

World Indigenous Housing Conference, National Housing Ministers' Forum, 'Building Homes That Last'

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Acknowledgements

Thank you Mr Tarbell for your kind introduction.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I acknowledge traditional owners with us today, including Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

I would also like to acknowledge:

- The many Chiefs and elected leaders participating in the Conference today.
 - The Hon Tariana Turia, Associate Minister for Housing from New Zealand, whom I understand will address the Conference later today; and
 - The Aboriginal Housing Management Authority, led by Andrew Leach and the World Indigenous Housing Conference Committee for their work in organising this Conference.
- It's a pleasure to be with you today. The past couple of days have been an important opportunity to consider how we can work together to ensure that our children can grow up healthy, and with a roof over their heads.

Introduction

There is much about the home that is hidden from public view. Our homes should be safe places, private refuges from the outside world.

For Indigenous people living in remote Australia, home can be thousands of kilometres from a major city, in places many Australians will never travel to.

But out of sight shouldn't be out of mind, and in Australia, remote Indigenous housing was out of the spotlight for too long.

The consequence was that houses in remote communities in Australia were literally left to fall down around peoples' ears.

And that is completely unacceptable.

We know that good housing is critical. Indigenous people tell me that – and housing has been the subject of many of my conversations with people in communities right across Australia.

Decent housing provides a firm foundation for life – it can provide security, safety, and stability.

Decent housing is a base from which children can go to school each day and parents to work.

In 2008, in my first months as Minister for Indigenous Affairs, I visited Groote Eylandt. Groote sits to the north of Australia about 50 kilometres off the coast of the Northern Territory.

It is even further north from our capital in Canberra than the Yukon is from Ottawa. Groote is home to about 1,500 people, the Anindilyakwa (*Anin-dilly-arkwa*) people.

The mine on Groote produces more than 15 per cent of the world's manganese and is one of the most profitable on earth.

In 2008, in some cases only metres away from that mine, many of the traditional owners of Groote Eylandt were living still in shocking conditions.

More than 60 per cent of the houses were overcrowded.

Many were derelict.

People were being hospitalised because of diseases associated with poor housing and environmental health.

Children weren't going to school, were wandering the streets late at night.

Tragically, this was a story echoed across remote Australia, pain woven through the lives of many communities.

The town camps on the outskirts of Alice Springs, in central Australia, were among the worst examples of this.

It's a place where houses sat beyond repair. Alcohol visibly ravaged communities, resulting in terrible health, terrible violence and terrible tragedy. Incidences of child neglect and family violence were rife. Old women slept outside on mattresses.

People were born, grew up in, and raised their own children in poor housing, with poor sanitation and terrible overcrowding.

This wasn't any place fit for a home.

Governments of the past had walked away rather than face up to the challenges of communally owned land, with government owned housing on it. Responsibility for basic maintenance, essential amenities, was hopelessly unclear.

In modern Australia, it's not acceptable that children live without running water, clean kitchens and good sanitation.

It's not acceptable that children live in overcrowded houses, where they can't get a good night's sleep or do their homework in a quiet space.

It's not acceptable – but for too many, this is the reality.

This was the result of dispossession, of injustice and of decades of failed policy.

It was the result of Indigenous disadvantage, for too long, remaining out of sight and out of mind for many Australians.

For more than 200 years, our nation perpetrated a falsehood against Indigenous people, arguing the principle of terra nullius – that there were no inhabitants when the British colonised the Australian continent.

We have now faced the facts, revealed the falsehood, in our High Court's historic Mabo decision in 1992. We enacted the Native Title Act the following year, which recognised in law the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over their traditional lands.

Statutory land rights schemes in the Northern Territory, South Australia and New South Wales, and to a lesser extent in Victoria and Queensland already existed.

And half of the Northern Territory is now Aboriginal land.

For two centuries, our nation perpetrated great injustices against Indigenous people, including removing children from their families and families from their land.

We faced the facts, and in 2008 our former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said sorry, on behalf of the Australian Parliament and the Australian people for past injustices.

And we faced the facts about the levels of disadvantage still faced by so many Indigenous Australians, particularly in remote communities.

Because for decades, governments had failed Aboriginal people.

While we had taken important steps – such as the Mabo decision – more needed to be done to

change the living circumstances for Indigenous people, particularly those living in remote communities.

