

## Submission

**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**

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## Representation – a background

People living in remote communities struggle to be part of the debate and policy making that affects their lives. We have one radio station in Atitjere, no mobile coverage and in a couple of years no access to free TV. We get one mail delivery a week so newspapers are out of date. Only those with access to the internet and who can read have access to news and debate. Even the ability to vote is compromised by a lack of knowledge about the process, with fewer and fewer remote community members nominating for elected positions at all levels of government in the Northern Territory. At a recent by-election for the Central Desert Shire three candidates were elected unopposed across two wards.

In March 1996 the first cut John Howard made was to abolish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Information Service. This was a very successful Australian Electoral Commission program that went out to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities in Australia and ensured everyone eligible was on the electoral roll and offered training and information sessions on our system of government. Voting participation in the 1996 Federal election for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was at its highest.

In the Council elections held here two years ago, just 32% of voters turned out. In our community the electoral roll was out of date and most of the young people were disconnected with the process and knew very little about it. In the Northern Territory elections three years ago we did not even get to vote because our member was elected unopposed (one of two electorates in the Territory). The failure of so many people to vote in the council elections and to nominate for representative positions is not apathy, but a failure of all levels of government to ensure this vulnerable group of people are engaged meaningfully in the debate about their future and are represented fairly.

People here could not vote until 1967 and it was compulsory for them to do so until 1984. They were only given information about voting in the late 1980s and early 1990s and this ceased abruptly in 1996. There is nothing fair about making and changing laws that directly affect a group of people who have no real means of registering their opinion, either through the media or at the polls.

## Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) and Amalgamation of Remote NT Councils

I made a submission [attachment] to the incoming Minister Jenny Macklin in December 2007 relating to the impact of the Northern Territory Emergency Response on Imanpa, the community where I lived and worked as the Council Chief Executive Officer at the time. I pointed out that housing and education were top priorities – and they remain so in Imanpa and most other remote Territory communities.

In February 2008 we moved from Imanpa to Atitjere [Harts Range] where I took up the position of Chief Executive Officer for the local community council and then Shire Service Manager on 1 July 2008, when the 9 councils comprising the Central Desert Shire were amalgamated with the head office located in Alice Springs.

Over the last three years I have experienced the Northern Territory Emergency Response first hand along with the abolition of local community councils and the formation of shires. I remain frustrated at the lack of progress in services and living standards of people living in remote communities. I am concerned about the constant ill-considered and expensive government programs that are foisted on communities while the main issue of homelessness is lost in the bureaucratic nonsense that are the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP), job networks and myriad other programs that involve many people driving aimlessly around the remote regions of the Northern Territory in expensive four wheel drives.

Laws protecting people against racial discrimination should not be suspended to allow social experiments with welfare to be undertaken on Aboriginal communities and executed by an army of 'field workers' and other visitors who take up time and resources with little or no positive outcomes and often negative results. The fact that it has been only Aboriginal people who are being subjected to income management has contributed to a general feeling of helplessness and depression. Any benefits of income management have been overwhelmed by the general feeling that this is a racist policy. It should have been voluntary, or at least targeted.

## Housing and Education

Homelessness and lack of educational opportunities are the major contributing factors to the disadvantages faced by people living in remote Northern Territory communities, the majority of whom are Aboriginal people. I point this out because if we are to "improve the social and economic conditions, social inclusion and life outcomes" for these disadvantaged Australians, the Australian community and Australian governments must start seeing these as social justice and equity issues rather than "Aboriginal issues". Yes, these are 'Aboriginal communities' but they are also Australian towns – where young Australians face barriers and standards of service that are more akin to a third world developing country than a 21st century Australian community.

Being Aboriginal and living in a remote community should not mean that it is somehow okay for children to miss out on school because their parents have no-where to live, or that it is acceptable that 16 and 17 year olds in 2010 are unable to write anything but their name because an education and social system of neglect, homelessness and disrespect has failed them entirely.

On the 'My School' website our school predictably performs at the lowest levels, but this is okay because in the explanatory paragraph it states: "The population of the community is approximately 250, however this fluctuates dependant on cultural activity." That is not why children do not attend school regularly. "Cultural activity" would take up about two weeks of the school year and any smart education system would include it in the school's activities.

The reason children miss school is because they are homeless or living in such crowded conditions they are constantly sick and tired and many of their parents are forced to move time and again. Outstation children miss school because their parents are poor and do not have reliable vehicles that they must drive on corrugated and pot-holed dirt tracks or the money to fuel and maintain them. There is a complex system of rebates for fuel that relies on people being reimbursed at the end of each term. It wasn't 'cultural business' but lack of school bus that kept these children away from school for a whole year.

