

## ARGUING THE INTERVENTION

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### Introduction

As anthropologists studying people who live under conditions of extreme duress and distress, we feel it imperative to link theory to practice. Otherwise we would be merely intellectual voyeurs. It is politically and analytically gratifying to engage with critical theory, but we also need to operate at the level of immediate policy options and specific local interventions that can be implemented in both the short term and the long term to reduce the structurally imposed suffering of our research subjects.<sup>1</sup>

I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday. On 21 June 2007 I was driving through Darwin just after midday when my mobile rang. It was an ABC reporter, ‘John Howard and Mal Brough have just announced a national emergency; the Commonwealth is going to take over Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory’. I pulled over and quizzed Annie Gaskin, she was able to play back for me some recorded material from a dramatic Canberra press conference and asked me to comment, which I did. The Howard Government’s action that day was a personal tipping point when I stopped suspending judgment, a decision I recognise now as deeply liberating.

For a social scientist trained to suspend judgment such action can be interpreted as a cardinal sin. One frequently hears academics assert, like bureaucrats, that they have no personal views on policy matters, only detached professional assessment. It is worth reading sociologist Pierre Bourdieu on this in *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*. Discussing the role of the state in the service of dominant market forces he asks ‘Why are the intellectuals so ambiguous in all this? I will not try to enumerate—it would be too long and too cruel—all the forms of surrender, or, worse, collaboration’.<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu reminds us that silence too is highly political and as an academic I was unwilling to either surrender or collaborate in a paternalistic state project driven by moral panic and tokenistic reference to a neoliberal trope. I had not become an academic to be a part of any ‘anti-politics’ machinery.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schomberg, *Righteous Dopefiend*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2009, p. 297.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, translated from the French by Richard Nice (The New Press, New York, 1998) p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> To use that evocative phrase composed by James Ferguson in *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development”, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

That same evening I quickly prepared a brief piece ‘Another Failed Howard Experiment in Indigenous Affairs’ for online media outlet *Crikey*.

My relationship with *Crikey* had only been formed in the previous month, May 2007. In one piece, *Budgeting for All Australians Except the Indigenous Ones*, reproduced as the opening piece here, I had been highly critical of the Howard Government’s parsimoniousness towards the most needy Australians during a period of unprecedented national bounty. In another, *Working on Country: Merging Indigenous Knowledge and Science*, I had praised the Howard Government, and in particular Greg Hunt, for introducing the new Working on Country program in that same budget—to be transparent, something that I had advocated for by lobbying the Minister and working with senior officials in his department since June 2006.<sup>4</sup>

My piece that evening, as well as my more off-the-cuff radio response earlier in the day, was influenced by two serendipitous factors.

First, as recounted in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia* (co-edited with my partner anthropologist Melinda Hinkson)<sup>5</sup> I had just returned the day before the Intervention announcement from my 38<sup>th</sup> fieldwork visit to central Arnhem Land. I could not readily accept that the demeaning language used and blanket measures proposed by Australia’s political elite was justified; I felt a deep moral obligation to speak up for the Kuninjku community that I had worked with since 1979 and who I knew would lack the media means to speak up for themselves. As I heard dramatic military language spoken by Howard and Brough wearing severe faces and proposing to suspend racial discrimination law, I empathised with those who could be negatively impacted by the deployment of army and police by powerful agents of the ‘law and order’ state flexing their muscles at the most politically and socio-economically marginalised and spatially isolated groups in Australian society. I did not take kindly to people who I had known for decades being stereotyped so negatively and so readily by pompous white politicians in Canberra.

Second, we were staying at Nugget’s Place, a flat at the ANU’s North Australia Research Unit facility named after my late colleague HC Coombs. I could not help but ponder then and now how he might have responded to such top down policy making? Negatively, I am sure, but probably with a great deal more diplomacy and effectiveness than I can muster.

My initial response was not of course just based on what I heard of the proposed Intervention measures that day. I had been working on Indigenous

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<sup>4</sup> <<http://www.crikey.com.au/2007/06/04/working-on-country-program-merging-indigenous-knowledge-and-science/>> accessed 31 December 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson (eds) *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, Arena Publications, Melbourne, 2007.

development and policy issues for just on 30 years when the Intervention was announced. My approach over those years had been honed by my initial academic training as an economist, encouraging a focus on quantification and realism; later training as an anthropologist, adding an abiding openness to cultural relativism and the views of others; grounded research experience with many Aboriginal groups in remote areas; and a personal commitment to social justice formed by my own upbringing.

