

The Road to Better Days - Searching for Equality in Australia

Jeff McMullen

The road to equality is the way ahead and the way home for Aboriginal people. Equality, living on their Ancestral Lands, on their terms, would mean justice. This is the journey the Australian nation must make.

If we remember that we are gathered here tonight in an Aboriginal land, on Darug country, where more generations than we will ever know persisted against extraordinary odds, then we will surely appreciate the Ancestors and the progress made by so many who came before us.

As we raise our voices and support the struggle for equality those longer timelines of history remind us that we need humility, patience and a reasonable sense of balance. These are virtues I have come to greatly appreciate in so many Aboriginal people I respect.

After travelling this world for more than fifty years and seeing the best and worst of humanity, I have no doubt that the road to better days will be a long road. The search for equality may always be a great struggle. But it is the right struggle and once you face up to this truth in your mind you will see that even in the most challenging times there are opportunities for progress.

Today is one of those challenging times in Australian history. More than 40,000 Aboriginal people in the remote areas of the Northern Territory have been presented with a radical new Government plan for life on their ancient Ancestral Lands.

Still reeling from the Shock and Awe of almost two full years of the Federal government's Intervention into their lands, Aboriginal people have been told today of the NT Government plans to develop twenty communities as 'Territory Growth Towns'.

According to the NT Chief Minister, Paul Henderson, this is the "most dramatic new policy for Aboriginal people since 1978".

A newly appointed Coordinator General, Bob Beadman chooses the word "radical" to describe the policy. Yes, it is certainly that. Remember when the Northern territory Intervention began in 2007 how Patrick Dodson warned that this was the big push for a "radical agenda" towards Indigenous people?

What is shifting before our eyes is the right of Aboriginal people to control their destiny. Their children, families, communities and lands are increasingly under the control of government administrators. This does not perturb the architects of assimilation. Frustrated by the lack of progress in remote communities this group of academics and government advisers has never accepted that generational disadvantage and Government denial of reasonable funding for Aboriginal people is

the key explanation for the continuing poverty of so many people in a rich country. The architects of assimilation blame the victim and decide that it is time, once more, for Government appointed managers to control Aboriginal community life.

It was in the wake of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) in 1976 that thousands of Aboriginal people returned to their traditional lands across about half of the Northern Territory. The new NT policy affects more than 500 smaller homelands communities and the 73 larger remote communities targeted by the NT Intervention.

In the years ahead the Federal and NT Governments will coordinate their combined major investment on housing, health, education and economic development in just twenty of the communities.

The NT Government says it will maintain current funding of \$36 million a year to the homelands, but there will be no additional funding, no new homelands. People who want better services must travel to and from the twenty larger 'Territory Growth Towns'.

This comes as the Federal Government is telling the remote communities that if they want new funding for urgently needed housing they must sign 40 year leases. The Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin says nine NT communities have signed leases to this date but some Traditional Owners, Lands Councils and Aboriginal Land Trusts have been shaken by the sweeping nature of this policy and the implication that they will not be fully in control of the communities. It remains to be seen whether after legal advice all of the designated Territory Growth Towns sign the 40 year leases. In Arnhem Land some Traditional Owners have already condemned the plan as an attempt to draw in Aboriginal people to these twenty larger towns.

Clearly the future of the smaller homelands communities with less than 100 people will be massively affected if they do not get the additional support they have been seeking to improve education, housing and the quality of water supplies.

The NT Government logic is that Aboriginal people in the homelands and medium sized remote communities will look to these twenty 'Territory Growth Towns' to access various services. There is a suggestion of this in the NT Government's announcement promising to improve transport to get people in smaller communities to the "schools, jobs, clinics and other services in the larger towns".

Whether this truly benefits Aboriginal people, whether it is what they want on their land and whether these changes bring them any closer or further away from equality, is what we are here to consider tonight.

Put yourself in the shoes of 40 000 Aboriginal people who have been presented with this radical new Government plan.

It was the well being of bare-footed Aboriginal kids in these remote communities that was the pretext for the Australian Government sending in the Army and Federal Police to take over more than 500 homelands and 73 larger communities across about 600,000 square kilometres of Aboriginal country.

