

Wadeye: a case study of the Australian government's Aboriginal agenda

Erika Zimmer
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Under the guise of concern for Aboriginal women and children, the Howard government has seized upon revelations of sexual abuse in indigenous communities, initially broadcast in an Australian Broadcasting Corporation “Lateline” program in May, to push through its right-wing agenda of “ending welfare dependence”.

After the ABC program, Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough announced an audit of indigenous communities, with “small, unviable communities ... encouraged to pack up and leave”. The government intends to strip thousands of Aborigines of welfare entitlements so as to push them out of remote communities and into the “real economy” in towns and cities. The *Australian* estimated that the audit would include 1,000 settlements with fewer than 100 people.

Two Labor governments—those of Western Australia (WA) and the Northern Territory (NT)—are collaborating closely with the federal Liberal-National Party government. The NT government is to study 547 indigenous communities with a view to targeting “specific communities ... for resettlement or service reduction”. The WA government announced an audit of 300 indigenous communities.

These “audits” have nothing to do with gathering information about the appalling conditions in remote communities, let alone attempting to address their underlying causes. Brough’s spokesman rejected a call by the Australian Medical Association, the doctor’s organisation, for a royal commission into the “health, land and social justice issues in remote Aboriginal communities”. Such an inquiry was not needed “because we know the magnitude of the problem” and “clear objectives and practical initiatives” had already been worked out.

What this agenda means in practice can be seen in the

Aboriginal township of Wadeye, 320 km southwest of the NT capital, Darwin. It has faced the full glare of media attention following a riot in May, allegedly involving hundreds of young people.

Surrounded by 20 outstations, Wadeye, formerly known as Port Keats, is the town service centre of the Thamarrurr region. While rich grazing lands south of the region, including the vast Victoria River Downs station, were opened up to pastoral interests in the late 1880s with devastating consequences for local Aboriginal people, the poor grazing potential and difficult terrain of the Thamarrurr region discouraged pastoral settlement.

Lacking an economic base and crippled by chronic government underfunding, the region’s conditions are comparable to some of the worst in the Third World. For example, the median life expectancy is 46 years, with death most commonly due to heart disease, kidney problems or diabetes. Twenty percent of the children are stunted, 21 percent are underweight and 10 percent wasted.

While approximately 800 children of school age live at Wadeye, no high school exists. The sole Catholic primary school is able to accommodate only 300 children. At the same time, a shortage of housing means that up to 20 people live in each house.

Unemployment stands at 84 percent while the average personal income for Aborigines is estimated variously at between \$4,000 and \$8,000 a year, less than 20 percent of the national average. It is little wonder that Wadeye has the highest per capita juvenile offending rate in the NT.

One cause of the appalling statistics, according to the community’s legal representatives, Arnold Bloch Leibler, is the redirection of hundreds of millions of dollars away from remote indigenous communities. A

detailed analysis undertaken in 2004 revealed that Wadeye, the sixth largest town in the NT and the largest Aboriginal town was being short-changed \$4 million per year. According to the *National Indigenous Times*, Wadeye's leaders are preparing to sue federal and territory governments for several decades of neglect.

But neither the Third World statistics, nor the lack of government spending have rated any media scrutiny. Instead Wadeye first came to national attention when Prime Minister Howard flew into the town in April 2005, accompanied by a bevy of dignitaries and a large media contingent, to impose a Shared Responsibility Agreement (SRA) on the community.

Wadeye was one of eight remote communities selected nationally as "pilots" for SRAs, which mark a step towards the complete abolition of social spending and welfare benefits. They make the provision of basic services and facilities, such as kidney-treatment centres, petrol bowsers and air-conditioning, contingent on communities carrying out activities such as rubbish disposal and increasing school attendance rates.

This is not the first time that indigenous people are being targeted for measures to be used against the entire working class. The CDEP scheme of the 1970s, which imposed compulsory labour requirements on unemployed Aboriginal workers and became the forerunner for the 1990s Work for the Dole scheme.

One of the requirements of Wadeye's SRA was to boost school numbers. A massive push by the local community saw school enrolments soar towards 700 at the start of the school year 2005 and again in 2006. But the shortage of desks, pens and teachers due to government under-funding led to five out of every six students dropping out.

Taking advantage of the current media blitz, Brough sent a senior official, Wayne Gibbons, to the town to issue an ultimatum: residents would be stripped of government funding and welfare payments unless, within a month, gang members repaired damaged houses and parents sent their children to school.

Two elders walked out of the meeting with Gibbons. The Thamarrurr Council wrote to Brough, describing Gibbons' behaviour as "verging on just plain bullying" and saying it would need more than a month to repair the houses, given the extent of the work involved.

"In relation to every child must attend school every

day, we point out that we have 688 schoolchildren and a school facility that can only hold 420," the council wrote. "Your representative, Mr Wayne Gibbons, came here and blamed us totally for the problems we are having. Is this how one partner treats another, by coming into their home and demanding unrealistic things and treating them with disrespect?"

In order to enforce the Howard government's objectives, the NT government has joined in unleashing repressive "law and order" measures against the people of Wadeye. In June it attempted to ram through court hearings for more than 100 Wadeye residents—most of whom were arrested during the May riot—over just two days in Wadeye's tiny courtroom.

One 36-year-old resident was jailed for two months and scores of others face months or years in prison. Legal proceedings were placed on hold after defence lawyers for two of the men charged argued they had no case to answer.

On the eve of the hearings, NT Police Minister Paul Henderson unveiled legislation providing for greater police powers and harsher penalties to deal with gang activity. Police would be allowed to prevent large crowds gathering and stop and search alleged gang leaders without a warrant.

Henderson said fast-tracking the court hearings was part of a plan to deal with violence at Wadeye. "This sort of behaviour is simply unacceptable and we are attacking it at its source," he said. In reality, with the willing assistance of the media, the Liberal and Labor governments have come together to try and whitewash the sources of Wadeye's crisis, including their own culpability, in order to pursue an increasingly vicious social agenda.



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