

The Federal Government's intervention in the Northern Territory

Australian Greens position paper 2007

Senator Rachel Siewert

The Greens welcome the Federal Government's focus on the plight of Aboriginal communities (after many years of neglect) and are keen to find ways we can work to translate this national concern into long-term action.

We do not believe that the Government's current top-down approach will succeed and we want to see a more considered and comprehensive response. What is needed is evidence-based policy that builds on existing knowledge of successful programs to deliver long-term solutions that strengthen and empower communities.

To succeed in the long-term it is absolutely essential to have genuine community engagement and ownership of these programs and initiatives. Community consultation is the first recommendation of the Little Children are Sacred report, and one of the key criticisms of the top-down approach taken by the Federal Government is that they have failed to consult and failed to learn from the past.

The *Emergency Response and Development Plan to protect Aboriginal Children* put forward by the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory on 10 July 2007 outlines a comprehensive two-phase approach to this issue which we endorse. The Australian Greens are calling on the Federal Government to put aside its current intervention strategy and enter into a partnership with Aboriginal communities to deliver a comprehensive and considered proposal.

We are critical of the Howard/Brough 'crisis' plan, which comes after eleven years of inaction and numerous reports and attempts to superficially tackle complex issues in an election environment. We are particularly concerned by the way that it seeks to use an emotive problem as an excuse to overturn communal ownership of land and scrap the permit system -- which both communities and the police agree is an effective way of helping to keep grog-runners and carpet-baggers out of remote communities.

We are also worried that a law-and-order approach to banning alcohol on Aboriginal communities will prove ineffective and could increase the levels of violence and abuse if it isn't backed up by rehabilitation and counselling programs and isn't part of a strategy that also tackles the problems in the larger regional centres.

We are critical of the punitive approach the government is taking to welfare by quarantining 50% of income support payments as food and rent vouchers, and removing 50% of income support (and 100% of family tax benefits) if children miss school without a good reason. There is already compelling evidence that these punitive approaches do not work. At the same time the government has failed to support community schemes to voluntarily put aside welfare monies (like Tangentyere's Centrepay scheme), which continue to cost communities thousands of dollars to run.

The Greens believe that there must be a long-term commitment by governments to combat the underlying causes of child abuse and community violence in partnership with Aboriginal communities - supported by the commitment of substantial ongoing resources.

Strategies and programs must ensure:

child protection

- Safe communities through adequate and appropriate policing and more resources to support safe houses, night patrols and Aboriginal community police and community-based family violence programs.
- Investment in proactive preventative strategies, early intervention programs and intensive programs for victims of abuse as part of a national strategy for child protection¹ which includes a priority plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children²
- Implementation of all 97 recommendations of the *Little Children are Sacred* report
- Recruitment and retention of skilled and culturally-aware child protection staff
- A whole of community approach to working with victims and perpetrators to break the cycle of violence
- Increased recognition and support for kinship care for children placed in out-of-home care and for community-based family support and foster care services

health

- Healthy kids and healthy families through increased resources and infrastructure to provide primary health and wellbeing services
- Urgent investment to reduce the gap in life expectancy and rates of chronic disease within a generation as part of a national Indigenous health strategy (a commitment of \$500M/yr)

¹ 'A Call to Action for Australia's Children' Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia (CAFWAA) <http://www.cafwaa.org.au/>

² Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) <http://www.snaicc.asn.au/>

- The establishment of multi-purpose family centres providing primary health and welfare services; parenting services; childcare and early childhood education programs; and family support
- Increases in the number of multi-function ATSI childcare and community learning centres
- Significant investment in programs to reduce alcohol and other substance abuse which includes education and demand-reduction strategies as well as rehabilitation and counselling services as part of a national strategy
- Support for existing community alcohol and substance abuse initiatives and management plans, and tougher restrictions on alcohol sales in regional centres

housing and infrastructure

- Sufficient housing to reduce overcrowding and increase child health and safety (\$2-3 billion nationally over ten years)
- Genuine employment opportunities providing community-based health, education and welfare services as well as housing and infrastructure maintenance and construction

education & training

- Delivery of quality education to all Aboriginal children, with a focus on early childhood development and with school attendance strategies that encourage family engagement (an extra \$295 million for infrastructure plus \$79 million a year is needed if all children in the Northern Territory attend school³)
- Introduction of positive parenting programs
- A universal school meals program
- Resources to identify and support students experiencing trauma
- Increased education and training opportunities for adults

partnership and governance

- A human rights approach to partnering with communities in developing policies and programs
- Government funding programs should be streamlined to reduce red tape and focus on service delivery rather than compliance, and there should be a commitment to long-term predictable funding rather than temporary pilot projects.
- Financial management education and services, and support for voluntary community-based financial management initiatives (such as Tangentyere's successful Centrecare scheme)
- Extension of the successful community governance project
- Cultural awareness training for government staff

³ CAEPR **Costing the NT Intervention** by Jon Altman
[Stabilise, normalise and exit = \\$4 billion: Cheap at the price?'](#)

To deal with all of these issues in a manner that is sustainable in the long-term we need to ensure these programs include a capacity-building component that trains local people and puts them into real jobs within the community. We also need to make sure our policies are evidence-based by carefully evaluating our actions, so we can build upon our successes and learn from our mistakes.

The Australian Greens are calling on the Federal Government to urgently rethink their current approach to tackling child abuse in the Northern Territory and to give serious consideration to the *Emergency Response and Development Plan to protect Aboriginal Children* outlined by the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory. We believe that this presents a great opportunity for the Prime Minister to put aside the irrelevant issues of communal control of land and the permit system, and sit down with Aboriginal organisations and discuss how they can solve this problem in partnership. It is only through such a partnership that this issue can truly be solved and we can move forward to address the underlying causes of Indigenous disadvantage.

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