

**Alice Springs Sub-Branch
Australian Labor Party**

31st January 2012

Committee Secretary

Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
<https://senate.aph.gov.au/submissions/pages/index.aspx>

Submission to Senate Community Affairs Committee on the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011 and two related Bills.

The Alice Springs sub-branch of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) has the following comments on the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011 and two related Bills.

Members of the Alice Springs ALP sub-branch, including several Aboriginal members, have considerable experience working with Aboriginal people and their organisations over a long period of time.

The introduction of the original NTER by the Howard Government was of great concern to a significant number of Aboriginal people and organisations, as it was undertaken without a specific consultation about its more radical aspects. It was also introduced just a year before the creation of Shire Councils, and this has caused a high degree of confusion.

The issue of widespread child neglect and abuse in the NT, as detailed in the Little Children Are Sacred report by Rex Wild QC and Pat Anderson, is a serious matter that required a serious and well thought out response, in collaboration with affected families, communities and relevant Aboriginal community-controlled organisations such as health services, women's organisations, legal services, youth services, outstation resource services and land councils. Unfortunately, the original NTER did not attempt to engage with these services in a positive way, nor did it adequately address all the 97 recommendations contained in the Little Children Are Sacred report.

A genuine long term and well planned collaborative relationship between the Shire Councils, NT Government, the Australian Government, the private sector, Aboriginal organisations and other reputable NGOs must be developed to address Indigenous disadvantage.

The Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill and its related Bills provide a valuable opportunity for the Australian Parliament to provide a suitable framework for this collaboration, as well as for careful adjustments to existing programs. Now is the time for the Australian Government to work in a truly collaborative way with families, communities, community-controlled organisations and the NTG.

On specific policy areas the following points are submitted:

Part 1: Stronger communication and capacity building – the prerequisites for successful and efficient provision of government programs such as Income Management, Alcohol Management, Health and Family Services, Early Childhood Services, Violence Prevention, Policing, Education, healthy stores and nutrition, and SEAM in the NT remote Aboriginal communities

1.1 Development and Use of Local Aboriginal Language Interpreters

There is a need for all Australian and NT Government departments and programs to work closely with the Aboriginal community leaders and organisations to ensure the following changes:

1.1.1 Greater provision of intensive interpreter training courses for remote Aboriginal people who are fluent speakers of local languages and who wish to become accredited interpreters.

1.1.2 Greater provision of full-time and permanent part-time employment funding for accredited interpreters, so that sufficiently qualified interpreters are more likely to keep working as interpreters, and so be available when needed. (At present most of the best accredited interpreters, who are often highly valued and sought-after employees for jobs other than interpreting, do not receive sufficient casual interpreting contracts to enable them to eke out decent livings, and so must seek permanent employment in other fields in order to maintain sufficient regular income to care for their families. Thus accredited interpreters are often not available to do interpreting when most needed, as their full-time work must usually take priority).

1.1.3 Formal requirements that government departments, schools, clinics, hospitals, police, courts, prisons and other agencies, should use qualified interpreters not just in special consultations, but also in daily activities when dealing with Aboriginal language speakers who have low levels of formal education attainments. (The use of qualified interpreting needs to reach 'critical mass' if it is to achieve high quality, best practice status, and a good reputation amongst user organisations and departmental staff; this will enable sceptical service providers to learn the benefits of effective interpreting, as well as enabling the interpreters to achieve higher levels of competence and confidence).

1.1.4 Funding of preparation workshops for Aboriginal interpreters when they are faced with the task of providing interpreting services in meetings which are meant to explain new legislation, policies or programs containing new terms and jargon to Aboriginal audiences who are not fully conversant with conventional and specialist forms of English.

1.2 Competent Cross-cultural Training

There should be significantly greater provision of competent social and cross-cultural training to government and NGO employees, including managers and supervisors, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers.

1.3 More Effective Community Awareness and Use of Aboriginal Media

It is important that there should be a major upgrading of efforts to provide community awareness projects about important topics and issues, meetings and consultations, promotion of civic activities, violence prevention training programs, parenting skills courses and provision of other educational services through government-subsidised communication

media such as CAAMA Radio, Imparja TV, the ABC, SBS and NITV; including increased use of qualified Aboriginal interpreters in provision of these services for remote area audiences

1.4 Community Development and Capacity Building in Remote Communities

There must be government support for comprehensive, competent, professionally-run community development programs and civil society building projects in remote communities

Centrelink should be resourced to maintain and extend its program of supporting the development and employment of locally-resident Aboriginal workers, and other Australian and NT Government Departments, NGOs and Shire agencies should be encouraged to adapt the same model

There must be provision of comprehensive, continuing adult education services in each remote region, staffed by locally resident, professionally trained, appropriately qualified teachers and instructors and assistants

There must be provision of access to appropriately experienced and capable mediation services for assisting in resolving disputes and feuds in a timely fashion

1.5 Counseling, Education, and Skills Training for Prisoners

At any given time, a significant proportion of adults from many remote NT communities may reside in the NT's prisons. Prisoners in gaols and, where feasible, those on remand for long periods, and ex-prisoners on probation and parole, should be provided with intensive education, training and/or counseling opportunities, according to their needs, time in detention, and responsiveness to these opportunities.

