

Five Years On ... NT Communities are still not ‘Normalised’

The Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) Intervention was dramatically declared as a ‘National Emergency’ in respect of reported widespread child sexual abuse on June 21, 2007.

It was an emergency that necessitated the deployment of the Australian army, at least for a short symbolic time, soon followed by a plethora of ‘helping’ professionals and bureaucrats.

The Government’s Chief Spokesperson, Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough articulated with military precision a hastily conceived, centrally-planned, five-year program to ‘stabilise and normalise’ 73 prescribed communities, before an orderly ‘exit’ proposed for June 21, 2012.

Seeing Brough on the ABC’s 7.30 program last month pontificating again, with his undeniable passion, about deep social problems persisting at Toomelah in New South Wales, was a chilling reminder of two things.

First, Brough is adamant that the NT Intervention, that many have now dismissed as a political stunt contrived by compliant senior bureaucrats under the Howard Government (as their stocks hit a new low), would have worked if only implemented with more fulsome, racist brutality.

Second, Brough can see potential for such ‘shock and awe’ tactics beyond the NT and what is more there is some possibility that he will be re-elected and end up as either Indigenous Affairs Minister or very influential in a future Coalition Government.

In 2007, while I was a vocal critic of the form that the Intervention was to take, I initially interpreted normalisation to mean socioeconomic equality to be delivered in five years.

I lauded this goal while at the same time being deeply sceptical that the Howard Government would be able to deliver when Canberra rhetoric hit harsh outback reality.

It was not the Howard Government that was left to implement this hastily conceived ‘five year plan’ locked into federal law in August 2007, but the Rudd and then Gillard Governments.

Crisis theory tells us that a circuit breaker is needed lest hastily conceived ‘National Emergency’ pronouncements become embedded as the new policy paradigm.

That circuit breaker could have been activated in November 2007 with a

change of government, but perhaps with a strategic eye on focus group sentiments and already on the next federal election the Rudd Government took what can only be described as the low risk default option: it retained the race-based Intervention laws, inspired by the very particular toxic mix of neoliberal and neoconservative ideology, of a heavily defeated government: John Howard 1, Kevin Rudd 0.

The Rudd Government tried to divert some attention from the media obsession with the NTER by locking it into a national assimilation plan to Close the Gap announced as part of the National Apology in early 2008. This plan was quickly endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments in the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) and a series of National Partnership Agreements (NPAs) that obfuscated citizenship entitlements with special Indigenous specific initiatives.¹⁰⁵

The NTER measures, cosmetically redesigned after an independent review whose main recommendations were ignored, were craftily entangled in a number of NPAs, including Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory.

This last NPA drew heavily on the discredited Territory Martin Government's 'Closing the Gap 20 Year Indigenous Generational Plan'—a comprehensive plan announced in August 2007 to address all 97 recommendations in the Anderson/Wild Report on child sexual abuse with limited NT resources.¹⁰⁶

But this clumsy attempt to discursively rebadge the Intervention never caught on with the media and was rarely used even by the clever bureaucrats who designed it. The Intervention may have been 'independently' reviewed and cosmetically redesigned but it was, and remains, the Intervention.

The NPA to Close the Gap in the NT runs to June 30 2012 and like Brough's notion of 'normalisation' sounds as if it is about closing socioeconomic gaps as measured by the mainstream society.¹⁰⁷

But in reality the logic of the Intervention and its policies and programs are not tailored to close gaps at all, but rather to alleviate deep disadvantage.

Unfortunately, owing to multi-generational neglect, no Australian Government has ever dared to not only calculate what expenditure (the state likes the word

¹⁰⁵ COAG Reform Council, *Indigenous Reform 2010-11: Comparing performance across Australia* (2012) <<http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/reports/Indigenous.cfm>>.

¹⁰⁶ Northern Territory Government, *Closing the Gap: Northern Territory Government's Response to Anderson/Wild Report and Indigenous Generational Plan*, (2007) <http://newsroom.nt.gov.au/adminmedia/mailouts/2871/attachments/martin.20.08.07.closing_per_cent20the_per_cent20gap.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ FaHCSIA 'Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory National Partnership Agreement' (2009) <<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/Indigenous-australians/programs-services/closing-the-gap-in-the-northern-territory>>.

‘investment’) is needed to address historical legacy but also what delivery process might prove effective.

And so we have much discursive flourish and thick government spin—closing the gaps here, there and everywhere—but two fundamental truths that just cannot be concealed.

First, despite the plethora of reports, the establishment of an evaluation frame to establish whether gaps have closed since 2007 has been shrewdly avoided.

But judgment day is coming and when data from the 2011 Census become available later this year we will be able to objectively assess whether the Government’s approach is working, or not, according to its own normative criteria.

