

To the Senate Community Affairs Committee Regarding the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011

Dr Ingrid Slotte

As a permanent resident of Australia I wish to make a submission to the Committee to express my opposition to the Stronger Futures legislation.

The views presented in this submission are based on anthropological research in Ramingining, an Arnhem Land community, concerning the Intervention. I visited Ramingining during three weeks in August, September 2010 and three weeks in October, November 2011. I also lived in this community from 1990-1992 and carried out research on Christianity, memories of the mission days and self-determination. The people I have met in Arnhem Land are deeply hurt and deeply offended by the measures relating to the Intervention. I support Ramingining elders and community members in their opposition to the Stronger Futures legislation and join them in their demand for an end to the Intervention and the beginning of proper consultation and self-determination regarding their futures.

As a result of the current Intervention CDEP has finished and the people in the Ramingining community who were previously working are now unemployed. The CDEP program had 105 people employed in the community. A new reduced employment scheme is about to begin where people will be working 15 hours per week in return for \$20 (!) per fortnight on top of unemployment benefits, a far cry from the previous CDEP where people could sometimes earn top-up money and also some superannuation. In the meantime white people employed in the community continue to earn extra high wages and bonuses, get subsidised housing, subsidised travel and extra remote area allowances.

Since the beginning of the Intervention not one single house has been built for Aboriginal people in Ramingining despite a continuously growing population. Only white staff who are employed in the community have received houses. In Ramingining there is a whole street of new houses in the community for white people. Today there are approximately 35 houses in the community for about 50 white staff and about 95 houses for the remaining 750-800 Aboriginal people to live in. Many of the houses occupied by Aboriginal families are old and run-down, initially built in the 1970s.

As part of the Intervention local Aboriginal people have received fencing around their houses but some residents stated that they did not want the fences and were not consulted on the issue. The fences cut off the natural spaces between houses where connected families often live near each other. In practice it means that the normal ceremonies pertaining to the Aboriginal life cycle such as

initiations and funerals cannot be held in their natural places near the homes any longer. The spaces between houses are now cut off by fences.

Aboriginal people in Ramingining widely expressed deep concern regarding the direction of development since the Intervention - lack of housing for Aboriginal people, the lack of employment, the lack of support for homelands, and that current government policy appears to be designed to destroy Aboriginal culture. There is a strong feeling that government representatives fly in to the community, write down local viewpoints, fly out in the afternoon and simply throw the comments in the bin when they get back to their offices.

My own observation is that local shire councils that have replaced the old community councils are functioning, but they are limited to issues such as dog control, maintenance of parks and gardens and roads in town. The shire councils do not have control over community issues which really matters to most to residents – allocation of housing, employment and services for homelands.

The Stronger Futures documents place a strong emphasis on tackling alcohol abuse. While this is important there is no acknowledgement that many Aboriginal communities are so called 'dry communities', and have been dry long before the Intervention. Ramingining is one of these places that has been a dry community for decades. There is none of the social mayhem that the Stronger Futures document is designed to tackle. The 'men's cooling off shelter' that was built as part of the Intervention is now used instead as a gym for the local football team.

Many of the residents in the Ramingining community have distinguished themselves as artists, musicians, dancers and actors over the years. Their paintings, sculptures and fibre arts hang in the major galleries around Australia and the world. Many books and films have been made about the people, their unique lifestyle, knowledge of their culture and environment. In the award winning film *Ten Canoes* (Cannes film festival 2006), Ramingining people act and direct a story of their own together with Rolf de Heer. It seems to me that there would be far more to gain for Australia as a nation in viewing the people and their culture from this region as a source of inspiration and their traditional fields of knowledge as an asset to the nation. Consequently policy in economic development, health, employment and education should be supportive of Aboriginal culture and aspirations.

The Stronger Futures consultation document does not reflect the extent to which people feel disempowered and discriminated against. I believe that the Stronger Futures legislation will further embed the disempowerment and discrimination that was begun under the Northern Territory Intervention.

Thank you,

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