Members of the Senate Inquiry into Stronger Futures in the Northern Territories Bill.

I make the following points regarding this bill.

- It is well over 200 years since my white ancestors invaded this country with a policy of brutal dictatorship towards the original owners.
- We no longer approve of a 'shoot on sight' policy towards aboriginals but this bill indicates that dictatorship is still our method of dealing with them. We are imposing a slow spiritual death by destruction of their culture through measures such as this bill.
- Nowhere in the bill are there any signs of the democracy that non-Aboriginal Australians enjoy. Few, if any, aboriginals appear to have been consulted in drafting the bill even though this is recognised and required as the basis for democracy. We condemn dictatorships overseas yet accept it here. Such philosophies are neither successful nor efficient.
- The bill shows lack of ability on the behalf of those who created it. No reference is made to appropriate methodology which has been, and is being, successful in other countries.
- As a highly qualified and experienced teacher and sociologist I question why methods which are accepted and proven as unsuccessful are the basis for this bill. It raises the question of the qualifications and experience of those who drafted the bill.
- Aboriginals have a very different attitude towards their land, a different system of law and different languages. To take these away from them is equivalent to slow death for their communities. Is it any wonder that they need financial support since white people have deprived them of all that is important to them, including removing their children?
- We try to force them to participate in a foreign education system in a foreign language in which their own culture has no part or recognition. When the children show their opinion of this as only children can by avoiding the system we punish the family by withdrawing financial support. Do we provide opportunities for parents to voice their distaste at this system and do we put the children at risk of violence? Are we fuelling the situation by alienating the next generation by this action?
- We make no attempt to provide an education system appropriate for their needs.
- We are condemned by the United Nations and other countries for our treatment of the original inhabitants of this land. The conditions under which they are forced to live are an embarrassment to all caring Australians.
- Aboriginals who have attended conferences and panel meetings overseas addressing the issues intended to be addressed here do not appear to have been involved in drafting this bill.
- The only way out of the current situation is to scrap the current bill, set out clearly the aims it is intended to achieve and then work in collaboration with Aboriginals at all levels to draft a bill which can achieve these aims through proven methods. Aboriginal people, including those with appropriate qualifications, must be involved in all aspects of this including rewriting the bill.

- Without the involvement of Aboriginals we will continue to pour money into Aboriginal health and education with minimal if any positive results and Aboriginals will continue to be second class citizens.
- We have been through the same process with women, originally treating them as second class citizens until they protested, a process which was/is long and painful. Until we accepted women as equals we missed out on half the talent of the country. We are currently missing out on the talent of the Aboriginal people as well as making life unbearable for them. This error is extremely costly, both in financial and human terms.
- This bill is an unacceptable reflection of Australia's values in the 21st century, particularly its acceptance of democracy for all. In the states it would need to be approved by the state Parliament and the people of that state would have a voice. Such a measure is not available with this bill for those who will be subject to it, except through this inquiry.
- Today we are ashamed of those who enacted the bill which resulted in the Stolen Generation. Those who come after us will be equally ashamed of those responsible for this bill.

The above are the words and opinions of a white Australian woman. I attach the following interview with an Aboriginal woman, taken from the Australian Human Rights Commission web site, giving the situation from her viewpoint.

Intervention in the Northern Territory

- Audio - 11 July 2011: Rosalie Kunoth-Monks (MP3, 23 minutes)

Graeme Innes: Hello and welcome to Pod Rights, a series of podcasts from the Australian Human Rights Commission. I'm Graeme Innes, the Disability and Race Discrimination Commissioner.

The government's Intervention in remote Northern Territory communities is regularly in the news. But I wonder how many Australians have a perspective on the Intervention from someone actually living in one of those remote communities. This Pod Rights seeks to fill that gap. I'm speaking by phone with Rosalie Kunoth-Monks. Rosalie is an Arrente/Anmatjere woman from the Utopia station in the Northern Territory. She lived on the station until the age of nine where she learned the Aboriginal laws of her tribe, the Anmatjere people. In 1953, she was discovered by filmmakers Charles and Elsa Chauvel and won the lead role in Jedda, a film that became an Australian classic. Later Rosalie spent 10 fulfilling years as a nun in a Melbourne convent before leaving to set up the first Aboriginal hostel in Victoria. And she has continued to work in these areas and as a campaigner for her people for many years. Rosalie is currently Mayor of Barkly Shire Council in the Northern Territory. So welcome to Pod Rights, Rosalie.

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: Thank you very much.

Graeme Innes: Now firstly, can you paint a picture for us? Tell us about Utopia and your community?

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: Utopia was born in the 1970s on behalf of Aboriginal people as a growing cattle station. Later on it was converted into Aboriginal land rights with the land trust being put over that and the Land Rights Act. There were about 800 people. I think we can say now 1200 to 1300 people are here.

