

RETURN TO THE RATION DAYS: THE NORTHERN TERRITORY INTERVENTION – GRASS- ROOTS EXPERIENCE AND RESISTANCE

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Welfare days – Ration days

One Tuesday in early December 2008, I drove with some friends from Alice Springs to Yuendumu, a Warlpiri Aboriginal community about 350 kilometres to the North West. I needed to get to Yuendumu to follow up on some research. Many of my Warlpiri friends had been trying to get back to the community for over a week. But cars had broken down and money was tight, so people were jumping at the opportunity for a lift. Our plans for the day were straightforward. Pick people up at nine o'clock, head into town to get Centrelink and other business done by mid-morning and be out at Yuendumu just after lunch.

I went first to Kunoth Town Camp, a block on Charles Creek, to pick up Valerie Martin and some of her family. She is a strong Warlpiri woman, a wonderful translator, agitator and community spokesperson, who I had grown close to through the campaign against the Northern Territory Intervention. We had worked hard together speaking with her people in language, collecting stories that detailed the increasing hardship being faced due to the imposition of the income management system and the fears about loss of land and culture. Valerie would always stress the need for people to be vocal and challenge the new laws, 'if we don't stand up now – and fight – it will go on for generations to come'.

When I arrived at Kunoth there was already a conversation bubbling about income management ('IM').¹ Specifically, people were talking about their frustrations with the 'BasicsCard' which had been slowly introduced over the

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¹ The Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Payment Reform) Act 2007 (Cth) passed through the Parliament alongside the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007 (Cth), establishing the 'income management regime'. During the period of this study, the Act applied to all residents of prescribed Aboriginal communities receiving Centrelink entitlements. Fifty per cent of these entitlements, including aged and disability pensions, child support payments and unemployment benefits must be managed by Centrelink and cannot be accessed as cash. One hundred per cent of lump-sum payments distributed through Centrelink, such as the baby-bonus, are also managed. Quarantined income can only be spent on 'priority needs' such as food, clothing, household items, household utilities, childcare and development, education and training and is prohibited from being spent on items such as alcohol, tobacco, gambling and pornography.

previous few months. Before the BasicsCard, people subject to income management were required to physically go into Centrelink to negotiate access to the 50 per cent of their social security entitlements quarantined through the Intervention.

Mostly people were given 'store cards' for Coles, Woolworths or K-Mart. If you brought in an invoice, Centrelink staff could also write out cheques to purchase 'approved goods' from local businesses like the mechanics or second hand shop, but this took lots of work and was rarely done. The BasicsCard could now, theoretically, be used at over 500 shops across the Northern Territory, just as a normal EFTPOS card is used. Credit could be transferred from an income management account onto the card with a phone call. Spending was still restricted to certain goods and services however, and it was forbidden to access cash from the quarantined amount.

There had been some official talk about introducing the card to provide greater levels of 'choice' to Aboriginal people. Launching the card, Minister Jenny Macklin said, 'it's a much more flexible way of shopping and doing business under income management'.² But all the public forums put on by Centrelink about the change were convened for the local business community and there was no consultation with people who were actually quarantined. This suggests that the BasicsCard was introduced in an attempt to ease pressure coming from many smaller businesses which were missing out on customers.³

At Kunoth there was frustration at the new problems that came with the card. Valerie's daughter had spent over an hour and a half on a public phone trying to get credit transferred, before the line unexpectedly cut out. 'We almost used all of the credit on the phone card', said Valerie. 'More than an hour, just listening to that music, and for nothing'. Others explained that the credit they had put onto the BasicsCard was missing when they actually went to purchase food. A relative visiting from a community across the border in South Australia said, '...back at home I'm been explaining what people are going through here. Everyone is really scared they're going to blanket the whole of Australia'.

Hendrix, another friend of mine from Kunoth, was trying to get to Halls Creek in Western Australia by bus. His partner was keen to come with us to Yuendumu. She had credit on her BasicsCard and wanted to use it to buy the bus ticket for Hendrix before we left. After some discussion, people seemed sure that the Greyhound bus company accepted the card, so that would be our

² Minister Jenny Macklin, 'BasicsCard roll-out underway after successful launch'(Media Release, 13 November 2008) <http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/mediareleases/2008/Pages/basics_card_02nov08.aspx>.

³ Karen Dearn, 'Labor rules out smartcard for Income Management scheme', *The Australian* (online), 12 June 2008 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/labor-rules-out-smartcards-for-welfare/story-e6frg8zx-1111116606576>>.

first stop in town.

We loaded up the car and headed off. We dropped people off at the bus terminal, then to the chemist and the supermarket. We were making good time. Back at the bus terminal though there was trouble. The BasicsCard wasn't working. With silent patience it was understood that Hendrix would miss today's bus, but we agreed to stay in Alice Springs until his ticket was sorted. Greyhound wrote out the \$90 invoice and we drove the young couple to Centrelink to ask them to write out a cheque.

When we arrived the place was quite full, but not bursting as I'd previously seen it. There were about 30 people waiting on benches, but only four in the queue. By this stage it was 11:30 am. Not thinking it would take too long, we left to collect the last passenger, Harry Nelson. Harry is another staunch campaigner and veteran of the fight for land rights. He'd been president of the Yuendumu Community Council until mid-2008, when it was abolished by the local government reforms which had been introduced by the Northern Territory Government on top of the Intervention. On the drive back to Centrelink, Harry explained how he'd tried numerous times to get his BasicsCard, but had abandoned the queue after being made to wait for more than an hour each time.

Walking into Centrelink for the second time, the atmosphere had become manic. The line had blown out to over 15 people and there were more than 50 sitting and waiting. Almost everyone was Aboriginal and trying to deal with IM. Harry gasped like he'd been hit, 'God this is bloody inhuman treatment'. Hendrix and his partner had been told to wait, but had been given no indication how long it would take. We had left Valerie's daughter and two grandkids in the car and the kids were already getting restless. Together with Valerie, I braved the long queue to speak to Centrelink staff and explain our situation.

'We really need to get to Yuendumu by this afternoon. There are kids waiting in the car and it's hot. All we need is a cheque for a bus ticket. Does she really need to stay here? Maybe Hendrix can just wait and collect it?' said Valerie. 'You see everyone waiting here?' said the officer, 'they're all after the same thing'. 'You're just going to have to wait'. 'Can you at least give us some idea of how long it will take?' 'It shouldn't be too long. Just sit down and wait'.

It was 1:30 pm. The quiet grumbling across the full bench seats was constant which sometimes broke out loudly, 'this is bullshit'. Most of the people waiting were young mothers with kids and elderly people. Valerie's comments were always with a raised voice, and the row of old ladies up the back nodded along. 'We're being herded like cattle,' she said. 'And here are all the "sacred little children"⁴ – lining up crying for food.'

⁴ Northern Territory, Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual

A patronising minute long video about the BasicsCard played on constant loop, providing the infuriating sound track of a monotone voice: 'Do not throw away your BasicsCard. Do not tell anyone the pin for your BasicsCard'.

At 2 pm we went to get some lunch and started talking about leaving. Much of the road to Yuendumu was unsealed and in pretty shocking condition. We wanted to get there before dark. Hendrix needed the ticket though, so his partner would have to stay behind. Harry told us to wait some more. 'This is what we are fighting against, this income business; let's give them a bit more time'.

I lined up for one more try pleading with the staff. 'This is unbelievable. She just wants to get a bus ticket with her own money. We've been waiting almost three hours'. The man behind the counter had a distant look in his eyes. He shared my disbelief, but had become resigned to it.

'We are so understaffed. I've never worked in an office where people have to wait for more than two hours. It's this income management'.

'It needs to change', I said. 'It can't go on like this'. He half laughed and looked at the computer to check the progress of the bus ticket. 'That's funny', he said, 'she doesn't seem to be in the system'.

'What do you mean she's not in the system!' The couple came over to see what was going on.

'I'm sorry. It's a system problem. You seem to have dropped out of the system somehow', explained the Centrelink man.

'Well can I just get my bus ticket?'

'Go and sit down. I just need to make some inquiries. Go and sit down I'll just sort this out for you'.

I wanted to scream, to demand to see managers, to refuse to leave the counter until the issue was sorted. But there were so many people in the line behind us. I knew that everyone else was waiting to negotiate income management. We sat down, fuming. Maxine Carlton, a legal aid worker from the town camp, had come up to see how everyone was.

'Nowhere else in Australia would people be treated like this', she said. 'Just us Aboriginal people here in the NT'.

By 3:15 pm Maxine had convinced us to leave. Hendrix's partner would get the 'bush bus' out to Yuendumu on Thursday. Another unnecessary cost of around

Abuse, *Little Children are Sacred* (2007). The report's findings were used by the Howard Government to justify the Northern Territory Intervention. Both of the report's authors, Pat Anderson and Rex Wild have spoken out against the Intervention, saying it does not reflect the recommendations of their report which calls for action in close consultation with Aboriginal people and investment in community development. See Rex Wild, 'John Howard is Taking Over the Territory', *Crikey*, September 14 2007, <<http://www.crikey.com.au/2007/09/14/rex-wild-john-howard-is-taking-over-the-territory>>

\$80. We had been close to four hours in the Centrelink office. ‘Here we are back in the welfare days again’, said Maxine. ‘Forced to line up for our hand outs’.

Introduction

In June 2007, I was travelling in a bus from Sydney to Rockhampton to participate in protests against a major series of military exercises called ‘Talisman Sabre’. More than 20,000 American troops were joining Australian military forces to train for neo-colonial operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and potential future invasions. As we entered Rockhampton and back in phone range, I received a text message from a friend that read, ‘Howard is sending troops to take over Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory’.

At a public meeting held in Sydney in October 2007, organised by Women for Wik, I heard Northern Territory Aboriginal women describing how mothers had run away into the scrub with their children when they heard the army was coming, fearing forced child removal.

The army never carried weapons into the communities that have been targeted, or ‘prescribed’ by the Northern Territory Intervention. Their impact was largely psychological. The Australian public were supposed to get the message that ‘real action’ had been taken against the ‘paedophile rings’ that Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough, alleged were operating in ‘lawless’ Northern Territory communities – a claim that has since been proved entirely false.⁵ For the ‘prescribed communities’, the presence of the army sent the clear message that power relations had decisively shifted – township lands owned by Aboriginal people under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth), were now under government control.

After attending the October meeting I became heavily involved in a campaign against the human rights abuses taking place through the Intervention. This included working from my home city of Sydney to bring more speakers down from affected communities to address public meetings and protests. I built on these relationships in 2008, moving to Alice Springs to conduct seven months research for the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, University of Technology Sydney, on the impact on daily life wrought by the profound changes introduced by the Northern Territory Intervention.

No one interviewed through this process contested the idea that Aboriginal communities required serious assistance from government to address acute social problems. Having not previously visited remote Aboriginal Australia, the

⁵ Nick McKenzie, ‘Paedophile ring claims unfounded’, *The Age* (online), 5 July 2009, <<http://www.theage.com.au/national/paedophile-ring-claims-unfounded-20090704-d8h9.html?skin=text-only>>.

living conditions being suffered by many people – such as an absence of permanent shelter, access to power and water or consistently failing septic systems - were deeply disturbing.

However, Intervention policies were doing nothing to rectify these social problems and in many cases, were exacerbating them. In almost every community I visited, large housing and office compounds had been built very quickly to house the new 'Government Business Managers', often surrounded by barbed wire, while community elders still lived in tin shacks or 'humpies'. This spectacle provides an apt metaphor for the whole Intervention. As explained by countless Aboriginal voices, many of the resources budgeted for the Intervention, which had been demanded by local people for community programs for decades, were now being spent to impose discriminatory controls.

The purpose of this research paper is to give readers an understanding of what life has been like under the Intervention and how discriminatory policy plays out in everyday experience. The paper is built around interviews conducted from June 2008-January 2009, both in Alice Springs and on trips to 'prescribed communities' in Central Australia.

The paper is titled 'Return to the Ration Days' because, overwhelmingly, I found that the Intervention had been experienced as a re-imposition of colonial forms of governance that Aboriginal people had lived under before the election of Gough Whitlam in 1972, and the end of 'assimilation' as a formal policy framework. As outlined in this paper, 'the ration days' were a time when Aboriginal people were not entitled to handle cash like other citizens and rationing regimes were used to control Aboriginal movement and labour, as well as to try and discipline people out of 'Aboriginal' behaviours.

The legislative and bureaucratic regime set up by the Intervention seeks to enforce a complete restructuring of how life is administered in the 'prescribed communities'; transferring control of assets, property and decision making from local people to government authorities. Since this paper was written, this regime has been slightly modified in a series of amendments that came into effect in July 2010.⁶ During the time this study was conducted however, the Intervention regime included:

- The suspension of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) and the *Anti-Discrimination Act* (NT);
- The classification of all communities living on Aboriginal land as 'prescribed areas' - including the Aboriginal town camps in urban areas;
- The compulsory acquisition of Aboriginal township land by the

⁶ Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform and Reinstatement of Racial Discrimination Act) Act 2010 (Cth).

Commonwealth, under five-year leases. The appointment of Government Business Managers as figures of government authority in ‘prescribed communities’;

- The cessation of Community Development Employment Projects (‘CDEP’), which had employed 7500 Aboriginal people, largely in municipal and other community work before the Intervention;
- The removal of the ‘permit system’ which regulated access to Aboriginal township land;
- The prohibition of judicial consideration of customary law in sentencing; and
- The imposition of income management on all Centrelink recipients.

Each of these measures is explored in more detail throughout this report. The paper is broken up into short stories and essays, each designed to stand alone. They are largely statements from or interviews with people living under the Intervention. Interviews included are with people from the communities of Yuendumu, Kalumpurlpa, Tara, Ti-Tree, Titjikala, Nyirripi, Santa Teresa and the town camps of Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. I also write about some of my personal experiences from observing the policy 'roll-out'.

