



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
PETITIONS

received 16.6.08

The Hon Jenny Macklin MP
Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services
and Indigenous Affairs

Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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MC08-007516

04 JUN 2008

Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
Member for Fowler
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mrs Irwin *Julia*

Thank you for your letter of 17 March 2008 regarding a petition from the NSW Branch of Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation about the Northern Territory Emergency Response, that was considered by the Standing Committee on Petitions.

I note that under Standing Order 209(b), there is an expectation that Ministers will respond to the referred petition within 90 days.

Please find attached a response to each of the concerns set out in the petition.

Yours sincerely

JENNY MACKLIN MP

RESPONSE BY THE MINISTER FOR FAMILIES, HOUSING, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS, THE HON JENNY MACKLIN MP

**TO A PETITION FROM THE NSW BRANCH
AUSTRALIANS FOR NATIVE TITLE AND RECONCILIATION
TABLED ON 17 MARCH 2008**

Petition

The Government's strategy has been implemented with no consultation with Indigenous community leaders.

Response

The Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) was introduced by the former Government on 21 June 2007. The present Government is working to develop a relationship with Indigenous Australians based on mutual respect. To this end, the Australian Government is consulting with a broad range of Indigenous stakeholders on a variety of issues.

Immediately after the election, the Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd MP, and I met with a group of Indigenous leaders in Darwin to discuss the future of the NTER. I am committed to meeting regularly with this group. A second meeting was held in February 2008 and another is scheduled for June 2008.

The Government is currently considering longer term consultative arrangements that will include a national representative body for Indigenous people. The Government will consult with Indigenous people on the form that this body should take prior to making any decisions.

Petition

The bulk of the \$587 million allocated is to be spent on administration and bureaucrats rather than directly assisting Indigenous Communities.

Response

During the stabilisation phase of the intervention there have been a number of concrete improvements to services and amenities in remote communities. Among these improvements are:

- 8,559 Child Health Checks have been undertaken in 74 communities and referrals have been made, where appropriate, to specialist services for follow up treatment;
- over 50 additional police have been deployed in remote communities, which has increased perceptions of community safety. Night Patrols have also commenced in all 73 prescribed communities;
- 44 community stores have been licensed. Community stores are reporting increased sales of food, including fresh food, which, over the longer term should support healthier families and communities;
- students in 35 communities and five Town Camp regions are being provided with meals through the School Nutrition Program, improving levels of concentration and classroom learning;
- the Community Clean-Up program has commenced in 52 communities resulting in improvements to the communities' surroundings and houses to make them cleaner and safer;
- 52 Government Business Managers have been appointed serving 72 communities, providing a central point of contact for the coordination of important Government services and programs.

Petition

Quarantining of welfare payments will result in many families, who are already struggling, being worse off.

Response

Income management recognises that parents who receive income support and family payments have an obligation to use those payments to ensure their children are adequately housed, fed, clothed and educated. Income management assists parents who are not meeting these obligations by re-directing a portion of their welfare payments to priority expenses. Financial education and counselling is offered in preparation for the introduction of income management.

Early indications are that, through income management, families are purchasing more of the goods and services essential to improving their children's health and wellbeing. An initial survey of ten community stores in remote Northern Territory communities found that six stores recorded an increase in sales of food, including fresh food, since November 2007.

Income management arrangements will be evaluated as part of the planned review of the NTER which is expected to commence in July 2008.

Petition

Removal of the entry permit system exposes communities and children to further risk.

Response

The Government is committed to restoring the permit system on Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory. The Government believes that Aboriginal people should be able to decide who can visit their land. A Bill that seeks to reinstate the permit system has been introduced into Parliament. In the meantime, the Government is urging people to continue the current practice of seeking permission to visit Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. The Government will be taking steps to allow journalists to enter Aboriginal communities without a permit under certain conditions to report on events in the communities.

Petition

We call on the Federal Government to revisit the Northern Territory strategy.

Response

As mentioned above, the Government is committed to a comprehensive review of the first 12 months of activity under the NTER. The review will be examining all measures and available evidence to assess what is working, the extent of each measure's effectiveness, and the impact to date.

I envisage that the review will be highly consultative with face to face meetings with a variety of Indigenous people and communities in the Northern Territory and submissions called from interested groups. I expect the findings to be delivered to Government before the end of 2008.