Dispersal, Autonomy and Scale in Indigenous Community Governance: Some reflections on recent Northern Territory experience.

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Introduction

When the Northern Territory was granted self-government in 1978, one of the first pieces of legislation to be passed by the new Legislative Assembly was a Local Government Act. The Territory at that time had formal local governments in its four major urban centres, but none elsewhere. Part XX of the new Act provided for a form of local government, called community government, which was intended for small urban settlements and outlying areas, including Aboriginal communities. Community government was to be optional for communities to take and it was intended to be more flexible than municipal local government.

In this seminar, I want to begin by reflecting on some work that was done on community government here at the North Australia Research Unit in the late 1980s by Canadian, Jackie Wolfe and in the early 1990s by Tim Rowse. I then want to move on to more contemporary developments surrounding local government in Indigenous communities in the latter days of the long-standing Country Liberal Party (CLP) government and in the two and a bit year reign of the current Martin Labor government. My aim, if this is indeed possible, is to be both critical and supportive of recent Northern Territory government attempts to reform local government structures and processes for Indigenous communities. Recent reform efforts have raised the possibility of the introduction of somewhat larger, more regionalised local government arrangements than have emerged over the last twenty five years. Some of these reform efforts have already come to fruition. In 2001, a single Tiwi Islands local government replaced three pre-existing local

councils and in 2003, the Nyirranggulung regional grouping of councils has been established to the east of Katherine and the Thamarrur community government has been established replacing the Kardu Numida council in the Wadeye region. To mention these instances of newly emerging more regionalised local government structures is, however, to foreshadow the end of the paper and the contemporary situation. Whereas I want to begin with a little bit more policy history and a review of past literature.

Community government, dispersed governance, and autonomy

In 1989, Jackie Wolfe wrote a very good NARU monograph, entitled 'That Community Government Mob', about the introduction of local government to small Northern Territory communities. Wolfe documented the introduction of the community government provisions of the Northern Territory Local Government Act first in 1978 and then in slightly amended form as part VIII of the Act in 1985/86. Although Wolfe's detailed case studies were of open mixed population towns, she was also interested in the use being made of community government in discrete Aboriginal communities. Hence the relevance of her work to Indigenous community governance.

Wolfe noted the CLP government's line that community government was not to be imposed on communities, but rather was an opportunity which people living in unincorporated localities outside the Northern Territory's major urban areas with incorporated local government might or might not take up. She also noted the legislation's flexibility in terms of what functions and powers community government councils could take on and also in terms of their boundaries and electoral systems. The Australian Labor Party (ALP), she noted, had in Opposition, endorsed the community government provisions of the local government legislation whenever they came before the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly, seeing them as potentially enhancing moves towards community self-management that were already underway and as giving local governing bodies 'legal status and recognised authority' (Wolfe 1989: 38).

Wolfe saw the Northern Territory government's implementation of the community government provisions of the Local Government Act as being divided into two phases: a laissez-faire phase from 1978 to 1985 and a more active promotional phase from 1985 to 1988. During the first eight –year phase, just four Aboriginal communities had taken up the community government option, while during the second four-year phase, nine

communities had, including three or four more mixed population towns (Wolfe 1989: 87). Neither this early laissez-faire period, nor the ALP Opposition's support for the CLP's legislation, however, saved the community government provisions of the Northern Territory Local Government Act from becoming quite controversial during the 1980s. This was because the Commonwealth-created Aboriginal land councils saw the community government provisions, when applied on Aboriginal land, as potentially in conflict with their responsibilities to traditional owners under the Commonwealth's Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act; as they potentially were. Indeed on one reading of the situation, the community government provisions of the Local Government Act were an attempt by the Northern Territory government to subvert the Commonwealth-imposed Aboriginal land rights regime (Mowbray 1986). Wolfe, I should add, did not subscribe to this view and saw herself as offering a somewhat less partisan, but also less promotional view of community government than any of the Australian players directly involved. She wanted to look at the legislation and its implementation on its merits in comparison with other local government systems elsewhere, but still quite critically (Wolfe 1989: xv).

