

To Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT.

## **STRONGER FUTURES IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**

A Submission from Margaret and David Hewitt

### **INTRODUCTION**

There have been many very positive results from the Northern Territory Emergency Response and we look forward to this continuing under *Stronger Futures*. Remote Central Australian communities are now safer places, stores are better places to shop, children are eating more, housing is improving and health services have improved.

The biggest impact with NTER has been Income Management. We have seen more money spent on food and clothing in communities rather than on cigarettes or motor vehicle expenses or taken out of the community to buy alcohol. Without exception, women whom we know in remote communities have supported income management. Last year a friend from a South Australian community who was visiting Alice Springs told us that when she got back to her community she was going to get a basics card because she had seen the benefits of having some of her pension quarantined. We had to tell her that for now she could not use a basics card in SA.

Our observations below come from working in remote communities over a forty seven year period.

### **ALCOHOL ABUSE**

**We believe that until the flow of alcohol in Central Australia is reduced we are not going to see a long term improvement in Indigenous health, school attendance or employment.**

With increased policing there is thankfully now not much alcohol in bush communities but there is hardly a family in a remote community that is not in some way impacted by alcohol. This includes violence, premature death from alcohol related illness, road accidents, suicide, and chronic illness including renal dialysis resulting from high alcohol consumption.

In our visits to the Alice Springs prison it is incredibly distressing to see so many families that we know represented there. Local estimates are that at least 60% of inmates men and women, are there because of alcohol related offences.

Access to alcohol in Alice Springs must be reduced. Recent Territory Government moves such as the buy-out of two liquor shops, and the introduction of ID scanners and

the Banned Drinkers Register are to be applauded but much more need to be done. The Peoples Alcohol Action Coalition (PAAC) in Alice Springs has been advocating for a floor price of \$1.20 per standard drink. This is yet to be supported by the Territory Government. However after lobbying from PAAC, last year Coles offered a minimum price of \$1.14 per standard drink and withdrawal of two litre casks from sale. Woolworths and all bottle shops in town except two have now followed. Pressure needs to be applied to the Todd Tavern and Gap View Hotel to agree to come on board.

236 two litre empty Renmano wine casks were collected from an 800 metre stretch of the Todd River on 27 January 2012. - Refer attached photo. They were bought from one of the two outlets that still sell casks, for a total cost of over \$3700. With 21 standard drinks in one of these casks, and 75 cents per drink, this is much less than the minimum of \$1.20 being lobbied by PAAC. The big increase in casks in the Todd over the past 6 months indicates that many river drinkers have turned to cask wine, as the cheapest way of getting drunk now that a 750ml bottle sells for a minimum of \$8.00. It is even more imperative therefore that these casks be removed from the market.

We believe that the Federal Government should introduce a volumetric tax and this should happen soon to ensure a permanent minimum price in the Northern Territory. It will only take one major retailer in Alice to back out of the voluntary accord for a massive amount of cheap wine to come on sale again. A big retail chain is this week advertising specials in the southern states for as little as 21 cents/standard drink. If wine at this price were available in Alice Springs it would expose many more innocent women and children to serious physical abuse and family disruption.

There is a particular responsibility for the welfare of babies suffering foetal alcohol syndrome and children abused by alcoholic family members - those who do not have a voice, and who face the sad consequences of excessive alcohol consumption by others.

Another very effective move on alcohol will be a grog-free day once a week, the same day that Centrelink payments are made. In communities some years ago all payments were on a Thursday. It is unfortunate that this was ever changed and Centrelink should return to the payments being made on only one day of the week. A grog-free day would see money going on food and clothing before the drinkers can spend it.

We welcome the move to permit the Commonwealth Indigenous Affairs minister to request an independent assessor be appointed to review a licensee's operations. The first licensees to be investigated here should be the Todd Tavern and Gap View Hotel.

Wet Canteens in remote communities comes up for discussion every few years. In 1971 two staff members at the Docker River Settlement proposed a wet canteen "to teach the Aborigines how to drink". The women of Docker River were strongly opposed and recruited the help of the Indigenous Lutheran pastor. They successfully lobbied the then Northern Territory Welfare Branch to abandon the idea. 40 years later we believe the opinion of people in remote communities has not changed. That these canteens would reduce the number of drinkers in the towns is totally unrealistic. The logistics of

selling alcohol in a particularly remote location will be impossible to manage.

As a result of NTER there are now enough police resources to enforce alcohol regulations in remote communities and conduct regular road block searches. However some communities are still not served by a permanent police presence. Docker River depends on visits from 100km away. Police in a community need to be visible and easily approachable. *Stronger Futures* should extend the police coverage in the bush.

