

Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities

April 2009

Submitted by: John Greateorex

The select committee has been appointed to enquire into:

- (a) the effectiveness of Australian Government policies following the NTER, specifically on the state of health, welfare, education and law and order in regional and remote Indigenous communities.
- (b) The impact of state and territory government policies on the well-being of regional and remote indigenous communities;
- (c) The health, welfare, education and security of children in regional and remote indigenous communities; and
- (d) The employment and enterprise opportunities in regional and remote indigenous communities.

The contents of this submission provide concrete examples of the effectiveness or otherwise of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) in the Marthakal region of north east Arnhemland.

Following the announcement of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers feel that as good citizens they have been bad mouthed by the Australian government, and singled out by White Australia and the wider world as child abusers and alcoholics. They know this was unfair because they know the Marthakal region of Arnhemland has always been dry, and child abuse was less of a problem there than in the rest of White Australia. The debilitating impact on Yolngu of the government and the media re-defining Yolngu as alcoholics and child abusers cannot be overstated.

One mother on Elcho Island said, " I have five children, I have worked very hard to provide the best education for my children. I teach them good manners, and to be respectful to other people. I buy and prepare good food for them, I send them to school every day. But every time I watched the TV, I only hear bad stories about my Yolngu peoples. I see every day the government and white people telling us that we are child abusers and alcoholics. There is no alcohol and no child abusers here. I am so shamed by the posters they put up here and the news reports that I've stopped watching the TV and I

won't be able to visit Darwin anymore because I know those white people will look at me and see me as a child abuser."

Not long after the NTER was announced a Yolngu man living at Galwin'ku, Elcho Island rang, he was distraught. So many of his younger extended family members were attempting suicide. He said, "I don't know what to do, all we hear government people and TV reporters speak about, everything we read in newspapers tells lies about us, the news say all Yolngu people are substance abusers and child abusers, we are not. These stories are having a bad affect, these stories make us feel bad, they stories are increasing the level of substance abuse, and these things have made a big increase in attempted suicides."

A respected matriarch and grandmother whose family lived on Elcho Island, and who had lived and worked in Darwin for many years, "me and my families can no longer do our shopping during the day. (White) people look at us as if we are child abusers, we are not we are honest good people." She felt that after the "Intervention" she and all the women she knew were identified as a child molester by white Australians. She blames the government and the media for the way they portrayed all black Northern Territorians. Not long after the introduction of the NTER she left her work and Darwin, she returned to her family. This was the only way for her to maintain a positive sense of self.

The immediate, and continuing impact of the NTER has been to belittle and marginalise the NT's First Nation peoples from the wider predominately white society. Although possibly well intentioned, the NTER has undermined the dignity, pride, sense of purpose and worth of the majority of Yolngu people. Any positive outcomes from the NTER were doomed from the outset because the Federal government failed to negotiate meaningfully, respectfully, and in good faith with the broad spectrum of First Nation peoples in the NT. The teams of people implementing the NTER failed to recognize the complexity of the First Nation societies, and failed to recognize and work with the First Nation governance structures already existing across the Territory.

By concentrating their efforts to the major settlements the AG through the NTER is abandoning the most entrepreneurial, healthy, happiest and most sustainable communities. By forcing each first nation and their extended families to leave their ancestral estates and homelands, governments are compounding the dysfunction that they, and the missions created in the first place. The funding that governments may save in the short term by spending big on the centralised townships, and less on the self-sufficient, self-governing homelands will compound into greater social and financial cost in the future

Possibly the most significant failure of government's action through the NTER has been the development and implementation of policy based on ideology, not evidence. Children in north east Arnhemland are now under greater threat than ever before. Following the introduction of the NTER, children, parents and grandparents living in the large settlements have consistently reported the increased use of petrol, marijuana and other

substances, the increased levels of suicide and attempted suicide, the increased number of teenage pregnancies, the lack of discipline and general disrespectful behaviour of children, teenagers and young adults in the larger communities for the reasons cited above.

The Australian Government (AG) policies through the NTER have consistently ignored the mountains of evidence that children (as well as adults) are happier, healthier, safer and better behaved in homelands than in the larger settlements and ex-missions. Over the 30 years that I have spoken with homeland residents they have continuously and adamantly said, they do not want their children living or visiting the larger towns like Galiwin'ku. They want the best for their children. They know in the large settlements there is too much: drug taking, youth suicide, wrong way marriages, teenage pregnancy, no discipline, petrol sniffing, violence, friction between clans and galka (sorcery). The AG through the NTER has failed to act in the best interests of these families and their children.

