

dream

EXCLUSIVE

AMOS AIKMAN

NORTHERN CORRESPONDENT

IN subtle tones and halting words, the bush is waking up.

From the West Australian border to the Eastern Plenty, central Australian indigenous communities are starting to use their newfound voice in the wake of last month's Northern Territory election, which for the first time saw Aborigines grasp the power of the swinging vote.

In six communities and two outstations visited by *The Weekend Australian* in the past week as part of a tour organised by Minister for Regional Development and Indigenous Advancement Alison Anderson to show senior bureaucrats first-hand the problems that led to the former Labor administration's dramatic loss, people came together to demand better housing, more jobs and the resurrection of local control.

"This is where service delivery has really failed. These people have been really neglected," Ms Anderson said.

"I took these bureaucrats out there so they could see with their own eyes the failure of government service delivery. It's also Labor's failure."

At Mosquito Bore, one of a group of outstations and communities known as Utopia about 200km northeast of Alice Springs, Violet Pitjara lives in a single-storey "tin house" backing on to a swamp. The swamp periodically floods, washing the dirt out from beneath her slab, while the house is little more than a lightweight shipping container, perforated by window holes. It is baking in the summer and freezing at night, furnished only by a single chair and a makeshift bed that she and her relatives share.

Inside, an unrefrigerated packet of sausages sits open on a dirty bench, beside some milk powder and a stale crust of bread, while the dust wafts through. A doorway at one end, marked with a rough cross, leads to an empty room.

"We've got nothing here. No jobs, nothing for the young people," Ms Pitjara said.

"All the time, people come here to promise us things, but nothing ever happens."

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Violet Pitjara has reported the broken fittings in her house, in the central Australian outstation Mosquito Bore, but says no one has come to help

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From east to west across Ms Anderson's vast desert seat of Namatjira, covering the southern part of the Territory, people complained of chronic overcrowding and housing management and maintenance problems, in spite of record recent investment.

They also said the former Labor government's centralising shire reforms had robbed them of employment, assets and a voice in the running of services and maintenance affecting their lives.

"We want to go forward. We don't want to live in the olden days," pastor Howard Smith told a gathering at Docker, a community close to the West Australian border. "But the shires took away our power, making us feel like we're living in the past. We feel hopeless and helpless."

At Kintore, a community north of Docker River, Ms Anderson said local residents had "lost all interest because someone else is doing everything for them".

"They just say, 'If the toilet is blocked, let that toilet be blocked',

and forget about it, because it's not their responsibility any more," she said.

Under existing contracts, the NT local government shires have responsibility for housing maintenance and tenancy management, co-ordinated by the NT government and paid for largely with commonwealth revenue.

However, in Ms Pitjara's house, the hot-water system and most of the electrical fittings are broken, there is no heating or cooling and, nearby, a commercial washing machine stands idle, brought in but never connected.

Like many others, Ms Pitjara says she has reported the problems, but no one has come to fix them.

Len Griffiths, central Australian regional executive director for housing, local government, regional development and indigenous affairs, says the shires have been relying largely on outside contractors for maintenance. Some charge up to \$2000 just for a remote call-out.

"A lot of people have been saying, 'Why do we have to wait weeks

to get a tap fixed? Why do we have to get people in from outside to do work in the community?'" he said.

He proposes establishing community work squads to conduct maintenance, as pathways to full employment.

Ms Anderson says vast commonwealth and NT government bureaucracies are consuming too many resources inefficiently, leaving indigenous communities with "half a peanut". She says the government has to get better at checking to see that work paid for has been delivered.

"Everything seems to be too hard, too complicated for people living the simplest of lives," Ms Anderson said.

In Docker River, Tjubia Tjakati pays rent, but has never had a house, she says. While in Kintore, Kaylene Nangala and her sick husband say they pay for a house in another community.

In several communities, the Housing Reference Groups required by the commonwealth to give locals a say in housing allocation have not met or not met properly for more than a year.

Such failed meetings are not necessarily recorded as failures by the high-paid bureaucrats given large travel allowances to visit remote communities, who themselves sometimes arrive without community members being properly informed, *The Weekend Australian* was told.

Steve Edgington, regional executive director of housing for the Barkly Region, covering the north of Namatjira, says accountability is a key problem.

"I think if we had one person in each community authorised and accountable for fulfilling a plan in each community, that would be a significant step forward," Mr Edgington said.

At present, commonwealth government business managers in most communities are supposed to fulfil a similar role. However, they have earned the nickname of "gingerbread men" among locals for being inert.

Ms Anderson flagged the prospect of changes to partnership arrangements with the commonwealth. The new conservative Country Liberal Party govern-

ment will give communities the option to break away from the shire model and form their own, regional community councils based on tribal affinities.

It is also considering leveraging the welfare stream to increase workforce participation and give communities more control over their affairs, by establishing work programs similar to the old Community Development Employment Projects. Participants would be paid "top up" money for engaging in community chores.

Scott McConnell, chief executive of Ingerkerke Outstation Resource Services, supports the idea of on-community maintenance, but warns work and welfare "cannot be combined".

"We need to make sure that this program doesn't keep people stuck so they can't progress to real jobs," he said.

Menial tasks could be accomplished through such programs, but as much service delivery as possible should be put out to private tender, with private, community-based businesses encouraged to apply, he says.