### **The greatest needs regarding alcohol in Central Australia**

- **Two remaining bottle shops in Alice Springs should accept the voluntary accord on a minimum price and removal of two litre casks.**
- **The Territory Government to bring in a weekly grog-free day.**
- **The Federal Government to move a volumetric tax on alcohol, or Territory Government introduce a minimum price of \$1.20 per standard drink.**
- **Support for the women who are so opposed to the possibility of wet canteens in their communities.**

### **GOVERNANCE**

There is an unfortunate perception that the 'Super' shires were an NTER initiative. The shires are certainly taking some time to settle into the responsibilities formerly held by community councils. Many of these councils had become totally dysfunctional through poor administration, difficulty of holding staff and favoritism of some family groups.

Shires need to take a role, along with Government Business Managers in bringing together agencies working in communities. Last year a community in Central Australia had 12 different Government departments, community organizations and NGOs operating in the community. While they were all doing worthwhile work, there was not enough communication between agencies and some services were not coordinated with each other.

Today, communities are suffering from a lack of strong leadership. Older men with the key to traditional knowledge have passed away and many middle aged men are not in good health, sometimes facing renal dialysis. It is good to see women taking on leadership roles, a new move in some traditional communities. But unfortunately younger men, perhaps suffering from an old petrol sniffing illness or affected by alcohol or marihuana are not stepping up to take on responsibility.

### **HEALTH**

It is interesting that during the consultation for *Stronger Futures*, health was not rated amongst the four most urgent issues. School attendance, alcohol misuse, housing and job opportunities were all considered more pressing.

Although the Territory has the highest infant mortality rate in Australia there has been a significant improvement since the 1960s. A much greater concern should be the number of deaths amongst young adults. In 2010 one community of 350 residents had eight deaths of people under forty years old, representing over 2% of the population, with road accidents, alcohol related violence and chronic illness the biggest contributors. This would be a national disaster if it happened anywhere else in Australia.

Smoking amongst Aboriginal people remains a big issue. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Health Performance Study 2010 for Northern Territory reports that 44% of Indigenous mothers smoke, compared to 15% of other Australians. 77% of Indigenous children were living in a household with at least one daily smoker. Mothers smoking in a vehicle with a baby are a common occurrence. **Community stores need to carry messages discouraging smoking, specially in the presence of children.**

While alcohol in remote communities is prohibited and petrol sniffing is a thing of the past, marihuana is an increasing concern. The source of ganja is no doubt a frustration for law enforcement authorities, as it is for local community staff. The biggest concern we see here is the amount of money spent on marihuana that should be going to food and other essentials, and the pressure that young people put on their families for cash.

Renal disease is an increasing and tragic condition amongst traditional Aboriginal people - unheard of when I was nursing out bush in the 1960s and 1970s . Most renal patients must live in a regional centre such as Alice Springs to receive regular dialysis. We are seeing senior women and men leaving their homelands for good, thus depriving their people of strong leadership that they desperately need in these times of change.

An indirect impact of renal failure in Alice is that many relatives come in to town to join the dialysis patients. They are usually without adequate accommodation and with no regular work, are easily influenced by alcohol. They become a real burden on the older patient and indeed on the whole of the town.

Two mobile dialysis clinics set up with Government and private support and now on the road mean that some patients can return home for limited periods.

Western Desert Dialysis (the Purple House) has clinics and dedicated nursing staff in the NT communities of Kintore, Yuendumu and Hermannsburg. Further permanent remote dialysis facilities are urgently required, specially in the Pitjantjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra Lands of South Australia and Western Australia. A recent announcement by Warren Snowdon of \$13 million for renal patient accommodation in Alice Springs is welcome but money also needs to be allocated for remote dialysis. The Purple House recently estimated \$170 000 a year for supporting a kidney failure patient in a centre like Alice Springs and only \$85 000 for costs per patient on a community.

Remote dialysis is something that the Federal Government and the South Australian, Western Australian and the Territory governments urgently need to get together on. Opal fuel has provided the greatest ever single improvement in the health and well

being of Indigenous people in Central Australia. Since 1974 in remote communities in the eastern part of WA, the far north west of SA and the south of Northern Territory, petrol sniffing had taken a tragic toll and nothing seemed to be able to control the epidemic. At least 2 young people a year were dying as a result of petrol sniffing.

The development and introduction of the non sniffable fuel brought quite remarkable changes. Since the rollout of Opal fuel in 2005, only one death has been attributed to sniffing. The subsidising by successive Federal Governments of Opal has brought a financial return many times over in less medical expenses, reduction in damage to community infrastructure and an end to harassing of families by sniffers.