As it turned out, Wolfe had both complimentary and critical things to say about the community government provisions. For example she noted that the adoption process had 'more detailed requirements for community consultation than is the case in most local government legislation' and that a 'careful, slow adoption process' over an extended period of time was 'a strength of the legislation and its implementation' (Wolfe 1989: 46-47). However, she also noted that it was not always easy to ascertain who exactly should be party to the consultation and what it meant for a majority of residents to be in favour of a proposed scheme. In no community, she noted, had 'any attempt been made to identify the full roll of residents and to conduct a poll or referendum on community government' in pursuit of this idea of majority support. Instead, bias had been introduced in favour of 'existing interests' through 'protracted discussions… with members of existing councils or associations (Wolfe 1989: 48). In addition Wolfe argued that it was 'vital to the long term success of community governance' that schemes have regard to the 'needs of minorities', as well as majorities (Wolfe 1989:49).

On boundaries and electoral systems, Wolfe noted the variety of approaches that had been adopted both by mixed towns and by Aboriginal communities. Although 'efficiency' considerations pointed to the inclusion of small

outstations with larger Aboriginal communities, this could she noted 'run counter to the wishes and interests of outstation residents' who often wished 'to remove themselves from a central settlement, its lifestyle and its authority' (Wolfe 1989: 55). Residency requirements for both voting and standing for office ranged, in the schemes adopted, from three months to five years and in some Aboriginal communities voting rights were also accorded to non-resident traditional owners. Some electoral systems operated 'at-large', over the whole area of the community government scheme, while others divided their constituency into sub-groups, either geographically in wards or, in a number of the Aboriginal community schemes, into clan or language groups. The variety of arrangements was, in many ways quite astounding, and Wolfe was generally supportive of this, though in the case of the Yugul Mangi scheme which had adopted a 'no-vote', language-group-based electoral system Wolfe was somewhat sceptical, if not outrightly critical. The formal language of the Yugul Mangi scheme stated that:

> The method of election of a language group shall be effected by agreement between the persons eligible to participate in the election as to the persons they wish to be represented on the council (Yugul Mangi Community Government Scheme 1988: 8 quoted in Wolfe 1989: 66)

Wolfe's comments on this provision, and on the Yugul Mangi scheme more generally, were as follows.

> The above clause can be interpreted as a recognition both by the community and by Territory officials responsible for implementing community government that formal elections are not the way Aboriginal people identify leaders….Given the opportunity for flexibility afforded by the community government electoral provisions, a community has found a way to avoid elections.
>
> On the other hand, the Yugul Mangi scheme may also be regarded as extraordinarily complex, and probably unworkable. It covers a huge area, including large and tiny blocks of land, central communities, outstations and pastoral excisions…; has representation by language groups; and has a large council, small executive and nominated representatives…. The history of the communities covered by the Yugul Mangi scheme gives cause for concern over the

> appropriateness of establishing community government at all. The outstations arose out of many people's mistrust of the Ngukurr community council…. Outstation people vigourously opposed the control of Ngukurr council, because of what they regarded as inequitable distribution of funding and resources… Community government places a new formal political and administrative body over the disparate pieces (Wolfe 1989: 66).

In light of Yugul Mangi's subsequent history, these were prescient comments. To be fair, however, Wolfe was not just being critical of Yugul Mangi's language-group-based, no-vote electoral system, but rather of the whole idea of putting together a disparate congerie of partly rivalrous Indigenous localities into one Indigenous community government scheme. This was perhaps a consequence, or symptom, of the Northern Territory government's more promotional approach to community government after 1985 and clearly Wolfe didn't think it was going to work in the Yugul Mangi case.[i]

On the functions that community government councils might undertake, Wolfe noted that when the Northern Territory government began to actively encourage communities to adopt community government from 1985:

> it was assumed that all functions presently being carried out in the communities by existing councils and community agencies such as housing associations, pastoral companies, store associations and social clubs, would come under the aegis of the new community government council (Wolfe 1989: 69).

The reasons for this assumption on the part of the Northern Territory government were, as Wolfe characterised them, to do with 'efficiency':

> All funding for community facilities and endeavours is funnelled through council. There is one contact and one decision point. Ideally council can coordinate delivery of services. Councils can begin forward planning of service improvements. Equipment can be shared, not duplicated. On the human services side, council can begin to establish priorities, and encourage co-operation between related services such as adult education and training, health, hygiene and nutrition. If necessary related services can be overseen by committees of council, along the lines of conventional local government

> elsewhere. In terms of the efficiency model of service delivery this makes sense (Wolfe 1989: 69-70).

