

Still Intervening in the Northern Territory

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The two men responsible for the “Northern Territory National Emergency Response”, better known as “the Intervention”, both lost their seats in the Australian House of Representatives at the 2007 election that saw Kevin Rudd come to power¹. But the damage had already been done as former prime minister, John Howard, and former Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, had written their own chapter in the sobering story of black-white relations in Australia.

While the “Little Children Are Sacred” report on child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory was used by Howard to justify the emergency response his government initiated, only two of its 97 recommendations were actually implemented², the remainder of the intervention being of the government’s design. The report certainly did not call for a military deployment of 600 soldiers to enforce the new legislation, the lack of consultation with the Aboriginal community that has occurred, the compulsory acquisition of townships held under the provisions of the Native Title Act 1993, the quarantining of welfare payments or the disbanding of the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) or Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) 1975³. Indeed, in March 2009, Kevin Rudd received a letter from the United Nations, expressing their concern over the fate of the RDA in the NT⁴.

At odds with the damning reality of the situation (those things that have been outlined above) a number of myths in favour of the intervention have surfaced, continuing to fuel debate over its merits, outcomes and moral standing.

The argument that the intervention is improving the lives of Indigenous people in the Territory should be contrasted with the indicators that show poverty and racism to have increased since it was first implemented⁵ and the many voices coming out and saying that their children, whom the emergency response was supposed to protect are “worse off under this legislation”⁶.

Any argument that the Intervention is addressing child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities fails to take into account that since it began, the Intervention has failed to uncover any pedophile rings, that no child sexual abuse cases have been prosecuted and that just twenty child protection workers have been funded for the entire Northern Territory⁷.

The commonly held belief that Aboriginal children are eating better since the Intervention began should be contrasted with the stories of children now going hungry due to the welfare quarantining imposed on their families and the questionable nature of the research undertaken to obtain this information, a series of short interviews with shop managers that even the taskforce admits are merely “subjective observations and perceptions” and hardly concrete evidence on which something as serious as welfare quarantining should be judged on⁸.

Finally, the belief that Aboriginal women support the Intervention should be compared to the statement released by 100 affected women who met in Alice Springs on the 29th September last year...

“We don't want the intervention... for old people the intervention is bringing up bad memories of the past, the old days, the ration days, the dog tag days and the mission days.”⁹

Is it unreasonable then, to question the government's commitment to combating child sexual abuse in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities? All the (informed) evidence would appear to point to a hidden agenda behind the Northern Territory Intervention, as it certainly wouldn't seem as if the safety of Aboriginal children is the top concern of either presiding government given their failure to implicate the other 95 recommendations of the “Little Children Are Sacred” report and their inclusion of several alternative ones that are proving to worsen the lives of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory rather than improve them.

Considering the fact that continuous connection to land since 1788 is something on which land rights claims are based¹⁰, one could be forgiven for viewing the Northern Territory Intervention, specifically the plans to have Aboriginal people relocated to prescribed growth centres¹¹, as a means to sabotage the remaining Aboriginal peoples who could truthfully claim to have lived on the same land as their ancestors pre-1788. This unwanted “mainstreaming” of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory is effectively colouring in the last part of the map for the white settlers, and by denying native title claims to those who have lived there for thousands of years, is further opening up the country to the mining companies who help to bank-roll both sides of politics¹².

Until such time as the government feels it can resist the urge to interfere in Aboriginal people's lives, it seems they will always be doing something for which future governments will have to apologise.

References

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