

Subject: Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011 and two related bills - inquiry

SUBMISSION – SENATE INQUIRY - ON ‘THE INTERVENTION’

Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
Dear Committee Secretary,

Re: Stronger Futures in the NT Bill 2011 and two related bills.

The dire situation in many Aboriginal communities is acknowledged. This situation has been developing over more than 200 years because of well recorded actions by non-Indigenous Governments and the wider community.

Apart from the violence deliberately directed towards Aboriginal groups, the worse elements of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians involve a complete disempowerment of the First Peoples, and total disrespect, largely due to ignorance, and disregard of their culture.

This is not to ignore the pockets of wonderful work done, often in partnerships, by individuals and groups. Although the motives may have been well meant, in the main, the effect of Government policies has been sadly negative.

Problems with the 'Intervention' Legislation:

The negative elements of the Bills, known colloquially as 'The Intervention', are many. I accept my comments don't apply equally to all Northern Territory Aboriginals for some are happy with the new arrangements. However, a large number, as demonstrated by the reports - 'Will They Be Heard?' (Nov 2009), and books 'This is What We Said' (Feb 2010) and 'Walk With Us' (2011) show that there is deep hurt and frustration among Northern Territory Aboriginals. The Committee is also directed towards what Aboriginal people from prescribed N.T. communities said in 2011 on the issues of education - 'Cuts to Welfare Payments for School Non Attendance - Requested or Imposed?'

* Aboriginal people feel further disempowered and lacking control over their own destiny. Income control is an important contributor to this sense of helplessness. The negative effects of disempowerment on health, education and employment are well researched and widely acknowledged.

* Leasing arrangements, which impinge on the major cultural imperative, connection with the land, are a perfect way for non-Indigenous Australians to disempower and demonstrate disrespect.

* The planned termination of the CDEP program has been a grave mistake. It should be re-instated in a way that complies with Government requirements for part-time permanent employment.

* The tying of Centrelink income with school attendance also feeds into the sense of disempowerment and disrespect. Further it will damage the often delicate but vital relationship between school and parents.

* Aboriginal people have long experienced the cycle of Government edicts, followed by the sudden appearance of bureaucrats and people to enact change, followed by their disappearance to let programs run their course with dispiriting results. For example, the emergency health test programs often did not result in substantive immediate follow-ups. The end result of this approach over many decades has often been:

- to reduce the number of Aboriginal people employed in the communities

- to leave them asking 'what was that all about?'
- to result in them having a cynical attitude to the next new policy
- to feeling they have no say in what happens to them next

Guiding Principles for Future Policies:

Whilst the following are not all relevant to the legislation under discussion, We believe that any policy that isn't formulated with these principles in mind are doomed to fail. It is acknowledged that some may not be able to be realised for a range of reasons, but that shouldn't deter efforts to work in the right direction towards these principles.

* Everything that happens on a community must be driven by the community. A community must have a strong sense that they have control over their own destiny. Whilst this is easy to say but very difficult to do, this principle must be overriding and drive all actions. Without a sense of ownership by a community of future plans, any future actions are doomed to eventually fail because it is taking communities in the wrong direction. It is making them more dependent on outside decision-making. Because many communities are not ready to start making major decisions, this process will need a lot of time and patience and preparedness for failures along the way.

* All communities should be treated separately. It is a great mistake to assume all communities are in the same state of function or dysfunction, or have the same economic, social, educational or cultural needs. However, this does not preclude the possibility of a group of communities working collaboratively if they wanted to.

* Employment of local community members in local jobs should be an overriding and constant goal. This requires appropriate training/mentoring programs.

* Government representatives involved in working with communities should be associated with the communities on an ongoing basis for as long as possible - preferably 3+ years. One constant in black-white relationships in Australia is the fact that Aboriginal people living in remote communities know that the non-Aboriginal Government representative, advisor, partner, worker, friend will most likely leave in a day, a week, a month or a year. Slowing down this cycle will help these people derive more value from the trust that is built up from any relationship.

* Local languages must be respected and be incorporated into everyday functions such as education, health, employment and economic communications. Of course, it is important to include English in these processes, but it is wrong to focus children's language development too strongly on English if the adults in the community mainly use their own language. To do this drives a wedge between generations and helps to break down the strong inter-family connections, which are so important in Aboriginal culture. I believe, along with many experts, that education should be carried out in the local language but only if communities choose this path.

* The money and effort that would need to go into plans embodying such principles would need the support of the wider Australian electorate. Because of this, it is important that all Australians learn about the world's oldest living culture, appreciate what Aboriginal culture has to offer and its relevance to a future sustainable world, and derive pride in being part of a unique social, cultural and historical situation.

We accept that the embodiment of these principles into future policies may result in slowing the rate of change. Aboriginal Australians have a great capacity for patience. But more importantly we believe the eventual changes will lead to better results and be more sustainable. Australia has the opportunity

of creating an inspiring example for the rest of the world. We can show how vastly different people with diverse cultures and with a history of misunderstanding and conflict can work together to produce a creative social model from a situation that currently brings shame on all involved.

Howard Tankey