

## **NT Intervention Three Years On: Government's Progress Report is Disturbing**

Today marks the third anniversary of the Howard Government's 'National Emergency' Intervention in 73 prescribed Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. 'In the name of the child' the basic liberties of Aboriginal people were suspended and a draconian and paternalistic state project of improvement was launched to 'stabilise, normalise and then exit' these communities: stabilisation was to take one year and normalisation four.

On Saturday June 19, the latest six-monthly *Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory Monitoring Report—July to December 2009* was posted on the FaHCSIA website in two detailed parts totalling more than 100 pages.<sup>76</sup> Despite a six-month delay as the Report was compiled, it provides the latest information collected by a variety of government agencies on the Intervention.

This is a serious and disturbing Report that unfortunately is accompanied by the now almost *de rigueur* positive spin media release from Ministers Jenny Macklin and Warren Snowden—'Improving community safety under the Northern Territory Emergency Response'. The word 'improving' is ambiguous and provocative because there is an increase across a wide range of violence and other crime statistics.

As in the last Report for January to July 2009 multi-year comparative coverage from the time of the Intervention is only available for schooling, health and crime and the best data are provided by Northern Territory agencies.<sup>77</sup>

On schooling, enrolments are up slightly, but attendance has declined very slightly (-0.3 per cent) and remains at a reported 62.2 per cent (p.17) despite school nutrition programs at 65 schools and the employment of 200 people (161 local Indigenous people) in school meals delivery.

On health, hospitalisation for children aged 0–5 years is down (p.24) as are audiological and dental follow ups (p.25). Readers are warned that these raw hospitalisation data should be interpreted with caution, but nevertheless for the second Report in a row child malnutrition is up despite 88 licenced stores (p. 30) and 16,695 income managed customers (p.33).

On crime (previously termed promoting law and order, now the rather

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<sup>76</sup> FaHCSIA, 'Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory Monitoring Report—July to December 2009' (19 June 2010), <<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/Indigenous-australians/publications-articles/closing-the-gap-in-the-northern-territory-monitoring-report-july-to-december-2009>>.

<sup>77</sup> Jon Altman, 'After the NT Intervention: violence up, malnutrition up, truancy up', *Crikey* 9 November 2009 <http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/11/09/after-the-nt-intervention-violence-up-malnutrition-up-truancy-up/> at 30 October 2012.

saccharine 'safe communities'), alcohol, substance abuse and drug related incidents (p.53), and domestic violence and assault reportage and convictions (p.54) are all up. Also up are sexual assault reportage and convictions (p.56) and reports of child abuse (p.58). All personal harm incidents are up with some, such as attempted suicide/self-harm and mentally ill persons, increasing quite markedly (pp.54–55).

It is emphasised (p.52) that increases in reported crime are likely to be associated with increases in police numbers and may be associated with improvements in community safety. This may be the case, but for attempted suicide and mental illness? And this same logic of better servicing driving up negative numbers does not seem to be applied to health or other areas.

This latest Monitoring Report provides information for many areas such as provision of early childhood facilities and programs, economic participation (which includes income management for some reason), land tenure, and governance and leadership. For this transparency it needs to be commended. But much of the analysis is just description of dollar inputs and outputs rather than outcomes and there is no assessment of whether the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) represents good value for money to the Australian taxpayer (including Aboriginal taxpayers in prescribed communities). Importantly at an appendix the Commonwealth Ombudsman's Report documents complaints being common about BasicsCards, which is hardly surprising given that a reported 29 per cent of 3.8 million attempted transactions were unsuccessful (p.33).

Of equal interest on the third anniversary of the Intervention are some of the program delivery and broader policy issues that are not mentioned. Let me focus on just three areas where an alternative narrative and far more critical assessment can be provided from existing public information.

First, the area of housing and land tenure reforms appears to have gone from bad to worse with reports that some of the handful of post-Intervention housing delivered under the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) might need to be demolished owing to poor workmanship. Indeed there is the spectre that with normalisation standards hundreds of houses in prescribed communities might need to be demolished with a net possibility that shoddy work and population growth might actually result in more rather than less overcrowding. The state is capable of providing housing for its staff very quickly, but for Aboriginal citizens at only a snail's pace that would have been unacceptable to all during the ATSIC era.

Indeed, alongside this recent revelation is emerging evidence of inter-governmental tension with the NT Government now saying that it was blackmailed to participate in SIHIP and the NT Auditor-General delivering a

highly critical report of the program.<sup>78</sup>

Also in the May Budget was news that the Home Ownership on Indigenous Land program was being de-funded with prospects for ‘normalised’ individual home ownership dropping off the policy reform agenda.<sup>79</sup> This is hardly surprising given that the NT Valuer-General estimated 64 prescribed communities to have a compensatory rental value of only \$3.4 million, or less than \$30,000 each per annum, inadequate collateral for mortgage finance.<sup>80</sup>

Second, on the employment front the recently released Labour Force Survey indicates that the employment gap might be increasing nationally. Evidence from the Northern Territory suggests that the employment to population ratio may have improved slightly as the Australian Government invested heavily in providing public sector ‘proper’ employment for Aboriginal people.<sup>81</sup>

But all this looks likely to change. First, it is reported that 500 CDEP transitional jobs with Shire Councils might end by December 31, 2010.<sup>82</sup> And second the Commonwealth appears committed to shift over 4600 CDEP participants from employment to welfare next year, a move that will see the employment to population ratio decrease by at least 10 per cent in the ideological pursuit of labour market normalisation in situations where standard jobs are just not available. The CDEP debacle is not just likely to move people from work to welfare, but to also disempower and further demoralise people and destroy their community-based organisations.

