

A New Intervention?

The Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) officially referred to as 'Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory' but more commonly as 'the Intervention' is less than a year away from its statutory end in September 2012.

It has entered a potentially transformative stage that is a critical time for sound policy making and a dangerous time for Aboriginal people in 'prescribed' communities, especially if bad policy is legally locked in again.

On October 13 the Australian Government released its latest *Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory Monitoring Report January–June 2011*.⁸⁶ It came in two parts.

The most recent data on progress suggests that the Intervention is failing, at least if its aim is to close gaps of socioeconomic disadvantage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the NT.

This view can only be surmised because evidently measuring gap reduction, at least in the bizarre world of Indigenous public policy in Australia, can be magically undertaken without any comparative data on non-Indigenous outcomes.

The Report notes that while policies designed to improve can have a significant immediate effect (negative as well as positive?) this is the exception rather than the rule, as it will take a concerted effort over many years to achieve lasting change.

This is undeniable, but it begs the question of why the Australian Government is expending millions on six-monthly monitoring?

Even assuming that the policy aim is to improve the absolute wellbeing of Aboriginal residents of NTER communities—a more realistic and appropriate goal than closing statistical gaps—according to time series information available for four areas, this is just not happening.

Since 2007–08 Indigenous hospitalisation rates NT-wide (not just in NTER communities) have increased from 229 per 1,000 to 262 per 1,000. These are extraordinarily high rates unimagined in the broader community.

Recorded school enrolment and attendance has declined from 64.5 per cent in February 2009 to 62.7 per cent in February 2011 with total enrolments

⁸⁶ FaHCSIA, 'Closing the Gap in the NT Monitoring Report January–June 2011', (October 2011)

<<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/Indigenous-australians/publications-articles/closing-the-gap-in-the-nt-monitoring-report-january-june-2011>>.

declining from 8,960 to 8,914, despite rapid population growth.

Income support recipients have increased from just on 20,000 in June 2009 to nearly 24,000 in June 2011, with some of the change explained by new ('non-grandfathered') CDEP participants being shifted onto Newstart allowances.

In the name of job creation, welfare dependence is increasing.

Reports of child abuse in NTER communities have increased from 174 in 2007–08 to 272 in 2010–11; as have domestic violence reported incidents, from 1,612 to 2,968.

And the gap in child protection indicators between Indigenous and non-Indigenous has increased across the NT for a range of indicators. The most shocking statistic is on confirmed attempt suicide/self-harm incidents that have increased from 109 in 2007–08 to 227 in 2010–11 in NTER communities.

This statistic is embedded in Figure 6.4 of the Report, without any commentary.

If such a per capita rate was replicated in Sydney it would be about 22,700. Imagine the outcry!

It was buried in the Report, but registered as 'a concern' according to a spokeswoman speaking for Minister Macklin.

The Australian Government response to what looks awfully like policy failure is to promulgate more of the same. This is the strong impression one gets when reading *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Report on Consultations October 2011* released four days later.⁸⁷

The discussion paper and community consultations did not provide any of the factual information outlined above to inform small group (Tier 1) and community (Tier 2) 'consultations', about the Australian Government's performance to date. In fact, the Australian Government predetermined that the community consultation would focus on eight areas: school attendance and educational achievement; economic development and employment; tackling alcohol abuse; community safety and protection of children; health; food security; housing and governance.

It also engaged consultants, many ex-bureaucrats, to monitor proceedings to assure the Australian public that consultations were conducted properly.

⁸⁷ FaHCSIA, 'Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Report on Consultations October 2011', (2011) <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/09_2012/stronger-futures-consult_1710111_0.pdf>.

A Report by the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) dated September 2011 indicated that the facilitated discussions conducted over six weeks appeared open, fair and accountable.

CIRCA did observe, critically, that the upmarket Crowne Plaza Hotel, where the Alice Springs Town Camp meeting was held, may have been an unfamiliar, uncomfortable and unfriendly venue.

It also noted that some meetings were very long (four to five hours) and food needed to be provided as people were showing signs of hunger and exhaustion.

CIRCA, however, made no comment on the predetermined subject of consultations—this was reminiscent of consultations about the future of income management in 2009 that would not countenance the possibility of abolition.

Nor was there any consideration that the Intervention approach and its monitoring framework might be fundamentally flawed.

So, let's look at evidence from the four key areas of hospitalisation, education, employment and child abuse. Policy success would suggest that over time there should be less hospitalisation and child abuse and better education and employment outcomes.

But the correlations between interventions and improved outcomes are quite unclear.

- Should more medical attention result in more or less hospitalisation?
- Should more police result in more or less reported crime?
- Should more jobs result in more or less welfare dependence?
- And should more teachers, new teacher houses and better school infrastructure result in more or less attendance?

The possibility of such ambiguity indicates that the current policy of Closing the Gap and its monitoring framework is poorly designed and confused.

The Government can make what it chooses of the rubbery figures, possibly the intention?

Nowhere is the policy confusion more evident than in the vexed area of school attendance, with failure being blamed on parents and withdrawal of welfare entitlements proposed as the possible solution.

Historically, welfare or transfer payments have been a social policy instrument to provide income support for individuals and families in need. In policy circles there is an emerging view that welfare sanctions can be used to effectively alter social norms, to alter expenditure patterns via income management and to improve school attendance.

However, there is no evidence that school absentees are disproportionately the dependents of welfare beneficiaries.

Nor is there any evidence either here or internationally that punitive measures against parents will ensure school attendance, although there is a distinct possibility that children will suffer.

The NT Government has recently introduced its *Every Child Every Day* policy; and has amended its education laws to enhance the powers of school attendance truancy officers and significantly increase fines for truancy.⁸⁸

The Australian and NT Governments are in policy and potential legal conflict here, one government looking to fine, the other looking to take away the means to pay fines, with parental imprisonment a likely unintended consequence of school absenteeism.

It is hard to imagine such an outcome being good either for the child or family relations. Simultaneously, such discourse is imbued with a policy moral hazard of taking the attention away from the school system as a potential part of the problem. Could school attendance failure be a function of inappropriate curricula, poor teacher performance and an inability to stimulate students?

Is there something systemic that makes kids prefer the mundane every day to the supposed inspiration of school attendance?

These are the sorts of hard policy questions that are being avoided in the quest for simplistic and populist solutions to deeply entrenched problems.

If the Intervention policy framework is wrong, why is it about to be continued? Even evidence from the Government's own monitoring is being ignored.

Instead, the cozy Canberra consensus of political and bureaucratic classes believe they have the answers. Politicians in their political self-interest are donning ideological blinkers and listening too much to urban focus groups, rather than developing realistic policy in the interests of Indigenous residents of NTER communities.

And complacent and complicit senior bureaucrats appear too comfortable with the status quo they invented and the policy inertia born of bedded-down approaches and the persuasive ring of the persistent Close the Gap mantra.

Deeply disadvantaged people in remote Northern Territory deserve far better. Policy instruments need to be deployed that generate improvement in absolute,

⁸⁸ Northern Territory Government, *Every Child, Every Day* (2011) <<http://www.det.nt.gov.au/teachers-educators/school-management/enrolment-attendance/every-child-every-day>>.

not relative, wellbeing and that can be monitored less ambiguously. Otherwise the millions spent on reporting is a waste.

Evidently, we need a new evidence-based framework; but the innovation required is most likely to come from the marginalised subjects of this grand project of improvement rather than from the powerful, but distant and unconnected.

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