The stories are presented in a loose structure. Those at the beginning explore the concept of the ‘return to the ration days’ and experiences of income management. Subsequent stories outline the experiences of segregation and racism under the Intervention, experiences of police brutality and reflections on the re-emergence of policies of assimilation, such as the restrictions on funding for the ‘homelands’ and the ‘mainstreaming’ of Aboriginal housing.

Throughout the paper there are also stories which look at the resistance to the Intervention. This paper acknowledges that many have challenged the Intervention at every step, fighting for control of their lands, lives and communities. Since the drafting of this paper, three of the Aboriginal people interviewed have passed away. For cultural reasons, they are referred to here by their initials only. ‘Return to the Rations Days’ is dedicated to their memory.

Living on Rations

Geoffrey Shaw played a founding and ongoing leadership role in many of the major Aboriginal organisations in Alice Springs from the 1970s through to his recent retirement. On the afternoon of December 11 2008, he shared some memories of life in his home, the Mt Nancy Town Camp, during the ‘welfare days’:

My parents were out bush all the time, on the pastoral properties and so on and my brothers and sisters lived here at the dormitory there. We used to go to school from here. The base was here. All the men folk would go away, but all the women would stay here. But sometimes my mother used to go away long time ago, when I was a kid.

We were basically children of welfare. Native welfare times. We lived here and nobody worried about us because whitefellas, they don't see you. They know you are there, but they don't see that you're there.

That's prior to when they established the Bungalow (an institution set up near Mt Nancy). They brought people down to the Bungalow from up bush - Willowra, Yuendumu, Tennant Creek, Barrow Creek - and housed them there, even Pitjintjara people. And It was run by the Native Welfare. And a lot of those men folk and some women had some menial jobs in town. Some of them worked with construction companies like builders and so on.

See it was a ration post. Back in my day. They kept us out of town. We used to live along the creek here, a big mob lived over there at the Bungalow and down along the riverbed towards town. But just on the edge of town. And they fed us rations. We went to school there too. Used to go to school, before I went to main school. Go there and have a meal. But they used to provide rations every two weeks.

Aggie, these old girls, Georgina (who still live at Mt Nancy), we'd all go over there. Trip over there and get rations - big tins of beans and tea and this kind of thing. And big tins of bully beef. Fuckin army rations, they used to feed in the army, big tins.

I was watching Huey on TV, that cook? He was in the tropics somewhere and he opened up a tin, he reckon 'tropical butter'. And I was going to ring him up. Because we were having that back in the 50s. Tins of butter!

That was every two weeks. Just tins of meat and so on. And the only people that got some steak, every fortnight, was the workers. A big lump of rump or something. That was their pay. Meat was their pay for the fortnight.

They had a racist attitude to us mob. I can recall, they used to say to us, people of part-Aboriginal descent. They'd say, "you're better than him", which is the full blood. "You're better than him, but you're not better than me". This is how white fellas used to differentiate. Call part-Aboriginals second rate citizens, but calling our relatives, traditional people, at the bottom rung of the social ladder. "You're better than him. But you're not better than me".

Outside a meeting of the Central Land Council Full Council in Tennant Creek, in December 2008, I met an elderly Gurindji woman, who was very angry about having her pension 'income managed' due to the Intervention. She had participated in the famous 'walk off' at Wave Hill Station with the Gurindji leader Vincent Lingiari. The strike of Aboriginal stock workers began with the demand to be paid cash wages, equal to the white workers, but soon became a struggle for recognition of their rights to the land.

Back on that Wave Hill Station we bin walk off. We bin strike. You know with that old man Vincent Lingiari.

Interviewer: *You were there with Vincent?*

Yeah! Gurindji. We talk all people from all stations down the river. We bin walk off there and sit down and Vincent bin get homestead, Dagaragu. He said, "you stay there".

Interviewer: *What were you saying?*

Talking from tucker. Talking from money, we never got good feed you know. And just beef and bread. No good. We bin Strike. You know union strike, long time? We really Gurindji. That's our old man. Striking people now.

No good washing clothes for white man. Make him bed. Make him drink of tea, maybe like two o'clock in the morning something like that. We bin working like slaves, poor thing. All the white people just chuck him clothes and we wash by hand. We didn't have washing machine or nothing. Washing and ironing, fold him up. Make

bed.

Interviewer: *Only rations for that?*

Only for ration. Little bit tea and sugar. Flour bag. Little bit, not much. Every Friday and people been get hungry on the weekend time, go look around for bush tucker poor bugger.

Interviewer: *And you mob said, "that's enough" and walked off with Vincent?*

Yeah! Old man bin strike before now. Old Vincent. He said, "We don't live (like) white people. Its rough, we for money, we don't get money, we don't get proper food now nothing. Here look, they bin have on party time, Christmas time, they bin have grog. Our people don't have grog".

After strike won, they bin citizen now, all the blackfella. Poor bugger. And that old man bin passed away now and they still roughing people.

Roughing people. Like this one now where they giving me paper for tucker still might be. Only little bit money going on the keycard - \$150. I used to get \$400 every fortnight. But we don't get much money now. We get paper for tucker and not much money in the keycard. Might be old day again.

Tim Rowse, in *White Flour, White Power*,⁷ analyses the practice of 'rationing' as the key technique used by colonial authorities to control and socially engineer Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory throughout the twentieth century, before the advent of the 'self-determination' era in the early 1970s. Colonisation had severely disrupted traditional means of sustenance, and Aboriginal people were denied access to full payments in cash for either waged work or social security. They were provided instead with rations of basic foods and clothing. Station owners, missionaries and welfare board officials all distributed rations. Supplying or denying rations was used to establish settlements and control movement, but also to force particular kinds of work and behaviour, disciplining people out of their own cultural practices.

Rowse argues that:

...in Central Australia the rations based apparatus of 'assimilation' grew out of policies to control the extent and manner of the urbanisation of Indigenous people. In (this) vision, a few generations would see the Indigenous people emerge from training they received on missions and settlements and then move into the mainstream of Australian life.⁸

The Northern Territory Intervention is the culmination of the re-emergence of 'assimilation' as an explicit philosophy guiding government policy in Aboriginal affairs. The ongoing poverty and profound social problems facing many communities are again blamed on an inability of Aboriginal people to manage their own affairs, their failure to integrate in 'mainstream' society and the regressive nature of Aboriginal cultural practices.

Thoroughly documented government neglect and deep, institutionalised racism

⁷ Tim Rowse, *White flour, white power: From rations to citizenship in outback Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁸ *Ibid* 184.

are ignored as problems.⁹ ‘Social engineering’ strategies that compound this racism, used through the previous assimilation period, including rationing, are being deployed again. From ‘bucket loads of extinguishment’ of native title, through to the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (‘ATSIC’), the systematic wind-back of Aboriginal rights by the Howard Government has been thoroughly analysed.¹⁰ Despite the tight control governments have always held over funding and direction in Aboriginal organisations, ‘self-determination’ has been declared a policy failure.

The Labor party leadership is also committed to this agenda. Labor tailed most of Howard’s moves against Aboriginal people and was the first to flag the closure of ATSIC. Labor provided bipartisan support for the Intervention while in opposition and has been the face of its implementation for most communities, also pioneering new attacks in cooperation with the Northern Territory Labor Government such as harsh restrictions on bi-lingual education.¹¹

Through the work of influential think-tanks like the former Bennelong Society, the philosophy behind this current policy consensus is most clearly articulated. Bennelong was committed to assimilation and has played an important role shaping the Intervention. Their June 2008 conference included leading Intervention bureaucrats Sue Gordon and Major-General David Chalmers, along with its architect Mal Brough. The writings of the Bennelong Society combined a fierce denigration of Aboriginal culture with calls for punitive controls to force migration and the adoption of ‘white’ lifestyles.

In *Lands of Shame*,¹² key Bennelong figure Helen Hughes discusses ‘the urgency of the evolution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions to reasoning from evidence’. The Intervention took up many of the policy recommendations outlined in *Lands of Shame* such as the cessation of CDEP, removal of the permit system, the appointment of government administrators to communities and the removal of judicial recognition of customary law.¹³

⁹ John Taylor, ‘Demography is destiny, except in the Northern Territory’, in Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson (eds), *Coercive Reconciliation* (Arena, 2007) 173.

¹⁰ See for example, Janet Hunt, ‘Between a rock and a hard place: self-determination, mainstreaming and Indigenous community governance’, *Contested Governance: Culture, power and institutions in Indigenous Australia* (Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, 2008); Larissa Behrendt, ‘Back to the Future’ (2005) *Arena Magazine* 75.

¹¹ Prime Minister Julia Gillard, *Press Conference Darwin NT* (20 November 2008), <<http://mediacentre.dewr.gov.au/mediacentre/AllReleases/2008/November/OpeningofElearningandResearchBuildingattheBatchelorInstituteCollapseofCFKChildcareCentresABCLeaning.htm>>.

¹² Helen Hughes, *Lands of Shame* (Centre for Independent Studies, 2007), 42.

¹³ Hughes sent a draft of her book to the Federal Government three months before its publication to, ‘ensure that it is supportive of what (then Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough) is trying to do’. See Joel Gibson, ‘Indigenous Policy Link to Think Tank’, *The Age* (online), 22 November 2007, <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/indigenous->

In some Bennelong conference papers, even 'biological' ideas about assimilation, which formed the basis of earlier child removal policies, are beginning to be championed. For example, Joseph and Maria Lane, in *Hard Grind - the Making of an Urban Indigenous population*,¹⁴ presented at the 2008 conference, praise 'opportunity oriented' Indigenous people, who are 'much more likely to marry working non-Aboriginal people' and have 'planted the seeds of possibility for an open society'.¹⁵

In 2008, Bennelong republished a 1966 Northern Territory Welfare Board report. In his forward to the paper, Bennelong society President Gary Johns describes this effort as an attempt to help revive the spirit of 'the height of the period of assimilation':

... (we) hope that students of Aboriginal politics will read documents that describe the period prior to the fatal experiment with self-determination ... the work of 1966 must start again.¹⁶

For Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, the life of 1966 is starting again. Rowse's study demonstrates that the dreams of twentieth century assimilationist social engineers could never be realised through rationing. While their ideas of white supremacy and the traumas of dispossession and punitive control left deep scars, Aboriginal people took all steps possible to use available resources for their own life goals. The rationing system eventually collapsed due to the growing movement for Aboriginal rights and under the weight of its own contradictions, which forced official 'recognition of the limits of a certain kind of government intervention into Indigenous life'.¹⁷

The Intervention is reopening old wounds. Its layers of racist bureaucracy, purporting to teach people how to behave like 'mainstream Australians' form a new 'apparatus of assimilation'. The following series of interviews demonstrate the disastrous impact of the re-introduction of 'rationing' policies in the form of income management. They are a small selection, which highlight most clearly the problems outlined through the more than one hundred statements and interviews collected through this research. There are also strong voices speaking against the many other re-hashed colonial policies that have come with the Intervention – the imposition of government administrators to oversee communities, the seizure of Aboriginal lands and the strong police powers to

policy-link-to-think-tank/2007/11/21/1195321865960.html.

¹⁴ Joseph Lane and Maria Lane, 'Hard Grind—The Making of an Urban Indigenous Population' (Paper presented at the Bennelong Society Conference 2008), <<http://www.bennelong.com.au/conferences/pdf/JandMLane2008.pdf>>.

¹⁵ Ibid 4.

¹⁶ EP Milliken and PL Wilson, 'Employment Arrangements for Aboriginals in Government Departments and on Settlements' (The Bennelong Society Historical Reprints Series, No 1, August 2008).

¹⁷ Rowse, above n 7, 209.

enforce race-based alcohol prohibition. The white-picket-fence dreams of the politicians and bureaucrats are a nightmare for people living with their policies. But they are a people who refuse to be broken – and are fighting hard to claim control over their lives.

Valerie Martin (VM) translates during an Interview with four elderly ladies from Nyirripi community, who spoke mostly in Warlpiri. 31 August 2008:

Interviewer: *How did you find out about the Intervention?*

VM: Centrelink mob went there. First notified them.

L: When I went to Centrelink with my daughter. They said no cash, only purchase order. And I got surprised. They said 'we haven't got it', not cash - only purchase order.

Kids money, Centrelink mob said, you won't get cash, but you'll get a card.

Molly: And for pensioner. Same. Just paper.

Interviewer: *How did you feel?*

VM: She cried. She cried when they told her that. Instead of getting money like before, she got surprised and just cried when they told her all the money was in that card. Quick changeover.

Molly: Even pensioner too. So quick it changed from just money to purchase order.

VM: They were confused and are still very confused about it. Here today. They are saying they don't understand why.

Interviewer: Does it make it harder looking after family?

VM: Everyone says yes. Its hard. Not like before.

Molly: My daughter. Him cry. Him worry about money. Kids money, for kids money. True.

Alice: We never get him money - I've got grandchildren, and I look after my sisters daughter. Might be \$4,000 but no cash, Lowa (nothing).

VM: (translating) Like my grand-daughter, the other day, everything on that card. She didn't see the money. She has seen it in the computer, she went to Centrelink. They showed her. In her mind, she's been thinking a lot. How come?

L: I bin get angry then. I don't like you know.

Alice: I'm not drinking woman!

VM: (translating) we don't drink. We know how to look after the kids. That's what she's saying.

L: Is it for one year?

Interviewer: *At the moment the government is talking about pushing it out longer.* (Very angry response.)

VM: It's not working. We don't want it!

