

Aboriginal People of Darwin: the Bagot Community

By Dr Bill Day
2012

Introduction

The Bagot Community is situated on 23 hectares of suburban land on Bagot Road, surrounded on three sides by the suburb of Ludmilla. The community was founded in 1938 as an Aboriginal Reserve established to control and manage the increasing drift of Aboriginal people to Darwin from remote settlements, and to provide training in accordance with the prevailing policy of assimilation. Following a sudden turnaround in policy in the early 1970s, the reserve lost its direction and 'purpose for being' as an institution of control but remained as a segregated community reliant on government funding and living in an increasingly tense relationship with its suburban neighbours.

A brief history of the Bagot Community

After the Kahlin Aboriginal Compound was closed in 1937, the Assistant Chief Protector of Aborigines had recommended a property of 369 acres known as the 'Eight Mile' or 'Wilson's' next to the Ludmilla Creek that would make a suitable site for a new Aboriginal compound because it was beside the sea where Aborigines could fish or travel by canoe and also 'close to centres of totemic and ceremonial significance'. However, the Larrakia people expressed concern because they had heard that they were to be moved a long distance from the sea and away from their places of work (Wells 1995:26). With the Crown Land at Ludmilla Creek added to the newly created reserve it had an area of 743 acres [300 hectares] (Henderson 1984:6; Wells 1995:27).

Dr Cook, the Chief Protector of Aborigines and Chief Medical Officer in Darwin believed the new reserve would help control the spread of unauthorised Aboriginal camps around Darwin. He claimed, 'With the stricter supervision which must follow [the creation of Bagot Reserve] these camps will disappear and aboriginals now in the vicinity of Darwin will be concentrated under supervision.' Cook also maintained that without control, the scattered camps 'would be a menace to troops resident on the proposed aerodrome' (Henderson 1984:7; C. E. Cook to Administrator, 29 February 1937).

A fence was erected to separate the Compound from the 'Half-caste' Children's Home because it was the government policy to keep the children away from other Aboriginal people (Cummings 1990:38). Samantha Wells (1995:27) quotes a visiting missionary who wrote:

Our house was situated between the half-caste community on one side and the native quarter on the other...They were packed into these huts like sardines. You would be surprised at the number these of people these huts could hold. Most of the huts have a door but no window... There were two separate schools at the compound, one for the half-caste children and the other for the native children (Rotuman nd 7-8).

During World War II Aboriginal people on the reserve were evacuated until 1946 when the old RAAF camp at Berrimah, although 'in a state of disrepair,' was chosen as the most suitable location for the Aboriginal people returning to town (Berndt and Berndt 1987; Wells 1995:28). Until 1948, Bagot was occupied by 'half-castes' until 'full-bloods' were moved back from Berrimah that year. By that time the Retta Dixon Home for children had been gazetted on a new site at the corner of the reserve.

According to Barbara Cummings (1990:84) the missionaries had indoctrinated the children with a fear of Aboriginal people on the reserve. She writes: 'Many of these people were our countrymen, our grandmothers, cousins, brothers and sisters, some of whom came into the Home to work in the laundry or to chop wood. They were our kin and yet we were prevented from even talking to them' (*ibid*). The separation worsened in 1953 after the passing of the NT Welfare Ordinance. Under the new law, 'full-blood' Aboriginal people were declared to be Wards of the State with the Director of Welfare as their guardian. In Darwin they were expected to live at Bagot to be trained according to the new assimilation policy. The federal government wrote, 'As they progress towards assimilation, it is our intention that they should live in and with the rest of the community and that there should be no "native" quarter in Darwin' (cited in Woodward 1974:36).

During the 1950s and for much of the 1960s approximately 250 people lived at Bagot until the population stabilised to between 300 and 350, although the numbers rose to as many as 400 when visitors were in town (Woodward 1974:56; Bauman 2006:131-2). Some families whose fathers worked outside the reserve lived in 'model homes' and were photographed dining around their neatly set kitchen table to demonstrate their progress from 'transitional housing' to an ability to live as a suburban nuclear family. Other men and women lived in the single quarters, receiving a small 'training allowance' and eating in the communal dining room. Children attended school on the reserve and participated in interschool activities and eisteddfods. A preschool and health clinic was also established. Sports teams represented the reserve in basketball, football and many other sports. Open days were held annually, with traditional dancing, spear throwing and the like (see Day 2008:5).

The reserve is revoked

Meanwhile, after Darwin was declared a town in 1959 there was increasing pressure from politicians to move the Bagot Reserve. In that year the Mayor of Darwin, Mr J. Lyons, was quoted as saying, 'The way Darwin is growing leaving Bagot where it is would be like putting it in Smith Street. What a furore that would cause. It is high time Bagot was moved' (*NT News*, 2 January 1959, cited in *Bunji* October 1972 in Day 1993). Another prominent local politician stated in the NT Legislative Council, 'to put the natives further into the bush would be in their own interests,' adding, 'The town of Darwin is extending and we do require places within easy access to the city where people can live' (Hansard, 13 January 1959, cited in *Bunji* October 1972 in Day 1993).

