

After Rudd's "apology" to indigenous people

Australian government extends welfare "quarantining" and land grab

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When the Rudd government made a formal apology to the Aboriginal "stolen generations" on February 13, the WSWWS warned that all those hailing the apology as a step toward rectifying the historic crimes committed against the indigenous people were carrying out a monstrous deception. We cited the old maxim that when the ruling class apologises for past crimes, it is only in order to better commit those of the present. (See: "Australian federal parliament's 'sorry' resolution: the real agenda")

On February 27, Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin delivered a speech to the National Press Club that confirmed the necessity for that warning. Macklin announced that the two central thrusts of the former Howard government's police-military intervention against Northern Territory (NT) indigenous townships and camps will be expanded, with slight variations. She outlined plans to extend the "quarantining", or partial seizure, of welfare payments from the NT to Western Australia, and introduce new means for overturning communal land title to make way for private ownership.

Macklin said the welfare measures will give a government agency, Centrelink, the power to impose "income management to combat poor parenting and community behaviours". Officials will be able to freeze all or part of a person's unemployment, sole parent, disabled or retirement benefit, for alleged neglect of children or breach of "social norms". As in the NT, those affected will receive vouchers for food and other designated items, to be spent at government-approved shops.

While the NT regime "quarantines" half the benefits of all recipients in targeted communities (the number of which has doubled to 25 since Labor took office last November), the new measures will be triggered by state government child protection officers, who will ask Centrelink to subject families to income management. A similar pilot program is underway in four townships on Cape York in Queensland, in collaboration with that state's Labor government and indigenous lawyer Noel Pearson.

These provisions not only wind the clock back to the days when Aboriginal people were paid in rations and had their children stolen from them for alleged neglect. They provide a blueprint to be applied readily to all working class people. Significantly, Labor's program will apply, for the first time, to non-indigenous people living in "selected communities" in Western Australia.

On the land question, Macklin said it was imperative to "encourage private home ownership" and give potential investors "incentive to invest". The Howard government's measures, encouraging townships to lease their land to private developers for 99 years, will be made

more "flexible" by allowing for shorter-term leases, of 20 years or more. Similar schemes are being introduced by the state Labor governments in Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. Macklin claimed the new leases were nothing new—mining companies already held scores of such leases over Aboriginal land.

Cynically, in the name of overcoming "despair and hopelessness" and the "vast and worsening gulf" between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, Macklin has unveiled schemes that will further dispossess and impoverish indigenous people, pave the way for corporate profit and establish trial schemes for ending all welfare entitlements.

On both the welfare and land fronts, "free market" forces will be unleashed. The welfare cutoffs are essentially designed to coerce thousands of social security recipients into cheap labour jobs, in order to help meet the demand of employers for the removal of "disincentives" to employment. In remote townships, "quarantined" residents will be also under pressure to abandon the communities and clear potentially valuable land for mining, grazing or tourism ventures. Likewise, the land tenure changes seek to erode the obstacles of "land rights" and "native title rights" established since the 1970s, while pushing indigenous people into the private housing market.

Just as the Howard government used a report on Aboriginal child abuse in the NT to impose its welfare-cutting and land-grabbing measures on the false pretext of "protecting children", the Rudd government has utilised a coroner's report on indigenous suicides in WA's northern Kimberley region to deepen the offensive.

While claiming to be "appalled" by Coroner Alastair Hope's report on 21 suicides that occurred in 2006, including that of an 11-year-old boy—an increase of 100 percent over the previous year—Macklin declared that the problems could not be solved by "spending buckets of money" on Aboriginal people. Her line was little different to that of her predecessor as indigenous affairs minister, the Howard government's Mal Brough, who argued that "welfare dependence" and generous government spending were at the root of the indigenous social crisis.

In reality, billions of dollars are required to redress the terrible ill-health, sub-standard housing, poor education and substance abuse suffered in many indigenous communities. Less than a year ago, an Oxfam Australia report documented Australia's "health gap"—the fact that the federal government spent approximately 70 cents per person on the health of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders for every \$1 spent on the rest of the population.

Last week, the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Health* released a report into Aboriginal housing, which found that only 6 percent of houses had adequate facilities to prepare and cook meals, and just 11 percent passed a standard assessment for electrical safety. In half the houses, it was not possible to wash a child in a tub or bath, and a functioning shower was available in only a third. Overcrowding was commonplace—10 to 15 people, and sometimes more, were sharing houses. Notably, the report demolished widespread claims that Aboriginal people were to blame for wrecking houses. It found that the vast majority of the problems were due to faulty construction or lack of maintenance, and only 10 percent were due to damage.

