

# Australian Aborigines become first target for “welfare reform”

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Leaked cabinet documents reveal that the Howard government intends to make Australia’s indigenous people a test case for a sweeping assault on the welfare system. The new regime involves intensive monitoring and control of the unemployed, disabled and other welfare recipients in Aboriginal communities, designed to force them off benefits and into low-wage jobs or small businesses.

Among the measures are electronic “smartcards” to record and restrict what indigenous people buy using government-funded payments. “Work for the dole” and other “mutual obligation” programs will be extended to require individuals, families and entire remote communities to perform certain activities—including rubbish collection, crackdowns on school truancy and health checks—to qualify for government assistance.

Secret planning by the government and its senior bureaucrats is well advanced and the proposals will be implemented within 12 months, according to the documents, which were reported by the *Australian Financial Review* on November 10. As with other government initiatives, not a word was said about these plans throughout the recent federal election campaign.

Once the documents were revealed, Prime Minister John Howard and Indigenous Affairs Minister Amanda Vanstone declared their support for the proposals. “Passive welfare is over,” Vanstone declared.

A cabinet briefing note advocates using Aboriginal people to establish precedents for general use against the entire population. This will not be the first time that indigenous people have been targeted to lay the groundwork for previously unthinkable social measures.

In the 1970s, the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) imposed forced-labour requirements on jobless Aboriginal workers, long before they were widened by the Keating Labor government’s “Working Nation” scheme in the early 1990s and the Howard government’s current Work for the Dole program.

The cabinet note states that the support of key indigenous leaders such as lawyer Noel Pearson, “provides an important opportunity for the government to pursue unparalleled reform”. It continues: “Welfare dependency is a deep problem for Australian society generally: many indigenous communities which have suffered its devastating consequences are now willing to work with government to remedy the loss of personal and family responsibility that too often goes with ‘sit down’ money.”

Derogatory terms such as “welfare dependency”, “sit down money” and “passive welfare” have become code words for dismantling welfare entitlements for all those—the unemployed, sole parents, the disabled, the elderly and the poorest members of society—unable to seek or obtain decent, secure employment. The purpose of these terms

is to blame vulnerable victims for the deprivation and distress produced by the unleashing of market forces.

After more than two centuries of dispossession, violence and forced family separation, Aboriginal people already suffer some of the worst death rates and levels of ill-health, poor nutrition, substandard housing, illiteracy and imprisonment in the world. Now they will be denied the basic right to social assistance.

Under the proposals, parents will be obliged to ensure that children attend school and have regular health checks in exchange for parenting, rent assistance and other family payments. Those who fail to abide by such behavioural contracts will suffer sanctions that will only worsen their situation. Public housing tenants will even be punished by being denied repair work on their homes if their children do not go to school regularly.

In regional and remote areas, government departments will impose Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) on local and regional councils. The briefing note cites a case where an Aboriginal community in Western Australia’s Kimberley region proposed to guarantee that workers in the CDEP program collect rubbish from every house twice a week and manage the garbage tip.

Council leaders also pledged to ensure that every child is showered daily and attends school, and that chronic eye, skin and worm infection rates are lowered. In return, the federal government would fund two-thirds of the cost of installing fuel bowsers at the community—a basic facility that all settlements should have in any case.

Proposals include a “no school, no pool” system to reward school attendance by stopping children from visiting the community swimming pool if they do not attend classes. This will be reminiscent of the days, up until the 1960s, when Aboriginal children were barred from municipal pools because of the colour of their skin.

Likewise, the “smartcard” plan smacks of the ration card and voucher systems formerly used to control indigenous people and confine them to cattle stations and other locations where they were employed, often on a semi-slave basis.

Michael Sands, a local Aboriginal councillor at Yarrabah, south of Cairns, told journalists: “They are dictating to people what they can and cannot have and are more or less controlling your life for you. They are dictating to us how we can spend our money. It’s like the voucher system.”

Just as the old paternalistic schemes were justified as beneficial for the well-being of Aborigines, who were depicted as primitives, today’s plans are presented as necessary to protect children from parental neglect and tackle alcohol and substance abuse.

None of the underlying social and economic problems that are the

real cause of the social problems in Aboriginal communities—continuing oppression, lack of decent, well-paid employment, and woefully inadequate health, education and housing services—will be addressed. Instead, they will intensify. Over the next 12 months the Remote Area Exemption and other arrangements that exempt remote Aboriginal areas from mutual obligation rules—because no work exists—will be scrapped.

