

NT Consultations Report 2011
By Quotations Sydney 4th May 2012
Book Launch

“Stronger Futures Legislation. Points Against”

I begin by Acknowledging the Gadigal of the Eora Peoples of this area. These were the first to feel the impact of the invaders and are still today suffering with that impact.

So I pay my respects to those Elders of the past who stood up against the new comers. Those of today who still ‘maintain the rage’ and I pray for those who will come in the future, that they may not lose sight of who they are and where they come from.

A note on behalf of ‘concerned Australians.’

The consultations would never have been recorded if it had not been for a group of dedicated volunteers who travelled the countryside to film and record. They were followed by a second group of equally dedicated volunteers who gave their time and skills to transcribe the material – these wonderful people came from the NT and SA, Sydney and Melbourne. Huge thanks to all of them from all of us. Their work was the basis of bringing to the attention of the general public just how inadequate and unprofessional the Government’s consultation process really was, and more importantly, they have given us the

opportunity to record what the people of some of the NT communities really said.

Secondly a special thank you to the Sisters of St Joseph who assisted financially in covering the cost of plane fares as well as contributing to the cost of printing this little book report. Their support was critical.

And I would like to add thirdly a very special woman called Michele Harris. We play so loosely at times with the term 'National Treasure' but in my opinion Michelle is one of them. Anyone who has had anything to do with her would know how hard she has fought to get Aboriginal Voices heard in this sea of indifference. This book is just one example.

Let's us start with this little story by the Uniting Church Aboriginal Pastor, Bill Hollingsworth;

'The Parable of the Abattoir Wall'

For many years, the custom in one of the abattoirs had been to paint a coat of whitewash over the bloodstains on its walls. This was found to be a quicker approach to presenting a clean hygienic image than the laborious task of scrubbing down walls. However, the time came when the blood-caked stains from years of white-washing began to

turn yellow and a foul smelling slime began to seep from underneath the whitewashed interior. The abattoir had no option but to scrape down the years of accumulated blood-stained whitewash and go back to the original wall surface. There came a point in time, in history, when the scraping back exposure of the cover-ups was necessary before the abattoir could do its work. We believe Australia is now “scraping off the whitewash” and finding its soul.ⁱ

I did agree with the ending of this story in 1997, when it first appeared. The Land Rights movement, The Deaths in Custody Royal Commission, the setting up of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, The Reconciliation Movement, The Mabo Case and the Bringing them Home report, to name a few, helped to open the eyes of many Australians to our past and was pointing some directions for the future.

Sadly, I was mistaken!

On May 27th 1967, Australia resoundingly passed a Referendum to allow the Federal Government to make laws for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. A positive step forward – I would have thought.

Sadly, I was mistaken!

Forty Five years later, here we stand with Federal legislation which definitely is not for the benefit of those it is directly aimed at and God only knows who it might benefit?

As you are hopefully aware, a few weeks ago while the country's eyes were firmly focused on the Federal leadership spill, the House of Representatives quietly and with no real debate passed the Stronger Futures Bills. These Bills are now before the Senate and also have been the subject of an inquiry by the Senate Community Affairs Committee. It is astounding that the House of Representatives passed the Bills with barely a glimmer of dissent. In fact only three people voted against them. Bob Katter (Ind), Andrew Wilkie (Ind) and Adam

Bandt (Green). This is despite the fact that there are many informed voices speaking against the Bills and the negative impact this legislation will have on Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

The Senate Community Affairs Committee has now handed down its report and as I have said elsewhere: “It is disappointing that the Committee has comprehensively ignored a wide range of concerns raised by a significant number of submissions and evidence from Northern Territory Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal organisations, human rights groups, welfare groups, churches and others.

Across the Northern Territory Aboriginal leaders are clearly stating that they have not been properly consulted and that they do not consent to the so called Stronger Futures agenda and in particular to the ‘special measures’ contained within the proposed legislation.

As recently as Wednesday the Yolngu Nations Assembly released a statement rejecting these Bills.

They said:

The Yolngu Nations reject the Stronger Futures Bill (and those associated) and call on the Senate to discard these Bills in full. We have clearly informed you that we do not support the legislation.

The Australian Federal Government can achieve all its aims through partnership in our communities. They have no need to grant themselves the continued and new powers contained within these bills.

Despite the Minister's assertions that communities have been properly consulted it is clearly not the case. If Communities are saying No We do NOT support this legislation then the Government cannot claim to have consulted properly, and most importantly to have heard what they have been told.

There is significant evidence which shows that Government is not listening as this book shows.

National Indigenous TV has filmed a forum of Traditional Owners and Elders at Maningrida which is available to view on line (www.NITV.com.au). There are also a number of statements from Elders circulating. It is clear from this evidence that the process of consultation does not meet the criteria for free and prior informed consent that is necessary to be able to claim that special measures are necessary. It is also clear that the process of consultation did not allow for a free discussion about possibilities for the future. Rather the discussions were based on a pre-determined and Government led agenda. It is also clear that the Government has interpreted what it did hear to fit its own agenda.