While promising that \$1.6 billion would be spent on indigenous housing over four years, Macklin insisted that private investment was the key to overcoming the housing crisis and made clear that securing “long-term tenure” for investors would be a major plank of the bipartisan Joint Policy Commission to be chaired by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and opposition leader Brendan Nelson.

Macklin declared that indigenous people had to be given the same “opportunity of home ownership” as other Australians: “Australians have always aspired to home ownership as a measure of ensuring economic, physical and emotional security. If I have equity in my home, I have a stake in my economic future.” This is under conditions where at least 300,000 home buyers across Australia risk losing their houses this year because of “severe housing stress” caused by rising interest rates. Housing affordability has fallen to historic lows—servicing the median home loan now requires almost 50 percent of after-tax gross median family income.

In many respects, Macklin’s speech echoed an *Australian Financial Review* editorial published two days earlier, entitled, “Apology is first step”. It described Rudd’s rising public opinion poll ratings since the national apology as “in part, a reward for leadership on the symbolic” but warned that his approval rating had to be used to pursue a definite program. The editorial said the quarantining of welfare had to be “retained”, disincentives to employment “minimised” and the long-term viability of some remote townships “questioned”.

The central problem that the corporate and political establishment had in pursuing this agenda under the Howard government was the widespread and deepening opposition, among indigenous and non-indigenous people alike, to the NT intervention and the government’s entire program.

Last November, the Rudd government was swept into office on the wave of a massive anti-Howard vote. In the remote NT communities, such as the hostility to the NT intervention that Aboriginal people voted overwhelming Labor. In some communities, such as Wadeye, the vote was as high as 95 percent. Not only did the Coalition lose government, but both Howard and Brough lost their parliamentary seats.

That is why Labor’s approach differs from Howard’s in one significant aspect. In her speech, without uttering a word of criticism of the Howard government, Macklin spoke of “new ways of doing things”. She called for “partnerships” between government, indigenous leaders and business.

Her appeal underscores one of the central purposes of the February 13 national apology. It is to bring a layer of Aboriginal community leaders, business operators and officials, who were largely sidelined under the Howard government, back into the fold to help implement a pro-capitalist program. The apology also sought to cultivate support among the small-l liberal and radical “lefts”, who were largely critical

of Rudd’s bipartisan support for Howard’s policies during the election campaign, in order to assist in isolating and suppressing opposition to the Labor government’s program.

Among those welcoming Macklin’s speech was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma, who told ABC radio he was “very encouraged” by the minister’s “heavy emphasis on partnership”. Calma agreed with Macklin’s call for private home ownership, even though it was similar to her predecessor’s, Brough, while praising Labor’s welfare measures as “more palatable” and “totally different” to what existed in the NT.

Also expressing his satisfaction was an outspoken proponent of 99-year leases, former Labor Party national president Warren Mundine. In the lead up to Macklin’s announcements, Mundine, a member of the Howard government’s now defunct National Indigenous Council (NIC), insisted that such leases had to proceed, to avoid stifling business. “If we are looking to building economies in these communities then we need to have a free flow of people to create commercial activities,” he said.

Throughout last year, the Labor Party extended full support to the NT intervention, reflecting its agreement with the underlying economic and social agenda. It is now in the process of adjusting and refining the measures in order to meet the demands of the corporate elite while drawing in new “partners” to obscure the fundamental issues, confuse ordinary people and deliver the required outcomes.

The reality is that at the core of the measures being implemented are the very economic forces that were responsible for the destruction of Aboriginal society over the past two centuries—grounded on the establishment of private ownership in land. The clearing of the indigenous population from the land, through massacres, poisonings, forced removals and the seizure of children—was a product of the capitalist profit system itself, beginning with the development of the pastoral industry.

Rectifying these crimes, and providing the resources and assistance needed for decent health services, schools, housing, welfare and essential facilities, is impossible without abolishing the economic system that produced, and continues to perpetuate, these injustices. A unified mass political movement of the working class—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike—is needed to reorganise society completely along socialist and genuinely democratic lines, on the basis of human need not private profit. That movement will be built only in direct opposition to all those currently hailing Labor’s apology and embracing Macklin’s announcements.



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