In 2007, the Howard Government claimed that the greatest threat to these children was “paedophile rings”.

After almost two years living under the stress of the state of emergency, after numerous police investigations and inspections of more than 13,000 Aboriginal children, there is no evidence of a single paedophile ring.

The vicious Big Lie that heralded the Intervention has faded from the headlines but it should not be forgotten.

I work closely with remote communities trying to improve health and education. My grave concern is that Australia is refusing to give all of our children an equal opportunity.

As the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin says in her discussion paper on the Intervention, “The truth is that human rights of Aboriginal peoples in the Northern Territory have been compromised for many years. These include the right to healthy and affordable food; to a quality education and health care; to adequate housing; to the full protection of the law; and to live free from violence and abuse.”

So what about the children? How are they affected by the Intervention and the NT Government’s vision of a future with “real towns, real jobs and real opportunities” in 20 of the larger remote communities newly designated as ‘Territory Growth Towns’?

The ‘new deal’, as Alison Anderson, NT Minister for Indigenous Policy puts it, is about opening up Aboriginal communities, “not as black towns or white towns...but as proper towns.” Ms Anderson is an Indigenous MP whose own homeland of Utopia was one of those first reclaimed in the return to country movement. Like Warren Mundine and Professor Marcia Langton, this NT Minister supports the push to create ‘proper towns’.

Most people would like to see Aboriginal remote communities improved with better housing, health, education, access to fresh food, recreational facilities, training, fully paid work and the businesses Aboriginal people decide they need. But is this likely to happen by opening up remote communities? Let’s look at other ‘proper towns’ for any evidence that this might offer real benefit for Aboriginal people.

Most of Australia’s 460,000 Indigenous people live in urban areas or country towns. Only a third of these own their homes or a mortgage compared with about three quarters of other Australians.

Look at the glaring disadvantage faced by Indigenous people right here in Western Sydney. Here we have more than 45,000 Indigenous people, the largest single enclave in the country. They are living in communities like Campbelltown, Blacktown and Mt Druitt, alongside black and white people, with business opportunities and so called mainstream services, just like the NT Government vision of ‘Territory Growth Towns’. But the inequity right here in the suburbs of Sydney shows us how our nation still fails. You know the schools, the suburbs, the very streets with the greatest disadvantage. You also know where the two major hospitals are constantly

overwhelmed and where urban Aboriginal families still do not access GP's or other so called mainstream medical services.

When about 70% of our health and well being is shaped by our socio-economic status, our environment, the home we live in, our education, employment and ability to access primary health care, it should be perfectly clear why so many Aboriginal people around this nation are about five times sicker than the rest of us.

Health, education, employment and adequate housing are fundamental human rights that we have failed to deliver to Aboriginal people around this nation.

The idea that herding more people into larger towns, town camps or into disadvantaged suburbs is going to somehow improve their health and well-being is simply not born out by the evidence. Sometimes the very opposite is true.

On the fringes of mining towns and most country towns Aboriginal people still live apart and their kids are not sharing in this country's prosperity.

The architects of assimilation choose to ignore the evidence that the road to the city or town is not the road to equality for most Aboriginal children.

Under the NT plan, of course, children in the outer communities will have no choice but to hit the road.

Hundreds of smaller communities are to get an upgraded bus system for travel over considerable distances to the Territory Growth Towns.

It is also suggested that smaller schools will close and that the improvements will be made to large schools, some with boarding facilities.

If Aboriginal parents chose boarding schools or dormitory schools that may operate Monday to Friday before the children go home for the weekend, then it is an option. But there is a huge variety of opinion among Aboriginal parents. Some would agree to dormitory schools, some would not. Some are willing to combine some secondary classes between schools in reasonable bussing distance but others oppose it. Many Aboriginal parents would like an Aboriginal school with more emphasis on Culture and others want just the basics of learning from government schools. In other words, like parents and communities around Australia, Aboriginal parents would like a choice.

It has been a long and hard battle to have small schools built and staffed under great difficulty in many remote communities. The evidence indicates that it would be unwise to abandon the smaller schools, now attended by about 4000 children.

The Northern Territory's own education assessments show that children in the smaller remote schools average 73% attendance compared with just 59% in the larger community education centres. Reading, writing and numeracy levels are at their very worst in the larger communities.