In 1961 the Administrator, Roger Nott, wrote to Canberra suggesting that most of Bagot Reserve should be revoked to provide land for a suburban subdivision. His letter set out his reasons:

Because the Government has a considerable capital investment at Bagot and having regard to the fact that a large group of people now regard this area as home, many of whom will not move from the settlement into the normal community, I do not think that we could justify movement of the settlement to an area outside the Darwin town area even if a suitable place could be found. Moreover large numbers of the natives from Bagot now undertake employment in the Darwin area and with the Settlement situated as it is, these persons can travel to and from their jobs by normal transport.

In these circumstances I think we should consider retaining the present built up area of the settlement, including the garden area, and should provide a small green belt around this area to give opportunity for possible future development and to provide some insulation from the proposed housing sub-divisions. If this were done, the area of the Reserve would then be approximately 84 acres [34 hectares] which, in my view, would be sufficient for the immediate and future needs of this settlement (cited in Woodward 1974:56).

A report by the Aboriginal Land Rights Commissioner (Woodward 1974:55-64) documented the debate over the future of Bagot as recorded in internal government correspondence from the 1960s. Woodward (1974:55) believed 'it is worth setting out the history [of Bagot] in some detail, since it illustrates the way in which Aboriginal interests can be lost sight of when other requirements become pressing'. Woodward (1974:62) noted that the alienation of the Bagot land 'highlights the strength of the Aboriginal case for more land in the township of Darwin'.

The Minister for the Interior, Mr C E Barnes, issued a statement (cited in Woodward 1974:62). Barnes wrote:

Since its establishment, Bagot had served a very useful purpose, providing a home for Aborigines working in Darwin, and acting as a transit centre for those coming to the city for medical attention or special occasions. There was currently a programme for improvement of the buildings and facilities, and for the construction of individual homes where Aboriginal people could gain experience of normal home life under some guidance and be fitted to become fully responsible tenants in the general community...For this reason, and in keeping with its overall assimilation policy, the government had arranged with the Northern Territory Housing Commission that houses for Aborigines should be dispersed throughout new Darwin suburbs and that at least one house for each three blocks in the Bagot subdivision will be made available for Aborigines.

As Judge Woodward (1974:62) continued, 'It is difficult to see how it was ensured "that Aborigines would benefit from the sub-division."' The simple truth of the matter was that the scattered integration of Aborigines

was not what they wanted. They lost a large area of useful land and have nothing to show for it.' Woodward (1974:62) concluded, 'It also shows that the general Darwin community owes some land to Aborigines on the basis of past understandings' (*ibid*).

On June 9, the *NT News* (June 9, 1964) reported:

The residential subdivision to be created around and to include most of Bagot Welfare Reserve will contain 367 residential sites. The breaking up of Bagot Reserve – a major bone of contention in the NT Legislative Council and elsewhere for a number of years – was announced by the Minister for Territories, Mr Barnes, last week...the new subdivision will probably be called Ludmilla after the nearby creek.

After the passing of the Social Welfare Ordinance in 1964, instead of a small 'training allowance' residents were now entitled to Social Security payments. The dining rooms were closed and alcohol became more freely available on the reserve. Children were sent to a special class at Ludmilla Primary School.

Future plans

In June 1973, the Aboriginal Land Rights Commissioner reported on the Bagot submission:

The regular residents at the Bagot Reserve at Darwin have made it plain to me that their only concern is to obtain title to the Reserve so that they can develop it as an attractive and useful community living area. They foresee a mixture of houses and flats, including high-rise flats, with special provision for old-age pensioners. In due time they would expect to see the surrounding fence come down and all residents making use of outside schools, hospitals and other public facilities (Woodward 1973:25-30).



Above: Signs at the entrance to the Bagot Community, 2011 (*NT News*).

Surprisingly, the Bagot Council had made no claim for the large part of their reserve that had been resumed in 1965. As a result, the Gwalwa Daraniki Association at Kulaluk included in their land claim the area still lying vacant bounded by Fitzer Drive, Bagot Road, Totem Road to the sea, and Ludmilla Creek, including the old Bagot cemetery (*Bunji* October 1972, November 1973, May 1974, in Day 1993). Eventually, the vacant area revoked from the Bagot Reserve in 1965 was granted to the GDA as part of the Kulaluk Special Purpose Lease in August, 1979 (Day 1994:101; Wells 1995:61).

