

## Frederick Watson Fellowship paper

### **Darwin – no place like home: A history of Australia’s northern capital in the 1950s through a study of housing<sup>1</sup>**

*Public lecture for the National Archives of Australia, presented in Canberra*

*by Dr Mickey Dewar*

*28 October 2008*

When the war ended, Darwin was a town where much of the housing had been destroyed, either as a result of nearly 20 months of Japanese bombing raids or because of the military occupation of the town after the evacuation of all civilians. Like the rest of the Northern Territory, Darwin was administered and governed by the Commonwealth. There was not even any local government: the town council had voluntarily dissolved itself in 1937.

For most of its life, Darwin has been regarded as a multicultural, multiracial town. It has also been a town with a high population turnover. People have always come to Darwin as Australia’s last frontier – to assume another identity, to escape, to hide, to make money.

In the postwar period, and as soon as civilians were permitted to return, people poured back into the town. Some were returning to their lives after the experiences of the war, some had seen military service in Darwin during the war and returned, others came in a spirit of adventure seeking work or a new life away from the cities or bush of the south.

In this period Darwin was governed and administered by the Commonwealth. In 1945, the postwar Labor Government assented to the Darwin Lands Acquisition Act and assumed control and ownership of all land within a 10-mile radius of the bombed post office. In a stroke, the Commonwealth became the official owner and landlord of the entire town.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This lecture is only part of my research completed through the 2007 Frederick Watson Fellowship. A manuscript of the same name comprising the full research is currently under consideration for publication by Charles Darwin University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Welke and Helen J Wilson, *Darwin Central Area Heritage Study*, Report to the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory through the National Trust of Australia (Northern Territory), Darwin, 1993, p. xvi. 10 miles = 16 kilometres.

In addition to the absence of local government, in the 1950s the majority of the members of the Northern Territory Legislative Council were appointed, not elected, and the Northern Territory member in the House of Representatives did not have the right to vote.

So the people who came to Darwin in the postwar period were, for the most part, homeless, landless and disenfranchised. The story of how they found shelter and how they saw themselves, of the town that grew from the camps and hovels they squatted in as tenants, and of the political institutions and lobby groups that formed as a result, is the subject of my research.

This research could not have been undertaken without the support and assistance afforded by the 2007 National Archives of Australia Frederick Watson Fellowship. I am extremely grateful to the National Archives for its very great support, both financially and through access to material.

\* \* \*

In the postwar period, Australia suffered housing shortages across the country. A Commonwealth Housing Commission report released in August 1944 found that there was a shortage of 300,000 dwellings and recommended that the government take an active role in providing housing. The Chifley Labor Government's policy response was to initiate the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement, and the first was signed with six states in 1945.<sup>3</sup> Within the decade the national picture was more positive and home ownership had increased from just above 50 per cent at the beginning of the 1950s to around 70 per cent at the end of the decade.<sup>4</sup> J Yates has observed: 'A significant contribution to the expansion of home ownership came from houses built under the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement of the time.'<sup>5</sup> The Northern Territory, as a territory rather than a state, was not eligible for inclusion within the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement.<sup>6</sup>

In 1947, Darwin had a population of about 2500 people. By 1957, this had risen to about 10,000.<sup>7</sup> A census of 1951 showed that out of a total of Darwin's

---

<sup>3</sup> Greg McIntosh and Janet Phillips, 'The Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement', Parliament of Australia Parliamentary Library, E-Brief issued online 29 November 2001 <<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/sp/statehouseagree.htm>> accessed 7 October 2008.

<sup>4</sup> J Yates, *Affordability and Access to Home Ownership: Past, Present and Future? National Research Venture 3: Housing Affordability for Lower Income Australians*, Research Report no. 10, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Sydney Research Centre, Sydney, November 2007, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Yates, *Affordability and Access to Home Ownership*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> The Northern Territory was not included within the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement until 1981 and the Australian Capital Territory until 1989. McIntosh and Phillips, 'The Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement'.

<sup>7</sup> In 1947, Darwin town was comprised of 2538 people but, including people resident in the old military sites outside the immediate town area, the population was 3252. During the war, Aboriginal people were removed from the town and taken to Berrimah Camp. They were not

1032 housing units, 419 consisted of huts and shacks.<sup>8</sup> The Northern Territory Administration recognised the urgency for better housing but, unlike elsewhere, the private sector was not interested. The responsibility for the postwar reconstruction of the town rested squarely with the Commonwealth.<sup>9</sup>

Darwin was considered a real public service town; the 'Canberra of the north', it was sometimes derisively called. There was a feeling that policy for Darwin people was made by Canberra bureaucrats with little understanding of the town: 'southern wonders ... You know, up here for a couple of days and out again and knew all about it.'<sup>10</sup>

The legacy of the war was not all destruction. There was an improvement in transport and communications, most notably the construction of the Stuart Highway connecting Darwin to Alice Springs. A water supply had been created at Manton Dam. Sewerage and electricity services had been connected to some of the military camps.

---

permitted to return to Bagot Aboriginal Reserve until 1951: T Bauman, *Aboriginal Darwin: A Guide to Exploring Important Sites of the Past and Present*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2006, p. 131. By 1952 the number of people in Darwin had risen to 7836, representing an increase of some 240 per cent. In the Annual Report of 1952–53, the Administrator of the Northern Territory, Frank Wise, reported Darwin's population as 8214, but the Australian Year Book gives the figure as a little lower, 8071 for 1954. By 1955 Darwin was recorded as having 8330 residents. At 30 June 1957, Darwin's population reached 9395. This figure does not include Aboriginal people. Using the Gazette with the 1957 Schedule to the NT Welfare Ordinance 1953–55 listings under 'Darwin District' and excluding those listed under 'East Arm' or 'Sub-Districts' such as Jimbat and Goodparla, 494 names, including a number of Larrakia names, are given. This number approximately corresponds with the population figures given for Bagot Aboriginal Reserve the previous year of around 500, although archival sources also note that this could increase seasonally. This suggests that the Darwin population in 1957 would be close to 10,000 people. But clearly people were coming and going all the time; by 1958 the non-Aboriginal population had declined slightly to 8066. The following year, it had risen again to 8600 and by June 1960 had reached 9000 people. These figures suggest a stable population increase with minor fluctuations but it is likely that there was a high level of transience. Contemporary accounts describe the difficulty of filling positions and of the great rates of arrivals and departures in Darwin. Between 1948 and 1955, for example, the Public Service Association of the Territory in Darwin reported a total of 1511 new employees. There were probably much larger numbers of people both arriving and leaving the town than the relatively smooth population increase suggests, which would have created a situation of much greater social instability than is apparent in the data. What is clear from the figures though is that Darwin started with a population of a little over 3000 people in 1947 and finished the decade with a population three times that number. *Year Book Australia* 1951, 1954, 1955, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, taken from Australian Bureau of Statistics <www.abs.gov.au> accessed 15 September 2008; Northern Territory Annual Report 1952–53, p. 12, National Archives of Australia (NAA): F136, X5/5.

<sup>8</sup> BG Braithwaite, Acting Housing and Messing Officer, to the Acting Government Secretary, 3 October 1951, NAA: F1, 1951/1012.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of housing policy in the Northern Territory in the twentieth century, see Jan Whitehead, 'Settling Down: The Role of Housing in the Commonwealth's Northern Territory', PhD thesis, Charles Darwin University, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Northern Territory Archives Service (NTAS), NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews, Marsh, Reg, TS 90 Tape 1, p. 4.

In this period, too, the aviation industry boomed with Qantas and Connellan Airways providing regular services throughout the Territory. Bus and rail tours to central Australia, meant that the Territory was more accessible than it had ever been before.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the intellectual environment of Australia in the postwar period was redefining itself through the arts and the academy, but also politically in the post-colonial period. Part of this definition was the implementation of a federal policy for Aboriginal people.

In the prewar period, the federal government had formulated a policy for Aboriginal Australians, the 'New Deal',<sup>12</sup> but the war intervened and any initiatives stalled. The postwar period was the beginning of renewed political action by Aboriginal people in Darwin. In 1947, Aboriginal workers from Berrimah Camp struck for better pay and conditions.<sup>13</sup>

By the 1950s, and particularly under the energetic direction of the Minister for the newly constituted Department of Territories, Paul Hasluck, the Commonwealth aimed for a policy that would facilitate Aboriginal citizenship and remove issues of race.<sup>14</sup> Hasluck believed that:

Changes are taking place in the Territory which would kindle the imagination of any persons of sensitivity ... Irrespective of creed, color, racial origin, capacity or place of resident, the society we are going to build is that of one single, unified Australian people ... This must be a first-rate Territory, with first-rate people in it...<sup>15</sup>

Hasluck argued that the only way the Northern Territory would become 'normal'<sup>16</sup> was to bring it into the mainstream by de-emphasising the remote, the exotic and the frontier aspects of Territory life.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> See Baiba Berzins for more on this: Baiba Berzins, *Australia's Northern Secret: Tourism in the Northern Territory, 1920s to 1980s*, Baiba Berzins, Sydney, 2007, pp. 66f, 144f.

