

## **The situation since ‘intervention’ in North East Arnhem Land**

Misinformation seems to be the order of the day in the Arnhem Land communities. I feel I can make such a claim because I have not long returned from Yirrkala, a community not far from Gove Airport and the Alcan mining town of Nhulunbuy.

Yirrkala was visited on Friday 24 August, by Major-General Chalmers, who spoke to a gathering of Yolgnu people and others, about his understanding of the hundreds of pages of legislation that had been steamrolled through Federal Parliament.

Major General Chalmers assured the community that the Government was only acquiring their land for 5 year leases and that the dealings would be transparent. But now it appears the government is really planning to turn these into 99-year leases. This seems to be the reason for the recent secret meetings of Minister Mal Brough accompanied by very senior Canberra public servants, and Noel Pearson from Cape York, with Galarrwuy Yunupingu.

It is outrageous that Minister Brough should refuse to meet with Yirrkala Elders yet hold these secret discussions with Mr Yunupingu, as if he has some right to speak for all Yolgnu people. It was apparently expected that Mr Yunupingu would either sell out his countrymen or bully or cajole them into submission. Noel Pearson is well “off country” in Arnhem Land. Is he now in the direct employ of government, accompanying ministers and officials as they meet to persuade leaders?

Mr Yunupingu is a wealthy individual with legal advice at his beck and call. He has connections with other powerful and wealthy people, such as his new business partner Shane Stone (the former Country Liberal Party chief minister of N.T.). It can not be assumed that Yunupingu’s interests reflect those of the Yolgnu community. What opportunity is the government giving to other local leaders to get independent expert legal and financial advice? I fear the local Traditional Owners will be pressured into signing 99-year leases, thus surrendering their land rights.

Uncertainty and insecurity are affecting all organisations in this community. Yirrkala is home to the largest and most exciting Aboriginal Art and Craft Gallery in Australia – Buku Larrngay. The current managers there are virtually hamstrung in their planning and decision-making. They have the prospect of a federal government appointed Business Manager moving into the community and so do not know whether their ideas will be overridden by someone who cannot possibly have a real grasp of their operation.

An early casualty of the “intervention” is the future economic independence of the Laynhapuy Homelands Association. Their current economic basis was severely undermined by the peremptory cancellation on 25 June 2007 of the Association’s kava import licence which enabled them to run a carefully supervised business. They were licensed to import kava and to resell it to other communities which in turn were licensed to retail it. It was retailed in rationed packages of 400 grams per person per week.

The kava business provided jobs and training for indigenous people, and produced a profit of approximately \$1.2 million per year. Under the N.T. Kava Management Act, all profits from kava sales have to be used for community benefit. At Laynhapuy, kava profits have been used to: build a Rangers’ Centre and a school basketball court; do maintenance and improvements on some Homelands’ houses; build and operate Homelands’ offices; provide a new boat for the coastal Rangers; and fund heavy plant and equipment for maintaining homeland roads, rubbish tips and airstrips, amongst other projects.

Replacing alcohol with kava has been an excellent harm-minimisation policy, though alcohol was the preference of the younger guys. Kava relaxes people and does not increase aggression as alcohol does. Since the banning of kava from Yirrkala, which is a “dry community”, more locals now go to the liquor outlets in Nhulunbuy and either drink in town or on the way home.

The 400 gram weekly ration was the amount of kava that could be legally purchased and did not exceed what is currently regarded as a safe level of kava consumption. Any side effects it causes are reversible if its use becomes occasional or is stopped altogether. On the other hand, excessive amounts of alcohol can be legally purchased and, when drunk regularly, can cause liver damage and cognitive impairment. Heavy consumption of even soft drink does significant damage to health, for example increasing the incidence of diabetes.

Due to the peremptory nature of the cancellation of permits for commercial importation of kava, the Laynhapuy Homelands Association has lost several hundred thousand dollars in recent investments in the business and in kava-related research. A contract had been made with the Northern Territory Government to undertake a Kava Health Monitoring Project across all kava using communities, but that had to be cancelled just as it was getting under way.

In addition, about \$1.68 million of current and planned community projects are now at risk because of the Australian Government’s kava ban. These 14 projects cover such things as: the purchase of a Mitsubishi Canter Truck to support expansion of Indigenous Building Team; the installation of the ARDS Yolgnu language public radio service in six homelands and ABC Radio National in one homeland; a contribution for the provision of Night Patrol Services to Yirrkala and Nhulunbuy; scoping of a reticulated 240VV power system for Wandawuy Homeland; further basketball courts; a cyclone shelter; housing; and investment in other business ventures.

The Laynhapuy Homelands' Association has been told by the federal government that NO COMPENSATION for these losses will be provided.

The homelands are also being greatly disadvantaged by the Federal Government's decision to abolish the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). As reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 17.9.07 [edited version of quote]:

*"The Federal Government's intervention in remote indigenous communities in the Northern Territory could devastate a lucrative industry and leave artists open to exploitation by carpet-baggers, leading indigenous art academics and artists' representatives say.*

*"The industry depends on CDEP to support art centres and workers who do not earn enough to live on from art sales. As part of the intervention in Northern Territory remote communities, indigenous people will have up to half of their welfare payments quarantined by the Federal Government. But CDEP payments cannot be quarantined because they are technically income. People receiving these payments will be moved to the lower unemployment payments, which are subject to quarantining."*

*"Professor Jon Altman of ANU has said that ending CDEP is likely to jeopardise this most successful indigenous industry which has enormous spin off benefits for the nation."*

Doing away with the permit system opens the door to shonky art dealers – the carpet baggers.

The Rangers who patrol the coast and tend the land through bush regeneration and controlled burning have fulfilled their responsibilities with enthusiasm. But these jobs, which combined well with a traditional life-style in remote areas, are now gone!

What a short sighted policy this is, to replace dedicated CDEP workers in the communities! I saw an ad in the *Northern Territory News* 8/9/07:

*"Employment Brokers on \$114,920 to \$159,470 pa with potential for 'performance bonus' ... plus an incentive package which includes regular negotiated reunion visits to your home state. These are non-ongoing positions for the period up to 30 June 2008."*

Will these large salaries for outsiders be included via 'creative accounting' as money spent on Aboriginal employment? And what happens after June 2008? How many *real* jobs will have been created for the Indigenous people in the remote homelands? Not many I suspect.

Another concern is that there will be no police stationed at Yirrkala because it is considered too close to Nhulunbuy – even though it can take over an hour for police to respond to an incident. The new police for Galiwinku Island and Gapuwiyak community, several hundred kilometres away, are also based in Nhulunbuy because there is no available housing in those communities.

We need to hold the Federal Government and Opposition to account – not just in relation to child protection. Indigenous land rights and culture must not be eroded, and the promises of proper services and infrastructure must be honoured.

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