

Australia: Federal and NT Labor governments expand punitive measures in Aboriginal communities

By Susan Allan
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Since its election last November, the Rudd government has substantially expanded the previous Howard government's police-military intervention into indigenous communities across the Northern Territory (NT), with full assistance from the NT Labor government.

Behind the cloak of the national "apology" that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered to indigenous people last month for the genocidal crimes committed against them over the past two centuries, Labor has stepped up the central thrust of the NT intervention—stripping welfare payments from thousands of Aboriginal people.

So far, 25 townships and camps have been subjected to the "quarantining" of 50 percent of all welfare payments—including aged and disabled pensions, sole parent benefits and unemployment payments—affecting more than 6,500 recipients. The number of "quarantined" communities has doubled since Labor took office. Quarantining means that welfare recipients receive only half their benefits in cash—the rest is paid in the form of vouchers for food, medicine and clothing, to be spent at designated stores.

On December 11, less than three weeks after it came to power, Labor quarantined the communities of Mt Liebig, Kintore and Kaltukatjara. On December 12, quarantining began at the Weemol, Bulman, Beswick, Barunga, Manyalluk, Binjaria and Katherine town camps. The following day, Acacia, Larrakia and Nauiya were affected. On January 7, residents of the town camps at Alice Springs, Ingerreke and Amoonguna were quarantined, and on January 13, the community at Wadeye. On February 26, 450 Aboriginal welfare recipients in Darwin, Palmerston, Adelaide River and Belyuen were included. Yuendumu, with a population of 900, has been scheduled for May. If indigenous residents leave their communities, the quarantining measures follow them.

The Rudd government has also made clear its intention to push on with 100 percent quarantining—stripping all payments from parents whose children miss school or are considered "at risk"—which was part of the legislation passed by federal parliament last June with Labor's support.

Earlier this month, Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin said 100 percent quarantining would "definitely" proceed in the NT. She was "shocked" that while the Howard government had issued press releases and introduced the legislation on school attendance, it had failed to fund the program. "Unlike the Howard government, we intend to make sure that these important reforms go ahead," she said.

A federal-state pilot program has been announced in the largely indigenous town of Walgett in northern New South Wales. During a six-month trial of tying welfare to students' attendance, schools will provide Centrelink, the government welfare agency, with information about "unexplained absences". If the trial is "successful", the measures will be extended throughout northwestern NSW.

The NSW scheme is another indication of Labor's intention to

use the NT intervention precisely as the Howard government intended—as a prototype for welfare cutting measures nationally, and not only against indigenous people. The Walgett announcement came just weeks after the federal and state Labor governments extended welfare quarantining to the Kimberley region of Western Australia and to four indigenous communities in Cape York, Queensland.

Apart from slashing federal spending, these measures are designed to humiliate and punish Aboriginal and other working people, and give them little option but to leave their communities to undertake low-paid work, including on mining, agricultural and tourist projects, where employers are demanding access to new sources of cheap labour.

In the NT city of Alice Springs, welfare recipients now have to line up for up to two hours to obtain their vouchers. Many have to hitch-hike in 40-degree heat, sometimes up to 100 kilometres, into Alice Springs, where they are restricted—due to the voucher system—to shopping at designated stores such as K-Mart, Coles and Woolworths.

With a shortage of cash, residents in remote communities have reported that they are unable to have repairs done to fridges, washing machines and other appliances. Vouchers cover only immediate shopping items such as food, clothing and other day-to-day requirements. As a result, some people have had their electricity cut off while others have been unable to attend the funerals of loved ones.

The baby bonus payment provided to mothers has also been quarantined in NT communities. Last week, Macklin announced that baby bonus quarantining will be extended nationally to "problem parents" who allegedly neglect or abuse their children. Following the NT example, parents will receive vouchers to be spent on essentials for their babies.

There are now 200 Centrelink staff on the ground in the NT imposing welfare quarantining, including 26 employment brokers supervising 45 communities. Fifty-two "business managers" have been appointed to oversee 72 communities, each receiving a salary of around \$160,000.

Savage "law and order" measures

Central to the NT crackdown has been the mobilisation of the police, backed by the military, to enforce a series of measures to control, monitor and incarcerate Aboriginal people. There is now a permanent police presence in 18 extra remote communities, staffed by 35 interstate police and 18 NT police.

NT Chief Minister Paul Henderson stated immediately after the federal election: "Law and order is a top priority for my government and I am committed to providing our police force with the resources they need." The NT government spends \$798 per capita on police services, more than twice the national average of \$320.

On December 28, after visiting the community of Wadeye following a series of disturbances between rival gangs, Henderson announced the doubling of penalties for "violent disorder" from 12 months' imprisonment to two years. The legislation also allows the police to arrest people who allegedly

show violent intentions.