The remote community principals know that through a combination of additional experienced teachers and the immense possibilities of on-line learning, smaller schools promise a superior education for these children in the security of their own communities. Have we forgotten the argument for quality teaching and smaller classes in every Australian community?

If we can use satellite dishes and distance education to give children on sixty NT cattle stations a first rate education, we can surely improve on-line education and teaching in communities that have 450 or more people.

There is equally compelling evidence that the health of Aboriginal children (and adults) in the larger communities is dramatically worse than in the smaller homeland settlements.

The Aboriginal Medical Services have reported this for many years. Dr Paul Burgess, of the Menzies School of Health, confirms that people who continue to live and work on their traditional homelands enjoy better diet, more exercise, lower diabetes, renal disease and heart disease.

The chronic illnesses that are decimating a second generation of Indigenous people are significantly higher in the larger communities. Alcohol abuse, self-harm and family violence are also higher.

Overwhelmingly the medical evidence shows that the largest Aboriginal communities pose more threat to the well being of children.

So before abandoning the smaller schools and more liveable remote communities, let us be honest about why this is happening.

Our nation pays lip service to the Indigenous right to practice Culture and to live on these traditional lands. Just this year the Australian Government finally adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples clearly committing us to recognize the natural justice of allowing Aboriginal people to be in control of their own destiny on their Ancestral Lands. But as a consequence of the NT Intervention it is likely that history will judge our generation as again guilty of political treachery.

Let's be honest Australia! Equality here is still a hope, not a reality. We have moved closer to this goal than in many other countries, but the truth is that today Indigenous Australians still face massive inequality that calls into question our cosy sense of comfort about our nation, about the values we espouse and even who we claim to be. How can we be that egalitarian 'land of the fair go' while Indigenous people still endure discrimination and deep disadvantage?

Look at our shared history over more than 200 years. At times we've fought. At times we've walked hand in hand. At times we've loved, married and raised children together. But there is a persistent, undeniable pattern, a treachery in this relationship.

Our society claims to be fair, tolerant and multi-cultural but we stole, not only Aboriginal land, but a generation of Aboriginal children. Somewhere between ten and thirty percent of all Aboriginal children, perhaps 100,000 of them, were removed from their parents in that racist and totally misguided effort to raise them 'white' and end their attachment to their Culture and their traditional lands. When the NT Government says today that more than 500 homeland communities are not a priority for additional funding we are re-visiting a persistent ignorance of the deep animist attachment to land that is part of the Aboriginal sense of reasonable balance.

The old Culture War warriors say I am Romanticising the past. No, I am asking you to understand the longer timelines of Australian history.

Yes, we ended long ago that extraordinary, callous injustice of treating the first Australians as flora and fauna. But remember too that then we denied them the full rights of citizenship.

We promised Civil Rights, but we persisted with racism.

We passed the Aboriginal Land Rights Act of 1976, the just recognition at last of the Aboriginal ownership of Land and the right to Cultural autonomy. The Mabo and Wik judgements followed.

But we soon returned to the pattern of treachery as we unpicked these laws, defied the High Court judgements on what is fair and just, and almost erased the very meaning of Aboriginal Land Rights.

When a judgement is made that benefits Indigenous people, our state or federal governments usually appeal against it. We resist compensation all the way to the bank that has filled its coffers with the mineral wealth and other bounty of Aboriginal Land.

Yes, we have signed numerous international covenants on anti-discrimination, human rights, Indigenous rights and especially the rights of the child. We then shatter all of those rights with the Northern Territory Intervention.

What kind of fool would use Army troops, federal police and a new platoon of bureaucrats to try to take control of Aboriginal communities without their consent?

The Federal Intervention into the Northern Territory was launched of course by John Howard's government which had spent most of the previous decade attacking Aboriginal Land Rights and outrageously neglecting the well being of hundreds of thousands of Aboriginal people.

The Intervention is clearly part of the wider pattern of Australian political treachery in which white politicians promise, like that Prime Minister did, to "meet Aboriginal people half-way" but they then betray them and some of their most respected Aboriginal leaders by deceitfully taking control of their lands, their communities and even their capability and responsibility of being parents in control of their families.