**Under *Stronger Futures* this subsidy must be continued.**

## **CHILD PROTECTION**

**We welcome government efforts to improve the safety of women and children, and to continue pornography restrictions.** Interstate this is also an issue. The Mullighan enquiry into child sexual abuse in the APY Lands in South Australia asked the SA government to investigate ways of restricting children's access to pornography.

40 years ago every family member shared responsibility for a child's welfare. Today some children have no idea of the whereabouts of their parents and are being 'grown up' by a grandmother or great grandmother while the mother lives a life on alcohol in town. During holidays when the school breakfast and lunch program is not operating and where there is no close relative to care for them, children "lived like camp dogs" in the words of a community member. It has been suggested that in some situations 100% of welfare payments should be quarantined and the money given to carers of children.

## **EDUCATION**

School attendance is one of the greatest frustrations of remote communities. If kids are in their home community they will usually attend school - but there is now incredible mobility of families. With better communication to spread the word about a funeral, improved roads and more reliable vehicles we are seeing travel over great distances to attend funerals, sadly with increasing frequency. In the Pilbara region of WA school teachers talk of a 'funeral culture' that takes kids away from schools for long periods.

Mining money distribution meetings and sports carnivals also means families are away from their home community. We need to impress on parents and carers how important it is that kids are in their community for the whole school week. Meeting organizers should be encouraged to schedule these activities for school holidays. With a long winter school break in the Northern Territory, this is relatively easy to do.

There are many very dedicated teachers, excellent school facilities and a great range of incentives from meal programs to football, excursions and weekly prizes for attendance,

but it really needs support from families and whole communities to improve school attendance. Refusal to serve children during school hours should be made universal through remote stores. The Government can ensure that it applies to licenced stores.

**The Government's SEAM program should be continued and extended to other NT schools and to some remote schools in WA and SA as there is a lot of movement of indigenous people across state and Territory borders. We believe SEAM will have a positive impact on school attendance.**

## **FOOD SECURITY**

The licencing of stores has been a very positive move. Bookup should have no place in community stores and does nothing to improve family financial management. Pressure is put on store staff, specially from influential families and it is difficult for staff to decline requests. The accumulating debts to a store that bookup brings, often results in financial collapse. Another of our concerns is the high ATM fees charged by banks for transactions and balance enquiries - often up to ten in a day. We anxiously await the findings of a Treasury Taskforce on ATMs in 2011.

The community store and its manager have very powerful roles when it comes to the health of residents. **Licencing of stores should include anti-smoking campaigns, compulsory promotion of good foods and less availability of foods detrimental children's health.** It is easy for a store manager to take up a wholesaler's offer for a discount on soft drinks that does nothing for the teeth of young people but might improve the short term store profit.

## **CONCLUSION**

The very vocal mainly interstate brigade who condemned the Intervention and who are now calling for the abandonment of *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* are doing Aboriginal people of the Territory a lasting disservice.

It is a great frustration to those people in the field who believe that finally we are seeing progress in 'closing the gap', to have to devote time and effort to defending misguided and misinformed claims from supporters who just do not bother to seek the facts.

We believe the comments from Aboriginal organizations that criticise these valuable moves, are particularly unfortunate.

- In 'Land Rights News' October 2011 the Central Land Council opposes the SEAM school attendance trials, questions the emphasis on pornography and condemns the blue and white prescribed area signs.
  - Incidentally in the past four years in all our travels around communities we have never heard a concern on these signs.

- In the 'Centralian Advocate' of 29 November 2011 the Tangentyere Council CEO speaks out against *Stronger Futures*. He says it "will continue to disempower Aboriginal people and do little to improve their quality of life".

These and other organizations question whether six weeks was long enough for the consultation process on *Stronger Futures*. We suggest that they look closely at whether in fact they have consulted members adequately.

We were impressed with the consultation process. A public meeting in Alice Springs was well led by a manager of the local Indigenous Co-ordination Centre, despite the efforts of some people present to derail the discussion. In communities, residents had every opportunity to become involved. Indeed many did and were very positive in support for the *Stronger Futures* proposals, something conveniently ignored by critics.

We agree with many NTER initiatives that have been supported by both Labor and Liberal Governments:

Health surveys; improved housing; introduction of Government Business Managers; the increased police presence targeting domestic and child abuse and pornography; addressing school attendance, store licensing and the review of CDEP. There is still much to be done but we hope that these initiatives will continue and will be strengthened under *Stronger Futures*.

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Enclosed:

Photo of wine casks collected in the Todd River Alice Springs, 27 January 2011