

After the NT Intervention: Violence up, Malnutrition up, Truancy up

It is the nature of ‘national emergencies’ that if they drag on for too long the media and public lose interest in them and the state that has promulgated the moral panic to allow draconian interventions will quietly alter the discourse and hope that the issue dissipates and costs no votes.

Given this standard scenario the posting of the latest Government Progress Report on the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) Intervention on the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) website on Thursday 22 October 2009 is truly remarkable.⁷⁰ This is a Report developed by a number of agencies, but it does not present the Intervention with the positive and sugary governmental spin to which the Australian public has become accustomed.

The NTER Intervention is now called ‘Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory’ so the discourse is being altered; and the Report was posted very quietly, but this is hardly surprising because findings in it are damning of its effectiveness.

The reporting is in two parts, the first overviewing measures, and the second providing statistical information on progress, measure-by-measure. It is the second Report that is of greatest interest because for the first time ever some information is provided for 2006–07 (pre-Intervention) and for 2007–08 and 2008–09 (post-Intervention).⁷¹

This second Report covers 83 pages and is detailed and not all measures are given multi-year comparative coverage. But for those that are, some of the findings are extremely disappointing. For example:

- On health, child health care referrals are down, as are specialist audiological and dental follow-ups from referrals and reported child malnutrition is up despite the 85 licenced stores, the 15,000 BasicsCards and the \$200 million income managed;
- On education, total enrolments and school attendance rates are marginally down despite the school breakfast and lunch programs and more and more police are working as truancy officers;
- On promoting law and order, alcohol, drug and substance abuse incidents are all up (p.32–33); domestic violence related incidents are up (p.33); and breaches of

⁷⁰ FaHCSIA, ‘NTER Reports’, (22 October 2009)

<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/Indigenous/pubs/nter_reports/Pages/closing_the_gap_nter.aspx>.

⁷¹ FaHCSIA, ‘NTER Monitoring Report 2’, (2009)

<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/Indigenous/pubs/nter_reports/Documents/closing_the_gap_nter/NTER_monitoring_report_p2.pdf> at 9 November 2009.

domestic violence orders are up (p.33) despite a far greater police presence. The most disturbing data are contained in Table 4.4.1 on p.35 which reports personal harm incidents reported to police: all categories are up except for sexual assault reports that are slightly down.

A number of observations can be made about these findings.

First and foremost, they are comparative pre- and post-Intervention in prescribed communities, but they are not comparative with any other group in Australian society so it is hard to say how relatively bad outcomes are. All that is clear is that where time series information is provided almost without exception things have gotten worse.

Second, the quality of the Report is highly variable so in some key areas like land reform and especially welfare reform and employment there is the standard reporting of current outputs and no comparative analysis. And in the area of income quarantining there is still fraught methodology so it is store operators rather than customers that are surveyed, so while 68.2 per cent of store operators report more healthy food purchased, it is unclear if this 'more' is in dollar terms or quantity; and who is doing the purchasing? Interestingly, store operators report no change in tobacco purchase.

It is notable that there has been no serious coverage of this Report in *The Australian* newspaper, the unrelenting champion of the Intervention, which raises serious questions about its journalistic integrity and/or editorial censorship. The rival Fairfax Media has given the Report some coverage, for the first time on 31 October 2009 over a week after its posting.⁷²

The Ministerial Office response to questions about these poor outcomes has been that the negative comparisons reflect better state surveillance of Aboriginal subjects and their misdemeanours. This might explain the statistics, but surely not the deteriorating outcomes.

The Rudd Government must be commended for the efforts its bureaucracy, in partnership with the NT Government, is investing in rigorously and transparently monitoring the effectiveness of Intervention measures. But there is far too little investment being made in analysing why things are not improving. Fruitful areas for policy investigation might include the following:

First, can sustained race-based measures really deliver substantive equality, as recently asked by Sarah Burnside?⁷³ It might be time for the Rudd Government to demonstrate some decisiveness on this issue, instead of looking for tricky

⁷² See Yuko Narushima, 'NT intervention failing to make a difference', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (online), October 31 2009 <<http://www.smh.com.au/national/nt-intervention-failing-to-make-a-difference-report-20091030-hpr8.html#ixzz2Akb9Jobv>>.

⁷³ Sarah Burnside, 'Macklin's Special Treatment', *New Matilda* (online), 4 November 2009 <<http://newmatilda.com/2009/11/04/macklins-special-treatment>>.

technocratic-legal avenues to make the *Racial Discrimination Act's* tolerance of special measures comply with Intervention measures on which its own agencies are reporting poor or negative progress.

Second, can top down statistical goals, even if endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), ensure outcomes, if they are not negotiated with the purported subjects of the neoliberal state's improvement project? The Government's own research advisory agency the Productivity Commission raised this question as COAG was signing off on the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap).⁷⁴ This locks in an approach agreed by the Commonwealth and States and Territories for the next decade, conveniently but unfortunately during an interregnum when there is no national Indigenous representative organisation with whom to negotiate.

The Rudd Government should seriously consider the Productivity Commission's advice on what works: ⁷⁵ partnerships, bottom-up rather than top-down approaches, good governance—including by governments—and sustained support on an equitable needs basis.

I am in agreement with the Productivity Commission. It is imperative to concentrate on what has, and continues, to work; to support success and develop and replicate its key features. It is essential to engage with the reality of Indigenous heterogeneity of both circumstances and aspirations and tailor state approaches to fit. There is too much searching for technical statistical solutions to deeply entrenched and very human problems of disadvantage. Such approaches will not accurately measure, let alone fix, what matters, the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians.

The latest, and arguably most comprehensive, findings on progress in Northern Territory prescribed communities are of great concern especially given the significant \$1 billion plus public investment. These findings resonate worryingly with American political scientist Murray Edelman's sage observations decades ago about 'words that succeed and policies that fail'. And this is just in the Northern Territory, what about the rest of Australia?

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⁷⁴ Productivity Commission, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009*, (12 September 2012) <http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/Indigenous/keyindicators2009> at 30 October 2012.

⁷⁵ Ibid.