By claiming to “save the children” from sexual abuse the Intervention began with the tactic of political Shock and Awe. As that American political strategist, Karl Rove, boasted his kind can create a new so called “political reality” for us all even before the media and the public have really understood where we were in the last one.

The Intervention has ground on for almost two years, from the so-called “Emergency Phase” towards “Stabilization”, whatever that means. All this military jargon sadly betrays the underlying intentions of the architects of assimilation. The Intervention has always been principally about controlling Aboriginal people and their Land. Yet after all the Shock and Awe we were so easily distracted. Slowly our nation forgot the viciousness of that extraordinary opening Big Lie that again singled out Aboriginal people for a terrible national shaming. They were branded with a red-hot poker as paedophiles, rapists, wife abusers and hopeless alcoholics.

The Intervention’s propaganda assault on Aboriginal people in remote communities effectively confused our perspective about the widespread neglect and abuse of so many children in mainstream Australia, about the binge drinking in mainstream society and the extraordinary level of vile behaviour and violence towards women by Australian men in sport and in many other parts of our society.

From the start the Intervention was a shocking violation of Aboriginal parental rights when people were told that inspections of children in the search for sexual abuse would be mandatory. On the first day of the Intervention I pointed out that this would be unlawful. I said my wife and I would not stand for this if a mandatory sexual inspection were ordered for our son or daughter, and we would not tolerate seeing it applied to any other child, without parental consent. This heartless and unlawful abuse by Australian politicians of the dignity of Aboriginal parents has been forgotten, just swept away as if it didn’t happen.

The Howard Government’s propaganda machine merely reworked the message. The ‘mandatory sexual inspections’ were quickly re-badged as ‘health checks for Aboriginal children’. Even doctors who volunteered to join this tragic farce should have wondered why they were being paid to duplicate health checks that Aboriginal Medical Services already carried out on Aboriginal children.

The Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation in the Katherine region has pointed out how the Intervention has wasted funds that are needed for the follow up treatment for sick children. The Australian Indigenous Doctors Association and rural doctors alliance have also concluded that the Intervention has caused significant long-term damage to the well being of people in the occupied communities.

It is certainly hard for Australians living in the cities to gauge this real distress. Most of the Australian media, even the ABC, were duped on some of their most prestigious programs, like NIGHTLINE, into reporting dubious claims about the Intervention which can only be described as crude propaganda.

Where was the vigorous investigative journalism or even the professional scepticism about a government that had always refused to provide equality in primary health care

and had disregarded the pleas from medical services, parents and teachers for more support for their programs aimed at nurturing Aboriginal children? There has been so little reliable, thoughtful, on-the-ground reporting and so most people are left with the impact of that Big Lie.

What has happened since is that our nation has simply moved on to a new political reality.

Let us end this state of national amnesia.

We should commend the Government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd for its commitment to overcome Indigenous disadvantage. But we must look honestly at the Intervention's flagrant abuse of human rights and seek change for the better.

Expert level reports with Aboriginal input including 'The Little Children are Sacred Report', Patrick Dodson's report entitled, 'Our home, Our Homeland', and the Rudd Government's first year review of the NT Intervention, have not altered the unjust and discriminatory rationale of the Government approach to Indigenous people.

Consultation must not become a game of talking out of different sides of your mouth. Listen to what Aboriginal people are saying.

Let us remember that when 35 Traditional Owners from Arnhem Land met Prime Minister Rudd for their first direct talks with someone in power the majority were emphatic that they had not been consulted about the goals of the Intervention. There was a sense that history was tragically repeating itself and no one was listening to them. What they wanted most was genuine discussion between the government and a truly representative variety of Indigenous community leaders who have different prescriptions in different places. The Traditional Owners also asked for an end to the Intervention's wasteful spending on the new, white management bureaucracy and an end to the blatantly discriminatory and unfair quarantining of welfare money.

The new federal budget shows the appalling waste of money in applying a universal quarantine in these prescribed communities to fifty percent of the welfare payments. It is costing \$108 million, that is many thousands of dollars per person, to pay for bureaucrats to manage the income stream of about 15,000 Aboriginal people. These people live on an average income of around \$13,000 in many cases and we are wasting thousands on this bureaucratic, social engineering experiment that has no record of success anywhere in the world.

