

ONLINE ARTICLE

Title:	"Push for commission to solve outback crisis"
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Date:	10 September 2012
Publication:	The Age
Copyright:	Fairfax Media
Address:	< http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/political-news/push-for-commission-to-solve-outback-crisis-20120909-25mai.html >
Accessed:	Wednesday, 12 September 2012

REMOTE Australia is facing a crisis of disengagement, ineffective governance and national indifference that demands sweeping changes to the way outback communities are consulted, treated and serviced, according to a report to be launched today.

Drawing on more than three years of research, the report calls for the setting up of an Outback Commission with the mandate and authority to change the "dynamic of under-development" that afflicts remote Australia.

"Unless major changes are made to governance, policies and infrastructure and service delivery practices, there will be dire economic, social, cultural, environmental and security consequences for Australia as a whole," warns Fred Chaney, the chairman of the body that commissioned the report, Desert Knowledge Australia.

Mr Chaney, a senior cabinet minister in the Fraser government, says existing governance structures in remote Australia are neither fair nor adequate.

"One approach would be to establish a small number of trials, or 'innovation' regions or zones, with the specific aim of developing an ongoing process of learning, consensus and regional capacity building," Mr Chaney said yesterday.

"Another option would be for the Productivity Commission to investigate the capacity for such a governance reform to act as a micro-economic stimulant for remote Australia."

Written by Dr Bruce Walker, Dr Douglas Porter and Professor Ian Marsh, the report highlights a range of the concerns of those who live in remote areas, including:

- A sense of disempowerment at perceived institutional indifference that asserts itself in services that do not meet local needs or reflect local circumstances.
- Frustration that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to funding inhibits capacity to shape and deliver policy that meets the diverse needs.
- An inability to effectively engage with governments in identifying and dealing with problems.

- A failure to offer public servants incentives to work in remote Australia that has resulted in high turnover of staff and little retention of accumulated knowledge.
- A lack of transparency and accountability that inhibits the development of "realistic and effective programs that address local needs".
- The absence of a strategy, or even a considered development framework, for regional Australia, despite many attempts at developing one.