

# SUBMISSION

to

## Senate Standing committee on Community Affairs

**Inquiry into Social Security and other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform and Reinstatement of Racial Discrimination Act) Bill 2009 and the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (2009 Measures) Bill 2009 along with the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Restoration of Racial Discrimination Act) Bill 2009**

### Introduction

My name is Leonie Nampijinpa Chester. I am a 56 year old white Australian woman who was adopted into the Walbiri tribe by a senior woman from Yuendumu community. My submission only relates to the sections of the above Bills insofar as they relate to Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. I have lived with my tribal grandmother and her extended family in a town camp in Alice Springs and pitched my tent by the humpies of my Walbiri people in a remote community. Of course I do not claim to represent the Walbiri or to speak on their behalf but I do believe I have some idea of what their aspirations are. I have been a friend and supporter of the Aborigines in their struggle for justice for the last 30 years. In addition to having a great many close Yappa<sup>1</sup> friends, I have spent a lot of time studying their culture, spirituality and traditions and have a good understanding of how they think and what their aspirations are. Further, I have the deepest love and respect for Yappa.

First and foremost I would say that the people most qualified to make submissions to your Committee are the Yappa who who are affected by the Intervention. Unfortunately, many are unable to do so because if they speak English at all, it is as their second, third or even fourth language and many are unable to read and write English fluently, or at all. The old people in particular have the answers to the problems within their communities. There are many old Yappa still living at these remote communities who did not see a white man until they were in their twenties or older. They know and follow their old traditions and pass them on to the young members of their tribes. They have lived the white mans' way and walk in both worlds, at least to the extent that white man has allowed them to. Unfortunately no one asks their opinion. Their wisdom has not been sought. Instead "advisors" speak on their behalf without their permission and the Elders sit in the background not understanding what is being said, confused, hurt and insulted. This has been going on ever since white man first arrived in Australia, let alone the Northern Territory. This is why so many mistakes have been made in the past. ***The right people have never been consulted.*** These Elders will not be with us much longer so they should be included in all consultations while their knowledge and wisdom is still available.

The youth should also be consulted as it is their future that is at stake. Yappa are bright, intelligent, resourceful people and the youth would have some good ideas as to how to

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<sup>1</sup> Yappa is the Walbiri word for Aboriginal. I have chosen to use that word throughout this submission as I am myself a member of the Walbiri tribe and because it saves me constantly referring to "Aborigines living in remote communities in the Northern Territory"

alleviate the boredom, low self esteem and hopelessness that besets them and which leads to substance abuse. I have never seen so many little children as when I was in Central Australia. The Yappa population will continue to grow at a far greater rate than the rest of the community. Things have to be fixed up now, for the generations to come.

## Background

- First and foremost I would like to say that Yappa are the most disadvantaged people in Australia. From the time of the arrival of the white man, Yappa have been treated with contempt. Because their ways were not understood, they were seen to be inferior. They have never been treated with the respect and the dignity they deserve. Prior to the arrival of white man, Yappa were a proud, strong people with the most egalitarian social system I have ever come across. There were no bosses; everyone was equal. The initiated Elders were held in high esteem.
- The Yappa world view is so different to our own that it is almost impossible for non-Aborigines to understand. The land and family are everything to Yappa. For this reason, the vast majority of Yappa will not leave their country. Nor do they want to assimilate into white society.
- Yappa have never been included in our society in a meaningful way. Because of the way they have been treated in the past, Yappa have a very deep distrust of the the Government, and rightfully so.
- Yappa traditions and ceremonies are still conducted in these remote communities today, little different from the way they have been conducted forever. Yappa are tied to their country in a way white man cannot understand. Country and family are everything to Yappa.
- ***These are only my ideas. Fresh consultations must be held with Yappa, run by independent facilitators and with properly trained interpreters.***

## Health

- It will probably come as a surprise to most of you that Yappa will almost always go to a Nyungai<sup>2</sup> before going to a European doctor. I heard much anecdotal evidence of Nyungai going to Alice Springs Hospital Intensive Care Unit to treat their countrymen with miraculous recoveries occurring as a result of these visits. I suspect Yappa arranged these visits themselves without official sanction. Nyungai should therefore be employed by the city hospitals and at the medical centres in remote Yappa communities as an adjunct to mainstream medicine.
- Fresh fruit and vegetables in remote Aboriginal communities is extremely expensive and it is the price of such foods more than anything else that contributes to Yappa's poor diet. The cost of tinned fruit and vegetables are equally expensive. Not all Yappa have refrigerators so frozen food is not an option, and is expensive anyway.