This was a very orderly, managerial view of what community governance involved and in the next turn in her argument Wolfe provided a much needed, more realistic political analysis. What was not adequately recognised in this managerial, efficiency model, Wolfe argued, was:

> the power of existing organisations and their relationship to the community council. Each has a role in the distribution of status, prestige and power and in the allocation of scarce resources within the community. Positions not only on council but also on the boards and committees of associations afford individuals status and the opportunity to exercise some power, both as individuals and on behalf of clan, language or other groups. People who hold these positions are unwilling to have them subsumed under the authority of a community government council. A community government council will tend to concentrate power, prestige and access to valuable assets such as money, jobs, transportation and trips. Furthermore, sub-groups such as clans, have often gained responsibility for a specific functional area, such as housing or rubbish collection, and are reluctant to lose their power base… The dispersed governance typical of many NT Aboriginal communities may not be the most efficient structure for delivery of services. But communities may find it more effective, at least for a while, to let the associations continue, rather than lose the support of influential individuals and clans, and further undermine cooperation in the interests of coordination (Wolfe 1989: 70).

This more realistic political analysis pointed to the attractiveness to many Aboriginal people of a dispersed governance model in their communities and it noted that, in practice, by the 1980s this is what had already emerged in the Northern Territory. The fact that many Aboriginal communities did not have community government councils by the time of Wolfe's study did not mean that they did not have community governance structures and processes. Other organisations such as progress associations, housing associations, sports and social clubs and more general community resource agencies had been incorporated under other pieces of legislation in previous years in order to receive public funds and deliver certain services. Indeed in an early chapter in Wolfe's monograph, the director of NARU during the 1980s, Peter Loveday documented Commonwealth government

efforts to promote local government councils in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities from the 1950s to the 1970s (Loveday 1989). So the field of Indigenous community governance in the Northern Territory was by no means a tabula rasa when the Community Government provisions of the Local Government Act came along in the late 1970s.

Wolfe argued that this historically-developed, rather dispersed model of Indigenous community governance may be hard to change and, perhaps in the short term at least, not worthwhile changing in the name of efficiency. I think this is Wolfe's most important contribution to community government debates of the late 1980s and one which would-be reformers of Northern Territory local government for Aboriginal communities, even today, need to take seriously to heart. Together with Wolfe's comments, noted earlier about the difficulties of pushing together partly rivalrous locations such as outstations, pastoral excisions and central communities in cases like Yugul Mangi, this was a fairly cogent defence of the highly localised and highly dispersed system of Indigenous community governance which had emerged in the Northern Territory by the 1980s. This is not to say that I don't think this system has problems, which I will come to soon. But rather, that it is important to understand the social and political forces among Aboriginal people which have produced this dispersed pattern of Indigenous community governance in the Northern Territory and the degree of difficulty, or resistance, that might be encountered in trying to change that pattern.

For the moment I wish to turn briefly to the other piece of NARU research which I said I would refer to at the outset, Tim Rowse's 'Remote Possibilities' published in 1992. Rowse's work is much more general than Wolfe's and it only devotes two chapters of six to the community government debate in the Northern Territory. But I think it usefully reinforces and extends Wolfe's 1989 work.

Rowse noted that Wolfe was, in her work, responding to:

> one of the most common and seductive assumptions in the discussion of Aboriginal self-government: that community power is, or should be made to be, a unified centralised sovereignty (Rowse 1992: 89).

Rowse noted that Wolfe identified an 'alternative model for us to consider', that of 'dispersed governance', and that this model draws on 'already

practiced traditions of service delivery' in which 'a series of resource agencies … negotiate cooperation with one another when the need arises' but against a background of each being 'secure in their autonomy' (Rowse 1992: 89-90). Rowse's most important contribution to the community government debate of was, to my mind, to link this dispersed pattern of community governance to the larger theoretical idea of autonomy. Hence my title for this paper.

Wolfe had made relatively little use of the idea of autonomy in her analysis of the introduction of community government schemes. To the extent that she had used the idea, it had been when referring to the constrained autonomy of community governments in relation to the Northern Territory tier of government. The 'upper tier', as Wolfe referred to it, retained significant oversight powers, including the 'ultimate power' of 'dissolution' and also imposed quite stringent requirements for financial accountability. Together with the community government's rather weak revenue raising capabilities, this meant, for Wolfe, that community governments had 'little meaningful autonomy'. They were not in a position 'to set and implement their own priorities' and were:

> self managing only in so far as they… administer the programs, primarily for physical services and physical infrastructure development, that the Territory wishes to devolve' (Wolfe 1989: 84-85).