Graeme Innes: And how far is it from the nearest other community and how long a drive? Just give us a picture in that sense.

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: Alice Springs would be 250 kilometers from the southern tip of Utopia and Tennant Creek more like 450 kilometers.

Graeme Innes: And there are probably not freeways between those places, are they? The roads wouldn't --

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: No, the majority of it is dirt track, however, we do join on to the Stuart Highway which is the sealed road connecting both of the towns I mentioned.

Graeme Innes: Okay, well that's great. It gives us a picture of where you are and the situation. Can you take your mind back four years now to 2007 prior to the Intervention in the Northern Territory? There were some problems and challenges in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities at that time. Can you talk about those and how they were impacting on Utopia and on your people?

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: Yes, I can. I think in the remote area which seems to be the common words of use now, we were living fairly cohesive lives on Utopia because the overriding social structure was that of our ancestors, albeit, we did have access to little schools on the homelands. I think there were about five education centers under the Northern Territory Education Department so children were going to school. There were also Aboriginal assistant teachers. From within Utopia, there were quite a few ladies mainly who were teaching our people and this was taught in the bilingual situation where our youngsters were beginning to grasp a good understanding of English and the concept of the world outside of Utopia. But customary practices and all that was going on quite as it were when I left here some 60 years ago. But also into that came unemployment benefits, into that came a store, into that came a resource center set up to bridge that gap of coming into the dominant culture and knowing what was going on outside. But there was a sense of security, there was a sense of feeling that people could reach out and maybe even go in and get jobs elsewhere.

Graeme Innes: Now you'd be very well aware of some of the problems that were detailed in reports such as the "Little Children are Sacred" report, problems with use of alcohol, neglect of children – all sorts of issues. Were those things there as well in Utopia? I'm not asking you about the rest of the Northern Territory but –

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: No, at Utopia there was not, Utopia and the northeast area because we did not have access to alcohol and other substance abuse. Life out here, as I've said before, was quite cohesive, anything that was done against the social structure or against relationships was clearly taken care of from within the community. Now with the "Little Children are Sacred" I became aware of that because I had worked fairly closely with the prosecutor namely Nan Rogers. I had worked in the court system as an expert which I was and still is.
And I was aware of quite a few of those incidents that were horrific because as you know

going to fairly detailed discussion with either the victims or the witnesses. So I was well aware of that and I was appalled that these things were happening. And with the "Little Children are Sacred" I was also able to help Rex Wild and Pat Anderson in setting up and facilitating some of the meetings down here in Alice Springs. So we were all working quite closely with those two people

Graeme Innes: To address those problems.

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: And making sure we were going to find and recommend ways that we could perhaps look at this closely and help people to get back on track.

Graeme Innes: Okay. So when the Intervention occurred in June 2007, what happened? I mean we know about the big blue signs outside communities, what were the other impacts of the Intervention on your community?

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: Well from the "Little Children are Sacred" which by the way the [foreign language 12:45], that's in Arrente language. I put that into the language "Little Children are Sacred."

Graeme Innes: Okay, yeah.

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: And from that where we were working in a friendly, cohesive, careful way we were then with the Intervention which came to me like a thunderbolt out of the sky. We were told on the – I can't remember the date now –

Graeme Innes: It was June, I don't remember it either.

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: We were told to gather at Utopia, a the basketball area which is quite a big expanse of open area and all of a sudden we became aware around us of public servants, the police, and also – this is my recollection – and also the army. Some of these people were armed, if it wasn't armed they had batons, first armed with [inaudible 14:02] on remote communities. The shock – you could almost taste it and our hearts – not only mine but quite a few of the people here with me – our hearts were sinking and we didn't quite know whether we were going to be shot or put into paddy wagons or whatever. And then the directives came like shots from these rifles anyway and we were told there was a new way that Aboriginal Affairs is going to be handled. And that was our introduction to the Intervention. And I can tell you that it was horrific.

Graeme Innes: What's the situation now four years on from the Intervention? What's been gained and what's been lost as a result of it do you think?

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: Just from this community I have had tremendous amount of trauma, tremendous amount of soul searching of Aboriginal people feeling that they have done something wrong but they couldn't put their finger on what it is that's wrong. They've come to the conclusion what is wrong is that we were born black into a different culture and that as quickly as possible we've got to become as one people – speaking the same language, forgetting about our lands, forgetting even about our customary practices because we were really brutally removed by the Intervention into this new world. And they're still recovering from being told by the government that they are pedophiles, that they are substance abuse addicts, and the new thing that was hoisted upon them through the

Intervention was this thing called pornography which they'd never heard of in their lives before. And to interpret that to a group of people, to get some idea of what pornography is, that shocked them further because that is not a practice that they had heard about amongst Aboriginal communities within the vicinity of Utopia. But these are new things that they have to learn that was aimed at them like shots.