I once investigated Canada's so-called "tough love" experiment in the province of ALBERTA. When I consulted the Canadians again last week they confirmed my assessment that their welfare experiment had failed. A similar attempt at "tough love" failed also in the United States. Yet somehow the architects of assimilation cling to this belief that you can take away genuine incentive and punish people, regardless of how they have behaved. This is discrimination.

The Intervention rounded up everyone in these communities and branded them all as failures and problems. War veterans, teacher aides, hard-working men and women

have been shamefully discriminated against. And this, of course, is why the Intervention legislation excised the impact of the Racial Discrimination Act.

The Howard Government could never offer a real excuse for excising the Racial Discrimination Act and nor can the Rudd Government.

The Rudd Government's Review of the first year of the Intervention, led by Peter Yu and Marcia Ella-Duncan, strongly recommended that Australia immediately re-instate the full provisions of our Anti-Discrimination Act in the on-going programs in the Northern Territory. This was not done. The Australian Government instead suspended the Racial Discrimination Act in regard to the Intervention for another twelve months, promising to make a change around October, in the next Spring session of Parliament.

You decide for yourself. Is this political treachery? Are they saying it IS wrong, but let's live with discrimination for more than two years and then we will change it? Can a law against discrimination in Australia be so easily flouted by two Prime Ministers and two Governments?

This is a clear point of principle where all Australians must raise their voices. For the common good of our nation we cannot selectively tolerate Discrimination.

The Intervention remains unfair and discriminatory.

The truth is some of these communities are quite different and trying to clamp one big, clumsy and confusing policy onto 73 major communities and hundreds of homelands was never going to bring improvement across the map. Few people understood what was being inflicted on them. But as the Intervention Review concluded there has been an overwhelming sense of injustice among Aboriginal people that they are still being blamed for all the problems in their communities arising out of two centuries of inequity. We are truly a nation of hypocrites if we claim the Intervention was ever intended to address these two centuries of inequity.

You will recall that the Howard Government tried to grab control of the community of Mutitjulu near Uluru. When a Federal Court rejected that power play the Government upped the ante. The Intervention introduced 5 year leases on townships and dangled 99 year leases as the long term, master-plan.

Aboriginal people still ask me, "if they want to help us build better communities why do we have to trade off our land?"

What treacherous games we play. If Traditional Owners want to see any easing of an estimated two billion dollar backlog in desperately needed housing then, with the funding gun to their head, they will be forced to sign a generational lease. Would any good lawyer or legal aide service truly advise Aboriginal community leaders to sign such an open ended deal? Why is this the only way Australia can respect its obligation to see that all of our citizens have adequate shelter? The answer is that Government says it is the only way. The architects of the new assimilation do not want Traditional Owners, Land Councils or Aboriginal Trusts administering these lands. The Government knows what is best for Aboriginal people.

The new NT Coordinator General, Bob Beadman was heard to say on radio this week that government would do a better job of managing public housing and that 40 year leases, with an option for another 40 years, would give businesses the security to operate in the communities.

There is clearly little trust in or respect for Aboriginal organizations. Whatever way you look at it, if Aboriginal land is leased to the Government this land is not under true control for that time by its Aboriginal owners.

Australians have been promised that later this year Indigenous people will have a new national representative body. There can be no more urgent issue that the question of Aboriginal leases and how the policies we are now watching rolled out will change the lives of Aboriginal people for generations to come.

The Apology delivered to Aboriginal people by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his strong commitment to the Close the Gaps strategy to end Indigenous inequity have been rightly hailed as very important milestones on the long road to equality. We have all been heartened by these commitments. But when there is so much uncertainty and so far to go on that road to equality we all should insist that our nation does not drift back to that old pattern of promises that become hollow.

The Rudd Government has committed a major increase in funding to Indigenous primary health care, significantly addressing some of the underlying causes of the gap in life expectancy. This is the largest ever expenditure to address Indigenous inequity. Yet so many Aboriginal people I work with, especially health professionals, educators and community workers, emphasize that what is needed still is more involvement by Aboriginal people in the implementation of these policies if they are to work at a community level and in every Aboriginal home. That call is supported by evidence from the Saami lands and the First Nations in the USA who have indeed seen huge improvements in Indigenous health.