Rowse took up the idea of autonomy in an importantly different way. He had included in his more wide-ranging work a review of anthropological, or ethnographic accounts of the Aboriginal domain and their relationship to ideas of self-determination. In the context of the community government debate and the dispersed governance model, he concluded that:

> If there is one lesson that must be drawn from an anthropological consideration of Aborigines' emerging instruments of self-determination, it is that 'autonomy' refers not only to Aborigines' relationships with non-Aboriginal society, but, just as important, it refers to their relationships with one another' (Rowse 1992: 90).

There was, in Rowse's view, emerging from the ethnographic literature, a common recognition of a drive towards highly localised, even individualised, autonomy as a major 'feature of the Aboriginal domain'.

This feature was, in Rowse's view, in danger of being overlooked and 'trivialised in an administrative ideology' which presumed 'unification of local sovereignty to be the best or only basis of technical efficiency in service delivery and financial accounting' (Rowse 1992: 90). Here was a strong, much more theoretically- and ethnographically-informed defense of the dispersed governance model than Wolfe's, based on the value placed on autonomy within the Aboriginal domain. This was Rowse's significant contribution to the debate and it suggested that moving beyond the dispersed governance model of Indigenous community governance might be even harder for Northern Territory local government reformers than Wolfe had suggested. Dispersed governance in Aboriginal communities was not just something which had happened as the result of a particular history of Commonwealth and Northern Territory policies, but was deeply embedded in and reflective of the value placed on autonomy within the Aboriginal domain.

Enough said, at this stage of the paper, about the dispersed governance model and autonomy, and about the work of Wolfe and Rowse. I want now, under the heading of scale and the potential for regionalisation, to take the discussion of Indigenous community governance in the Northern Territory in a somewhat different and more contemporary direction and to be somewhat more positive about the need and potential for local government reform in relation to Aboriginal communities.

Scale and the potential for regionalisation

By the mid 1990s, the Northern Territory government recognised about 70 local governing bodies within its jurisdiction, about half of which were incorporated under the community government provisions of the Local Government Act. The other half were either municipal councils in urban areas or, in Aboriginal communities, so-called 'association councils'. This latter term meant that the councils were recognised for funding purposes as local governing bodies but were still incorporated under some other legislation than the Northern Territory Local Government Act, such as the Northern Territory Associations Incorporation Act or the Commonwealth Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act. Community government was no longer a new initiative and the work of the Northern Territory government relating to it had obviously become more about the ongoing running of community governments than about their establishment. Clearly during the 1990s, community governments, and association councils, in Aboriginal communities were not always running smoothly and the Northern Territory

government began to think about different ways in which councils could be organised, or structured, in order that they might run better. One idea that the Northern Territory government focused on in this attempt was that of scale.

In February 1999, the CLP government's Minster for Local Government, Lorraine Braham, launched a local government reform agenda in which it was argued that the 62 local governing bodies recognised by the Northern Territory government in 'rural and remote areas' were too small to attract 'sufficient numbers of qualified, competent and ethical staff' or to 'generate the revenue necessary to support the delivery of minimum services or to sustain an administration that allows for the achievement of any economies of scale'. Some Northern Territory local councils were servicing populations as small as 300 people, whereas, the Minister argued:

> councils with a population of less than 2,000 people encounter greater difficulties in maintaining adequate levels of administration and service delivery over the longer-term than those with larger populations (Braham 1999: 3-4).

In support of these arguments about scale, Minister Braham went on to cite the example of Victoria, which had recently reduced its number of local governments from 210 to 78. This, one would have to say, was a somewhat inappropriate argument of convenience, since Victorian local governments were, even before the change, servicing populations well in excess of 2,000. However, Minister Braham was onto something about the ability of small organisations to sustain administration and staff on a long term basis, which does need to be further explored.