Through the NTER the AG is penalising these families who are doing the right thing, by spending big to further enlarge the centralised settlements. Through its policies and actions in closing down homelands, the AG is acting irresponsibly for the following reasons:

1. School attendance is higher in homelands than in the settlements.

Department of Education and Training (DET) enrolment and attendance figures do not include student participation rates. This is the number of students enrolled at the school, divided by the number of students of school age present in the community. From personal experience as a teacher in Arnhemland for almost thirty years, participation rates at the Galiwin'ku school over the past decade have rarely, if ever exceeded 60%. While homeland school participation rates are rarely less than 100%.

2. More homeland students attend school. Usually every student present in a homeland attends school. Over an 18 months period ending in June 2004, 80% of homeland children attended school more than 85 % of the time, while at the Galiwin'ku school only 8% of the students attended more than 85% of the time.

See: http://www.culturalsurvival.org.au/2004_2way_HLCs/index.html

3. When homelands children do not attend school it is invariably because young students and their mothers are forced to travel for shopping. In one particular homeland, Mapuru, the NTER through income management (IM) has forced mothers and children to charter planes to do their shopping at Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island, (because FACHSIA refuse to register the local co-op to receive IM funds).

4. The AG through the NTER is acting in a racially discriminatory manner towards First Nations parents and children by failing to re-dress the greatly inferior level of schooling offered to children living on homelands.

Background: As an ex-teacher with the Northern Territory Department of Education (DET) I am particularly concerned with the level of schooling available to home-land students. In 2001, the Federal government provided computers printers and satellite connections and Interactive Digital Learning (IDL) to over 150 remote sites, including stations and remote schools. Homelands were deliberately excluded from the formula. At Shepherdson College, the provision of IDL to remote Aboriginal schools enabled only children of white staff to access distant learning.

See: Attachment Four

5. Recently over 250 remote sites received two way satellite connections as part of the Sky Connect program. This list includes less than five homelands. This is not an issue for homeland policy, but of equity. Access to educational services must be provided on a non-racial or language basis. There is no longer a reason why digital learning technologies cannot be provided to all homeland students and their families. Cheap permanent power sources are available to power internet access and laptop computers.

See: <http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/inc/pdf/saspwis.pdf>

See Attachment Four

6. Governments, both federal and territory spend tens of millions of dollars on distance learning for English speaking children. It is time to develop web-based English literacy and numeracy materials for students for whom English is a second language. Bachelor Institute Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) and Charles Darwin University (CDU) have developed a tool for homeland and other very remote students to develop English literacy. See: <http://www.cdu.edu.au/reow>

Such software reduces the need for extended face to face contact hours, while at the same time developing much needed English language skills.

The NTER the AG is neglectful for failing to reward parents for the hard work they do to ensure their children have a sustainable future for the following reasons:

7. Greater self-generated income in Homelands than in settlements. The non-government related income generated by Galiwin'ku residents is about \$60 per adult, compared with \$950 per adult at Mäpuru. These figures include only income generated from non-government related sources. This is a significant fact that is overlooked by governments when looking at homeland sustainability. These figures do not include estimates on the value of food collected and hunted, which if added into the calculation would double the homeland figure.

8. Greater business opportunities in homelands. Arnhem Weavers an ecotourism business has been successfully operating since 2003. This business has never sought nor received any government assistance. There are no in equivalent examples of small businesses operating at Galiwin'ku. See the website for this business:

<http://www.arnhemweavers.com.au/>

It would be impossible for the Arnhem Weavers to operate their business at Galiwin'ku, as Roslyn Malngumba says, “that (Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island) is not my land, I cannot do anything there.”

9. This successful business is under threat because of Income management (IM). In Just before the arrival of a group of tourists in 2008, five young Mapuru women weaving instructors chartered a plane to use their income managed money at the Arnhem land progress Association shop on Elcho Island. They charter to Elcho because FACHSIA has refused to allow the local co-op license to accept the Basics Card (despite an earlier undertaking to 'look after' the Mapuru Co-op). They did not have sufficient money to charter back to Mapuru, so they attempted to turn by boat only to end up caught in the mangroves at low tide for the night. Unfortunately they arrived back at Mapuru five days later, just as the tourists were leaving.

