

Reconciliation for Western Sydney



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The Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
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Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Dear Committee Secretary

We, members of Reconciliation for Western Sydney, are writing to express our deep concern at the Stronger Futures Bill 2011 and related legislation.

Most Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory have been calling for more police, police stations, schools, community services and appropriate health intervention for decades. We believe this legislation will not do this, but will simply extend punitive and discriminatory provisions already in existence following the previous federal government's Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER). Further, it will extend such provisions to more poor and disadvantaged communities across the nation.

Instead of assisting Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples to take control over the management of their communities, the government is proposing to expand NTER income management and the punitive suspension of social security entitlements if and when children fail to attend school.

The government should be following the example of Aboriginal educational experts such as Dr Chris Sarra from the QUT 'Stronger, Smarter, Leadership Program' who have very successfully demonstrated how to encourage children to succeed at school.

Why is the government continuing the Intervention while there is evidence that Aboriginal quality of life appears to be worsening. Incarceration rates are increasing and the rate of removal of children from their families is greater. There are indications of an increase in the level unemployment benefits paid through Centrelink. At least one Aboriginal health organisation has found deteriorating health standards following the NTER.

On what evidence did the federal government decide that the NTER measures would help Aboriginal communities improve their situation? Many Aboriginal communities and groups such as ours believe these measures to be punitive and in no way beneficial to most communities.

Why are we not redirecting funds to programs that are designed, owned and managed by Aboriginal people?

Our concern has always been for the way the Intervention has been carried out without meaningful consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal communities. Meaningful consultation means taking time to ensure people understand the issues and have time to review and respond to the issues **before** decisions are made. We believe that politicians and their advisers need to spend much more time consulting with Aboriginal communities (especially the remote ones) to enable different effective strategies to be implemented, rather than applying an inappropriate “one size fits all” strategy like the NTER.

Reconciliation for Western Sydney is supportive of the many NGOs, social service providers, Aboriginal organisations, health and education experts, who have expressed strong opposition to the NTER being applied to the many communities which do not support it.

Our group opposes the federal government continuing and expanding a policy that we and many others consider is punitive, humiliating, hugely expensive and by any standard overwhelmingly unsuccessful.

Yours sincerely

Lyn Leerson
Secretary