My position on the Intervention was also influenced by my growing disenchantment with the performance of the Howard Government in Indigenous affairs. I had previously been critical in both my research and media engagements on many issues: the Government's poor performance on practical reconciliation, the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, inept reform of land rights and native title laws, and the accelerating destruction of the institutions of Indigenous Australia and associated principles of self-determination and self-management.

And so my position on the Intervention was not just happenstance, I had a track record as a critic of the Australian state, but my position was neither party partisan nor just ideological—I had been critical of governments before Howard's and, as will become amply clear in this volume, governments since. But I have always aspired not simply to critique bad policy, but to provide constructive alternate proposals. I am committed to a position akin to that so neatly encapsulated in the opening quote above from Phillipe Bourgois and Jeff Schomberg.

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*Arguing the Intervention* compiles in one issue of the *Journal of Indigenous Policy* a selection of 39 research-based short essays about the Intervention published in the media over five years. This time frame represents the period between the announcement of the Intervention on 21 June 2007 and the expiry of Northern Territory National Emergency Response laws after 18 August 2012. Thirty-eight of the 39 pieces were published within this time frame, two were co-authored and one is a robust published exchange between Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin and myself.

This collection represents one form of writing about policy that I have undertaken as an academic engaging with the public sphere beyond the academy in an effort to influence policy and thinking. While the early pieces are rapid fire and often responded to Intervention issues as they unfolded, they are not just what is often referred to as 'opinion' but are informed by past and current research. Some of the earlier pieces published in the national print media are less than 1000 words in length, most published in Indigenous and online media are between 1000 and 2000 words. There is often a perception, common among my academic colleagues, that engagement with the media is

quick and ephemeral and some, like the off-the-cuff radio interview or the quick letters dashed off to the editor may be, but the pieces reproduced here have generally been carefully crafted as short essays.

As I have compiled this collection I have reflected on my engagement with the media during the five years covered here. From the outset in June 2007, I was determined to provide a critical take on the Intervention and avoid being caught up in the heady moral panic abroad, even within academia. But finding an appropriate mode of media engagement ‘to argue the Intervention’ has been challenging.

I look back now on that first interview with ABC Darwin conducted an hour or so after the Intervention was announced and am amazed at the unprecedented media coverage, for me, that it received: over 50 pages of material from the media monitors engaged by the Australian National University (ANU) where I work. AAP probably covered what I said that day best: ‘Jon Altman, Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at ANU, said the Commonwealth’s response was heavy-handed and undermined developments in the area. “What you have seen from Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough and the Prime Minister is a total unwillingness to deal with underlying issues, which is the neglect and marginalisation of Aboriginal communities,” he told ABC radio. “Rather than addressing those underlying issues, and they are complex and will take years to address, we are seeing a knee-jerk reaction and blame-shifting onto the Northern Territory government”’.

Initially my voice was a part of the mix, and even the flagship national newspaper *The Australian* reported my comments at length noting my views: ‘the commonwealth’s initiative was a knee-jerk action when it should have dealt with “real systemic issues that have not been addressed”. These include lack of opportunity, historic injustices, and marginalisation. Professor Altman told *The Australian* the Territory’s jails were already choked with Aborigines, and questioned whether the answer was to incarcerate more’. Tom Switzer, then opinion editor there, even published a short piece I co-authored with John Taylor in July 2007 and reproduced here.

But increasingly, as unspoken battlelines were drawn over the Intervention, it became difficult after the early flurry to have a substantive voice beyond writing letters to editors. Even these were not always appreciated; as Nicolas Rothwell wrote in *The Australian* ‘Professor Altman works as an economic development expert but his temperament is artistic; in fact his ideal job might be as an upscale newspaper editor, for he clearly spends a great deal of time reading newspapers and writing tart little letters to them, correcting errors in the reportage of indigenous affairs’.<sup>6</sup> I always thought that correcting errors

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<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Rothwell *Journey to the Interior* (Black Inc. Melbourne, 2010, p159); originally published in *The Australian* 3 September 2008  
<<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,24246848-25132,00.html>>.

was an important role of letters and of academic endeavour. Even publishing these ‘tart little letters’ has become more difficult, first as my hit rate declined, then as the Letters Editor of *The Australian* started to severely cut their length making them littler, and finally in April 2012 when I was informed what was acceptable and unacceptable to publish, so even the ‘tartness’ needed to be eliminated.