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<sup>2</sup> Nyungai is the Walbiri word for traditional spirit healer.

The biggest components of their diet are therefore bread, milk, tea and whatever game the men can catch. Yappa's addiction to refined sugar contributes to the inordinately high level of diabetes they suffer. Fresh fruit and vegetables should therefore be subsidised in remote communities. Alternatively, market gardens could be established where fresh vegetables could be grown as there is an abundance of underground water in Central Australia, and no shortage of water in the North. Any jobs created in these gardens must go to the Yappa living in the communities and not become the domain of white opportunists.

- Yappa would benefit from cooking lessons so that they could learn to make cheap and tasty meals as they often rely on fast food which is expensive and fattening.
- Culturally sensitive alcohol rehabilitation programs, such as the one being run by the Aboriginal controlled medical service, Congress, in Alice Springs should be extended to all remote communities. The Federal Government has recently provided in excess of \$5 million for this programme.
- Nicotine addiction is a major problem amongst Yappa. When I asked one of my old Yappa friends why his people came into the missions from the bush in the first place, he told me that it was to get tobacco. So Yappa have been addicted to nicotine for a long time. Nicotine is a very difficult addiction to conquer and I do not think Yappa are aware of how dangerous smoking is to their health. I would suggest that a culturally appropriate education programme aimed at Yappa be developed to help them give up smoking. Cigarettes are particularly expensive in remote communities too.
- Unfortunately many Yappa have not been educated adequately about the importance of hygiene and how it affects one's health. Toilets in particular are sometimes dirty but that is because Yappa houses are overcrowded and often there are family visitors who come and stay, adding further pressure to the system. More often than not toilet paper runs out with predictable outcomes. Toilet paper is very expensive in remote communities (\$3 per roll). Hygiene would be improved if toilet paper was provided free of charge. Separate ablutions blocks should be built at remote communities for visiting relatives. These could be cleaned daily. It would be helpful if an education program could be put in place where all Yappa were taught the importance of hygiene. Hygiene should be part of young Yappa's school curriculum.
- ***These are only my ideas. Fresh consultations must be held with Yappa, run by independent facilitators and with properly trained interpreters.***

## Housing

- It is obvious that Yappa have never been consulted regarding their housing needs. Consequently the houses that have been built for them in the past are inappropriate. It is Yappa who should decide the sort of housing they want and not consultants from outside. Yappa should also be involved in the building of their houses. Yappa should be trained in the maintenance of the houses and some could be employed to carry out minor repairs and maintenance, to paint them etc.

