
What I Would Do?

Professor Judy Atkinson is Director of Gnibi, College of Indigenous Australian Peoples, Southern Cross University, Lismore. After writing and talking about violence in remote communities for two decades, Judy responds to the Federal Government's intervention in the Northern Territory.

I have been looking for solutions since 1992. If I were prime minister, with all his powers, what would I have done? Firstly I would understand and respond accordingly to the fact that this is not an issue isolated to "Aboriginal Lands" in the Northern Territory.

In the short term

In the short term, I would focus on a child centred approach to building child centred, child safe communities.

A child centred approach: My first question would be to ask what child safe places are already within communities. How can I support them? Often the safe house in the community is inhabited by a grannie on welfare, who opens her door to any child in need. She is someone who, somehow, like the miracle worker with loaves and fishes, can feed many children from her welfare cheque. I would support those people who are already doing hard jobs with little or no resources.

Secondly, I would ask for Aboriginal peoples living in remote Aboriginal communities, rural towns and urban centres to put up their hands if they wanted to be involved in a long term approach to building their futures, from within a child centred-child safe infrastructure. I would then, in the short term, begin to work with select communities from each region across Australia, to help build their capacity. I would do this with an understanding that each community I worked with, supported and resourced, would be obliged to work, in turn, with others near them.

In the short to medium term I would provide educational opportunities to increase skill development which could be piggybacked from one community to another.

Third, following from my child centred approach I would immediately start to build networks of workers, already out there, on the ground, and I would build from their knowledge and expertise, resourcing them to do their jobs without the stress levels they live with, on a day-to-day basis.

I would provide educational opportunities to workers so they feel capable of working with the child, who as described on page 67 of the Northern Territory report, saw his mother shot in the head and had to clean her brains up of the floor. I would ensure that workers have clear child trauma counselling skills by providing short courses for culturally safe crisis intervention.

There are both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers who have, as their fundamental work ethic, the rights of the child to live and learn in child safe, child friendly environments.

These workers would include police who are legislated to protect children from harm. Hence restricting access to alcohol and other drugs is an important part of their work responsibility. Social workers, and child protection officers who see the damage pornography does to the developing child would be encouraged to work with police to help restrict access to such material. I would charge mine workers, and mining companies for the behaviours of their employees, and others such as mechanics, school teachers, builders, who are found with such materials, on Aboriginal lands, in Aboriginal communities. I would expect school teachers to embed in their class curriculum, modalities and activities which heal trauma.

In the medium term

In the medium term, if I were the Prime Minister I would build into all that I do, a **community strengths based approach**, grounded in advancing education at all levels. The strengths based approach would provide educational opportunities for Indigenous Australians to acquire skills so they can

their own people, and others, for healthy early childhood development; education for life long learning, and education for healing.

Such educational packages would be both community based and tertiary delivered. They would have formal accreditation so that graduates could work in any field that helps build a society where children will always feel and be safe. This approach is an Indigenous employment strategy, and I would build that into my government's employment and enterprise strategies.

A long term approach embedded in education and quality research

In the longer term, if I were the prime minister, I would embed in all that I do, research on the ground. Those researchers undertaking professional doctorates, with scholarships for Indigenous Australians, would work with those working on the ground, and would document the activities and processes, so that in five or ten years time, I could show the Australian nation what works, why it works, and how it would work in the towns and regions of Everywhere.

I would expect then that we would be able to work together, all of us, to build a future for all people in this country. I would then be able to say to my senior bureaucrats: you now have the practice based evidence. Support these approaches, on behalf of all Australians. But I am not the prime minister. And I am sorry that I am not, for if I were this prime minister, I would ask of myself: am I now willing to say *sorry* for my government's inability to respond to this *long term* "emergency," an emergency that has existed over the ten years that I have been prime minister of this country? Am I willing to say sorry on behalf of my ministers, who have known of this crisis for many years, for their lack of will to do their jobs? Their inaction has profoundly deepened this so-called emergency. If I were the Prime Minister I would sit in deep soul searching about my lack of leadership in response to these critical needs, and I would acknowledge that in my mandate on behalf of all Australians, I have failed Aboriginal children today. And I would say... **Sorry**.

Life in Utopia

By Simon Quilty

Norman is the ambulance driver and general handyman for the health clinic in Utopia. He drives the troop carrier ambulance, changes the tyres and fan belts when it's needed, and can fix most things. I met him and became good friends when I was working as a locum Doctor in Central Australia earlier this year.

He and his wife and their growing family - four children under five years old, and two teenage daughters - live in a tin hut across from the doctor's three-bedroom house, and were my neighbours while I was working there.

Norman's home is constructed of corrugated iron on a concrete slab. It was the original doctors' house built over thirty years ago when white medicine first arrived. It's a single room about 6 meters long and three meters wide. The inside is dirty, from years of wear and the desert sand that finds its way into everything.

There's a single tap, and a single power point running two fridges, and an air conditioner that has been roughly cut through the wall. In the heat of summer when the temperature goes above 50, the family close all the doors and turn the air conditioner up, but it's still bloody hot in that little space with eight people packed in like sardines.

There are a few live wires poking out of a piece of PVC tube protruding from one of the walls and Norman has wrapped them up in plastic tape. He was told that an electrician and a plumber were on their way to fix all of these problems over two years ago, but still nothing has been done. He worries that little inquisitive fingers will explore the blue plastic tape, and yells at the kids if he finds them playing with it.