The incoming Territory Labor government in 2001 also picked up on the issue of scale. Minister Ah Kit in a statement to the Legislative Assembly in March 2002 argued that it was difficult to find a fully 'functional' Aboriginal community anywhere in the Northern Territory and that outcomes from highly localised service delivery arrangements were not as good as they should be. In May 2003, the Minister announced a *Building Stronger Regions Strategy,* a key part of which was the encouragement of Regional Authorities under the Local Government Act. In addressing the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory about this initiative, Minister Ah Kit stated:

> Unfortunately, in many parts of the Territory the services that are being delivered are not achieving the outcomes that are required.
>
> The concept of Regional Authorities that we propose is straight forward. They will be established pursuant to the power provided under the *Northern Territory (Self-Government) Act 1978* that gives Parliament the power to make laws in relation to local government. The constitutions of Regional Authorities will give them the power to govern, and make by-laws for the area that they cover.
>
> We are not inventing a new tier of government, but we are creating the capacity for councils to voluntarily come together for improved service delivery (Ah Kit 2003: 13)

Elsewhere in this address to the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory, Minister Ah Kit reflected on tendencies towards regionalism within Aboriginal society, in much the same way as Sarah Holcombe did in her seminar here two days ago. Ah Kit stated:

> There is a completely false view that Aboriginal communities, from outstations and pastoral excisions, to larger communities and townships – through indeed to inhabitants of towns and cities – exist in splendid isolation from each other.
>
> It is a view based on colonialist notions encouraged by the days of the mission, the settlement and the pastoral property. It is an idea designed to divide Aboriginal people from our lands, our languages and our ceremonial connections.
>
> It is an ideology that deliberately denied the fact that Aboriginal people of what is now known as the Northern Territory have always worked together - socially, culturally and economically - as a series of overlapping and interconnected regions (Ah Kit 2003: 6).

The Minister then went on to give some examples of Indigenous regionalism, which again like Sarah Holcombe's two days ago, focussed on ritual, or ceremony, as an Indigenous socio-political phenomenon taking place on a quite large geographic scale. Minister Ah Kit writes:

> Across the Territory, the "finish up" of major ceremonies involve hundreds – at times thousands – of participants, from many clan and language groups, drawn from communities scattered across thousands of square kilometres. These ceremonies are not the exclusive possession of individual, discrete communities – they are shared across regions, they are the domain of owners and custodians linked in ways that have nothing to do with mere domicile.
>
> Indeed, the idea that a ceremony is the exclusive possession of a particular community is both bizarre and offensive. Major ceremonies express themselves socially and politically – indeed economically – as regional forms of governance and communal relationships.
>
> So the idea of looking at the Northern Territory as a series of regions – both overlapping and interconnected – for service delivery is not borne of bureaucratic convenience or ministerial faddishness on my part. It is based on an understanding of the reality of the Northern Territory's population – which is remarkably decentralised and dispersed on the basis of traditional affiliation to lands (Ah Kit 2003: 7).

This identification of Indigenous tendencies towards regionalism and socio-political activities undertaken on a quite large geographic scale is an important contribution to the contemporary debate on Indigenous community governance in the Northern Territory which Minister Ah Kit has perhaps been able to make all the more forcefully because of his own Indigenous identity. However, local government is an inter-cultural exercise and it is also important to pay attention to arguments emanating from the non-Indigenous side of the partnership. CLP Minister Braham was, I think, onto something important from this non-Indigenous side, back in 1999, when she spoke of the difficulty of attracting to Aboriginal community governments 'sufficient numbers of qualified, competent and ethical staff'. I take this to be a reference primarily to managerial staff, such as council clerks, who are predominantly still, though with some notable exceptions, of non-Indigenous or extra-community origins.

Small organisations, it seems to me, do face particular problems in relation to the recruitment, retention and development of managerial staff. In the case of many current local governments in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities, they are in fact likely to have only one or two such staff,

primarily the council clerk. An enormous amount of responsibility for the administrative and broader well-being of these organisations can be focussed on this one person. Also an enormous amount of community pressure can be focussed on this one person over the allocation of resources, such as jobs, vehicles and buildings, including houses, to particular community projects and to particular individuals within the community. These tasks are undertaken by these isolated managers without peer support and unsupervised by more senior managerial staff. The only form of oversight is from the council and from funding and regulatory bodies, such as in the past the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), now Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSIS) and the Office of Local Government within the Northern Territory Department of Community Development, Sport and Cultural Affairs. This is a very lonely managerial existence in which I prefer to think of people not so much as being unethical or incompetent at the start of the task, but rather of them becoming somewhat jaded and dissatisfied during the course of the task. In these small organisations with only one or two managerial staff, there is no real way of relieving pressure on staff, even by giving them leave or by moving them to another location. And there is no real career path ahead identified for the managerial staff, or a plan for succession within the organisation when the time comes that they will move on. This is a recipe for managerial disaster. It is highly likely that over time tensions will develop within the community over the allocation of resources and that these will be seen, in personal terms, as reflecting on the manager and his or her relations with particular people on the council or in the wider community. It is also highly likely that, in the face of these sorts of tensions, the manager will, at some point in time leave the organisation and the community without succession having being fully put in place and hence with virtually no passing on of corporate knowledge. The administration of these small Aboriginal local governments may at this point in the cycle fall into complete disarray, before the whole rather inadequate cycle of isolated managerialism starts once again.

