

# Australia: SBS television's bogus debate on Northern Territory intervention

By Richard Phillips  
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Each week Australia's SBS network screens an hour-long television show called "Insight", which invites various opinion makers—academics, politicians, journalists and others—along with members of the public to discuss topical political issues.

The show is hosted by veteran documentary maker and award-winning journalist Jenny Brockie and, according to its promotional material, "There's no hiding behind press releases and spin on 'Insight', it's face to face debate ... the place to speak your mind."

While "Insight" rarely achieves these aims, its March 18 program in particular was a travesty. In fact, the 60-minute program had nothing to do "face to face debate". It was a crude promotion of the federal government's police-military intervention into Northern Territory's Aboriginal communities.

Among those participating were Jenny Macklin, the federal Indigenous Affairs Minister, Tony Abbott, the Liberal Party's shadow minister, Dr Sue Gordon, chair of the taskforce overseeing the intervention and Graham Kelly, NT's assistant commissioner of police. All are open supporters of the intervention, which was initiated last June by the Howard government and is being expanded by the Rudd Labor government.

Contrary to government and media claims that Aboriginal communities are benefiting from the intervention, it tears up fundamental legal and political rights and slashes much-needed welfare programs. The provisions include the "quarantining" or partial seizure of all welfare payments and pensions in targeted communities, acquisition of Aboriginal land, suspension of the 1975 federal Racial Discrimination Act, and the installation of community business managers with wide-ranging powers.

So far, 25 communities, covering more than 6,500 welfare and pension recipients, have been subjected to "quarantining". Those affected receive only half their benefits in cash—the rest is paid in vouchers for food, medicine and clothing, to be spent at designated stores.

A key aim of these measures is to undermine Aboriginal communities and thereby force residents into rural towns where they can be exploited as cheap labour in tourism, mining and other new enterprises emerging in these remote areas. As a Labor Party press release from last November stated: "Sixty percent of Australia's mine sites are located next to remote Indigenous communities, providing real opportunities for local employment."

"Insight" producers originally planned to shoot the program in Alice Springs but then moved the show to Sydney, preventing ordinary Aboriginal people from attending and voicing their concerns. The handful of Aboriginal representatives invited

to appear in opposition to the intervention were given little opportunity to present their case, let alone challenge Macklin and Abbott.

A number of those "opposing" the measures, moreover, had only tactical differences and simply wanted the Rudd Labor government to make various modifications. Tom Calma, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, for example, recently presented a 10-point plan to the Rudd government on how to "make the intervention work". He declared that it was "too simplistic" to just oppose the intervention because there "are many aspects to the intervention—some are good, some are not so good".

"Insight" host Brockie worked throughout to prevent any serious challenge to the intervention, carefully directing the discussion at key moments into calls for more police and other law and order measures.

None of the essential issues facing Aboriginal people—the decades of dispossession, forced separation of families, chronic unemployment, and the lack of schools, health services and other much needed facilities—were discussed in any meaningful way. Nor was there any suggestion that those suffering from alcoholism or other substance abuse problems should be provided with counselling or other rehabilitation treatment.

Brockie opened the program by recycling false claims that the government measures were implemented to prevent sexual abuse of children. The authors of the "Little Children are Sacred" report, which was seized on by the Howard government to justify its intervention, have pointed out that virtually none of their recommendations to protect children by improving social conditions have been carried out.

Indigenous affairs minister Macklin told the show that Labor was totally committed to the intervention and went on to praise the Howard government for revealing "just how bad things are" in Aboriginal communities. Opposition spokesman Abbott declared that the former government deserved "the gratitude of the whole nation" for its actions.

Brockie did not encourage anyone critical of the intervention, but instead sought comment from Aboriginal leaders supporting welfare quarantining. Hermannsburg resident Mildred Inkamala was asked to comment several times. Her sentiments were supplemented by pre-recorded footage from other intervention supporters, including Allison Anderson, an Aboriginal Labor MP in the Northern Territory.

Anderson claimed that the intervention was "wonderful" and brushed aside any possible concern about the violation of the rights of those whose welfare has been quarantined. It was "sometimes necessary", she declared, "to give up our rights as good parents and good people for the bad ones". She later claimed that quarantining had produced a "huge boost

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economically” and a major increase in school attendance. Apart from a few personal anecdotes, no evidence was presented to substantiate these claims.

Brockie turned to another intervention supporter, Bess Nungarrayi, originally from Yuendumu, an Aboriginal community some 200 kilometres from the central Australian city of Alice Springs. Nungarrayi offered her “thanks” to former Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough for the intervention. She said Brough had “made people realise that there were big problems in these communities and someone needed to come in and shake these communities apart”.

While Brockie introduced Nungarrayi as representing the Yuendumu community, Aborigines from this settlement have denounced the intervention. On February 12, the community sent its council president, Harry Jagamara Nelson, and others to Canberra to join indigenous people from across the country to demand an end to the government’s repressive measures. The protest, held a day before Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s “sorry” speech, apologising for the “stolen generations” of separated children, was all but blacked-out by the corporate media.

Brockie briefly called on Greg Eatock from the National Aboriginal Alliance, which was formed last September to oppose the intervention. The alliance has called for the removal of business managers from Aboriginal communities, restoration of the Racial Discrimination Act and reinstatement of the permit system, which allows local communities to deny access to their townships.

Eatock said the health and other social problems of Aboriginal children were the result of the failure of consecutive governments to provide adequate resources. He pointed out that the “Little Children are Sacred” report was one of 13 over 11 years on the issue in the Northern Territory. The question of child sexual assault, he said, had been “racialised” by the government and media in order to target Aboriginal communities.

Brockie immediately objected: “But at least something’s happening now.” Eatock responded by saying: “Well, at least something’s happening but it needs to be done in proper consultation with the community.” Brockie cut him off before he had a chance to elaborate.

Eatock was only given one more fleeting opportunity to speak. Challenged by Brockie to explain why the alliance called for an immediate halt to the intervention, Eatock said:

“Well, I think firstly the intervention itself is discriminatory, it’s a racist legislation, the actual legislation itself didn’t mention children or the protection of children once.” Brockie abruptly cut him off.

A word of caution is necessary about claims that the intervention is purely a racial question. While the measures clearly have a racist component, the target is the working class as a whole. Aboriginal people, who are among the most oppressed layers of workers, are being used as guinea pigs for quarantining and other welfare cutting measures for all.

Reducing the issue to racism simply opens the door for the extension of these regressive measures to other sections of the working class. Brockie asked Macklin whether Labor would apply “income management” to all Australian families not providing their children with proper care. Macklin said the government was already implementing these measures.

None of the participants in the program opposed the extension of quarantining. The unstated assumption was that if the welfare measures applied to all working people, non-indigenous and indigenous alike, there would be no objection.

Brockie turned to law and order issues and complained about the “lack of prosecutions” in Aboriginal communities. Why weren’t there enough police officers and why hadn’t the perpetrators of child abuse been arrested?

Macklin promised that the government would increase police numbers in Aboriginal communities while Abbott declared that “the most important single aspect of the intervention is to get resident police into all the townships. Assistant police commissioner Kelly and taskforce chairperson Gordon both concurred that more police and lock-up facilities were required.

Brockie then suggested to Macklin that an increase in the prosecutions of sexual abuse charges would be an important “measure” of whether the intervention was “successful”. The minister readily agreed.

SBS’s promotion of the NT intervention and welfare quarantining is in line with the mass media’s uncritical support for these measures since they began last June. From sensationalist reportage of child sex abuse to bogus claims