

Australian government wages two-year vilification campaign to justify takeover of Mutitjulu

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21 August 2007

Mutitjulu is one of the first of around 80 Aboriginal communities in Australia's Northern Territory being targeted by the Howard government in its unprecedented attempt to takeover the poverty-stricken areas through military force. A review of the experiences of Mutitjulu's residents over the past two years helps provide an insight into the grubby methods that have been used to justify the extraordinary police-military intervention.

Mutitjulu is a small community of between 150 and 250 people near Uluru (Ayers Rock), and its inhabitants include the traditional owners of the famous landmark. Every year, more than half a million tourists travel to the centre of Australia to visit the World Heritage-listed Uluru-Kata National Park, attracted to its unique natural beauty.

Twenty kilometres up the road from Mutitjulu is the tourist village of Yulara, where the continuous stream of tourists can choose between a plethora of services and amenities, including apartments, a lodge and two five-star hotel resorts.

Not far away, the people of Mutitjulu live in third world conditions. For decades, the Northern Territory (NT) and federal governments have provided grossly inadequate funding for basic services. Because the community lies within the boundaries of a national park, the NT local government department provides no municipal service funding.

Some Mutitjulu residents receive royalties from entry fees to Uluru, but the township lacks many essential services, including a resident doctor. Aboriginal health workers and registered nurses staff a health centre, and their efforts are augmented by visiting health professionals. Other facilities include a general store, an art and craft co-operative, a mechanical workshop, a primary school and a childcare centre.

For years, local people have been calling for a counsellor and rehabilitation worker to help with endemic alcohol and substance abuse. Before Opal (non-sniffable) fuel was introduced to remote communities at the end of 2006, petrol sniffing by young people was a major problem. In 2005, a coronial inquest was held into the deaths of two young people at Mutitjulu, one of whom had been a chronic sniffer for nearly 10 years.

As with the many previous inquests into petrol sniffing, the coroner pointed to the prevailing social and economic conditions—the lack of jobs, health services, education, decent housing—that gave rise to such desperate and widespread substance abuse.

Mutitjulu's housing has been sub-standard for at least 10 years. An NT indigenous housing survey in December 2004 found that almost two-thirds of homes had no working stove; more than one quarter had no flushing toilet; a quarter had no functional laundry; three quarters

required essential structural repairs; and more than 10 people lived in each house.

On June 21 this year, when the government announced its “national emergency response”, it claimed that the trigger was revelations of widespread sexual abuse of indigenous children in the *Little Children are Sacred* report, handed to the Northern Territory government on April 30.

Canberra's takeover plan, however, includes none of that report's 97 recommendations. While it called for the provision of decent health, education, housing, employment and other basic services to “break the cycle of poverty and violence”, Prime Minister Howard's “emergency response” is aimed at imposing welfare cut-offs, abolishing jobs programs and confiscating communal land.

The June 21 announcement came just six days after the Full Federal Court overturned the government's last takeover attempt of Mutitjulu. In July 2006, the government sacked the local council, cut off its funding and appointed a Perth-based administrator—Brian McMaster, from KorthaMentha, a corporate recovery company—to take control of the community's financial affairs. Without any prior notice, federal funding of \$3 million was frozen, cutting resources for family and children's services, drug and alcohol programs, youth and sports services.

The Federal Court ruled that the Mutitjulu Community Aboriginal Corporation (the council) had received only 24 hours notice, giving it no chance to object. This clearly breached the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976, which required a “reasonable period” of notice. The judges said the dismissal notice was not even delivered properly to the council. Moreover, they declared, “there was no evidence of any particular threatened unlawful or imprudent transaction on the part of the (Mutitjulu) Corporation that needed to be urgently prevented.”

As a consequence of the court ruling, the federal government's Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations was forced last month to hand control back to the council, but without giving any guarantee of funding. The council's lawyer, George Newhouse, said the council had been left penniless and warned that residents could be reduced to begging from tourists. Federal registrar Laura Beacroft claimed that the council would have access to “about the same money it had” but her spokeswoman said it would have to apply for new funding.

Since the appointment of the administrator, the community has been without child care, aged respite care, night patrols, a permanent doctor and a community bus. The administrator actually under spent the budget by \$300,000, with every cent of that amount going back to the

government.

Sensationalised media campaign

Prior to the administrator's appointment in July 2006, Mutitjulu became the focus of a sensationalised media campaign, blaming the victims of government neglect for their own plight. Using misinformation from government officials in indigenous affairs, the campaign laid the basis for Prime Minister Howard's cynical claims to be acting in the interests of Aboriginal children.

