

Protests in Aboriginal communities as Australian parliament passes military takeover bills

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Several Aboriginal communities in Australia's Northern Territory (NT) took a stand against the police-military takeover of their towns last month as the Labor opposition joined with the Howard government in ramming the legislation through the Senate.

On August 17, the parliament's upper house passed the 500-page package of five bills without any amendment, after a farcical one-day committee inquiry. The previous week, Labor helped push the blatantly racist and anti-democratic bills through the House of Representatives in less than nine hours.

The legislation specifically overrides the 1975 Racial Discrimination Act, allowing it to target indigenous people, and gives Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough dictatorial powers to remove elected bodies and take direct control of every aspect of life in more than 73 indigenous townships and camps.

Under the guise of moving urgently to protect children from sexual abuse, the government is imposing unprecedented measures. These include imprisonment for possessing alcohol or pornography, sexual health checks for children, the seizure of communal land titles and the removal of the permit system, which allows local indigenous councils to exclude people from their areas. Presently 82 percent of the NT prison population and 96 percent of the juveniles held in detention are aboriginal.

The legislation abolishes employment programs and slashes welfare entitlements. Half of all welfare and family support payments will be "quarantined", that is, converted into vouchers to be used for food and clothing, generally in government-run shops. The cut-off will be extended to 100 percent if children do not attend school or are deemed "neglected". These welfare cuts will be extended nationally, starting with 50 percent quarantining for all parents whose children are judged to be at risk.

On August 14, the Yirrkala community in north-east Arnhem Land became the first to expel a government survey team of public servants, police and military personnel. Residents said they were sick and tired of answering the same questions and demanded to speak directly to Minister Brough. Yirrkala Council coordinator Adrian Rota said people were angry and frustrated that the survey team had not consulted with local authorities, and were unable to provide any information about the legislation.

On the same day, Banduk Marika, a nationally acclaimed artist and Yirrkala community leader, published an opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* condemning the government intervention. She stressed that it had nothing to do with protecting children. "What gives this government the right to say that we are not allowed to control our future, our lives, our families and who comes into our country?" she asked. "We will not be treated as though we have no rights."

Marika referred to the previous struggles of the Yirrkala people, who 33 years ago submitted a bark petition to parliament after the conservative

Menzies government signed their land away for mining. "Like our elders before us, we will continue to stand up for what is right and fair. Don't use our children as an excuse for stealing this land away from us."

Pointing to the racist nature of the legislation, she wrote: "The government is now trying to say that the land, community councils and the permit system are also part of the reason for child abuse. But this is a lie. Has any non-aboriginal council ever been taken over by the government because of child abuse occurring in its area? Has anybody in non-indigenous Australia had their land taken away because of child abuse in their community? I don't think so."

On August 15, in the central Australian town of Alice Springs, more than 300 people demonstrated outside the Northern Territory Taskforce headquarters and the office of the NT Chief Minister Clare Martin, burning a copy of the legislation.

The rally was organised by a number of Aboriginal organisations, including Tangentyere Council, which represents 18 town camps on the outskirts of Alice Springs. The council runs a range of services, such as managing the housing, collecting garbage, distributing the mail, patrolling the camps to avert violence, feeding and washing the old people, running a safe house for children, providing financial services and marketing the work of artists.

The rally was addressed by William Tilmouth, the chief executive of Tangentyere Council, Pat Turner, the chief executive of National Indigenous Television, David Ross of the Central Land Council and Neville Perkins from the Institute for Aboriginal Development. Representatives spoke from Mount Nancy camp and Larapinta town camp.

Tilmouth denounced leading Aboriginal figures for backing the Howard government's takeover. He likened Sue Gordon, chair of the government's NT taskforce, and Noel Pearson of the Cape York Policy Institute to indigenous members of the early mounted police force in Queensland, who had cold-bloodedly shot Aborigines. "The Queensland mounted police have taken their role again, in the voice of Noel Pearson and Sue Gordon," he said.

Likewise, Tilmouth condemned Warren Mundine, the immediate past federal president of the Labor Party, who had endorsed the legislation as "positively" discriminatory. "Warren Mundine should know better. He knows nothing about our culture; he knows nothing about the way we live. Those people should hang their heads in shame."

Pat Turner described the intervention as nothing more than a "short-term, cynical, electoral stunt". She said there was not one reference in the 500 pages of legislation to ensuring the "safety of the women and children in our communities". She pointed to the government's appointment of business managers who would disregard the elected councils and brush them aside. "This is the final nail in the coffin of self-determination for

Aboriginal people,” she said.

In a media release that morning, the Tangentyere council slammed the legislation as the most “racist” and “retrograde” ever considered by parliament. It said the government had failed to address any of the 99 recommendations of the “Little Children is Sacred” report on child sex abuse in the NT. Moreover, Labor and the party’s leader, Kevin Rudd, had betrayed Aboriginal people.