Working for rations in Tara

'We are going back to the ration days' is a constant refrain across all communities. Feeling an acute loss of autonomy, many older people compare the long lines going out the door in Centrelink for income management to the old queues for station rations. Similarly, supermarket 'store-cards' and the new 'BasicsCard' are a reminder of food tokens and 'dog tags' given out by the welfare board.

But for many in the bush, such as the small community of Tara, about three

hours drive from Alice Springs, the ‘return to the ration days’ is not metaphorical. Under the ‘bush orders’ system, introduced alongside income management, boxes of food are being sent out to communities in place of Centrelink entitlements and some people are being forced to work for these rations.

On 22 October 2008, I travelled out to Tara with Barbara Shaw, a strong campaigner against the Northern Territory Intervention from Mount Nancy Town Camp, to investigate stories of hardship we had heard from visitors stopped at her camp. We arrived in Tara at the same time as the ‘bush orders’ vehicle, which left as soon as locals had unloaded the boxes. A number of the boxes people were expecting hadn’t arrived and items were missing from other boxes.

Nathaniel Long explained that this was common:

Sometimes people just miss out, maybe they have to wait like a month or even two months for any to come in. Today they’ve had to leave for town, a couple of families. They can’t wait any more for food. They’ll spend the day travelling. Then when they get there, maybe Centrelink says come tomorrow. Then they rely on family in town to stay, to get a feed off.

Kevin Thompson outlined the barriers stopping people accessing their income managed funds in town: ‘Today they’ll be battling because they have no ID. They never needed ID to get their money before this income’. He said that people in the community all pull together to deal with the new challenges posed by the system, ‘we don’t have much, but we just share it out when this happens.’

Similar to many other people under income management, Tara residents thought that Centrelink was mismanaging their funds and losing their money. Joanne Nakamarra explained:

Sometimes we go to Centrelink over there and they don’t know where our money went. Like last time I went in there, there was about \$400 and then the next thing when I rang up they said only \$174 was there.

There was real disbelief when Barbara explained that Indigenous Affairs Minister, Jenny Macklin, was telling the rest of Australia that income management meant more food for bush children.

Kevin said:

It’s got harder here. We have to get into town more, chasing that income. We got family coming in, coming to visit and sometimes we don’t even have money to give them for fuel to get back.

Joanne went on:

It's really hard to get food in the community. We don't save money any more. And see long time, until last year, we used to give that other half money to family. We used to give em for Nanna, others, now I don't get it any more with income. None for sharing. And we got little kids crying. Specially with the kids, they need cold things, cold drinks, especially cause there is no power to keep things cool, we got no money for that now.

Selma Thompson is really frustrated:

It's so much harder now. They make big promises about doing things for the community. But all they like to do is cut off money. That's it. Cut off your money so you won't register your car, so you won't get more clothes for your kids. Lots of things, sometimes we're in the store at Ali Curung. We were looking at things we wanted but no money, all the money was gone to income management.

Selma works between 8-12 hours every week sorting out the 'bush orders' deliveries and following up mistakes. She and another worker were initially paid for this by the language centre in Tennant Creek who had been contracted by Centrelink to administer the Bush Orders. But Selma says, '... the pay stopped on 16 September. They don't explain why it stopped, so we are working for nothing.' Stories of unpaid 'Intervention work' are all too common. In winter the Intervention-installed Government Business Manager from Ali Curung visited Tara to oversee the start of the 'community clean-up program'. This included organising local men to paint the outside of Tara's houses.

Nathaniel was one of the workers:

We worked from 8 AM to 4 PM every week day for a month and a half. Sometimes on weekends too. They kept telling us we were going to be paid. We filled in time sheets. But we haven't been paid anything.

According to Michael Hayes, a resident who has done lots of work trying to encourage employment programs in Tara:

Ten fellas worked doing that painting. And then they just said it was work for the dole. But they never set up contracts, activity agreements that you need for work for the dole.

Selma says that no government official or agency is willing to take responsibility for the problems the Intervention has caused in Tara.

We have had meetings here. All these government people, they keep pointing at each other, like 'we don't know who's really supposed to do that.'
Because we have the community real strong here. We speak up. And when we ask the hard question that we really want to know what's going to happen and all that, they wouldn't give us any answer.

Michael Hayes said the pressure is on from Centrelink for more work for the

dole projects:

There's things that need to be done in the community, so why can't they pay people properly? Not this income management. The young fellas could be doing plumbing, carpentry, ranger work. They're willing, people have filled out so many forms, with Job-find and Centrelink. They promise training courses but it won't happen.

Some young men say Centrelink is threatening to cut them off unless they take work at the local station. But Michael Hayes explained:

The station only pays \$50 a day – no one wants to work for \$50! That's why these young fellas say no. We've gone back 60 years. Working for rations in the new millenium.

Jimmy from Ti-Tree talks about the Bush Orders system operating in his community. Centrelink in Alice Springs, 25 August 2008.

They're sending food that people don't want. They're sending the wrong food, they're sending the wrong brands. We've had problems down there with the meat going off. With detergents getting packed with edible foods. The wrong orders going to the wrong people. All sorts of problems you know.

The first few times they started they actually mucked it up that bad they had to give emergency rations out. Just boxes of rations because they never got the bush orders right, they weren't rocking up at the right time, they weren't finding the people who actually had the orders.

Up until 8 o'clock at night they were still delivering, out to the station. Up til 8 o'clock at night trying to find people to drop that stuff off.

You've got to go through a check list on every box that's dropped off. The old people don't even understand what they're getting. They don't understand what's being ordered for them - they can't do their own ordering, they don't know how to read.

And the people that are doing the ordering for them are talking them into buying things that they don't even need, that they don't know what they are buying. You see those people they don't need tooth brush and tooth paste. They've got good teeth they don't need that rubbish.

Plus it's a 100 per cent mark up on their items, whereas out on the farm its only a 60 per cent mark up. Where they are used to doing their shopping. So they are probably losing 20 per cent straight up just doing their bush order.

Interviewer: *What was the initial reaction from people when they were told that they were going to be moved on to this bush orders system?*

They don't want it. People like to do their own shopping and they like to shop when they need the food. They don't buy a pound of flour, they buy a drum of flour. And a few people out there getting the bush orders, their flour just ain't turning up. And that's their main diet - flour for damper - and they just aren't getting it.

It's a high mark up and a lot of embarrassment. Its downgrading people, because they want to do their own shopping. Those old women, its reminding them of when they were kids and they used to get passed out rations out on the stations. This government is trying to do virtually the same things. There's no ifs and buts about it that's exactly what's happening.

We had a meeting down there with the head of this financial management thing. And he pretty much said to me – 'they're just going to have to get used to it'. He was very rude about it.

Interviewer: *What's the reasons they are providing about why this change is happening?*

Because they reckon that the kids weren't getting looked after properly. And when he actually came out there, there were a lot of kids there at the meeting, when he was addressing the people. And I said, 'Can you see one kid that looks unhealthy or skinny to you?' He said, 'Well no, but in a lot of communities...' and I said, 'Well you can't just say like that!'

Interviewer: *Could all those resources have been better used in the community?*

They should have actually went out and seen where the problems are. Pick on the problem areas you know? Don't just put everyone in the same basket. Those people are mostly Christian at Ti Tree. The men, they've only got two hours of drinking there in the daytime.

There's no take away alcohol, so there's no problem with that part of it. They can't come shopping here anymore (Alice Springs) because you have to go through what I just went through - to get a \$90 cheque to get a pair of jeans with my own money - I was there for an hour!

It's even hard for me and I understand what Centrelink is doing. And many of those people don't understand and they have to go through all that garbage. To get a cheque with their own money to do a little bit of clothes shopping.

People are actually going hungry out there now. They get a two week bush order, in one go, they've got big families. That family comes in and eats too. So the food's gone in two days. Then they've got nothing. They've got to wait for the next person to get their bush order before they can go and eat again.

It's costing the tax payers millions and millions and dollars that they didn't need to spend. Centrelink mob out there, some of them are doing 14 hour days with this bush order. Delivering it and then there was no need for that. Let people do their own shopping. Its taking people's rights away. Everyone who I've talked to doesn't want this.

Interview with Central Land Council delegate from the Murray Downs community, 26 November 2008.

My name is Mr Kelly. I am working in the Murray Downs community. Work for the night patrol but my wife, she is a sick woman. She had three operations in Adelaide. Sometimes she misses out on income. Sometimes she will get it, but sometimes she misses out, I don't know how it happens.

Interviewer: *So you try calling and ask where the money is?*

Sometime, she always get on to contact someone, might be Centrelink or someone. Sometimes they bring all that stuff from Alice Springs to Murray Downs. They get a cooler there, bring boxes of stuff. Bush orders. Sometimes she misses out.

Sometimes others miss out too. That's the way this income business works. People that are under that income business, they should get that stuff all the time you know, because my wife, she's a sick woman.

Sometimes the income stuff doesn't come in. We worry where the money goes. The bush orders are supposed to come in every fortnight. We've got caught up with income. They should sort something out.

Interviewer: *How did you find out about it?*

They just come in and got stuck into everyone in the community with that income business. Saying, 'this is a better way to work something out.' But some of our children that go to high school, you can't even send them away, might be Darwin or something. We haven't got no money to send them away.

Interviewer: *Government is saying it is making it easier to look after children. Would you agree with that?*

Some of us, we can't even buy clothes for the kids to go out training, to high school. We haven't got no money to buy their clothes, bag and stuff.

Intervention got us down. The income, if we're lucky we'll get through. Gotta be

together. Everyone is getting sick of that card! People should get paid cash!

Barbara Shaw from Mount Nancy Town Camp in Alice Springs discusses Centrelink’s mismanagement of her income managed funds, 6 January 2009.

Well with income management right, it doesn't pay enough to pay my bills. And now, I've fallen way back. So they're going to repossess my fridge. So when I go shopping with my BasicsCards, where am I supposed to put my food?

When I was on Centrepay I was always in credit because I nominated a certain amount myself - and then come income management I fall behind and don't keep up with the payments.

And okay - I've been going to Tangentyere (shop) looking for my food vouchers that go there out of income management and there's nothing there. They're missing money. Misplacing my income management food vouchers that are supposed to go to Tangentyere. Three weeks of it. I get it every week out of both payments - out of my family allowance and out of my parenting payments.

I reckon that's happening to a lot of people where money is going missing. And you know that so many people are always saying that Centrelink is losing my money and now its actually happening to me! If they're losing our money in income management then why can't they give us cash?

The Return of the Superintendent: Government Business Managers

The Northern Territory Intervention has imposed new figures of authority on 'prescribed communities', the Government Business Managers ('GBMs'). Business Management Area Powers give the Minister for Indigenous Affairs extraordinary powers to determine what happens in 'prescribed communities' without any consultation with local people.¹⁸ The Minister can seize assets, fire staff, sit in at any meeting and direct local organisations. Government Business Managers are the human face of these powers.

Overwhelmingly though, people in communities we visited had experienced little or no interaction with their GBM.¹⁹In Santa Teresa, staff at the clinic said they had never received a visit. Imelda Palmer, a teacher in the local school said: 'We don't know him. He only came to the school once, but never came again.' Elaine Gori said, 'They don't go around and talk to the people. They just stay in their office. They go from town to there.' In Yuendumu, the GBM has earned the nickname 'ngipiri', Warlpiri for 'egg'. As Valerie Martin explained, 'Business Manager sits in his big nest, people gotta come, come to the ngipiri. He doesn't go out talk to us, nothing. Since the Intervention started, nothing's been done in the community'.

¹⁸ These powers are granted under the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007 (Cth) pt 5.

¹⁹ Similarly, the NTER Review Board reported, 'the Board met GBMs who had remained distant and apart from the community and, in some cases, from the key local service providers. In one case the Board found it necessary to introduce the GBM to senior staff at the health clinic.' NTER Review Board, *Report of the NTER Review Board* (2008) 44.

There were profound feelings of disempowerment, knowing that there was someone 'in charge' hidden away, who people never got to speak to, while simultaneously local councils were being lost through reforms initiated by the Northern Territory Government. There was also frustration at wasted resources. Government Business Manager salary packages were understood to be over \$150,000 per year and while the Intervention had promised housing for community members, all that had been built were imposing compounds to house the GBMs, which were ringed with barbed wire. Imelda Palmer explained, 'That's the Intervention village. That's their little thing. They came here, picked out a spot - bang. No consultation with traditional owners. Nothing.' Frank Baarda, a long-time resident of Yuendumu, took a group of inter-state supporters to the GBM's house to tell the story of its construction:

This compound here is the Government Business Manager's thing. It started off with one unit and then they had to add on it more. Now you may all recall when Mal Brough announced the Intervention, to 'save all the little children', that was over a year ago, he said one of the things that had to be fixed was the housing for Aboriginal people. Now the only housing that's been built by the Intervention is this, what you see in front of you. I don't think there is a single Aboriginal person inside by the way. Anyway this compound was plonked here... Now over there was a whole heap of Aboriginal people living in that house (points to a nearby house) and it was full up, so this young lady and her husband and their newborn baby decided to camp nearby their parents, see, so they camped themselves down there (points to site of GBM compound). They had a windbreak, and they picked the only bit of shade nearby, then suddenly one day these contractors came from town and they pushed the little camp aside.

The father of these people came down here and said, 'What are you doing?', and this contractor had a map, and they put this fence around here and they captured one of the mulga trees, and the protests from the family went completely ignored.

Alongside the re-introduction of 'rationing', the imposition of GBMs is the clearest indication for Aboriginal people that the government is bringing back its old paternalistic, colonial methods. Santa Teresa had previously been run as a mission. One of the old ladies said that, 'We have gone back to the mission days. It's all just white people in charge again now.'

