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Northern Territory Intervention

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In 2006 the NT Government established a Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (in the Northern Territory), which was Co-Chaired by Ms Patricia Anderson and Rex Wild QC. The purpose of the Inquiry was to find better ways to protect Aboriginal children from sexual abuse. In June 2007 their report, Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle "Little Children are Sacred Report", was released.

The issues outlined in the Little Children are Sacred Report, which shows that Aboriginal children are at much greater risk of being sexually abused, are not new. Further, reports in other states show that the problem is not limited to the Northern Territory.

In response the Liberal Prime Minister John Howard and the Minister for Indigenous Affairs Mal Brough announced that Indigenous child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory was a 'national emergency'. Howard announced an urgent government response which involved:

- * Seizing control of some Indigenous communities for 5 years
- * Sending the police/ the army in to deal with law and order
- * Banning alcohol
- * Quarantining welfare payments, so that the government could control how welfare money is spent by Indigenous people.

Regardless of any political slant taken by any parties, what is most important here is the rights and safety of children. All groups acknowledged that federal action was long over due.

However, with the exception of Noel Pearson, there has been almost universal condemnation of the strategy used by the Federal government for intervention in NT.

Even the authors of the report condemn the Howard Government's response, pointing out that not one of the recommendations laid out in the report has been adopted.

Pat Anderson, coauthor of the Little Children are Sacred report says, "There is no relationship between the Federal response and our recommendations. We feel betrayed and disappointed and hurt and angry and pretty pissed off at the same time." It is crucial to point out the flaws in the Howard invention:

- * There is a lack of a partnership approach with Indigenous communities – by essentially ignoring the local knowledge and experience.
- * The required physical examinations of Aboriginal children for signs of sexual abuse could have dire negative consequences on young children. Genital examination of children who have not been sexually

abused to akin to abuse itself, while the examination of children who have been sexually abused could further exacerbate the issue.

* Restrictions on welfare expenditure means the federal government will control 50% of all welfare payments in some communities – even if parents have not shown to be neglectful.

* There is a thin and tenuous link between child abuse and the Howard government's decision to abolish the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (ALRA) in the NT. The ALRA enables Aboriginal landowners a right to veto mining and other activities on their lands. For many, this intervention by the Howard government is nothing more than a grab for land.

Responses from Indigenous groups to the Howard intervention point out that:

* Abuse issues are related to other socio-economic issues such as poverty, unemployment, substance abuse and prior sexual abuse – and that these issues must be addressed if you want to fix the problem;

* A long term investment is needed, not a short term political campaign;

* Many aspects of the invention are inherently racist. It targets people for their background (and skin colour) and not for their actions.

It targets Indigenous Australians, and not all Australians who have committed sexual abuse.

The ALP has agreed to have a bipartisan approach and have endorsed the plan, although saying they disagree with aspects of it.

Resources

<http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/inquirysaac/> This is the link to the NT report "Little Children are Sacred".

Archives found at <http://reconciliation.org.au/nsw/recentissues/archive>

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