<sup>12</sup> Bauman, *Aboriginal Darwin*, p. 131; B Cummings, *Take This Child... From Kahlin Compound to the Retta Dixon Children's Home*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1990, p. 39; Julie T Wells, 'The Long March: Assimilation Policy and Practice in Darwin, the Northern Territory, 1939–1967', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1995, pp. 51f.

<sup>13</sup> Wells, 'The Long March', pp. 82f.

<sup>14</sup> See Russell McGregor, 'Nation and assimilation: continuity and discontinuity in Aboriginal Affairs in the 1950s', in JT Wells, M Dewar and S Parry (eds), *Modern Frontier: Aspects of the 1950s in Australia's Northern Territory*, Charles Darwin University Press, Darwin, 2005, pp. 21–2; also John Murphy, *Imagining the Fifties: Private Sentiment and Political Culture in Menzies' Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2000, pp. 189f; Wells, 'The Long March', p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> 'Dynamic advances in Territory, says Mr. Hasluck', *Northern Territory News*, 20 August 1957.

<sup>16</sup> A number of Territory historians have commented on this. See JT Wells, 'Finding the road to Rum Jungle', in *Modern Frontier*, pp. 8–9; Jan Whitehead, 'Becoming normal? The Northern Territory Housing Commission and normalising Territory living conditions', paper presented at the Australian National University, Charles Darwin University, and Museum and Art Gallery Northern Territory History Colloquium, 17 November 2007. I am indebted to Jan for discussion and making a copy of this paper available to me. See also Mickey Dewar, 'It's

The legislative mechanism for the 'assimilation policy' was the 1953 Northern Territory Welfare Ordinance which set out a framework for people deemed to be 'wards'.<sup>18</sup> 'Wards' was another name for Aboriginal people who were, in the terms of the time, classified as 'full bloods', but did not include those Aboriginal people with white kin. Hasluck hoped that by using this term that the debate would move away from race to circumstance. Russell McGregor has pointed out that 'Assimilation held emancipatory aspirations for Aboriginal people, and at the same time sustained oppressive forms of governance.'<sup>19</sup>

During the war years the military took over the grounds of Bagot Aboriginal Reserve and the Aboriginal people who were not evacuated south were moved to a work camp about 10 kilometres further out of town at Berrimah. After 1951, 'wards' were allowed back into town for work but had to live on the Bagot Aboriginal Reserve. At the same time, the prewar policy was continued for those Aboriginal children who had non-Aboriginal kin, so-called 'half-castes', who were separated from their Aboriginal families. These children were institutionalised, accommodated at the Retta Dixon Home, a church-run boarding facility located on the Bagot Reserve grounds.

In 1950 the Department of Interior and, after 1951, the Department of Territories, administered the Northern Territory. A number of policy strategies to deal with the extreme shortage of accommodation after the war were employed which ran in parallel. All schemes rested upon the prewar policy of providing rental accommodation for permanent public servants undertaking service in the Territory as the first priority.

In 1953 a Northern Territory Housing Loans Scheme began to provide funding for private home investment. In 1955 a rental housing scheme was started for selected families of Aboriginal descent to provide housing for those Aboriginal families not designated as wards under the 1953 Ordinance. This scheme had a very slow start in Darwin but was more active in Alice Springs. Finally, in 1959, the Northern Territory Housing Commission began to provide rental accommodation for families who did not fit into the previous categories. Throughout the decade the government undertook a

---

about lifestyle: the Territory in the 1950s', *Territory in Trust*, vol. 24, no. 1, January–June 2007, pp. 3–8, from a paper presented at the National Trust Heritage Seminar, 10 June 2007, which also looked at this aspect of 'normalisation'. This aspiration had broader applicability beyond the Northern Territory. Although noting that migrants had a 'markedly different' experience from Aboriginal people in the postwar years, John Murphy summarised the imagined Australia of the period: 'This nation would be monolingual, committed to development and unified around Hasluck's vision...': Murphy, *Imagining the Fifties*, p. 183.

<sup>17</sup> Sir Paul Hasluck, 'Pioneers of post-war recovery', *Sixth Annual Eric Johnston Lecture*, Northern Territory State Library, 7 November 1991, p. 182.

<sup>18</sup> See Wells, 'The Long March', for detailed analysis of Commonwealth policy and practice in Darwin in this period.

<sup>19</sup> McGregor, 'Nation and assimilation', p. 27.

program of land survey and subdivision, with provision of an appropriate level of services, to open up new areas for suburban development.

Apart from these housing schemes, federal departments outside the Department of Territories, such as the railways, post office or military services, continued to provide separate housing for their employees. The Department of Territories also provided and built institutional accommodation for specific categories of Territory residents: single employees could be eligible for rental accommodation in government hostels, and Aboriginal people could be provided with accommodation on government reserves as well as institutional care for children of Aboriginal and European descent.

The administration of the Northern Territory demanded resources and staffing, and the centre of this administration was Darwin. But it was difficult to attract staff if there was nowhere for them to live. The Inter-Departmental Conference on the Conditions of Employment in the Northern Territory of 8 March 1951 found that 'the housing and hostel accommodation question in the Northern Territory was the greatest single factor adversely affecting staffing in the area.'<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the Commonwealth's housing priorities for Darwin were directed towards construction of housing for its public service.

There were a number of ways public servants were allocated housing.

As was the case before the war, public servants recruited from the south were allocated government housing through rentals. In fact, it was a condition of the terms of employment that they were housed within three months of their arrival (or after their marriage),<sup>21</sup> and rate of rental was determined as 10 per cent of their substantive base salary level. There were further rental charges for furniture. Where possible, recruits with families would be allocated a house and single men and women were accommodated at government-run hostels.

Because the housing needs of Darwin were so urgent, the system was prioritised, with permanent officers of the public service, usually senior administrators, at the top of the list. 'Technical temporary officers' were the next level, a category that included doctors, architects, engineers and other professionals. The next highest housing priority was to accommodate skilled tradesmen and, last, temporary staff.<sup>22</sup>

Some positions in the public service also had what was termed 'successor-in-office-housing'; that is, the accommodation went with the job. As long as the

---

<sup>20</sup> Background Information for Conference Projected by Department of Territories, Hostels, Messes etc. in the Northern Territory, c. 1953, NAA: F1, 1953/259 Part 1.

<sup>21</sup> CR Stahl, Director of General Services, to the Assistant Administrator, 30 September 1960, NAA: F1, 1962/1103.

<sup>22</sup> CR Stahl, Director of General Services, letter to F Geddes, 13 November 1958, NAA: F1, 1958/876.

employee was in the position, they and their family could live in the house. If they resigned from their job, they had two weeks to leave the house and find alternative accommodation.

Finally, housing was also allocated to actual departments for those employees who were deemed to be necessary for the maintenance of essential services. The Department of Works and the Northern Territory Administration, as the largest employers in the Territory, controlled most of these, but other departments with housing included the Postmaster-General's Department, Attorney-General's, Customs, Taxation, and the Department of Civil Aviation. Each department put in annual 'bids' to the Northern Territory Administration, including bids for hostel accommodation as well as housing, but usually received less than requested. Once allocated housing, it was up to the individual department to determine exactly which of their officers was the most essential, or 'key'.

Surprisingly (to modern ideas of essential services) this definition of key staff did not usually include anyone employed by the Department of Works in sewerage maintenance or disposal or the sanitation crews. These jobs were usually filled by 'coloured' or Aboriginal employees. Individuals may have been employed for many years, but on a casual rather than permanent basis, and as such they were unlikely to receive government housing. By the middle of the decade, 1955, the Department of Works, the biggest departmental employer in Darwin, had staff with employment histories stretching back for nearly a decade but had *never* allocated any housing to any of their Aboriginal staff. By employing Aboriginal staff on a casual basis and by determining them not to be 'key' industrial personnel, there was no real requirement to find them departmental housing.<sup>23</sup>

The government's building program failed to build enough houses fast enough to meet demand.<sup>24</sup> The program extended out from town, building in neighboring Stuart Park, Parap, Larrakeyah and Fannie Bay, which were virtually bush at the time. The Department of Works gangs moved in, cleared the land, and organised the subdivisions. Essential services such as water, sewerage and electricity were connected and the houses were built as fast as contractors could be found to put them up.

Institutional accommodation was popular in this period. As previously mentioned, designated 'wards' were accommodated in share housing on the Bagot Aboriginal Reserve. Aboriginal children with white kin were taken to live at the Retta Dixon Home or sent south for further education. In town, also, single government employees were lodged at institutions around Darwin, either attached to a place of employment such as the Nurses' Quarters or Police Barracks, or as separate government-owned and run hostels.

---

<sup>23</sup> JW McKechnie, Acting Housing Officer, to the Director, General Services, 9 December 1955, NAA: F1, 1955/1119.

<sup>24</sup> Northern Territory Annual Report 1952–53, pp. 27–8, NAA: F136, X5/5.

