memorandum of Understanding which is the basis of the Territory's finances is a strong charter of entitlement for the Territory, and as long as there is political support for it the Treasury and Finance are held at bay. However, there is undoubtedly an awareness in these Departments in Canberra that in some respects the Territory does quite well out of the financing formulae it has negotiated. For example the NT Electricity Commission is subsidised at the rate of $60 million per year. On a per capita basis, this is a big contribution to power costs and permits a level of usage which otherwise the population could never afford. When cost-cutting exercises are in vogue in Canberra, subsidies of that sort become painfully conspicuous.

Another sensitive topic is the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement. The Northern Territory government in 1983-84 was concerned that the Commonwealth intended, in revising the Commonwealth - State Housing Agreement, to put the funding on a per capita basis. In January 1984, the NT government got Dr Judy Yates, a housing economist from Sydney, to do a study which was later presented to the Housing Ministers' Conference, to show how funding on a needs basis would produce a bigger allocation to the Northern Territory. The NT persuaded the Ministers at the Conference to undertake a needs-based study - a housing finance needs study - and this was to be done by the Grants Commission as soon as it has finished the Relativities study which is due to be completed in 1984-85. The NT Housing Commission put its research resources at Dr Yates's disposal and prepared much of the statistical information on which her study was based. The Commission produces a computer print-out showing state-by-state comparisons of such things as average cost of buildings completed, housing authority lending per capita, beneficiaries per capita of state population, and a number of other indicators which, when evaluated, interpreted and weighted, would be the foundation of a formula for needs-based allocation of Commonwealth housing funds, if the Ministers can be persuaded to adopt
this principle. However, since there will be losers as well as winners, adoption is not a certainty despite the preponderance of Labor governments in 1985 and the ALP's general sympathy with needs-based funding. In 1983-84 the Commonwealth was providing approximately $30 million for housing in the Northern Territory, including Aboriginal housing. On a per capita basis, this is more generous than the allocations to the states.
Chapter Seven

WINNERS AND LOSERS

In studying public policies an inevitable focus of interest is 'who gets what, when, how'. Policy-making is not a zero sum game in which one group's gains are necessarily at the expense of others. But neither is it a game in which everyone wins, or everyone shares equally in the benefits and costs. The most successful, long-lasting combinations of policies are ones from which the benefits are widely and fairly evenly distributed; or else, if the spread of benefits and costs is uneven, that unevenness corresponds with what is considered right, proper and legitimate according to the prevailing values in the community. How did the various groups involved in Darwin's housing policy see the scoreboard as it stood in 1984?

 Neither the Northern Territory government nor the Commonwealth government would have considered themselves winners on the housing front. The Northern Territory government, though proud of its accomplishment was fearful of losing some of the funding on which its housing policy had depended up to that point. Unions concerned with the interests of teachers and public servants were giving the government a bad time over housing. The opposition, though not a threat, kept needling the government over the high ratio of tenants to owners and the lack of adequate provision for needy groups. As for the Commonwealth government, it was trying to reduce its deficit and was making threatening noises about the relatively high per capita level of financial support from Commonwealth funds for Northern Territory residents. A particular target of Commonwealth attack was the electricity subsidy, though whether there would be biting as well as barking remained uncertain. The fact that the Northern Territory House of Representatives seat was won by Mr Everingham at the November 1984 national election might well explain why there was an open season for pot-shots at the Territory by Labor Ministers in Canberra.

 Darwin City Council appeared to be on a winning roll. Not all of its hopes were being realised in 1984, but its prospects for further gains seemed bright. The high cost of spreading the city outwards would lead to an inevitable increase in values of inner city and inner suburban property, especially any vacant serviced building site or blocks suitable for redevelopment. Pressure would be put on the Territory government to assist the city with necessary upgrading of headworks and services to enable infill development to take place. The City Council would fall naturally into the role of mobiliser for such pressures, and would look good to its client groups every time a gain was made.
Up to 1984, one group of clear winners were the public servants of the Territory, for whom both tenancy and acquisition of a home were on favourable terms. However, the palmy days were apparently coming to an end. They were still a relatively privileged group compared with others, but the loss of privileges previously enjoyed had given them an unpleasant taste of what it feels like to be on the losing end. Commonwealth public servants and personnel of the armed services were probably better off in terms of housing than any other group, though within that relatively privileged group there was a considerable gap between the levels of comfort available at the top of the range and those available at the bottom.

The poor ye have always with you, and in Darwin it is no fun to be poor - perhaps less fun than in most other parts of Australia because of the high cost of necessities, the difficulties of raising the price of escape, and the mood of depression which some residents say sets in just before the rainy season. Housing for low-income, disadvantaged groups is scarce and expensive, and while housing policies in the Territory are formed in part to help the needy, there are also limits to the charitable impulse, set by the probability that where housing is available the itinerant poor will congregate. The other constraint on charity is, of course, the perception on the part of established property owners that the value of their investment and the amenity of their surroundings will be better preserved if the poor are kept at a distance: in this respect, Darwin is like the rest of the world.

Among the winners, from Cyclone Tracy to 1984, were those small builders, real estate developers, investors and speculators who put their money into housing in Darwin, particularly into blocks of flats. They took risks, and many of them worked very long hours under difficult conditions, but by and large they were rewarded with big returns, mainly in the form of tax free capital gains. Also rewarded in the same manner were the home-buyers who got in early enough and at a protected price level. Late comers may not be so lucky. Darwin has a history of dramatic booms and equally pronounced recessions.

Winners in a different sense have been the makers of housing policy and the administrators who have carried it out. They can see tangible results for their efforts. There are frustrations, of course, in every field of public sector administration. However, Darwin has grown remarkably, and these people took a leading part in making it happen. Careers have thrived, and although the work has been challenging and difficult, when there is a shortage of expertise and people have to extend themselves to their limits and beyond, the rewards in terms of job satisfaction must have been substantial. Offsetting this gain would be, in the minds of many, a sense of regret at chances missed
and bold initiatives not taken. Darwin is not as good as it could have been. It remains to be seen whether it can become an attractive tropical city which will win the admiration of the world in the way that Sydney harbour does.

The losers, though they do not think of themselves in that way, include in my opinion the suburban homebodies, male and female, who live on their quarter-acre blocks, hop in their cars to go to the shops, watch their children drift away, see glamour in television and think that life in a Darwin three-bedroom house is just about as good as anyone should hope for. It is a good life by comparison with what others have. It is relatively safe, wholesome, possibly even affluent. To make it more exciting, to stimulate the suburban inhabitants to a sense of civic pride and an insistence on excellence is a task for statecraft in the decades to come. Housing policy could be the place to start.

However, that assessment is a subjective one. It probably does not reflect the predominant values of Darwin's political culture. As far as one can tell, the policies being pursued in 1984 were a valid reflection of the attitudes and preferences of the majority of the community. There were challenges to the mixture and to the distribution of the prizes, but such challenges came mainly from marginal individuals and groups - from social workers, from a few unconventional professionals, from individuals within the public service, or from persons associated with the opposition. Such groups and individuals have a long way to go before prevailing attitudes are likely to change.
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