

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to the committee to oppose the two *Stronger Future in the Northern Territory* Bills and the associated *Social Security Amendment* Bill. In their current form they amount to a 10 year extension of the Northern Territory Intervention, a program that has disenfranchised and stigmatised Aboriginal people across the country, at great expense to the tax payer, without any clear evidence that it has provided the benefits for which it was intended.

As a long time resident of Redfern I am well aware of the problems facing Aboriginal people all across Australia. While no one can say exactly what the best way to solve these problems is the entire post-invasion history of Australia has shown that taking away the power Aboriginal people have over their own affairs, as these Bills seek to, is a exactly what not to do.

These Bills are predicated on the idea that the Intervention so far has made a positive impact on the lives of Aboriginal people in the places affected by it. However I would posit that the evidence for this is poor and is based on cherry picking results from a consultation of cherry picked community members using a poorly set out and patronising study.

This predication is also contradicted by numerous quotes in the book *This is What we Said*, a compilation of statements from Northern Territory Aboriginal people about the Intervention. Quotes such as:

“What the Northern Territory Intervention is doing, as far as we are concerned, is dividing us from our white brothers and sisters”

and,

“We are part of this community that are categorised, all us blokes now, as racists, as sexual abusers and got this so called paedophile ring all across the Territory...We're put down. We're pushed down”.

epitomise the statements that were made by affected community members and I would urge all members of the committee to read this book for themselves and absorb what has been said.

The overall premise of the study on which these Bills are based is flawed in that it was carried out from December 2010 to June 2011 and the questions posed mostly ask respondents to compare aspects of their life now to what it was like three years ago. Given that the Intervention began in mid 2007 a point three years prior to the survey being carried out would have been during the early stages of the Intervention's implementation. This would have likely been a confusing and stressful time for those most affected by the Intervention and can in no way be taken to be a baseline period.

Likely some respondents took the questions as being intended as a comparison with life before the Intervention and answered accordingly while others would have taken the questions as written and answered about events of three years prior. This would

have created an inconsistency amongst the answers that likely makes much of the data inaccurate and unusable.

Furthermore many of the questions are quite patronising, such as the question that asks about pornography restrictions by referring to “new rules for sexy pictures”. Others are leading, such as “How safe do you feel being at a community meeting when people might be arguing?” - there is no question about community meetings without people arguing.

The researchers also, on at least one occasion, question the validity of the results by saying that the responses may have been influenced by “respondents’ desire to say the right thing, rather than their real opinions”. This issue is raised in relation to a high proportion of respondents declaring domestic violence to be unacceptable but not, for example, in relation to the proportion that think services have improved in the last three years, even though it is just as reasonable to suspect that some respondents may have felt the need to reflect positively on government initiatives when speaking to researchers that they would consider to be government representatives.

While the underlying premise for taking action is flawed many of the planned courses of action are also deeply problematic. Income management and the banning of traditional law being taken into account in the majority of sentencing decisions are prime examples of a “white man knows best” attitude that has echoes of missionaries and the stolen generation, policies that led to many of the problems experienced by Aboriginal people today.

If the rules on school attendance and behaviour that will be imposed under an income management regime are so important imposing them via this means seems clumsy and discriminatory. Working parents, who have less time to supervise their children than those on welfare, will not have their children’s activities controlled in this way and this has the potential to create a two tiered society amongst community children – those with parents in receipt of welfare forced to attend school and those with working parents able to flout the rules.

Presumably, if the Intervention measures to increase employment opportunities were a success, the effectiveness of income management would also decrease. I would therefore suggest that a more effective tool for encouraging school attendance and the like be found as income management is a discriminatory policy that works contrary to other major aims of the Intervention.

Furthermore the main means by which income management is implemented, via the Basics card, results in significant stigmatisation of those forced to use it, who are required to line up in separate queues in supermarkets. This projects the idea loud and clear that these people are not considered able to manage their money, or their own affairs. Paradoxically, this measure makes people less able to manage their money as they are restricted to purchasing groceries to a limited number of shops, usually major supermarket chains in larger towns and the overly expensive community store in smaller communities. They are unable to be wise consumers, shopping around for the best deal, and may ultimately pick up habits of poor spending choices that will continue even if they enter employment or otherwise cease being subject to income management.

The licensing of food stores is also a patronising and will further inhibit the ability of Aboriginal people to manage their own affairs and improve their lives through their own efforts as it restricts enterprise within Aboriginal communities. The idea of requiring government permission to set up a business in a remote community fosters the idea of dependence on state overseers, an idea that is contrary to many other worthy social policy goals.

Another major problem with the Intervention thus far has been the changes made to the Community Development and Employment Project (CDEP). Having workers in such programs receive quarantined Centrelink payments, as distinct from the wages received under the previous system, means they are working for effectively less than minimum wage even if they work only their prescribed weekly hours, due to the lesser value of the quarantined portion of their payments. However many CDEP workers work far more than the prescribed hours for fear that their payments will be cancelled under unclear guidelines, resulting in them being the worst paid workers in Australia.

While the goal to replace CDEP positions with “real jobs” is laudable the uncertainty of funding for these jobs from one budget cycle to the next puts communities dependent on them in a worrying and uncertain position.

For many people living in remote communities the Intervention has been an abject failure and the idea of extending it for another 10 years is abhorrent, anti-democratic and infantilises those affected.

As a City of Sydney Councillor I have been involved in the concept planning of the Pemulwuy project, the redevelopment of “The Block”. This is an incredibly positive project that combines services for Aboriginal people with Aboriginal run enterprise. When built the site will provide significant housing for Aboriginal people, including many former residents of The Block, but will also generate income to fund this through providing general student accommodation and other facilities for local people.

It is innovative projects such as this that the government needs to be fostering with appropriate education and support to improve the lives of Aboriginal people.

The problems I have raised here with the justification and implementation of these Bills are just a small number of the great many that surround the continuing Intervention. I would urge the committee to recommend that these Bills be abandoned in their entirety and that the government work on new solutions to Indigenous disadvantage not just in the Northern Territory, where it is politically easy, but throughout Australia, based on genuine consultation with the people whom it will most affect. Such solutions should focus on empowering Aboriginal people to use their skills and resources to better their situation, not on paternalistic interventions by the welfare state.

Regards

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City of Sydney Council