

Australian PM attacks “lifestyle choice” of poverty-stricken Aborigines

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Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s contempt for poverty-stricken Aborigines living in outback areas was on open display last week when he was asked about plans by the Western Australian (WA) state government to completely shut down many communities.

“What we can’t do is endlessly subsidise lifestyle choices if these choices are not conducive to the kind of full participation in Australian society that everyone should have,” Abbott told the media in the WA gold-mining town of Kalgoorlie last Wednesday.

To claim that Aborigines are indulging in a “lifestyle choice,” akin to that of layers of the upper middle class moving to an idyllic rural setting, is grotesque. The conditions in remote Aboriginal communities, which lack jobs, proper housing and essential services, are frequently described as “third world” or even “fourth world.”

People “choose” to remain because of the connection they have to family, friends and tradition, and the alternatives are even worse. To move out means, in most cases, to lead a marginal, alienated existence on the fringes of towns or amid unemployment and poverty in major cities.

Yet this is exactly what the WA government is preparing to force these residents to do. It has already made threats to shut down 150, or more than half, of the 274 remote indigenous communities in the state. It will render up to 12,000 Aboriginal men, women and children homeless, driving them into under-resourced towns and urban centres.

The aim of closing Aboriginal communities is not simply to cut budget spending by eliminating even the grossly inadequate basic services in these settlements, but to fully open up areas of land to pastoral, mining and other business interests.

The plans to shut the communities were flagged last September in response to the federal Abbott government’s decision to cease funding municipal and essential services, such as power, water and rubbish collection, in remote indigenous settlements and hand over full responsibility to the state government.

The federal government, which previously provided two-thirds of this funding for such communities, handed the WA government a \$90 million one-off payment as part of the deal. The South Australian government was offered \$10 million. An estimated 60 indigenous communities could be closed and 4,000 people rendered homeless in that state.

Aboriginal people in these communities, also known as homelands or outstations, are among the most poverty-stricken, vulnerable and oppressed sections of Australian society. Conditions of life are harsh in the extreme.

Far from the government “endlessly subsidising” remote communities, successive governments, Liberal-National and Labor alike, have been engaged in decades of underfunding and neglect aimed at starving residents out. Access to electricity, running water and sewerage is rudimentary, if these services exist at all, and housing is inadequate, overcrowded or dilapidated to the point of being uninhabitable.

The decision to live in outstations and homelands is not “a lifestyle choice.” A return to traditional lands for many is the only means of escaping from the unemployment, alcoholism, substance abuse and other horrors in the urban ghettos and town fringes.

What the government’s decision will mean is shown by the 2011 closure of the Oombulgurru settlement in WA’s far north and the forced relocation of its 107 residents.

After years of inadequate government funding, the

community was deemed “unviable” and its houses bulldozed. Homeless Oombulgurru residents were forced onto the fringes of larger regional towns, where they suffered unemployment and the social ills produced by poverty—malnutrition, substance abuse and suicide, even among children as young as 12.

Abbott’s “lifestyle choice” remark was condemned by Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten and an array of Aboriginal bureaucrats, including Noel Pearson and former Labor Party president Warren Mundine, who now chairs Abbott’s Indigenous Advisory Council. These denunciations are utterly cynical.

The criticisms were mainly directed against Abbott’s choice of words, not the substance of the policy. The deliberate run-down and closure of remote communities has been taking place for more than a decade, beginning under the Liberal-National government of Prime Minister John Howard and continuing under successive Labor and Coalition governments.

These socially destructive policies, which determine the fate of Aboriginal communities according to whether they are “economically viable”—i.e., whether profits can be extracted from them, one way or another—have been fully endorsed by Pearson and Mundine and other well-paid Aboriginal bureaucrats.

Abbott’s call for more government cuts to remote communities is in line with the “Northern Territory intervention,” the police-military takeover of Aboriginal settlements launched by the Howard government in 2007.

The intervention’s array of anti-democratic measures, including welfare income management and alcohol bans, were supported by Labor from the outset and extended by the subsequent Labor governments. In 2009, the federal and Northern Territory Labor governments introduced “Working Futures” with the aim of forcing an estimated 10,000 Aboriginal people living in 580 settlements into 20 so-called growth towns.

Abbott’s callous indifference to the fate of Aborigines in remote communities speaks volumes about the attitude of the entire political establishment and its occasional hypocritical expressions of concern about the fate of Aboriginal people.

As Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Abbott recently tabled in federal parliament the seventh “Closing the

Gap” report, which is meant to record basic social indices among indigenous people, such as infant mortality, life expectancy and education outcomes. He was forced to concede that many of the limited indicators were static or getting worse, not better. He then declared: “There is no more important cause than ensuring that Indigenous people enter fully into their rightful heritage as the first and as first-class citizens of this country.”

In reality, the policies of the Abbott government and its predecessors are directly responsible for the social crisis facing Aborigines. Nothing was said in the report about the cuts to remote community funding and the more than \$540 million slashed from indigenous programs in last May’s federal budget.

Moreover, the new attacks on Aborigines are a warning of the savage austerity measures being prepared against the working class as a whole. Regressive policies such as welfare quarantining, first trialled on Aborigines in the Northern Territory, have already been rolled out in working class suburbs.

While Abbott has targeted remote indigenous communities, his declaration foreshadows a far broader assault on the “lifestyle choices” of workers and youth compelled to subsist on poverty-level welfare payments.



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