It seems clear to me that the national print media was looking to promulgate a particular narrative by a stable of journalists all too often reporting government media releases, by and large uncritically, with some commentary or opinion editorials allowed for a select group of black and white commentators. This deployment of power via the mainstream media is of no surprise, in my view powerful political forces in Australian society (and globally) are in a dialectic relationship with possibly more powerful commercial and media interests. But it is something that I wanted to challenge as a policy academic with whatever means at my disposal and to expose. And increasingly it was the alternate, or non-mainstream media, that has provided me with opportunity to publish a viewpoint that had little in common with the dominant discourse.

A very particular form of writing is presented here that has allowed me to critically engage with current issues of Intervention policy and related matters as they have unfolded. This intellectual response is not mere opinion; it is deeply influenced by over 30 years of research experience about the economic and social situation of remote living Aboriginal people in many parts of the Northern Territory, of likely policy effectiveness, and of likely intended and unintended consequences.

My aim has been to provide an alternate critical viewpoint and just so as not to sound too heroic, among others, to counter a tsunami of mainstream opinion strongly in favour of the Intervention. This dominant discourse has been over-influenced in my view by carefully crafted, often saccharin-sweet, ministerial press releases, strategically published or judiciously leaked to select journalists, advocating for a particular form of paternalism. I am not aware of any Intervention measures that are systematically based on either comparative practice or evidence of success; most have been based on ideologically predetermined positions, some on cogent argument tightly framed to a particular policy script, and most anticipating political popularity with the wider Australian voting public.<sup>7</sup>

My motivation in seeking publication of this collection of short media essays is

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<sup>7</sup> As recently suggested in another article, perhaps the Intervention and its evaluations and media releases about them are as much about ‘societal comfort production’ as about addressing deeply embedded wicked problems of Indigenous disadvantage. See Jon Altman and Susannah Russell ‘Too Much Dreaming: Evaluations of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Intervention 2007–2012, *Evidence Base*, Issue 3/2012 available at <<http://journal.anzso.gov.au/userfiles/files/2012Issue3Final.pdf>>.

influenced in part by an escalating personal concern about the power and growing influence of the mainstream media on Indigenous policy and its increased ability to directly influence policy formulation, what has been referred to as a ‘mediatized practice impact’, while simultaneously less and less is factually reported.<sup>8</sup> But it is also influenced by a growing interest in the potential utility of the media as a means to communicate academic views on issues of national significance, recalling that in 2007, when the Intervention was launched, Indigenous affairs rated very highly alongside climate change, as an issue of national importance.

Much of what I wrote, and continue to write, is based on research that I am undertaking. As an academic I have always sought to reach a broader public beyond academic audiences, a principle that has guided my university-based career spanning 36 years to date. Since 1982 I have been working at the ANU, an institution committed to engage with issues of national policy significance. Pierre Bourdieu has asked rhetorically: ‘Why have we moved from the committed intellectual to the ‘uncommitted’ intellectual? Partly because intellectuals are holders of cultural capital and, even if they are the dominated among the dominant, they still belong among the dominant’.<sup>9</sup> I recognise that I am privileged to have the opportunity to write from this bastion of cultural capital and counter to Bourdieu’s lament this has made me even more determined to remain a committed intellectual.

The short pieces republished here can be roughly divided into two groups, those published during the first three years of the Intervention, and those published in the last two. Part of the distinction can be explained by my stepping aside as Foundation Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) for a variety of reasons after 20 years in April 2010 which freed up more time for media writing. But I also learnt over time that if one wants to control the message then one has to have total control of the product. To again quote Bourdieu ‘Our dream, as social scientists, might be for part of our research to be useful to the social movement, instead of being lost, as is often the case nowadays, because it is intercepted and distorted by journalists or by hostile interpreters, etc.’<sup>10</sup>

Some in Australian society today, like Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton, Warren Mundine or Helen Hughes, are afforded generous coverage and space in *The Australian* and elsewhere. Others who have alternate views, like me, might see their opinion pieces, even when invited, rejected and as noted earlier their letters heavily edited. Media outlets in Australia do have strong ideological lines despite protestations to the contrary while alternate views are carefully

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<sup>8</sup> Kerry McCallum (ed.) *The Media & Indigenous Policy: How News Media Reporting and Mediatized Practice Impact on Indigenous Policy* (Journalism and Communications Studies, Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra, ACT, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*, p. 58.

managed to placate any charges of blatant bias.