## SIHIP

The Federal Government set aside many millions of dollars to address the housing crisis, resulting in SIHIP – a program that has been a spectacular failure and so far has wasted enough money to have built all the houses we need in Atitjere plus a sewerage system (we don't have one). Instead in two years SIHIP has failed to deliver any new houses anywhere.

When building finally commences SIHIP and the Northern Territory Government have determined that only a few communities will get new houses while others, like ours, will only get 'upgrades' to existing housing. At a 'consultation' meeting in Atitjere at the beginning of 2009 the SIHIP representative told a meeting of 40 people that it did not matter what their wishes were, new houses would not be built and houses would only be extended and repaired. Many of the elderly people at the meeting were very upset. In the two years I have been here most of the requests for housing received in the council office have been for smaller houses for the elderly. They want small comfortable quiet houses, with their families living nearby – much like the rest of the Australian community.

The SIHIP representative also said that work would begin on repairs in a few weeks, that was back in February 2009. A contingent of about 12 contractors did visit the community and undertake yet another 'house to house' evaluation (the third one undertaken – with extensive evaluations undertaken by the Central Desert Shire as well). No work has yet commenced through the SIHIP scheme.

We have 26 houses here in Atitjere for over 300 people. Attending the Atitjere Housing Reference Group set up by the Northern Territory Housing Department to oversee tenancy placements and deal with waiting lists, is like watching the rearrangement of those famous deck chairs on the Titanic. It doesn't matter how you do the maths, 26 houses for 300 people are not enough and our population, like every other remote N.T. community is growing. New-born babies are being taken home to extreme overcrowding and many are coming back to their communities to a homelessness that sees their parent/s moving from house to house, and from community to community, when the situation becomes unbearable. Homeless families are forced to move from house to house and community to community when generous and hospitable people find that they can no longer cope. The houses themselves cannot cope with the stresses and so we still have people living in humpies with no running water or sewerage and running power cords into a neighbour's house.

Our Housing Tenancy Officer is homeless and lives in a tin shed with no bathroom or sewerage and our Night Patrol Team Leader and his family are also homeless. He and his family are sharing a two bedroom house with 6 other people, one of whom is having a baby in June. Many more people are homeless or living in extreme overcrowding.

Meanwhile, the Federal Government was able to build emergency accommodation on every community within a matter of weeks of the announcement of the NTER to house the Government Business Managers and other visiting workers, and yet nothing has been done for the local people to address the growing housing problem. While we were given two of the demountables from Baxter Detention Centre to form our Aged Care residential facility, requests to receive more (particularly for housing the Night Patrol Team Leader and his family) were ignored. I believe the demountables stored in Alice Springs for 18 months have been or are about to be shipped to Christmas Island. While I understand that refugees require accommodation, there must be a more efficient way of providing this while at the same time allowing us to house people who live just down the road from where these demountables have been stored.

## Government Business Managers

During my time here in Atitjere we have had two Government Business Managers, both of whom show genuine concern for the many deficiencies in the community and the deprivation of basic standards faced by the local population. They have facilitated small amounts of funding for minor projects, but nothing for sewerage, housing or a permanent base for adult education. The ability to get funding for a community depends on the ability of the GBM to convince someone in Alice Springs and Darwin, who then convinces someone in Canberra that the project is a good idea. This also usually involves consulting with the Shire if the project involves land use or Shire infrastructure or services. There remains no long term funding or development strategy that address fundamental infrastructure, housing and educational issues facing our community – which is something I pointed out in the report to the Minister in December 2007. We often get requests to think of something quickly because a funding round is closing in a couple of days, that goes something like: "Hey, we've got \$15,000/\$1,500 left to fund something and a couple of days to put in a submission, what do you want to apply for?"

While I believe it could be useful to have a permanent representative of the Federal Government on each community, it is disappointing that their presence has not brought about real changes to the living standards of local people.

Our community does not have sewerage and relies on a very old and badly installed system of septic tanks. Our houses are old, run down and overcrowded and while our crèche is fully staffed and cares for 25 children it operates from a shed that would not pass any test of suitability as a child care centre anywhere in mainstream Australia. Our art centre is also an old shed with a leaky roof.

When I arrived in Atitjere two years ago we desperately needed a bus to collect 15 children from outstations some 40 and 50 kms away. These children lost 12 months of schooling waiting for someone to take responsibility for getting them to school. In the end we used our old sports and recreational bus and have just found out that we have finally awarded funds to buy a new bus. This has taken two years – far too long for such a pressing issue.

We received funding through the GBM to build a roadside stop that the community had in mind for some three or four years and with local skills wanted to build themselves. The funding became available over a year ago but delays in approving the design with the Shire have meant that this has not yet been built. We are situated on the Plenty Highway and every winter we get many vehicles passing by. The roadside stop is an important element in building our economy here in Atitjere by encouraging tourists to drive into the community and spend their money at our takeaway, store and arts centre, as well as using our camping ground. The Shire has determined that the roadside stop should not be designed and built in the community as was anticipated, but prefabricated in town and delivered and erected here. To date the prefabricated building has not arrived although we have been asked to choose the colours.

