

Tabled: FaCSIA

How does changing the permit system link to combating child sexual abuse?

There has been a lot of misinformation about what the Government is doing with permits. During the recent review, we listened to concerns and decided to modify the permit system, not abolish it. There are three very important things about the changes.

Firstly, the changes do not apply to sacred sites, private land or to the vast majority of Aboriginal land. They apply to towns only – places with roads, shops and public places like other towns. Currently, access to these towns is closed, with no justification. This sets these towns up as somehow different, and encourages the people who live there to have different expectations and aspirations – to think that because they are different they don't need to worry about having a job or sending their kids to school.

Secondly, the Government recognises that there may be situations where flexibility is needed. So, the changes provide that even in these towns, permits will still be able to be granted to restrict access to the town if there are special occasions or ceremonies.

Thirdly, a piece of paper that determines who can come into the community cannot replace an adequate police presence. The removal of the permit system in townships will be backed by a strong police presence to prevent inflows of undesirable people. A proper police presence will also let people report abuse without fearing retribution.

Removal of the permit system will promote strong, safe communities because:

- People who live in towns across Australia should have access to the same opportunities and experiences. A strong argument would be required to shut particular people off from the rest of the community. It has not been made here.
- Having closed communities can allow bullies to dominate and stand over people. For example, closed communities mean limited services and economic opportunities. Those who control these resources can then use access to them to bully others. In some cases, we know this has meant some people have been bullied and abused, and others intimidated into not reporting abuse.
- Closed communities have also meant less public scrutiny. Normally, where situations as grave and terrible as those in the NT come to light, solutions are pursued relentlessly by the media, which often leads to investigations and legal and policy changes. While journalists do not directly instigate prosecutions, they can help to create a groundswell so the community can say "no more". Closed communities make it easier for abuse to stay hidden.
- Closed communities also prevent the free flow of visitors and tourists that can help to stimulate economic opportunity and job creation. The NT report tells us that some girls have seen their only life option as becoming someone's "wife". Jobs and economic opportunities allow people to imagine a life of economic independence, and to see meaning in education.

The question is often asked why we are removing the permits system in these towns, but a more pertinent question is: why would you have such a system in the first place? Why set up Indigenous people living in towns as different and prevent them from having access to normal experiences that see most Australian communities prosper and thrive?

It would be easier to understand why some people argue so strongly for the permit system if these towns were well functioning havens. But the *Little Children* report clearly tells us this is not the case. The permit system has been one of the culprits in hiding an ever-worsening situation of child abuse from the public gaze.