

SENATE INQUIRY INTO STRONGER FUTURES IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY AND OTHER RELATED LEGISLATION

I am a naturalised Australian, having lived in Australia since 1961. For the past 42 years I have lived and worked with Aboriginal people in many parts of Australia and for the past 26 years have lived in Alice Springs and surrounding Central Australian communities.

The "Stronger Futures" legislation needs to be withdrawn. It is not the way forward to empower Aboriginal people and enable them to take the steps needed to deal with the many issues confronting them today.

There is no evidence that any of the measures implemented during the first 4½ years of the NTER (Intervention) are working. It is true that a huge amount of money has been expended in enabling government control of Aboriginal people's communities, lives and social security payments. But the damage that has been done far outweighs any new buildings or infrastructure that might have occurred in some places.

The introduction of the Intervention with the massive media attention, the huge blue and white signs to Aboriginal people's living areas, and the continued propaganda by media and the government has demonised Aboriginal people and labelled them as alcoholics and child abusers, incapable of managing their affairs and looking after their children. In particular it has stigmatised the men.

We now have the situation (under the so-called 'Special Measures') of more and more Aboriginal people being jailed for non-criminal offences such as non-payment of fines, illegal possession of alcohol etc.) Families are having children removed in ever-increasing numbers as overcrowded living situations continue and people are more impoverished than ever with income management.

The loss of autonomy, disrespect for Aboriginal people and their culture, massive loss of jobs etc. has led to more and more Aboriginal people attempting self-harm and suicide.

I attended several of FAHCSIA's recent 'Stronger Futures' consultations. Aboriginal people want to take responsibility for their own lives and their future. Many came up with good suggestions but these have been ignored in the government's report on these consultations. Many talked about the good programmes that used to be in place before the Intervention and the introduction of the Shire

system of local government. Successful Aboriginal initiatives and community-based programmes have been undermined or abolished under the Intervention.

The serious issues that led to the "*Little Children Are Sacred*" report (the trigger for the Intervention although very few of its recommendations were implemented) came about through years of neglect including lack of resources or ongoing funding for programmes, lack of transparency or checks and balances which enabled rorting of systems and nepotism, kickbacks, government ineptitude in recognising, assessing and dealing appropriately with serious issues particularly in the health and social wellbeing areas and so on.

The way forward

The only way to deal with the serious issues impacting on Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory is to take a community development approach. This will take time and money but some actions could be taken immediately and bear in mind that a huge amount of money is being expended in continual 'consultations', inquiries and reports, in managing people's welfare quarantining, and in continuing another 10 years of intervention.

Step 1:

Immediately **remove or paint over all the blue and white Intervention signs** that demark Aboriginal living areas. This could be done fairly expediently by shire workers. The signs could in the interim remain blank until communities decide what they would like on them.

Step 2:

Restore community governance. Aboriginal people have lost the decision-making power for their individual communities. A system that suits each community needs to be devised in consultation with them, using a community development process of arriving at appropriate governance structures within Aboriginal culture.

Step 3:

Using community development techniques, work through **economic development and employment** plans with each community to suit their specific needs. An employment programme such as the CDEP should be established (where appropriate) to suit people's needs given the cultural, environmental and social demands. Employment programmes need to be funded adequately to pay fair wages. The waste of money in engagement of job service providers and other such agencies should cease.

Step 4:

End the pressure on communities to sign leases in order to receive services and infrastructure. Land is life and spirit for many Aboriginal people and the continual pressure to sign over their land is causing considerable stress. Respectful negotiation could find ways around the issue of provision of services. Community housing models should be investigated so that housing programmes that suit Aboriginal people's social needs could be established.

Step 5:

End Income Management

There is no evidence that income management has helped people manage their money, learn budgeting, improve their lives, helped them find a job or access to a healthy lifestyle. In fact, on the ground evidence reveals life is more difficult with the continual demands from Centrelink, issues with accessing information and funds, inability to share money, restrictions on shopping. Many people detest the income management system of controlling them. In the cases where people prefer to continue with their income being managed, this could be done through the previous system of Centrepay or through community agencies.

Step 6:

End blanket bans on alcohol and pornography. Prohibition has been proved not to work. The continuation of these bans stigmatises Aboriginal people and causes division and demonisation. Giving the minister power to over-ride communities' alcohol management plans sends a message that it is pointless them putting in any effort if the minister can veto what they decide. Community residents best know their strengths and weaknesses and should be supported and enabled to take responsibility for their actions.

Step 7:

Review all laws relating to alcohol consumption. Exorbitant fines for possession of alcohol are leading to more and more Aboriginal people being imprisoned. The social and economic cost of this needs to be urgently taken into account when we see families being broken up, Aboriginal men and more and more women being jailed, no rehabilitation thus recidivism is inevitable in many cases.

Step 8:

Reintroduce customary law.

Customary law needs to be taken into consideration by the courts when considering bail and sentencing. This was abolished under the intervention. This is directly discriminates against Aboriginal people and puts them at a disadvantage before the law.

Customary law needs to be recognised as an important vehicle in empowering community leaders to take responsibility for dealing with issues of offending and justice, and in improving community safety.

Summary

The government needs to withdraw the proposed Stronger Futures legislation. There is no evidence that the initial intervention has improved lives for the Aboriginal people living in the 73 prescribed areas in the Northern Territory and there is increasing evidence that the situation in general is deteriorating.

The government needs to seriously consider the steps proposed in this submission, respect Aboriginal people and their ability to deal with issues confronting them, and work with them in equal and genuine partnership.

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