Before land rights, Yuendumu had been governed by The Commonwealth Native Affairs Branch. Explaining the GBM's position to a community meeting in Yuendumu, Warlpiri leader Ned Hargraves said, 'I call them superintendent. Like we had in the 50s and 60s.' I asked him to explain why he drew this comparison, and what life was like in those times.

Interview with Ned Hargraves, 18 December 2008

Way back in 50s and 60s. As I was growing up, its one of the things that crosses my mind all the time. My old man. I have this limp because the polio. My old man was with me all the time. The government at that time, they didn't let him get on the plane with me. Because no shoes and also, because he was yapa (Aboriginal). He couldn't

come with me and put me on the plane. Just even for that seconds, you know, for that minute. That was the time that was really really rubbish.

And the superintendent at the time, when I was growing up. My father would leave about seven or something. Really early to work. Doesn't matter whether it was freezing cold, it was raining, they had to go, they had to get to the office and sign up. Sometimes they would salute to them - to the superintendent.

If they were fighting with family members, the penalty was you weren't allowed to get ration. At the ration depot down here. One full day. The superintendent at that time were really bad.

They had to supervise people and make sure they all came to work. Everyone had to tuck their shirts in and wear boots and stuff you know? No kids at that time were allowed to go with their father to work. We would only go to school. If I didn't go to school, my father would suffer for that, wouldn't get ration. The superintendent was really hard at that time. Making everyone to get wood, yards, fence, orchard and vegetables. But it wasn't a blessing time, it was no good.

Interviewer: *Did people get paid cash or ration for their work?*

Well, there was a bit of a ration and a bit of a cash. Those were the times when there was some payment in pounds. \$7, \$10 something like that.

Interviewer: *So, like now, with some money for your pocket and some in the ticket for rations?*

Exactly (laughs). Its back like that one now, today. And it's not good.

Interviewer: *Can you remember the change, when the superintendent left?*

Oh when he left - everything sort of, you could see the change. Everything was like, to us, more free, we could be in charge of doing work and not saluting the superintendent all the time.

You could work in your own way - but we still came to work. When he left it was good. Really different. We could feel that change. For us it was flexible you know, we didn't have to feel somebody like looking over us.

When they said that community - you demand yourself you know, self-determination. But what does this mean to Aboriginal people? Still people not giving us our fair go so that we can make a go of these things.

A lot of those things that happened at that time were about to make us live like a Kardiya (white person) and also to give away our culture. And that really sort of hurt us very very deep.

If I had to go away to a college, in one of the homes, I wasn't allowed to speak my language there. They didn't want to know about it. They were saying to us - you are going to have to live like Kardiya! Like us! And I just - I thought always, this isn't right. I was born black and that's the way its going to be. You know? That's what I think.

Anyway, the superintendent. I'm glad they're gone and we never want to go back to the same things again. Sadly with this Intervention thing, I think it's bringing it back. It's not really good to live those memories back.

It's brought hardships and our family members found it very difficult to work with superintendent, specially, because there were things they didn't want to do. They couldn't argue with him, because he was over-ruler. If you didn't do it, that was his penalty, you weren't allowed to get ration.

Getting back to this one - yes it's exactly like way back in the 50s.

Santa Teresa – ‘We’ve had this problem before’

Santa Teresa is a community of about 400 people, 90 kilometres south-east of Alice Springs. In early November, Barb had bumped into her aunty from Santa Teresa, who had brought a number of elderly ladies from the community into

Centrelink to deal with their managed income. They were very angry about having to make the trip and then wait for hours. Barb spoke about the work she was doing documenting stories and we were invited to visit Santa Teresa and speak more with people. Our first stop was at the local school to speak with a teacher, Imelda Palmer, and a number of other staff.

Imelda was furious over the Intervention:

We got no say. No power. Who do we go to?

Its getting harder you know. Everyone has to follow their rules. Just white man way. Everyone is struggling. It is really turning people into living a poorer life than they used to.

The government is crying about school attendance now. They've got to look at the housing! You look at these houses and you think that maybe a married couple and a family living there hey? It's got about 20-30 people living there! Could have built 20-40 houses here with that money they've spent on the Intervention.

Other teachers explained that many people were on the BasicsCard, but that it could not be used in Santa Teresa.

You've got to go into town. Old people got to go into town, to do your shopping.

They want to stay here in the community. You know it's just wrong.

And some people can't go into town to do shopping because they've got no car. Or the price of fuel is too high. So sometimes they miss out on food. Lots of families hungry, poor things. And no cash to buy power card.

The teachers spoke of the recent storm, and how the road became impassable when it was raining, leaving people stranded and hungry. Imelda took us around to a number of houses in the community to speak with people, mostly local women who were trying to look after children and grandchildren. Two young mothers were facing problems, 'We don't want that card eh? No cash.' The women talked about how much harder it made it trying to look after children, because there was no money to send them to social events, to football, or travelling on school excursions. They said it was possible to direct some income management credit to the local shop, but that there was less choice there since a change of management that had come alongside the Intervention. 'It's all diet stuff hey, and Black and Gold. And we can't buy takeaway food any more with that Income.'

We went to another house, where three women shared the familiar story:

We have to go once a fortnight into town and wait three hours just for that little card.

Last month, we travelled all the way in. We called Centrelink and they said that the money was there, but we travelled all the way in and there was nothing. So we couldn't do shopping.

Imelda said income management had made it harder to keep up with cultural obligations:

They didn't consider culture when they made this legislation. Like people like on sorry business (the period after a death), like the widows. Widows have to stay in one place. They can't go into town to get their income, BasicsCard, anything. They just stay at home and live on families' food.

The lack of employment was a massive issue. We were told that between 150-200 CDEP positions had been lost due to the Intervention. Labor had only restored a tiny fraction of these, at most 40, and most young people were being told to work for the dole. One friend of Imelda's told us:

'Lots of young people are just walking around since they scrapped CDEP. They used to do everything, pick up the rubbish. Gardens everywhere. Go and check on the old people and make sure they had things.'

Imelda added, 'Now people told to do that work for the dole. They don't get paid much. And half of it goes into that card, BasicsCard, or some to the shop. But it's not much.'

'You know we've had that problem before,' said Elaine.

'Just a hand out - ration - given out, without any money. Now it's just like going back you know. The government's using all that money for Aboriginal people through Centrelink.'

'People were suffering with John Howard. He made all these decisions. They should have changed when they new government came in. But they're letting Aboriginal people suffer.'

Interview with Jason, Manager of the health clinic at Santa Teresa

The sad thing is it feels like we are going backwards. Other people tell me it's like when they used to work at the station and were getting tucker, tea, milk and sugar, rather than getting paid properly like everyone else.

Interviewer: *What has been the impact of the CDEP cuts?*

A lot of money went down when it first started. Because it's become work for the dole now, people don't get top up or anything. CDEP needed work itself. They were supposed to train people to prepare for work in the community. But employers came to rely on CDEP. Instead of putting people on CDEP for a year for training, then putting them onto full time work, it just stayed on CDEP. CDEP became the way to pay people. Instead of paying the right amount and on salary it was easier to keep them on CDEP.

Interviewer: *Is there many people doing work for the dole?*

Yes there is now. Not many people are keen on working, because it's managed. And the fellas don't like it, because a lot of single fellas should have the right to work, get their money and then go and have fun, because they have no family there, just responsible for themselves. Not the government telling you how to spend your money.

Barb: Have you seen any government officials come and talk to people here about the Intervention?

Well I work at the health centre. And we don't see anyone out there. Business Manager - he hasn't even been to the clinic yet. And he's been here ever since those buildings were put there. They just came in and built them! We were like, "oh look at those dongas they've put up". And this huge yard around it.

People weren't happy so they had to lower the yard a bit. People were feeling - why do they need this huge yard with barb-wire. Don't they trust us? Just coming in, worried we are going to be running in and eating them like cannibals! We're not that starving!

Interviewer: *That's the mindset they are coming in with though, 'this community is out of control, we are going to come in and take it over'.*

Yeah they think all communities are out of control. It's just sort of going into somewhere with this big fear.

Interviewer: *How did you all feel at the clinic when news came through about the Intervention health checks?*

Well we kind of fought so we could do it. When they came over, we put all our clinic workers over there, so that we could do the checks and all that. We wouldn't support it if it was mandatory. That is abuse in itself forcing a child to get that check, especially the genital check, that's abuse in itself. The whole Intervention is disempowering.

Barb: *You know because you mob were at the clinic, you do the checks all the time. Did you think it was a waste of time all their checks?*

Yes that's what we thought.

Barb: *Do you think they should have properly resourced clinics?*

Yeah, all that money, that could have gone to the health centre. To hire staff ourselves.

Barb: *How do you feel about the big 'prescribed area' signs they put at the entrance here? As a man in this community. Because back at home many of our men feel that behind that sign they're all classed as alcoholics and paedophiles.*

Yeah I come through there with people. When I bring people in, they say 'stop, have a look at that sign' and they got the same feeling as that.

When the shire came in, they brought paint, painted all the houses! Because now there's no permit system, they are worried people will come in and see all these dirty houses, so they want to just do the outside fix up.

What really gets me is it's not happening in any other state. The Canberra government has decided this will happen.

The shire, they have no idea what's going on themselves yet. Because all these bills from prior haven't been paid yet. We've got a lot of phone calls asking about bills, but we don't know who is responsible, who are we supposed to go to to get these bills paid. Who's taken over from the council? Like we need this equipment, some people haven't been paid and it's been more than 6 months now and we're still waiting for it. One person have worked for a week before 30 June and hasn't been paid. Who is supposed to pay her?

There's that law that they won't bring back...

Interviewer: *The Racial Discrimination Act?*

Why won't they bring that back! Its so obvious! Isn't anyone in the government speaking up? Can't they see it? Well I suppose they can see it. It just puts them into control. There's no rights. Its ridiculous.

And what about the police issue? They've been out there. Like way out of town. Stopping cars and taking alcohol off people, out of their cars. And I just thought - isn't that a public road?

I've been thinking about the Intervention. Its just too obvious it's racist. We need as many people as possible to just go to Canberra (for protests). We need the whole Territory to go!

Segregation

When I first moved to Alice Springs in July, I was on the dole. My study of history had taught me about segregation in the United States of America, in South Africa, and also in Australia, through stories about the 'freedom rides' in New South Wales in the 1960s. Racism is still so deeply built into our social system that dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are influenced by race in most

social processes, from access to education, or different restaurants, to the function of immigration detention centres. But it wasn't until my first visit to Centrelink in Alice Springs, in 2008, that I first felt the reality of an open, formal segregation.

When I walked through the door, it was immediately apparent where I was supposed to line up. I felt sick. On the left was a queue of five people, four white and one African. On the right, sixteen Aboriginal people were in a separate line. Many more were seated on the benches, waiting to be served. I noticed the small sign above the counter of the Aboriginal queue, 'Store cards'.

I hovered nervously for about five minutes, muttering, looking around and catching the eyes of people in the queue who were clearly concerned. I remember one Aboriginal woman walking assertively through the doors and straight into the middle of the waiting area with anger in her face. She stopped for 30 seconds, surveyed the scene with steely eyes, then she walked out again.

Feeling ashamed, I shuffled over to put in my dole form. I tried to justify it to myself. Maybe making a fuss would just embarrass lots of people. It's no point just doing something by yourself. Come back with more people and have a proper protest. I tried talking. The man in front of me was from Sudan and had just started working at the supermarket. After some small talk I said, 'I don't like this. I'm actually not comfortable at all.'

'No it's no good here.'

I wasn't sure if he understood what I was referring to. Centrelink is, after all, rarely a good place for anyone to be.

'I mean, there shouldn't be separate queues like this. We should all be together.'

'Yes and you should see it in the supermarket,' he answered. 'People just aren't treated well.' Almost at the front of the queue, we didn't say much more. But we both seemed happy we'd at least marked the issue. The conversation also gave me confidence to raise it with the Centrelink staff.

I thought I'd wait until my form had been approved, before asking any hard questions. The woman processing me apologised for the wait. 'We are just so busy' she said.

'It really looks like you need some more staff. Has it created a lot more work since, since they started with that Intervention stuff?'

She paused for a second.

'Oh yes. I'd say we get at least three times more people coming through. It's very hard.'

'Three times! That's crazy, you poor things.'

It looked like my form was done.

'Yeah. Well we're not really supposed to talk about it ... Here that should be fine. Just come back in a fortnight.'

I'd already assured her I had a job lined up, but that it would take a few weeks. The whole process of dealing with Centrelink had been far easier than in Sydney.

'I'd have to say, it's very different for me coming in here. I haven't really seen separate queues like this before.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, people all over to one side ...'

She interrupted – 'Oh no it's not like that. That's just for the store cards that's all. This line is for people who just need to put a form in.'

'Yes, but it's all Aboriginal people lining up there.'

'No, it's not like that at all. It's just that there's so many people come in for store cards. So they take a long time.'

I tried to tone it down. I really didn't want to make it sound like I was attacking the staff.

'But it's only people from Aboriginal communities who get store cards though. Right? It's pretty much like segregation.' I wasn't quite sure how much to push. 'It's quicker for them this way too.'

Seeing me grimace at 'them', her tone quickened again.

'Oh well I mean every Centrelink would have its different problems. You're from Sydney. I couldn't work down there. They need security guards on the door down there!'

Less than two months later there were security guards in Alice Springs as well. I called Barb and told her about it all.

'So you've seen our big line hey? You know sometimes it comes all around, like coming out the door.'

I said I thought we should organise a sit-in style protest.

'Yeah, I've been saying we should do something like that for ages. We need everyone in there to just say 'we're not going to line up like this!'

Letter from the Intervention Rollback Action Group ('IRAG') to Centrelink Management, 4 August 2008.

