

Australian Labor government responds to social crisis in Alice Springs with law-and-order measures

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Last Tuesday, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese visited the Northern Territory (NT) town of Alice Springs, where he pledged greater resources for the police and other measures of a reactionary law-and-order character.

The rapidly scheduled visit, and the measures announced, were a direct response to an hysterical campaign by the media and the most right-wing sections of the political establishment.

In the weeks prior to Albanese's arrival, the Murdoch press had run a stream of lurid and sensationalist articles alleging, with very little concrete evidence, a major crime wave in the town, which like the rest of the NT has high rates of poverty and a large Aboriginal population.

Liberal-National Coalition leader Peter Dutton had called for a return of the 2007 NT intervention, including the deployment of Australian Federal Police and defence force personnel to the NT.

Albanese has not gone that far, yet. He did, however, reimpose intervention-era alcohol bans that were put in place by the previous federal Labor government in 2012, and which automatically expired after a decade last year.

Albanese announced an immediate ban in Alice Springs on takeaway alcohol sales on Mondays and Tuesdays, on top of existing restrictions on Sundays. On other days, takeaway alcohol can only be sold between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m., limited to one purchase per person each day.

A federal government press statement, coinciding with Albanese's visit, asserted that the Labor administration would "invest \$48.8m over two years." In line with the broader law and order campaign, the chief priorities would be "to tackle crime, keep women and children safe and provide support to young people in communities."

The money includes \$14.2 million to boost police numbers in Alice Springs and \$2 million for CCTV cameras and lighting. The additional funding for social services in the town is paltry. Just \$2 million will be allocated to domestic violence services, scarcely the equivalent of the value of two small houses in a capital city. Some \$25 million for "community and safety services" is merely a continuation of existing funding arrangements that were set to expire at the end of next year.

More broadly, across the entire NT, the government has pledged \$19 million for indigenous health services and \$100 million for housing and essential services, only \$25 million of which has been

concretely allocated.

To describe this as a drop in an ocean of crying need would risk overstating matters. Amid a catastrophic social crisis in the NT, that has been deepening every year, the government is providing a pittance. The police, the only well-resourced entity in the territory, are being provided a further boon to enforce these horrendous social conditions, and to scapegoat and brutalise the victims, in the first instance Aboriginal youth.

To provide this right-wing agenda with a progressive veneer, the Albanese government is further entrenching the position of a privileged layer of Aboriginal bureaucrats. The police build-up and miserly expenditures on social services are ludicrously being billed as "community led."

The chief justification for this claim is the appointment of Dorrelle Anderson, the indigenous director of a domestic violence charity as Central Australian Regional Controller. She is to "consult" with remote communities on whether they wish discriminatory alcohol bans to be enforced on their community, and to provide the government with non-binding recommendations at the beginning of February.

In addition to boosting the repressive forces of the state, the entire thrust of the Labor government's response is to demonise the residents of Alice Springs and the NT more broadly as being responsible for the social crisis they confront.

This dovetails fully with the statements of police themselves and the media campaign spearheaded by the Murdoch media. The police have asserted an increase in crime rates in Alice Springs, including property damage (purportedly up 59.64 percent), commercial break-ins (55.76 percent) and alcohol-related assault (54.6) between 1 December 2021 and 30 November 2022.

The right-wing commentary has presented these as being the result almost entirely of the alcohol bans elapsing last year. In reality, these are mainly petty crimes of poverty and despair.

Figures prior to the pandemic showed that almost 45 percent of the roughly 61,000 Aboriginal people living in the NT were below the poverty line. Indigenous youth, in particular, have virtually no prospect of a future. They are blighted by a lack of access to education, housing and medical services, and have few chances of decent employment. They have, moreover, grown up under the repressive NT intervention, which at times had the character of a hostile military occupation.

In an indication of the official indifference to the social crisis, recent figures are scanty. But it is clear that the social situation is worsening, not improving. In explaining the crime figures in Alice Springs, NT residents have pointed to the fact that residents of remote communities are increasingly being forced to move to the town to access medical facilities and other services. Such communities have been hit by the broader inflation crisis, as well as price gouging, including for such essentials as food. Some are staying in the town with no employment or secure housing.

