



26 May 2008

The Secretary
Select Committee on Regional and Remote
Indigenous communities

The Senate
P.O. Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir,

1. I would like to make a brief and very preliminary submission to your committee.

Two matters in particular interest me.

1. The rate of payment of Social Security Benefits and Pensions.
2. The need to extend effective fire management over all of central and northern Australia.

encl... I made 500 word submissions on both of these subjects to the recent 'Australia 2020 Summit'. I enclose copies of those submissions with this letter. Please treat them as part of this submission.

I would like to add a few further comments to those very brief submissions.

2. entitled In connection with the paper NATIONAL SHAME.

Perhaps the paper should have been called GUILTY SECRET?

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Seat in the House of Representatives, as an independent. It was a great learning experience for me. I spent about 4 months out and about, door knocking, talking to people in hotels and so on.

When I encountered people who were prepared to talk openly with me I asked them what it was about living in Australia that really gave them the slits. Only three issues came up at all commonly and they were:

- (a) the shamefully inadequate rate of payment of Social Security payments,
- (b) the un-affordability of land; and
- (c) something 'very wrong' about our schooling system.

Item (a) was mentioned most often. It was nominated by some 70 or 75 percent of the respondents. And by men and women in approximately equal numbers. All seemed to feel terribly guilty about not having done anything to alter this abuse of powerless people. They did not have to think about my question for very long before the answer came to them.

In 1972 'the political will' to correct the situation was present in the population at large. That was my conclusion at the time. I felt as if I had discovered a guilty secret. People were ashamed of the situation and they felt that it was very wrong. A consensus to that effect did exist.

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3.

Being aware of that 1972 concensus, I paid attention to the issue in the years that followed.

The first ^{by} very significant development was a scurrilous campaign of "dole bludger bashing" that seemed to begin outside of government but was eventually promoted (most famously ~~at~~ by Malcolm Fraser) ~~and~~ by Paul Keating, at the Prime Ministerial level. but also by

A subsidiary campaign of vilification was directed at single mothers.

I would suggest to you, most seriously, that the 1946 (?) Government White Paper on FULL EMPLOYMENT was a mistake. A mistake that really should be corrected. There is a great deal that can and should be done in a society on a voluntary basis and outside of the "employment contract context". We have, I would suggest, been suffering from chronic over-employment in Australia since 1946. And: so suffering, as a consequence of a formal government policy.

The Keating White Paper WORKING NATION followed on from, and extended the error of the FULL EMPLOYMENT White Paper. The Howard governments WELFARE to WORK legislation more or less completed the trifecta.

How have these provisions impacted on Remote and Regional Indigenous communities in the N.T.?

4. I was travelling around some of the Maningrida Outstations in June of 1980. At that time people were being educated to the fact that they could apply for Unemployment Benefits. Prior to that time Aborigines were not entitled to Unemployment Benefits.

They may have had to wait 34 years to be paid Unemployment Benefits like other Australians but they were very definitely in the vanguard when it came to being subjected to 'work for the dole schemes'. I refer of course to the 'Community Development Employment Scheme'.

It has been presented as a 'voluntary scheme' but people told me that they were subjected to 'unconscionable pressure' to volunteer. Pressure from the community and from the Department. In practice, CDEP has been a form of 'forced labour' that contravenes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Following on from this pilot scheme other forced labour schemes were extended and elaborated under the provisions of The Employment Services Act. An act which is unconstitutional in my opinion.

The idea that Indigenous communities are now addicted to ~~the~~ "Cheap CDEP Slave Labour" is just too ironic for words.

You will not find me supporting or defending CDEP. I would suggest that CDEP has been counter-productive in terms of its own stated objectives. It has undermined real employment and done very considerable economic damage to the communities, according to my informants.

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I have known a number of people, who have worked on CDEP sponsored "Community Ranger Programs" on land management tasks. They have found life very frustrating. They have been let down ^{time} and, again when promised support: in motor vehicles for example, or real full time jobs, or "top up money" has failed to eventuate. The experience has been soul-destroying in the extreme. As I see it CDEP has squandered the goodwill that people originally brought to it — and it might now be described as "spiritually bankrupt."

5. Most of us are familiar with the idea that all power tends to corrupt and that absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely.

We tend to overlook the fact that powerlessness and poverty also tend to corrupt.

A whole community living in desperate poverty might well be tempted to agree to a very destructive forestry project, or the building of a Nuclear Waste Storage Facility — just because they are sick of being poor.

No community should be made vulnerable in this way by government policy, in my opinion.

We pay our Members of Parliament generous salaries so as to remove that very "temptation to corruption" from them, do we not?

6. I recently discovered a most marvellous book.

Joan Colebrook, "A House of Trees", Chatto and Windus, London, 1988.

The author grew up in North Queensland prior to 1937. She sketches the economic and ecological history of the region. She explains the way that people were obliged to ruin the land if they were to have any money at all. Much of the ruination of Australia was caused in this way, prior to 1946.

There can be no doubt about it, we did act wisely when we amended the Constitution in 1946 to create a WELFARE STATE. Our motivation may have been social justice, and a reaction to the horrors of the GREAT DEPRESSION, but there are very good ecological reasons to have a WELFARE STATE.

