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**Sent:** Tuesday, 7 August 2007 11:42 AM  
**To:** Abetz, Eric (Senator)  
**Subject:** Open letter to Senators on NT measures

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Dear Senators,

I am writing to express my profound objection to the violation of property rights and racist treatment of Indigenous Australians being proposed by the Howard government.

I am deeply shocked that a so-called conservative party could be so cavalier with the property and privacy of any of its citizens. The measures you are proposing are morally offensive and will almost certainly be counterproductive in terms of improving Indigenous people's ability to protect their communities from substances and their children from abuse, let alone deal with the broader health and economic problems facing them. There are many communities who are doing their best to deal with these issues and who only need support and resources to make their measures successful. Instead we are pulling out what little support we do offer through funding and the CDEP, and instead forcing them to waste their time dealing with well-meaning but clueless bureaucrats – YET AGAIN. Robbing deeply disadvantaged people of one of their few substantial assets and sources of control over their lives is invasive "big government" at its absolute, shameful worst.

As for the welfare measures, if the intention is to protect children from abuse and neglect why on earth are you not rolling out these changes across the board? I can tell you that abuse and neglect are well represented among non-Indigenous Australians! Even if such protection were the intent, I am deeply dubious about the effectiveness of the measures, but then you could at least legitimately claim that child welfare was your concern. As it stands there is no good reason for targeting Indigenous people in this way – and no evident logical reason other than to vilify them by suggesting all Indigenous parents are worse than all non-Indigenous parents. That kind of slander is not only grotesquely unfair and racist, it is deeply divisive and counterproductive.

If your aim is to develop a coherent, cohesive, unified response you will fail unless you follow the actual recommendations of the *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle (Little Children are Sacred)* report to consult and work with affected communities – not just powerbrokers, but whole communities. If you do not have the support of the people actually living in the communities, any measures you take will be ultimately ineffective; top-down, one-size-fits-all government is an expensive and usually coercive waste of everybody's time and money. Again, this is a basic tenet of conservative political thought and should not need to be pointed out to a supposedly conservative party.

The early signs are that the Government squandered the opportunity for genuine national co-operation on a vital issue. I hope I am wrong, but I see no evidence that this is the case.

This means that unless the approach changes drastically and immediately, the Howard Liberal government will have the dubious distinction of being the political party that can't even get people behind it when it is trying to stop child abuse.

The Howard Government's usual response to people not falling in line behind it is to suggest that they are opposing its actions for ideological reasons. I, like most Australians, have no entrenched ideological position. A little more humility on the part of government – again, something conservative parties should understand – would permit the Liberal Party to consider that its critics are criticising it because they have good reason to believe that the measures it proposes will not work, and will in fact make things worse. In fact the government approach to this issue ignores the existing hard work of Indigenous and other people to deal with this issue, ignores the substantial backlog of information and evidence-based but unimplemented recommendations in numerous reports, and ignores decades of history; as a result it is highly likely to make life substantially worse for the people it is supposedly trying to help.

The Opposition's position so far also leaves a deal to be desired – but as it has only just received the draft legislation for comment, I reserve judgment there. Any Opposition senators should note, however, that acceding in the Howard approach will be viewed by the vast majority of interested Australians as acceding in its racist assumptions; most people who are informed enough to actually care about the issues can see the profound errors in this strategy. Whether or not the Opposition goes along with the Government, there will be no national unity on this issue because the approaches are so flawed – and in fact often make it easier for predators and dealers to get into Indigenous communities – so that consideration need not concern Opposition senators.

No responsible Senator – Liberal, Labor or other – should support these measures as they stand. I commend the desire to act on a vital issue, but urge you to do better by Indigenous Territorians than these dispossessive, insulting, racist measures. You should start with the 97 recommendations of the report which prompted your action.

Sincerely,

Philip Minchin