10. The Mapuru co-op is another example of a small business run for and on behalf of the homeland residents. This co-op is on a trust basis, it has never asked for or expected funding from external sources.

See: <http://www.arnhemweavers.com.au/mapuru2.htm>

The co-op is located in the Homeland Learning Centre building so that student learning is contextualised. Jackie Nguluwidi said, “the children are learning to do this shop of business for their future. Later they will takeover.” In 2005 this small co-op won the National Heart Foundation Award for Small Community Initiative. Jackie continued, “Galiwin'ku isn't our country, we can't make a shop there. This is our country so we can make a shop here.”

The Mapuru co-op is another business under threat because of the NTER. Despite admirable attempts by the Galiwin'ku General Business Manager FACHSIA, the Minister responsible continues to refuse to allow Mapuru residents the right to use their Basics cards at the Mapuru Co-op. Old age pensioners and others are forced to travel by plane to use their IM funds to do their shopping.

See Attachment One

Through the NTER the AG has failed to acknowledge and act to back up the other initiatives shown by Yolngu:

11. In region surrounding Galiwin'ku, there are approximately 70 times the number of personally owned computers in homelands than in the township of Galiwin'ku, per head of population. This statistic shows the determination of homeland residents to engage with the outside world.

12. Greater internet usage in homelands. There is far greater access to privately owned computers and the internet in homelands than is currently available in townships like Galiwin'ku. Anecdotally homeland residents use the internet more often than settlement residents. For example, until recently Ramingining had no public Internet access. The

initiative shown by homeland residents needs to be recognized and supported by governments. For more information see: <http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/aflf/>

Evidence based policy.

13.If the AG is serious about Closing the Gap through the NTER it would undertake research into the range of large settlement and homeland sustainabilities to ascertain the financial and social costs. It is a pity the government has spent in excess of \$2.5B on micro-managing people's social benefit payments. And yet is unwilling to spend a fraction of that money undertaking qualitative and quantitative research into homeland and regional centre service delivery and sustainability costs.
Cultural competency for public servants involved with policy development and implementation of the NTER

14.While the NTER is an attempt by the AG to improve the social, political and economic position of the NT's First Nation peoples, the government has done little if anything to improve the cultural competency of the public servants working on the NTER. Currently public servants have limited understanding of the behaviours, protocols, languages and cultural backgrounds, and little or no understanding of the aspirations and goals of the Indigenous population. There are no incentives or encouragement for public servants to gain these understandings. A positive move would be to encourage all public servants to undertake formal accredited cultural study. See attachment 4 as an example.

Attachment One

Mum Julie

Julie is the salt of the earth, she has worked all her life supporting her family and her community.

Why would the government want to hurt her and people like her who give their all, and are model citizens to whom we can aspire?

I am one of the more fortunate in life, I have two of the best mums that have ever been. One mum lives in Melbourne, at the age of 87 she continues to serve, she drives neighbours to the doctor or shopping, and cooks regular meals for friends and relatives. At her age she is rarely at home. I remember not long ago when her grand-daughter Anna was called by her friends to celebrate their end of Year 12, she decided instead to spend the weekend with her gran instead.

My other mum I met when I moved to Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island in the Northern Territory to take up my first teaching post over 30 years ago. Walking to school every day I would pass a house where I would always hear laughter and music. One day I plucked up the courage and asked if I could sit with the mother and father of the household. Soon I was calling in every day, often well after dark, after having prepared my lessons and teaching program. Sometimes I would stay overnight sleep on the concrete floor of the kitchen, or during the dry season outside on the blanket by a fire.

Julie welcomed everybody to her house and I was no exception, except that I was white. This made no difference to her, and because I had no relatives she thought I should be her son. I was clearly interested in learning about Yolngu culture and language, but most importantly, was respectful and willing to listen and learn from her, her husband and their families. Mum Julie and her families have always been respectful of my background and looked after me, educated and advised me as their own.

It was deeply distressing to me to witness the devastating and debilitating effect that aspects of the intervention have had on my Elcho family.

In April income management was forced on all people receiving Centrelink payments and living on Aboriginal land, including Mum Julie.

Before going much further you need to know a little more about Mum Julie. In the 70s she worked for the local council as a cleaner, but it wasn't long before she was given the pay clerk responsibilities. She was a natural for this position because of her honesty and frankness. She worked for many years while her children attended the local school.