The only trouble is that an inadequate rate of payment for SOCIAL SECURITY PAYMENTS can have such terrible consequences. An inadequate rate of payment is a very serious kind of a false economy.

I am suprised that so little has been said about this aspect of the matter in the press and on T.V. since the Federal Intervention in Northern Territory Affairs in 2007. It seems as if the guilty secret remains secret. This is an ABSURD situation. Concerning this matter we have maintained a silence closely akin to stupidity, in my opinion.

Yours faithfully

Strider

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AUSTRALIA 2020 SUMMIT

NAME FOR PUBLICATION: STRIDER

CONTRIBUTION NUMBER THREE

CRITICAL AREA 6

TITLE: NATIONAL SHAME

1: In 1946 Australians amended the Constitution to create a welfare state. One aspect of this was provision for the payment of Unemployment Benefits.

It was clearly understood that access to Social Security payments in time of need was to be a right not a privilege.

So, the people instructed the government to make social security payments. The people did not tell the government that it would be alright to pay them at an inadequate rate.

2: There can be no excuse for paying these benefits at an in-adequate rate.

The consequences of paying at a rate below the poverty line include:

- encouraging people to have more children in the hope that they will provide support in old age
- psychological depression, despair, anger and suffering.
- The diseases of poverty and inadequate health care.
- Major reductions in the productivity of people on social security.

An inadequate rate of payment is a false economy, and a crime against humanity. And: it is not authorised by our Constitution.

3: The disastrous situation in Aboriginal Australia in the Northern Territory today is primarily a consequence of the inadequate rate of payments under the Social Security Act.

If we only knew it similar levels of illness and dysfunction are to be found in all people living on Social Security in Australia today.

Talk of some strange "illness" called "Welfare Dependency" as a sort of an institutionalised moral defect is absolute nonsense; and fascist propaganda. It is an insult to the intelligence.

AUSTRALIA 2020 SUMMIT

NAME FOR PUBLICATION: STRIDER

CONTRIBUTION NUMBER THREE (CONT.)

If you can't depend on the Social Security system, what can you depend on? What is wrong with depending on it?

The only thing that is bad about depending on it is the fact that the rate of payment is inadequate. That is where the evil resides, and that is the aspect of the matter that requires corrective action.

4: An end to this obscene (government created) poverty is urgently required.

- a) as a matter of justice
- b) as a public health measure
- c) as a key item in population policy
- d) as a key item in our productivity agenda

5: In some quarters Social Security payments are called "sit-down money". This fact is widely misunderstood, and misrepresented.

It is not that people are being paid to sit down and be unproductive.

The point of the story is that when you have so little money you can only 'sit-down', and become dejected and un-productive,

[ends]

AUSTRALIA 2020 SUMMIT

NAME FOR PUBLICATION: STRIDER

CONTRIBUTION NUMBER SIX

FOR CRITICAL AREA 4

TITLE: "THE FIRE MANAGEMENT SPECIALIST"

1: Human beings are the only organism that can make and manage fire in the landscape.

All of the other organisms in the biosphere depend absolutely on us for this essential ecosystem service.

This is the most distinctive feature of human beings. We are the fire management specialists.

There is no way that we can evade our responsibility in this matter.

If you are a human being this is the true meaning of life. Our highest cultural ambition should be to play our fire management role well.

2: If we suppose for a moment that only one item can lie at the heart of a culture, then we should centre ours on the fire management task. I would qualify that by including an over-riding concern to respect human rights and dignity so that we do not have to worry about being conscripted by Centrelink to work at fire management camp 35 on the Arnhem Highway or anything like that.

3: So – how are we going with the fire management task today? I will not talk about southern and eastern Australia (for lack of knowledge) but I will talk about central and northern Australia.

Fires that run too far, too frequently, and (in many cases are too hot) are causing a genuine eco-catastrophe (and galloping desertification) in central and northern Australia.

The ^{tame} ~~term~~ "industrial fire" that we use has been so over-done that the oceans can no longer absorb all the Carbon Dioxide produced and the planetary climate is changing.

The report card is not good. It is about as bad as it can be.

4: There has been a lot of talk recently about industrial infrastructure in Australia. I think that the emphasis is misplaced. What we desperately need is the infrastructure for caring for the country. This is what has been neglected for too long.

AUSTRALIA 2020 SUMMIT

NAME FOR PUBLICATION: STRIDER

CONTRIBUTION NUMBER SIX (cont)

The most important infrastructure need in central and northern Australia is people on the land to provide the fire management service to the ecosystem.

That need can provide a basic rationale for a minimum human population size and a population distribution pattern. I suggest that we embrace that opportunity as stage one of a new form of pioneering.

5: Pioneering should be act of searching for and occupying a harmonious and constructive role (or ecological niche) in the ecosystem. This is what the concept of Ecologically Sustainable Development is all about. The very first stage in development in the vast areas of central and northern Australia must be settlement to obtain control over fire.

In the first place this must mean generous support to the outstation movement in Aboriginal Australia.

[ends]