

Australia: Growing opposition to police-military takeover of Aboriginal communities

Mike Head
27 June 2007

Opposition is mounting within Aboriginal communities and among medical and welfare professionals toward the Howard government's plan to impose police-military control over about 70 indigenous communities across the Northern Territory.

As troops and police officers assemble in the central Australian city of Alice Springs, ready to move into the first five communities this week, local people and experts are warning that the takeover, supposedly aimed at halting sexual abuse of indigenous children, will only exacerbate the shocking social conditions facing the Northern Territory's Aboriginal population.

Last week, on the last day of parliament before the winter recess, Prime Minister John Howard suddenly announced a "national emergency" scheme to pour police and soldiers into townships and camps to enforce a series of punitive measures.

Welfare and family payments will be cut off if children miss school more than three days a term, or are considered neglected. Half of all payments will be stripped off all families, and replaced by food and clothing vouchers.

Children in "prescribed" zones will be forced to undergo medical checks, many of which will be carried out by military doctors. Possession of alcohol and X-rated pornography will be outlawed, with those breaching the bans likely to be hauled off to prison.

"Work for the dole" job programs under the Community Development Employment Program will be scrapped. They will be replaced by forced labour programs, to "marshall local workforces" to "clean up and repair" communities.

Communal land rights granted to Aboriginal communities since 1976 will be swept aside, through forced federal government acquisition, and community housing will be abolished, to make way for "market based rents and normal tenancy arrangements".

Any semblance of self-government will be overturned by scrapping the permit system that enables communities to restrict access to their lands, and installing "managers of all government business" to take command.

Customary law will be removed as a mitigating factor for sentencing and bail in criminal prosecutions, ensuring that many more indigenous people will be jailed. The Northern Territory already has the highest incarceration rate in Australia.

Social workers and indigenous MPs in the Northern Territory are being swamped with phone calls from local people wanting to know what will happen in their communities. Lesley Taylor, an experienced child abuse worker, said: "They are scared stiff ... This is creating very stressful environments that could lead to even more children being at risk."

Anger in Mutitjulu

Residents of the first township targeted for intervention, Mutitjulu, near the famous Uluru (Ayers Rock), have told journalists they are worried that authorities will take their children away, just as they did for many decades, until the early 1970s. Women and children are reportedly so terrified they are considering fleeing their homes.

Mutitjulu elder, Vince Forrester, said: "The community are bewildered. Why is there a military operation against the most poverty-stricken community members of Australia?" Forrester said residents were considering a civil disobedience campaign, in response to Howard's intervention, that would target tourism operators by preventing some half a million visitors each year from climbing Uluru.

Another resident, Mario Giuseppe, told ABC radio: "This community is in terror—the women and children. I thought the government was here to protect them. They are scaring the living daylights out of the kids and the women. They think the army is coming to grab their kids and the police are coming to help them to take them away." He accused Howard of "calling martial law on his own citizens."

Community members drafted a statement that condemns the government for treating them as a "political football," while starving them of health, housing, education and social services. The statement says the Howard government "declared an emergency at our community over two years ago—when they appointed an administrator to our health clinic—and since then we have been without a doctor, we have fewer health workers, our council has been sacked, and all our youth and health programs have been cut".

Under federal government control, the childcare centre was closed, and work programs, including rubbish clean-ups and the collection of wood to warm homes during cold desert nights, shut down. A kidney dialysis machine had been donated but not installed.

The statement raises a series of questions: "How do they propose keeping alcohol out of our community when we are 20 minutes away from a five-star hotel? ... What will happen to alcoholics when this ban is introduced? How will the government keep the grog runners out of our community without a permit system? ... Where is the money for all the essential services?"

At a town meeting yesterday in Mutitjulu, resident Harry Wilson gave voice to the widespread perception that Howard had seized on the child abuse issue in a bid to reverse his government's disastrous polling for the federal election due this year. Wilson compared the government's intervention to its false claims before the 2001 election that refugees aboard a sinking boat had thrown children into the sea. This time it was, "black children overboard ... this government is using these kids to win the election".

Howard made his announcement last week just six days after the Full Federal Court overruled the government's appointment of an administrator to Mutitjulu on the grounds that the community had been given only 24 hours notice. Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough had earlier cut all funding for services provided by Mutitjulu's governing

committee.

The Mutitjulu takeover is part of a wider land grab designed to disperse communities, particularly in financially lucrative tourism, mining and pastoral areas. Central Land Council head David Ross commented: "Under the smokescreen of helping children, the federal government is taking the opportunity to impose its ideological agenda in relation to Aboriginal land. The proposals seem to be a grab-bag of unrelated strategies aimed at a quick fix in a pre-election period."

"Trojan horse"

About 50 community, church and indigenous groups yesterday issued an open letter to Howard and Brough, protesting against the military plan and asking the government to start consulting indigenous people. They called for the development of a long-term plan that strengthens families and communities and addresses the underlying causes of abuse, such as unemployment, overcrowding and poor education.

Pat Turner, the former chief executive of the now-disbanded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, said: "We believe that this government is using child sexual abuse as the Trojan horse to resume total control of our lands." Turner said there was no evidence to suggest scrapping the permit system for indigenous land would lead to improvements in children's health. "We are totally against tying serious social need to our hard-fought land ownership and land tenure," she said.