Things were better organised during the mission and early days after the government took over, there were jobs, local people independently built, wired and plumbed all the houses. There was fishing and the market garden was productive. Later on governments began tendering building contracts, so fewer and fewer houses were built by local Yolngu. This was just one of the reasons for the low attendance at school. Why go to school if there are no jobs?

Mum Julie decided to get a job at the school in order to encourage her grandchildren to attend school. With a job at the school she could take them to school and be with them all day, a commitment many grandmothers would understand. Last year Mum Julie suffered a stroke and was unable to continue working. So she began to receive a Centrelink invalid pension.

Towards the end of April, Mum Julie rang and asked me to find out what this income management was about, and why she wasn't receiving her full pension. She was outraged that half her pension was isolated without her permission, and at being treated like a child. She believed that all Australians, black and white, on Centrelink payments were being income managed. Centrelink had given her a food card to swipe at the local store, but for weeks and weeks she struggled and limped into the store to swipe the card, and for weeks and weeks there was no money in the food card. Upset and with her pride and dignity severely hurt she threw the card away.

After discovering what IM really meant, Mum asked me to assist her gain an exemption from Income Management. I became a nominee to enquire on her behalf, and not long after I was visiting Galiwin'ku and called in to the Centrelink office. I asked the officers the reasons why Mum was being income managed.

One officer responded, "it's a response to the *Little Children are Sacred* Report".

I responded, "You must think she is a child abuser. I want my mum exempted from income management."

The officer asked, "What are the reasons she should not be income managed?"

I thought, then asked, "First you tell me the reasons she's on it."

At first he couldn't answer then eventually replied, "because she lives on Aboriginal land."

I went on to explain that Mum had never touched alcohol, which is not surprising given that all the Aboriginal townships in north-east Arnhemland are dry and always have been, she has never smoked, never gambled, has never abused children or any of the other things that the Federal government has labelled Aboriginal people as in the Northern Territory. The officer then said so

far there have been no exemptions to IM. We later found out that the only valid reason is not to live on Aboriginal land.

The effect of this blanket targeting in the case of Mum and her families is debilitating and dehumanising. I was sensing that income management is having a severe and negative impact on the spirit and psyche of Aboriginal people; an elderly matriarch rang a couple of days ago and said, "the tide is in, we are drowning. Why don't they just come and shoot us?"

John Greateorex

June 2008

Attachment Two

Statement by Yingiya Guyula from Liya-dhalinymirr clan of the Djambarrpuyngu People

My name is Yingiya Guyula from Liya-dhalinymirr clan of the Djambarrpuyngu People.

I am the Yolngu Studies lecturer at University in Darwin

The intervention has only created problems in East Arnhemland communities as well remote homeland centres. The Intervention has made our people more frustrated and confused, the white man's way of thinking is **forced on us, and forcing us to abandon our culture.**

Government Ministers have flown into Arnhemland communities just for few hours on the ground to gather a little bit of information, then they fly back into cities thinking they know how to fix the problems in the communities, **thinking they know what's best for us.**

Governments only looked at the fringe camps and towns and wet areas where people drink alcohol in places such as Nhulunbuy, Katharine, Tenant creek, Jabiru Alice Spring and Darwin.

White people see Aboriginal people in these places and think that these people that don't care about life, who don't care about living. But who are they to judge them. They class all Aborigines the same, but they are wrong.

These white people and those bureaucrats do not go out to the East Arnhemland communities, where my people live, where there has never been alcohol, and these is no child abuse. There are Aboriginal people living on remote communities of Arnhemland, in homeland centres, away from towns, away from the binge drinking areas, poker machine and gambling venues.

These are people that are able to manage their funds and work, or want work, educate, discipline, and practice ceremonies.

Quarantining of Centrelink payments should be optional and not compulsory. Quarantining might be ok for people living in town camps and cities, where alcohol and gambling is a problem, but it doesn't work for my people living on

remote Arnhemland homelands where there is no gambling, no alcohol and no child abuse.

We are asking simply for understanding that in life, their needs to be an understanding between two cultures. There needs to be respect between cultures.

Mapuru homeland has a Coop store which won a National award for selling healthy food. Centrelink won't approve it to accept quarantined money.

This means an aircraft charter flight from the mainland homeland at Mapuru to the closest shop on Elcho Island costs 560 dollars return. This means it's costing \$560 return flight just to buy 150 dollars worth of food, where's the sense in that?

