

Submission re Stronger Futures Legislation:

To: the Senate Community Affairs Committee

Re the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011

The Chairman

Sir, I wish to make a submission expressing my opposition to the Stronger Futures Legislation.

To legislate for extension of the Northern Territory Intervention for another ten years would impose further suffering and disempowerment on aboriginal people in Northern Territories.

In the 40 years I have lived, worked and had continued contact with aboriginal families on communities in the Top End, Central Australia and the Barkly, the sense of powerlessness and despair has been at its lowest with the many changes wrought under the Howard Government's Emergency Response, and ongoing measures since.

This action was more motivated about issues to do with control and access to aboriginal land than responding to the "Little Children are Sacred" Report. How many of those recommendations were actually addressed?

There were so many negatives with the Intervention and the almost simultaneous dissolving of 63 Community Councils and creation of 8 mega shires by the NT Government.

The loss of the ability to have a voice in the governance of their own communities, together with so many of the Intervention actions left people totally devastated. A one size fits all approach, dictated from top down, with no consultation, left people on communities feeling devastated. They could see convoys of white Toyotas, strangers arriving along with infrastructure erected in short time frames, when they often wait for months or years to have their own housing and maintenance needs addressed.

Where outside health teams were sent in to do such things as children's health checks, the initiative disrupted existing services - the clinics sometimes had to cease other services to accommodate - and caused a bottleneck in the system, meaning up to 57 per cent of patients referred to secondary care never received an appointment.

A much more effective strategy would have been to direct monies wasted in this undertaking towards giving sufficient funding to improve capacity of the existing health services which have been so thinly stretched over decades. The Intervention in fact gave very little recognition or support to the workers on the ground, paid little heed to the many studies and reports already compiled, and above all did not consult at all with community members.

The Intervention destroyed many positive initiatives that were happening in various places. One example was the program on Arnhem land communities where the ALPA stores have operated. Many people voluntarily set aside money on a card to be used for the basic needs of food and clothing. Pride and self management was dealt a blow with the blanket imposition of welfare quarantine, a humiliation for many people . (Those who want to use money on alcohol or gambling will always find ways to do it regardless of restrictions)

Income management, rather than quaranting amounts of money to the Basics card, would have been far more effective if in fact it was a program which assisted families through budgetary advice, to manage their day to day basic needs. The imposed system makes it very difficult for people to have necessary funds for purposes of attending funerals and related obligations, car repairs, travelling away as a carer for a sick relative – especially if interstate.

The failure of successive governments over many years to address housing needs, thereby creating many of the health and social issues, is likely to be repeated by the current policy of the NT Government in allocating new houses only to the 20 “Growth Towns”. There are many more very functional and viable communities where new houses will not be provided, and maintenance is a perfunctory standard. “They make us feel like rubbish” said one woman, “and the rent has gone up. I would be better going to live under a tree again.”

In another house both Shire and Territory Housing refuse to deal with airconditioning repair. A woman with complex health conditions and a newborn are amongst the family forced to double up in another dwelling in our 40 + degree weather. They are still charged rent on the house which is too hot to live in.

Along with so many imposed changes was the scrapping of the CDEP, which at least allowed people some remnant of pride, and a purpose in life. The “No Pornography” signs stigmatised people on communities, made them feel shamed. Children asked their parents”what is that”. Such signs would be better erected outside the nations capital – is that not where such material emanates from?

There are many resilient aboriginal leaders with vision, How will they have their voices heard? What of their representations to have support for their homelands where they can care for country and imbue values for their kids. They worry about the trouble kids will get into in urban centres. They deserve support for better roads, healthcare and education. These leaders recognise that the Intervention and the Local Government made life very much more difficult , as one put it – The clock has been turned back 50 years

I support the representations made by community groups and national organisations in opposing the proposed stronger futures legislation , and urge that the Government desist from punitive policies which further discriminate against people already marginalised.

It is time to once again empower families, households and communities, return authority so they can make their own decisions and life choices. In the Little Children are Sacred report one of the first recommendations was that all solutions, and finding all solutions and implementing them had to be done in negotiation with the leadership of each of those communities, and indeed even families so people felt empowered again to make better informed decisions.

Lesley Reilly