And so I count myself fortunate to have been given space, mainly in the alternate media, to have my views published without any content restrictions and with only titles outside my direct control. It may or may not be evident to the reader, but in the earlier period my pieces tend to be shorter and a little more haphazard because of the urgency of the response—so much was moving so quickly during the early period of the Intervention. Since 2011 my approach has been more disciplined and measured as I was engaged as a columnist by *Tracker* ‘the black monthly’ published by the NSW Aboriginal Land Council.<sup>11</sup> My column is called ‘Evidently’ and this is why the word evidently appears in every piece that I have written for *Tracker* since April 2011. To date, the editor Amy McQuire has allowed me *carte blanche* on what I write with the proviso that copy must be on hand to her timetable. *Tracker* has also allowed my column up to 2000 words because its editorial team recognise that complex issues need space for explication. And equally importantly they have generously allowed the column that they have commissioned to be republished elsewhere, since 2012 on a monthly basis in *Crikey*, usually slightly abridged and with a different title. This has allowed me to reach a diversity of audiences, although interestingly the political economy of knowledge reproduction in contemporary Australia means that material in alternate media like *Tracker* and *Crikey* is often missed by media monitoring and reporting services, including the one engaged by the ANU.

So far I have focused on my motivations and means for finding media space to articulate the critical stance that I took on the Intervention since inception. Now I want to briefly outline three inter-linked reasons why I approached the *Journal of Indigenous Policy* with a proposal to compile this selection of short essays in one volume.

First, skilful politics by the Australian Government is seeing the Intervention discursively reframed while key measures are retained. I have written about this elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> I am keen for my views on the Intervention to be available in one place, for the historical record. This is not just vanity. It is a little surprising how quickly even with Google, and other search engines, media pieces disappear—we may have the social media means to disseminate information far and wide but information storage and retrieval remains problematic. These pieces will now be available in one place in hard copy or in portable document format (PDF) as a collection for some time. In a sense I am looking to challenge the ephemeral nature of print and electronic media even today.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> My links to *Tracker* go back to occasional writings for the *National Indigenous Times* over a number of years; its editor Chris Graham became the managing editor of *Tracker* in 2011. It goes without saying that robust personal relationships with those who own and/or manage media outlets matter.

<sup>12</sup> See Jon Altman and Susannah Russell ‘Too Much Dreaming’, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Even in retrieving these pieces in 2012 it has been difficult to replicate the links between



Second, the compilation of these pieces in one document affords readers the opportunity to hold me accountable, as a policy intellectual, for what I have written—this is an important part of the academic tradition. It strikes me that too many commentators and journalists, black and white, publish views for which they are not held accountable. So in this one volume a significant portion of my writing on the Intervention for wider public audiences can be readily accessed. What is more, these pieces provide opportunity to both check their consistency over time; and equally importantly if they have added value as a cumulative narrative: transparency matters. It is for this reason that while the pieces have been style edited for consistency, and links in *Crikey* pieces have been converted to footnotes, I have looked to retain original wording as much as possible—there is no ex post facto adaptive massaging of views here.

Third, I am keen to use this volume to demonstrate that media engagements can be substantial and research intense. I have heard on the grapevine that words are whispered in the corridors of the academy that my public writings are ‘too political’ and even that I am a ‘media tart’—this can be a way of subtly undermining the committed intellectual. And yet at the same time academics, certainly at my university, are being encouraged to engage with the media more and more to demonstrate the value of research—the ANU even annually makes media awards to its academics judged to be successful in this domain across a number of criteria. To my colleagues I say, as above, I did not choose an academic career to be depoliticised or silenced. To universities I say get serious about valuing what is termed outreach or public service and stop prioritising peer-reviewed scholarly publications in assessing academic performance as if little else matters. As an example, the essays compiled here when published in *Tracker* or *Crikey* got no credit as publications and so they are not just explicitly devalued, but implicitly deemed of little academic worth.

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The critical stance I took on the Intervention 2007–2012 was, and remains, the subordinate discourse, and so gaining space for such heretical views in the mainstream media has been difficult. And so I would like to thank those in the alternate media especially at *Tracker* and *Crikey* but also at the *National Indigenous Times*, *Arena Magazine* and the ABC’s *Drum* who have provided me with space ‘to argue the Intervention’.

I would also like to sincerely thank Larissa Behrendt for her thoughtful foreword and the editorial board of *Journal of Indigenous Policy* for allowing an entire volume to be dedicated to my short writings. I would also like to thank Elisabeth Yarbakhsh for compiling and standardising the pieces; Tessa Altman for checking for style consistency; Nicholas Biddle for assistance with

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documents that was possible when they were first published especially on *Crikey*.



some statistical data; and Melinda Hinkson for suggesting the volume's title and for always encouraging my political and academic efforts.

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