Arnhemland is like the European Union, made up of many different nations, each clan-nation with their own language, each with it own national estate. Bringing everybody in from the homeland centres into the major settlements is not the right thing to do because people do not feel secure or happy living in another mans land. Children are forced to go to school, but really they do not feel safe and insecure on other peoples' land.

There are about 40 children who willingly run to school every day at Mapuru homeland because it's their home and they feel secure. Yet the N.T. Government wants to close down the homeland schools and bring everyone in to the major communities.

They think it's not worth spending money on homeland schools who have 40 or more children freely, and with their own will attending school, but is providing internet services, facilities and technology to white schools with attendances as low as 5. The Education department provides computers and internet and distance learning for hundreds of cattle station and small schools, across the Northern Territory, but homeland schools are neglected.

Further more I would like say that these homelands are our homes. There is no violence in the remote homeland communities, no child abuse happens, no alcohol, no pornography, because out there in the bush is where the cultural ceremonial grounds are, and from it is where strong discipline comes through spirits of our fathers talking through the land.

Both the Commonwealth and the Northern Territory Governments hasn't given equal opportunity to us the First Australians to be able to exercise our rights.

Through the intervention white man police stations have been put in the major communities for dealing mostly with cultural conflict issues (problems that can only be solved through traditional cultural justice), but instead the white policeman force white man law onto us, disrespecting our black fella law. They think they've done the right think. But often they're only making it much worst by locking up senior leaders, the very ones who are wise and keeping our Indigenous Law strong.

This time we are taking the case further where it can be heard loud and clear by people whose ears, brains, feelings have a heart for Indigenous Australians. It is now being taken further where there is an ear that will listen.

We are taking it further, to the United Nations and will talk about the intervention, about how income management in the Northern Territory has had a devastating and debilitating impact on remote communities in Arnhemland.

Finally, we need you to support us. We need you to tell governments that we want the same opportunities as white people, to live and enjoy our own cultural life, but they must stop trying to make us like whiteman, we have our own cultural identity. Let us be who we are, and together we will have hope for the future.

Thank you

Yingiya Guyula

Attachment Three

Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
P. O. Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament house
Canberra ACT 2600

4th February 2008

Dear Minister,

Mapuru is a small town on the mainland adjacent to Elcho Island in North-east Arnhemland. It has a population of about 150, with about 40 children attending school every day. The residents of Mapuru are healthy and fit, their town is drug and child abuse free. For over 35 years they have struggled to stay on their country but it now seems that through the 'Intervention' and government assessment that Aboriginal peoples are unable to manage their Centrelink payments these struggles might have been in vain.

For 6 years the people of Mapuru have been successfully running their own community co-op. While the co-op is not a registered organisation, it runs on a non-profit, trust basis benefiting all community members. In the co-op people can only buy healthy foods, fishing lines, tyres and other necessities needed to stay at Mapuru. Two years ago the Mapuru co-op won the National Heart Foundation award in the category "Small Community Initiative". The co-op does not sell soft drinks, chips, lollies or many of the other foods that are deemed bad for health.

With the compulsory quarantining of 50% of Centrelink payments, it has been stated that residents will only be able to access this money through food cards, and that they will not be able to shop at their local co-op. If Mapuru residents are forced to shop at Galiwin'ku they will have to charter a plane to Elcho Island, and because people will not have enough money to pay for charters and food they will be forced to leave their ancestral land at Mapuru and relocate to the town of Galiwin'ku where they are unwelcome, unsafe and unrepresented. This will have a detrimental impact on the health of Mapuru residents and their children.

These forced changes are likely to also result in the closure of the ecotourism business that the residents have been successfully running for five years. The ecotourism business, like the co-op, has been initiated and funded entirely by Mapuru residents without any external assistance.

Mapuru residents ask: Will you allow them to use any quarantined money to shop at their non-profit community? The Mapuru community asks that you act in their best interests, so they and their children can continue to look forward to a prosperous and healthy future on their own land, and not be forced to live in a town where they will not have a future.

Why should Mapuru residents receiving Centrelink benefits have 50% of their payments quarantined? They do not know, and no-one has told them. They have heard that some whitefellas living on Aboriginal land have been exempted from the quarantining laws. Is this true? Some people say it is to make sure children go to school, which raises a second issue.