The GBM has been successful in getting funding for our local women's organisation, assisting with upgrading aged care services and infrastructure for the local cook house as well as providing a refrigerated truck to supply the aged care, takeaway and school lunch programs. But what we really need are houses and sewerage and training.

## Employment, training and education

While the position of Community Employment Brokers has been scrapped, Job Network providers continue to visit communities in what I believe is probably the most wasteful of all the programs foisted on communities. They waste time and resources attempting to find jobs where none exist, most ignoring the obvious problem of illiteracy, work readiness and homelessness. There is no long term planning which makes these efforts to implement the latest changes/experiments in welfare delivery a waste. The money and resources currently being expended in this area should go to building an adult educational facility that will enable people to learn to read, write and count while undertaking meaningful work, i.e. building themselves and their neighbours houses.

A permanent adult education centre and educators would see more people involved in literacy and numeracy training and using computers and becoming part of the national discussion about their lives. With a regular and well programmed education centre adults would be able to show children that education is important and this would help build a community-wide culture of valuing education, particularly if that education leads to being able to build better houses and a better community life, i.e. it has real positive outcomes.

Job Network providers have been awarded contracts that they cannot fulfil and often do not really understand. Work for the Dole programs have no long term viability and the many changes to CDEP over the past two years has seen it almost completely fall over here in Atitjere. We had 52 participants prior to July 2008 when the Shire took over and now have about 15. The Shire was unwilling to carry on the system of top-up which the previous council had maintained allowing people to make a living wage. The Shire created some full time positions for field workers and no top-up for the rest. After 1 July 2009 new CDEP participants are paid by Centrelink and not the Shire and are now income managed – and so the number of people interested in working has plummeted. Those few with full time jobs find life very difficult as they are called upon to support many of their unemployed relatives and friends.

The Job Networks drain a lot of resources that could be better used in actually making a permanent difference in our community. The GBM complexes should be housing permanent adult educators and the growing list of people willing to volunteer on communities through ICV (Indigenous Community Volunteers).

## Local programs

The best programs that we have undertaken in our community of the last two years have been undertaken with the assistance of volunteers and are outside of any of the programs funded by the NTER, they are:

**Internet cafe** – we set this up with little or no funding, using a small building that is shared with the Night Patrol team. A young volunteer came to live and work in Atitjere for the whole of 2009 to set up an internet cafe that is available to all community members. The results have been very encouraging with many community members learning basic and higher level computer skills as well as learning how to use the internet. Since our volunteer's departure we are having trouble keeping the cafe open and we are hoping to get another young person who wants to undertake an interesting gap year here in Atitjere.

When the volunteers arrived (there were two of them at the beginning of the year) they were not permitted to stay at the GBM complex because they were 'not government'. Their presence in our community had more long term positive outcomes than all the job network and government visitors who stayed at the GBM complex in 2009. Our lack of local accommodation saw one of the volunteers leave early with the other staying on until the end of the year to fulfil his commitment. The Central Australian Youth Link Up Service (CAYLUS) were also very supportive of our internet project and continue giving practical and financial assistance.

**Aged Care residential facility** – In 2008 the community purchased two demountables and two others were gifted to us to build a much needed residential facility for our elderly community members, some of whom were living in unlined tin sheds and car bodies. While we have moved one elderly couple into the facility it remains unfinished because we need funding to build a roof over the entire complex and ramps. We need the money to finish this facility urgently. It has been over a year since the buildings were delivered.

**Recreation Hall** – In 2008 the community purchased three demountables that are joined to form a small recreational hall. CAYLUS assisted the community by getting the funding necessary to build a verandah around the Recreation Hall and to build a house to accommodate a permanent youth worker.

## Planning for future training and housing

Before the NTER and the amalgamation of councils into Shires our small community was doing fairly well. We were earning a small amount of money that enabled us to pay people extra on top of their CDEP and in the 2007/2008 year we were able to seal the 1.5 kms of road from the Plenty Highway into our community and all of our community roads, which has reduced dust considerably.

We were also able to purchase the demountable for a recreation hall and two new demountables to add to the two given to us for the aged care facility. Our CDEP participants were regularly involved in training and we have many talented welders, grader operators, concreters and building workers. Our art centre is one of only a handful in the Territory that is run entirely by local Aboriginal people, as is our crèche, Centrelink office, Night Patrol team and housing sector. Of the 24 shire jobs available in our community, 20 of them are currently filled by local Aboriginal people. Since the intervention and the amalgamation of councils, we have never been given the opportunity to build on our strengths here in Atitjere. Instead our wishes, concerns and suggestions have been ignored in favour of a one size fits all approach.