- At Ti Tree I found a great many people had chosen not to live in houses at all but instead live in very basic tin humpies. These structures are more or less based on the traditional windbreaks Yappa use, with a small area for storage and with Yappa sleeping under an extended roof, next to an open fire. These small settlements have no running water, no toilets or showers and certainly no electricity. Even when old people do live in a house with relatives, they inevitably put their bed on the verandah so they can sleep next to a fire.
- Apart from the houses offered to them being inappropriate, the main reason Yappa live in these humpies is because they do not want to pay rent. In Ti Tree houses are shared and each adult pays \$40 per week rent. So, it is common to have 4 couples living in a 4 bedroom home (with any number of children) which has an inadequate kitchen, broken plumbing, and is generally in a very a run down state. Each adult is charged \$40 per week so the total income generated from these dilapidated, overcrowded houses is \$320 per week! Yappa would prefer a very small, simple dwelling with low rent where just one small family unit could live.
- I met one old gentleman living in a humpy with his wife. He told me that about 7 years ago the Government had built 7 houses for his family at his traditional homeland but that it was only after the houses were finished that the contractors tried to sink a bore for water. Only then was it discovered that there wasn't any suitable drinking water in the vicinity of the site. The houses sit empty still and the old man's request to Central Desert Shire to run a pipe out to his homeland so that his family can live in these 7 houses has not been responded to. This sort of waste and incompetence is unacceptable.
- It would be best for all concerned if Yappa were allowed to design their own houses, and shown how to build them. There should be no deals that they have to sign leases over their land and no other strings attached. This was successfully done at Lake Tyers Aboriginal Mission in Victoria under the CDEP programme.
- In Arnham land Yappa built a 5 bedroom timber bunkhouse on their land, independent of the Government, with timber that they cut and milled themselves from their land. They were assisted by The Jack Thompson Foundation. The house was built by 15 Yolgnu men, many of whom came from tragic family circumstances and/or had battled alcohol dependency. They plan to build more houses this way and the self esteem of the Yappa builders has been greatly enhanced.
- The NT Government has proven itself to be totally incompetent so far as providing houses for Yappa. The NT Government's current push to create "economic hubs" (*Working Future*) at 20 remote settlements, is no more than a push to draw Yappa away from their homelands. It is hoped these "economic hubs" will attract private investors. Private investment in Yappa towns will not benefit Yappa. No jobs will be created for Yappa in these "hubs".
- ***These are only my ideas. Fresh consultations must be held with Yappa, run by independent facilitators and with properly trained interpreters.***

## Education

- I did not meet a single Yappa child who attended school in a remote community that could read or write. They knew the alphabet but nothing more.
- Yappa children speak English as a second (sometimes third) language. Tribal language is spoken at remote communities and by the time a child is ready for school, they know virtually no English. Yappa children should be taught the rudiments of reading and writing (say, for the first 2 years of school) in their own Aboriginal language. Once this had been achieved then teaching them the English language could be attempted.
- A special curriculum should be developed for Yappa children that they would find interesting and relevant. The children would then be more inclined to attend school if they found it fun and enjoyable. Currently truancy rates are very high in remote communities with children attending school on average 2-3 days per week. Obviously this is not enough for them to get a grounding in reading and writing and consequently most Yappa children graduate from school not only illiterate, but no longer able to speak their tribal language properly.
- Adult literacy programs should also be established for Yappa. I met several Yappa who, despite being able to read the Pitjantjara Bible, were convinced that they could not read and write. I explained to them that if they could read that Bible in Pitjantjara then it would be very easy for them to learn to read and write in English because the same alphabet was used and they already spoke English. I was able to sit with one old gentleman and listen as he shyly read in English for the very first time in his life. He was a Lutheran Pastor 70 years of age!
- It is my belief that Yappa culture and traditions, the stories of their resistance to the colonization of their lands, the truth about the stolen generations and Yappa's ongoing fight to retain their lands become part of the general school curriculum. In this way all young Australians would not only develop an understanding of the First Australians, but also respect for Yappa and their culture would be nurtured.
- ***These are only my ideas. Fresh consultations must be held with Yappa, run by independent facilitators and with properly trained interpreters.***

## Employment

- Contrary to popular belief, Yappa are not lazy. All the men I met would love to work but there just aren't jobs available.
- CDEP worked very well in Yappa communities and should never have been scrapped by the previous Government. The current Government should reintroduce CDEP as a matter of urgency as it provided a great many jobs and supplemented many Yappa's incomes. Having this work gave Yappa self esteem

and a sense of purpose. Since scrapping CDEP no “real” jobs have been created and it simply isn't possible to create “real” jobs for all the Yappa who were previously employed under CDEP.