At Mapuru EVERY child goes to school EVERY day, all forty or so of them. Jackie the Assistant Teacher in Charge of the "Homeland Learning Centre" has been the teacher for 25 years, but has no formal teacher training. The Mapuru community desperately need, and have been asking for a fulltime qualified teacher to live and work at Mapuru. In 2003 Syd Sterling the NT Education Minister at the time made a personal commitment to the Mapuru community to ensuring that Mapuru would be allocated a fulltime teacher. This promise has not been kept. While there are about forty children at Mapuru with no permanent Teacher, there are 'normal' schools in the NT with less than 10 children, and according to an ABC news report in 2007, one such school has only 5 students, with all white students. This is unjust. During this same report Jackie said; "they (the kids) are starving for English, and starving for Maths." This is true, the parents determined to ensure that their children get the best schooling they can. Yingiya Guyula said on the same program; "we want to be equal in education, we want to be equal in life, and just give us a chance, give us a go."

What will you do to support "acceptable standard" schooling for the Mapuru children if the NT Department of Education continues to ignore the Mapuru children?

Yours sincerely,

John Greateorex

POBox 40743
CASUARINA NT 0811

Attachment Four

The Prime Minister
P. O. Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament house
Canberra ACT 2600

7th September 2008

Dear Kevin,

RE: ACCESS TO EQUITABLE SCHOOLING IN NORTH EAST ARNHEMLAND

The Northern Territory government has a differential level of schooling that is unique to the NT. In Arnhemland this manifests itself as 'homeland' schooling, whereby many remote black children have extremely limited access to infrastructure and formally qualified teachers. The current system of homeland schooling does not working efficiently or effectively. The homeland schools with which I am familiar have very high attendance. Over the two decade I cannot remember a time when a child missed school, every day every child present in the homelands goes to school. The problem is not with the children or the parents it is with bureaucracies incapable of meeting the schooling needs of these children. Last year by one parent publicly stated, "the children are starving for English and Maths".

In your statement Quality Education: The case for an Education Revolution in our Schools, August 2008 *"the Australian Government considers that the COAG reform agenda must deliver real changes in three core areas:*

1. *Raising the quality of teaching in our schools.*
2. *Ensuring all students benefit from schooling through strategies based on high expectations of attainment, engagement and transitions for every student, especially in disadvantaged school communities.*
3. *Improving transparency and accountability of schools and school systems at all levels."*

Further, the COAG agreement says *"the agreed targets focus on the most important goals for reform in education and training. In particular, the targets focus all governments on the pressing and significant challenge of addressing Indigenous disadvantage."* I am not advocating that teachers be placed in all homeland schools, nor that the children and parents be forced off their First Nation estates to attend school. This has already had a crippling impact on thousands of Aboriginal lives, but I am asking that your government takes immediate action where it can to improve access to quality schooling for these remote black children.

Distance education is offered to remote, mainly white children through a number of NT Department of Employment, Education and Training (NT DEET) schools including the NT Open Education Centre (NTOEC). White students are catered for because they speak English as their first language. Is there any reason why black children cannot have access to similar distance education programs tailor made for students for whom English is a foreign language?

Given your governments commitment to removing the gap in 'Indigenous schooling disadvantage' and to delivering fast telecommunications throughout Australia this model seems the most effective option available. Does your government have plans to work in conjunction with the NTG on developing web based learning software for black students for whom English is a foreign language? If not, why not?

At this very moment the federal government in conjunction with Telstra and Rio Tinto are funding the laying of an optic fibre cable from Jabiru to Nhulunbuy in the Northern Territory. This cable will provide a high speed telecommunications links for the Rio Tinto mining operation at Nhulunbuy as well as form a link in Australia's defense telecommunications network.

The cable is being laid directly through Yolngu country and is bypassing most of the Yolngu towns and all the permanently inhabited homelands along the way. I am concerned that the needs of Indigenous schools in the larger homelands along the path of the cable have been overlooked. The decision to exclude the permanent larger homelands needs to be reversed for the reasons given above, because of your governments stated goals, and for the reasons below;

1. Remote schooling and distance education has always been available to white Australians while at the same time being unavailable to many black Territorians. A decision not to provide a future proof (optic fibre) cable to selected homelands will be a continuation of the current discrimination.

2. Distance education is the way of the future for remote Australian students. As more educational programs are developed for distance learning an optic fibre communications link will ensure that bandwidth will not be a barrier. Such a mode of delivery will also reduce the number of teachers required and cost to deliver quality distance schooling programs. Remote adult education and training also will be enhanced and delivery cost reduced by a very fast internet connection delivered by optical fibre cable.