Because if anything, living conditions in remote Australia had declined.

Houses had been constructed in an ad hoc fashion, and without real input from the communities they were built for.

The population was increasing as housing stock declined.

In the town of Wadeye, south west of Darwin, with a population of 2,500, around 80 babies are born each year.

But houses were falling down faster than they were being built.

Most houses in remote communities had at best a seven year life span, while social housing in urban and regional Australia usually lasts at least 30 years.

Chronic overcrowding meant that as many as 17 people would be living in one house. These facts are confronting. And overcoming the challenges can be more confronting still.

But it's not a reason to turn away – it's a reason to press on.

Since the election of our government in 2007, we have embarked on a generation-long effort to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage.

We have brought the challenges facing Indigenous Australians – including in remote housing – into the light.

We have brought Indigenous Australians into the conversation. We can't hope for change without working in partnership with Indigenous people. People must have a say over what happens on their land.

We have set clear and measurable targets, against which we will hold ourselves and successive governments accountable in an annual report to the nation's Parliament.

Targets in education, in health, in employment and in life expectancy.

Built on firm foundations – schools, health services and housing.

The foundations for change

Because good policy, like good houses, has to be built on firm foundations.

Our starting point in working to address the challenge of housing – not just for this generation, but for generations to come – has been building firm foundations.

We acknowledge and support the inalienable and communal rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over their traditional lands.

We believe that tenants in houses in remote communities, like tenants everywhere, should pay fair rent – and should have rights in relation to their houses, their maintenance and repair.

That wasn't happening, because the responsibility for those houses was unclear.

Statutory land rights schemes allow for Land Trusts, on behalf of the traditional owners, to hold the land under communal title.

Governments who built houses on Aboriginal land were unclear about who owned the houses once they were built.

Because the land was communally owned, housing providers had no security over their assets.

Fair rent wasn't being collected, so there were limited resources for repairs and maintenance on the houses.

And houses fell down around peoples' ears.

So we worked to fix that. We set out the responsibilities – of communities, governments and tenants – just like in cities and towns across the country.

We commenced negotiations with traditional owners for voluntary leases. Leases respect the underlying communal title of traditional owners, provide certainty for governments and for tenants, and make the responsibility of governments for building, maintenance and repair crystal clear.

One of my first acts as a new Minister was to sign the township lease for Groote Eylandt. This allows for subleases to be managed, in accordance with the terms and conditions agreed with traditional owners, for the construction of new homes, for the shape of a town to emerge.

In 2008, we agreed with all state and territory governments a new housing agreement, with clear and measurable targets, to:

- reduce severe overcrowding in remote Indigenous communities;
- increase the supply of new houses;
- improve the condition of existing houses in remote communities; and
- ensure that rental houses are well maintained and managed.

And we matched that commitment with dollars -- we have committed \$5.5 billion over ten years to secure these goals.

We insisted on building regulations for all buildings constructed through the program – which had never applied in remote communities before.

All buildings funded through the agreement must be designed and delivered in line with the requirements of the National Indigenous Housing Guide, the National Construction Code and

all Australian standards and construction legislation.

And we started work with Indigenous communities about the houses they needed.

For some communities, these conversations are the first they have been involved in about the future and the planning of their towns.

Our lease proposal for voluntary leases includes a whole of community survey to support proper town planning and encourages the economic development decided on by traditional owners.

Communities – in planning their housing – are building their futures.

On Groote Eylandt, housing supports large extended families living close to each other, but with the comfort and independence of their own discrete family units.

They are built to withstand cyclones, but are designed to allow for cross ventilation and natural breezes.

In the Northern Territory, we are building nearly 1,500 houses, every single one of which will comply with relevant requirements. Nearly half of these have now been delivered.

All upgrades to existing houses will comply with Residential Tenancy Act standards, and with the introduction of proper tenancy management we have clarified responsibilities so that houses, once repaired, will also be maintained.

And we are investing, with the Territory Government, in essential infrastructure – power and water supplies, new subdivisions, new streets. When we reach our targets, the vast majority of houses in remote communities in the Territory will be to standard. For the first time, they will be managed as part of the Northern Territory social housing system.

And they are built by Indigenous people.

We have insisted on a minimum of 20 per cent Indigenous labour in the construction of houses in remote communities, and in many places this has been higher than 30 per cent.

