

From the bush to Bankstown - communities prepare to fight 'Stronger Futures' implementation

Remote NT communities are joining with the south-western Sydney suburb of Bankstown in a pledge to challenge the implementation of 'Stronger Futures' legislation which is set to be debated in the Senate today.

'Stronger Futures' will extend draconian NT Intervention powers for a further 10 years. The laws also facilitate the national expansion of income management, pioneered under the NT Intervention, beginning with Bankstown and four other "trial sites" across Australia.

'Stronger Futures' has faced fierce opposition from Aboriginal communities, churches and peak organisations. More than 36,000 people have signed the online 'Stand for Freedom' campaign calling for withdrawal of the legislation.

In an historic statement from Arnhem Land last week, Yolŋu Elders pledged to refuse to negotiate any leases, including mining exploration leases, while the government pushed ahead with 'Stronger Futures'.

In Bankstown, the Say No to Government Income Management Campaign Coalition, with strong roots in the community sector, Aboriginal and migrant communities, is organising a major seminar on May 26 to discuss strategies for stopping the implementation of income management.

Mathew Dhulumburrk, a Gupapuyngu Elder from Ramingining, was part of the Yolŋu Makarr Dhuni, (Yolŋu Nations Assembly) which issued the statement against Stronger Futures last week:

"We do not want another decade of discrimination here at Ramingining. After five years, it feels like the water level has climbed up to our neck. Another ten years will bring it way over our heads. The government is drowning us slowly and wonders why twice as many of our young people are attempting suicide. There is no valid reason to discriminate against Yolŋu in this way."

"We put out a statement last week and we stand by that. We will not be co-operating with the government when they try and bring in Stronger Futures. We will not sign any leases over our land. We want to determine our own future and run our own communities. We need laws and support that will let us do that", concluded Mr Dhulumburrk.

Paddy Gibson from the Stop the Intervention Collective Sydney has just returned from a research trip to the NT:

"The NT Intervention was designed to deny any control or opportunity to Aboriginal people in remote communities and force a migration into town and larger settlements. Every time I visit these communities the situation has deteriorated further. People are completely disenfranchised, there is next to no employment and in places even basic amenities like sewage are collapsing."

"Scratch the surface of the government's 'Stronger Futures' budget announcements for the NT and you find even less funding for homeland services than the current levels which keep people living in third world conditions. The decision not to fund a waged employment program to replace CDEP, once 7,500 strong in the NT, is a death sentence for many communities. Meanwhile funding for bureaucracies to punish and control Aboriginal people through the income management and prison systems are spiraling out of control", concluded Mr Gibson.

Ms Randa Kattan, Executive Director of Arab Council Australia and spokesperson for the Bankstown Coalition, visited NT communities late 2011 to see firsthand the impact of income management:

"From the bush to Bankstown, people do not need income management. They need job opportunities, higher incomes and improved social services. But here in Bankstown 'Stronger Futures' means the same punitive approach that we see in the NT. Only \$2.5 million has been allocated for community based programs, while \$23 million will be spent on income management."

"People in the NT told us of the humiliation and degradation of being forced to go on income management and how this hurt their families rather than helped them. The government wants to take the community sector down a path where the relationship between client and worker is about control and punishment. But in our stand against the NT Intervention and what is planned for the Bankstown community and other areas, our campaign will continue to support and advocate for the rights of vulnerable people and families and we are encouraging other organisations to do the same ", concluded Ms Kattan.

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