This idea of a cycle of isolated managerialism seems to me to give greater substance and definition to the somewhat imprecise idea that there are problems of scale in small Indigenous local governments in the Northern Territory in the area of staffing. It directs our attention away from the Indigenous aspects of community government reform efforts to, instead some predominantly non-Indigenous concerns surrounding extra-community managerial staffing. The idea raises issues and questions for Northern

Territory local government reform such as the following. How can predominantly non-Indigenous managers drawn from outside Indigenous communities be given the support they need to be effective operators within an Indigenous community context on a sustainable ongoing basis? How can they be given adequate more senior managerial supervision and opportunities for relief and career development? These are big issues and questions, but they are in sense also more precise issues for local government reform to grapple with than sometimes somewhat vague ideas about regionalised service delivery. Good sustainable systems for the recruitment, retention and development of good managerial staff are crucial, perhaps a pre-requisite, to sustainable service delivery of any kind on any geographic scale. Managerial staffing issues demand the attention of Northern Territory local government reformers as much as service delivery issues.

I would argue that there are ways in which the regional reform agenda in Northern Territory local government could be quite innovatively brought to bare on this crucial issue of sustainable managerial staffing. This could be done through the development of regionalised teams of managerial staff who support and relieve each other within regional groupings of communities and provide each other with ideas and opportunities for career development. I also think there is potential for small Indigenous local governments to develop ongoing staff exchange and mentoring relationships with larger municipal local governments, not just in the Northern Territory but all over Australia. This could apply to general and technical staff, as well as managerial staff and could be as much about locally-recruited Indigenous people expanding their employment experiences outside the community as about bringing local government managers, or technical staff from elsewhere into the community for short term support, relief or secondments.

Local government in Indigenous communities is not, after all, so totally different from local government elsewhere in Australia that skills acquired and issues dealt with by staff, and indeed councilors, in one context are not also relevant in another. There is a long tradition of involvement in physical infrastructure services in southern Australian urban local government and also a long tradition of ‘parochialism and particularism’ in decision masking (Painter 1974). There is even a current debate within southern Australian southern urban local government about moving back towards smaller local councils, as opposed to the dominant idea of recent years of moving towards larger local councils (Allen 2003, Dollery 2003). The Northern Territory

local government system is indeed unique in Australia in being so caught up in issues of Indigenous community governance, but it is not so unique as to have nothing to gain from links and comparisons with Australian local government elsewhere.

Conclusion

I will conclude by returning to one of Jackie Wolfe's comments about community government made in 1989. There was an 'assumption', she argued, 'implicit in the community government model… that if proper structures are developed, other important matters will correspondingly fall into place' (Wolfe 1989: xvi). Wolfe clearly didn't believe this assumption, and neither do I. Eighteen months ago I wrote a paper for a conference on good governance in Indigenous communities and regions which was subtitled 'more dispersed than unified, as much process as structure' and I stand by those ideas today (Sanders 2002). I still believe that a degree of dispersal of power is a good thing in governance systems and I still believe that ongoing processes of council policy development, administration and staffing are as, if not more crucial to good governance as initial structures. Structures, such as electoral systems, boundaries and lists of functions, are at one level quite alluring and easy to focus on. But they are only the beginning of the Indigenous community governance story, a means to an end. Sustainable ongoing processes of community management and decision-making within those structures are the ultimate end or challenge. And these are much harder to grapple with. If there is a danger in the current regional reform agenda for Northern Territory local government in Aboriginal communities, it is that the creation of regional authorities becomes a new form of 'structuralism': that if we get the regional structures right everything else will follow. This is as naïve an assumption now as it was during the first round of community government formations back in the 1980s. There are, as we have seen, forces towards both localism and regionalism operating within Northern Territory Indigenous society and community governance structures alone will not manage or resolve the tensions between these forces. More thought needs to be given by local government reformers to processes for managing these tensions between localism and regionalism on an ongoing basis within Indigenous community governance, almost irrespective of structures. This is, of course, a hard ask.

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[i] Yugul Mangi Community Government was established in May 1988