Dear Centrelink Manager and members of staff,

The Intervention Rollback Action Group is made up of people from 'prescribed' Aboriginal communities under the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) and their supporters. We feel that the welfare provisions enabled under NTER legislation are racially discriminatory. We are currently engaged in [a] political campaign demanding an end to the Intervention.

We write in regards to our particular concern that federal government policy has led to the creation of segregated queues for service delivery in Alice Springs Centrelink.

People from 'prescribed' Aboriginal communities, who receive the same Centrelink entitlements as others across the broader community (such as a pension or parenting allowance), are being instructed to form a separate queue to receive these entitlements.

We understand this practice may currently be legal due to provisions of NTER legislation which suspend the operation of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) and the NT Anti-Discrimination Act (1992).

However, it represents an affront to basic principles of justice and human equality. It

also contravenes a number of international human rights charters Australia has signed. For example;

- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), "Ensures the right of access to social security systems on a non-discriminatory basis, especially for disadvantaged or marginalized groups".

- The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) states, "governments undertake not to engage in any act or practice of racial discrimination and must ensure that all public authorities and public institutions act in conformity with this obligation"

We request the immediate de-segregation of service provision in Alice Springs Centrelink. People from 'prescribed' Aboriginal communities must be able to stand in the same queues as others attending Centrelink to speak with staff about receiving their entitlements.

We understand that the NTER has created enormous pressure on people working in Centrelink and we in no way hold staff responsible for the "income management" system currently in place. We believe the government should be providing more resources and better conditions for staff.

However, as this matter is causing considerable distress, we request a timely response. We will be initiating a more public campaign against this practice to ensure it does not continue.

Intervention Rollback Action Group (Alice Springs).²⁰

William Armstrong from Alice Springs. Interviewed outside Alice Springs Centrelink, 9 August 2008.

It's another form of apartheid, but it's just worded differently. Apartheid is what I say because we still can't even think to ourselves, we still can't even get that right of deciding for ourselves how we are going to spend that money, that income that we have. We are just going back into the system anyhow.

I see that as an affront to basic human rights. Now days, the government is just coming in and saying, "you've got to do it this way". Just like the old days when people can't even think for themselves - lining up for the old ration day and things like that.

It's still creating that division, strengthening that racist element here. We're not in a very unified situation here because of this whole thing of "anti-social behaviour". We are bearing the brunt of that racism, because of these decisions made somewhere down in Canberra or where ever they are being made from. We still don't have that right of having a voice and raising our concerns, it's being done from somewhere else.

There is a lot of anger out there and I think that is why we need to channel it out, because of all the issues that the Intervention has raised. At the moment it's being channelled out in Alice through the alcohol, through the anti-social behaviour, the abuse that you talk about and self-inflicted injuries to our people basically. That's what it is, it's going internalised, there is no outlet here for the Aboriginal people in Alice Springs except getting on the grog. So why don't you talk about those sort of issues - tackle those sort of issues head on?

One thing I'd like to say is about getting more support from Interstate. It's not us here the Aboriginal people really. We are caught up because of the methodologies that are being implemented here in Alice Springs. A lot more needs to be done with the politicians and all the Aboriginal 'leaders'. Are they affected? I doubt very much. Its

²⁰ Letter from Intervention Rollback Action Group (Alice Springs) to Centrelink Manager and members of staff, 4 August 2008.

always us here in the street. Putting it back down on us.
You know - they've got to stop passing the buck and do something to stop this racism and bring back equality and justice. Its sadly lacking here in the Centre.

Interview with Geoffrey Shaw, Mt Nancy Town Camp Alice Springs, December 11 2008.

Racism existed in those days, back when I was a kid. Oh blatant racism. They'd have two movies. We'd walk from here. Me and my relatives over here at Bungalow. We'd walk along the river to go to the movies. In those days I didn't know about racism, assimilation, nothing.
But there was segregation in the movie theatre there. Everybody had to sit down at the floor in the front. And the other one too they made a sand pit for us, while the whitefellas sat at the back in cushioned canvas seats.
As soon as the movie was finished we had to get out of there. And that's the only time we had to stay in town was movie nights. Once a week. So we were allowed to stay there til late. But all the other times, we had to be out of town by 6 o'clock. So the racism was there. But because I was young I didn't see it, but now I know about the racist attitudes. 'You mob have to go, you might cause trouble' and so on.
Back in them days they had prohibition too. The only people who were allowed to drink were people 'of Aboriginal decent', the likes of me, part-Aboriginals. And all them old blokes. Those old fellas here, some used to work here. What they used to do, they liked to have a drink. Closing time in pubs I think. They'd go down with a hessian bag. They'd go along with a matchbox. What them old blokes would do is put a five pound note in there, walk along the street past the pub. The old blokes sitting at the bar would come out and say g'day. They'd walk past, drop the match box and say, 'the bags over at that gum tree there'.
So prior to six o'clock what the old blokes would walk along, pick the match box up and go and buy the alcohol. They'd go and put it in the bag. Other ones who were allowed to drink in the pubs used to do that. Then they'd go and get the alcohol or the fortified wine and take it up into the hills to drink.
They couldn't drink at the Bungalow because that was under native welfare so that had to go and drink in the hills and hide away. And a few of them old fellas, they got caught. Back in them days they'd do 3-6 months day for providing alcohol. But that's what happened. All the way through.

Racism and Daily Life

The racism at the heart of the Northern Territory Emergency Response ('NTER') legislation has become progressively structured into the daily life of Alice Springs. Income quarantining brought open racism into the shops, new police powers saw it intensify on the streets and the entire process gives confidence to racists in town. Valerie Martin explained, 'It's getting worse now. People shout from the car at me. Our old people have had glass bottles thrown at them, just while they are sitting there. It's not on.'

The introduction of the multi-million dollar 'BasicsCard' system in shops throughout Alice was a massive bureaucratic operation, exacerbating the public division between two classes of customer – the normal and the 'prescribed'. Many shops now have big colour posters, with pictures of items 'prohibited' on the card. This reinforces the same negative stereotypes as the big blue road

signs outside every town-camp and community, and littered along the highway, which warn of entry into a 'prescribed area'.

Using the BasicsCard often takes far longer than paying in cash. There is no way to check the balance either at an ATM, or in the shop. The only way to do it is to call Centrelink, which costs money and takes time. Even when people think they know the balance, the credit could be missing. As a result, 'prescribed' customers are often left with no choice but to shop through 'trial and error'.

Barb outlined one experience:

At the shop one day there were these two young girls in front of me. I knew who they were and that they had kids. They brought up \$40 worth of food to the check-out, mainly food for kids. And the worker said 'No, not enough'. So they put items back, two at a time. 'No still not enough'. When they come down to it, only \$9 or \$10 was left in that card. And I thought, 'Oh no'. Lucky I was behind and I had extra money in my BasicsCard I could give them.

Along with leading to shame and embarrassment for people trying to shop with the card, income quarantining also creates a nasty, frustrated atmosphere at the shop counter, which easily takes on a racist quality. I spoke with Maxine Carlton at her town camp, who had just finished work, surveying people in different camps who had complaints about the card.

This BasicsCard is really bringing out the racism in Alice Springs. The way we are being treated in shops, being spoken to like dogs - 'Go and line up over there!' 'No, you stand back and wait!'

In some instances, shops responded to complaints from staff and other customers by simply segregating the queues. At the IGA supermarket in Eastside, a sign stayed up for many months, 'Attention customers. BasicsCard may only be used at this register.' It was only removed after consistent complaint. The paternalistic ideology of income management has been internalised by shopkeepers, who take it upon themselves to decide what Aboriginal people can and cannot buy with their BasicsCard:

'They like telling us what to buy now. This one fella was told he could buy a pie and drumstick, but wasn't allowed chicken and chips!' said Maxine.

'An old lady said to me – "are they going to lift up my clothes and tell me what bloomers to wear!"'

Maxine's husband Donald had recently been given a BasicsCard.

'I can't find anywhere that will sell me phone credit. The only place is Kmart. I could buy a mobile phone from this one store – but not any credit!'

Police have stepped up persecution of Aboriginal people through the Intervention. Houses in prescribed areas can be entered without warrant, all that is needed is suspicion that some alcohol could be inside. Unopened alcohol can

be confiscated on the street – again, police need only to suspect it will be consumed in prescribed areas.

The sight of Aboriginal people having beer cases taken, and sometimes smashed in front of them, is a common one. Dianne Stokes described problems with the police in Tennant Creek:

They've got a strong law behind their back, the law that came in through Intervention. Every time people get caught [with alcohol] by the police they gonna get fined for that. They get taken into jail.

And that's sad, seeing our people going back into jail, you know. Without having violent problem, it's just the problem through grog, just for the police fining them in one spot.

Selma from Santa Teresa complained about police behaviour, searching cars for alcohol on the highway:

Instead of just putting them cans in the police car you know, they smash all the grog on the road. When they pull over people ... smash it on the road and say, 'OK you fellas clean it up'. They got the badge, that's what's making them feel high you know. Why can't they tell people, 'take your few cans home and drive safely'.

At Kunoth there are constant complaints about police. They barge through the houses. They have ridden through camp at speed on new dirt bikes, sometimes close to children playing. One evening I was told that they drove through a group sitting in the creek bed cooking Kangaroo tail. When people protested there was tail under the coals, they doubled back to ride over it repeatedly.

Early in February 2009 I got a call from a friend Robin Granites, who often stays in Alice Springs:

I just wanted to tell you that the police reckon there is a curfew now, for us Aboriginal people. I was just standing in the Todd Mall with others. Selling paintings you know? And this copper came up and said. 'Right - all of you people, you have to be out of here by 8 PM. Home by 8 PM. The Sergeant has given new orders. No-one out after dark.

And I reckon, 'I don't have to leave. I'm going to stay here. What are you going to do, arrest me?' But many people left.

One Legal Aid worker I spoke with talked of the compounding effect income quarantining had on the new police powers. When taken into lock-up, people were often finding it harder to afford both bail money and any fines they may be given, due to a shortage of cash from income management.

Concern about the racism of the Intervention is routinely dismissed by its conservative champions. Warren Mundine argues criticism of racism is '... the concern of the latte-sipping set in Sydney,'²¹ while Marcia Langton derides it as

²¹ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'Survey of the Northern Territory Intervention', *The*

being, ‘ ... entangled in the 50-year-old abstractions and ideology of the sanctity of the individual versus the collective rights of groups.’²² Invariably, the ‘action’ of the Intervention is contrasted with the ‘bleating’ of privileged people unable to move on from a ‘failed rights agenda.’

But the racism of the Intervention is not an abstraction. In the words of people living under the policy it is the reason they can’t access food to which they are entitled, why whole days are spent dealing with cruel bureaucracy as the pressures of life pile up and why even more people are going to jail. It is breaking down health, crushing self-esteem and exacerbating cycles of self-destruction.²³

Anti-racism is not just an ideology held in cities. It is an everyday practice demanding food at the supermarket counter, dignity in life’s endless queues and protection from the violence of police. It brings people together, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in relationships of solidarity and struggle against a government set on enforcing bitterness, hunger and division.

Interview with Uncle Kevin Buzzacott, long-time Aboriginal rights activist, 30 August 2008.

I think the Intervention is like many of the policies, many of the tricks over the years, over the last couple of generations, how to control Aboriginal people. It is to nail people, to scare people, to get the land off people. The full control.

I think people of Australia - they better watch this. Because if they get away with it here in the Territory, they are going to do it all around the country. So your freedom, whatever freedom you think you might have, its going to go down here. The Intervention, they can pin you for drinking, pin you for whatever they want to pin you for. You’ll end up in their jails, you’ll end up a criminal.

You get a mother in a car, with their kids, driving home from the shop or somewhere. The cops lights blare - the sirens going. They pull the car over. They breathalyse the mother. The kids are screaming in the car, they’re terrified because they’re scared of the cops and they think they’re going to arrest their mother or whoever else is in the car.

I’ve seen people spread-eagled on the back of the car and strip searched. They even take you to the jail if you speak your rights to them - all in the name of the Intervention.

They bust into your homes, whether there’s grandmothers or grandfathers, baby sleeping in the house. They arrest you. They hassle you.

It’s insulting as well, you get pulled up on the main street or in the community. Its insulting. Other people looking at you getting arrested or pulled over. No respect

World Today, 15 August 2008,

<<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2008/s2336553.htm>>

²² Marcia Langton ‘Optional Intervention Gives Choice’, *The Australian*, 16 October 2008, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/optional-intervention-gives-choice/story-e6frg6q6-1111117762019>.

²³ The Australian Indigenous Doctors’ Association have also documented the ‘sense of existential collective despair’ brought on by the NTER. The Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, *Submission to the Northern Territory Emergency Response Review Board 2008* <www.aida.org.au/pdf/submissions/Submission_8.pdf>.

towards who we are, what we are.

Some of these police. I don't know how they're trained or taught. But they don't care what age you are, if you're sick, anything. They just scare you, really freak you out. Now people, just driving into town, as soon as they see a police car, they start shaking and carrying on. Even the mothers, the way they've been spoken to.

The control - this is no monkey business. This is full on. Terror – it's a terror attack.

Taking half of your pension. The money - people don't know where to go. You've got to chase Centrelink again to get your food vouchers, this sort of thing is just crazy. I've never dreamed that they'd pull us back 50 years or more, back in the old mission days, it's just crazy. I've never seen this before.

What this is doing - racism has always been an issue in this country. This is going a bit more, because this is creating racism more amongst a people. It's not a good solution for peace.

I've said I think there's going to be an explosion - I don't know how long people can sit back and take this bullshit by the coppers. They chase you off the road, they run you off the road. There's been accidents where the police has chased people on the road. There's all sorts of pressure and fear.

