

# *Fight for the Homelands*

*Jeff McMullen*

Traditional Owners across Arnhem Land will resist the Government's proposed ten year extension of the Northern Territory Intervention by refusing to surrender Aboriginal land through 40 year leases.

When the five-year leases imposed by the Government's declared Emergency end in August this year the most respected Aboriginal leaders across the Top End will not enter into any new land lease agreements until the draconian and discriminatory *Stronger Futures* legislation is junked.

In the style of Northern Australia's famous bark petitions, Traditional Owners met first in Maningrida and then again in Ramalinging, hosted by the senior elder, Matthew Dhulumburrk Gaykambayu, forging a united front and agreeing on a very powerful message to Canberra.

"This is a last stand against the racism of the Intervention and we will go on resisting discrimination against our homelands," declared Dr Djiniyini Gondarra, from Galiwinku, Elcho Island. "East, West and Central Arnhem Land Traditional Owners are united and determined not to give up our legal rights under the Northern Territory Land Rights Act to control the future of our lands."

Among numerous strong remote community leaders challenging the Government's proposed ten year extension of the Intervention are Djapirri Mununggirritj and Dhanggal Gurriwiwi from the Yolgnu community of Yirrikala, George Pascoe Gameraia from Millingimbi and Reggie Wurridjal, Helen Williams and Matthew Ryan from Maningrida.

The wave of protest is spreading across the Northern Territory and Traditional Owners in other regions are demanding that Lands Councils protect the rights of the communities and defy the surrender of local control to Protector Macklin and those she appoints to take charge of the Government's agenda.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Government and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott's Coalition have colluded to press ahead with the federal control of Aboriginal lands in the Northern Territory, but significant cracks have emerged in this twisted bi-partisanship.

The ALP Government wants a decade long extension of the Intervention and managed to ensure this proposal was cunningly approved by the House of Representatives on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2012 while the country was distracted by the political in-fighting of who should be Prime Minister. Since then the Abbott team has sought to exploit the widespread criticism of Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin's sham consultations and the lack of prior, informed consent for the Government's program.

The Federal Government's abuse of democratic process and disrespect for the genuine views of a clear majority of remote community leaders and residents has prompted the Green Senators to oppose the *Stronger Futures* legislation and to propose amendments to soften some of the harsh jail penalties destined to increase the dangerous incarceration rate in the Northern Territory.

Coalition Senators, including Nigel Scullion who seeks to be Minister if Tony Abbott is elected Prime Minister next year, don't like the idea of committing federal funds to ten more years of an Intervention that so far has cost around \$2 billion with no evidence that it has transformed the terrible conditions in so many places. Scullion and the Greens have countered with proposed amendments seeking five more years of the federal controls.

The problem with most of these fiddling white politicians is that none of them is prepared to stand up against the grinding force of the growth agenda, that big development machine that is gobbling up Aboriginal lands and lives.

The Traditional Owners opposing *Stronger Futures* want us all to challenge the Australian Government to abandon its spin, that avalanche of media releases telling the Australian public how much money is being showered on Aboriginal people, and to truthfully admit that, in essence, Australia has no real policy for the thousands of families living on the homelands.

Djiniyini Gondarra notes that the money being provided to the homelands in the Northern Territory will be inadequate even to provide the most basic citizen rights of sewerage and power in communities that are being left to die on the vine while the federal funding is concentrated in the twenty so called “growth towns”.

Traditional Owners in the larger communities such as Maningrida are increasingly distressed because they do not have the additional housing, health or education facilities required to handle greater numbers of people being steadily pushed towards the hubs through this social engineering.

The growing anger and frustration among Aboriginal people over this relentless assimilation and control of their lives shows out wherever I travel in this country.

Many of the oldest freedom fighters of the Struggle came to Walgett in western NSW to bury that gentlest of Songmen, Uncle Jimmy Little. Family members and friends gathered in the little wooden church where Jimmy and his wife Marge were married fifty years ago. Painted dancers sung him onto the next part of the journey and the streets of Walgett were lined with small groups of people respectfully observing the passing of a true legend.

Remember this. Jimmy Little put strength and will into one of the last important messages of his life. Fully understanding the tragedy unfolding in the Northern Territory he urged people to oppose the *Stronger Futures* Legislation. In an open letter to the Government and Australian Parliament he called on the politicians to listen to the wisdom of the NT Elders, saying “*many elders recently have stated unequivocally...that they have not given their ‘prior, informed consent’ to these very serious provisions that are clearly aimed overwhelmingly at Aboriginal people living in desperate poverty.*”

When my phone rings with news of the loss of another young girl or boy in one of these anguished communities it is not enough to shed tears at the grave. We must listen and learn from these children, from the men and women too who have poured out their heartfelt explanations for why so many Aboriginal people feel there is no future for them while the Government relentlessly continues the theft or destruction of all they hold sacred.

Ray Peckham, the 83 year old Aboriginal activist, who travelled across the land with other freedom fighters such as Chicka Dixon and Faith Bandler, looks out at the landscape of Aboriginal life today and says, “What have we got ...after all of these years, we’ve got nothing.”

Talking late into the night in Dubbo with this hard working man who has worked in so many places across the country he was scornful of those people and organisations who believed colluding with the Government controllers, protectors and business managers would bring any benefit to their communities.

Ray’s advice was to have no part of this corrupt system and to work only with people who understood the genuine needs and views of communities.

Where does that leave Australia?

Australian Government must begin by ending the continuing racism and discrimination of the Intervention, abandoning all policies that shame and blame only Aboriginal people.

Tearing down the Government signs, a stigmatising symbol of discrimination, would be a first step.

Destroying the discriminating *Basics Cards* would follow. Stop punishing parents whose kids are not attending school and engage them instead. Listen and learn why so many of these children feel lost.

Give up the talk of jailing more Aboriginal people and give them more local support for grog management, community control and effective education of young people are now at risk.

Recognize that by throwing up the metaphorical barbed wire of discrimination in this manufactured state of emergency, the Government is fuelling a sense of catastrophe, a feeling that life can only get worse.

Aboriginal people will continue the Struggle no matter what Government inflicts on them. So I say, listen and learn.

Pay heed to Ray Peckham's warning that nothing really has changed for Aboriginal people, understand that Djiniyini Gondarra and other Traditional Owners have drawn a line in the sand and the resistance will go on, and think deeply about that voice from the grave, the late and great Jimmy Little who left us with these words...*"it is the elders who best understand the needs of their community, know what the solutions must be, and have to live with the consequences."*