

Australia: Scepticism mounts towards Howard's Aboriginal intervention

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Barely into its second week, the Howard government's police-military operation in the Northern Territory against remote Aboriginal communities is being met with growing scepticism and outright opposition.

A recent Galaxy opinion poll, conducted just over a week after the plan was announced, found that 58 percent of respondents thought Howard was only acting because of the forthcoming federal election, while 25 percent accepted that the prime minister cared about the plight of Aboriginal children. The same poll showed overall support for the Liberal-National Coalition government slipping further, from 42 percent to 41 percent, giving Labor a 10-point lead on a two-party preferred basis.

The results indicate that ordinary people have drawn the conclusion that Howard's belated pretence of concern about the sexual abuse of indigenous children, after 11 years in office, is yet another political fabrication, like the "children overboard" allegations concocted against refugees in 2001 and the "weapons of mass destruction" lies used to justify joining the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Trying to answer the poll results, Howard claimed on weekend television that his Aboriginal plan was "not electioneering" because, "I have no idea what the political consequences will be, that was not in my mind."

Another sign that the "national emergency" scheme to take over 73 Aboriginal townships and camps is meeting unexpected resistance was the rapid resignation of the man appointed to lead its ground operations, Australian Federal Police (AFP) assistant commissioner Shane Castles. Castles quit before the government's handpicked task force held its first meeting on June 30. Confusion surrounded the affair, with Howard and Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough initially reporting that Castles had left for "personal" and then "family" reasons. Several days later, on July 1, Brough said Castles had decided not to lead the task force once he realised its magnitude.

As the WWSW reported on June 28, Castle's had previously led the Australian government's military and police intervention in the Solomon Islands, engaging in a series of provocations against the Solomons' government, on behalf of the Howard government, which flouted legal and constitutional norms. The article warned of the chilling parallels between the Solomons operation and the plan for the Northern Territory (see "Australian neo-colonialism comes home: The Northern Territory and the Solomon Islands").

Castles has been replaced by an army commander, Major General David Chalmers, who led the military task force sent to Indonesian Aceh after the 2004 tsunami. His appointment underscores the unprecedented military character of the intervention on domestic soil.

Howard's plan received a further blow when the second co-author of the Northern Territory's "Little Children Are Sacred" report, which the federal government claimed was the basis for its intervention, denounced Howard's response. Pat Anderson joined co-author Rex Wild QC, who spoke out against the plan last week, declaring that if the prime minister were seriously concerned about child sexual abuse, he should implement

the report's 97 recommendations. Anderson said the report provided "an excellent and evidence-based framework for intervention", but Howard's actions bore no resemblance to its findings. The 320-page report called for measures that directly oppose Howard's martial law "crackdown" (see "Australian government takeover of Aboriginal communities: the real content of the "Children are Sacred" report").

Sydney Morning Herald columnist Alan Ramsay recalled last weekend that in 1999 the Howard government had refused to act on a 122-page report, "Violence in Indigenous Communities," which drew attention to severe problems of domestic violence, sexual assaults and child sex abuse in remote areas. Ramsay said Howard's claim to have suddenly discovered a "national emergency" in "saving" Aboriginal children was enough to make him vomit.

Squads of soldiers, police and government officials, who have begun arriving in Aboriginal areas to start implementing the takeover, have met increasingly hostile responses. Visits to at least three communities had to be postponed. Local people angrily denounced the government for cutting off funds for essential social projects, then feigning concern for child welfare.

On July 2, one of the government's teams was refused entry to Amoonguna, south of the central Australian city of Alice Springs. Local council chief executive Barry Byerley told organisers it was "the height of arrogance" to "just barge in" without appropriate consultation with the community's 350 residents.

Byerley said the township, which recently won a local government award for good governance, had been angered by the federal government's decision to cut off funding for Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP), forcing more than 30 residents back on the dole. "They treat the community with contempt by failing to adequately explain the loss of CDEP after just nine months and then they give us only 24 hours' notice that they want to come into the community. People are genuinely worried."

Further north, representatives of the Arnhem Land town of Maningrida said they had been shocked that the government had rejected their funding application for a child safety program. The "Little Children are Sacred" report had recommended the program, run by the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, as a model for other communities.

Corporation CEO Ian Munro said the Commonwealth's lack of support did not make sense. "Last week we heard Minister Brough saying one of the problems of Aboriginal communities was that there was no point of reference for kids, there was no safe place that they could report child abuse," he said. "Well, in Maningrida there is such a place and it is working well and it's just had its funding knocked back."

At Santa Teresa, 85km south-east of Alice Springs, the government party was not entirely welcomed. Instead, people suggested that the officers and officials should not have arrived uninvited. At Imanpa, in the Territory's south-west, Aboriginal elder Sandra Armstrong made an impassioned plea for help and said she was worried about children being

taken out of the community.

William Tilmouth from the Tangentyere Council in Alice Springs asked why the government was only acting now. "There's numerous reports right through the history of indigenous affairs that really highlight the need, especially in housing, health, education, employment and also sexual abuse," he said. "Aboriginal people have been crying out for years to have something done. Why act on this report when there's been numerous reports in the past?"

At Wallace Rockhole, west of Alice Springs, several vocal residents raised concerns about the plan. One questioned why there were no local Aboriginal leaders on the government's task force.