Everyone really needs to look at this, they really need to get together and be really strong about it. There's rallies coming up, there's meetings coming up. I really think people need to get down there, with the people that are organising it, and have their own say about how this Intervention is, what it's doing to you. And if you don't nail it now, you're going to be wearing it the rest of your life. And when you die, your kids are going to be wearing it and so forth.

You have your rights. Your human rights. You gotta be strong. Don't be scared of these mob. Go to these rallies, speak strong. You gotta speak the truth. The truth will get us there.

Police raid Kunoth camp

On the night of Thursday 9 October 2008, a large number of police participated in a raid of the Kunoth Town Camp in Alice Springs. Residents of Kunoth called me immediately and asked for their story to be documented. Police jumped over fences to enter the camp, displayed rifles, pushed and abused residents and trained a laser on the chest of one man. Police claimed they were looking for weapons, following a tip off from the fire brigade that there were guns in a car that drove back to the camp. A miniature toy gun was later found on the dashboard of the car.

Protesting at the police station on Monday 13 October, Kunoth locals blamed the Intervention for the incident. They had previous experiences of house raids conducted by police using Intervention powers,²⁴ and criticised the deployment of police from interstate who had no experience of working in Aboriginal communities. Their protests came just one week after accusations by Yolngu people that heavy-handed behaviour by police deployed through the Intervention was responsible for the suicide of a young man in central Arnhem Land. The 21 year-old man committed suicide after being arrested, escaping and then being hunted down for being involved in a consensual and

²⁴ *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007* (Cth) s 12 extends police search powers under the *Liquor Act* (NT) to enter and search houses without warrant to all land in 'prescribed communities'.

community-sanctioned relationship with a fifteen year-old girl.²⁵

Donald Kunoth, vice-president of the town camp, explained the danger of the raid:

There was a big mob of police here. They come running in like they were looking for terrorists. We've never had that here before. I have a heart condition and my parents too.

Apparently there were guns stolen in Alice Springs earlier in the week. And they just assumed it was our Aboriginal kids. It's so scary to see your kids get harassed like that. At gunpoint. One of them could have been shot by accident. They even had bullet proof vests on. Lights were shining into the camp from outside and that blinded us. What if someone came walking out with a stick? They could have been shot.

Maxine Carlton had spoken to me many times about police harassment:

We were just watching a TV program about the death in Arnhem Land after police actions. Little did we know it was going to happen in our yard.

One copper that I took in to search the rooms was stationed in Alice and he said to me 'we know you mob Kunoth family that live in this block, we know you mob sort your own problems out'. That's why I think it's the Intervention cops who organised raid, like Chris Burns [Northern Territory Justice Minister] said, they get chucked in there and they don't have the training. We're not living freely like we used to in our town camps, you know, we have to keep looking over our shoulders.

Eva Kunoth lives at Utopia, but stays at the camp when she comes into town with her husband:

We've got two out there also at Utopia from this Intervention thing ... they don't know what they're doing out there. They don't know what their role is, they don't know who to talk to, they don't ask either, the Intervention just put them there and that's it. That's how that one died up there in Arnhem Land. They don't know who to talk to.

Robbie Petrick lives in a humpy, built in the backyard of his uncle's house at Kunoth:

This little girl was sleeping and the police just came in and shake the humpy (where little girl is sleeping), and we live in the humpy, the police come in with rifles, pointing them at my uncle, they was like a sniper with red light, laser come on his chest, pointed, just for no reason. Like soldiers, just like a soldier.

His partner Josephine was furious:

The local cops come in and ask where the grog is hidden, and we just tell them the others, Intervention mob, they just come raging in you know. It's just outrageous. A disgrace. We need human rights you know. That's why we feel sad. Its been just like we been chained up again, like our ancestors did in the past. They were chained up

²⁵ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'Misguided Intervention blamed for young man's death', *ABC Radio News*, 10 October 2008.

and dragged like animals. We don't want that to happen again, for our children, and their children you know. We gotta stand for our rights.

Valerie Martin was staying at Kunoth at the time of the raid. She helped encourage the residents to stand up and protest against the raid:

The Intervention was supposed to protect children. But the children are more scared now because of these police. I have been calling the Intervention an invasion since the start. And now here it is – they invaded our community.

Invasion isn't 'closing the gap'

The following extracts are from speeches made at a public demonstration outside the Alice Springs police station on 13 October 2008.

Barbara Shaw

We have had raids on our town camps for a long time. This is the latest one - and we're going to make an official complaint. Because a lot of our people, who are affected by the Intervention, are sick of it. Especially invasion into our homes.

We have a lot of sick and elderly people on our town camps and this is what the police do. Without any respect or knowledge of our people. So yeah it's all about respect and working together. If they want to talk to us they should knock on our doors and respectfully talk to us. It's all part of consultation.

They brought the Intervention out as an emergency response - now it's far more than an emergency response. And this is not closing the gap either for our people by invasion of our homes.

Donald Kunoth

My uncle had a red laser dot [on] his chest. I don't know what it was - a gun, one of those taser guns? It was like commandos back over there. They was jumping over the fence and one of them made an arrest to my nephew. Grabbed him, without talking to him properly. He cooperated. We all cooperated there, but the way they did this was pretty scary you know? Frighten our kids. It shouldn't be like that. Can't we just get along?

Eva Kunoth

I'm the grandmother of those kids that they arrested ... I'm a woman that's got a heart condition. I live out bush. And my grandchildren never carry guns. This one (holds up the toy gun), it belonged to my three year old grand son.

Eileen Hoosan

I have a statement here on behalf of town camp women in Alice Springs - in prescribed areas. We are calling for a full investigation of the use of force by police in this case - the Kunoth military style policing. This is not the first time that police have acted in a way that could be called police brutality. The use of excessive force. Confrontation by police in our camps has replaced investigation. Case one

surrounding our south camps - home invasions. No one could come in or out of our south camps. The police systematically conducted home invasion on each house, resulting in frightening women and children, scaring and frightening old people. Our communities are now being subject to psychological intimidation by police and there is an atmosphere of terror. Town Camp women will comprehensively document, statistics on the use of force by law enforcement on the town camps and all prescribed areas. We believe if we don't do this, there could be a possible shooting on the town camps in Alice Springs. If police need to go in there is a right way to do it. We are worried that there will be a shooting by police of our people on the town camps.

Valerie Martin

That's what I was all about - invasion. Right from the start. Its not on. It's got to stop. Please, show us some respect! We are human beings too! I hope we can live side by side here. This is not the way to go. We call this place Australia home. We should all live in harmony and share this land.

Cracking the Plastic: Grassroots resistance

In November, the Northern Territory Council of Social Services ('NTCOSS') organised a forum in Alice Springs for affiliates and the general public about the progress of the Northern Territory Intervention. NTCOSS had lined up management level workers from the range of government agencies implementing the Intervention, including Centrelink, to give presentations and field questions.

Most people who came to the forum were from front line service organisations, working everyday with people affected by the Intervention. A handful of people were from 'prescribed areas', including Elaine Peckham, who lived at an outstation on the Iwapatuka Land Trust and was a member of IRAG and her son George, an experienced community worker. The presentations were cheerful and superficial. The session on the BasicsCard couldn't have been more disconnected from reality:

'So you would have all seen out new BasicsCard. Isn't it a lovely green?'

The Centrelink presenter forced a smile through the entire 15 minute powerpoint and referred three times to the, 'beautiful new green card'.

'We have had such good feedback, everyone says they love their new green card. That's what they call it, "their little green card".'

Except when discussing a new employment program within Centrelink, the word 'Aboriginal' wasn't mentioned during the presentation. When question time started, the plastic quickly cracked and the smiles disappeared. Criticism fired from all over the room:

'My clients are disabled. This has created massive levels of work for us. We don't have the resources to always be taking people into Centrelink.'

'We have received a number of complaints that money continues to be taken out of income management for the school lunch program, even though children are no

longer attending that school. Sometimes more than \$50 a week.'

'There are signs up in shops telling people to form separate queues.'

'What you are doing is in direct breach of the Racial Discrimination Act. It's racist. The government's own report showed that. Isn't their disquiet in your departments about what you are doing to people?'

George was upset that, despite all the focus on income management, many well-functioning financial management programs coming from communities had not been supported. Community organisations were being forced to 'water down their programs to fit with what the government is doing.'

'I see a complete lack of accountability in the services that are hitting communities right now. There is so much money being spent and we can't see anything to show for it.'

The staff sat shuffling their feet. Certainty and confidence turned quickly and a sense of shared frustration. Things 'weren't supposed to be happening like this'. Our issues would be 'taken into consideration ... but we have no idea where the government is going with this'. This wasn't good enough for a young woman from a local town camp:

'Tell me why this is just happening to Aboriginal people'.

A woman from FaHCSIA started to respond, 'Well, there are many people from affected areas who aren't Aboriginal...'

'So why was a white lady from my town camp told she didn't have to be on Income Management because she wasn't Aboriginal?'

FAHCSIA: 'That's not supposed to happen...'

'That's what they told her. The staff in Centrelink. She's getting her full cheque now so why can't we!?''

FAHCSIA: 'No that's not supposed to happen at all. We'll look into that'.

Someone from Centrelink took over:

'The NTER was a response to the *Little Children are Sacred Report*, which was an inquiry focussed on Aboriginal communities...'

The young woman responded with the following:

But there's a lot more people drinking in my camp now and a lot more domestic violence.
More domestic violence because people can't access money through their BasicsCard and this causes fights. More drinking, everyone is always coming in from the bush. I can't sleep until four in the morning. Before this I used to go to bed at nine at night. Now its 100 times worse. People supporting this - have they ever lived in a town camp!

She was very angry, and started to cry.

Is the government taking into account what they are doing to our elders? This is killing them. Back in the old days they fought really hard for black people to get their rights. Now they have to see their grandkids going through this.

The room was silent. A Centrelink worker tried a response:

‘As difficult as it is to hear that ... we will take your stories back’.

The young woman walked out. Elaine Peckham took the chance to speak:

This Intervention has brought us right back to a ground level. Its taken everything away from us. Our journey, everything that we've gone through to get where we are today.

You say it's going to get better – it's never going to! How are our young ones supposed to come up with happening all around us?

We were working from 14 and 15 years of age. We went out and got an education. For what? For the government to do this to us? Now all of a sudden, I feel we are just empty again.

We have to survive again. We survived getting land. Old people going out with swags to get it back. Now they are taking it away from us. We are being victimised for living on the land by the Income Management.

We heard no more talk of the ‘beautiful new green card’.

Dennis Nelson from Yuendumu discusses 'White Australia', 1 October 2008.

From the start, when the first government was formed in Australia, every Australian government, every policies has always been based on the White Australia policy. The White Australia policy was born out of the fact that, when white people started fighting to build a nation in Australia, they saw that Aboriginal people as a dying race. They said to themselves, "they'll die out in 100 years. Let's make a White Australia policy, only for white people". And that gave them the legitimacy to own Australia.

That's why all the lands have only been given to white people, everything has been removed. Mineral rights, land and sea rights, they've all been taken off us by the Australian government and now they're still making these laws against Aboriginal people. Their policies have always been to take away self-determination from the Aboriginal people because, they think we are still a dying race.

From the start, since the birth of the Australian government it's been a White Australia policy only. And they are still making these laws to take away everything from the Aboriginal people just so that all the policies will always support white Australia.

Waves of Assimilation

Through late October and early November 2008, a raft of new policy

announcements, from both the Federal and Northern Territory Governments, caused further distress amongst communities already struggling with the Intervention.

First came a growing awareness of the implications of the Northern Territory Government's new discussion paper into the future of outstations and homelands. The paper said that no new housing would be built on outstations and that ongoing support for all currently existing outstations would not be possible.²⁶

Mark Lane, from the Kalumpurlpa homeland near Tennant Creek, attended a public consultation about the new policy:

They reckon that they'll just give us funding money for two years and then they don't know what will happen there. Maybe we have to go. That's not right. Felt bad really. How can they do this to us, pushing people?

We told them - Every outstation here in the Northern Territory everywhere, they live next to a sacred site. They dance that sacred site, they sing that sacred site.

We are connected to the land like that. And no one can come from the outside and tell us 'move out from there' you know, 'you've got nothing there, you've got nothing to do there'. They're wrong. They don't even come out you know, them government people.

We been going on that for 40,000 years you know! First Aboriginal people, we bin look after the land. Doing all the work on the land, looking after the land, looking after the sacred sites. Now this fella wanna come over and say, 'we'll break it up now'.

We sat on that land and we are going to stay there. Rudd, we thought he was going to take the old laws out, but nup. He's sticking on with Howard's law.

Then came an announcement that there would be severe restrictions placed on the teaching of Aboriginal languages in schools. Comprehensive bilingual programs operating in ten remote government schools would effectively be abolished and teaching in language would only be allowed in the afternoons.²⁷ Imelda Palmer, a teacher at an independent school in Santa Teresa, was very worried about the policy change:

We are shocked. And confused. The Intervention first, and then the shire came in and now they are talking about the bi-lingual education. And the homelands, it's just continuing. On and on. What next? What are they going to take away from the people now? Are they going to start taking kids who don't come to school?

At the same time, pressure was intensifying for a select number of communities to sign away leases over their land for between 40-90 years, to enable construction of houses under the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program ('SIHIP'). SIHIP is a major investment program. Six hundred and forty-seven million dollars is being committed to Aboriginal

²⁶ Northern Territory Government Outstations Policy Discussion Paper, 2008,

<http://www.action.nt.gov.au/outstations/docs/Outstations_Discussion_Paper.pdf>.