In February, the NT police purchased 74 taser/stun guns and are currently training officers before “rolling them out across the region”. With a population of some 216,000, the NT will have more tasers in operation than NSW, which has almost 7 million people. Medical professionals fear there is a high risk of death if tasers are used on Aboriginal people because of their general ill-health. Amnesty International has linked taser guns to at least 150 deaths in custody worldwide since 2001.

On February 13, Henderson introduced a Youth Justice (Family Responsibility) Amendment Bill, providing for punitive measures against parents whose children are involved in “youth crime”. Parents will be required to sign agreements to monitor their children. If they refuse, or breach the agreement, they will receive a court-imposed Family Responsibility Order. If the conditions of an order are not met, the parents will face fines of up to \$2,200 or the seizure of non-essential items or a community work order.

The Bill also provides that “serial” juvenile offenders will be referred only twice to diversionary programs, such as literacy, education and drug rehabilitation, which were established some years ago in a bid to keep young people, particularly indigenous youth, out of jail. In a media release, Henderson stated: “The message is clear—continue to break the law and you face incarceration.”

Five days later, on February 18, legislation was tabled to tackle “anti-social behaviour” allegedly associated with increasing numbers of itinerant or homeless people in Darwin, the NT’s capital. The package included the installation of closed circuit television cameras in downtown Darwin and the Casuarina shopping centre precinct, a first-response patrol staffed by police and justice department officers, and a Darwin area night patrol. Along with the construction of an \$8.1 million police station at Casuarina, the measures will cost over \$18 million.

In late February, a four-day police operation was carried out in Darwin by members of the Social Order team. One person was arrested, 49 were taken into protective custody, 90 were moved on and 58 litres of alcohol were confiscated. A similar operation was conducted in Alice Springs at a football match that attracted many indigenous visitors to the town. Police reported that 93 people were taken into protective custody, 272 were moved on and 19 liquor infringement notices were issued.

This month, the NT government announced the establishment of a permanent mounted police unit in Alice Springs. Henderson said the government was taking a “hard-line”, with mounted police entering previously inaccessible areas where “police vans can’t go”. Police on horseback will be used in areas, such as dry river beds, where Aboriginal people are camping out or “sleeping rough”.

Henderson also announced that a computer-based ID system will be used in 12 public alcohol take-way venues in Alice Springs and 13 venues in Katherine, Pine Creek and Victoria River. In addition to requiring individuals to carry ID forms, the system will identify those on court orders banning them from consuming alcohol.

The prisons in Darwin and Alice Springs are already so full

that the NT government this week awarded a tender to install three shipping containers at Darwin jail to house prisoners and provide ablutions facilities. A further jail is under consideration for Tennant Creek or Katherine.

Meanwhile, the Australian Crime Commission-led National Indigenous Violence and Child Abuse taskforce, an intelligence unit established in Alice Springs under the Howard government, has been given coercive powers to imprison uncooperative witnesses. Officials heading the 31-strong taskforce claim that their 18-month investigation into alleged child abuse has hit a wall of silence. The new powers are similar to those granted to the police and security forces by anti-terrorism legislation. No-one questioned can reveal that their interview occurred, except to their lawyer.

Serious child health problems

When the “emergency” intervention legislation went through the federal parliament last year, both the Howard government and the Labor opposition claimed its purpose was to “protect the children” from sexual abuse. Where medical checks have been conducted since then, however, what has been revealed is a shocking state of ill-health.

Medical checks have been completed on about 7,000 children in 65 remote communities. Of those, 500 require urgent surgery for ear, nose and throat problems. A further 4,000 have been identified as in need of further follow-up. Many have severe hearing problems, a third have severe dental decay, others have skin infections caused by scabies, while others have renal disease.

In the communities where health checks have been administered, it is estimated that up to a third of children have missed the examinations because mothers fear that they could be taken away, as thousands of children were during the “Stolen Generations” until the 1970s.

The serious health problems are exacerbated by overcrowding in housing and a lack of basic health services. In May last year there were less than 25 resident doctors in remote communities. Last week, Macklin announced that in mid-April, 200 children with ear problems will be bused to Alice Springs for operations, while a number of surgeons will be flown in.

The NT branch of the Australian Medical Association, which represents doctors, criticised the “surgery blitz” as a temporary response, when long-term care is desperately needed. Spokesman Peter Beaumont said it was like sending “someone in with weed-killer to spray the weeds and hope they don’t grow back”. Until Macklin’s announcement not one medical specialist had been deployed, despite estimates that at least 100 new doctors, dentists and medical practitioners are required.

Under the fraudulent banner of protecting children, indigenous people are being subjected to a massive surveillance and monitoring operation designed to suppress and contain any opposition. The Labor government’s use of police-state measures against the most disadvantaged layers of society has far-reaching implications for the lives, social conditions and basic democratic rights of all working people.

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