New homes were built as Bagot was re-established after Cyclone Tracy, until in the late 1970s the reserve was vested to an incorporated Aboriginal community council to become a self-governing community for permanent residents and visitors to Darwin. By 1978, vacation activities were being held for Bagot children as part of the Vacation Care program with a children's activity area and campsite on 'Bagot Beach' (Plater 1980; Day 1994:117; see also Henderson 1983; Day 2008b).

In 2007, the Federal Government Emergency Response, known as 'the Intervention' again introduced uncertainty and change through an imposed government policy. When the federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough visited Bagot in October 2007 he condemned the NT Government for tolerating the conditions at Bagot. Mr Brough told the media, 'There is no street lighting, substandard and overcrowded housing and residents are left to cope with problems of blow-ins.' Speaking about the boundary fence reminiscent of Northern Ireland or apartheid South Africa, Brough said: 'It's an appalling circumstance when a government of any persuasion puts a fence up between one part of the community and the other and lets what goes on behind it hide behind it' (Ravens 2007:5). At a meeting in the community hall, he informed residents that if re-elected the Howard government would convert the 23-hectare community into a 'normal suburb' (*ibid*).

Under the federal government proposal, a private developer would build 150 houses, a medical centre, shops and other facilities. Some areas would be set aside for Aboriginal people. Present tenants would have the opportunity to buy their own houses, provided they could finance a debt of up to \$50,000 for improvements (Day 2007:16). Tenants who continued renting would make their payments to Northern Territory Housing instead of the Aboriginal controlled housing corporation, guaranteeing that their rents would rise substantially. Not surprisingly, Brough was heckled by shocked and angry residents (Murdoch 2007a:6, 2007b).

After a change of government in late 2007 the uncertainty remained. A huge sign at the Bagot front gate warned visitors of heavy penalties for bringing alcohol or pornography into the community. The sign added that enquiries are to be directed to 'The Australian Government's Emergence Response Hotline'. No assistance has been offered to enforce these regulations. The newspaper reported that Bagot had been labelled a 'town camp', subject to alcohol and pornography restrictions. The same paper announced that

more than \$200 million had been cut from the NT Intervention program. The newspaper added that 500 residents shared 41 functioning houses. (*The Australian*, 14 May, 2005).

The controversy was reignited when the local member of the Legislative Assembly, Dave Tollner, introduced a motion into the NT Parliament proposing to convert Bagot into a 'normal suburb' (Rawlinson 2011; Calacouras 2009). Tollner suggested 'gifting' community houses to long-term residents who would then own their own homes. He added, 'Some of these people have lived there a long, long time. They are wonderful citizens of Darwin and there should be some recognition of their life there. People are saying, look we want to live a normal life, the days of town camps are over.' Tollner also quoted neighbours in adjoining streets who complained of 'late night music, swearing and yelling...' (Rawlinson 2011).

In response to Tollner's proposal, the NT Minister for Public Housing, Dr Chris Burns, noted, 'there is no simple way to make Bagot a 'normal suburb'. Taking a cautious approach, Burns said, 'Further major developments would require extensive changes to land tenure, funding arrangements, and must be supported by the community, the Australian Government and other important stakeholders' (Betts 2011). However, others suggested means to use the Bagot land as a showcase multiracial housing suburb with a central community centre, facilities, open spaces and a community council to serve all who will be living on the estate (Day 2009, 2011).

According to the alternative plan (Day 2009, 2011), the vacant land covering two thirds of the lease could be subdivided into 80 or more blocks to be sold with a row of investment apartments along the Bagot Road frontage. The sale and/or rental of investment properties managed by an Aboriginal Corporation would facilitate:

- An 'all purpose' community centre and sports field' to be an example of multiracial sharing, controlled by a council representing all residents of 'Old Bagot' and a new multi-racial Bagot.
- Bagot could retain its own council and medical service which would be represented on the 'umbrella' elected committee of stakeholders for the whole area.
- The money from the sale of the blocks would provide funding for housing for present-day Bagot residents and also a Trust Fund for the benefit of all Aboriginal people.
- Old and New Bagot would be integrated into the Kulaluk lease which would provide open space for sports fields (*ibid*).

Rather than a bold new approach, the Northern Territory Government (NTG) committed \$4 million to upgrade services and infrastructure in Bagot Community 'to the same standard as any other Darwin suburb'. The NTG stated that the upgrade will be completed over three financial years (2009/10, 2010/11 and 2011/12), with initial works commencing in August 2009, including the fencing of 36 residential houses, installing water meters on 56 residential houses and providing numbered letterboxes to houses (NTG 2008:1).

