

Australian government takeover of Aboriginal communities: the real content of the “Children are Sacred” report

By Susan Allan
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Prime Minister John Howard has claimed that the trigger for his announcement last week of a federal military takeover of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory was the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry’s report into sexual abuse of Aboriginal children, entitled “Little Children are Sacred”.

Anyone who has read the 320-page report, and its 97 recommendations, however, will quickly conclude that it bears no relationship with Howard’s martial law “crackdown”. While the federal government plans to deal with the social crisis in remote Aboriginal communities by stigmatising and punishing its victims, the report proposes a series of long-term measures, based on the allocation of large-scale funding to education, health, counselling and other services, in collaboration and consultation with the communities themselves. Just as in the period prior to the 2001 election, when Howard ran an anti-immigration campaign based on lies about refugees throwing their children overboard, so now, in the months before the 2007 election he is utilising lies and deception to run a hysterical “law and order” campaign against the most vulnerable layers of Australian society.

The NT inquiry into sexual abuse was initiated in August last year after a series of sensationalised reports on the ABC’s “Lateline” program. The first, in May 2006, consisted of a highly-charged interview with NT prosecutor Nanette Rogers, who provided graphic details of several instances of horrific sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities. Rogers’ interview was quickly followed by another “Lateline” “exposure”, claiming paedophiles were running rampant in the Aboriginal community of Mutitjula, near the famous Uluru (Ayers Rock), and using children as “sex slaves”.

The “Little Children are Sacred” co-authors—Rex Wild QC, a former NT Director of Public Prosecutions, and Pat Anderson, an Aboriginal woman with experience in indigenous health—travelled throughout the NT for ten months, receiving ongoing advice and assistance from a group of indigenous affairs experts. They visited 45 communities, held 260 meetings with individuals, agencies and organisations and received 65 submissions.

The final report, brought down on April 30 this year, declared that there was nothing new or extraordinary about the child abuse allegations. There had been myriad reports delivered to the Territory and federal governments about widespread sexual abuse within remote Aboriginal communities over many years. What was new was the sensational publicity now surrounding the issue.

In a summary of their report, the authors noted the following:

* Sexual abuse was widespread in Aboriginal communities. The phenomenon was not limited to people of Aboriginal descent, however, but was a national and, indeed, international, problem.

* Most Aboriginal people were committed to solving problems and helping their children. They were also eager to better educate themselves.

* Much of the violence and sexual abuse occurring in the Territory communities was a reflection of past, current and continuing social problems which had developed over many decades.

* The combined effects of poor health, alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment, gambling, pornography, poor education and housing, and a general loss of identity and control had contributed to violence and sexual abuse in many forms.

* There was a breakdown in services and poor crisis intervention on the part of government departments and agencies.

* Programs needed to have enough funds and resources and be backed by long-term commitment.

The inquiry’s recommendations

Contrary to Howard’s aggressive police-military plan, calls for policing comprise a tiny fraction of the 97 recommendations. Only five recommendations deal specifically with the issue. The report proposes a coordinated response between police, the child abuse taskforce and family services, including ongoing consultations and support for communities’ own efforts at maintaining a stable environment. In addition, the report recommends increased numbers of Aboriginal police, in particular females, including the recruitment and training of Aboriginal interpreters, all of whom are properly educated and trained to deal with the issues surrounding sexual abuse.

On alcohol, the report makes 10 recommendations, calling for community education and rehabilitation programs to reduce alcohol consumption, along with a media campaign emphasising the relationship between excessive drinking and the increased incidence of child abuse and violence. Unlike Howard’s plan, there is no recommendation for the banning of alcohol. Instead, there is a series of proposals for the Licensing Commission to work with communities, police and the Department of Health, and to consider the social impact on children and others in the community before issuing liquor licences.

On pornography, the report calls for a ban on X-rated

material. On the problems of gambling, it recommends further research, counselling, and an education campaign.

Nowhere does the report mention the need for military intervention, the cutting of welfare, or the lifting of long-standing Aboriginal land tenure arrangements.

The vast majority of the recommendations, well over 50, stress the urgency of improving health, education, housing, job opportunities and social services. Education, the report insists, is the “key to solving (or at least ameliorating) the incidence of child abuse. By education we mean not only that which occurs in schools but that which occurs in the wider context.”

References to education and rehabilitation programs abound. These apply not only to those suffering in Aboriginal communities, but to government officials, police and health workers as well.

In relation to schools, the report recommends parenting education, pre-school education for all three-year-olds, smaller class sizes, remedial education, cross-cultural education, local language development, employment of additional school counsellors, a universal meals program with parents contributing to the cost, and the utilisation of school facilities after hours for adult education. While the report stresses the importance of school attendance for all children, it opposes any punitive measures, such as cutting parents off welfare payments—one of the central planks of Howard’s plan.

Some 27 recommendations deal with family services, health and infrastructure. They include programs for maternal and child health home visits in urban and remote communities, pre-natal and maternity support, including support for vulnerable and maltreated Aboriginal children. In particular, the report calls for services that address the underlying effects of both recent and “intergenerational trauma” and that enhance the emotional and mental well being of all members of the community. Multi-purpose family centres, safe houses, youth programs, an increase in health facilities, child protection workers and the recruitment of Aboriginal staff are all deemed essential.

There are no proposals for compulsory medical checks for under-16 year-olds—another feature of the Howard government’s plan.

Given the extent of overcrowding in community houses, the inquiry’s report strongly recommends a program of mass construction of housing, including the maintenance and repair of current stock. It calls for flexible accommodation to be built

for single women, single men and the elderly. It recommends that Aboriginal people be employed and trained in building skills to assist in the process.

Long-term strategy needed

The report emphasised that no short-term or band-aid fix was viable. Such measures, it said, had not worked in the past. What was required was a massive reform effort by the NT government and the federal government, coupled with a long-term injection of funds, to provide communities with the resources, infrastructure and skills to transform the present situation. So severe was the crisis, it would take at least 15 years to make definite inroads. And to further assist in the implementation of the report’s recommendations, the authors proposed it should be published and translated into the nine main Aboriginal languages and distributed throughout the NT.

In response to Howard’s announcement, co-author of “Little Children are Sacred”, Rex Wild QC, told the ABC’s “Lateline Business” program that the government had ignored the 97 recommendations, and was resorting, instead, to “sending in the gunships”.

Wild attacked Howard’s plan as “short-sighted” and the opposite of what his inquiry had proposed. Referring to the lack of funding for social programs to address the underlying problems in remote Aboriginal communities, he pointed out that the Howard government received \$6 billion in alcohol taxes every year. Yet it spent, he said, “a miserly portion of that on education and alcohol programs. Why not give that \$6 billion to this problem we are now addressing?”

Wild went on to declare that he had seen no figures on what the government intended to spend on Aboriginal housing, “which is a major problem, which I haven’t heard addressed, and unemployment and all the other issues we raise in the report.”

Neither the Howard government, nor any incoming Labor government will carry out the type of social reforms which this report has indicated are necessary. Rather, both parties are dedicated to a “free market” agenda, requiring the winding back and destruction of social reforms and concessions made in the past.

That is why there has been such bipartisan agreement on Howard’s measures, and such bipartisan opposition to the real contents of the “Little Children are Sacred” report.

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