Australia: UN envoy denounced after he describes Northern Territory “intervention” as racist

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All factions of the Australia’s political establishment came together last month to condemn James Anaya, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights, after he described the federal government’s Northern Territory Emergency Response or “intervention”, as racist and discriminatory. Anaya spent 11 days visiting Aboriginal communities in Australia last month.

The intervention was initiated by the former Howard government with Labor Party support in June 2007 under the claim that it was to protect Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory from child abuse.

The legislation, which has been maintained by the Labor government, includes the compulsory “income management” of Aboriginal welfare and pensions, suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act and the seizure of Aboriginal-controlled land. The measures have nothing to do with protecting indigenous children but were initiated to assist corporate Australia gain access to valuable Aboriginal land, cheap labour and to trial-run welfare cost-cutting policies on NT indigenous communities.

Anaya told the media on August 28 that the intervention was “stigmatising already stigmatised communities” and violated various human rights conventions and treaties to which Australia is a signatory. These include the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

While Anaya called for reinstatement of the Racial Discrimination Act, his criticisms were limited and diplomatically couched. A Harvard Law School graduate and head of the University of Arizona’s human rights laws and policy department, he praised Prime Minister Rudd’s national apology to the Stolen Generations and Labor’s empty promises to “close the gap” between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians’ health, education and housing inequality.

The official response to his comments, however, was immediate and universally hostile. Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin, who previously declared that the UN rapporteur’s visit would provide “an extraordinary opportunity for an honest and open exchange of views,” rejected Anaya’s comments.

The intervention, Macklin declared, was defending “the rights of the most vulnerable, particularly children” and would provide them with “a safe and happy life.” “These are the rights that I think need to be balanced against other human rights,” she said.

Macklin was backed by Mal Brough, intervention architect and indigenous affairs minister in the Howard government, who said he was “sick and tired” of people like Anaya “pontificating about human rights” and “telling us that we’ve offended some law.” This was echoed by Liberal Party indigenous affairs spokesman Tony Abbott, who declared that the UN envoy’s comments were “sanctimonious claptrap” from an “armchair critic”. ALP official Warren Mundine, and the party’s first indigenous president, concurred telling the media that Anaya’s report should be “thrown in the bin”.

The Murdoch media was in full flight with an editorial in the *Australian* newspaper describing Anaya’s statement as “ill-informed” and urged the Rudd government not to be “diverted” by the UN official.

On September 2, *Australian* commentator Janet Albrechtsen launched into Anaya with a diatribe blaming Aborigines for the social conditions created by centuries of oppression and government neglect. Anaya, she declared, should have spent his time focusing on “the need for indigenous people to be accountable for the crimes of violence and neglect so rampant in their communities.” Rudd’s indigenous affairs minister deserved a “hooray” for opposing Anaya, she continued.

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Writing in Murdoch's tabloid *Sunday Telegraph*, Akerman fulminated against the UN envoy in an August 30 column entitled "A future free of UN meddling". In a cruder version of Albrechtsen's "blame the victims" comment, Akerman branded Anaya as "totally unrealistic" because "some violence in the black community now and historically has been caused by other blacks" and that "homes purpose built for Aboriginal Australians get trashed, only to be rebuilt and trashed again, costing taxpayers large sums of money."

Notwithstanding the hysterical reaction, the UN envoy's comments were simply statements of fact about the discriminatory character of the intervention and the situation facing Australia's indigenous population. In his interim report, Anaya's recommendations were limited to calling for the government to bring its policies and legislation into line with UN conventions and guidelines and urging closer collaboration with UN bodies. His comments, however, did point to the gulf between reality and the government's lies.

Macklin insists that health, education and conditions of life have improved in indigenous communities since the imposition of "income management". But no evidence has been provided to prove these assertions. Last year the Rudd government rejected the findings of an intervention review board which interviewed thousands of indigenous people in the NT and concluded that compulsory income management should be abolished. The review board found no popular support for the measure.

Hundreds of Aborigines are being forced out of remote communities by the income management measures and funding cuts to "homeland settlements"—small communities on traditional Aboriginal lands. Under Labor, total government funding to some 580 "homeland" communities deemed "non-viable" will be frozen at $36 million per annum. An estimated 10,000 people will directly be affected and encouraged to move into already over-crowded urban settlements and town camps, intensifying the already serious problems of alcoholism, drug abuse and other social evils that impact heavily on children.

Health indices also give the lie to government claims. A survey by Sunrise Health Services in the NT's Katherine area found that anemia rates in indigenous children under five in the region had trebled from 2006 to 2008. In December 2008, almost 18 months after the intervention began 55 percent of children under five were anemic. The survey also revealed that there had been dramatic increases in low birth weight rates—from 9 percent of indigenous children in early 2007 to 19 percent by the end of 2008.

According to Australian Indigenous Doctors Association and the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the Northern Territory, income management has resulted in near starvation and demonstrable harm in many indigenous communities.

Education for indigenous children in the NT is catastrophic: 94 percent of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory have no preschool, 56 percent have no secondary school and 27 percent have a primary school more than 50 kilometres away.

The Rudd government promised to provide funds for the construction of hundreds of new houses and repair others in indigenous communities. But in the past two years only a handful of homes have been built, and these were commissioned prior to the intervention.

Labor has also made clear that no homes will be built, or any other facilities provided, unless Aboriginal housing cooperatives and local government bodies hand over their land to the state authorities via 40- and 99-year leases. Macklin, who is currently attempting to impose government control on Alice Springs town camps, reiterated this threat in parliament on August 21, a few days before Anaya's comments.

As for the lurid government and media allegations in 2007 that organised pedophile and pornography gangs were operating in indigenous communities, the Northern Territory police or the Australian Federal Police have been found no evidence to back these slanders.

Under Labor, "income management" has now been imposed on more than 15,000 Aboriginal pensioners and welfare recipients and extended to four far-north Queensland communities and others in Western Australia's Kimberley region. It is also being trialled in the south-eastern Perth suburb of Cannington, a largely non-indigenous working class suburb.

The government's intervention measures are therefore the first stage of an integrated attack on all sections of the working class and poor. Confronted with the impact of the global financial crisis on its budget bottom line, the Rudd government is preparing to extend this and other socially regressive measures to all welfare recipients. That is why the media and political establishment are so sensitive to any criticism of the regressive NT intervention.

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