Yilli-Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation ('Yilli-Rreung') managed the first stage of works and Ironbark Employment and Training ('Ironbark') supplied labour and organised training. Meetings were to be held regularly between Bagot Council, the NT Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), the Government Business Manager, Yilli-Rreung and Ironbark to share ideas and provide feedback (NTG 2008:2). Items put forward at the meetings ranged from improved street lighting for community safety, building cement pathways throughout the community and installing speed bumps on internal roads. In addition, the Department of Construction and Infrastructure will prepare a report and develop a master plan, in consultation with Bagot Community residents and key stakeholders that identifies the long-term infrastructure priorities for Bagot Community (*ibid*).

Conclusion

Whether footpaths, numbered housing and extra street lighting will solve the problems of the Bagot Community, time will tell. The difficulties of administering an urban population from many different language groups across the Northern Territory are immense. Although the Bagot Community is located in the heart of Darwin, in many ways the people who live there have more in common with Indigenous people in remote areas than with other residents of the Territory's capital. This is a gap that remains to be crossed.

Larrakia representative organisations would agree that they do not speak for the Bagot Community, which has earned its own right to a place in the Darwin landscape. For many years, the Larrakia were the predominant group at Bagot but today only two Larrakia extended families remain in permanent residence – the Thompsons and the Rankins. However, whatever direction the Bagot Community takes in the future, its 400 residents will remain a significant and influential section of the Darwin Aboriginal population who cannot be ignored.

Unlike One Mile Dam, the Bagot community has too much political influence and their sorry history is too well-recorded for them to be threatened with eviction.¹ And unlike Knuckeyes Lagoon, Bagot is not strangled by bureaucratic inertia. However, unlike the Kulaluk lease, Bagot is restrained from considering commercial development and is mired in the tradition of its institutional past.

The mostly 'traditionally orientated' residents of Bagot live largely segregated lives but continue to exploit the natural resources of the Darwin harbour for bush foods. If Darwin is to develop as projected, the poverty and social problems of the gated Bagot Community will be increasingly contrasted negatively with the outside world. As people with a long historical connection to the Darwin scene and, as a result, with some political influence, the Bagot people have more right than most representative groups to be involved in consultations over Darwin futures.

¹ See Davidson (1974) 'The white man giveth and the white man taketh away'. *Canberra Times*, May 10, 1974.

References

- Betts, Alyssa 2011 No simple way to make Bagot a suburb, *Northern Territory News*, October 28, p.14.
http://www.ntnews.com.au/article/2011/10/28/269001_ntnews.html
- Berndt, R M and C H Berndt 1987 *End of an era: Aboriginal labour in the Northern Territory*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Calacouras, Nick 2009 Government pushes Bagot to be normal suburb, *Northern Territory News*, July 8.
- Cummings, Barbara 1990 *Take this child: from Kahlin Compound to the Retta Dixon Children's Home*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Davidson, Gay 1974 'The white man giveth and the white man taketh away'. *Canberra Times*, May 10, 1974.
- Day, W B, (ed) 1993 *The complete 64 editions of Bunji, newsletter of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement, 1971-1983*. Comb-bound compilation.
- Day, Bill 1994 *Bunji: a story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Day, Bill 2007 The wheel turns for homeless indigenous people in Darwin, 1967-2007 *Parity* 20(10):16.
- Day, Bill 2008a *A Bagot History*. Darwin: Unpublished report, 17 pp.
- Day, W B 2008b *Recommendations for a Kulaluk Wilderness, Heritage and Education Park: A last opportunity to be true to the vision of its founders?* Report to Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation.
- Day, Bill 2009 Letter to Sheila White, President Bagot Community Council, 22 July, 2009, 2pp. with map.
- Day, W B 2011 Letter from W B Day to President of Bagot Council, 22 March 2011.
- Henderson, Krimhilde 1983 *Land Use Field Study of the Kulaluk Area*. Darwin: Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Authority (unpublished).
- Henderson, Krimhilde 1984 *History of the Kulaluk lease*. Darwin: Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Authority (unpublished).
- Murdoch, Lindsay 2007a Brough decrees makeover for Darwin camp, *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 29:6.
- Murdoch, Lindsay 2007b Brough extends intervention to heart of Darwin, *The Age*, October 29.
- Northern Territory Government 2008 *Bagot Community Upgrade*, undated two-page media release.
- Plater, Diana 1980 Kids – Out and About, *The Star*, May 22.
- Ravens, Tara 2007 Brough heckled at Bagot in Darwin, *National Indigenous Times*, November 1, p.5.
- Rawlinson 2001 “Eyesore” Bagot community mooted for “beautiful suburb”, *ABC News*, October 27.
- Wells, Samantha 1995 *Town camp or homeland? A history of the Kulaluk Aboriginal community*. Darwin: Report to the Australian Heritage Commission.
- Woodward A E 1973 *First report of the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission*. Canberra: Australian Publishing Service
- Woodward A E 1974 *Final report of the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission*. Canberra: Australian Publishing Service