

The New Land Grab

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Aboriginal leaders in the Northern Territory have issued a strong warning that the Australian Government's new land grab in the form of the proposed ten year extension of the Intervention will send many communities into a dangerous downward spiral with still more death and misery.

As a Senate Committee from Canberra listened to elders and community representatives in Maningrida, 600 kilometres east of Darwin, I watched men in ceremonial paint dance into the centre of the proceedings to assert their right to Aboriginal Law and challenge the increasing take-over of their rights to land, language and culture.

The target of the rising anger across the homelands and larger communities like Maningrida is the federal government's provocatively named "Stronger Futures" legislation now before the Parliament.

If approved it is a massive assault on Aboriginal Land Rights, an extraordinary shift of power to the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs and a tightening of government hands slowly throttling Traditional Owners, Aboriginal organisations and the voices of Aboriginal people.

Dr Djiniyini Gondarra, the Mandela-like Yolgnu leader from Galiwinku, Elcho Island, stared into the Senator's eyes and declared, "This legislation is going to kill us. We are losing 9 or 10 people every week. People can't live. They have lost their will and all hope."

The Government's big stick is coming down so hard on Aboriginal people that Maningrida's Malabam Health Board warned the Senate Committee that the rising suicide rate and community anger could explode with even more arrests and incarceration, a pattern that has grown far worse under the Intervention.

Helen Williams, a courageous defender of the 35 homelands surrounding Maningrida, mocked the claims by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jennie Macklin that the Government's so called "consultations" had given approval to any of the "seven deadly sins", the new measures aimed at controlling so many aspects of Aboriginal family life.

One of Maningrida's Traditional Owners who has challenged the Northern Territory Intervention since the beginning in 2007, Reggie Wurridjal, told me that the northern communities had never given consent to a ten year takeover that had weakened their own right to govern their lands.

Matthew Ryan, chairman of Maningrida's Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) which has done well against great odds to build a brighter future, said the discriminatory legislation could not possibly be presented as "a special measure" as Minister Macklin had never provided people with adequate information or time to understand, let alone, approve the Federal Government's most serious grab for power.

These Aboriginal people have good reason to be full of anguish over the extraordinary increase in federal control. Maningrida, a community of 3200 people nestled against the Arafura Sea, has been declared one of the government's "growth towns". The population is increasingly stressed because of the oppressive shortage of housing and the burden of some 800 countrymen scattered around 35 surrounding homelands that are now feeling increasingly abandoned by the government.

Instead of utilizing the local labour force and the organizational leadership of the BAC the Intervention's masterminds awarded \$500,000 of work to contractors for work on school housing and up to \$50 million for a larger housing project. These fly-in, fly-out, white-fellers huddle each night in their own compound. Very little of this tax-payer funded investment actually improves the local economy.

As the local Aboriginal men of the BAC run their own earth brick factory and have just finished Maningrida's excellent new art and culture centre, why not boost their employment and real wages by letting them build up their own community?

The Intervention will deliver Maningrida about 100 small houses now being constructed on former swamp-land but some locals claim the new housing project will be inundated in the frequent big wets. The low, concrete slab houses look like hot boxes, painted neatly in pastels with high wire fences, a mini Mac-mansion that someone has decided is good enough for Aboriginal families.

Across town, many huge families of twenty people or more are crowded under rusting tin roofs, with flapping tarps to keep out the driving rain. Old cars and trucks are pulled up at the sides. Many here told me that what they truly hate about the new tenancy rules imposed by the Intervention extension is that they will not be allowed to light an open fire in their yard, not for cooking, not even for ceremonial purposes after a death in the family.

Just before my arrival a much-loved Old Man, a highly respected Traditional Owner passed away. Maningrida's elders had even more pain in their hearts as they struggled to convey to the visiting Senators their increasing frustration.

As men, women and even school students addressed the Senators their unmistakable collective message was that Jennie Macklin had not listened to their voices and that last year's Government consultation was an insulting farce, disrespectful of all of their most important rights and beliefs.

Peter Danaja, the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation's highly intelligent Treasurer, said Ms Macklin had promised that there would be "follow-up" a fortnight after she visited the second largest community in the Northern Territory. Instead, here was another convoy of white Toyotas, this time the Senate Committee promising to "follow-up" the broken promises of the previous lot.

Is it any wonder that Aboriginal people can't fathom white politicians?

