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MEMBER FOR KATHERINE



*Putting Katherine First*

**Theme Topic:**  
**Cultural Heritage**

- Can Parliament protect indigenous cultural traditions and identity during times of
  - significant population movement, immigration and urban development?
  - MPs' roles in a fast-growing multicultural urban setting — tensions and benefits —
  - maintaining cultural harmony.
  - The Indigenous/ Aboriginal experience — is urban living destroying culture?
  - What has been the experience of women, particularly indigenous women, in rapid urbanisation?

**Paper Title**

Urbanisation of regional towns: The challenges and benefits

**Synopsis of paper**

Challenges of balancing urban sprawl accredited to economic and population growth vs retaining the cultural integrity and historical value of regional areas in the context of Northern Territory first nations people.

**CPA SPEECH – SANDRA NELSON**  
**Making space for culture**

<Acknowledgement of country>

I am pleased to be with you today as a representative of the seat of Katherine in the Northern Territory and a proud East Timorese woman who has lived in America, Japan, East Timor and Australia. I think I'm the perfect person to talk about culture; preserving it, celebrating it and making space for it.

My speech today is supposed to be about the challenges and benefits of the urbanisation of regional towns. But surely this is an oxymoron? If we urbanise our regional towns – like my home town of Katherine – surely they are no longer regional towns; but mini-cities.

As mini-cities, they lose their charm and that sense of community that we love. They lose their uniqueness and become the same-old, same-old.

This doesn't mean that regional towns should be devoid of services or roads or other infrastructure. It simply means that those regional towns need to be grown thoughtfully and in keeping with the traditions and natural environment of the area.

As the least populated but one of the largest jurisdictions physically, we are grappling with the balance of getting it right at this very moment; finding the delicate balance between the need to grow our population, stabilise and grow our economy, and preserve and protect culture, heritage and environment.

This is not a new problem for the Northern Territory. As people move to be closer to cities to access necessities like health and education, government agencies like Centrelink and Medicare, and employment, we see a strain on both ends of the spectrum.

Our regional towns and cities become full. In Katherine, we are dealing with an immense housing shortage. Not just public

housing but all housing including crisis and short-term accommodation. It's no surprise that the vast majority of people affected by this shortage are women and their children.

At the other end of the issue, we see the long-term population of remote communities decrease. As a result, we increase investment in housing and infrastructure in those regional towns and cities to deal with the influx. But the budget doesn't grow. We still have to provide health, education, policing, child and family support, utilities, roads, infrastructure and housing to those communities and the people who live there.

What gives is the investment out bush and we end up with overcrowded houses, unsustainable tenancies, reduced services in health clinics and more people coming into town. The cycle repeats.

Perhaps the issue isn't a financial one but one of priority. Can we say that we have truly made space for culture and

community in mainstream society when we still have remote Aboriginal communities?

I realise that asking that question has the potential to get me misquoted in the NT News but I'll continue on. My point is this: if it is possible for the majority of the population to just look away from the issues facing Indigenous people, argue that the solution to all of our social problems is to send people back to their communities, have we really made space for all of our citizens? Do we really have the desire to address population and economic growth when a third of our population can be dismissed as belonging somewhere else?

When we do make space for Aboriginal people, it seems to be in response to a problem: Elders programs in jails, bush camps in place of juvenile detention, bush court – recently reinstated by my government – in response to crime and antisocial behaviour, safe houses in response to domestic and family violence, parenting support for families on the verge of losing

their children to the child protection system. These community services are all great – and needed – but they are at the wrong end. They are the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff rather than the proactive community activity at the top.

Aboriginal people have been legally-recognised citizens of this country for more than 50 years, and custodians of the land for tens of thousands more. Why do we still not have this right?

Part of it is government rhetoric. When we talk about spending on Indigenous issues – and this was an issue with the federal government last year – we talk only about money and things: buildings, clinics, police stations, roads. We don't talk about outcomes or effectiveness. We talk about dollars.

That focus is seized on by all and sundry as proof that we do enough. "Look at all the money we spend," they say. I can spend all the money in the world on something but if it doesn't work, it's money wasted. Instead of dealing with our issues of

population, economic growth and development in a whole-of-community approach, we talk about it as if it is an us and them proposition.

It isn't and it shouldn't continue to be.

We also need to do a better job of weighing up economic benefit with community benefit. One cannot be more important than the other. Without an economy, our community suffers; but without a robust community, our economy suffers. They are equals.

For the Northern Territory, the most recent example of this tension has been the introduction of fracking. I am on the record as saying that I do not support fracking in the Northern Territory. Many of my constituents feel the same way.

Fracking has the potential to be a huge economic boost to the Northern Territory. Just like the INPEX project before it,

fracking operations across the Northern Territory stand to bring in millions, if not billions, of economic benefit through jobs, supplies, and revenue. But at what cost?

As I mentioned before, many of my constituents are against fracking. They are reasonable people with very real concerns about the potential impact these fracking operations will have on the environment, on the water supply and on their futures.

Those community members of mine are battle weary. We are already dealing with contamination of drinking water thanks to PFAS. PFAS wasn't known to be a problem until a few years ago. Now the people of Katherine are frightened. I am frightened with them.

Water is life and when you start messing with water supply, you walk a very dangerous path. What could be worse for an economy than not fracking? Contaminated drinking water. It is almost certain death for a community.