It began in August 2005, during the coronial inquiry into the deaths of young petrol sniffers. As a woman was giving evidence to the inquiry, her son walked in holding a can to his face, sniffing petrol. Coroner Greg Cavanagh was so shocked that he closed the session. This became headline news, with the Murdoch-owned *Australian* splashing a photograph of the young man sniffing petrol across its front page.

One witness to the inquiry was given particularly widespread media coverage. Gregory Andrews, a government official who had been employed as a manager in a "working together project" organised by the Mutitjulu council with the NT and federal governments, told the coroner that young people were exchanging sex for petrol and that welfare payments were having a damaging effect on the community.

Andrews had earlier written a discussion paper entitled "Economic passivity and dependency in Mutitjulu: some suggestions for change". In it, he argued that welfare payments, royalties from tourists visiting Uluru and "free service provision" such as water, electricity and rent were fuelling an addiction epidemic and social dysfunction.

In February 2006, Andrews began work at the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) in Canberra as an assistant secretary managing the Communities Engagement Branch. In the same month, the NT police received an anonymous fax from OIPC alleging that men in Mutitjulu were engaged in pedophilia.

Two months later, in April 2006, Andrews and OIPC chief Wayne Gibbons appeared before a Senate committee on behalf of Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough to give evidence on petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal communities.

Later that year, Andrews was forced to write an apology to the Senate Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing, admitting that he had made false statements about the Mutitjulu community, including that he had lived in Mutitjulu for nine months and that young people were committing suicide by hanging themselves from the church steeple. He only made the retractions after NT Senator Trish Crossin demanded that Brough correct evidence given by a senior official of the OIPC.

In the meantime, in May 2006, ABC television's "Lateline" program interviewed NT prosecutor Nannette Rogers, who gave graphic descriptions of sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities. Taking her cue, Brough made unsubstantiated claims the following day that pedophile rings were running rampant throughout the camps and townships.

On June 21, ABC's "Lateline" claimed that Brough's allegations of pedophilia had been substantiated. Under the headline, "Sexual slavery reported in Indigenous community," "Lateline" interviewed Andrews, who was posing as an anonymous former youth worker. His face was obscured and voice altered. Andrews claimed that people in Mutitjulu were protecting a pedophile.

Several days later, OIPC wrote to the Aboriginal Corporations registrar, stating that the Mutitjulu council was not fit to govern and should be put in the hands of an administrator.

In August 2006, however, Colleen Gwynne, the head of an NT police taskforce established to investigate the "Lateline" allegations, said the claims of sexual abuse in Mutitjulu were "overstated". After interviewing at least 100 local people, police found no evidence of pedophilia or of youth selling sex for petrol. "Lateline" failed to report Gwynne's findings.

In September, a report appeared in Melbourne's *Age* written by photographer Kia Mistillis. She had spent the previous five weeks in Mutitjulu taking photographs to accompany a book telling the stories of Uluru's "stolen generation"—children forcibly removed from their parents. In her article, Mistillis reported that local women had unequivocally rejected "Lateline's" allegations of a pedophile ring, child sex slaves, petrol warlords, drug running and cliques of violent Aboriginal men. The community had confirmed just one incident of a suspected pedophile, formerly an officer with the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, who had been reported to police but not charged. The man had been confronted at a community meeting one year earlier, and had left the area.

In October, Brough visited Mutitjulu to open a \$2.4 million police station and was met by a group of angry community members outraged at the government's vendetta. One resident shouted: "You are the minister for racism, the minister for neglect. You have attacked our men and women. You are telling lies."

It is little wonder that Mutitjulu residents have bitterly opposed the latest intervention, asking why a military operation has been set in motion against some of the most poverty-stricken people in the country. "Why us?" and "why now?" asked a resident at a June 27 community meeting. Another speaker raised the question: "Why has the government taken this radical action immediately after the Federal Court finding?" Others expressed fears that, once again, children could be taken away from their families.

Last month, a visiting federal medical team examined 27 local children. The doctor in charge, Tony Hobbs, told reporters: "This is a community striving to be the best it can. There have been a range of conditions these children are suffering from and nearly all relate to poverty and living conditions". In a statement, Mutitjulu Council chairman Sammy Wilson said the council welcomed the health checks, but said the community still lacked ongoing medical care.

There are several serious questions raised by the government's record that require immediate answers: Why has it spent the past two years vilifying Mutitjulu's residents? Why did Gregory Andrews lie to the Senate inquiry about what was happening in Mutitjulu? Where is the evidence confirming his sensational claims? Why does the government want to control Mutitjulu, by whatever means possible? If it is so concerned about the fate of Mutitjulu's children, why is it ignoring the 97 recommendations from the *Children are Sacred* report? And, finally: is the government's unstated, long-term agenda to drive the community out, and use its land for far more lucrative tourism facilities?



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