Prisoner education courses in literacy and numeracy: VET accredited training and Higher Education opportunities can be provided to all prisoners serving sentences of longer than six months and accessing these opportunities should be recommended in management plans.

The very small proportion of women in prison in the NT who undertake accredited training should be investigated and reversed. The withdrawing of education access in prison as a "privilege" is unacceptable and should be investigated.

Expanding library services to prisoners is essential to support educational programs.

1.6 Governance.

The Australian and NT Governments should jointly ensure that high quality governance training is available to adult people in the NT, and particularly for those who are involved in the governance of community organisations, with special assistance to be given to communities which have low average education attainments.

The Australian and NT Governments should jointly ensure that Shires are resourced to strengthen the role and capacities of their Local Advisory Boards, including a proportion of democratically elected members and gender equality in Board composition, and clearly defined roles and powers for the LABs.

Governance training for elected Shire Council members, and members of the Shires' Local Advisory Boards, must be designed and delivered by professionally qualified and competent trainers

- **Part 2: the role of SEAM**

Educational achievement: School attendance, school staffing, and youth development

The attendance rates of school children is quite rightly a high priority and must continue being addressed, particularly by building the capacities of individual communities to develop and implement integrated local action plans, involving a range of community agencies and interest groups (community leaders, elders, and Night Patrollers, youth workers, sport and recreation workers, church groups, health service staff, GBMs and IEOs, Shire Service Managers and Shire staff, police, store managers, football coaches and team captains could all have input and possibly have implementation roles) as well as the school staff and parents, as this has been an effective approach at Hermannsburg, Harts Range and several other communities. These action plans must be fully supported by government departments, Shires and other government-funded agencies, including by the use of SEAM and other sanctions available for use in the extreme cases to assist carers who are continually derelict in their duty to play a full, co-operative role in ensuring school attendance by those children who are legally under their care. This must also include children legally under the care of the relevant Minister.

At the same time, it is absolutely necessary that the Australian and NT Governments jointly ensure the presence of *adequate numbers of properly qualified, experienced* teachers and allied staff, including English as an Additional Language (EALD) trained teachers and assistant teachers working in a number of areas:

- professionally qualified and EALD-trained pre-school co-ordinators and workers,
 - professionally qualified and EALD-trained primary teachers,
 - appropriately qualified EALD-trained secondary teachers,
 - professionally qualified EALD-trained special needs teachers,
 - professionally qualified EALD-trained counselors and
 - professionally qualified child psychologists working with accredited interpreters,
- to meet the needs of the embattled remote schools.

These schools are attempting to provide for the educational requirements of all children now attending the schools, including many students who have not previously been successfully integrated into normal classroom activities, or who haven't attended school regularly enough to be taught at their group age level. These cohorts include considerable numbers of students who have special needs and/or challenging behaviours, and who are often extremely disruptive to the progress of other students if not attended to promptly and expertly by specially trained staff. Similarly, the provision of adequate accommodation and teaching spaces, and other material needs of teachers and other staff in remote schools are of high importance.

The governance of most remote schools has to be revised to incorporate appropriate involvement of local parents and elders in decision making with the assistance of NTG providing training and support for the development of real School Councils. Funding from DEEWR needs to be reviewed to ensure ongoing provision of school governance including

the oversight of funding to the local school. The Families as First Teachers (FaFT) program must be retained and extended to more communities, and provided with adequate work and staff facilities, including accommodation.

Suitable student accommodation must be provided to meet the need, including properly run boarding houses for primary- and secondary-aged students and adult learners in the larger remote communities.

The Clontarf Program, using the disciplines of sport to motivate and involve students in prolonging their schooling and improving their study habits, or similar programs, should be extended into more urban and remote areas.

Properly funded and staffed youth, recreation and after-school programs, should be expanded and extended into more remote communities, using professionally trained, competently managed and adequately housed staff; these programs must include intensive training, mentoring, supervision and development of local Aboriginal staff.