Others who signed the letter of protest include former indigenous affairs officials Mick Dodson and Lowitja O'Donoghue, former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, the Central Land Council, the Australian Council of Social Services, Anglicare Australia and the National Council of Churches.

One of the letter's signatories, Anglicare Australia's chief executive, Dr Ray Cleary, asked why it had taken so long for the federal government "to recognise something that the wisdom and experience of agencies like ours have been saying for 20 years".

Likewise, support organisations that have spent years lobbying the federal and territory governments for more alcohol-related funds and services, questioned the imposition of blanket bans. Tennant Creek's Anyinginyi Health general manager Barbara Shaw said services were needed to support heavy drinkers and their families.

Alcohol withdrawal symptoms could include the shakes, depression and, sometimes, fits. In severe cases, withdrawal could be fatal. "(We must) look at the causes of alcoholism, like overcrowding, where 15 people live in one house, people living below the poverty line, people who have no work."

Indigenous Doctors' Association president Dr Mark Wenitong raised concerns about the compulsory health checks. He said doctors would not perform an examination on any child under the age of 16 unless a parent had given consent. He warned that sexual abuse check-ups by doctors not familiar with indigenous people could scare patients.

"[I'm] particularly thinking of an eight-year-old girl being examined by a male doctor for trauma—vaginal trauma and things like that. That's a real issue and that really needs to be thought through in detail, not to mention the fact that we just don't have the medical work force currently."

The doctor shortage flows from the systemic under-funding of indigenous health services by successive federal, state and territory governments. Members of the Close the Gap coalition are calling for an additional \$460 million per year to be allocated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health programs as a first step toward rectifying the large "gap" between the funding of indigenous and other health services.

Far from filling the "gap," the government's plan contains no spending

on health care, or any of the other essential services long denied to remote communities, notably schools and housing. While it was launched on the pretext of responding to a Northern Territory government report, "Little Children are Sacred", which found evidence of widespread child sexual abuse, the military takeover ignores the report's recommendations. Instead, Howard has seized on the social distress and breakdown caused by decades of deprivation to impose measures that serve his "free market" agenda.

Dorothy Scott, the director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia, and an expert adviser to the Northern Territory child abuse inquiry, said the prospect of such mandatory checks left her "lost for words". It demonstrated, she said, the "lack of child protection expertise" in the government's response to the *Little Children are Sacred* report. Professor Scott said the inquiry made 97 recommendations but mandatory checks for sexual abuse was not one of them.

Other critics pointed out that cutting off welfare payments for school non-attendance punished indigenous families for the chronic under-resourcing of education. The Northern Territory report noted that "even if all Aboriginal children turned up at their local schools, there would not be enough teachers, classrooms and resources for them". It also condemned governments for failing to meet previous recommendations for guaranteed access to play centres and pre-schools for all children in the three- to five-year age group.

In a ham-fisted bid to counter the rising criticism, and intimidate opponents, Brough yesterday accused those who had spoken out of "very typical scaremongering, standover bully-boy tactics and lies" to cause panic in indigenous communities. His comments constitute an accurate description of the Howard government's own modus operandi.

Labor leader backs Howard's agenda

The intervention will be overseen by an "implementation taskforce", which will monitor indigenous communities, nominate those to be "prescribed" for takeover, and appoint local government business managers. The government's appointees to the taskforce are highly revealing. They include former Woolworths chief executive Roger Corbett, who presided over record profits at the supermarket chain, which relies heavily on paying low wages to its young checkout operators and shelf stackers. Brough said Corbett would be a valuable contributor, "from his business perspective and his logistics perspective".

Also included is former senior Australian Federal Police (AFP) officer Shane Castles, who will lead the work of the taskforce on the ground. Castles's last assignment was heading the police contingent of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), a colonial-style takeover of the small South Pacific state in 2003. Last year, the Solomon Islands government effectively dismissed Castles for his active part in a series of Australian provocations aimed at destabilising it.

Howard's own department head, Peter Shergold, has also been appointed, along with two members of his handpicked National Indigenous Council, Western Australian magistrate Sue Gordon and Roman Catholic school principal Miriam Rose Baumann.

Far from attacking this wholesale assault on the democratic rights and living conditions of the most vulnerable and oppressed layers of the Australian working class, the Labor "opposition" is stepping up its collaboration. On Sunday, Federal Labor leader Kevin Rudd declared that if a Labor government were elected he would establish a bipartisan "national war cabinet" to direct the fight against Aboriginal child abuse in remote communities. Yesterday he called on all Labor state and territory

leaders to fully cooperate with Howard.

Rudd also announced Labor would spend \$200 million over four years on the recruitment of 500 new AFP officers. As well as being deployed in the Northern Territory, the new officers would meet the “growing demands” placed on the force. Just last September, Howard announced the doubling of the AFP’s “international deployment group” to 1,200, and the formation of a heavily-armed, 150-strong riot squad.

Labor’s indigenous affairs spokesperson Jenny Macklin followed suit by backing a plan put forward by Aboriginal lawyer Noel Pearson to extend Howard’s welfare cutoff measures to Queensland’s Cape York Aboriginal communities. Macklin said Labor had long supported tying welfare payments to school attendance and the proper care of children. Her comments came after Howard and Brough announced their intention to make the Northern Territory scheme a prototype for stripping welfare entitlements from working class families across the country.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact