

Government ignores calls for restoration of Racial Discrimination Act

Australia: Labor's reviled Aboriginal "intervention" to continue

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In another sign of its contempt for the democratic rights and social aspirations of Australia's indigenous people, the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has decided to continue its police-military "intervention" against Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory (NT). The intervention, which was launched by the former conservative coalition government of John Howard in June 2007, was implemented amid a lurid and sensationalist media campaign claiming widespread pornography and pedophilia in Aboriginal communities.

Howard, backed by the then Labor opposition, claimed at the time that the anti-democratic measures were the only way Aboriginal children could be protected from rampant sexual abuse. In the almost eighteen months since the intervention, however, no serious evidence has been provided to substantiate the slanderous allegations.

Elected to power in November last year, Rudd and his minister for indigenous affairs Jenny Macklin claimed that their support for the intervention was "not ideologically motivated" and that they were taking an "evidence-based approach".

These assertions were bogus. The real purpose of the intervention was to slash welfare—derisively dismissed in the Australian media as "sit-down money"—thereby forcing Aboriginal people out of their remote communities and townships to wherever they could find jobs—principally in mining areas, where major mining corporations are desperate for cheap labour.

In June this year, however, in the face of mounting opposition by Aboriginal communities and growing concern among broader sections of the population, the Rudd government established a special review board headed by former Kimberley Land Council chief Peter Yu to "assess" the intervention measures.

The board visited over 30 NT Aboriginal communities, collecting evidence and interviewing local Aboriginal people. It also received more than 200 submissions, including from Aboriginal health and legal aid services, the Australian Law Council, Amnesty International, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and others, with the overwhelming majority demanding the immediate restoration of the Racial Discrimination Act—which had been suspended in order to carry

through the intervention—and an end to welfare "quarantining" and other attacks on democratic rights.

According to the media, release of the report was delayed by several weeks in late September and, under government pressure, some of the measures proposed by the board were apparently "watered down", with the final report stating that the intervention "should continue". The *Australian* newspaper reported on October 18 that an earlier draft was not so categorical. Both the government and Yu denied the allegation.

Extracts from the earlier draft published by the *Australian* likened the intervention to "an experience of violence itself". It also included references to "dysfunctional government service delivery", "chronic failure by all levels of government to provide basic services" to Aboriginal communities, and cited complaints from Aboriginal people that the intervention made them feel like pedophiles.

Numerous other comments, including a description that the intervention was a "disgracefully insensitive approach to the social problem of sexual abuse—a problem present in all layers of Australian society", were absent in the final report.

The review board's modified report attempts to appease the considerable opposition to the intervention whilst offering advice to the government on how to modify the measures in order to secure support from a section of the Aboriginal leadership. Notwithstanding this political balancing act, the document cannot disguise the devastating social impact of the intervention on Aboriginal communities.

More than 15,000 Aboriginal pensioners and welfare recipients in 73 prescribed communities in the NT are now subject to income management—double the number "quarantined" by the previous Howard government. This, the report claims, has led to increased spending on food.

No serious evidence, however, is provided to back up this assertion. Rather, the report admits that there is "widespread disillusionment, resentment and anger", "indignation", "confusion and anxiety", "frustration", "embarrassment", and "humiliation" over income management.

The report goes on to state that most communities observed "little or no perceived change in the safety and well-being of

Aboriginal children as a result of the NTER [Northern Territory Emergency Response]".

Promises of child services, education facilities and alcohol and substance abuse rehabilitation, the report continues, have not materialised in most NT Aboriginal communities. And up until last month, only 60 percent of children examined by intervention doctors in the past year have been provided with follow-up treatment.

While the media and the former Howard government claimed that pedophiles and pornographers were rampant in Aboriginal communities, the report provides no evidence to substantiate these claims. It notes instead that no one has been arrested for child sexual abuse since the intervention was launched, and that from June 2007 until May 2008 only one person was prosecuted for pornography violations.

The report does refer to one child sexual abuse case, but explains that the girl in question was only visited once by a health counsellor. There was no follow-up consultation, nor were the girl, her family or the community ever contacted again by health officials.

Nor have government promises to establish "safe houses" for victims of domestic abuse materialised. The only "safe house" set up since the intervention consisted of several shipping containers grouped in a circle. The shipping containers were from the Howard government's infamous immigration detention centres and used to incarcerate refugees.

The report makes clear that Aboriginal housing remains in a horrendous state. The only homes constructed since the intervention were for Government Business Managers, the highly paid bureaucrats sent to impose government policy on remote Aboriginal communities. Promised maintenance from the intervention has been non-existent or minimal and in some cases only consisted of painting the outside of homes. The review board also observes that the intervention is "driving large numbers of Aboriginal people into urban centres on a permanent basis."

The review board explains that the Rudd government's ongoing suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) constitutes a violation of international human rights laws and United Nations principles on the rights of indigenous peoples. It concludes by calling on Labor to abolish compulsory income management and to replace it with a voluntary system, or one based on individual recommendations from child protection agencies, and the restoration of the RDA.

Other proposals include government compensation for the five-year compulsory acquisition of Aboriginal land; increased funding to health, education, housing and other social services; and the establishment of "genuine government collaboration with Aboriginal communities".

The Labor government's response to these appeals has been dismissive and cynical.

Indigenous affairs minister Jenny Macklin claimed on October 23 that she "agreed" with the principal recommendations but declared that the intervention would nevertheless continue.

Income management would remain compulsory, she said, and work would begin on a "new long-term development phase" that would, in effect, make the measures permanent. The revised

measures, she also stated, would be compatible with the Racial Discrimination Act.

Far from modifying the intervention, the Labor government intends to extend its measures to ever-wider sections of the population. Income management has already been imposed on four far-north Queensland communities, and will commence on November 24 in Western Australia's Kimberley region and in the south-eastern Perth suburb of Cannington, a largely non-indigenous working class suburb. In June, legislation was introduced by the government to cancel welfare payments to parents for 13 weeks if they fail to provide a "reasonable excuse" for their children not regularly attending school. The measure will affect over 3,000 children in six NT Aboriginal communities and in Cannington.

Macklin has justified her approach by claiming that income management is "popular" with Aboriginal women. She has failed to provide any evidence, and not a single journalist has asked her to provide it. At her October 23 media conference she arrogantly declared that Aboriginal communities needed to demonstrate "increased levels of personal and community responsibility".

Right-wing Liberal Opposition spokesman, Tony Abbott, immediately congratulated Macklin's announcement that compulsory income management would continue. "I think she does seem to be moving from a kind of conventional lefty to sensible pragmatist, and that's a good thing obviously," Abbott declared.

The real impact of the intervention was demonstrated this week when the Sunrise Health Service, a Northern Territory health agency, reported that anaemia rates among children aged between six months and five years had increased from 32 to 55 percent in the last 18 months in NT Aboriginal communities east of Katherine. Sunrise Health CEO Irene Fisher told the media that intervention "income management" was a major factor in the increase.

Fisher also pointed to the disturbing number of mothers-to-be who did not attend the clinic until they were at a very advanced stage of pregnancy. "I think it's fear, particularly for young teenagers having consensual sex. They're worried that their partners are going to be charged with pedophilia," she said.



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