- Yappa have been socially and economically disengaged from the broader community since the coming of the white man. Welfare dependence has just brought additional problems. Many old Yappa I have spoken to said it was better when they were working on stations (before they received Social Security payments) because, even if they were treated as virtual slaves, they had something to do with their time as the men worked as stock-men – work they loved. Pastoral companies that lease Yappa land should be encouraged to hire Yappa stock-men.
- Yappa are the most resourceful people I have ever met and are extremely intelligent and quick to learn. Any employment opportunities must therefore not be too menial as Yappa will simply become bored. Possible areas of employment for men could be as motor mechanics, horticulturalists, stock-men, and making stock-whips and other horse tack. Yappa could also be involved in the building of their houses. They could be trained to carry out maintenance on their houses such as carrying out minor repairs and painting etc. Yappa Women tend to marry early and have children early. Because of the kinship system a Yappa woman is mother not only to her own children but to all her sisters children, so much of their time is spent looking after their children or grandchildren, leaving little time left over for full-time work. Some remote communities have art centres where the women are able to make some extra money from their art which they can do either at the centres or in their homes at their own pace. Such art centres should be built at all remote communities. Women could also be trained to be office administrators, horticulturalists, teachers aids and nurses or hospital workers.
- Yappa should be supported and encouraged if they wish to establish eco-tourism, or cultural tourism ventures on their country.
- Nyungai should be employed at city hospitals and at medical centres in remote Yappa communities. Not only would this create meaningful employment, but Yappa patients would feel more at ease when they were in hospital.
- ***These are only my ideas. Fresh consultations must be held with Yappa, run by independent facilitators and with properly trained interpreters.***

## **Promote personal responsibility and rebuild community norms in Northern Territory Indigenous communities**

- Yappa have their own community norms which are vastly different from our own. It is their own traditional community norms that should be rebuilt and only Yappa can do that. Prior to the Intervention, some of the communities were doing a very good job of promoting personal responsibility and community norms. This work has been sabotaged by the Intervention.
- Town councils were run by democratically elected members of remote communities

and these have now been taken over by large Shires which are run by non Aboriginal administrators. The effect of this is that you take away Yappa's dignity and pride. They feel like they are being treated like children.

- Yappa distrust the Government and see the requirement for them to give leases over their land in exchange for houses as nothing more than a plot to take their land away from them, again. Why should they hand back the land that was already stolen from them and which they fought so hard to gain back? Some communities have signed the leases. Others **never** will, not in another 40,000 years! They distrust the Government and with good reason. Any good that may have been done in the past has been completely undone by the Intervention. Yappa's feelings have been hurt. They have been insulted and Yappa have absolutely no confidence in the Government.
- ***These are only my ideas. Fresh consultations must be held with Yappa, run by independent facilitators and with properly trained interpreters.***

## The cost of implementing programs

- The costs of any measures taken to improve the lot for Yappa should be of little consideration, given the waste that has occurred in the past. It should be remembered that the vast majority of any money directed to Yappa finds its way to the pockets of the white men anyway, be they builders, administrators, consultants or advisors.
- ***These are only my ideas. Fresh consultations must be held with Yappa, run by independent facilitators and with properly trained interpreters.***

## Conclusion

Since the first arrival of Europeans on Australian shores the indigenous peoples have been treated as inferior; they have never been shown respect. The "grass roots" people have never been consulted as to how we can best help them move forward. As far as I am concerned, the current situation for Yappa is actually worse than it was 30 years ago when I first became involved in their struggle, and I lay the blame squarely at the feet of successive Governments who have all failed to listen to the Elders.

Aboriginal people are fine, intelligent and resourceful people. All of the failings of past Governments come down to the fact that the people who are affected by the changes wrought upon them have never been consulted. There is no shortage of intelligent, educated, articulate traditional people who are well able to sit down and have meaningful dialogue with parliamentarians. Until Yappa are consulted and asked what will best help them, money will continue to be wasted and the situation will continue to deteriorate.

The Intervention is a failure. My tribal grandmother is a pensioner, a Christian and does not drink, yet her money is quarantined. No doubt there are people who are not looking

after their children and wasting money on drugs and alcohol, in both Yappa and White society. Each case should be looked at individually. It is very insulting and embarrassing to Yappa to have had their money quarantined this way. The crude signs at the gates of the Prescribed Areas are insulting to Yappa. Many of the Communities that had these signs erected were already alcohol free in any event!