When torrential downpours sparked flooding earlier this month, remote communities cut off from roads and transport faced a major crisis. Ampilatwatja, one of those towns, is about 350 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs. Its population of 500 people have only the most rudimentary medical facilities. When one resident suffered a medical episode, transporting them for treatment proved a major logistical exercise.

Christine May, manager of the local clinic, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), “Because we do not have a sealed air strip, there was no way we could get anybody in or out.” She added: “People come out here to live because it’s their country... but when they need services, they’re very poorly served out here... It’s one of the biggest problems with living remotely.”

Another ABC report this month noted: “Over this Christmas and New Year’s period, the Salvation Army has seen a 30 percent surge in the number of clients dropping into their centres across the NT, compared to last year.” Many of the homeless were from remote communities, whose residents are frequently compelled to live in makeshift dwellings. Overcrowding is the norm. Hardly any such properties have air conditioning, under conditions where summer temperatures in the NT are frequently in excess of 40 degrees celsius.

The ABC article added: “In Alice Springs, only a handful of shelters still have space—but according to the Salvation Army, these shelters don’t accept children.”

The Northern Territory government is pressing ahead with changes to public housing rent, that will likely see costs soar. Rent is no longer to be charged based on income, being replaced by a flat rate of \$70 per bedroom a week, capped at \$280. Charity groups have warned that this will lead to a further increase in housing insecurity and homelessness in the NT, which is already among the worst in the country.

A number of community representatives have condemned the alcohol bans and the prospect of their reintroduction in remote areas. They have noted the punitive and racially-discriminatory character of such measures, as well as the fact that they do nothing to address the underlying social crisis.

NT youth are locked up at the highest levels in the country. A December report by the Australia Institute of Health and Welfare last December found: “In the Northern Territory, from the June quarter 2020 to the June quarter 2022 there continued to be a sharp increase in the rate of young people in detention on an average night from 6.6 per 10,000 in the June quarter 2020 to 21 per 10,000 in the June quarter 2022.” That figure compares with 1.1 to 2.2 per 10,000 in other states and territories. Frequently, 100 percent of juvenile detainees in the NT are Aboriginal.

The conditions in such facilities have previously been denounced

by international human rights groups as akin to torture. In 2016, an ABC investigation exposed the use of spit hoods, brutal beatings and other abuses at the Don Dale facility.

The role of the police, now being provided with a further boost by the Labor government, was underscored by the police killing of Aboriginal youth Kumanjaji Walker in the remote town of Yuendumu in 2019.

The police officer who shot Walker, Zachary Rolfe, was found not guilty of murder last year. In a text message to a friend published by the media, Rolfe had written: “Alice Springs sucks ha ha. The good thing is it’s like the Wild West and f*** all the rules in the job really... but it is a shit hole.” The police could do “cowboy stuff with no rules” in Alice.

The current campaign recalls the atmosphere whipped-up prior to the launch of the NT intervention in 2007. Lurid reports of child sexual abuse were broadcast by the media, led by the ABC. These were used as the pretext for the deployment of the military to the NT. There, the army enforced not only discriminatory measures, such as the alcohol bans, but further attacks on social conditions. These included denying residents their welfare payments, and instead providing them with “basics cards,” that could only be used at a handful of outlets.

In 2008, recently-elected Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued an apology to Aboriginal people for government crimes against them, including the forcible removal of children. The apology, lauded by liberal commentators and others, was a cynical fig leaf for Labor’s deepening of the intervention, which remained in place until 2012.

Similarly now, the Albanese government is proposing an indigenous “voice” to parliament. The establishment of the consultative body, which would need to be approved by a referendum, would do nothing to improve the social conditions of Aboriginal workers and youth, who are the most oppressed section of the working class. Instead it would further entrench a layer of privileged upper middle-class Aboriginal figures, as an another mechanism to maintain and enforce that oppression.



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