Another proposal is to use “native title” land holdings as collateral for business and housing loans. This means turning native title, which is theoretically a communal title, into a form of real estate—placing a cash value on individual interests so that they can be used to borrow money for personal and commercial purposes.

The cabinet documents outline the “mainstreaming” of the delivery of all programs and services to indigenous people. Many were previously administered by the elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), which the government is seeking to abolish as soon as parliament resumes this month. Already, over the past two years, ATSIC’s programs have been transferred to a separate public service agency, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services. It has tendered out services, such as health and legal clinics, formerly run by Aboriginal groups, to private providers.

All programs are currently being consolidated in Indigenous Co-ordination Centres, run by Centrelink, the government’s social security bureaucracy, which will also enter into SRA contracts with local communities. This will draw to a close the period since 1972, when successive governments handed aspects of welfare services to Aboriginal organisations in the name of limited “self-determination”.

In the aftermath of the overwhelming victory of a 1967 referendum to authorise the federal government to take Aboriginal affairs out of the hands of the states and territories, successive Labor and Liberal governments sought to head off a growing political movement demanding justice and equality for indigenous people by promoting a privileged layer of Aboriginal bureaucrats, politicians and business operators as a new “leadership.”

Having presided over the continued deterioration of social conditions for ordinary Aborigines, this increasingly discredited stratum is now being swept aside. The new banner is “self-reliance”, which essentially means trying to set up a business or, in the vast majority of cases, accepting low-paid work.

The Aboriginal business elite is well represented on the personally-appointed National Indigenous Council (NIC) announced this month by Vanstone to replace ATSIC. Among its members are John Moriarty, a prominent Sydney businessman, Joe Proctor, an investment banker and chief executive officer of Indigenous Capital Ltd, Joseph Elu, chairperson of Indigenous Business Australia, and Robert Lee, chief executive officer of the Jawoyn Association, which is associated with tourism ventures in the Northern Territory.

Tammy Williams, a barrister, is regarded as a protégé of Pearson. She is a director of Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships, which he founded in 1999 to encourage Aboriginal business ventures and seek the patronage of Australian corporate boardrooms. Other appointees include conservative Aboriginal administrators, ex-military personnel, and a token sports star. The NIC chairperson, Sue Gordon, is a magistrate and former Western Australian government department head.

Council member Wesley Aird, the first indigenous graduate from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, said it was important for the NIC to have a “conservative edge” because “we want to make changes with the conservative government”. He summed up the

official contempt for the popular movement against Aboriginal injustice by declaring: “We had a million people walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge and, other than increased sales of Mount Franklin water bottles, what change did we see?”

In 2000, hundreds of thousands of people marched across the bridge and in other capital cities, calling for a government apology for the crimes committed against Aboriginal people since British settlement in 1788. The protest was the culmination of a nine-year campaign in which demands for rectification of the terrible injustices were diverted into a “reconciliation” process between indigenous and non-indigenous leaders.

Vanstone’s preferred choice to chair the NIC was reportedly Pearson. For the past decade, promoted by the media and Labor and Coalition governments alike, he has rejected the very notion of tackling the problems in Aboriginal communities as social problems, caused by centuries of oppression, instead accusing indigenous people of laziness, drunkenness and irresponsibility. Along with other ATSIC board members, he was one of the first exponents of developing welfare “smartcards”.

Pearson recently suggested that Aboriginal children be sent away to city boarding schools to address chronic academic underachievement. His remarks revived memories of the “stolen generations”—the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families in order to send them to government or church institutions, a practice that continued until the 1960s.

Pearson declined Vanstone’s offer, apparently concerned that the new body would be widely regarded as a collection of “government lackeys”. A prominent Aboriginal figure, Patrick Dodson, has denounced the NIC, accusing the government of denying Aboriginal people any say in their future and “reducing us to being subordinates”. Dodson has also labelled the welfare measures as “fascist” and a return to the days of bureaucratic control over Aboriginal people.

The Labor Party, however, holds no such qualms. Its backing for the policy shift is underscored by Vanstone’s selection for NIC membership of Labor’s national vice president Warren Mundine, who is also chief executive officer of NSW Native Title Services Ltd. Mundine’s appointment is in line with Labor’s support for the axing of ATSIC.

These developments end a quarter century in which, in the name of “self-determination” and “reconciliation”, successive governments have sought to prevent the development of a unified movement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers against the profit system, while, at the same time, trying to repair the country’s racist “White Australia” image, particularly in Asia-Pacific markets.



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