

Submission to Senate Community Affairs Committee re ‘Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011

I am tendering this submission to add my voice to the many who are deeply concerned at the proposed Stronger Futures Bill due to be considered in 2011

My name is already attached to the submission by the CORE group sent about a week ago, but I feel so strongly on this issue that I want to add my own emphasis on a few aspects. There are many facets of the NT intervention that are highly disturbing to anyone who believes in human rights and justice, and the need for the right ordering of process, but here I will limit my comments to two aspects that concern me most.

One is the continuation of the punitive approach to school attendance, whereby parents of children whose children attend less than the mandatory percentage set are forced into the worst aspects of the Income Management scheme (- even where the attendance is 80% and the child has been given awards for ‘best attendance’!) Should the proposed legislation be enforced, many parents will be pushed into situations where their welfare payments are reduced or suspended, risking their ability to provide adequately for their children, (and hence they may be further accused of child neglect!)

There seems to be no verifiable support for this punitive approach, studies in the USA have revealed no clear evidence of positive outcomes where welfare payments have been cut, and the recent reviews of SEAM in Australia again have failed to identify any clear evidence to support the present position to continue and even increase this extreme management device.

There are surely more positive ways to support both the schools and the parents as they try to balance the educational needs of their children with the pressures of their cultural and family life, and the demands of living in remote communities. In other states increasing number of families are opting to home-school their children, often without this being registered, and I have not noticed the same vehemence of pressure, punishment and labelling as ‘bad parents’ being laid upon them!

What is required is better funding for educational resources and culturally aware experienced staff, encouragement and re-inforcement of more positive approaches, especially those developed and promoted by many of the communities themselves, (such as a return to the bi-lingual learning programs, retention and support of aboriginal teachers and teachers aides, adapting terms and school hours to suit local needs, and involvement of local elders in planning and implementing curriculum.) These are more likely to meet the needs of the children and to make their school experience more relevant and rewarding.

Such community centred and locally supported changes would also serve to increase the connection and personal control and management that the aboriginal peoples can and should have over their own lives. The diminution of this has been one appalling result of the NT intervention over the last 5 years, examples drawn from school management are just part of the total picture of loss of control that has been experienced by diverse aboriginal communities since the NT Intervention.

The distress at the failure of the whole consultation process is another deeply felt concern in many communities, and is the second area I wish to comment on. Dr Anthea Nicholls has documented this area well on behalf of the Ramingining Community, and her comments re the long history of disappointing and confusing consultations, the subsequent dismembering of local successful institutions and initiatives, and the lack of reporting and seeming indifference to their own community and personal strong stories will sound very familiar to the residents of many other remote communities I am sure!

There were requests to FaHCSIA re record keeping: Why weren't all the consultations recorded and reported openly as requested by 'concerned Australians'? (In the 10 consultations recorded by the concerned Australians group, not one requested welfare cuts, so where was the supposed strong support?) Greater transparency of recording and reporting is certainly needed to help settle the confusion in many communities.

With regards to the Advisory Group appointed to the Nov 2011 Evaluation, however well meaning they may be individually, it seems amazing that it did not include any Aboriginal Elder who lives permanently under the NT intervention regime. Much of the present distress could have been alleviated had there been more intense and genuine consultation with respected local Elders and senior law people. This sad defect in relationships and communications was also commented on in the Little Children are Sacred Report, so again, this is familiar territory and the same mistakes should not have been made once more.

Neither does the Nov 2011 Report suggest any role for the Elders in the future, in fact as this is reported in the Bill under discussion, those writing the report seem unaware and unconcerned about the importance of so many of the Elders and their on-going role in their communities. This re-inforces the point I have made above, regarding the need to repair the dismay and disengagement that has been experienced by so many, and the desirability to repair and adopt these existing community strengths and skills and use them for the benefit of their own communities.

Digby Habel's submission contains a critical analysis of the points I have raised in the last two paragraphs, and I will conclude with a comment I have heard him make:

Extensive consultation is not necessarily good consultation, if the process is intrinsically flawed!

Recommendations:

1. There should be better funding for educational resources combined with positive encouragement and recognition of local expertise and knowledge. Punitive measures such as welfare cuts have not proven to be effective in improving school attendance, and cannot help parent morale or the overall health of the communities.

2. Consultation processes must be long-term, open-minded, culturally aware, recognise local initiative and wisdom, and reporting of these processes must be transparent and genuine

Margaret L Evans Canberra 1 February 2012