

## Northern Territory intervention

# Manipulating social tragedies for political gain

## Part 4

**A WSWS reporting team**  
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World Socialist Web Site journalists *Susan Allan and Richard Phillips* and freelance photographer *John Hulme* recently visited central Australia to report on the social and political impact of the federal government's Northern Territory Emergency Response or police/military intervention into Aboriginal communities. This is the fourth in a series of articles, interviews and videos. Parts one, two, three, five, six and seven were posted on June 21, June 26, July 2, July 24, August 6 and August 25 respectively. Video interviews can be viewed [here](#).

A key element in the Howard government's preparations for its long-planned NT intervention was a series of sensationalised news reports in 2006 about child sex abuse in Aboriginal communities. Indigenous affairs minister Mal Brough, working with the corporate media and programs such as ABC television's "Lateline", claimed that pedophiles were running rampant in Aboriginal communities.

None of these allegations was ever substantiated. In fact the "evidence" for one lurid story came from Greg Andrews, a senior official in Mal Brough's department of indigenous affairs, who appeared on "Lateline" in May 2006 claiming to be a social worker. Andrews, whose face was blacked out during the interview, insisted he had hard evidence of organised pedophile activity in Mutitjulu, a remote community adjoining Uluru (Ayers Rock). His "evidence", it appears, was not presented to police, nor was anyone charged.

Right-wing academics and Aboriginal leaders, such as Kimberly Land Council director Peter Yu, also got into the act, whipping up public outrage and demanding immediate government action. Yu, who has recently been appointed to the Rudd government's intervention review board, called for a military style intervention in Aboriginal communities to deal with the alleged crisis.

Brough continued to insist that sexual predators were operating widely in Aboriginal settlements. "Everyone knew who was running the pedophile rings," he told the media in April 2006, but they were being protected by tribal law and a "code of silence".

There is no question that Aboriginal people confront serious problems, including alcoholism, petrol-sniffing, high-levels of family violence and other social evils caused by endemic, long-term poverty. But to suggest that a substantial proportion—at the very least—of Aboriginal parents had been transformed into child molesters was nothing short of slanderous. It was aimed, not at rectifying the alleged crisis, but at creating a public scandal that would justify harsh and long-planned government measures.

This was the political climate in which the *Little Children are Sacred* report was released in June 2007. The report, written by Rex Wild QC and Patricia Anderson, was commissioned in August 2006 by the NT government to consider ways to protect Aboriginal children from sexual

abuse.

Howard and Brough seized on the report. Within two weeks of its release, they had launched the police/military intervention, claiming to be acting to protect Aboriginal children.

The government's cynicism was breathtaking, especially considering it came from representatives of the very social and economic order that had removed hundreds of Aboriginal children from their parents only a generation ago—as part of an ongoing "assimilation" policy aimed at wiping out the country's indigenous population.

The government, moreover, wilfully ignored the actual recommendations made in the *Little Children* report, which insisted that decent health, education, housing, employment and other basic services were required to "break the cycle of poverty and violence" in Aboriginal communities.

Twelve months on, none of Brough's much-vaunted pedophile rings have been discovered in the Northern Territory, a fact verified by the Australian Crime Commission in May. Nor have any of the almost 11,000 Aboriginal children checked by intervention doctors shown any direct evidence of sexual abuse.

What has been exposed, though, is that thousands of Aboriginal children are suffering from ear and eye disorders and other serious health problems caused by chronic poverty and the grossly inadequate health facilities in many communities.

This is not to suggest that sexual abuse of Aboriginal children does not exist, or that it should be condoned. But it is not—or, rather, should not primarily be—a police issue. It is a problem bound up with the deprived and marginalised existence that Aboriginal people are forced to endure. And so far, the only evidence that has come to light of child sex has involved young people in what they consider to be consensual relationships.

This was confirmed by Mark O'Reilly from the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service (CAALAS) in Alice Springs. He told us that the consensual relationships in question had been sanctioned by the families concerned, and/or by Aboriginal customary law.

