Australia: “Closing the Gap”—another Rudd Labor fraud

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Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered his first annual "progress report" in late February on his government's pledge to "Close the Gap" between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in health and education. This was the prime minister's first major statement on indigenous policy since his national apology to members of the Stolen Generation in February 2008.

Rudd noted the 17-year life expectancy gap between Aboriginal people and the rest of the population, the high mortality rate of Aboriginal babies and the persistence of preventable diseases in remote communities, but claimed that "important progress" had been made over the year.

The prime minister went on to announce various spending proposals—$806 million over four years to deal with chronic illnesses, 35 new community centres for Aboriginal families and the construction or upgrading of 9,000 homes in indigenous communities. These amounts represent a pittance compared to the billions of dollars urgently required to lift Australia's indigenous people out of poverty.

The Labor government, Rudd insisted, was building "a bridge of respect between indigenous and other Australians," which would "turn the dream of reconciliation into a reality that we could see and feel and know".

Notwithstanding his feigned concern, Rudd's speech was crafted to divert attention from his government's ongoing expansion of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, or "intervention," and to sow confusion among ordinary people about its real agenda.

The "intervention" was initiated in June 2007 by then Prime Minister John Howard's conservative coalition government amid sensationalist media claims of widespread paedophilia and pornography in Northern Territory (NT) Aboriginal communities. Howard, with Labor Party backing, declared that emergency measures, including the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975), were necessary to save indigenous children from sexual abuse.

In reality, the intervention had nothing to do with "protecting the children". Its real purpose was to axe Aboriginal welfare rights via "income management," break up so-called "unviable" remote indigenous communities, and impose government control over indigenous land on behalf of the mining corporations and agribusinesses (See "Australian government imposes military-police regime on Aborigines").

Since its election in November 2007, and behind a smokescreen of "respect" and "reconciliation" rhetoric, the Rudd government has taken the intervention far further than its predecessor ever did.

"Income management," which compulsorily diverts 50 percent of social welfare and pension money due to Aboriginal people into government approved store-cards, has been imposed on more than 15,200 indigenous people in the Northern Territory—almost three times more than under Howard. Moreover, NT indigenous parents now have their welfare suspended if any of their children fail to attend school without "reasonable excuse". The government's "baby bonus" and "stimulus package" payments are subjected to income management and all these measures have been extended to indigenous welfare recipients in northern Queensland and in the Kimberly region in Western Australia, as well as non-indigenous families in the Perth suburb of Cannington.

Rudd and his indigenous affairs minister Jenny Macklin insist that their policies are not "ideologically driven" but "evidence-based". The Labor government also claims that "income management" has improved health outcomes for Aboriginal children, reduced alcohol and substance abuse problems in Aboriginal communities, and won widespread support.

No serious evidence has been presented to back these assertions, because none can be found. In fact, last year the government rejected the findings of its own intervention review board, which noted that the intervention had no popular support in indigenous communities. It called for an end to compulsory income management.

Health and education

Contrary to Labor's claims, the intervention has drastically worsened the social position of tens of thousands of indigenous people in the NT. Hundreds of Aborigines are being forced out of remote settlements and into already over-crowded town camps, intensifying the already serious problems of alcoholism and drug abuse. This, in turn, has further impacted on children, exacerbated health problems and led, in some communities, to lower school attendances.

According to NT education department figures released in early March, attendance at remote schools has dropped by 2 percent during the past 12 months.

A recent survey of child anaemia rates by Sunrise Health Services, which provides medical care to remote communities in the NT's Katherine area, found that in December 2006, 20 percent of children under five in the Katherine region were anaemic. A year later, this had increased to 36 percent, and, by December 2008, it was 55 percent. In other words, the

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rate had trebled over three years—more than half of which were spent under the intervention.

Sunrise Health Services has also noted a dramatic increase in low birth weight rates. In the six months leading up to the intervention 9 percent of indigenous children in Katherine had low birth weights. This increased to 12 percent by December 2007 and to 18 percent six months later. By the end of 2008 it had risen to 19 percent.

Housing

Rudd boasted in his "Close the Gap" speech that the building of 80 new homes in NT Aboriginal communities during the past 12 months constituted further evidence of government "progress".

But 27 of these homes were commissioned before the intervention was launched in 2007, and 50 were built for the highly-paid government "business managers," or intervention bureaucrats, leaving, at most, three new houses for Aboriginal families. According to current estimates, homes in NT Aboriginal communities accommodate an average of 15 residents.

Rudd's "Close the Gap" promise to build or upgrade 9,000 homes, moreover, will only affect 26 indigenous communities—those deemed by the government to be economically viable. Conditions in the rest will continue to deteriorate, leading inevitably to a drift by residents to the "economically viable" communities, giving rise to yet another housing crisis.

NSW Aboriginal Land Council head Geoff Scott told the media that the government's indigenous housing policy was a disaster. "They've just thrown a hand grenade and stepped back," he said. "People's anxiety levels are going through the roof, and the level of trust in any government has gone."

The Rudd government's housing funds, moreover, will only be provided if the nominated indigenous communities agree to sign away their land to the state authorities via 40- and 99-year leases.

This political blackmail was part of the initial intervention, but under Labor it now applies to any of the 650 indigenous community housing organisations that seek government housing funds. A recent letter from indigenous affairs minister Macklin directed state and territory housing ministers not to spend any federal housing funds on public housing in remote Aboriginal communities unless a minimum 40-year lease on the land was obtained first.

The letter also demanded that the states and territories push through "tenancy management reforms" to ensure that landowners are not able to intervene in the relationship between the government, as the public housing provider, and the Aboriginal tenant.

More police

A week after Rudd's speech, his government announced it would provide extra funding for 66 additional Australian Federal Police officers to maintain the NT intervention and to build five more permanent and 10 temporary police stations in remote communities.

The government will also continue to fund the National Indigenous Violence and Child Abuse Intelligence Taskforce (NIVCAIT). This highly secretive organisation, which was established in 2006 to investigate claims that Aboriginal communities were awash with paedophiles, carries unprecedented powers. Those questioned by NIVCAIT examiners cannot publicly reveal why they have been summonsed or any information about their interrogation. Anyone refusing to comply can be jailed for up to five years.

In the past two years the NIVCAIT has been unable to substantiate any of the government and media slanders that paedophiles and pornography gangs were operating in NT Aboriginal communities.

More manoeuvres

During the past two weeks, following criticism by Amnesty International that the intervention violated the democratic rights of NT Aborigines, the Labor government has informed the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that it plans to restore the Racial Discrimination Act this year. Indigenous affairs minister Macklin also announced that Labor would ratify the UN's 2007 declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples.

Yesterday Macklin made the promised ratification statement in parliament house, declaring: "The declaration gives us new impetus to work together in trust and good faith to advance human rights and close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians."

But the UN ratification—like Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, his recent "Close the Gap" speech and his other much-publicised promises—will not change anything for ordinary Aboriginal people. Prior to yesterday's statement, Macklin assured the media that ratification of the UN declaration was "not legally binding" and "will not affect Australian laws".

NT indigenous affairs minister Alison Anderson later admitted that the ratification meant "absolutely nothing" to indigenous people in the NT. At the same time, government ministers have emphasised that any restoration of the Racial Discrimination Act will end neither income management nor any of the other punitive measures being conducted under Rudd Labor's "good faith" intervention.

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