Yuendumu is a community that has been quarantined. Two of my extended family, Peggy Brown and her husband Johnny Miller, took it upon themselves to start a rehabilitation programme for the petrol sniffers at Yuendumu as their hearts were breaking as they watched the youth dying from petrol sniffing. Peggy and Johnny had no government assistance and simply took the kids to Johnny's homeland at Mt Theo, 200 km away. There they taught them the traditional Walbiri ways. Their programme was very successful and Peggy and Johnny each received the Order of Australia Medal in recognition of their work. Lucy Napaljarri Kennedy (also from Yuendumu) was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1994. Wendy Nungarrayi Brown and Rex Granites from Yuendumu were awarded the Centenary Medal in 2001 which recognised "citizens who made a contribution to Australian Society or Government". We adorn them with these trinkets in much the same way the early settlers hung plaques around the necks of the Aborigines 200 years ago, but these same Elders are not consulted by Government when it comes to making decisions that affect the communities they live in!

Do not underestimate Yappa's tenacity! Vincent Lingiari persuaded his tribesmen to walk off Wave Hill Station in 1966 until they got equal wages, and once they got equal wages he persuaded them to move to Wattie Creek and stay put until their land was given back to them. They were given assistance by the Australian Trade Union movement and they sat down there for 8 years and the rest is history!

In mid 2009 the Alyawarr people left their community. Initially they were forced to do so because despite their requests, no one was sent out to clean their septic tanks and their homes became inundated with sewage. The septic tanks have been cleaned but the Alyawarr have not returned because they have been told no new houses will be built at their community, despite them being desperately needed. Whilst they are camped away from their community they are no longer in a Prescribed Area and no longer subject to the Northern Territory Emergency Response. More and more people are joining the Alyawarr. They will sit down for as long as it takes for the Government to listen to them. They will not give up their land no matter how you much they are threatened or what sacrifice it takes. Already the Trade Union Movement is assisting them to build a house. History is repeating itself!

Yappa are calling for Jenny Macklin to resign. They should also be calling for the NT Minister responsible for Aboriginal Affairs' resignation because he is either totally incompetent, corrupt, or both:

- Of the \$672 million Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Project, \$45 million has been spent on consultants **and not a single house has been built!**
- Over the past 5 years The NT government has diverted \$2 billion earmarked for indigenous disadvantage and other key services on Government superannuation and government debt, and culture and recreation in marginal seats.



***A Royal Commission into this disgraceful mismanagement of Yappa money is needed. That so much taxpayers money could be wasted in this way is outrageous!***

I am not an anthropologist; I did not even finish high school, but I have been blessed to have had many close Yappa friends and my life has been enriched by those friendships. I wish all Australians could have the experiences I have had because then I believe the fear would go away. I really believe that the average white person cannot even comprehend how fair and generous Yappa are. We tend to expect them to be greedy and covetous like ourselves (and there are indeed some like that and unfortunately they are the ones with power who the Government listens to!). Ask Yappa what they want and you will be surprised at how little they ask for. Yappa are the most generous and reasonable of people. At this stage the thing they require most is that their dignity is restored by being consulted about their lives and to be treated like the intelligent human beings that they are. That is not a lot to ask.

***Non-traditional Aborigines from the big cities with university degrees do not know what Yappa wants and needs, and it is an insult to Yappa that these people are consulted and allowed to speak on their behalf. Until Parliamentarians are able to sit on the ground, literally, at the communities with my people, and spend time with them and listen to them, then the Government will continue to undermine them, and insult them, and fail them.***

Yappa feels that the Government is trying to trick them into giving their land back, and who could blame them given the treatment they have received in the past and the hoops they had to jump through to get the land back. Yappa who have not already done so will **NEVER** sign leases over their land.

I sincerely thank you for reading my submission and if I have touched the heart of just one of you, then I have done my job well. I feel greatly privileged to have been adopted by the Walbiri. It is not a token gesture; I am a Walbiri. Walbiri don't care about my skin colour, what I own, or what I do. They just care about who I am and I am flattered that they see in me something worthy of belonging to their tribe. Yappa are the most wonderful people and we have so much to learn from them. So anything I can do to help them is an honour for me and I thank the Committee for the opportunity to present this Submission.

**LEONIE NAMPIJINPA CHESTER**