"In the past," he continued, "these matters would be dealt with as a health or education issue and involve the parents, but now there is increasing pressure on judges and magistrates to be tough on this sort of thing and people are going to jail for consensual relationships between 18- and 15-year-olds. The girl gets pregnant, the health service finds out and has to report it to the National Indigenous Violence and Child Abuse taskforce and then it ends up in court."

O'Reilly said that the lives of young Aboriginal men jailed for these relationships had been "ruined". "Their names go on a sex-offenders

register as pedophiles for at least 15 years, which seriously hampers their ability to get work or move within and between states.”

“This is outrageous and very serious,” he continued, because “there doesn’t seem to be anyone saying we should have family meetings and getting health professionals involved. There seems to be less scope now for dealing with these sorts of problems in a humane manner.”

## Substance abuse

Alcoholism and substance abuse, a long-standing problem in many Aboriginal communities, was another element used by the federal government to justify its intervention.

Chronic alcoholism is a disaster both for the individuals afflicted and the communities in which they live. Our first night in Alice Springs gave us some sense of how it impacts on Aboriginal communities. Our accommodation was located not far from the Mpwetyerre or Abbots town camp and drunken fights and shouting raged on into the early hours of the morning.

Why is alcohol abuse such a major problem in the NT? This is a complex question but one that cannot be understood without recognising the impact of two centuries of unrelenting oppression of Australia’s native peoples. After visiting the town camps, it became clear that a major element is that alcohol provides the means for individuals to anaesthetise themselves from the harsh realities that their communities have endured, not just for a few weeks or months but for generations.

Alcohol abuse, of course, is not confined to Aboriginal settlements in Australia. Similar problems afflict indigenous populations in the US, New Zealand and Canada. And, of course, it is not restricted to indigenous communities. According to recent figures, one in 10 Australian children lives in a household in which there is parental alcohol and/or drug misuse. In England an estimated 1.3 million children are affected by the alcoholism of at least one parent. In all cases medical authorities insist that what is required is a holistic approach—i.e., one that recognises the major role played by social deprivation.

The government intervention had no interest in pursuing such an approach. It callously used the tragedy of alcohol abuse in Aboriginal communities for its own political gain, simply declaring that it was a legal question and criminalising the victims via a total alcohol ban on 73 “prescribed” Aboriginal communities.

Twelve months on there are no new treatment centres or counselling services and, up until the end of May, only one new “safe house” had been established for children in Alice Springs. At the same time, the constant police patrols enforcing alcohol bans have ramped up tensions in the communities.

Town camp residents we spoke to said that alcohol-related problems and violent assaults had worsened since the intervention. In Alice Springs, for example, the number of violent assaults had increased by 17 percent in the last quarter of 2007, while Darwin had a 25 percent rise in the first quarter of 2008.

The Rudd government and the corporate media claim that the intervention’s “income management” scheme has improved conditions of life, ensuring that Aboriginal families purchase food, clothing and other necessities for their children, rather than alcohol. We saw little evidence, and no objective statistics have been produced to prove these claims.

What is known is that Centrelink-issued store cards are now being traded or gambled in exchange for cash, which is then used to make alcohol purchases. Moreover some alcoholics are turning to dangerous substitutes—mouth-washes, raw spirits and worse.

Petrol sniffing is also resurgent with virtually no assistance available to

those involved. In Alice Springs, for example, there are more than 20 Aboriginal youth addicted to petrol and glue sniffing, an increase over the past year. Two months ago the town opened its first treatment clinic, ten years after medical experts called for the facility. The clinic, however, only accommodates 10 people.

## Police harassment

NT police have wide-ranging powers under the intervention, including the right to conduct warrantless raids on any property they believe might contain alcohol or pornography. Pre-dawn raids on town camps and other violations of basic democratic rights are now commonplace.

