

Submission to Senate Community Affairs Committee re: Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011 and two related bills.

Justice Empowerment Mission Inc. (JEM) is a Christian organisation that believes that the key to alleviating poverty is through empowerment. Our aim is to pursue social justice for all members of society; locally, nationally and globally. JEM is committed to empowering at-risk young people to reach their full potential and make a positive contribution in the wider community. We focus on encouraging young people to holistically transform their lives, whilst building dignity and self-respect.

JEM believes that everyone has the right to self-determination. Serving communities in Arnhem Land NT has given us insight into the disturbing outcomes that have come to bear as a direct result of the NT Intervention. We condemn the way in which politicians have used the suffering of our Indigenous Peoples as a pawn in political power plays.

Our organisation is united in strong opposition to the concept and proposed implementation of the Stronger Futures legislation. The 'top down' approach in policy making has proven to be ineffective in community development, especially harmful for Indigenous communities, and largely unsustainable. The Stronger Futures legislation contradicts international human rights standards, in particular the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We are appalled by the fact that the government suspended the Race Relations Act 1975 during the Intervention and the Stronger Futures legislation will threaten to continue this maltreatment of the law.

In particular, there are a number of aspects that we strongly disagree with:

- Removal of self-determination for Indigenous peoples undermines local law, creating a deep-rooted sense of despair and depression brought about by an inability to control their own futures. Disillusionment and a lack of hope for the future is evident in the soaring suicide and self-harm rates that have pointedly risen since the initial Intervention was implemented
- Income Management: in particular the restrictions, which link, school attendance rates to access to financial support
- The complete inadequacy to legitimately and appropriately consult with the Aboriginal people and have meaningful conversations without pre-conceived political objectives
- The political manoeuvring and use of language that stigmatises Aboriginal people as child abusers, alcoholics, dole bludgers, untrustworthy, and illegitimate

- Removal of land rights: the implementation of the Hub Town model is disrespecting the sacred connection to the land, demolishing the cultural capital of the oldest known culture in the world. Furthermore, it is proven that the health levels are much better amongst those living on homelands, and that moving into urban Hub Towns increases alcoholism, obesity, domestic violence and drug dependence.
- The removal of bilingual education and lack of culturally relevant school curricula are further decimating the Indigenous culture. It reduces the likelihood of children attending schools, and is racially discriminatory, breaking internationally recognised human rights standards.

Amnesty International slams the legislation for being illegitimate and out of touch with reality, saying that there is no case for Special Measures and that it “is in breach of international law and the impacts remain discriminatory”

This submission calls for:

- An immediate end to the Intervention and proposed Stronger Futures bill
- Return to governance through community councils
- Community-based approaches to addressing the issues, as proven in the development sector to be the most effective and sustainable approaches
- Improved Aboriginal land rights and the government to support Aboriginal people in their mission to improve health and life expectancy rather than imposing overarching and culturally-inappropriate policies
- Policies that are preventative rather than punitive
- A conscious effort from our government to repair the damage created by false and negative stigma and racially-discriminatory language
- Our government to abide by international human rights regulations
- Our government to recognize the capacity of self-governance in Aboriginal communities

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We ask for politicians to actively listen to the people and engage in legitimate consultation that is free from bias and ulterior motive and we hope that the government acknowledges that the Stronger Futures legislation will be a step backwards in the pursuit of social justice and human rights for our Indigenous people.

Yours Sincerely,

~~Jesse Mitchell~~
Managing Director

~~John Clark~~
President of the Board