

Reconciliation for Western Sydney



51 Candowie Crescent Baulkham Hills 2153

Phone: Lyn 9639 8394 Phil 0425265 170 Fax: 9686 8158

Email: lynlew@optusnet.com.au website: <http://reconciliation4westernsydney.org/>

A.B.N. 24 402 471 782

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tpm

Senator the Hon Christopher Evans
Leader of the Government in the Senate
Minister for Tertiary Education,
Skills, Science and Research
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senator Evans,

We, members of Reconciliation for Western Sydney (R4WS) wish to raise with you, our deep concerns regarding the proposed 'Stronger Futures' legislation currently before the Senate.

RW4S has received complaints from a host of Indigenous people across the nation expressing their concern and indeed, anger, at the way this legislation will impact on their lives. Despite government rhetoric about consultation, we believe no meaningful consultation has occurred – especially in remote areas where many Aboriginal people have English as a third or fourth or even fifth language. This is especially true of the Yolnu People.

Instead of sitting down with and consulting Aboriginal leaders, the government's approach will bring about a return to the 'mission and government reserve era' where Aboriginal people will be made, once again, to feel as though they are wards of the state.

The recommendations in the government-commissioned report by Peter Yu *et al*, would, if accepted, have resulted in a constructive partnership between the government and Aboriginal communities, but those recommendations were rejected. As the report noted, "the manner in which many of the Intervention's measures were imposed... [failed] to engage constructively with Aboriginal people... [and] has so far compromised its success."

The current (and proposed) legislation will further widen the gulf between the living conditions of Aboriginal communities and the rest of Australia. The Indigenous Doctors Association and other mental health experts have highlighted the link between stress and mental health. The proposed legislation will increase this stress with the likelihood of increased mental health problems, leading in some cases to suicide.

Stress is being further exacerbated by policies that restrict the teaching of Aboriginal languages (unlike in New Zealand where research has shown that focusing on Maori, then English, yields better results), the introduction of Hubs at the expense of Homelands, pressure on Land Councils to comply with government demands and pressure on communities to agree to leasing arrangements.

While we freely acknowledge that a minority of residents – especially women, in the prescribed communities are in favour of income management since it reduces the extent of 'humberging', we believe, along with Peter Yu and others, that such management should be voluntary. Anecdotal stories abound about the frustration experienced by BasicsCard holders: The amount of money that has to be spent on taxi fares to get to prescribed supermarkets, the woman who was told she could not have her refrigerator repaired using her BasicsCard, and the humiliation experienced by those having to queue up under a sign reading, 'BasicsCard Holders Only'.

We, therefore, respectfully urge the government to scrap the proposed Stronger Futures legislation and return to the negotiating table.

Yours sincerely

Lyn Leerson
Secretary, on behalf of,
Reconciliation for Western Sydney