The government’s suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, an integral part of the intervention, also means that Aboriginal people have no legal protection from any acts of racial discrimination by police. Police lawyers only have to argue that the officers were looking for alcohol or pornography to justify their actions.

Soon after we arrived in Alice Springs, more than 190 Aborigines were taken into so-called “protective custody” in a two-day special police operation. Its purpose was to target alcohol consumption and “loitering” and was aimed against youth who “might get up to no good”. This was necessary, police told the local media, because of “increased numbers of Aboriginal people in public spaces”—i.e., homeless.

Not surprisingly, we encountered numerous Aborigines who had been taken into “protective custody”, had their homes raided, or been pepper-sprayed or assaulted by police.

One woman from Mt Nancy town camp, who wanted to remain anonymous, told us that police had raided her home in the early hours of the morning on three consecutive days in early April. She said that armed police burst into her home, pulled the blankets off sleeping residents and shone torches in their faces. The officers had no search warrants. They simply claimed that they were looking for one of her distant relatives.

The town camp resident said she was violently assaulted by police during a warrantless 6 a.m. raid late last year. The police declared they were searching for someone from the town camp.

“Seven police came into our house when people were sleeping and started pulling the blankets off everyone. Many of us, including me, are under medication. I’m an asthmatic and epileptic but they just dragged me around like a dog.

“I said to them, ‘Excuse me, have some manners’ but they just sprayed mace right in my face and I had a fit. They kicked me in the legs and the ribs and then dragged me to the paddy wagon, chucked me in the back and took me down to the watch house.

“The Aboriginal police officer verbally abused me—he kept calling me an elephant—and then they pepper sprayed me in the watch-house yard. They gave me a big spray in the eye. I cried out for a doctor because it was burning, but they didn’t take any notice. They were really crueling me.” The woman was eventually released without charge and taken to a health clinic.

Since this raid, NT police have been equipped with taser guns. One can only imagine the tragic consequences if they had been used.

## A wink and a nod

Not long after this interview, we read about the trial of a senior police sergeant, Michael Bourke. In late November 2006, Bourke assaulted a handcuffed Aboriginal prisoner, 31-year-old Graham Kunoth, in the Tennant Creek police station.

Bourke punched Kunoth in the face, threw him to the prison floor, repeatedly kicked him in the head and then dragged him along the corridor

to another cell. A female probationary police constable caught Bourke attempting to tape over CCTV footage of the incident and decided to tell authorities.

Bourke was charged and put on trial for aggravated assault and attempting to destroy evidence, charges that carry maximum penalties of five years' and 18 months' jail respectively.

During the trial the media published comments from former police officers praising Bourke as a "good copper", while an unnamed source cited in the *Australian* newspaper denounced Kunoth as "a complete mongrel" and "the most violent person" in Tennant Creek. Up to 20 police officers, some in uniform, and their wives and girl friends attended the trial in a show of support for Bourke.

Needless to say, Bourke was found guilty and last month sentenced to six months' jail for the aggravated assault charge and three months for attempting to destroy evidence. Bourke's sentence, however, was suspended and, in a "wink and a nod" from Australia's ruling elite, he was ordered to serve the entire nine months in home detention!

Such lenient treatment is no isolated incident. It needs to be contrasted with the following statistics:

\* Over 240 Aborigines died in police custody in Australia between 1980 and 2000, with only 5 percent of these deaths attributed to the conduct of authorities and not one charge of murder laid against police or prison officers.

\* More than 82 percent of NT prison inmates are of Aboriginal descent, with 21 percent of those incarcerated for driving offenses.

\* In 2005-06, more than 22,000 Aborigines were taken into "protective custody" by NT police. With a population of about 66,000 indigenous people in the Territory, this means that, on average, one in three Aborigines was taken into police custody that year.

These grim figures are yet another reminder that the war that was waged against NT Aborigines by pastoralists, mining corporations and other representatives of the profit system in the latter part of the nineteenth century is still underway, albeit under the banner of a new "humanitarian" intervention to protect Aboriginal children.

*To be continued*



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