Government hostel residents enjoyed some of the best and cheapest accommodation in town. In June 1954, there were some 211 men and 135 women accommodated in five government hostels in Darwin, with a further 30 people waiting for vacancies to open up.<sup>25</sup> This does not include the residents of 'No. 3 Hostel', known as 'Belsen'. This was a former Allied Works Council camp consisting of about 60 little fibro huts each housing two residents.<sup>26</sup>

The Commonwealth ran all its hostels at a loss, effectively providing a cost of living subsidy for its single employees,<sup>27</sup> and the occupants appear to have enjoyed an active social life – assisted no doubt by the fact that they were mostly young, single and employed. The institutional nature of hostel life with sharing of rooms and bathrooms, mess-style dining and the sheer numbers of residents in one space, meant that complaints were the norm; poor sanitation,<sup>28</sup> noise,<sup>29</sup> lack of hot water, monotonous meals with 'a New

---

<sup>25</sup> The bed numbers are derived from the list of accommodation provided at the following hostels: Peel Street, 184; Mitchell Street, 24; Town Mess, 28; Abbott House, 34; Marrenah House, 46; total = 316. The accommodation required was as follows: Works, 68 males and 30 females; Civil Aviation, 12 females; Health, 18 males and 7 females; Trade and Customs, 7 males and 2 females; Audit, 1 male and 1 female; Postmaster-General's, 34 males and 12 females; Attorney-General's, 4 males and 5 females; Labour and National Service, 2 males and 2 females; Immigration, 2 males and 1 female; Territories, 61 males and 36 females; South Australia Education, 12 males and 22 females; Commonwealth Education, 2 males and 3 females; Army, 2 females. FJS Wise to the Secretary, Department of Territories, 7 June 1954, NAA: F1, 1952/257.

<sup>26</sup> Belsen was probably determined to be a hostel, rather than a camp, because there was communal messing. In the camps, the individual hut dwellers cooked for themselves. Ted Egan provides a good description of Belsen: Ted Egan, *Sitdown Up North*, Kerr, Marrickville, 1997, p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Unsigned copy for LF Loder, Director-General, to the Secretary, Department of Territories, 8 October 1952, NAA: F1, 1949/411; see also Background Information for Conference Projected by Department of Territories, Hostels, Messes etc. in the Northern Territory, c. 1953, NAA: F1, 1953/259 Part 1, which says, 'The Conference noted that the hostels were running at a loss ... It was agreed however, that it would not be possible to run hostels as a paying proposition.'

<sup>28</sup> An entire book could be written detailing the circumstances, technical characteristics and nature of lavatories and sanitation in Darwin in this decade because this topic occupies an inordinate amount of the correspondence on the archival files. It is sufficient to note here that the comments by the Acting Hostels Supervisor at Marrenah House, that 'urgent attention is necessary' to the septic system, can be applied almost universally across the hostels and camps in this period, whether dealing with septic systems or 'flaming furies', which was the colloquial name for incinerator latrines. NAA: F1, 1951/585.

<sup>29</sup> NE Constantine's comments on his Peel Street neighbour are typical: '[He] occupies a room in the same wing ... arrived home during the early a.m. ... [and] immediately proceeded to kick around rubbish bins, throw stones down the passageway, bang on louvres and doors, and shout, scream and whistle very loudly...': NE Constantine, letter to the Hostel Manager, Peel Street Hostel, 23 August 1954, NAA: F1, 1955/71.

Australian who speaks no English at all',<sup>30</sup> even having to dine or mix with junior staff,<sup>31</sup> were all grounds for complaint.

The very public and communal nature of hostel life meant that while, for some, it was one continuous party with people coming and going at all times of the day and night, for others it was their worst nightmare. Not all the partygoers were actual hostel residents, which created some anxieties.<sup>32</sup> Alcohol consumption was high. In a single year, 1956, for example, non-Aboriginal Territorians drank 700,000 gallons of beer.<sup>33</sup> 'Beer tins lying all over the floor and a half 44 gallon drum outside in the breeze way to keep beer cold. I don't consider these two persons fit or proper persons to be living in a community hostel...', complained SE Radell, the manager of the Mitchell Street hostel.<sup>34</sup>

Although conditions in the hostels were basic – often shared rooms, separate shower and latrine blocks, no fly netting, no overhead ceiling fans and uninspired menus – hostel life is often remembered with affection. The single men and women of Darwin earned reasonable salaries and enjoyed active social lives with additional pleasures of fishing, bush trips and dances in town.

Even minor infringements of behaviour in this comparatively innocent age were the subject matter for thick piles of official correspondence. When one hostel resident lost a quilt and army blanket, she made financial reparation for the loss. What caused the authorities of Marrenah House, an all female government hostel, particular pain was that the items 'were lost from the back of a motor-cycle between Katherine and Darwin.'<sup>35</sup> When another guest, something of a party girl who had frequently formed the subject matter of other complaints to the administration, had to be carried into her room one night, the files fairly bristled with condemnation.<sup>36</sup> Despite the occasional administrative oddity or behavioural lapse, having accommodation and food

---

<sup>30</sup> MJ Rose, resident of Mitchell Street Hostel, letter to the Director, General Services, 29 October 1958, NAA: F1, 1955/71.

<sup>31</sup> This was a complaint of both medical and police staff: J McLeod et al., letter to the Medical Superintendent, 11 February 1953, NAA: E48, 120/5/4; BG Braithwaite, Acting Housing and Messing Officer, to the Acting Chief Clerk, 18 October 1951, NAA: F1, 1951/210.

<sup>32</sup> In the middle of the night, to the ire of the hostel managers, non-hostel residents would sometimes attempt to use the facilities, such as laundries, giving the casual and anonymous excuse that they had 'been brought in by a chap from Works and Jerks': Mitchell Street hostel manager to W McGuinness, Hostel Officer, 4 August 1956, NAA: F1, 1955/71. 'Works and Jerks' was the colloquial name for Works and Housing.

<sup>33</sup> 700,000 gallons is the equivalent of 3,185,000 litres of beer.

<sup>34</sup> SE Radel, Hostel Manager Mitchell Street Hostel, letter to the Hostels Officer, Northern Territory Administration, 3 March 1958, NAA: F1, 1955/71.

<sup>35</sup> LJ Murphy, Finance Officer, to Acting Assistant Administrator, 15 January 1959, NAA: F1, 1955/74.

<sup>36</sup> For those interested in following this case in more detail, see NAA: F1, 1958/1599.

provided meant that the hostel occupants, while not feeling necessarily as if they were at home within the prescribed rules of an institutional environment, were largely released from the anxieties that troubled the rest of the Darwin population at this time.

Public servants with families lived in government-built elevated houses, single employees lived in hostels, Aboriginal people lived at Bagot Aboriginal Reserve, and everyone else had to find accommodation where they could. People took up residence in the old military camps, camped on Mindil Beach or bunked in with relatives, friends and colleagues where possible. While camping or staying with relatives was free, living in camps incurred a fee.<sup>37</sup>

In the city of Darwin today, there is little physical evidence of this period. As noted previously, the No. 3 Hostel, or 'Belsen' Camp, was a collection of wood and fibro huts that had been moved to Darwin from Adelaide River as wartime accommodation for Allied Works Council employees.<sup>38</sup> It was located on land formerly owned by the Roman Catholic Church, the site of St Mary's Cathedral today. Parap 118 Army Camp, vacated by the Army in 1947, was a collection of Sidney Williams huts that provided accommodation for about 60 families.<sup>39</sup> The remains of Parap 118-K9 (the old Works camp) have disappeared into the present day suburb of Stuart Park. Nightcliff residents in the 1950s were fortunate to have an electricity supply of sorts connected, which dated back to the former use as a United States Army camp hospital.<sup>40</sup> Today the old World War II dump at Nightcliff beach (now on the Register of the National Estate) is the only tangible reminder of its military past. Some of the very large buildings and layout of Winnellie Camp have not totally vanished but, as they are now part of the Darwin Showgrounds, the corrugated iron sheds and infrastructure goes unnoticed.

When the Commonwealth took over all the land, they also took over the camps and became the official landlord. Tenants usually paid a rent of around 5 shillings per week for the privilege.<sup>41</sup>

Some of the names of these camps have grown into suburbs, such as Stuart Park, Parap<sup>42</sup> and Nightcliff while others such as Salonika,<sup>43</sup> Police Paddock,<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, the rents on the huts in Stuart Park: NAA: F1025, Register. Using 1955 as a median figure, 5 shillings was the approximate equivalent of \$11.30 in 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Peter and Sheila Forrest, 'The winds of change howled in the year of '57', *Northern Territory News*, 29 May 2007, pp. 14–15.

<sup>39</sup> Maisie Austin, *Quality of Life*, Maisie Austin, Darwin, 1992, pp. 10–11.