The distrust has erupted despite efforts by local indigenous Northern Territory Labor MPs to convince township residents to embrace the takeover. Among them was the Member for MacDonnell, Alison Anderson, who spent last weekend touring her electorate to try to "ease the minds" of local residents about the new system. She told a meeting in Areyonga, about 160 km west of Alice Springs: "There is nothing to be frightened about. Welcome them on to your country, talk to them about your problems." When residents insisted violence was rare at Areyonga, despite the absence of a police station, she responded that it was still vital to ensure "our children are in a safe environment".

Brough's first media statement announcing the plan specified "compulsory health checks for all Aboriginal children". Medical experts immediately objected that forcing children to undergo tests for sexual abuse would itself constitute assault, as well as being extremely traumatic. Pediatricians also warned that only specially trained children's doctors, not GPs or military surgeons, could perform such tests.

Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott later denied that tests would be compulsory, only to state that other measures, such as the docking of welfare payments, would be used to convince parents to comply. "There are different levels of compulsion ... already existing in our system," he said. Abbott claimed that "well-meaning parents" would be happy for their children to be examined, insinuating that any parent who objected to the intrusive procedure would be suspected of abuse.

The government is drawing up legislation to strip parents of welfare payments if their children are considered "at risk" or if they miss more than three days school a term. This is on top of "quarantining" half of all payments, which will be transformed into food and clothing vouchers.

Last week, CDEP programs in the Northern Territory received official letters threatening to terminate their funding unless they obeyed written directions to comply with the legislation. These directions, which would override existing agreements, could compel Aboriginal health workers, many of whom are employed through CDEP, to perform coercive medical tests. More broadly, CDEP programs, on which some 6,000 jobless indigenous workers depend for subsistence, could be ordered to enforce any directive issued under the "national emergency".

Aboriginal councils could be financially crippled if they refuse to help carry out the medical tests or challenge any aspect of the "emergency". Last year, the federal government abolished a 25-year-old provision that assigned land councils a statutory share of mining royalty payments. Brough now completely controls council budgets.

A member of the government's task force, former Australian Medical Association president Bill Glasson, only exacerbated growing concerns by saying that removing children from their communities would be "a last resort". The very mention of the removal of children raises the spectre of the "stolen generation"—Aboriginal children who were seized from their parents and communities for decades, right up until the 1970s.

It has become increasingly clear that one of the primary motivations for the takeover is a land grab, designed to clear the way for private housing and various commercial purposes, such as tourism developments, cattle grazing and mining projects, including uranium mines and nuclear waste dumps.

As numerous commentators have pointed out, overturning the 1976 Land Rights Act and the system of permits required to enter Aboriginal land has nothing to do with overcoming child abuse, let alone with providing health, education, housing and other essential services. The government says it will acquire Aboriginal land for five years and then promote 99-year leases in an attempt to push "economic development" and private home ownership.

The intervention is the latest in a series of aggressive federal government moves to coerce local Aboriginal councils into giving up control of their land. Less than two months ago, Brough withdrew proposed funding of \$70 million to repair homes in Alice Springs's poor town camps when the Tangentyere Council refused to agree to cede the land to the Northern Territory government.

Brough said this week that people who lost land title under the new scheme would have the same legal rights as anybody facing "compulsory acquisition" to sue the government for "just-terms compensation". After five years, he said communities would be told they need not return to communal title. They would instead be given the chance to buy their homes on 99-year leases.

Pat Turner, former chief executive of the disbanded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), described as farcical, government claims that it had to take over Aboriginal lands so it would not waste time negotiating with councils to make repairs and collect rents. "Rubbish," she said. "If the Government is serious about this it can negotiate an arrangement and no community is going to say 'no, we don't want you to come in here and build us houses'. Every community has been screaming out for additional housing stock for decades."

In neighbouring South Australia, the federal government has also halted funding to an urgently needed housing project, insisting on changes to the permit system and transfer of title to leases. State Aboriginal Affairs Minister Jay Weatherill said a "severe housing shortage" in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands meant up to 19 people shared a single house, creating an environment in which sexual abuse and other forms of social dysfunction could develop. Weatherill said the Commonwealth had promised \$25 million for Aboriginal housing on the APY Lands, for about 65 new houses and 30 upgrades to existing houses, but then attached new conditions.

The Labor Party is continuing to back the Howard government's takeover. Interviewed last weekend, Labor's indigenous affairs spokesperson Jenny Macklin insisted that Labor would not back away from its pledge of "bipartisan in-principle support".

Macklin has also endorsed this week's decision by the federal cabinet to extend the welfare cut-off measures nationally to all families. Under the national plan, parents whose children miss school or are identified by state child protection agencies as being at risk will have half their welfare and family benefits "quarantined". Centrelink, the federal welfare monitoring agency, will take the money to pay for rent, food and medical bills.

The plan differs slightly from the measures in the Northern Territory, where all parents in the 73 targeted areas will have half their benefits withheld, while those whose children are considered neglected will lose all benefits. This differential treatment is probably illegal, with lawyers and federal Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma warning of a likely breach of the Racial Discrimination Act.

Macklin supported the national scheme even before the full details were released, saying, "the idea that family payments are for the benefit of children is a principle that Labor strongly supports". Labor's position underlines its agreement with the entire "free market" agenda behind the Northern Territory intervention: gutting welfare to force impoverished people into cheap labour; privatising social assets; and removing all barriers, such as communal land title, to corporate profit-making.

Once again, the appalling social conditions confronting the most disadvantaged and vulnerable sections of the working class are being

exploited to justify measures that will, sooner rather than later, be imposed on the working class as a whole. The military-police deployment in the Northern Territory is a testing ground for the methods that will be used to enforce them.



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