Indigenous people aren't just getting a new house, they're getting a new trade and a good job.

We're not just building houses – we're building them to last.

On Groote Eylandt, the completion of a new house is a cause for great celebration.

Elston Mamarika is a trainee carpenter up there. He said:

When we finish a house we have a big party, with heaps of people and we sing for our land, traditional songs. We are proud to finish a house.

In Alice Springs, we are delivering on a transformation plan which has seen the construction of 86 new homes and the repair of another 196 houses.

We have built special accommodation for people who are coming and going from the town camps, and we are delivering more support to help people suffering alcohol addiction, and to address family violence.

We have worked with the people of the Alice Springs Town Camps to build a town – with streets, and blocks of land, with street numbers, lights and letter boxes.

The first postal services to the camps began in October last year.

Across remote Australia we have built well over 1,000 new houses and we have refurbished more than 4,000.

About half of the 9,000 families targeted for assistance – families who were not living in suitable accommodation before this work began -- are already benefitting from new or improved housing.

On homelands, we have extended funding for essential services like clean water, power, sewerage systems and road maintenance. Through the National Affordable Housing Agreement we fund the Northern Territory government to maintain houses, including on outstations.

Nationally, we are supporting more than 300 community based Indigenous housing organisations bring more than 7,500 houses to public housing standard, with an investment of more than \$400 million.

And in urban and regional areas, more than 17,000 new homes have been delivered so far to vulnerable Australians – about 14 per cent of whom are Indigenous Australians.

Indigenous Business Australia approved more than 600 new loans last year alone to Indigenous people. Over the next four years, we will help more than 2,000 Indigenous families to own their own home. On Aboriginal land, home ownership is more complex. When land is held by communal title, banks are reluctant to provide finance to build new homes. Governments can be reluctant to invest in infrastructure, and to undertake the necessary land surveying and town planning.

These are barriers we must work to overcome. We must find a balance between building homes, supporting economic development on Indigenous land and respecting the communal title of that land.

On the New South Wales central coast, Darkinjung (*Dark-in-jung*) Local Aboriginal Land Council, has developed some creative solutions to these problems.

The Land Council is the largest private land holder in the region, and holds prime residential land just over an hour from Sydney.

Many local Aboriginal people haven't benefitted from the capital gains of increasing property values because they don't own a home – they didn't have a credit history, or a good renter's reference, a permanent job or savings to break into the housing market.

To address this problem, the Land Council is developing 1,500 residential housing blocks and will keep 150 of these for affordable housing for Aboriginal people. They have developed a 'rent to buy' package, through which families will pay rent to the Land Council at the same rate as if it were a mortgage for 5 years.

After five years, the Council will return 60 per cent of the rent to them as a cash deposit. Tenants will be able to walk into a bank with equity, a deposit and sound references as a good tenant.

In Cape York, the northern most tip of the Australian mainland, we have been working with local people and the state government to provide Indigenous people with the opportunity to own their own homes.

We are developing new ways for local Aboriginal Councils to manage town planning and development – so local people can support each other on the path to home ownership.

We have a lot more work to do.

And our work to date has not been easy.

When we started work, we were confronted by the scale of the change – many more houses than we had anticipated were beyond economic repair and required a complete rebuild.

We restructured funding to make sure we would still meet our housing targets, and we now have more knowledge, better relationships and are on the ground in a way we have never been before.

We have had many front page stories about the disrepair of housing in remote communities.

This isn't a bad thing – it means that the questions and the challenges of remote housing have emerged from out of sight, to front of mind, for the Australian people.

Conclusion

Families now have a place to call home.

Homes where they can now prepare food in proper kitchens, bathe children and wash clothes.

Homes where children can get a good night's sleep.

A young couple called Caine and Roxanne moved into the first duplex on Groote – having never before had a place to call their own. Caine told us:

It is much easier to get work when you have a house.

He mowed the lawn for the first time that week.

The task of rebuilding remote Australia has just begun, and it will take some time to complete.

And while we have put firm foundations in place, we have invested and we are seeing results, it's critical that the work continues.

We won't have done 'enough' for a very long time – as families and communities grow and prosper, we must ensure both public and private housing provision grows with them.

But with housing in our sights, no government will be able to put this out of mind. I do not for a second underestimate the challenges that still lie before us.

But I am optimistic that we have turned the corner in Australia. We are building homes to last.