The first fracking activities commenced in the Beetaloo Basin just last month and I have to say, it was not a proud day for me. Maybe it was a proud day for the treasury boffins and company shareholders.

In Darwin, we have recently built a road into the city that replaces another road into the city that got congested at knock-off time. To make that road, we cut through a historic and cultural landmark of Frogs Hollow. An old government school, Frogs Hollow transformed into an arts and culture hub for Darwin. It is where the Darwin Festival team were based for years, where local drawing and painting classes were held, and was a stunning piece of undisturbed green space in a hot, concrete city.

Now it's a road. We can get where we're going faster but where's the heart of our city? Where are the innovative

solutions to addressing traffic and population movement?

Surely we don't need another road.

The challenges lie in the fluctuations to the economy. When the economy is strong, we build. When the economy is weak, we stop, sometimes even halfway through a project. Just as we saw the boom and bust during the length of the INPEX project.

In my opinion, we need to start making decisions about the economy and our population through the community lens. We need to make space for culture and community – all of those vibrant and fantastic cultures that make up who we are.

Of course, when I talk about culture and community, I am not just talking about race. I'm talking about every kind of culture – racial, ethnic, religious, sporting, arts – the true definition of culture which is essentially a community of like-minded people doing similar activities, with similar traditions, values and backgrounds.

In some ways, parts of the Northern Territory have really done a good job at this. In Darwin, if you walk through our markets on a weekend or at Mindil Beach, you will be overwhelmed with the smells, sights and sounds of dozens of different cultures being celebrated and embraced in the community.

When I'm in Darwin, I stay with my mother in the relatively new suburb of Lyons. As a joint Defence and private suburb development, it has all the hallmarks of a modern Australian property development: neat and tidy streets of modern houses, with manicured lawns and two cars in the driveway. You could be forgiven for getting lost in Lyons as the houses are pretty much the same and some of the street names sound almost identical.

But apart from that, there are some things that the developers of Lyons definitely did get right. They made space for community. And it wasn't just parks and playgrounds; they built

a community centre – a place where groups can meet, young mums can go to support groups, a place where older people can do fitness classes, a place where foster carers can meet and talk about their challenges. It is a hive of activity.

In other suburbs in Darwin, that sense of community is missing. There are no large places for events or gatherings in suburbs like Stuart Park for instance – one of the wealthiest suburbs financially and just 2km from the city at its farthest point. There are no corner stores throughout the suburb, just a small strip of shops on the outskirts and the edge of the Stuart Highway lined with car yards and just a few small parks and playgrounds that look less than inviting.

It's just rows of houses and streets bordered by major roads and industrial development. It's lovely but it's missing that great community vibe.

In Darwin – and in even bigger capital cities – it seems that many of us don't know our neighbours. We live in high-rise apartment buildings with secure building access. We see a different car next to us in the car park and assume that we have a new neighbour. It might be months before we actually lay eyes on them. There's a complete loss of all of us being in this together. We build bigger houses, higher fences and stay away.

Humans are made for connection. Our brains are hard-wired for it. When we don't have it – for whatever reason – we get sick, feel sad and become isolated.

As community members we need to do more to facilitate connection but as Parliamentarians we have a big role to play. We have to make and allow space for community.

We need to make sure that our town and city plans make space. Developers need to be forced to include a certain amount of **useable** community space. A small square of grass

and a cheap playground isn't going to cut it. Community space needs to be inviting, maintained and useful.

Governments across the country have had to enforce car park numbers and size to make sure that residents can park adequately and not clog the streets; we should absolutely be doing this with useable community space too.

There's no money to be made in community space so it's incumbent upon us as lawmakers and decision-makers that we make it a priority.

Or perhaps, we have made space...but it's the wrong kind of space and it's hidden away from the rest of the community.

As governments, we also need to stop pretending that providing social housing is just about building a house. It's not. But too often, we throw a few houses together, hand over the keys and that's it. In vulnerable communities like older people

especially, this facilitation of community is so important to health and wellbeing.

Anyone who watched the ABC's recent program "Old People's Home for 4 year olds" – how cute was it - will know exactly what I mean by that. A social experiment, facilitating activity and friendship and plain old human connection, worked wonders for the participants. We need to remember these things when we plan our developments.

The old adage "It takes a village to raise a child" is still true, but we seem to have lost the village. We don't build our communities to facilitate it.

Sadly, in Australia, we have more and more families with no support trying to raise kids in a world that's busier and expects more than ever. That's not sustainable.

As governments, we can support events and groups and give people helpful advice on how to engage with their community. But at the same time, we are making it harder to run these kinds of events and groups.

Sadly, we are starting to see these events and groups become more and more data focussed. The reporting requirements are becoming a turn-off for people looking to set up a new group and seek some funding. We measure every possibly metric to see “value for money.” But the reality is, a lot of what is gained from groups and events is the stuff that can’t be measured by numbers.

How do you measure a community connection? How do you measure an event that has been the highlight of someone’s week or got them out of the house or the first time in 3 days? You can’t – but we continue to try.

So what do we do?

We know we have to balance growth and community. We know that a lack of connection makes people sick and costs us money. We know the benefit that making space can have on the health, vibrancy and economy of a community.