

Official response to Aboriginal child sexual abuse in Australia: more law and order

Susan Allan
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Graphic details about the rampant sexual abuse of Aboriginal children and babies in central Australia, broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) "Lateline" program last Monday, are being utilised to justify a vicious new government assault against the country's impoverished indigenous population.

The program featured an interview with Nanette Rogers, Crown Prosecutor for central Australia and author of a recent briefing paper entitled "Child Sexual Assault and Some Cultural Issues in the Northern Territory." Rogers, who has worked as a prosecutor in Alice Springs for the last 12 years, claimed her "highly confidential" paper was only intended for a small number of senior police in the Northern Territory. Nevertheless, in the course of the interview, she described several of the incidents documented in the paper of sexual abuse, rape and murder of Aboriginal children and babies, some as young as seven months.

The story has provoked a storm of outrage from politicians, Aboriginal leaders, police, welfare and childcare organisations, women's groups and health organisations. With further excerpts from Rogers' paper being reprinted and embellished, and the exposure of other evidence of sexual abuse, demands for "action" have become increasingly hysterical.

Peter Yu, Kimberly Land Council director and chairman of the West Australian Housing and Infrastructure Council, called for the Australian military to intervene, insisting that the government must do "just like we have done in the Solomon Islands, just like we have done in East Timor, just like we are doing in Afghanistan and Iraq." Others have called for a state of emergency, for UN and Commonwealth government intervention, for more police and law enforcement, for the forced removal of children from their dysfunctional families, for the closure of Aboriginal town camps and remote communities, for the banning of alcohol, and for a retrospective blitz, including the jailing of every known sexual abuse offender.

Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, has fanned the flames of indignation, using highly sensationalised and unsubstantiated claims of "pedophile rings" and "mafia style" thuggery running rampant through Aboriginal communities. Declaring that the lawlessness had proven that Aborigines were incapable of deciding their own destinies, Brough has called for the implementation of a long-prepared political agenda of punitive and economic measures, developed by the right-wing think tank, the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS).

In response to Rogers' "Lateline" revelations, Brough bluntly declared, "I, quite frankly, think it is wonderful that this has been highlighted to the rest of the Australian public so people can have their sensitivities shocked to the core and as a nation, not just as politicians, but as a nation, we demand that these things change."

Opening the "Lateline" show last week, presenter Tony Jones set the scene by warning that the accounts of violence and abuse might offend some viewers. He went on to ask the Crown Prosecutor if she could explain why there had been such silence on these issues.

Rogers replied by openly blaming the Aboriginal population. "Violence is entrenched in a lot of aspects of Aboriginal society. Secondly, Aboriginal people choose not to take responsibility for their own actions," she said.

Rogers proceeded to describe in minute detail a series of horrific cases. The first was of a two-year old, raped by a drunken Aboriginal man. The child had been playing outside, unsupervised by her mother or father, who were drinking alcohol. The child was taken into the bush by a member of the community, sexually abused and then returned to the family. Only later did they notice the child was bleeding. The second involved a seven-month-old baby, who was removed from the family while they were sleeping, and sexually assaulted. Both the seven-month-old and the two-year-old required internal and external surgery.

The third case involved the rape and drowning of a six-year-old girl by an 18-year-old, who had been sniffing petrol/gasoline. The child had been paddling at a waterhole with other children. She was grabbed by the petrol sniffer, dragged into the water, raped and then drowned.

In all, "Lateline" presented six shocking cases of violence and sexual abuse against children and babies. In each case, the offenders were highly intoxicated with alcohol or petrol.

While every nightmarish detail of the sexual abuse was fleshed out, not a word was spoken, or a question asked, about the social, economic and historical circumstances which created this. Any conception of an objective appraisal was completely abandoned, with the express aim of provoking an emotive, knee-jerk response.

But why do these terrible assaults take place? What conditions create the climate for such violent acts? Why is there so much substance abuse in Aboriginal communities? Why are so many Aboriginal youth sniffing petrol, suffering permanent brain damage and committing suicide in growing numbers? Why do these communities have the highest rates of self-harm in the

country? What is the source of the ongoing sense of hopelessness, despair and grief that has continued for generations?