²⁷ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'NT leaders clash over language in schools', *AM* 18 November 2008 <<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2008/s2422382.htm>>.

housing in the Northern Territory, in a joint venture between the Federal and Northern Territory Governments. But this money is being used as a weapon - to further break up community control, push people out of remote areas and entrench the Intervention. Despite overcrowding being a serious problem in virtually all 73 communities 'prescribed' under the Intervention, only 16 have been offered any new housing, along with the town camps in major population centres like Alice Springs and Darwin.

In Central Australia, only three communities have been earmarked for new construction - Yuendumu, Lajamanu and Hermansburg. Even many larger communities of more than 500 people are excluded, such as Papunya and Ali Curung. This despite two thirds of all Indigenous people in the Northern Territory living in overcrowded houses, compared with just 6 per cent of the Australian population.²⁸ The Northern Territory Emergency Response Task Force, in their June 2008 report, recommended precisely such a restriction of resource provision to communities deemed 'economically viable'.²⁹

Speaking about the Central Australian communities selected by SIHIP at a Central Land Council meeting in November 2008, Deputy Chair, Maurie Ryan, said, 'You see those communities are big communities, where the mining industry is already established. So if the government is going to take it over for 40 years and build houses – what about the smaller communities?'

Minister Jenny Macklin has made it clear that any housing will depend on communities signing long term leases. Through the final months of 2008 people were being increasingly threatened – unless they signed soon, they will be left to rot. In October, David Ross, Director of the Central Land Council said, 'Aboriginal people are being delivered ultimatums – sign a lease with Canberra before Christmas or forget about any further funding ... of course people are resisting.'³⁰

Community control of township land was won through decades of struggle for land rights. It signalled a break with the days when Aboriginal lives were controlled by paternalistic welfare boards and mission managers. It ensured that local people had input into what developments took place on their land and played a central role in service delivery. The five-year leases taken through the Intervention were a huge attack on these gains. They have already facilitated a major asset grab that forms part of SIHIP, being used in many places to

²⁸ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2007*, Canberra Productivity Commission, 2007.

²⁹ Northern Territory Emergency Response Taskforce, *Final Report to Government*, (2008) 15
<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/nter_reports/final_report_2008/Pages/default.aspx>.

³⁰ Central Land Council, 'NTER Review Board: CLC Response' (Media release, October 2008) <<http://www.clc.org.au/Media/releases/2008/NTERreview.html>>.

forcibly transfer all existing community controlled housing stock to the Commonwealth, to be managed by the Northern Territory Department of Housing.³¹

The concern is that this will mean higher rents, more restrictive tenancy conditions and easier eviction. Elaine Peckham explained that this would make it harder to live on her outstation:

As well as the hardship from the intervention, the NT government is also taking control of tenancy management away from the community. We are facing rent increases that I can't afford as a pensioner.

One resident of Santa Teresa explained how Aboriginal control of tenancy management was necessary to ensure respect for cultural practices, like the need to move house if someone passed away.

They own the houses now. We can't just go into houses now. We have to see the person. It's a Territory house now. You can't change when you want. This makes it harder on the cultural side. We can't stay in a house when someone loses a son you know? Or daughter. We have to get out because you can't stay in that house. It will be hard eh?

Geoffrey Shaw explained why the Tangentyere Council had been so strong in resisting attempts by Northern Territory Housing to take over tenancy management in the town camps:

We need to practice self-management. Determine who gets a house, who moves into the community. In that way you've got control over your own life. They say culture is a problem. But it reinforces the administration of this place. Because you've got the structure there of people and how they fit in, how to control the affairs of this place. NT housing, they can't even look after Aboriginal people in their own state housing! If we go towards NT housing taking over and they maintain control over these houses it will be 'upmarket rent' I suppose. And I can't imagine these people paying \$250 per week.

William Tilmouth, the current executive director of Tangentyere, outlined further fears that inform ongoing opposition among town campers to the provisions of SIHIP:

One of the questions that remained unanswered is, what will happen to people living in tin sheds? There are 70 tin sheds and they represent people's accommodation and also the need for housing. Those tin sheds will be bulldozed and I don't think they'll be building 70 new houses. In my estimation that's a question the government hasn't thought of and hasn't put money forward to accommodate those people.

³¹ Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Australian Government, *Monitoring Report measuring progress of NTER activities Part 2* (9 February 2009)

<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/nter_reports/Documents/monitoring_report_2/part5.htm>.

The NT government, they create a lot of homelessness through failed tenancies in urban housing and the people always come and live on town camps, that's their fallback position. If the NT housing management takes over the town camps and applies the same rules and regulations, where's your fallback position if you get evicted from a town camp? You don't have a fallback position. Especially if you are a renal patient and you need to be in town.

The only fallback position is back into the scrub, from whence you came. This is how Aboriginal people started, by living in humpies and car bodies and tin sheds in the scrub first. It's a push back to the old days 30 years ago. That's how Tangentyere came about because of the need to accommodate these people.³²

Contracts for construction under SIHIP have already been signed with multinational construction and infrastructure consortiums. For example, Parsons-Brinkerhoff, who have made millions from reconstruction contracts in Iraq, are now following the troops into Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. They occupy senior positions on the SIHIP operational steering committee.³³

Yuendumu Fights Back

Harry Nelson from Yuendumu told a demonstration in Alice Springs to mark Human Rights Day in December 2008, 'I'll tell you point blank. We will never sign ... the elders who have fought so hard for land rights cannot sign'. The most consistent, vocal and organised opposition to the Northern Territory Intervention coming from the Central Australian bush has been based out of Yuendumu. Yuendumu is proud of many successful independent organisations that provide services and employment opportunities to local people, built up over many years by the community.

Yuendumu women were the founders of the Night Patrol Service for example, which has been replicated in many communities across the Northern Territory. Relatively large in terms of remote communities, the Yuendumu community has a strong Warlpiri identity that is, for many, fiercely political. Warlpiri Media, a local media organisation which broadcasts over a massive area covering the Warlpiri language group, allowed me to watch some footage of community meetings held with government officials in the early days of the Intervention.

The hurt and anger were raw. So too was the spirit of defiance. But it was the eloquence and sophistication of the critique of the Intervention, coming from a broad range of voices in the community that seemed most intimidating for the visiting bureaucrats. On 30 October 2007, Major General Dave Chalmers, Operational Commander of the Northern Territory Emergency Response and Brian Stacey from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services

³² Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, 'William Tilmouth talks about alternative housing model', *Strong Voices*, 27 March 2009 (William Tilmouth).

³³ Northern Territory Government, *SIHIP Overview Presentation* (February 2009) <<https://www.batchelor.edu.au/system/files/SIHIP%20Overview.pdf>>.

and Indigenous Affairs ('FaHCSIA') went out to Yuendumu to face a meeting. Chalmers stood in front of the crowd in full army fatigues and tried to sell the Intervention:

There is \$587 million in the NT for remote communities. Hundreds of millions of additional money ... We want to work with the Warlpiri people to see how you can make the most of that money and make the most of that opportunity.

From the start he tried to distance himself from those who were responsible for the Intervention:

I apologise. I am sorry that the consultation didn't happen. Can I ask that we acknowledge that was not right but we need to move forward. How can we consult? How can you take control of what the government is offering? Take control of those \$100s of millions. I want to hear you. We have a Government Business Manager (GBM) - Noel - who you can talk to at any time and he can talk to me.

Ned Hargraves translated for Chalmers. Relaying the point about the GBM he added, 'I call them 'superintendent'. Like back in the 50s and 60s'. At the end of the translation he asked, 'Are we dog face? I don't know', then shouted – 'Give us our permit back!'

Denis Wilson spoke about the five-year leases:

After the five year lease I think the land will be taken away from us. Land is our mind, place that holds everything. That belongs to us ... land's got the dream site, ceremony, everything. That's why we want our land. Not to touch or take away from us.

Encouraging him, there were shouts from the crowd – 'This is Aboriginal Land.'

'This place belongs to the community is not for sale. Government can keep the millions there. We want the land.'

Chalmers responded:

That leased area is so government can invest money in public housing, to make sure that you have the houses and services in the community that you should have and they can be properly looked after. That's why government is leasing the land so it can become the landlord of new public housing in the community.

This investment never came. The Government is now demanding a minimum 40-year lease to build housing on Aboriginal land at Yuendumu. J. Egan outlined the detailed plans that the community had made for its own future and their incredible frustration these were not being supported. 'We had so many meetings about that five-year plan. We talked about education and we talked about police ... we went to so many meetings, what happened to this?'

Harry Nelson supported the point:

The five-year plan. We got a five-year plan worked out ... It got thrown in the rubbish bin. This Intervention has put us back 30 years. Self-determination has been knocked on the head. Self-government knocked on the head. ATSIC was abolished. Why? Because they were too brainy! They talked up for rights, on behalf of Aboriginal people in Australia. During the 40s, very few of us mixed with white people. I didn't know half of the teachers. Lack of consultation - same as the Intervention.

James Japangardi Marshal spoke too of the parallels with the past:

I want you to think back to the assimilation policy. Back in those days ... the same thing with this Intervention is happening right now for us. In the past, way back, the government, I'm talking about the Labor party, gave us the right for self-determination. Gave us everything. Slowly the government step in, bit by bit ... now today the government has taken everything. The rights of our people. We are like a puppet on a string and you mob will be telling us what to do. We haven't got any rights. Back in the old days, when the assimilation policy was on. We've got a Superintendent here - he's like a watchdog. We're like animals or something like that. It's been done way back in the assimilation policy. Now you've got Intervention here - right here against us.

Otto Jungaarayi Simms was one of many people who spoke about the pain caused by the propaganda about Aboriginal people used to justify the Intervention:

Are we bad? You see those old ladies, are they bad? You're telling us how to live. We know how to live! We are law abiding citizens. You know? That's why we've got to talk up strong. This mob come up here, they're telling us how to live. How to work. We have been screaming out for work. For health. Lowa (nothing). And now they come up. Because there's an election looming. They want to tell the mob in the southern cities they are helping black people.

Robbie Jungala Walit said, 'All the men here. Are they paedophiles? None of us! This is a shame job for Yapa... We have been trying to protect our kids from invaders like you!' Robert Simms was furious that the Government was using *Little Children are Sacred* to justify the Intervention:

The thing that makes me so upset is that based on that child report you just chuck in all those things. The permit system has got nothing to do! You just stick to that child abuse report ... I sat on the oval speaking to those consultants who made that report.

What I told Rex Wild was that we needed more professional help, not taking the permit system away! We need work, training, that's what we wanted. Up there at the school - education. And what has the government done? They wrote that report and now take the permit system away. Five-year lease. That's your idea. You didn't listen to what we said.

Instead of listening to us, when we were kind enough to invite the QC Rex Wild and Pat Anderson to talk to community members ... we were kind enough to invite them to tell them we need help in areas such as education and employment and getting social workers here ... what you have done is completely the opposite! So who is wrong here? Are we wrong? I think it's you mob who are wrong.

You didn't listen to the people who are living with the problems. Where we live day by day. Daily. You come in here - with 5 million bucks to tell us how to live and to upgrade the housing. When we've been screaming for 20 years to get more houses.

You know? You tell me - I'm so upset you know.

I tell you Dave Chalmers. You start building a bigger jail. There are so many Aboriginal people in jail and the jail will get full up. The crime rate will go up. Instead of helping the Aboriginal people you just make it harder.

Valerie Martin translated for me his final comments in Warlpiri:

All the people that are facing fines, they can't pay this fine - Chalmers, would you want to chuck in your \$75,000 to pay this? Throw a few bob in?

Staff from the Yuendumu 'Old People's Program' have told me stories of a period of intense harassment from Intervention bureaucrats late in 2007, who made explicit attempts to take over the program. They were only stopped through people literally standing their ground and defying the visiting officials. At the same time, many in the community started to develop a strategy for holding off implementation of the income management regime.

Frank Baarda explained:

The two stores in Yuendumu, the Mining store and the Social Club store resisted applying for a license because they didn't agree with the idea of income management. What the Social Club committee, who had a lot of pressure put on them to adopt income management came up with was, a public position that said 'we have got mixed messages about income management, so we would much prefer if it was deferred until such time as the government review', which was promised. What they asked was 'hold off on income management until such time as the review comes out'. But that was not enough.

Not having a store licensed to deal with income management severely held up its implementation. Many times, Centrelink set dates for introduction of the system in Yuendumu, only to push them back. Desperate to break the community opposition, Intervention bureaucrats began trying to find a wedge in the community.

Frank Baarda explained:

So the Intervention made an agreement with the Women's Centre, talked the Women's Centre into opening up a third shop, and a large amount of money was spent opening up this other store. So to me that tells me what their agenda is, that their agenda is more important to them, pushing their ideas, rather than to actually think about it and going, hey, hang on, here's a bunch of people who don't like income management.

Valerie Martin, who was working for the Women's Centre until the time of this decision, said it caused a bitter division amongst women associated with the Centre. Valerie left her job and remains insistent that the proposal had support of only a handful of women, and that most of the initiative had come from the manager. She also raises concerns that the Centre, which was once a place which provided services for women, is now just a shop.

Nevertheless, the fact that it was the Women's Centre which eventually allowed income management to come into Yuendumu was a serious coup for the Commonwealth, one which would be further exploited by Jenny Macklin when she visited the community for the opening of a new swimming pool.

Whitewash

The news that Indigenous affairs Minister Jenny Macklin would visit Yuendumu on 27 October 2008, to open the local swimming pool, sparked a flurry of activity among local residents opposed to the Intervention. One common complaint about the Intervention process had been the lack of opportunity to communicate community concern directly to the high levels of government.