Tangentyere residents and many others throughout the NT fear that their councils will be taken out of their hands and outside administrators appointed, leaving them powerless. Under the legislation, the minister can terminate any land rights, title or other interests at any time, and the government can lease and sublease the land without monetary compensation. Having taken possession, the government can exclude anyone from the land, because the terms of leases are at the minister’s discretion. In the town camps of Alice Springs, people fear they may be evicted.

Already, Tangentyere has been stripped of Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) subsidies worth \$98,000, immediately affecting the staffing of aged and community services. The “old peoples service,” which has been providing support for elderly people for nearly 30 years, faces cuts to weekend services.

The abolition of CDEP threatens at least 7,000 jobs across the NT, varying from land management to working at health clinics and art and craft centres. Hundreds of jobs could be axed in the arts sector, where artists and art advisors are supported through CDEP. The new measures could force artists to deal directly with the private market, creating the conditions for even more poorly-paid artists to produce works that fetch high prices in distant art galleries.

This is just one example of how free-market measures will force Aboriginal workers into cheap labour jobs and training schemes. A recent report from the Centre of Aboriginal Economic and Policy Research warned that the scrapping of CDEP would drive up unemployment levels in remote communities to disastrous levels. Minister Brough admitted that “non-viable” remote communities would be starved of funds and basic services, leaving their members no choice but to drift into the towns in search of work.

Since the Howard government announced its intervention two months ago, government intervention teams have visited at least 66 of the 73 designated communities. In all, 18 extra police have been deployed and eight government business managers appointed to oversee 13 remote communities. More than 850 children have had health checks. While some have been diagnosed with ear, throat and skin infections, no cases of sexual assault have been reported.

Ironically, one of the communities left out of the government’s intervention is Elliott, where, according to the *Little Children are Sacred* report, serious alcohol and sexual abuse problems abound. Brough’s junior minister, Community Services Minister Nigel Scullion, said the government had not intended to exclude Elliott; it only happened because the community was not on Aboriginal land.

Addressing the National Press Club on August 15, Brough confirmed the land grab and free-market agenda behind the intervention. The minister declared that recognition of land rights had resulted in the impoverishment of Aboriginal people. Claiming that communal title and “collectivism” had failed, he called for the opening up of the land to private ownership to provide “economic opportunity”. This will allow mining companies, cattle station operators, tourism entrepreneurs and real estate developers to exploit the most valuable sites for private profit.

Brough also emphasised that the “welfare reform” measures would apply across Australia, confirming that the second objective of the NT intervention, after the land grab, was to use indigenous people as a testing ground for a wider assault on the working class.

After the rally at Alice Springs, the WSWS spoke to Walter Shaw—one

of the speakers from Mount Nancy town camp and a member of Tangentyere Council—about the background and thrust of the federal intervention.

“This year was supposed to be a celebratory and commemorative year for Aboriginal people with 40 years since the 1967 referendum [in favour of basic civic rights for Aboriginal people] and 50 years of NAIDOC [National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration] but now we are standing up here fighting for our future existence.

“We are angry that the Labor Party has let us down both nationally and within our own territory. We have relied on Labor for years to have some empathy and sympathy for our cause. Now we don’t know whom to turn to.

“Over the past year, Brough has hit a brick wall in the NT with subleasing agreements. Brough wanted us to hand over the land and the housing stock to the NT government for some money for infrastructure.

“At Tangentyere Council we took a staunch position. We negotiated and talked with them but we stood up to this government. They said they would allocate \$60 million for infrastructure if we handed over the land. We desperately needed the money for housing and services but we stood up for principle. It was never about money; it was about principles. A lot of the town campers were terrified that if the NT took control, there would be mass evictions. The NT government does not have a great track record in housing Aboriginal people. Some of the camps sit on prime real estate.

“The town campers try to live a semi-cultural existence and we did not want that taken away. Sometimes we cook bush tucker in our backyards and the NT housing department will not allow these cultural practices to continue. The camps have a close connection to many of the people in the remote communities through language, kinship and marriage. For the people in remote areas, Alice Springs is a service centre and at the camp we have an open door policy for Aboriginals who come to Alice Springs.

“For years we have been neglected by governments. Aboriginal people have always tried to keep a strong sense of communal culture and our connection to the land, despite 200 years of oppression. Brough says that our communalism and collectivism have failed. Howard and Brough are trying to break down our culture and put the final nail in the coffin. We have had problems because none of our communities had been properly funded or resourced. We have always raised the problems but it has fallen on deaf ears.

“Our rally was the launching of the fight against the government that will be ongoing.”



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