Second, while the fundamentals of the original Intervention remain firmly in place, it is far from clear, even from the Government’s own six-monthly Closing the Gap in the NT Monitoring Reports, if there have been absolute improvements.¹⁰⁸ Indeed things today may be worse than in 2007.

Despite the promise of jobs growth, there are more people than ever on welfare; there is no evidence that income management is making a difference; school attendance rates remain intractably low; and child hospitalisation rates have grown.

Most worryingly information on self-harm/suicide ‘incidents’ have more than doubled, an appalling paradox given the original rationale for the Intervention.

What these reports do not tell us is how prescribed communities have been fundamentally transformed—socially, culturally, politically and economically—by an influx of non-local ‘helpers’ as well as surveillance staff, while supreme community control has been vested in an externally-appointed and accountable Government Business Manager.

The Aboriginal citizen-subjects of prescribed communities have been fundamentally disempowered as the institutions that they once controlled have been dismantled, as the permit system has been abolished, and as the authority of land owners has been usurped through the compulsory leasing of their land with just terms compensation still not paid.

In a separate measure that the Commonwealth has quietly condoned, community councils have been eliminated in favour of Super Shires that effectively depoliticise individual prescribed communities. Not only have

¹⁰⁸ FaHCSIA, ‘Closing the Gap monitoring reports’ (2012) <<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/Indigenous-australians/publications-articles2/closing-the-gap>>.

communities not been normalised, but even by the standards of the wider society there is nothing normal about them.

As for exiting, and the possibility for re-empowering community, this possibility has been unilaterally postponed by the Australian Government until 2022. What was arguably a five-year emergency ‘state of exception’ has been extended to 15 years with no evidence that the current Intervention approach is working.

Instead we have continuation of key Intervention measures like disciplining the expenditures of welfare beneficiaries, around 80 per cent of the adult population of prescribed communities with income quarantining now rebadged income management; disciplining labour through the misguided abolition of CDEP and greater emphasis on activity testing and much breaching (suspending payments) in the absence of jobs; blackmailing communities to turn private and community assets into public assets; regulating community stores from outside; and establishing new draconian measures to link welfare payments to school enrolment and attendance.

This continuity has again been rebadged, this time as the more nebulous Stronger Futures for the Northern Territory.¹⁰⁹ Stronger Futures will require more regulatory presence, and the residents of prescribed communities will be caught up in a social void of panoptic oversighting with limited escape options.

This could result in less community control, more dependence, fewer jobs, more poverty and more anomie, all now not in the name of ‘the child’ or the name of ‘the gap’ but in the name of ‘stronger futures’.

Neither exited nor normalised, one has to wonder about a third dismal possibility, that this Intervention seeks to creatively destroy an enduring bastion of Indigenous jurisdiction that generates much anxiety for neoliberal sensibility, partly because it represents unacceptable risk to minerals dependent 21st century Australia.

Intervention measures and principles outlined in NIRA are explicit that a neoliberal project of moral restructuring is currently underway.

So is elimination the ultimate goal of the Intervention? In a recent article in the *Journal of Genocide Research*, historian Patrick Wolfe draws on his earlier work on settler colonial theory to make three points of great pertinence to this possibility.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ See Australian Government, *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* (2012) <<http://www.Indigenous.gov.au/stronger-futures/>>.

¹¹⁰ Patrick Wolfe, ‘Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native’ (2006) 8 *Journal of Genocide Research*, 387.

First, he notes that the colonial invasion and its transformative capitalist system were predicated on wholesale expropriation of the land and resources—the principal settler colonial logic to eliminate Aboriginal societies was to gain unrestricted access to territory and resources.

Second, Wolfe notes that settler colonisers came to stay: invasion is structural; it is not some historical event that can be isolated to a particular place and time such as Sydney in 1788, it continues in the present.

And third, Wolfe suggests that settler colonialism has negative and positive dimensions. Negatively, it strives for the dissolution of Aboriginal societies—a dissolution that in the past included the summary massacre of Indigenous people, as new histories of frontier conflict now document.

Positively, a new Australian society is created and a range of new options emerge from the logic of elimination, including the possibility for Indigenous people to assimilate if they so wish—this is mainstreaming with its goal of Closing the Gap as measured by the norms of the dominant society.

The state project of improvement links elimination, normalisation and exit in a triangulated relationship: elimination of Aboriginal ways will lead to imagined neoliberal normalisation that provides the path for Aboriginal citizens to exit state controls and paternalistic over-sighting.

Evidently, Aboriginal people are not meekly acquiescing and are deploying whatever means at their disposal to undermine this state project that arguably began with colonisation, but was accelerated rapidly first by the Howard Government and then by subsequent Rudd and Gillard regimes.

Global evidence suggests that stronger futures for Aboriginal people will require more self-determination that in turn will allow a form of normalisation, but in accord with local values and aspirations, not imposed ones. Evidently this is something that the Australian state and its agents still need to comprehend.

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