

The Labor Government, under Julia Gillard and Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin, has introduced “Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory” legislation that extends the Northern Territory Intervention for a further ten years. This comes despite its recent community consultations that had demonstrated overwhelming Aboriginal opposition to the Intervention.

The Federal Government has introduced legislation to extend a scheme which suspends key Centrelink payments to parents whose children are not regularly attending school. These policies hold already vulnerable families to ransom, in return for their basic human rights to appropriate and adequate shelter, food, healthcare and clothing etc; The government has failed to explain how families affected by the policy will meet basic living costs for food, rent, clothing and medicines. ANTaR is concerned that this policy is likely to put more pressure on families doing it tough and place them at risk of serious harm.

This Government promised to work in partnership with Aboriginal people, yet this ‘consultation’ has remained tokenistic at best. Whilst in reality, policy makers continually fail to listen or implement policies based on Aboriginal communities actual input and commentary. Aboriginal communities knowledge which is clearly born out of their own first hand experiences, their own cultural practices and awareness of what needs to occur, at grass roots levels, in order to fully address their communities very real needs on the ground.

This situation is highlighted in the report prepared by M. Harris and R. McKenna for the ‘concerned Australians’. The report refers to transcripts of recorded consultations in 2011 from the Aboriginal communities of Maningrida 12 July; Yuendumu 5 July; Bagot Community 15 July; Alice Springs Town Camps 14 July; Yirrkala 3 August; Kintore 21 July; Mutitjulu 16 August; Galiwin’ku 18 August; the Alice Springs Public Meeting 2 August, and the Darwin Public Meeting 28 July 2011.

I refer to excerpts from the report, titled, Cuts to Welfare Payments for School Non-Attendance: Requested or Imposed? as they serve to highlight very real concerns about the way in which the voices of Aboriginal are being undermined and in some instances, erased, only to be substituted with non-Aboriginal voices, during so called Aboriginal ‘community consultation’ processes.

*“..there were a number of major concerns that were prioritised by Aboriginal people across all the prescribed community meetings. Among these concerns education was given high priority. **Most prominent amongst those concerns was the reintroduction of bilingual learning, access to full-time education in homelands, support for Aboriginal teachers and the need to distribute funding more equitably. There was considerable anger and frustration but there was not a single request for welfare cuts or fines to those parents with children who were not attending school.**”*

Aboriginal community members have repeatedly explained to governments and policy makers what they need to occur on the ground in order for Aboriginal communities to address educational issues and improve outcomes for their children and communities. The report goes on:

*“Participants also focused on the need to re-empower communities and allow for self-determination, as well as the undermining of community cohesion through the transfer of management from community councils to shire management. These issues, though not falling directly under the education umbrella, if addressed, would certainly improve the capacity of communities to work more effectively towards improved attendance. **Unfortunately, in the Government report these particular concerns appear to have fallen into the category of “Other issues raised by participants” and that “there will be a separate process and follow up to these issues.” The nature of that process is not explained.**”*

And this..

“when one {Aboriginal} community enquired as to why the bilingual learning programme had been removed and indicated that it should be returned, the FaHCSIA facilitator, Richard, responded:

“Um, that is a message I’ve got in every single community I’ve gone to. Ah, that bilingual education is really important to support families in getting kids to school and kids learning properly about culture and about language. It’s a strong message and we’ll send it back from this community as well. Thank you.”

“The consultation in Galiwin’ku was held on 18 August by which time more than 70 prescribed community consultations had already taken place and Richard, the FaHCSIA facilitator, had been involved in a large number of them. **If he has received a request for the return of the bilingual programme in every single community he facilitated, it is hard to understand that it has not been given due attention in the final Government report.**”

This situation is just one of numerous examples of how Aboriginal peoples voices are being omitted from the consultation processes. It is not enough for Governments and policy makers to say, “yes thankyou I will pass that on”. Aboriginal peoples deserve to be given the respect that is their human right, to be acknowledged as the oldest surviving cultures and as Australia’s original people they know what they need for their people, for their health and well being and for their continued survival.

As we are aware, for many people, including Aboriginal peoples, ownership of a situation promotes self reliance, encourages responsible and active participation in solving and improving that situation, whilst engendering community pride, cohesion and individual accountability, through working together for the shared vision of their future. Aboriginal community leaders are willing and able to tell governments what they need in order to achieve and maintain positive and improved outcomes for their shared vision, and their children’s future, so why are Australian Governments still not truly listening?

Funding is only part of the story, respecting the needs of the oldest culture in existence and truly listening to their knowledgeable requests for real, adequate and ongoing support, that is culturally relevant and respectful, so that Aboriginal peoples can improve their children's lives and their futures, creating culturally relevant environments, is vital to improving educational outcomes, providing realistic work opportunities whilst improving and maintaining health and wellbeing. Aboriginal leaders and communities understand that it is not possible to address these issues separately, that education and other issues need to be addressed in a positive, re-empowering manner, at a holistic community level.

However, right now the government is stripping funds for essential services from traditional Aboriginal homelands. This will effectively force families from their lands and homes into larger towns and cities like Alice Springs. Further demoralising whole families and entire communities as they become displaced from their countries and further dispossessed of their lands. It is imperative that the Australian Federal Government includes funds for essential services on Aboriginal homelands in the next Federal Budget. The government has repeatedly claimed that it supports and understands the vital need for supporting homelands. Now they have the chance to prove their support by funding essential services on homelands in the next Federal Budget.