<sup>40</sup> They did not have very good electricity. In a candid report, 'Future of Camp Area: Nightcliff', to the Administrator, Hugh Barclay points out that when, in 1949, the Department of Works and Housing found the wiring to be substandard, it was decided to sell the huts to the occupants 'in situ' at a 'low figure': HC Barclay, Director of Lands, to the Administrator, 6 September 1951, NAA: F1, 1949/594 Part 2.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, the rents on the huts in Stuart Park, NAA: F1025, Register. Using 1955 as a median figure, 5 shillings was the approximate equivalent of \$11.30 in 2001.

Frances Camp, K9, Peewit Camp, No. 2 Power House, Vestey's Meat Works, Maranga, East End of the Civil 'Drome and Victualling Yard have faded from collective memory, recalled only by longer-term residents.<sup>45</sup> Few of these sites were sewerered and relied upon incinerator latrines with the waste water from communal bathrooms and laundries flowing along open drains.<sup>46</sup> There were serious health issues on site and typhoid outbreaks were not unknown.<sup>47</sup> Site managers, or 'camp attendants' as they were sometimes called, were employed to provide a measure of security and some of the upkeep but it was difficult to maintain the camps to an appropriate standard of hygiene.<sup>48</sup> The

---

<sup>42</sup> Use of the term Parap to denote a suburb is confusing. Today Parap is the name given to the suburb between Fannie Bay and Ludmilla on one side of the Stuart Highway and opposite the suburb of Woolner on the other. In the 1950s, the name Parap was used as a general term for what would now be called Stuart Park, that is, the area of land on the western side of the Stuart Highway between, and including, Duke Street in the south to Armidale Street in the north. The area from about Mary Street in the south to Armidale in the north included Parap Camp, Francis Camp, K9, Police Paddock and No. 2 Powerhouse Station areas, all of which had large numbers of tenants in government-controlled properties left over from the war – transitional to the building of houses, which also took place in this decade in this area. Although official files could then refer to 'Tenancies – Parap Area' (for example, JW McKechnie, Housing Clerk, to Housing Officer, 7 September 1954, NAA: F1, 1952/990), today this would be called Tenancies – Stuart Park. To make it even more confusing, sometimes it was also called Stuart Park, but this seemed to mean the area, rather than Parap Camp, or Parap Community Centre as it was sometimes known. FJS Wise, Administrator, to the Secretary, Department of Territories, 22 February 1954, NAA: F1, 1952/990.

<sup>43</sup> Salonika was so-called because it was the site of a Greek community from the early twentieth century (the other was in Darwin town) and was located near the rail link to Vestey's, 'Salonika Crossing', close to modern day St John's College around about the site of the current Hastings-on-Mindil apartments. In the immediate postwar period, squatters moved into old Vestey's houses there but the government acquired these along with all the other properties in Darwin. See, for example, LF Finnis, No. 21 Salonika, to the Government Secretary, 6 August 1946, NAA: F1, 1951/543; K Martin-Stone, *pers.com*, 23 July 2008; K Vatskalis, 'Greeks in Darwin' <<http://www.arafura.net.au/greeksnt/presence.html>> accessed 7 May 2007. The names on the Salonika tenancy files at the Darwin Office of the NAA – Chambers, Festing, Butler, Robertson, Lewis, Babin etc – seem to indicate that, by the 1950s, most of the houses were not occupied by Greek families.

<sup>44</sup> Police Paddock was located in modern day Stuart Park overlooking Frances Bay and Dinah Beach. 'Stuart Park Primary School now occupies part of the old Police Paddock site': Bauman, *Aboriginal Darwin*, pp. 26–7.

<sup>45</sup> Some of these names can be found in NAA: F1025, Register; others appear more generally in correspondence files.

<sup>46</sup> JW McKechnie, Acting Housing Officer, report to the Administrative Officer (General Services Branch), 21 January 1958, NAA: F1, 1974/2354.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, comments from F Drysdale, *Legislative Council Debates*, Fifth Council, 29 March 1955, on Parap Camp.

<sup>48</sup> Or perhaps it was very hard work for one man? One camp attendant at Winnellie Camp found 'working in the sun is to[o] hard for him'. MS Nordsvan, Administrative Officer, to Director-General, 28 July 1958, NAA: F1, 1958/1005; Specification of Duties: Camp Attendant, Nightcliff Town and Camp area, NAA: F1, 1949/594 Part 2.

solution was usually to spray chlorate or lime or other corrosive chemicals into the open drains and sullage.<sup>49</sup>

The Commonwealth recognised that the situation could only be temporary and was desperate to move people on so that the military structures could be demolished, land surveyed, roads put in, and water, power and sewerage connected. Unfortunately, there was nowhere for the hut dwellers to go to if they were evicted from the camps, which meant that the land could not be surveyed, and the lack of overflow accommodation stymied the progress of suburban development. It was a stalemate that would only slowly be resolved when housing was built.

It is difficult to accurately determine how many people lived under these conditions in the camps. From 1949, a housing list was kept which contained the names of people on a waiting list for housing assistance. By 1958 the list had some 500–600 names, but it had not been maintained and was considered to be of ‘very little value’ and any attempts to match tenants with housing would be a ‘stab in the dark.’<sup>50</sup> In the meantime, the files were full of correspondence from people who had patiently believed that they were on the waiting list for accommodation only to be disabused when a recent arrival or neighbour managed to gain housing ahead of them.

The Sidney Williams huts housed at least two families in each hut and were situated almost close enough to touch. Despite the tough times and difficult conditions, there was an active social life in the camps, particularly Parap Camp at Stuart Park. Daisy Ruddick remembered:

Even though my father was a returned soldier, he wasn’t allowed to take his wife to the RSL Club because of the colour of her skin. In those days social functions and dances were segregated. The white men that married Aboriginal women formed the Sunshine Club in the old Parap Camp. They acquired a hall and a band and even though that Sunshine Club was formed for Aboriginal people, white people still came.<sup>51</sup>

The dances were festive affairs attended by everyone. Mary Lee remembered: ‘We had Ballroom dancing, quick step, foxtrot, tango, very graceful sort of dances, waltzes and all that. When rock ‘n roll came in I used to teach the younger kids to dance. I loved dancing.’<sup>52</sup> As Jim Souey, whose family were identified as Chinese, recalled of the Sunshine Club, ‘I never missed a

---

<sup>49</sup> R Marsh, Assistant Administrator, to Director, Health, (date-stamped and difficult to read but probably 17 June) 1958, NAA: F1, 1958/1005.

<sup>50</sup> JW McKechnie, Acting Housing Officer, report to the Administrative Officer (General Services Branch), 17 January 1958, NAA: F1, 1974/2354.

<sup>51</sup> Daisy Ruddick with Esther Carolin in *Under the Mango Tree: Oral Histories with Indigenous People from the Top End*, collected by Peg Havnen, condensed by Leonie Norrington, NT Writers Centre, Darwin, 2002, p. 47.

<sup>52</sup> M Lee, ‘Fulfilling a dream’, in *Under the Mango Tree*, p. 62.

dance.’<sup>53</sup> Patricia Raymond remembered the Saturday night dances at Parap Camp: ‘You would dress up, wear your Saturday best. They used to have debutant balls too.’<sup>54</sup> One modern commentator has noted of this period:

Music played a vital part in community life, as returning string band players and visiting TI [Thursday Island] pearlers such as Seaman Dan, joined forces to make music, provide entertainment and fight for the right to set up their own ‘Sunshine Club’ for community dances and social functions at Parap Camp. Indeed, music, dance, sport and struggle were the ‘cement’ that bound together that post-war Parap Camp community. They remain the ties that bind, down through the years, to this day.<sup>55</sup>

Other studies of Darwin in the 1950s illustrate that alongside the shared memories of multiculturalism there were also sporting and cultural institutions that demonstrate a degree of exchange and interaction not typical in Australia in this period.<sup>56</sup>

The shared cultural life was strong and enduring, but there was also an equality of circumstances within the community. The conditions were tough but they were shared by everyone alike – no one living in the camps had significantly better conditions than anyone else, even though the anecdotes stress the diversity of the inhabitants. As Patricia Raymond remarked, ‘People were pretty poor ... but in them days everybody was pretty much in the same category.’<sup>57</sup> Terry Lew Fatt remembered:

After Police Paddock we shifted to Parap Camp. That’s where everyone lived; the Cardonas, Cubillos, Roes, Muirs, Angeles, Hazelbanes, the Ahmats. Mostly the coloured families, also white people stayed there too. We lived in the Sidney Williams huts left-over from the Army.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> J Souey, ‘Working the sea’, in *Under the Mango Tree*, p. 88.

<sup>54</sup> P Raymond, ‘Never knock a cleaner’, in *Under the Mango Tree*, p. 101.

