

From: victor ziegler
Sent: Wednesday, 8 August 2007 9:15 PM
To: Faulkner, John (Senator)
Subject: Psychologist's submission re NT legislation

Dear Mr Faulkner

I am a Psychologist in Sydney, and I have been following closely the debate regarding the Federal Government's intervention in the Northern Territory.

As a psychologist I am appalled at the way in which the government has ignored the recommendations of the "Little Children are Sacred" report, and has instead chosen to act in a manner which I believe will cause more psychological damage to the individuals involved.

I am aware from media reports that there will be a Senate Committee meeting regarding the relevant legislation next week, and I would like to make a submission to the Committee regarding the psychological impact of the measures. However I am unsure of the correct procedures to follow in order to make a submission, and would be grateful if you could inform me as to the procedure which I should follow. I have included a copy of my submission below for your information.

Yours sincerely

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SUFFER LITTLE CHILDREN.....

My question to the members of the Committee is 'Have you read the report *Little Children are Sacred*'? From all I've seen and heard in the media over the past couple of months, I get the impression most commentators on the subject haven't. And that includes the Prime Minister, John Howard, and the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough.

The Prime Minister said the report upset him so much he decided to act quickly to do something about the problems it described. Yet what the Prime Minister is actually doing is exactly the opposite of what the report said *should* be done. The report's recommendations don't mention the army, or land permits, but they do stress that consultation with the communities themselves is essential to the success of any intervention. The Prime Minister says he hasn't got time for consultation. How could it be that the actions he wants to put into place are so completely different to what the experts say is needed? Maybe the Prime Minister didn't read the report. Or maybe he did and assumed he "knew better" than the authors who spent months researching the situation in detail. Either possibility is shameful. It is not possible that any politician really knows better than highly qualified teams of people who've been there on the ground, examining and researching for months.

But this is a very common approach to Indigenous Affairs. Throughout our history, governments and others in authority (of all political persuasions) have decided that they “KNOW BETTER”. Enormous mistakes have been made, some from ignorance, some from racism and some from misguided good intention. All suffered from the arrogance of thinking that they knew better. And the consequences of these big mistakes have rippled down through the generations.

The report clearly states the current problems in indigenous communities to be **symptoms** of a much broader, more complex problem. Psychologists understand these symptoms to be maladaptive coping mechanisms as a response to trauma. Due to these “mistakes”, people have been psychologically traumatised, and hence don’t have the capacity to cope very well with life, and so they muck up their attempts to look after themselves and their families. As a result their children are psychologically damaged and the cycle begins again. The results of the trauma are passed on throughout the generations

Those trained in understanding human behaviour and motivation are not surprised that years of trauma have led to the terrible situations described in the report. Psychologists have long demonstrated how the most important factors for the development of psychological resilience are the security of the relationships we have in our very early years. If you break up families, and remove children, you destroy the attachments and relationships which have given them security, and hence deny them the opportunity to develop psychological strength and the capacity to deal with stresses in their lives. Very recent research using modern technology now shows how poor attachment relationships and trauma in early life affects the development of pathways in the brain during the first years of life. Hence the kind of stresses you’d expect for a baby whose family were struggling with poverty, over-crowded housing and alcoholism (just to name a few), actually affect the developing brain, and thus the individual’s capacity to cope later in life, leaving them more vulnerable to maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as alcoholism.

Bad government policy resulted in children being taken from families. The children were traumatised; even those who may have received a ‘better education’ were denied the chance for secure attachments to their parents, and disconnected from their way of life, and hence denied the chance to build psychological resilience. This is not about blaming. It is just about facts – if these things happened to you or me, we would be traumatised. How well we could adapt or respond to the trauma would depend upon what we had been through when we were young while our brains were developing.

As family separation and cultural disconnection continued over generation to generation, then each successive generation would have had fewer and fewer psychological resources to cope. Little wonder these communities can’t cope today. And it was not only the kids who suffered trauma -you only have to imagine how it would destroy your life to have your own kids taken away from you to recognise how that could destroy your will to build a better life for yourself. Surely that’s a recipe for depression and hopelessness on a community –wide scale.

This is not to say that everybody will be affected the same way. Some will cope better than others. But it is clear that, on a wider scale, the long term consequences of families and homes being torn apart has resulted in long term, wide-spread reduced resilience and capacity for coping. *All because somebody “knew better”*. The problems identified in the report are **today’s results of yesterday’s mistakes** by previous generations of law-makers. Today we have the chance to respond with knowledge and wisdom and the benefit of hindsight, and

hence to follow the recommendations of the report. Or we can “know better”, ignore those who really do know, and go ahead and make yet more mistakes based on (at best) misguided good intention, or (at worst) political expediency.

The report is there on the Internet for all to see. Any Australians who really want to know how indigenous children could and should be helped, should read it. Any parliamentarians who are going to vote on this legislation need to read all of it, and note the specific recommendations. Experts have spent a lot of time and effort working out the best ways to address this extremely serious and complex problem. They say not to delay in implementing their recommendations. They say that action should begin now and they list exactly what should be happening. By trying to do the opposite, the government is not only delaying the potential solutions, but is creating yet more psychological problems.

*Memo to the Prime Minister, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and all parliamentarians voting on this legislation: before you decide you “know better” than the experts, read the report. Then follow what they say. **Then we’ll know you are serious about the children.** “Knowing better” makes things worse. Or if you are choosing not to follow the recommendations for political reasons, then know that little children will suffer for generations due to your political expediencies.*

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8/8/07

About Cecilia Conolly - Psychologist

Cecilia Conolly is a psychologist with 20 years experience both in private practice and in the public sector. Celia specialises in counselling and psychotherapy, and has a special interest in working with children. In particular, her work has an emphasis on examining some of the deeper issues which affect an individual’s relationships and ways of coping in the world. She has taught at UNSW and UWS, and currently trains and supervises psychologists and counsellors. Celia is a founding member of Mandala Community Counselling Service, a charity which provides free counselling to the disadvantaged in the community. Celia’s private practice is located in Maroubra, NSW.