

## **AN INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORKER'S RESPONSE TO JOHN HOWARD'S INTERVENTION IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**

Firstly as a Torres Strait Islander woman I would like to pay homage and respect in acknowledging all of the Aboriginal Nations of this great Land and all of those Ancestors who have walked here and left their footprints here and worked tirelessly to pave the way for us, THANK YOU.

As an Indigenous Social Worker, I am writing to express my grave concern about John's Howard's Intervention strategy in the Northern Territory. This intervention is a totalitarian, paternalistic and imperialistic one. It is the same intervention strategy that the colonisers of old utilised to subjugate, demoralise, disempower, dispossess and dislocate Indigenous Australians.

This is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and it is the anniversary of the 40<sup>th</sup> year of the 1967 Referendum that gave Indigenous Australians the 'right' to vote and the 'right' to be called 'citizens' of their own country and yet very little has changed in the way of equity of access to resources, which includes housing, welfare, employment, education, healthcare and the list goes on. Where is our right to cultural freedom, autonomy and self-determination? Where is our right to govern our own affairs? Indigenous Australians are still being crushed underfoot and disregarded as second, third and fourth class citizens.

After careful review of the 'Little Children are Sacred Report', it is clearly evident that John Howard did not read this report carefully / properly, if he did, then he has totally disregarded the contents and recommendations within the report. One of the major points highlighted in this report is about appropriate and proper CONSULTATION with the Aboriginal people in the grassroots communities. In the report, Indigenous Elders expressed their deep concerns about outsiders coming in and taking over without proper consultation and being totally disrespectful of Indigenous Knowledge and Expertise, using that "*we know better than you and we know what's good for you*" approach .

As an active member of the Brisbane Indigenous community, I am appalled to hear first hand about the blatant disrespect, disregard and breach of cultural protocols within the Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. From the complaints and reports in the wider Indigenous communities across Australia at a grassroots level, one can only draw the conclusion that there has been NO culturally appropriate consultation and engagement at a grassroots level, before Howard's military intervention in the Northern Territory.

I remember back in April – June 2004, during the time when John Howard was abolishing ATSIC, I and five other Indigenous delegates from around Australia met with John Howard in his Canberra office. When it was my turn to speak, I talked to Howard as an Indigenous Social Worker in the grassroots community in Brisbane and spoke to him about the impact that the abolition of ATSIC would have on the remote and rural communities who rely on ATSIC funding to provide services and programs to individuals and families on the ground.

I remember saying to Howard that, "if the funding from ATSIC were to cease, then many of these small organisations would be forced to close down because many rely solely on ATSIC funding. I told Howard that this lack of funding and resources for services on the ground would have a devastating impact on the lives of Indigenous people in those small remote communities right throughout Australia. John Howard's response was, "I can't comment on that, because I haven't been advised' and he looked across to his adviser. I thought, "I'm advising you now, Prime Minister".

Martin Luther King in his comment about human rights in America made the statement, "they tell us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, but how can we? when we don't even have any boots". This is exactly how it is for Indigenous people and Indigenous services right across Australia. It seems that the current Australian Government's approach is to put a band-aid on it and if that doesn't work, then send an ambulance to the bottom of the cliff to catch them as they fall.

As an Indigenous Social Work practitioner, I would like to ask John Howard, "what is your long term plan for the Aboriginal People of the Northern Territory? Have you taken into consideration the intergenerational and unresolved trauma, loss and grief suffered by Indigenous Australians, due to the devastating impact of colonisation and imperialism on all levels? All of which are the major CAUSE of the multiple and multi-faceted social issues in the Indigenous communities throughout Australia. All of this needs to be addressed in a CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE and RESPECTFUL manner and with PROPER CONSULTATION, ENGAGEMENT and INDIGENOUS PARTICIPATION.

I would also like to point out that contrary to popular belief, we **do** have many Indigenous Leaders, Elders, highly skilled, highly trained, Community educated, University educated people in the Northern Territory and throughout Australia, all of these people are out there and can be consulted. Furthermore, if John Howard was really serious about the health and well-being of Indigenous Australians, then he would not only say SORRY, he would change the draconian Constitution to allocate designated seats in the Federal and State Parliament for Indigenous people and he would most definitely CONSULT WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ON ISSUES CONCERNING THEM.

Finally, I would like to add that the matter is a HUMAN RIGHTS issue that as Indigenous Nations of this Land in a so-called democratic Australia, we have NO Indigenous Representation or voice in Parliament to speak on issues concerning us. Those who speak on our behalf do not understand us or do not want to understand us and they do not have OUR best interest at heart.

And the Struggle Continues,

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