



Education International
Internationale de l'Éducation
Internacional de la Educación
Bildungsinternationale

The Honourable John Howard MP
Prime Minister of Australia
Parliament House
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Brussels, October 10, 2007

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President

Thulas Nxesi

General Secretary

Fred van Leeuwen

Dear Prime Minister,

I write to you on behalf of Education International (EI), the Global Union Federation of teacher and education worker unions to express deep concern about the recent measures taken by your government with regard to Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

The 5th World Congress of EI held from 22-26 July in Berlin passed an urgent resolution on the Australian Government's incursion, without traditional owner consent, into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, thus undermining the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 and the Racial Discrimination Act 1975.

The protection of children and its concomitant requirement for safety and security are incompatible with the coercive measures being pursued by your government. The federal incursion and takeover of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, by the deployment of the army, police and government administrators to these communities, is unprecedented and unjustifiable. The stated aim of the government that of reducing child abuse is in itself a laudable aim for any government. However, when the actions taken serve to undermine legislation designed to protect Aboriginal rights, namely the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 and the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, it is clear that the government has used the serious issue of child abuse to malign, stereotype and marginalize Aboriginal people.

There is no link between the control of the land and addressing effectively sexual abuse, social dysfunction or poverty. The proposed legislation, "Emergency Response in the Northern Territory", implies the compulsory acquisition of five-year leases over prescribed townships; in consequence, Aboriginal offenders will no longer be able to cite customary law and cultural practices to mitigate the seriousness of their criminal behaviour when they appear before Territory judges and magistrates. This, of course, is a very significant change with a significant consequent impact on the lives of all people in these communities.

Mr. Howard, none of these measures is consistent with established international trends in Indigenous policy; nor do they fit with the stated vision that "Indigenous Australians, wherever they live, have the same opportunities as other Australians to make informed choices about their lives, to realize their full potential in whatever they choose to do and to take responsibility for managing their own affairs" (Ministerial Task Force on Indigenous Affairs, June 2004).

The Northern Territory Board of Inquiry's Report into sexual abuse of Aboriginal children, entitled "Little Children Are Sacred", considers education a key factor in addressing the problems in the Aboriginal communities and stresses the importance of school attendance for all. Its recommendations include education in parenting, pre-school education for all three-year olds, smaller class sizes, remedial education, cross-cultural education, local language development, employment of additional school counsellors, and the provision of adult education. These recommendations, if implemented, have the possibility of effecting real change for Aboriginal people, of creating opportunities for a life with dignity and free from poverty and dependence. Again, I must point out that the path of action chosen by your government is in direct conflict with the approach reflected in these recommendations.



The unanimous voice of 1600 delegates to the EI 5th World Congress, representing more than 380 education union organizations from 160 countries and territories, condemned the basic infringement of human rights and the discriminatory welfare measures imposed on residents of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territories.

EI calls on the Australian government to cease legislative changes to the land permit system and the Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Rights' Act.

EI calls upon your government to acknowledge the recommendations of the "Little Children are Sacred Report" which was drawn up in collaboration and consultation with the Aboriginal communities.

EI urges your government to seek long-term measures based on the allocation of large scale funding to provide Indigenous children and their communities with quality education services, and health and housing services.

The commitment of EI to quality education and social justice for all forms the basis of its concern; its consideration of this matter therefore arises from what matters the most: the protection of the human rights of the Indigenous people. EI respectfully requests and urges you most strongly to give the greatest consideration to these concerns, and in particular to the provision of comprehensive, free quality public education services so that Aboriginal people may achieve their maximum potential as human beings and have the opportunity to contribute to the country of their birth.

Finally, Prime Minister, EI requests a meeting with you to discuss the current situation and the broader issues relating to the education, health and human rights of the Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, in particular the children. Ms. Susan Hopgood, EI Vice President, would represent EI at the meeting, and representatives of EI Member organizations in Australia, the Australian Education Union (AEU), the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), and the Independent Education Union of Australia (IEU) should also be invited.

I look forward to your positive response.

Yours sincerely,

Fred van Leeuwen
General Secretary
Education International

cc.

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