<sup>55</sup> J Corfield, ‘String bands & shake hands – the days of Old Darwin Town’, 30 August 2002 <[http://www.topendfolkclub.org/images/Days\\_of\\_Old\\_Darwin\\_Town-Music\\_forum\\_article\\_Jeff\\_Corfield.pdf](http://www.topendfolkclub.org/images/Days_of_Old_Darwin_Town-Music_forum_article_Jeff_Corfield.pdf)> accessed 2 May 2008.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, M Dewar, ‘You are what you eat: food and cultural identity’, in *Modern Frontier*, pp. 71–89; S Ritchie, ‘From Absence to All-Stars: An Exploration of Australian Rules Football Culture of the Darwin Area 1916–2000’, BA Honours thesis, Department of History, University of Melbourne, 2006, particularly chapters 2 and 3; NTAS, NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews, Nickels, Catherine, TS 1169, p. 2; M Stephen, ‘Darwin Town Oval – heart of the Darwin community’, *Territory in Trust*, vol. 24, no. 1, January–June 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Raymond, ‘Never knock a cleaner’, pp. 101–2.

<sup>58</sup> T Lew Fatt, ‘A sporting life’, in *Under the Mango Tree*, p. 67.

At the camps people joined together to share meagre resources, play sport, dance, gamble<sup>59</sup> and work.

The cooperation encouraged people to work together on solutions to other social problems particular to the time. In the new postwar Darwin, people resisted the old paternalistic methods of control. Pat Anderson recalled her Aboriginal mother's determination to hold onto her own finances. Gaining control of child endowment payments became something to be discussed at Parap Camp. As a result of her action, other women in the camp were encouraged to take control of their own finances from the administration.<sup>60</sup>

The fact that the equality that Aboriginal soldiers from Darwin had shared in battle with their mates did not even last long enough after the war for old diggers to share a drink was something deeply resented and a spur for action:

That's why that political kind of action sprung up. Because men were saying 'We went to the war and fought and now when we came back we are not allowed to drink in the pubs.' There was still discrimination until the '60s.<sup>61</sup>

In 1951 the 'Halfcaste Progress Association' formed.<sup>62</sup> About 300 people attended the meeting held at the Parap Parish Hall on the Sunday night of 4 March; Jack McGuinness was the Chair and 'Babe' Damasso the Secretary.<sup>63</sup> Peter Talbot recalled:

Bob Menzies was Prime Minister ... one bloke got up and he put it to a motion – a motion to go to the Prime Minister – 'we fought the Germans, the Italians' ... 'and fought the Japanese, [but were] not good enough to go in the pub and have a beer' ... I think that really hurt us most, you know.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Vicky Bonson says that, for example, 'Gambling was ... a means of raising money for funerals. If the person was very poor and they couldn't afford to pay for the funeral, certain people would open their home to have a gambling game to make money, just for that purpose, to help pay for the funeral.' V Bonson, 'Keeping old skills alive', in *Under the Mango Tree*, p. 80.

<sup>60</sup> Pat Anderson, Chairperson, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Douglas Gordon Oration at the Public Health Association of Australia 38th Annual Conference, Alice Springs, 25 September 2007, <<http://209.85.173.104/search?q=cache:F1LryAp3UUoJ:www.craah.org.au/communication/downloads/CRCAH-PHAA-Speech-final-September-2007.pdf+Parap+Camp+map&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=5&gl=au&client=firefox-a>> accessed 7 October 2008.

<sup>61</sup> M Lee, 'Fulfilling a dream', p. 62.

<sup>62</sup> For detailed information about Aboriginal policy during this decade, see Wells, 'The Long March', p. 75.

<sup>63</sup> ES Evans, Patrol Officer Native Welfare, memo to the Director of Native Affairs, 5 March 1951, NAA: F1, 1951/744.

<sup>64</sup> NTAS, NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews, Talbot, Peter, TS 391, p. 21.

Julie T Wells argues that the critical role Aboriginal women played in this action has sometimes been overlooked. She specifically identifies women from Parap Camp, such as Mrs Angeles, Mrs Ruddick and others, who spoke in vocal support at the meeting.<sup>65</sup>

But it was not only the Aboriginal camp dwellers who took action. Many 'hut dwellers', as these tenants sometimes called themselves, banded together in the Darwin camps to argue for change. 'Badgering the administration for improvements'<sup>66</sup> continued in the 1950s through several new 'progress' associations. In town, there were Stuart Park, Port Darwin, Nightcliff, Winnellie, Fannie Bay and Temira<sup>67</sup> Progress Associations, and the Marenga and Rural Districts Progress Association in Berrimah, this last association mainly comprising holders of agricultural leases.<sup>68</sup> A Central Council was created, which comprised two delegates from each association, 'for the purpose of fostering interest in municipal affairs and giving expression to the views of the residents in municipal matters as well as working for the municipal development of the district generally.'<sup>69</sup> Nightcliff residents in particular, from the earliest postwar days, demonstrated a capacity to organise and lobby the Administration. In the 1950s, for example, at least three organisations were formed to provide a voice for residents and, in particular, fight the speed of the proposed evictions: the Nightcliff Progress Association (1950), Nightcliff Lessees Association (1955) and the Nightcliff Hut Dwellers Association (1958).<sup>70</sup> Along with concerns about housing and access to land, other civic issues were raised: street lighting, signage, waste disposal, parks, public transport and playgrounds.

---

<sup>65</sup> Wells, 'The Long March', pp. 76–7.

<sup>66</sup> Reg Marsh's view of the Progress Associations: NTAS, NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews, Marsh, Reg, TS 90 Tape 1, p. 13.

<sup>67</sup> For Temira, read Larrakeyah; Temira Square was not part of the original Palmerston town survey by Goyder but was added later at the behest of Government Resident, Captain William Bloomfield Douglas, after complaints by selectors who deplored the lack of open areas for public use. Temira Square, bounded by Foelsche and Gardiner Streets, and Larrakeyah Square, with Sweet and Gulnare Streets, were added on. Temira Square occupied Beetson (Smith Street West) and McKay (Mitchell) streets and Foelsche and Gardiner at either end with Berry Street passing through the middle. See Kathy De La Rue, *The Evolution of Darwin, 1869–1911*, Charles Darwin University Press, Darwin, 2004, p. 25.

<sup>68</sup> There was a clear sense of community at Berrimah but unlike Nightcliff or Parap or even Belsen, where it seemed to centre on social activities in the local hall, there were insufficient funds raised to establish a hall at Berrimah. Nonetheless, the cohesion and success of the Show Society demonstrates that the community at Berrimah was agriculturally, rather than residentially, based. See, for example, the correspondence in NAA: F1, 1951/983.

<sup>69</sup> See the form letter from the Administrator sent, for example, to the President of the Port Darwin Progress Association, 29 November 1950, NAA: F1, 1950/756, or to the Fanny [sic] Bay Progress Association, 29 November 1950, NAA: F1, 1950/572.

<sup>70</sup> LF Barter, *From Wartime Camp to Garden Suburb: A Short History of Nightcliff and Rapid Creek*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 1994, p. 31; also MD Morris, President, Nightcliff Hut Dwellers Association, n.d., NAA: F1: 1958/1254.

Women's organisations began to mobilise specifically around the conditions of women and children in the camps and shanties of Darwin and were active throughout the whole decade. In 1949, the Darwin Housewives Association was formed and immediately began lobbying for better conditions for families – including a regular and affordable supply of foodstuffs and the establishment of a school canteen with healthy food on sale.<sup>71</sup> The Darwin Branch of the Country Women's Association (CWA), a chapter of the Queensland CWA,<sup>72</sup> was, like the Darwin Housewives Association, a powerful women's lobby group that worked actively to improve conditions, particularly for families. From about 1949 onwards, the CWA campaigned to establish a hostel for women and children requiring emergency accommodation.<sup>73</sup> The Northern Territory Guild of Darwin Professional and Business Women lobbied the Northern Territory Administration specifically on housing issues.<sup>74</sup>

In 1950, the Darwin Housewives Association invited the Minister for the Interior<sup>75</sup> 'to have a tour round Doctor's Gully, the Police Paddock, Stuart Park, Parap Camp and Nightcliff.' The Association claimed that most residences were unsuitable for living in, arguing that the problems of crowding, lack of sanitation, the 'dysentery ... and the filthy conditions' were deplorable. The Association declared that:

they would like to see some of the houses that were being built allocated to those most deserving cases among the workers who were living under such deplorable conditions. There were expectant mothers and women with young babies in the camps, and no improvement in conditions was in sight. Many women,

---

<sup>71</sup> Mrs Daniel says in correspondence that the Association has been formed 'recently': EH Daniel, Secretary, Darwin Housewives Association, to Administrator, 23 April 1949, NAA: F1, 1953/251.

<sup>72</sup> The organisation's letterhead was headed Queensland Country Women's Association Darwin Branch but it was sometimes confusingly only identified as Queensland CWA in archival references: see, for example, P McInnes, Hon. Secretary, to the Administrator, 22 April 1952, NAA: F1, 1952/141.

<sup>73</sup> P Hasluck, Press Statement by the Minister for Territories, CWA Hostel at Darwin, 26 August 1952, NAA: A431, 1950/686.

<sup>74</sup> DC Haensel, Hon. Sec., Business and Professional Women's Club of Darwin (NT), to the Administrator, 12 March 1958, NAA: F1, 1974/2354.

