

A VIEW FROM THE LONG GRASS

by W. Bartlett Day

In 1999 the Mayor of Darwin announced that ‘Aboriginal drifters and white trash’ would be harassed and driven from the city. ‘Tourists like to see Aborigines but begging is getting worse’ he told the Northern Territory News on February 11. The mayor called for a revival of the harassment campaign which began on Clean Up Australia Day in 1996 when the Darwin homeless were blamed for the city’s litter problems. Later the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory advocated that Aborigines creating a nuisance in public places should be ‘monstered and stomped on by the community’ (NT News April 17, 1997). Despite his zero tolerance policy, it was the Chief Minister who was thrown out by his own party. The latest tirade against the homeless was marked only by its racially-specific abuse. It is more usual to lump the homeless together as ‘itinerants’ or ‘long grassers’.

Frequent media references to the ‘itinerant problem’ in Darwin, is a non-discriminatory code for Aborigines without accommodation who are often seen sitting in groups in the parks and other public places. However, ‘itinerants’ is also a generalised category for migratory people without claim to the places they live, conveniently avoiding the claims of Aboriginal prior ownership of the land where Darwin now stands. This is despite the ‘complex and purposeful’ movement of ‘itinerant’ Aboriginal people between town and country described by a parliamentary inquiry report in 1992.

Authorities claim all are treated equally and if Aborigines want to live in town they can apply for housing like anyone else. But many caught up in the harassment of the homeless have lived in Darwin for most of their lives. They have established bushland camps in town after being evicted from state housing because their communal lifestyle does not suit a nuclear household. Now the NT Anti-Discrimination Commissioner has stepped in and urged the mayor to seek more positive solutions. In The Northern Territory News on February 12 the commissioner suggested the mayor use his influence to help set up appropriate accommodation ‘including serviced camping areas for remote area Aborigines’.

The need for shelter, services and land has been the grounds of two complaints to the Anti-Discrimination Commission by members of an Aboriginal group at Fish Camp, under the flight path of the International Airport, who have lived under canvas without power and water at various sites

around the city for over five years. Nothing has changed for them despite both their complaints being accepted by the commission.

Although their humpies and tarps distinguish them from 'itinerants', being without conventional shelter the Fish Camp people are grouped with 'the long grass people' of the Darwin area. In the tropical nights many Aborigines prefer sleeping in the open and cooking on a fire in the camps. Resources can also be pooled and extended kin accommodated in these sites which remain illegal except for four inadequate official town camp leases.

'Long grass' suggests the wild, untamed and hidden nature of their lifestyle although few of the homeless sleep in the two-metre high grass where there is little breeze and insects abound. However, it is the 'short grass people' in their suburban homes behind mown lawns who are hidden, while the lives of the homeless, without walls or property rights, remain open for all to see. Indeed, one researcher has noted that the Darwin media has 'something close to an obsession' with the bodily functions of the homeless.

The cutting of the grass and the cleaning up of litter also suggest the ordered taming and settling of the land, removing threats from an unfamiliar landscape and dispossessed indigenous people. Also, for Aborigines in the north, the establishment of a colonial land administration meant they could no longer regularly burn the grass, making a 'long grass' existence a symbol of powerlessness. Marcia Langton suggests Aboriginal people and their land management traditions have been 'rendered invisible' in Australian landscapes, in particular their use of fire. Without the power to burn the grass in the towns, the Aborigines are concealed in their long grass camps. Power resides with the 'short grass' people with their mown lawns who want the long grass people out of town.

On May 3, 1997 the *NT News* cartoonist drew a wall of flame threatening two oblivious long grass drinkers to illustrate the start of the dry season at a time when authorities were tightening controls. The Aborigines are now threatened by an environment they used to manage. Another *NT News* cartoon has a worried householder peering out a window complaining, 'I don't feel safe in my own home'. A ragged long grasser is answering, 'You should try it out here'. For the short grasser, the 'wilderness' with its untamed savages remains as a threat, for the long grasser what was once a managed 'wilderness' has become an unpredictable alienated place with the dangers of eviction or arrest.



Darwin officials want to forcibly discourage Aborigines from moving into the city where opportunities are greater. The remaining of Darwin's homeless Aborigines are to be moved into the established camps and reserves, which were created for other cultural groups. One of those town camps is to be 'relocated' to make way for a public park for a new apartments in the inner city. These policies are a form of 'ethnic cleansing', making way for more profitable land developments. Meanwhile the homeless groups, who are often the more traditional people, are called upon to perform cultural displays for functions and festivals. However, homeless Aborigines feel that despite their apparent lack of rights insinuated by the derogatory 'long grass' and 'itinerant' labels, they have more claim to be Darwin residents than most of those attempting to expel them.

Govt moves to clear Point camps



The NT Government has moved to evict campers from bushland at Lee Point.

Lands, Planning and Environment officers served eviction notices on people staying at two camps last week. The itinerant residents moved out on Friday.

Varying numbers of people had been living at the camps.

One resident, Bob Bumbabi, about 65, believed he had been living in his camp through wet and dry seasons for seven years.

He has moved to Kulaluk community at Coconut Grove.

Mr Bumbabi had been living with the Davies family from Maningrida.

He lost his hands and feet to leprosy and is a former resident of the old leprosarium at East Arm.

Richard Davies said yesterday that they had cared for the area and kept it clean.

"We were told we had to go," he said.

"We would like to be left here. We have been here a long time and we are a bit worried."

Complaints

A department spokesman said there had been complaints about rubbish from the campers.

"The decision was made to ask them to leave," he said.

The camps are near the popular Casuarina Coastal Reserve which includes Lee Point.



Warning ... no camping

Raymond Halliday helps Bob Bumbabi leave the camp after being evicted

Above: NT News 8th July 1996