The original intention of the amalgamation of shires was to enable community development and the original idea behind the NTER was to make communities safe and healthy places for children. The reality is that these two programs are failing and further alienated people from decision making. These programs have created bigger and more remote bureaucracies and funding seems to get further and further away from the people who need it.

At a recent community meeting here in Atitjere the local councillor (and my partner) Bruce Finter put forward a proposal to build 25 houses here. We can no longer stand by while our community grows for a incompetent bureaucracy to deliver housing. The following was put forward by Bruce to the community who all embraced the idea enthusiastically:

“Housing

With no further advice about SIHIP, and progress seeming as close as it was 2 and a half years ago when the Federal Government intervention started, it is time for small communities like ours to take back control of building programs because the situation has gone beyond urgent.

The community needs at least 25 houses over the next 5 to 7 years if the people here are to 'close the gap' of disadvantage. Housing is the key to better education, better nutrition and healthy lifestyles, improved life expectancy, dignity and social justice. We have 300+ people living in 26 houses. It doesn't matter how much maintenance occurs the houses will remain overcrowded.

This community has a history of doing things for itself and learning new skills, so my housing proposal builds on the idea that we can do this for ourselves in this community with the support of the Shire, N.T. Government, Federal Government and private industry. I bring this to you for discussion.

1.1 Identify 25 to 50 residential blocks, including site for future sewerage (even though we may need to make do with septic tanks in the short term). We may also need to identify where future buildings and infrastructure will be required, i.e. Recreation and Community Centre, recreational facilities, Arts and Cultural centre, Child Care centre, adult education centre, high school, retail businesses, library and internet centre, purpose built Aged Care facility, parks, roads, electricity, water and sewerage and all weather 24 hour airstrip.

1.2 I will work to ensure a fast tracking of the approval of the subdivision of the residential blocks as a matter of priority with the Shire, N.T. Department of Lands and FACHSIA. Additional approvals for other types of subdivisions and long term plans can be submitted subsequent to the urgent approval of a residential subdivision.

1.3 Determine the plan and design of the houses. I am proposing that we build steel framed houses that are appropriate for the local climate and considerably less expensive than houses built on slabs, and most importantly, will be able to be erected by a local workforce. Over the next 6 weeks I will source some house plans that are affordable and where community members will be able to erect at least 75% of the buildings themselves. We can invite others to bring their costed ideas so that we can meet again and choose the most cost effective and comfortable houses available.

1.4 I propose that we ask the Federal Government to release some of the SIHIP funding to us so that we can get on with the task of building suitable and affordable housing. Our proposal to the Federal Government will need to include a costed plan and a building strategy. The model I am proposing is:

1.4.1 Find out the cost of delivery and raw materials for 25 houses.

1.4.2 Consider funding options (including Federal & Territory Government and private industry assistance) and home ownership options.

1.4.3 Submit to the Federal Government that the building team will include everyone in the community who wants their own home and is able to help. Houses could be either purchased by their occupants through low interest loans (there are some successful overseas models of this in areas of high unemployment), or a local housing cooperative could be established that administers ownership/rental of the houses and sets out lease/ownership arrangements with the occupants. With everyone helping to building their own and everyone else's houses, many people will benefit from the experience and gain valuable skills as well as having the satisfaction of having built their own comfortable and safe home where they and their families can thrive. With these skills the community will then be able to build other necessary infrastructure for themselves, i.e. church, child care centre, recreation hall, etc.

1.4.4 Membership of the housing cooperative and occupancy of a house will also bring with it a commitment to learning about the technology of houses and undertaking home skills training, probably with the help of ICV volunteers.

1.4.5 Set up a suitable work area so that the welding of the steel frames and other prefabrications can be undertaken here efficiently and safely. We already have many qualified welders and the necessary equipment. If the houses are built off the ground we will need less concrete (slabs are a major expense), plumbing will be more accessible, easier to keep dogs and snakes out of the house. We have an experienced concreting team that would be able to pour all of the footings and stand the frames. Tradespeople can be brought in when required on the understanding that they train and work with local people. The cost of this expert advice and assistance could be met by the

Federal Government with the funding currently be directed through the job network/CDEP/work for the dole programs, many of which are short term and offer few opportunities for either substantial training, education or jobs and no opportunities for people to have their own house.

The proposal was agreed to unanimously. We would be seeking the Federal Government's support with this project and hope that somehow we can be heard and given an opportunity to show that some of the solutions to the problems facing us in remote communities can be addressed right here with a willing and enthusiastic community relying on its own resources with assistance when required and requested.

Deirdre Finter

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