<sup>75</sup> In 1950, the Minister for the Interior was the Hon. Eric Harrison, also Resident Minister in the UK. Since another archival file (NAA: F1, 1952/141) identifies the 'Minister for the Interior' on 3 April 1950 as 'the Hon P.A. McBride' (who the NAA website lists as Minister for Defence in Menzies' 1950 Cabinet), it is reasonable to assume that the meeting with the Darwin Housewives' Association involved McBride rather than Harrison. See NAA, '1950 – Menzies government', <<http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/explore/cabinet/notebooks/1950.aspx>> accessed 22 August 2008.

who would otherwise be only too glad to stay here and develop the country, would not do so for the sake of their children.<sup>76</sup>

The Darwin Housewives Association was tireless throughout the 1950s, lobbying at the highest levels. The President, Mrs Lou Stewart, wrote eloquently to Prime Minister Menzies setting out the problems for Darwin women in the camps. The disparity of conditions enjoyed by public servants as opposed to everyone else was particularly galling:

The Darwin Housewives Association, would like to draw your attention to the following; -

The wet season will soon be upon us, here in Darwin, this will mean that many families, who have no proper accommodation, will be in a desperate position, some with quite a number of children. They are not in need of food or help that way, but they do need accommodation. A roof over their heads. They are Australians Sir, people who have come out to Australia to settle. Also those who were born here. Who else has a better right than these people? There are houses here empty, waiting for people living down South who are being brought up here as Government employees, to live in. Often these people leave good houses, to be rented, closed up, or sold, and have their furniture brought up here at great expense to the government. If they stay a year or two, its an achievement [sic]. Some might stay longer, but very few. Yet the people who have lived in the Territory for years, and have not been able, or not wanted to buy a house, have been allowed any old accommodation to live in with a promise of being the first on the list when the new houses were built. Now the houses have been built, why has'nt [sic] that promise been honoured? Or was it just another responsibility that could not be thrashed out, and was put upon the shelf, hoping that in time the people will manage to get out of the rutt [sic] themselves. This is a forlorn hope, as people, like every on the earth will continue to multiply, and the days when all the family as they were married off, stayed on in the house and all settled down to carry on as the generations had done before them, has ceased to exist, and with the enlightened times of today, people like to have their own little castle...

Thanking you Sir,

and trusting you will do your utmost to relieve the tension that is being felt up here ...<sup>77</sup>

The Darwin Housewives Association continued to campaign and some time later wrote to the Governor-General:

---

<sup>76</sup> Extract from Notes on Deputation to the Honourable the Minister for the Interior April 1950 Darwin Housewives' Association, date-stamped 3 May 1950, NAA: F1, 1953/251.

<sup>77</sup> L Stewart, President, Darwin Housewives Association, to Prime Minister Robert Menzies, 4 October 1957, NAA: F1, 1974/2354.

Your Excellency, cannot something be done for the people they are living in broken down shacks, white ant eaten, and falling down around them.

They are not poverty stricken, but a good type of working class people who need a little place of their own, to bring their families up in, They do not want charity... Practically every block of ground sold so far is for Government employees or Hostels for single Government staff.

The children are growing up in squalid surroundings, giving them an inferiority complex. Is this what the future Australian has to like? Just because the circumstances which were forced upon their parents led to his being brought up this way?

The children of today are the backbone of the future. Let us at least give them the feeling of being equal, not feel hopeless like they seem to be at present. Causing them to look for outside entertainment, when they should be in their own homes...<sup>78</sup>

Not content with writing to the Prime Minister and the Governor-General, the President of the Darwin Housewives Association also wrote to the Queen. The contents of her letter reveal something of her personal circumstances, as well as her faith in the system to redress her disadvantages:

Your Majesty

In desperation I am writing to you, knowing that you are genuine and everyone is classed the same... The Government have decreed that only Government Workers are allowed to have accommodation in the Houses that have been built. And if you are a private resident you are not wanted up here. If you can afford to build your own place, well & good otherwise one has to live in any old place & the Government take rent for these. The last of these places are now falling down. And the Government has decided that ... the Vestys old Meat Works has to be demolished ... This means that the people living in this area including myself & family have to go with no alternative but to live on the beach no other accomodation [sic] has been offered. This has been going on for years. We have had eviction notices given to us to leave Vestys by the end of August. Please Your Majesty cannot something be done for the people who do not work for the Government. At Home in England there are Council Houses but here there is nothing I enclose some cuttings from the paper for you to see.

Thanking you for reading my letter. God bless you & your husband and children.

---

<sup>78</sup> L Stewart, President, Darwin Housewives Association, to His Excellency, the Governor-General, 3 February 1958, NAA: A452, 1957/2620.

Unsurprisingly, the Queen did not get to read Mrs Stewart's letter; it was, however, forwarded to the office of the Governor-General who forwarded it in turn to Minister Hasluck (as was Mrs Stewart's correspondence with the Prime Minister).<sup>79</sup> Hasluck took the issue seriously and asked his department to consider some of her suggestions and report back.<sup>80</sup>

The Northern Territory Housing Commission was not established solely due to the lobbying of the Darwin Housewives Association, but it is apparent that they did have some influence in forcing this issue to the attention of the federal government. Mrs Stewart certainly believed that she was instrumental in the decision to set up a Northern Territory Housing Commission;<sup>81</sup> but then, senior Commonwealth public servants also believed they had played a role in its establishment.<sup>82</sup>

It was probable that the case was so pressing that everyone who had anything to do with accommodation in postwar Darwin, not least of all Hasluck himself, appreciated the urgent need for affordable public housing. In May 1958, Hasluck presented a Cabinet paper arguing for the introduction of a housing scheme that could provide accommodation for people other than public servants. He believed that this hiatus in public policy was holding back the Territory's development. 'In the Northern Territory,' he argued, 'the Government has built houses for letting to public servants but not for private persons... Development of the Territory has been hampered by difficulties of attracting and holding a suitable work force, especially workers with families who will settle down.'<sup>83</sup>

The main impediment to this idea was that the accepted Housing Commission rent formula (based on percentage return on housing construction cost) meant that only low cost housing, that is £3000 or less, could provide affordable rental rates. The rent formula was based around national housing costs. By the end of the decade the median house price in Australia was between about £3500 and £4000 at a time when average

---

<sup>79</sup> L Stewart, President, Darwin Housewives Association, to HRH Queen Elizabeth II, 26 July 1957. See NAA: A452, 1957/2620, for more on this.

<sup>80</sup> Minister, Department of Territories, to the Secretary, Department of Territories, 5 September 1957, NAA: A452, 1957/2620.

<sup>81</sup> NTAS, NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews, Stewart, Lou, TS 123 Tape 3, pp. 6-7.

<sup>82</sup> Assistant Administrator Reg Marsh recalled: '[Administrator 'Clarrie'] Archer and I decided that we ought to set up a scheme to house the ordinary citizen, so that Housing Commission was debarred from housing public servants, because they had their own housing scheme and it was also required to prefer the lowest paid people.' NTAS, NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews, Marsh, Reg, TS 90 Tape 1, p. 9.

<sup>83</sup> Paul Hasluck, Minister for Territories, Confidential Cabinet Submission – Northern Territory Housing for Persons Other than Government Employees, 6 May 1958, NAA: F1, 1974/2354.

earnings were around £1000 per year.<sup>84</sup> Even conservatively the cost of putting up a house in Darwin was considered closer to £5500 than £3000, which would mean a rent of about £8 per week.<sup>85</sup>

The private sector estimates for housing were even higher, at £4,500–6,500. This was well beyond the means of the average client.<sup>86</sup> Unless costs of housing could be kept very low, the rental would be prohibitive.<sup>87</sup> What was required was 'three bedrooms in about 10 squares, with a tropical life of about 60 years, proof against termites and rot, not requiring painting; and otherwise with a minimal maintenance liability in tropical climate; and at a cost of no more than £3,000.'<sup>88</sup> It was a problem.

In the end the solution was found through building smaller houses. Public service housing was on average 12 squares;<sup>89</sup> Housing Commission houses would be eight.<sup>90</sup> As Hasluck put it, 'the accommodation standards of Government houses are beyond those generally adopted elsewhere for minimum-cost housing for persons of small incomes, being approximately two squares greater in area.'<sup>91</sup> Reg Marsh described the typical Housing Commission house as 'low maintenance ... brick houses.'<sup>92</sup>

The public servants enjoyed the elevated breezy louvered houses while the Housing Commission houses were smaller and at ground level. The architecture echoed the social divide of the town.

In addition, there was another housing scheme that had technically been in place since 1955 to place 'mixed-race' families into Administration-owned houses. Native Welfare Branch had recommended such a scheme since at

---

<sup>84</sup> Yates, *Affordability and Access to Home Ownership*, p. 5. The actual figures given are \$7000–8000 and \$2000, but for consistency I have converted these to pound equivalents.