3. A recent study into the costs of health provision estimates that it is 30% cheaper to keep people on country in homelands than in centralised towns like Galiwin'ku. We also know that children and women are safest in homelands. The provision of a fast internet connection to selected homelands will encourage people to stay on country and save the government millions of dollars. The larger homelands have proven their sustainability by generating their own money through business activities, such as the Cultural Education Centre at Baniyala and the weaving business and shop at Mapuru (www.arnhemweavers.com.au). They need reliable fast internet connections to survive and grow into the future.

4. The cost to install the cable between Jabiru and Gove is approximately \$25 million. It is estimated that it will cost \$5 million to install an optic fibre cable to five homelands: Mapuru, Donydji, Gangan, Dhalinybuy, and Baniyala. The figure of \$5 million is insignificant in comparison to the over \$900 million that has been spent just on administering Income Management, and the \$3,500 million spent on expanding the processing facilities at the Nhulunbuy mine. All the trenching and land clearing equipment is currently onsite. It will save millions of dollars to lay the cable now while the equipment, workers and worker accommodation is on site.

5. You may respond that with the cable being laid to Nhulunbuy bandwidth will increase sufficiently for distance learning to occur throughout the region. I would strongly argue that this is not good enough. Why not act now to future proof these communities and ensure they have access to bandwidths that the rest of Australia will soon have, while you have the opportunity? It is important that optical fibre cable is supplied to these homelands now because it is doubtful that it will ever get there if they miss this opportunity.

For over thirty years I have lived and worked with Yolngu as an educator in Arnhemland. I am convinced that the provision of a fast internet connection is the cheapest, most effective and important way to deliver quality education, and to support residents maintain social structures, community cohesion, control over their lives, and the opportunity to develop sustainable, healthy and productive futures for themselves. Can you give a commitment to ensuring the optical fibre cable is delivered to the homeland schools identified above?

I look forward to your response with the hope that a fibre optic link will be laid to the homelands schools noted above, and to a commitment of developing a comprehensive model for delivery of distance education to remote Aboriginal children.

Yours sincerely,

John Greateorex

cc:

Julia Gillard, Minister for Education (Federal)

Marion Scrymgour, Minister for Education (NT)

Warren Snowden, Minister for Defence, (Federal)

**ISSUE: CLOSING THE GAP AND THE NT GENERATIONAL PLAN FOR
INDIGENOUS TERRITORIANS**

Recommendations:

4. 1. The NT Generational Plan be expanded to include all Territorians.
5. 2. The NTG encourage tertiary accredited cultural education for all NTG employees engaged in policy development and implementation, or service delivery involving Indigenous Territorians.

Background:

Issues surrounding Indigenous peoples and their involvement in the broader social, political and economic development of the Northern Territory are complex and of national significance. The future development of the Northern Territory is dependent upon the successful engagement of our Indigenous peoples in economic, social and political challenges. To make a difference Indigenous Territorians must be meaningfully and respectfully engaged by governments. However current policy decisions and program implementation are based on assumptions that reflect scant understanding and little respect for Indigenous aspirations, values and culture.

Current situation:

The NT Government has placed the issues of Indigenous disadvantage and equitable economic participation on the COAG agenda. This makes a strong public statement that necessitates action. Currently public servants have limited understanding of the behaviours, protocols, languages and cultural backgrounds, and little or no understanding of the aspirations and goals of the Indigenous population. There are no incentives or encouragement for public servants to gain these understandings. Given the current demographic trends in the Northern Territory, it would seem timely to promote avenues that will promote intercultural understandings and awareness. This can easily be achieved by placing successful completion of Fee for Service units or the Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Knowledges as **Highly Desirable** in the selection criteria for identified positions in the NT Government. Units selected for study would reflect employee work responsibilities. Charles Darwin University's School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems (SAIKS) is ideally positioned to offer the appropriate training and education necessary for the NTG to achieve this visionary goal.

Such a progressive step would provide a leading example to all Territorians of the need to take the NT's Indigenous peoples seriously as social, economic and political equals within the wider NT community. This initiative makes a bold statement that the NTG is not only interested to engage Indigenous Territorians but most importantly that it is willing to act.

Budget Implications:

The addition of a formal university qualification under the Highly Desirable section in the selection criteria for all public servant positions will have insignificant budgetary impact as study is only recommended not mandatory, and could be placed within the existing approved study guidelines.