Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

An alliance of the CLC, NLC, CAALAS, NAAJA and AMSANT

MEDIA RELEASE

Tudge wrong on community housing crisis

Thursday, 11 September, 2014

APONT, the organisation which represents Aboriginal peak organisations in the Northern Territory, has rejected outright an attack on housing rights by Alan Tudge, who has responsibility to the Prime Minster for Indigenous employment policy.

Writing in *The Australian* on Tuesday, Mr Tudge said free houses in Indigenous communities have contributed to problems of welfare dependency as much as payments.

APONT spokesperson, John Paterson, said Mr Tudge's comments were irresponsible and factually wrong.

"Mr Tudge should know better – the Commonwealth Government was the landlord of remote community housing from 2007 to 2012," Mr Paterson said.

"There is no such thing as a free house in Indigenous communities in the NT, and for Mr Tudge to claim otherwise is inflammatory.

"The houses are not free or given to people – it is public housing, managed by the Northern Territory Government. To get a house people have to show that they are eligible – that they are homeless, live in an overcrowded house, have medical problems or suffer from domestic or family violence. Once they move in, they pay rent, just like any other tenant in Australia.

"All adult residents of houses in remote communities are expected to pay rent, and given that most houses are overcrowded, the rent charged can be higher than the market value of the house

"And there is a real shortage of houses in remote communities that can't be denied: the report that launched the Intervention estimated that 4000 houses were needed to adequately house the population in 2007[1]; NPARIAH built 1465 houses in 16 of 73 remote communities.

"In fact people in public housing in urban and remote areas cannot get rent assistance, despite paying rent of up to $500 a fortnight – which people living in private rental are eligible for.[2]

"The appalling state of disrepair of housing stock in remote communities, the shortage of housing is a matter of national concern as is the affordability of housing in urban centres.

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[1] *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle* – Little Children are Sacred, Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 2007.

[2] http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/enablers/centrelink/rent-assistance/payment-rates

"Mr Tudge writes that the attractiveness of a free house is a disincentive to seek work elsewhere, but he's plain wrong. He's pushing an ideology which wants to force Aboriginal people out of remote communities into towns. The trouble with that is, where in those towns are the entry-level jobs that he speaks of and where are the houses to move into?

"The housing crisis in the Northern Territory is well known. For people on minimum wages or Centrelink benefits, there are simply no houses in the private rental market that people can afford to rent.

"If the Federal Government is serious about Closing the Gap and improving education, health and employment outcomes for people in remote communities, housing should be priority number one."

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References

There is a maximum dwelling rent for each house which means that the household will not pay over, for example, $250 a week for a 4-bedroom house http://www.housing.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/138222/rfs37_remote_rent_Sep12.pdf)

Anglicare Australia Rental Affordability Snapshot of 2014 shows none were affordable and appropriate (therefore suitable) for people on Youth and NewStart Allowances, Parenting Payment or Disability Support Pension and only 6 were suitable for people on some benefits and minimum wages.[3]

In its factsheet on remote rent, Territory Housing uses an example of a remote household of four income earners paying a total of $230 a week in rent to live in a 3-bedroom house. But for living in public housing, a couple with three children would receive $167.30 in Rent Assistance.

[3] Anglicare Australia *Rental Affordability Snapshot* April 2014, p 37.