The Canberra mob can't even settle on who they want to be their own boss but they are always determined not to allow Aboriginal leaders and communities to manage challenges that Government has never and will never be able to solve.

In Maningrida I found some grudging admission of this failure by white politicians. Nigel Scullion, the Coalition Senator who was part of the original Intervention, told me standing there under the hot morning sun, "I steamed in here to Maningrida 26 years ago and it is worse today."

What's Senator Scullion's remedy? More involvement by the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs!

So let's say the ALP Government were to fall at the next federal election in 2013. Imagine Shadow Minister Minister Scullion becoming the next Government Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in a long list of disastrous appointments in the eyes of Aboriginal people. Am I hearing an echo of Mal Brough, barking orders at people in Wadeye?

The unmistakable consensus on both sides in Canberra is that the federal Minister must have the controlling vote on what happens to remote Aboriginal communities.

Only the Greens in the Federal parliament, especially Senator Rachel Siewart, have mounted a credible defence of the basic human rights of Aboriginal families.

Senator Siewart, who is on the Committee that travelled to Alice Springs, Ntaria, Darwin and Maningrida, told me that it was perfectly clear that Aboriginal people had not given consent to the drastic increase in punishment dealt out in the Stronger Futures legislation.

For example, she said, cutting three month's welfare money from parents whose children missed five days attendance in a school term would see less money for food on the table and possibly harm the well being of those children. "This income management and punitive approach has never worked here in Australia or overseas and it is a serious worry," Senator Siewart said.

The Stronger Futures bill also includes harsh penalties that could see people jailed for six months for possessing a bottle of beer or eighteen months for having a six pack (more than 1.35 litres of alcohol) in the prohibition zones.

White people often get exemption permits to drink alcohol in places like Maningrida and the double standard and discrimination is glaring.

The Maningrida mob want to manage any troubled youth or sick adults by caring for them on their homelands where the wellbeing is stronger. But the Northern Government's blind folly in herding people towards twenty larger growth towns leaves the homelands feeling abandoned.

Peter Dunaja told me that Maningrida and other communities across the Northern Territory wanted no part of Stronger Futures for the next ten years because they had no input in shaping this drastic government plan.

Senator Siewart acknowledged that this feeling of anger and abandonment is spreading alarmingly because of disillusionment with the Government process and the loss of control of individual decision-making and even in family rights and the life of whole communities.

As they packed up in Maningrida and scrambled for their plane to move onto the next hurried meeting with Aboriginal people, I challenged Senator Claire Moore, chair of the Senate Community Affairs Committee, on how "Stronger Futures" could possibly be deemed a legal "special measure". I explained that public transcripts of the Government's visits established that there was no real community knowledge of the measures, so much more was lost because of inadequate translation, and certainly they had given no prior, informed consent. Somewhat agitated, Senator Moore insisted that the Senate could look at this in the weeks ahead and that she would also inform the Government of the community outrage.

What the visiting politicians rarely see on their fleeting fly-in and fly-out visits is the scale of the poverty and hunger. In these Aboriginal homes a big extended family is struggling to survive on about \$800 a fortnight, paying \$240 or more on rent under the new tenancy rules, battling to find the \$500 a week that they must pay for meagre rations, over-priced sacks of flour and sugar for damper. If the government had truly been listening they would have directed the Intervention money to improve transport costs of vital food supplies.

A senior insider in the Northern Territory Government told me that the feds had spent \$400 million over four years just to bring in the income management of these families. It would cost another \$25 million a year to extend the control and punishment program by taking away the money when school attendance lagged.

The terrible irony is that stoic school principals like Maningrida's Stuart Dwyer have won high praise from Aboriginal parents and community elders by working hard to build attendance through engagement and making the school a safe and happy place. Trainee Aboriginal teachers told the Senate committee that punishing parents could only harm the children in the circumstances of increasing helplessness.

In Maningrida and in so many other communities where spirits are being crushed by the government's approach there is no sense of a "Stronger Future" for the heartlands of this country.

Is anyone listening to the truthful voices in remote communities?

Djiniyini Gondarra, shaking his head in sorrow and with a sense of grim foreboding over what is ahead, says the new legislation is "racist, deeply discriminatory and a travesty of Australian Democracy because it so clearly against the will of the people."

With her beautiful face fixed in determination, Djampirri Mununggirritj, an eloquent woman from the Yolgnu community of Yirrikala, glares at the visiting Senators and says, "Let's be serious, for goodness sake. We have suffered. We are a people of pride. We are not invisible. We do exist."