<sup>85</sup> P Hasluck, Minister for Territories, Confidential Cabinet Submission – Northern Territory Housing for Persons Other than Government Employees, 6 May 1958, NAA: F1, 1974/2354. In 1957 £3000 was the equivalent of about \$62,580; £5500 was about \$114,730 and £8 was about \$167 in 2001.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example, correspondence from GO Farrell, Manager, TC Waters and Co. Ltd, 19 August 1958, and the Administrator, 26 August 1958, on this topic, NAA: F1, 1974/2354. In 1957 £4500–6500 equated to about \$93,870–135,590 in 2001 value.

<sup>87</sup> CR Lambert, letter to the Administrator of the Northern Territory, 10 May 1957, NAA: F1, 1974/2354.

<sup>88</sup> JC Archer, Housing Programme – Northern Territory, 15 August 1957, NAA: F1, 1974/2354. £3000 in 1957 was the equivalent of about \$62,580 in 2001; 10 squares = 93 square metres.

<sup>89</sup> Unit of space measurement: 1 square = 9.3 square metres, ie a 12 square house is approximately 112 square metres; an 8 square house is approximately 74.4 square metres.

<sup>90</sup> Whitehead, 'Becoming normal'.

<sup>91</sup> Confidential Cabinet Minute, Canberra, 17 September 1958, Submission no. 1344 Northern Territory: Housing for Persons other than Government Employees, NAA: F1, 1974/5231.

<sup>92</sup> NTAS, NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews, Marsh, Reg, TS 90 Tape 1, p. 10.

least 1954,<sup>93</sup> which aimed to ‘assimilate’ chosen families of Aboriginal descent into the mainstream suburbs of the Territory’s urban centres. Frank Wise as Administrator had been keen to promote a scheme of subsidised housing for ‘coloured couples and their families.’<sup>94</sup> ‘Coloured housing’, as this scheme was sometimes called, operated throughout the Territory but most enthusiastically in Alice Springs. In Alice it was sometimes called ‘Gap Housing’, not in the sense of stopgap, but in reference to the location of the houses – ‘fibro cottages on the Gap Road.’<sup>95</sup> The scheme was never very popular in Darwin.

This dedicated scheme had yet another complicated formula for calculating rent, separate from the Housing Commission or public service housing formulae. The ‘mixed-race’ housing scheme set rent at 20 per cent of the basic wage<sup>96</sup> less a weekly allowance to cover garbage, water and sanitation (not paid to the tenant but included in the total rental), with a further 20 per cent rebate for rent paid on time.

The problem with any formula tied to income was that there were clear cases where ‘mixed race tenants’ could not pay an economic rent without undue hardship because of the low wages they received. On the other hand, the Commonwealth rejected special rental conditions based ‘only on race.’<sup>97</sup> Legislative Council member and lawyer Dick Ward knew that without rental assistance of some kind many families would be locked out of the scheme despite ‘living in deplorable conditions.’<sup>98</sup>

It was an awkward problem for the government. The Commonwealth recognised the importance of the home:

if mixed-race and aboriginal families in the Northern Territory are to be provided with a better standard of housing and encouraged to move out of sub-standard dwellings and their general standard of living raised, it will be necessary to fix rentals at a figure within

---

<sup>93</sup> RK McCattery, Acting Director of Native Affairs, to Administrator, 3 February 1954, pp. 9–10, NAA: F1, 1952/250.

<sup>94</sup> FJS Wise, Administrator, to Secretary, Department of Territories, 9 July 1954, NAA: F1, 1952/250. In 1954, £30,000 was the equivalent of about \$696,000 in 2001 value.

<sup>95</sup> See, for example, Alec Kruger’s account of moving in to the Gap Settlement housing in the 1950s. He, like Barbara Cummings, describes a sense of community and extended family in the corporate identity forged amongst what he termed the ‘Gappies’, which included sharing resources and barracking for the same football team. A Kruger and G Waterford, *Alone on the Soaks: The Life and Times of Alec Kruger*, IAD Press, Alice Springs, 2007, pp. 239f.

<sup>96</sup> As noted above, for 1959 a Commonwealth basic wage for the Northern Territory was £14.15.0: *Year Book Australia*, 1959, taken from ABS <[www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)> accessed 15 September 2008. Approximate equivalents: £14.15.0 in 1959 = \$307.44 in 2001.

<sup>97</sup> Typewritten draft, Department of Territories, Rental for Houses Provided for Mixed-Race Families in the Northern Territory, 1 September 1960, NAA: F1, 1974/5231.

<sup>98</sup> R Ward, Housing Commission Bill, *Legislative Council Debates*, 14 January 1959.

the means of the average mixed-race or aboriginal tenant so that no undue hardship or distress will result.<sup>99</sup>

At the same time, the government did not want a rental rebate and did not wish to institute yet another separate scheme for Aboriginal housing.<sup>100</sup>

The notion of a Housing Commission was greeted by the Northern Territory Administration as a way of addressing the needs of 'part-coloured' families. The Administrator, 'Clarrie' Archer, wrote:

Now that the Government has accepted in principle the establishment of a housing commission it is considered that responsibility for part-coloured housing will be embraced among the responsibilities of the commission once it starts to operate, because the criteria which it will be required to observe in the letting of the houses will give priority to those people whose need at present justifies a special housing scheme. It is not considered desirable to have running parallel three housing schemes, i.e. for public servants, for part-coloured persons and for the general public other than part-coloured persons...<sup>101</sup>

Despite everyone's hopes for mainstreaming, it is clear that distinctions were made between the different groups – and the system of social differentiation that Archer hoped to avoid was established. Canberra did not support the Housing Commission supplying housing for 'part-coloured' families. As the Minister himself noted, the Housing Commission hadn't been set up to deal with 'this particular social problem.'<sup>102</sup>

Native Welfare Branch lobbied to include housing for 'part-coloured families' as a part of the essential mandate of the Housing Commission but their demands were extremely modest – for the 1959–60 budget, it was proposed to construct five of these houses in Darwin with a view to more in future.<sup>103</sup> Clearly this would not address the need, since an estimated 93 eligible families required housing in Darwin as of April 1958.<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Typewritten draft, Department of Territories, Rental for Houses Provided for Mixed-Race Families in the Northern Territory, August 1960, NAA: F1, 1974/5231.

<sup>100</sup> Typewritten draft, Department of Territories, Rental for Houses Provided for Mixed-Race Families in the Northern Territory, 1 September 1960, NAA: F1, 1974/5231.

<sup>101</sup> JC Archer to the Secretary, Department of Territories, n.d. (date-stamped 24 June 1958), NAA: F1, 1958/351.

<sup>102</sup> Whitehead, 'Settling Down', p. 282.

<sup>103</sup> HC Giese, teleprint message to Works, 3 April 1959, NAA: F1, 1958/351.

<sup>104</sup> CR Lambert, Secretary, Department of Territories, to Administrator, 10 May 1958, NAA: F1, 1958/351. The majority of these families lived in Stuart Park (48 at Parap 118 Camp and 11 at Stuart Park), with a further 24 families in Winnellie; Salonica had five families, Pee Wee Camp two, and Vestey's had one family: JC Archer, Administrator, to Secretary, Department of Territories, n.d. (date-stamped dispatched 7 March 1958), NAA: F1, 1958/351.

Archer realised that the nature, development and very character of the town lay squarely with this section of the population because of their long-term commitment to staying in Darwin and building the region through work:

I do not need to stress to you that unless this housing programme for part-coloured persons is adequately tackled it will not be possible for us to undertake the programme of native welfare which has been planned, and we will be left with segregated slum communities on the outskirts of the normal community ... Furthermore, it must be recognised that the part-coloured families form an integral part of the Northern Territory community; they have their roots in the Northern Territory and are extremely unlikely to want to leave the Territory to seek work elsewhere. In these circumstances they represent permanent assets to the Northern Territory, and *in my view every attempt should be made on this basis alone to provide suitable housing units for them.*<sup>105</sup>

Archer here drew out what others had commented on but not addressed, that is, that the Commonwealth focus upon housing for public servants did not benefit the long-term development of Darwin as a town. Darwin's economic and cultural future could only be guaranteed by providing secure accommodation to that section of the community who intended to stay in the town for the long-term. By the end of the decade, the 'Territory' perspective had started to differ on a number of points from the 'Canberra' viewpoint.

Despite the harsh conditions and, in particular, the very poor housing and accommodation most Darwin people experienced, many remember the decade positively. This includes many people who were arguably in the most disadvantaged category, that is, those people accommodated in camps or institutional 'homes'.

As former Retta Dixon resident Barbara Cummings asserted, the people who arguably suffered most disadvantage in this decade formed the nucleus which enabled the city to grow and would continue to give Darwin its unique character:

We have survived. Aboriginal people from the days of Kahlin Compound, police paddock and the Parap and Winnellie camps, have constituted a large and identifiable part of the cosmopolitan and multi-racial population of the Territory and will continue to do so...<sup>106</sup>

My study reveals that the great difficulties of housing in Darwin in the 1950s were shared. It was difficult for anyone apart from the most senior public servant to achieve security of housing – and even that was usually conditional upon holding the position. The extreme shortages forced a kind of democracy

---

<sup>105</sup> JC Archer to Secretary, Department of Territories, n.d. (date-stamped dispatched 7 March 1958), NAA: F1, 1958/351; my emphasis.