Extra funding must be made available to provide improved sport, recreation and youth worker facilities and equipment in most communities; adequate resources based on minimum standards must be provided to ensure that there are necessary ranges of facilities and equipment, and commensurate staffing levels and accommodation, in all communities.

- **Part 3: Tackling alcohol abuse**

We support the legislation as presented in the first reading speech of the *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011*, particularly in regards to making both the penalties for transporting liquor into restricted areas, and the technical aspects of measuring quantities of alcohol involved in grog running offences, consistent with the NT legislation.

We support the Commonwealth Minister having a role in approving Alcohol Management Plans and, together with NT Ministers, arranging for independent reviews of the operation of specified laws relating to alcohol, particularly their effectiveness in reducing alcohol-related harm, provided the results of these reviews are normally made available to the public.

We also support making provision for investigating and assessing premises licensed to sell alcohol and which appear to be producing substantial harm to the community.

We wish to note that the introduction of a floor price by major retail outlets in Alice Springs is a positive step forward, which will support the NT Government's recent 'Enough is Enough' alcohol reforms. The Australian and NT Governments should jointly introduce a floor price pegged to the normal price of beer, as well as ensuring there is at least one day per week on which there are no sales of take-away alcohol.

We also wish to raise the following community safety and justice issues closely connected to Government responses to alcohol- and drug-related problems. Most of these measures are dependent on government funding being provided to ensure their implementation:

Policing

The Australian and NT Governments should ensure and jointly provide adequate policing services to all NT communities, including comprehensive community policing programs. This would be the best way to deter grog runners and drug dealers.

Special efforts should be made to recruit Aboriginal people and speakers of local languages into the police force. Police presences should be stabilised, with lengthened average periods of residence in communities. Police facilities and accommodation in remote communities must be improved, and brought up to a standard which will assist in retaining police who are willing to serve in these environments.

Violence Prevention Programs

The Australian and NT Governments should jointly ensure that violence prevention and anger management programs are developed using qualified expertise, as well as motivated local residents, especially local men, and implemented in a professional manner on an ongoing basis, in all NT regions where alcohol-related violence is a continuing problem.

Night Patrols

Special efforts should be made to ensure police work supportively with the local Aboriginal Night Patrols. Night Patrols should be extended to include female as well as male workers in as many situations as possible.

Hours of employment for Night Patrol workers should be extended where this is warranted, particularly where NPs are performing effective services in encouraging parents to behave more responsibly in relation to their children, assisting children to get adequate sleep at night, and assisting families to ensure their children attend all classes each school day.

Night Patrollers and police should be encouraged to support recreation and youth services wherever possible.

- **Part 4: Food security**

We support the measures to improve the government's ability to regulate stores which sell wares mainly to welfare-dependent people in remote areas. The Australian and NT Governments must jointly ensure all stores in remote communities do not conduct their business in exploitative ways, or promote sales of salty, fatty, sugary and excessively refined foodstuffs. Healthy low-salt, low-sugar, low-preservatives and low-fat foods should be made available at affordable prices, whilst high fat, high sugar, high salt-content, high carbohydrate and other foods which are dangerous in the context of welfare-dependent, poorly educated and low exercising communities should not be subsidised or promoted.

Outback Stores should be asked to give the lead to its store managers by placing restrictions or limits on the amount of potentially harmful foods being sold in their stores. For example, the amount of highly sugared drinks allowed to be ordered by the stores should be reduced – a quota could be developed based on best practice: the maximum recommended number of highly sugared drinks to be sold annually per head of population could be advised, based on recommendations from

dieticians about appropriate consumption rates for those having (and those likely to develop) diabetes and at risk of heart disease.

The amount of fatty and high-carbohydrate foods sold should also be reduced using similar techniques to reduce rates of obesity & risk of cardio-vascular diseases.

Of particular importance is the reduction of salty food consumption. Specifically designed campaigns should be developed to promote fresh, low-salt cooking & eating, and measures should be taken as a matter of urgency to reduce the total amounts of salt being sold in all foods in all stores. Outback Stores could promote an inter-store campaign to educate store committees, managers and staff about the quantities of salt in all foods, and the harms that it causes; and then have inter-store and inter-community competitions in regions, with good prizes, to see which stores can produce the best reductions in quantities of salt, sugar, white bread & saturated fats being sold.

I look forward to an improved quality of life for all for Indigenous Territorians through the implementation of the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory legislation.

Please be in contact if you would like to follow up any points made.

Yours sincerely,

Rowan Foley
President
Alice Springs ALP Branch