The overriding poverty—lack of jobs, health services and nutrition—that lies behind the abuse and violence being committed was not even mentioned. Yet the people in these communities live in tin sheds and shacks, 10 to 20 in each dwelling, with no laundries, toilets or electricity and three or four people, including children, sharing a mattress on the floor. Aboriginal children suffer from diseases that have been eliminated from many of the poorest countries in the world. There are no youth facilities or apprenticeships, no aged services, no books, computers, recreational facilities or cinemas.

During the past week, Brough has repeatedly asked: why are there communities in central Australia with more than 2,500 residents, but no police officers? The most important question to ask, however, is: why there are communities, such as Wadeye—which has participated in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) trials to improve the delivery of service to Aboriginal people for the past six years—with no high school, but with a school age population of over 1,000 children? Is it not surprising that Wadeye is experiencing increasingly violent conflicts between rival gangs of youth? Another relevant question would be: why has it taken five years for a medical practitioner to be employed in Wadeye, where the male life expectancy is 49 years?

“Lateline” chose not to examine any of these issues, because to do so would have meant uncovering the indefensible record of neglect by both federal and Northern Territory governments over decades. This record has created some of the most brutal and inhuman conditions to be found anywhere in the world—conditions that inevitably give rise to brutal and inhuman behaviour. Even programs that have proven to be highly successful in beginning to overcome social problems and raising the community’s self-esteem have had their funding cut off, with no explanation, throwing the community back into despair.

The one-sided and distorted picture painted by “Lateline” is designed to lead to the conclusion that Aboriginal people are inherently violent, criminal and even “sub-human”—and that the only solution to violence and abuse is more “law and order”.

For politicians to claim surprise at the “Lateline” revelations is yet another political ploy of misinformation. Since the early 1970s, mountains of evidence have been compiled—documented in parliamentary reports and coronial inquiries—and presented to both state and federal governments, giving prominence to the appalling and tragic circumstances in Aboriginal communities. Recommendation after recommendation, accompanied by desperate calls for immediate and urgent action, have been presented by coroners, health professionals, welfare workers, academics, and Aboriginal communities themselves, only to be ignored or used as a weapon to blame the victims for the situation they confront and inflict further attacks on their communities.

The alternative—providing decent jobs, services, infrastructure, welfare and professional assistance to the country’s indigenous population—is regarded as an unjustifiable drain on government resources.

The policy of the entire political establishment—the Howard

government, the Labor opposition, the Northern Territory (NT) Labor government and the various entrepreneurial representatives of the Aboriginal leaderships, is that Aboriginal communities are either “economically viable,”—i.e., profits can be extracted from them in one way or another—or they deserve to perish.

In 2005, the influential CIS published three documents that were acclaimed in the Murdoch press and adopted as the ideological underpinning of the Howard government’s program to dismantle remote communities and further eliminate welfare. The central thesis was that Aboriginal deprivation was not the result of a lack of government funding but of “socialist dreaming”. The main problem was communal land ownership, as opposed to private property.

Last December, the former federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Amanda Vanstone described the remote Aboriginal communities as “cultural museums” without a future. This was followed in February 2006 by a senior public servant, quoted in the *Alice Springs News*, revealing NT government plans to move over 5,000 Aboriginal people from bush communities by “starving them out of existence”—under the euphemistic motto of meeting “new needs.”

Three weeks ago, in the wake of the sensationalised media coverage surrounding the murder of Aboriginal teenager Jenissa Ryan, Brough and the NT Chief Minister Clare Martin held a joint press conference declaring the town camps on the outskirts of Alice Springs, which are home to more than 2,000 Aborigines, would be taken out of the hands of the Tangentyere Council, an Aboriginal organisation that has held control for the last 30 years. While Brough adamantly denied it at the time, there are indications that abused children will be removed from the camps and relocated in housing units from the now-closed Woomera refugee detention centre and be protected by security guards.

The government and media response to the Rogers’ interview comprises just one component of a renewed campaign by the Howard government to “solve” the “Aboriginal problem”—not by providing the necessary resources to overcome centuries of oppression and neglect, but by breaking up and destroying the town camps and remote communities—removing children, jailing men and dispersing the rest.



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