

Senate Committee for Community Affairs

Dear Community Secretary,

Re: Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011, and two related Bills

I wish to object to the Stronger Futures legislation passed in the House of Reps end Nov 2011. I see it as highly disrespectful of Aboriginal people.

Firstly, the Government has said the legislation is based on what it was told in the consultation process last year. As far as I'm aware, scribes made occasional notes but the sessions were not recorded by the company carrying out the consultations for the Government. This creates a problem with the Government's transparency and accountability, which I find unacceptable.

The Government continues to ignore the fact that proper or appropriate consultation with Aboriginal people involves both parties sitting down together right from the start to sort out ways of addressing the particular problems in each community. This is also the essence of any 'special measure' – that the community concerned be very involved in the planning and implementation of the measure. The Government has not done this.

Alice Kemble, an advisor to Jenny Macklin, says in a letter dated 20th Jan 2012 that the two most urgent issues raised in the consultation process were "ensuring that children attend school so they can get a good education, and tackling the serious harm that is being caused by alcohol abuse." The wish of parents and other adults to address the reasons that stop children getting to school (eg. illness, transport problems, impact of alcohol, no suitable teacher, lack of equipment, materials etc.), and their suggestions, has instead been turned by the Government into a 'bad parenting' problem requiring punitive and potentially belittling measures. That in itself is also impossible to understand, given that a rewards system is recognized world-wide as being far more beneficial. The wish of Aboriginal people for partnership in addressing issues related to alcohol addiction has instead been seen as an Aboriginal (not Australian) problem needing rules and penalties, and with a strong lack in focus on appropriate rehabilitation programs. It is not good enough that what was recognised as the two most urgent problems be addressed in such unrealistic and disrespectful ways.

The 'consultations' did not happen in an appropriate way; the Government has also failed to recognize what it says were two key concerns, instead legislating according to its own interpretation. There is a lot in the rest of the legislation that I also question because of the lack of Aboriginal input into dealing wisely with issues in each community, and because of 'solutions' that do not recognize the full gambit of the issue, nor respect and empower Aboriginal people. I believe the legislation is not based on a firm foundation, and is flawed, and I ask that it be withdrawn.

Margaret Spong