<sup>106</sup> B Cummings, *Take this Child*; see also Bauman, *Aboriginal Darwin*, p. 136.

upon Darwin's citizens. Housing in the old wartime camps was primitive and conditions tough, but people helped each other; in doing so, they became active agents for political change in Darwin.

Despite the numerous schemes proposed throughout the decade to encourage a spirit of civic consciousness or sense of self help for the tenants, what people really remember as fundamental to the decade was the sharing of hardship and the creation of corporate entities of loyalty and political action as a result of the enforced communal living in the camps. There was a select core of public service employees who lived above the others in their elevated louvered public service housing, the so-called 'government greys',<sup>107</sup> but they were always viewed as separate from the rest of Darwin – transient, temporary, just passing through.

Darwin people suffered hardship, but they also partied hard; the weather was tropical and the town was 'free and easy.'<sup>108</sup> The local music scene arguably reached a creative height not matched again with a unique Darwin sound that reflected Aboriginal, Pacific, Islander and Asian influences. Probably most importantly, everyone was young.<sup>109</sup> Tom Baird remembered:

I often think back over the years and, you know, of all your luxuries instead of having all the country to yourself – no laws and no worries about anything, you know, you just go where you wanted to; fish where you wanted to fish and that. Now all the restrictions are coming in – its nowhere near the lifestyle that Darwin used to have... After the war people ... they were easy going, very friendly and if there was a party going you were invited whether you were asked or not... it doesn't matter what colour or creed you were, and if you left money on the table somebody'd say, 'I took half a quid off you, I'll pay it back next week.' That was all right, no trouble about it ... they were genuine honest people ... that sort of lifestyle gradually faded out...<sup>110</sup>

Most of the townsfolk who actually lived in Darwin shared the hardships equally and, for the most part, no one was seen as better off or different from

---

<sup>107</sup> This was the name given to the C and D series elevated fibrocement housing built for public servants throughout the 1950s. Adrian Welke uses this term; David Bridgeman quotes Ken Frey: D Bridgeman, 'Modern or modernism: building Darwin in the 1950s', *Territory in Trust*, vol. 24, no. 1, January–June 2007, p. 12. See also D Bridgeman, *acclimatization [architecture at the top end of australia]*, Royal Australian Institute of Architects, ACT, 2003, pp. 83f. for more on this.

<sup>108</sup> NTAS, NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews, Ashelford, Frederick John, TS 449, p. 65.

<sup>109</sup> Ken Frey said, 'All the older people from Darwin had been moved out during the war; not that many of them actually came back.' NTAS, NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews, Frey, Ken, TS 630, p. 13 (T3).

<sup>110</sup> NTAS, NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews, Baird, Tom, TS 155, p. 13–14.

anyone else. Tenants complained that the huts at Vestey's let in the water and that they were never dry. The Administrator of the Northern Territory's roof leaked in the wet season and the administration struggled, unsuccessfully, to find other appropriate accommodation in Darwin for its most senior political appointment.<sup>111</sup>

The public housing of the 1950s, with its multicultural, multiracial communities, had generated a particular kind of social makeup in the town. New corporate identities had grown up around communities that had sprung up around the camps, hostels and even the institutions that provided a home to the Darwin residents. People would speak about the uniqueness of the Darwin identity, predicated upon sharing of hardships, poverty, heat and entertainment. Long-term residents look back nostalgically to postwar Darwin as a town of friendliness and trust, without doors or locks.

But the enforced cooperation of the camps, institutions and hostels also enabled Darwin people to begin working together cooperatively for political change. At first this took the form of grass roots organisations with the simple aim of bettering conditions. As the 1950s progressed, political changes included the reinstatement of the Darwin Town Council in 1957, city status for Darwin in 1959, and, also in that year, the number of elected members in the Legislative Council was raised to six. In addition, also in 1959, the right to vote on Territory matters was granted to the Territory member for the House of Representatives. Although these changes appear small, they marked huge steps forward in democratic representation for Darwin people.

Former senior public servant Reg Marsh commented on the spirit of the times:

There was a great Northern Territory patriotism. It was a really vital force... As fruits of that patriotism, you see, they got self-government... In a way Hasluck started it ... He did his bit. Archer did his bit. They created the machine that could make some claim to be able to run the place.

Then on the political side, Tiger [Brennan] and Dick [Ward]<sup>112</sup> ...

---

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, correspondence on this topic in NAA: F1, 1953/277, which indicates this had been a problem probably dating back to when the Administrator's accommodation was bombed in 1942, but at least from 1951 onwards.

<sup>112</sup> Harold Charles Brennan, or 'Tiger' Brennan as he was known, returned to the Territory after military experience during World War II and successfully stood as an Independent for the seat of Batchelor in the Northern Territory Legislative Council in 1955. He was, among other things, a passionate advocate for political reform for the Territory and personally went to Canberra where he argued vociferously with Hasluck and others for more self government and greater Territory representation in the Commonwealth Parliament. He continued to fight for this throughout his life and died in Darwin on New Years Day 1979: B James, 'Brennan, Harold Charles ('Tiger')', in D Carment and B James (eds), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 2, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1992, pp. 20f. Richard Charles Ward or 'Dick' Ward, a law graduate, saw active military service during World War II and stood successfully for the Legislative Council in 1947 when based in Alice Springs but did not contest the seat in 1949. In 1956 he, with Paddy Carroll, was elected for the seat of Darwin. Ward was sometimes known as 'Red Richard'; a dedicated socialist, he eventually joined the

they did a remarkable job and they expressed Territory patriotism.<sup>113</sup>

David Carment has argued that in the contemporary period governments have promoted a particular kind of regional political identity for Territory residents which he calls, ironically, 'Territorianism'. This is, he says, a device to establish 'bonds of loyalty to the Territory among its non-Aboriginal population, most of whom came from other parts of Australia and the world.'<sup>114</sup>

The notion in Northern Territory politics that there is a kind of separate identity – the Territory 'patriot' – that cuts across traditional allegiances and boundaries to define a new loyalty of place, current in the contemporary period, has its clear origins in the 1950s.

In the steps towards political autonomy and self-government of the Northern Territory, the grass roots actions by its citizens, in banding together to facilitate social change, have somehow been forgotten. It is salutary to remember that significant political changes were taking place amongst the people of the camps and huts, and that their actions brought about a more just society with greater equality, democracy and sharing of resources.

A study of housing in Darwin in the 1950s offers many insights into the past and the present. Whilst the decade began in poverty and poor conditions that were common to many, the enforced sharing of hardship, nonetheless, had a unifying effect. If the hardship and isolation reinforced a sense of Territorians against Canberra, this too would become a significant factor in the formation of a distinct identity within the community that found expression in political action. Modern Darwin is a city of transience and rebuilding, and there is apparently little there to remind the visitor of life even before Cyclone Tracy. Nonetheless, there are continuous political, cultural and social threads that endure that have clear origins in the postwar period.

---

Labor Party in the 1960s. Dick Ward was well known as an advocate for the poor and the disadvantaged, and he died in 1977. Ron Withnall in tribute said: 'In the formative days in the development of political institutions in the Northern Territory he was a leader...': B James, 'Ward, Richard Charles (Dick)', in D Carment and Helen J Wilson (eds), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 3, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1996, pp. 332f.

<sup>113</sup> NTAS, NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews, Marsh, Reg, TS 90 Tape 1, p. 6. Former Territory Administrator 'Aubrey' Abbott also used the term. He lamented that the Territory 'has not produced a local patriot who can speak for his country and urge its progress': CLA Abbott, *Australia's Frontier Province*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1950, p. 204.

<sup>114</sup> D Carment, *Territorianism: Politics and Identity in Australia's Northern Territory 1878–2001*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2007, p. 8.

## Notes

Historical material from the postwar period inevitably means dealing with nomenclature that would not be considered appropriate or acceptable in the contemporary context. Use of terms such as ‘half-caste’ or ‘part-coloured’, for example, are acknowledged to be offensive and are only used in quotations specifically relating to the period. Use of these terms is not endorsed by the author and only included where unavoidable as evidence of policy and language from the period.

It is always difficult to make sense of cost and pricing in the pre-decimal period, particularly as costs and wages have increased overall. Using the formula recommended by the University of Melbourne Giblin Economics and Commerce Library web page (<http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/ecocom/giblinfaq.html>), based on a ratio created through comparison of Australian Bureau of Statistics Consumer Price Index figures between the year given and the latest figures available, 2001, modern estimates in dollars are given in the footnotes for those interested in indicative costs. When possible, original prices are matched to other costs at the time, such as wages, to provide a relative guide.

The original Imperial measurements of length, volume, area etc given at the time are used in the text but footnotes provide the metric equivalent.

Original spelling in quoted material is retained.

*© 2008 Mickey Dewar. Dr Mickey Dewar is currently working as a freelance historian and museums policy consultant based in Darwin, and teaching northern Australian history at Charles Darwin University. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent those of the National Archives of Australia.*