

Australian government deepens Northern Territory “intervention”

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The Gillard government last month marked the fourth anniversary of the Northern Territory Emergency Response Intervention by announcing a further intensification of its regressive measures against Aboriginal people. A “second stage” of the intervention will commence next year, when the emergency legislation was due to expire.

Launched in 2007 by the Howard government, fully backed by the Labor Party, the intervention has become a testing ground for a continuous assault on welfare recipients, indigenous and non-indigenous alike. Labor’s next phase seeks to go further in closing “unviable” remote communities, opening up Aboriginal land for exploitation and creating a “work-ready” cheap labour force.

Accordingly, the announcement was widely welcomed by the corporate media. An editorial in Murdoch’s *Australian* applauded the extension of welfare measures to the wider community, suggesting that this could well prove to be “the most important legacy of the Rudd-Gillard years.”

Earlier, Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin had launched a discussion paper, *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory*. At the media conference, Gillard made clear the connection with the government’s May budget, which included cuts of \$22 billion, specifically targeting single parents, disabled workers and the unemployed. “We are bringing a tough minded approach,” she said. “I mean the world doesn’t owe Australians capable of work a living; they’ve got to get out and make that living themselves.”

Stronger Futures claimed to be the basis for “genuine dialogue and partnership” with Aboriginal people. As with the Labor government’s “consultations” in 2009, which were aimed at manufacturing “consent” for discriminatory measures, the real concerns of ordinary Aboriginal people—especially those who have been directly affected—will be ignored or censored. Before *Stronger Futures* was even translated into any Aboriginal languages, six weeks of consultations were hastily scheduled to cover more than 90 communities.

The document reviews the intervention’s so-called

achievements. Over 16,000 people in the Northern Territory (NT) are now under income management—that is, their welfare payments are subject to “quarantining”, or diversion into BasicsCards that can only be used for authorised purchases from selected outlets. Over four years, 310 houses have been built and 1,400 refurbished—a tiny fraction of what is desperately needed to overcome generations of government neglect and denial of services.

According to the document, 22 additional family workers and 185 teachers, along with 15 mobile child protection workers positions have been created, while 10,600 health checks have been conducted on children. The figures again point to the completely inadequate services available to Aboriginal people in NT communities, most of which would have received few or no extra services.

Gillard and Macklin claimed that “families are better fed, clothed and less money is being spent on alcohol and gambling.” However, drinking and gambling are just symptoms of the oppressive conditions of poverty and unemployment facing Aborigines. The intervention blamed Aborigines for the social crisis they confront and imposed punitive measures to divert attention from the failure of successive governments to address the underlying social causes.

Stronger Futures admits that the conditions of life for Aborigines in the NT are worse than anywhere else in the country, with life expectancy for indigenous males still 17 years lower than for non-indigenous Australian men. The infant mortality rate is the highest in Australia, three times the rate of non-indigenous infants in the NT.

The document targets three priority areas for the second phase of the intervention: improving school attendance and educational achievement, economic development and employment, and tackling alcohol abuse.

Stronger Futures speaks approvingly of the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM) trials initiated in 14 NT schools and 30 Queensland schools during 2009. SEAM allows for the suspension of parents’ welfare payments for up to 13 weeks if their children are not

enrolled in school or fail to maintain regular attendance.

Up until May this year, 56 parents in the NT had suffered such welfare cut-offs, but the document makes no mention of this, or the declining attendance rate in NT schools. In February, NT Education Minister Chris Burns admitted that average school attendance in remote areas was around 56 percent. In the remote communities of Maningrida and Lajamanu attendance had dropped to 31 percent and 37 percent respectively, a fall of over 10 percent in 2009-2010.

Educators and community members believe that the declining attendance is partly due to the axing of bilingual school programs, which have been replaced with the compulsory teaching of English for four hours per day.

This year the NT government introduced a number of measures to supposedly address declining school attendance. These included prosecutions and on-the-spot fines, the cutting of income support, the establishment of new truancy agencies and a new agreement with retailers to deny service to students without a school leave pass during school hours.

Stronger Futures states that the federal government supports these changes, indicating their possible extension elsewhere, making the NT regime another test case for punitive anti-welfare measures.

Under the heading of economic development and employment, *Stronger Futures* stresses that “welfare reform” is a “tool in promoting and encouraging family responsibility” to “break the cycle of welfare dependency”. In particular, the document foreshadows a review of remote participation and employment services, with new arrangements to be set in place by next July. This is likely to be a step toward removing the Remote Exemption Allowance, which excuses welfare participants in some areas from looking for work and provides a small additional financial payment.

The exemption has long been a bone of contention in establishment circles, including right-wing think tanks such as the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS). The provision is regarded as a barrier to forcing people out of remote communities and into cheap labour jobs. Forcing people from their homelands into the targeted “growth” towns—often hundreds of kilometres away—would cut individuals off from their community and family ties.

In order to encourage young people to leave remote communities, the Gillard government last month announced funding of \$3.75 million to build accommodation at Tennant Creek to house youth from remote areas studying, training or looking for employment. Long-term leases are also being established over Aboriginal land to give open access to

mining and other forms of business exploitation.

These processes, all referred to in *Stronger Futures*, have also been featured in the Murdoch media. Last month, the *Australian's* Nicholas Rothwell, a prominent supporter of the intervention, highlighted a report by Bob Beadman, the recently retired NT co-ordinator general for remote services. Beadman called for not only the scrapping of the Remote Exemption Allowance but welfare payments generally.

Also in the *Australian*, Helen Hughes, Sara Hudson and Mark Hughes from the CIS blamed Aboriginal land rights and communal ownership for “remote indigenous poverty and dysfunction.” Economic prosperity for Aboriginal people, they argued, could be achieved only by establishing private property rights. Any ongoing government commitment to provide public housing to Aboriginal communities was derided as wasteful.

As for the third priority, alcohol abuse, *Stronger Futures* treats this as a “law and order” issue not a symptom of underlying social, economic and psychological problems. The paper endorses continued alcohol restrictions in Aboriginal areas, supporting the NT government’s introduction of ID scanners and a Banned Drinkers Register.

The intervention has never had anything to do with overcoming Aboriginal poverty or protecting Aboriginal children. The current “consultation” is a smokescreen for implementing a pre-determined agenda, in particular welfare cutting and the removal of all barriers to low-wage labour and corporate profit. The “second stage” like the first, will use Aboriginal people to test measures for use against the entire working class.



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