

# Macklin's housing deception



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Minister for Indigenous Affairs Jenny Macklin concluded a dismal performance in 2010 by saying it was, "important to get the facts right about the Australian Government's record commitment" to providing Aboriginal housing. Yet she began 2011 with more deception, saying Indigenous housing targets had been exceeded, when in fact 40 houses remained unoccupied leaving the Government 16 houses shy of its target.

The Minister's claims are symptomatic of a Government that is focused on appearing to do something to address Indigenous disadvantage rather than actually delivering outcomes and in particular, value for money. Grand announcements are made, usually involving hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars, and then the Government seeks to avoid scrutiny of its progress by making more announcements.

When faced with the facts, the Minister responds by saying the Coalition is, "spreading mistruths and misinformation" about the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP). Yet she never disputes the facts presented, and continually fiddles the numbers to support her broken record mantra that the program is 'on track and on budget'.

It was a Coalition Government that recognised the need for a strategic housing program and essential infrastructure in Aboriginal communities over and above the housing that was being provided. The Coalition allocated \$547m towards this goal in a genuine attempt to provide better living conditions for Aboriginal people. No-one wants to see the program fail, so the clear motive in raising questions is to ensure taxpayer funds are dedicated to house construction and renovations, not wasted on bureaucracies and administration.

In December Minister Macklin said the Labor Government had built 112 houses in the Northern Territory compared with an average of 70 houses completed by the Coalition during its last three years in government. Yet she failed to mention those 112 houses were built over the course of three years. Even with millions set aside by the Coalition in its hip pocket, Labor has only managed to build around 38 houses a year.

Meanwhile 875 renovations have been downgraded to a 'make safe' renovation, which means they only received urgent maintenance to fix broken toilets, faulty and dangerous electrical circuits and kitchen sinks and benches. Many houses remain unpainted and in one well-documented case, a house was left with a large hole in the wall.

Despite hefty salaries and administration

fees paid to alliance partners to ensure work is being done to a high standard, we are still seeing breaches of the most basic occupational health and safety rules.

Minister Macklin has praised the work of these expert quality assurance teams to justify the considerable slice of the budget which they absorb, yet there are still reports of sub-standard work being handed over, for example in Wadeye where one family moved into a house and discovered days later that the sewerage was not connected to the mains after sewage backed up into the new house.

In June last year it was revealed that seven Groote Eylandt residences built under SIHIP would have to be demolished or rebuilt due to shoddy workmanship and the use of sub-standard materials. Again the highly-paid teams of quality assurance inspectors were missing. The Northern Territory Housing Department's executive director of remote services Andrew Kirkman told an estimates committee in Darwin that the remedial works would cost taxpayers in excess of \$1 million.

Most recently, two senior Territory Alliance staff were sacked after asbestos from a demolished house at Maningrida was simply dumped at the tip.

When half the funds set aside to construct and renovate houses in Wadeye are going towards administration and company costs, including one salary of \$894,700 for less than two years' work. When you include the budget allocation of \$18,000 for tea and coffee for the managers and supervisors it is no longer a mystery as to why only one-bedroom houses and limited maintenance is all that can be delivered to the residents of Wadeye. And because many renovations do not meet the national standard, the houses will not be able to return sufficient rent to maintain them in the future, and the cycle of overcrowding will continue. We can't expect Aboriginal people to sign tenancy agreements for sub-standard housing that saddle them with the same obligations as people living in much better quality housing stock in other parts of Australia.

The Coalition is committed to sound, sustainable and consistent economic policy, because it's the only way to provide the resources to meet long-term community needs. We are acutely aware that taxes are other peoples' money which is why it's so important to administer government programs responsibly. By contrast, if there is a more expensive and reckless way of delivering a program this government will find it, and then raise taxes. For this reason SIHIP has a lot in common with other Labor Government failures like Pink Batts, Green Loans or the

become disengaged when they are promised one thing then delivered another (or nothing at all). Wadeye traditional owner Toby Nganbe last year said, "They send groups in - consultants to this community...we sit down alongside them and plan...they go back into town and back there they change the goal posts."

Locals are also not happy with the Government's attempts to cover up the truth about problems in the program, nor its abject failure in allowing small business operators to gain from lucrative contracts. There was a public outcry when the Government attempted to include a secrecy clause in new shire contracts banning council members, staff and private contractors from discussing the program's issues with the media. Residents from Alekarenga described SIHIP as a 'shame job', while Willowra general business manager Ralph Dein said the Government was paying up to three times too much to upgrade homes. His reward for blowing the whistle was dismissal. Residents at Gunbalanya said they could not understand why the houses were taking so long to build, and in Katherine an Indigenous health service reported that families waiting for their houses in Ngukurr had been living in tents for up to three weeks and were suffering from vomiting, diarrhoea and sores. Indigenous elders from the community, where about 1,300 people are crammed into only 113 houses, said

they had been 'conned' into signing leases in return for a sum total of eight extra bedrooms.

After delivering the historic apology to Indigenous Australians, many hoped that Labor would honour promises to build houses, reduce unemployment and address the chronic health conditions suffered by so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Labor has failed at reducing Indigenous disadvantage. The 2010 Productivity Commission report 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage' provided evidence of worsening social indicators and trends for Indigenous Australians. Minister Macklin needs to spend less

energy on covering up her failures and more energy on making sure houses are actually built for a reasonable price and to an acceptable standard.

The Coalition set up an unprecedented investment in Aboriginal housing, but the investment is not being used wisely. The problem is not the availability of funds but the respect with which they are administered. I have repeatedly asked Minister Macklin to give me the address of a completed house and a completed renovation and tell me exactly how much they each cost, but been met with contemptuous disregard for the transparency such important programs should afford. Until the Government starts telling the truth about the state of SIHIP's budget, adequate housing will remain as elusive as ever for Aboriginal families while hundreds of millions of dollars simply disappear into the bureaucratic wilderness. And while Minister Macklin continues to deny the examples of waste and mismanagement which are so obvious in this program, I will continue to highlight her failures.

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Above and below: Appalling housing conditions for Northern Territory Aborigines



The Government must be held responsible for wasting millions of dollars on a bureaucracy that has not improved the lives of Aboriginal Territorians as promised, and apologise for the cases where peoples' lives have been put at risk. They should be held accountable for failing to identify the breaches, given that the Northern Territory Government receives more than \$53 million to administer SIHIP, which includes employing quality assurance inspectors.

It's no surprise that corners are being cut

Building the Education Revolution that have wasted billions of dollars, and in some cases, endangered lives.

Minister Macklin's ongoing deception is dangerous for two reasons: firstly, a lack of transparency means Aboriginal people are not getting the houses they need in a timely fashion and because of budget blowouts the standard of repairs and the size of houses is being downgraded. Secondly, it damages relationships and creates disillusionment. It is no wonder that many Aboriginal people