

The real face of Howard's Northern Territory intervention: welfare cuts and community closures

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In June, the Howard government announced a “national emergency” plan to take control of more than 70 Aboriginal communities throughout the Northern Territory (NT). Police and military forces were sent in, purportedly to protect Aboriginal children from sexual abuse. So great was the alleged urgency that the 1975 Racial Discrimination Act was suspended to allow for the racially-targeted intervention.

Four months on, not a single case of child abuse has been identified, and no charges or arrests for child sexual abuse have been made. But other police actions against the Aboriginal population have skyrocketed.

In the first three months of the operation, in seven communities alone, police made 63 arrests and issued 72 summonses, mostly for traffic offences, alcohol smuggling, domestic violence and assaults. By singling out Aboriginal areas for racially-based bans on alcohol and pornography, the government has only ensured that the imprisonment rate among indigenous people, who are already some 30 times over-represented in prisons, will rise. What the intervention has done, however, is highlight the shocking state of indigenous health and the lack of basic medical services. The government reports that 3,000 children have been examined in 34 communities. More than 80 percent have been found to be suffering from chronic ear, throat and nose conditions, directly related to inadequate and overcrowded housing conditions. It is already patently clear that the government has no intention of funding the intensive long-term and specialist care needed to address this situation. So far, around 40 doctors and 77 nurses have volunteered to carry out the medical checks, with 5 doctors and 26 nurses already completing a second deployment. But 30 communities have yet to be visited, meaning resources are so inadequate that not even an initial examination has been carried out on thousands of desperately needy children.

If any proof were needed that the military intervention had nothing to do with concerns about the welfare of Aboriginal children, this is it. By contrast to the lack of medical staff,

800 government officials have been dispatched, together with an additional 350 Centrelink staff, to implement the government's takeover of community land and facilities, and to enforce welfare cuts and work-for-the-dole schemes. Among the officials are 25 business managers, with another 25 more to be appointed, who will displace the elected councils. As an example of what these people will be doing, the new manager at Yuendumu has drawn up a School Attendance Proposal, which calls for alleged truants to be rounded up each morning, questioned by police and, with the assistance of the elders, sent to clean up rubbish all day until they are “visibly tired”.

The government intervention is being utilised to carry through previously-prepared plans to abolish the Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP) scheme, and shut down supposedly “unsustainable” townships.

When it was established in 1977 by the Fraser Liberal government, CDEP was a forerunner of the “work for the dole” programs later imposed on all jobless workers. Through CDEP, Aboriginal people in remote areas, where there are few or no jobs, were compelled to perform cheap labour to provide basic social services. CDEP participants worked part-time for 16 hours a week, earning around \$240 per week. In some cases, these wages could be “topped” up for extra hours, but many Aboriginal participants worked longer hours with no additional pay.

CDEP projects included municipal services, waste management, housing construction, home and community care work, aged care, child care, support for artists, land and sea management. In the absence of the usual government-organised and staffed services, CDEP projects became a financial lifeline for many communities, providing at least a modicum of income for participants and their extended families.

On July 23, one month after the intervention was launched, the Howard government announced that CDEP payments would be eliminated, forcing all recipients onto straight-out

“work-for-the-dole” schemes. Aboriginal Affairs Minister Mal Brough cynically stated that the effect would be to move people into “real jobs, training and mainstream programs.” He failed to mention that these simply do not exist in most of the relevant localities.

Work-for-the-dole pays far less than CDEP, and participants face continual harassment and scrutiny. They are forced to meet unrealistic job-seeking or training expectations, under threat of being cut off payments. It is expected that in most NT communities the change will see an overall decline in household income of around 20-30 percent.

The immediate impact on around 8,000 people will be the shutdown of their communities, which rely upon CDEP projects. Already, leaders in Mutitjulu, near Uluru, and nearby Imanpa are discussing closing the townships to move to more “sustainable locations”. Titjikala, a tourism venture partly based on the CDEP, faces possible closure, with half the workers being transferred to work-for-the-dole schemes.

Thousands of indigenous artists and craftspeople could also lose their livelihoods. For two decades, many indigenous artists—including those with international acclaim—have relied on CDEP to supplement their incomes. In June, a Senate Inquiry, *Indigenous Art—Securing the Future 2007*, called on the government to convert CDEP positions in art centres into properly funded jobs. Instead, art workers will be pushed onto work-for-the-dole. At the same time, all welfare payments in the 73 designated communities will be automatically 50 percent “quarantined”. Parents whose children are considered “at risk” will have their entire benefit “quarantined”. Welfare recipients will be given vouchers that can only be spent in certain stores such as Coles, Woolworths and K-Mart. For most remote communities this is unworkable and will have disastrous ramifications. Take, for example, the small community of Mapuru, situated 600 kilometres east of Darwin in North East Arnhemland. Local people, renowned for basket weaving, have been running a co-operative venture, where they can buy healthy foods, fishing lines, tyres and other necessities. Two years ago, the “co-op” won a National Heart Foundation award for its health initiative. It is not, however, a licensed community store under the National Emergency Response Act, so no-one can use welfare vouchers there. The nearest licensed community store is a charter flight away, or many hours by road. Residents fear they will be forced to leave their community, something they have resisted for decades.

The not-too-hidden agenda behind these measures is the closure of “unviable” townships, whose people will be forced into urban centres, where they can be exploited as cheap labour. Their lands will be cleared for mining,

pastoral, waste disposal or tourism projects. At the same time, the entire intervention project is being utilised as a testing ground for national schemes to slash welfare entitlements. Human Services Minister Chris Ellison declared earlier this month: “What we’re learning in the Territory will be extremely important for our nation-wide roll-out in relation to income management.”

Among ordinary people, opposition to these measures is deepening. Last week, indigenous community workers from the NT travelled to Sydney, addressing a 600-strong audience and exposing the harrowing effects of Howard’s measures. Raelene Rosas condemned the seizure of welfare payments, saying this had been met with confusion, fear and incredulity in remote areas: “[People are saying] ‘what’s going on? Why are they taking half our money? What for?’ They are taking away our rights as human beings.”

From the outset, the Labor Party has extended full bipartisan support to the NT intervention, reflecting its agreement with the underlying economic and social agenda. In the face of growing criticism, Labor’s indigenous affairs spokesperson, Jenny Macklin, belatedly announced that a Labor government would reinstate CDEP. She nevertheless insisted it would maintain the quarantining of welfare.

The Socialist Equality Party has condemned the military intervention from the outset. We demand the immediate withdrawal of all troops and police from Aboriginal townships in the Northern Territory. At the same time, we call for the implementation of a vast economic and social program, involving the commitment of billions of dollars for health, education, child care, housing and recreational facilities, along with well-paid, full-time permanent jobs, to overcome two centuries of dispossession, disadvantage and oppression suffered by the Aboriginal people.

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