Minister Macklin had been consistently quoted in the press arguing that there was widespread Aboriginal support for Intervention measures, particularly among women.³⁴ I had heard people from Yuendumu often explain these comments as arising from an ignorance of the realities on the ground, that the Minister had simply been 'told the wrong information', or had been 'listening to the wrong people'. The experience of Macklin's trip to the community hardened a more cynical suspicion – that she was both perfectly aware of the hardship being suffered through the Intervention and was taking measures to distort the message of community opposition.

Despite widespread participation in 'sorry business' the weekend before Macklin's visit, 236 local residents signed a petition. One hundred and forty of these were women.³⁵ The petition outlined opposition to imposed controls such as income management and called for an end to the Intervention, the immediate reinstatement of the *Racial Discrimination Act*, support for community control and for the Government to stop blackmailing the community into signing an ongoing lease over township land. It was prepared collaboratively by many local people, including Warlpiri women Valerie Martin and Peggy Brown, a deeply respected elder who had received the Order of Australia Medal for her work establishing the Mt Theo Program and ridding Yuendumu of serious petrol sniffing problems.

Harry Nelson, along with a strong delegation of Warlpiri including Peggy Brown, presented the petition to the Minister during a 'community meeting'

³⁴ Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 'Compulsory income management to continue as key NTER measure' (Media Release 23 October 2008) <http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/mediareleases/2008/Pages/nter_measure_23oct08.a_spx>.

³⁵ Petition from Yuendumu Residents to Jenny Macklin MP, Minister for Indigenous Affairs, 27 October 2008 <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/0838_petition.pdf>.

prior to the pool opening. The community controlled Pintubi Anmatjere Warlpiri Media Association (PAW Media), who had filmed numerous, similar meetings with government representatives, was instructed to leave the meeting by Jenny Macklin.

Harry explained later that Minister Macklin accepted the signatures with sympathetic words, but said there was little she could do to make any real changes, due to Labor's lack of control in the federal Senate. Speaking to media however, the Minister made no reference to the petition, or Labor's 'problem' with the Senate. 'The division between men and women over income management could not have been sharper', she told Russell Skelton from the Fairfax press, 'I explained to the men that it was going to continue.'³⁶

Peggy Brown, whose photo appeared in *The Age*, unwittingly became the face of 'the women' in Yuendumu who, in all corporate media reports, were presented as a homogenous block, battling 'the men' to retain the Intervention.³⁷ Brown was quoted by Skelton saying, 'it's working, there's no doubt about it'. Her strong comments in a speech opening the pool were not printed. 'This is our land! Government has got to support Yapa (Aboriginal people), we've got to keep control of our land!'

Peggy was furious. She immediately issued a public statement, written in Warlpiri and translated into English by Valerie Martin. 'My name was used telling lies. I did not agree with the Intervention.... Intervention is rubbish and isn't working in any way at all for us.'³⁸ She expressed similar sentiments in a video, posted on the Warlpiri Media website in response to the incident. Here she spoke in Warlpiri, angrily banging the newspaper articles on the table, also taking aim at journalists who had 'doubted the authenticity' of her statement and implied pressure from outsiders:

Nobody told me what to do. These are my own words, what I said in Warlpiri, it is here in Warlpiri and at the bottom is translated into English. Nobody never tell me, it is all my own knowledge from my mind and from my heart. Leave us alone, don't tell us what to do.³⁹

Many in the community were angered that the petition was not reported in the corporate press. Francis Jupurrula Kelly from Warlpiri Media said he had suspected unfair play when Macklin ejected cameras from the meeting where

³⁶ Russell Skelton, 'Intervention is working: Warlpiri women tell Macklin', *The Age* (28 October 2008).

³⁷ See also Natasha Robinson, 'Locals buoyant as NT outback gets an inground pool', *The Australian* (28 October 2008).

³⁸ Bob Gosford, 'Peggy Napaljarri Brown's Fury' on *Crikey Blogs: The Northern Myth* (29 October 2008) <<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/northern/2008/10/29/peggy-napaljarri-browns-fury/>>.

³⁹ Peggy Brown and Francis Kelly, *Yapa-kurlangu vodcasts*(October 2008), <http://www.pawmedia.com.au/vodcast/?page_id=98>.

the petition was delivered:

I just want to ask [Minister] Macklin, why did [s]he throw those media, especially Warlpiri Media, out ... We had a bad feeling that she don't want to tell the truth, she just want to play games with us. That is why I think Macklin didn't want to be caught on local film on (Warlpiri) Media side.⁴⁰

Anita Thomasson from IRAG was in Yuendumu during Macklin's visit. Using IRAG's media contact lists, she had helped send out the press statements coming from Yuendumu. Thomasson said that racist assumptions skewed media focus on the day. Journalists had been willing to report community sentiment when it matched Macklin's stereotypes of abusive men, pitted against women needing strong controls for their own protection. But they were dismissive of political statements organised by the Warlpiri. Thomasson said:

I spoke to journalists doubting to the credibility of the petition, suggesting that people were unaware of what they were signing. This presents Indigenous people as ignorant or naïve, signing anything they are given. There was a refusal on the day to engage with women who had indicated to the press they were available to speak about support for the anti-intervention statement.

Following the whirlwind tour by Macklin and her media entourage, Warlpiri leaders were dazed and angry. Macklin had staged a serious propaganda coup on their home turf. But any lingering illusions about the new Labor Government were now gone and resolve had strengthened.

Mt Nancy

The first time I spoke with Barbara Shaw was on the phone in August 2007. She had just organised a 100 strong meeting of women from 'prescribed areas' surrounding Alice Springs, who voted overwhelmingly for immediate repeal of the Northern Territory Intervention legislation. This meeting had come off the back of a strong rally in Alice Springs the previous month, which had seen women burn a copy of the legislation.

I was trying to get a copy of the statement from the meeting. She read it to me, which took a while. She was simultaneously getting a load of kids ready for dinner, growling unwanted dogs out of her yard and shouting across the camp to get gates opened for approaching cars.

Barb has been the backbone of the campaign against the Intervention and her house - no 5 Mt Nancy Town Camp, just past the big 'Prescribed Area' sign - has been its headquarters (of sorts). Barb has four children in her care and looks after countless more. In her activism she gets strong support from her family at Mt Nancy. Her brother Walter Shaw is a brilliant speaker, who has toured the

⁴⁰ Ibid.

country to speak out against the Intervention.

Geoffrey Shaw and Eileen Hoosan, Grandpa and Nanna of Mt Nancy, have decades of experience in the movement for Aboriginal rights which they have imparted to their children. They also continue to speak out. A pet hate at Mt Nancy are the constant assertions in the media that 'women like the Intervention'. When Warren Mundine told ABC radio on August 15 2008, 'I've not heard one woman complain about the intervention on the ground because they find themselves safe',⁴¹ Eileen and Barb came in swift media response, 'If Mr Mundine had any meaningful connection to our communities he would know that women have been leading the fight against this racist policy.'⁴²

Barb's fence is covered in banners painted for the numerous protests held in town:

'Stop Quarantining Our Money' - 'Re-instate the Racial Discrimination Act' - 'Strong Women, Strong Families'.

The banners have also hit the road twice – with Barb leading two large delegations to Canberra to join with thousands of people who have protested on the opening days of parliament in 2008 and 2009. The IRAG met under the shelter in her yard for most of 2008. We'd converge in cars to organise leaflet drops to town camps for upcoming protests. We would meet before sunrise to head out to remote communities for days of meetings and interviews. In late September, the yard hosted more than 200 people who came from interstate to join a protest camp demanding an end to the Intervention. We sat on the grass outside her front door and were welcomed, and told to keep fighting, by speakers in five different Aboriginal languages.

My Nancy has also been base camp for many people traveling into Alice Springs to attend the two meetings of the 'Prescribed Area People's Alliance' ('PAPA'), held on September 29 and November 17, which have involved more than 130 people from different communities.

It is the constant agitation by Barb and people brought into the campaign that has ensured the overwhelming sentiment felt in communities - deep resentment of the Intervention - has been given some expression. Despite a deliberate whitewash of this opposition, from both the government and the media, it is starting to break through into broader public consciousness.

The first meeting of PAPA was crucial for giving this process a serious boost.

⁴¹ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'NT Intervention 'blanket approach' not working: report', *ABC News*, August 15 2008 (Warren Mundine) <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-08-15/nt-intervention-blanket-approach-not-working-report/477738>>.

⁴² Barbara Shaw et al, 'Women Living Under the Intervention Condemn Warren Mundine', (Media Release 19 August 2008).

It saw representation from all major communities in Central Australia and some delegates from further North. But a key theme of the speeches at PAPA was the need to step up this campaign and dig in for a long battle to win genuine self-determination for Aboriginal people.

Extracts of speeches from the Prescribed Area People's Alliance. Held in the Pioneer shed Alice Springs, 29 September 2008.

Dianne Stokes, Kulumpurlpa outstation near Tennant Creek.

I reckon it's no good. White people want us to use our brains like them. We don't want our brains to be like them. We want our brains to be the way we want to see them. We got our own things to think about. We got our culture, we got our country to think about, we got our stuff to think about, our law, we got our own things back home to think about. We should be looking at these things, we should be backing each other up. We all the same, we all got culture, we all go law, we all the same, we all humans, and we gotta stand up for our rights.

Ross Jakamarra Williams, Tennant Creek

Since the Intervention, its created problems! More problems than what we realised. Now in the 70s, we went down to Canberra. Lotta people passed away now, and me and my brother Mr Shaw sitting over here went to Canberra, and we was marching for land rights. And now we're 2008 here, and we still having to march! But it's good, you know, it's about time we stood up. I think it's time we stopped talking too much and get up, get together, and show our faces, and show people who we are, and what we are, and be strong within ourselves.

Now I don't want to say too much because I've heard everyone say everything here today, and I think everything was positive and good. And it's just like repeating ourselves over again, hey. The time has come now to stop talking, get together and go out there and show our faces. Nothing's gonna happen unless we show ourselves, and tell people who we are, where we come from. Because we're all one! It's time for stop talking and a bit of action now, you know.

Phillip Willuka, Titjikala

This is the thing that we need to stand up on our feet and shout out to the Government, give us our right back! We wanna live our own life! It's their promises, they are the one who put the promises there, we'll give you pay out, welfare system and all that. And our ancestors ... had nothing. They were the wanderers of the land right across Australia. They knew where the rockhole and water, and surviving in the desert. They knew that!

But now with the Government being pull together over our neck, you come into my law, we gotta stand up for that ... So we gotta stand up strong and be counted! We are the government, you the older people are the government of this land! The land that we own, that land we were born on! This is our land! The Government needs to understand that! Talk, be strong, and point out to them, leave us alone! Give our self-determination back, self-governance back! Give it back to us!

Sorry about the Intervention?

Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations on 13 February 2008 contained a clear condemnation of the assimilationist ideology that had guided the policy of child removal in Australia through the twentieth century. He explored the ideology in vivid detail:

One of the most notorious examples of this approach was from the Northern Territory Protector of Natives, who stated:

'Generally by the fifth and invariably by the sixth generation, all native characteristics of the Australian Aborigine are eradicated. The problem of our half-castes' - to quote the protector - 'will quickly be eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white.'⁴³

As tears of hope and relief poured around Australia – finally the truth was being acknowledged – the Prime Minister promised, 'A future where this parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again'.⁴⁴

But the day before the apology, 2000 people had marched on Parliament house demanding an end to the Northern Territory Intervention, one of the largest Aboriginal rights protests in a decade. Simmering through the protest was a belief that the 'terrible history' outlined by Kevin Rudd was being echoed in the present through the Intervention. Walter Shaw, who had led a delegation of more than 20 people from the 'prescribed communities' to Canberra, explained this sentiment to gathered media:

We hope the Government's apology to the stolen generation will draw people's attention to the consequences of intervention... This current intervention was done on the same basis. It was done to protect children.

Mitch, a strong Arrrente-Luritja woman, told the demonstration:

Kevin Rudd has said his apology will contain an affirmation never to repeat past wrongs, but this is exactly what his government is doing rolling out Howard's intervention. He is continuing the genocidal policy of the stolen generations.

The Apology contained ambitious policy commitments. Massive investment in Aboriginal affairs would begin in an attempt to eradicate socio-economic disadvantage, to 'Close the Gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. These commitments, like the Apology itself, were greeted with enormous enthusiasm, and hope for real change. But unless these resources are redirected from discriminatory bureaucracy to employment opportunities and programs based in Aboriginal communities, the wellbeing and living conditions of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory will continue to sharply deteriorate.

⁴³ Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 13 February 2008, 167 (Prime Minister Kevin Rudd).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Through the Apology speech, Kevin Rudd gave examples of the deep personal pain caused by previous government policies of forced migration. He told the tragic story of Nana Fejo from Tennant Creek:

She and her sister were sent to a Methodist mission on Goulburn Island and then Croker Island. Her Catholic brother was sent to work at a cattle station and her cousin to a Catholic mission. Nanna Fejo's family had been broken up for a second time.

But Barbara Shaw argues the same destructive strategy is now being recycled:

The government has named only 20 communities across the entire NT to be 'service hubs'. What about the hundreds of other communities and outstations that will miss out on funding? They will be forced to move off homelands to get an education, for housing and services. It's a return to the mission days where people were herded into towns so the government could assimilate them.

The massive outpouring of public support for Kevin Rudd's apology shows the extent to which people across Australia hold a deep opposition to the idea of coercive government action based on concepts of racial superiority. Halting the new wave of social trauma being created by the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments will require strong mobilisation of the public sentiment expressed through the apology.

Improvements in the shocking social conditions facing Aboriginal Australia will never be made by a government beating people into submission 'for their own good'. The voices buried by a racist political system must be pushed into view. Aboriginal people must be able to control their own destiny. We can't wait another thirty years to hear a politician say, 'sorry about the Intervention'.

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