Third is the vexed issue of income quarantining or management, a measure that the Government is determined to extend to non-Indigenous people in the Northern Territory to avoid the opprobrium of supporting race-based measures that contravene the *Racial Discrimination Act*. The Rudd Government has gone to extraordinary lengths to discredit and demean the only credible research on the efficacy of income management pre- and post-Intervention.<sup>83</sup> This research

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<sup>78</sup> See Natasha Robinson, ‘Shoddy homes to be rebuilt for Aborigines’ *The Australian* (online), 18 June 2010 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/shoddy-homes-to-be-rebuilt-for-aborigines/story-e6frg6nf-1225881079857>>.

<sup>79</sup> Jon Altman, ‘Closing the gap between rhetoric and reality’, *The Drum* (online), 17 May 2010 <<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/34484.html>>.

<sup>80</sup> Patricia Karvelas, ‘Traditional land owners finally collect rent’, *The Australian* (online), 26 May 2010 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/landowners-finally-collect-rent/story-e6frg6nf-1225871295142>>.

<sup>81</sup> Jon Altman, ‘Rudd overpromised on Indigenous employment’, *Crikey* (online), 4 June 2010 <<http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/06/04/closing-the-gap-rudd-overpromised-on-Indigenous-unemployment/>>.

<sup>82</sup> Malarndirri McCarthy, ‘CDEP extended till 31 December 2010’, (16 June 2010) <<http://newsroom.nt.gov.au/www.newsroom.nt.gov.au/indexe400.html?fuseaction=viewRelease&id=7054&d=5>>.

<sup>83</sup> Julie Brimblecombe and David Thomas, ‘Macklin’s twists truth on income management’, *Crikey* (online), 17 May 2010 <<http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/05/17/income-management->

was published by a team of health researchers from the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin in May, but is not mentioned in the Monitoring Report. And a counter Report from FaHCSIA intentionally or unintentionally misrepresents the Menzies School research in Senate Estimates and spuriously questions the peer review processes of the prestigious *Medical Journal of Australia*.<sup>84</sup>

The latest Monitoring Report provides no fresh evidence on the efficacy of income management and it remains unclear if it is the better availability of fresh fruit and vegetables or altered expenditure patterns that might be making a difference. Irrespective, the Government will seek to pass legislation that will expend more than \$400 million in the next six years on income management processes despite contestation over outcomes.

There are some very worrying big picture policy issues emerging from the evaluative indeterminacy of the Intervention despite the massive resource commitments.

First is the possibility that the Closing the Gap in the NT National Partnership Agreement between the Australian and NT Governments that is to continue its normalisation project to June 30, 2012, might collapse. There is already inter-governmental disputation over the SIHIP alliance model and the housing and infrastructure Memorandum of Understanding foisted on the NT by the Commonwealth in 2007; and about funding for CDEP transitional employment with Shires. Will cracks start emerging in other areas such as health, education and policing?

Second, the normalisation project appears to heavily favour state regulation and monopoly supply of services. In some cases such monopolies might be justified because of the small size of communities. But the crucial question arises whether natural monopoly should be community or externally controlled. There is growing evidence that rents imagined to be extracted by local Aboriginal elites are now being extracted by government-sponsored and subsidised store managers and companies, income managers, housing alliances, employment brokers, and others. In short, one could ask who is mainly benefiting from the millions being expended on ameliorating Aboriginal disadvantage, Aboriginal citizens or public and private sector Intervention entrepreneurs?

And third, the Intervention was originally justified as a consequence of a failed state in remote Australia with highly dependent and politically weak Aboriginal communities and organisations wearing the blame.

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isnt-working-and-macklins-twisting-the-truth/>.

<sup>84</sup> 'Remote healthy food sales up, Macklin insists', *The Australian* (online), 7 June 2010 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/remote-healthy-food-sales-up-macklin-insists/story-e6frg6nf-1225876211261>>.

Development in remote Aboriginal communities will inevitably require state subvention for the foreseeable future, but the current delivery architecture is faulty and runs counter to sound principles of participatory development. Rather than empowering communities to strengthen governance institutions to deliver development, in diverse forms suited to local circumstances, the current top-down, monolithic and paternalistic approach is enhancing dependence on the state—with a high proportion of the resources earmarked for Aboriginal development programs being syphoned off to external, generally non-Indigenous, interests. The state policy of normalisation is not delivering even by its own benchmarks. This is unconscionable policy failure without any apparent policy risk assessment or contingency planning.

Today we are halfway through the Howard Government's original normalisation phase that has now mutated into the Rudd Government's Closing the Gap in the NT National Partnership Agreement. No one would argue that remote Aboriginal communities do not deserve equitable needs-based support. But of what form? Much has been made of the extensive NTER redesign consultations undertaken in 2009. Perhaps such consultations should now be asking residents of prescribed communities whether they prefer 2007 pre-Intervention 'abnormality' to the 2010 version of normalisation.

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