There has clearly been an impressive commitment by the Rudd Government to an education revolution, to improving Indigenous literacy and numeracy, training and jobs. But let us all remember that children everywhere have the right to a quality education.

When Patrick Dodson led a community engagement group travelling last December through the Northern Territory homelands most Aboriginal people conveyed a deep sense of attachment to their land. They wanted their children to go to school in their own communities. But many also expressed the belief that adaptation through the new technologies would allow them, with help, to give their children a brighter future.

The homelands and remote communities are well aware of what can be done with the new technologies to improve services. They have eagerly taken up solar energy but many have to still make do with untreated water systems.

Children in remote areas do need people in the cities to lend a hand and open up opportunities for them to us and share the experiences that all schoolchildren benefit from.

The Australian National University's Bergman College has an excellent exchange project, so does Sydney University's Women's College. My kids are in a surf club that every year trains young people from the Jawoyn communities in the Northern Territory. All three of these projects are built on a two-way exchange. We learn from one another, get to know one another better and we move down that road together.

I see strong evidence, right here in Western Sydney, that young Aboriginal people, despite these hard economic times, are helping lead the way.

Aboriginal university graduates still in their twenties, including Jack Manning Bancroft, Paul Sinclair, Clark Webb and Jake Trindorfer, have created an extraordinary Aboriginal movement called AIME. Like the great Nelson Mandela has always advised this movement uses education as the most powerful weapon against inequity.

AIME, or the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience, is connecting hundreds of Indigenous kids in high-schools from the inner west, out to Campbelltown and across to Blacktown and Mt Druitt. The program lets them meet other young Aboriginal people who will tell you that education is not a 'gubba' thing, not a 'white' system of thinking, it is the universal power to transform social disadvantage and achieve equality.

These young people have as their peers, role models and new friends successful and confident young Aboriginal men and women who are studying, working and starting families. There is so much promise in the AIME movement and it is in total contrast to the image of Aboriginal dysfunction in the minds of so many Australians.

AIME has the potential to match the great American education project that was launched as I arrived in New York back in 1972. "A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste" the campaign declared. Those words have never left my own mind. They are a challenge as I watch the change.

On the campus of Sydney University, Western Sydney, at the University of Wollongong, Southern Cross at Kempsey and now at Macquarie University, we have undergraduates by the hundreds volunteering to work as AIME'S tutors and mentors with Aboriginal students who want to change the pattern. Schools from around Blacktown have just seen their Aboriginal students attend the first AIME session at Macquarie University where Ian Thorpe is studying.

Ian is of the same generation as these young Aboriginal people and he has been using his foundation, Fountain for Youth, to help build this education movement. Together we are raising funds for AIME to see it grow around the country. There is no reason this movement can't link every university or tertiary college to schools with Aboriginal students. It is another useful way for non-Indigenous Australians to learn more about Aboriginal people and this will help equip many more to be part of the literacy task force we need in so many parts of the country.

There is still another promising program for the very youngest Indigenous children. The Literacy Backpack program lets every kid take home reading for the whole family. It closes the space between the home and the school and helps create that critical, life empowering literacy. The program was created by Aboriginal people and

Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth. You can see it on the website,
www.ianthorpesfountainforyouth.com.au.

Help yourselves to our blue-print or try something similar in your community. Learn how anyone can raise a few hundred dollars to provision a child's Literacy Backpack for this important home learning.

The Literacy Backpack program is now in 20 remote communities from Bidyadanga in WA, across the Northern Territory, at Lockhart River on Cape York and hopefully soon on Palm Island in Queensland. Our approach is not to say that any community is too small, too difficult or 'not viable'. We say that even where a committed score of Aboriginal people have the conviction that a genuine community is viable right there on their land, then it is possible together to create a much brighter future for these children.

This hall is full of people who raise their voice and who lend a hand. If you use every breath, you will make a difference.

Jeff McMullen

20th May 2009.

Address to Reconciliation for Western Sydney.

Karabi Centre. Wentworthville.