As a result this legislation will ensure that Northern Territory Aboriginal people will be subjected to racist, discriminatory, disempowering and ineffective policies for at least another ten years. An opportunity to create truly stronger futures will have slipped by for another generation.

If you watch the video of the National Indigenous TV forum you will hear Revd. Dr. Djinyini Gondarra say that this legislation is dehumanising and will kill Aboriginal peoples and their cultures.

This legislation is taking away Aboriginal peoples' right to govern their own lives. It is doing so on some spurious notion that these measures are going to make things better. There is no real evidence that the Intervention has made any real and positive changes in the Northern Territory. The reports published by the Federal Government do not provide sufficient evidence of the effectiveness of the policies. The Intervention has been a very expensive exercise but nobody can honestly say whether it has delivered tangible and sustainable outcomes to Aboriginal peoples.

The proposed legislation as it stands will deliver inordinate power to the Minister whilst diminishing the ability of Aboriginal people to manage their own lives, returning us to the days of assimilation and dependency, despite the lack of evidence to justify such actions.

There are many issues with Stronger Futures, both with regard to the intent as well as particular measures. As we (the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Sydney) submitted to the Senate Enquiry (Submission No. 350) our key concerns could be summarised as:

- The lack of proper and appropriate consultation;
- The lack of proper, independent and verifiable evidence of the Intervention's impact;
- The fact that the Government is relying on special measures to discriminate but does not meet the criteria to validate their use;
- The denial of Aboriginal rights to manage their own affairs and the characterisation of Aboriginal peoples as incapable as evidenced through measures such as Alcohol Management Plans. Communities across the NT have for many years been working on solutions to address alcohol problems. Now it will be entirely up to the Minister whether she will accept their solutions;

- The punitive nature of many of the measures for example SEAM. What logic is it that says we will punish already disadvantaged children by removing income from their family and causing more disadvantage?
- The coercive move to long term leases completely undermines hard won land rights and is not necessary for the Government to improve its delivery of services;
- The lack of recognition of the importance of land, language and culture to Aboriginal peoples;
- **The lack of recognition that Governments need to change the way they deliver services. The Government agenda and dialogue is all about changing Aboriginal peoples. Perhaps the most insidious of all the problems with this legislation is that the Government has failed to listen to Aboriginal peoples and continues to treat them as a problem to be solved. Further, that the only way to solve these ‘problems’ is by forcing people away from their own cultures towards the dominant White culture. This legislation is more than**

bad policy it is racist and assimilationist. It will hurry the demise of Aboriginal Cultures and will only succeed in debilitating and demoralising Aboriginal peoples.

I urge you to approach your Senators to vote against this legislation. Read this book and hear what is being said. Take the time to watch the videos mentioned above. Read the submissions to the Senate Inquiry; even reading a small cross section will quickly identify that this legislation is fundamentally flawed and must be thrown out. Look at the Stand for Freedom website (www.standforfreedom.org.au) and sign the petition. Already over 35,000 have signed it and we hope more will before the legislation is debated in the Senate later this month. Take the time to think through what the impact of this legislation will really be on the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Ask yourself; if it were your family living under these laws would you still allow it to pass?

This legislation must be thrown out and the Government must instead engage with Aboriginal people to ensure that they are supporting Aboriginal aspirations for stronger futures. There should be no place in this modern era for coercive and discriminatory policy. Having been whisked through the lower house it is now up to the Senate to ensure that another generation of Aboriginal people are not consigned to the scrap heap of bad policy. It will be put to the vote in this month, May, probably with some minor amendments which tweak it. But this legislation is fundamentally flawed and Northern Territory Aborigines deserve legislation that does more than fiddling around the edges. They deserve a complete overhaul.

I would like to congratulate ‘concerned Australians’ for putting this book together. It is so hard to hear the voices. The Government - and the Media - cherry pick what is put out in the public domain. There are very few spaces where Aboriginal voices are heard talking about their experiences. This book is so important as it enables us all to question what our Government is telling us. We don’t have to hear it through filters we can hear straight from the people themselves. If you

want to read the full transcripts they are on the concerned Australians website.

I might add that Tracker is another excellent avenue for hearing Aboriginal voices. It has very quickly established itself as a quality publication which fills a much needed gap for thorough and thoughtful journalism on Aboriginal issues. If you haven't subscribed yet I am sure Amy will be able to help you do so!

I would like to end with this little story:

An old man walking along a beach at dawn noticed a child ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. Catching up with the child he asked what she was doing.

"The starfish will die if they are still on the beach when the sun roasts them with its mid-morning heat," the child answered.

"But the beach goes on for a long distance, and there are millions of

starfish,” countered the old man. “How can your effort make any difference?”

The child looked at the starfish in her hand and threw it safely in the waves.

*“It makes a difference to this one,” she said.*ⁱⁱ

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ⁱ *Pastor Bill Hollingsworth, ‘Message Stick’, Journal of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian Congress of the Uniting Church in Australia, June 1997.*

ⁱⁱ Source Unknown