Graeme Innes: And that was the message on the signs and following through, wasn't it?

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: Absolutely. Because a lot of the younger people asked us what's the new word, what is that pornography, and I was the chairperson of our community here. And I had to explain that to a mixed group of people like women and men, for them to get a concept of what I was talking about and they asked me "Well which black people are doing it in the Northern Territory and where are those things?" and I said "Now, as far as I knew, there was no black actors and actresses here were doing pornography." This is what men think that had been forced on to us and there was no – as far as I knew from across the territory – no Aboriginal people doing that kind of a job.

Graeme Innes: So you've talked about the damage that the Intervention has done, have you seen positives from it as well as the negatives?

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: We haven't really seen a positive at Utopia. The only thing that we got from that, from the Intervention, is the police station. Whether we put that as a positive I'm not quite sure because we have always worked cohesively and wonderfully with the police from either Harts Range which is 150 kilometers from me or from [inaudible 18:34] or indeed from Alice Springs. We've not had any qualms or run-ins with police, we knew what the police were there for law and order, and that assisted us in looking after our families and making sure we had law and order on our community along with the customary law and order. So it just enhanced what we already had on the land of Utopia and adjoining communities.

Graeme Innes: Now the government has said that when the Intervention's finished next year, the current Intervention, that government involvement in the Northern Territory communities will continue but it will be in partnership with Aboriginal people. Could you talk about what a genuine partnership with Aboriginal people would look like from your point of view?

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: I believe – I've only come back actually from Tennant Creek and I believe what the people are saying that to achieve true reconciliation with Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory the negotiations have to change, that there has to be some justice and justice put into place, whereby Aboriginal people will now tell the government what is needed on our homelands to bring us closer to accessing some of the things that the rest of Australia takes for granted. One of the things that we are terrified of is losing our identity through brutal treatment of us on our homelands. We want to retain our language, we want to see [inaudible 20:32] schools remain, we want to and demand that our identity and our culture continues whilst we are from that secure, accessing all the other knowledges, not only within Australia but outside of Australia. So at the moment how we're feeling -- and I think this is common across the Northern Territory – is that we call upon the Australian government to have some principles of democracy on our land and that includes taking into consideration the living continuing culture of the first Australians of this country.

Graeme Innes: Rosalie, you travelled with a number of other people, myself included, to see Australia's appearance before the Expert Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in Geneva last year and you and Dr. Djiniyini Gondarra, another elder from the Territory, spoke to members of that committee about the impact of the Intervention on your communities and that was very powerful for me. Tell us of the impact of that experience on you though.

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: The impact from that journey was that for the first time since I've been aware, since I've had this black consciousness of myself, that is the first place where I was greeted as an equal, as a thinking person, and that people actually listened to me. It was a very moving wonderful experience. From that, I believe, I came back feeling stronger, feeling that I had a right to express myself and my people's – not ambition so much but our rights to continue living as Aboriginal people within our own country, having the right to our land, to our language, and having a right to say our children are educated. What I also became aware of was that on the human rights, we do not have to succumb and be passive to assimilation in the way that the Intervention actually was rolled out. We have a right to a quality of life. So that was my experience from coming back there -- and also continuing on – some of the wonderful people that I've met there, continuing on a relationship with those people that do not look down on me but rather look at me as another human being and treat me as such.

Graeme Innes: Well it's great that you had that experience; it's sad that you had to go to Geneva to enjoy it. Rosalie tell me finally what are your hopes for the future for remote communities in the Northern Territory?

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: I think the future negotiations for all Aboriginal people within Australia should be that the government actually has to have a diplomatic and respectable dialogue with us. It is again another opportunity to start and give the government a chance to negotiate with I think Dr. Gondarra's faith at traditional lawmen and law women in the communities to be affected.
The fact that the Racial Discrimination Act was removed alone shows me that the way the government went about in the last Intervention is that they felt they had complete absolute control over us. They must first of all remove that control and acknowledge there is a living vibrant culture in spite of everything that's been thrown at it that is still alive and well. And the fact is that black consciousness is becoming more and more aware of the hideous history that Australia and its government has against Aboriginal people. And we don't want to sever the relationships between human beings – we're far more mature than that – within Australia. We just want to take our place right there in the midst of that, albeit with our cultural identity in place. And I think with the young ones – I have two beautiful grandchildren, one 18 and one 9 – this is the way they're thinking: they do not want to go back into the bushes and hide and feel second class, they want to take their place, speaking their language, being proud of who they are, and being accepted for what they are, accessing all knowledges in the dominant culture as well as their culture.

Graeme Innes: Well Rosalie thanks very much for this opportunity to talk. This is a really important issue I think for all Australians and it's great to have a chance to gain a firsthand perspective on it from someone living in those communities.

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks: Thank you.