

Australia's Northern Territory schools crisis shows ongoing impact of 2007 "Intervention"

Leith Smith
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A phoney political debate has developed over the fact that the Northern Territory Labor government in Australia is maintaining a punitive school attendance-based funding model, implemented by the previous Country-Liberal government in 2015.

Labor has enforced this cost-cutting regime since taking office in 2016. As a result, many students are learning in buildings without power or water, and 78 remote communities have no access to local secondary education, resulting in high dropout rates and crime.

Worsening literacy and attendance rates plague the people of the territory, with 58 percent of all students and 85 percent of indigenous students falling below minimum literacy and numeracy standards.

The "effective enrolment" funding model, based on attendance rather than enrolment figures, has resulted in inadequate support for students and squalid conditions in schools. With attendance rates as low as 20 percent in some cases, this model is aimed particularly at cutting off support to remote Aboriginal communities.

The indigenous people of the Northern Territory (NT), who make up 30 percent of its population, have long faced such assaults on their basic social rights.

Recent comments by former Liberal-National Prime Ministers Tony Abbott and John Howard criticising the NT as a "failed state" because of the schools' crisis expose the hypocrisy of governments, past and present. Both politicians had a crucial role in decimating public services in the territory.

Abbott stated: "It doesn't appear as if a lot has changed over the 15 years that have gone by," claiming a "chronic failure of administration in Central Australia." Howard remarked: "I think what emerged from the events in the territory was a further indictment of the inability, the failure of the Northern Territory Government to provide the basic services."

But the education catastrophe affecting the impoverished indigenous population is inextricably linked to the police-state measures imposed in the territory via the 2007 Northern Territory National Emergency Response, or "Intervention." This was implemented near the end of Howard's government, in which Abbott was a key minister, with bipartisan support from Kevin Rudd's Labor Party opposition.

Ostensibly, the intervention was directed at protecting Aboriginal children from alleged domestic violence and neglect. What instead occurred was the imposition of a military-style regime, supervising welfare-stripping measures and the attempted closure of "economically unviable" remote communities.

Howard's government suspended the Racial Discrimination Act in the territory and introduced anti-democratic measures. Among them was the School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measures program, or SEAM. It targeted parents receiving social welfare whose children were not regularly attending school or were not enrolled. Families were forcibly cut off from welfare, but the program produced no improvement in student attendance.

Succeeding federal governments introduced legislation to strengthen such measures and extend them to other working-class areas of the country. The Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard essentially extended the intervention for a decade. It became a testing ground for potential use against all working-class households.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's current Labor government has refused to address the education crisis, as has the NT Labor government. Earlier this year, NT Education Minister Eva Lawler announced that a shift to enrolment-based funding would be made "within

five years,” effectively prolonging the attendance formula for the foreseeable future.

This is a further exposure of Labor’s false claims that the Voice referendum proposal would have improved the appalling conditions that many Aboriginal people are suffering.

Another result of the 2007 intervention was an increase in Aboriginal incarceration, which has risen to 84 percent of adult prisoners and 96 percent of youth detention. Most supposed government “indigenous expenditure” in the NT goes to running prisons holding indigenous inmates.

The defeat of the Voice referendum largely reflects the mounting working-class distrust in the Labor government and the political establishment as whole, including of their promises to improve indigenous conditions, while “saving money” in the process.

Working-class areas saw large no votes. Workers and youth in these areas also took the opportunity to cast ballots against the Labor government’s whole program of backing US-led wars and imposing cuts to living conditions.

Facing a cost-of-living crisis, with wages failing to meet steep inflation, they had no reason to believe that the Voice would provide “better outcomes” for indigenous people, one of the most vulnerable sections of the working class.

Given the shocking situation in NT schools, it is no surprise that workers have become disillusioned with Labor’s posturing and desperate attempts to put a progressive gloss on its program of war and austerity.



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