

7 August 2007

Little children are sacred, not political footballs

Legislation introduced into Federal Parliament today will do little to protect Northern Territory Aboriginal children from abuse, according to Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR).

ANTaR National Director, Gary Highland said that none of the measures proposed by the Government were consistent with the recommendations of the *Little Children Are Sacred* report.

"The Government has not presented any evidence to support its claims that seizing Aboriginal land, removing the permit system, quarantining welfare payments or throwing Aboriginal people off CDEP will stop child abuse," Mr Highland said.

Mr Highland said that while there was no doubting Minister Brough's sincerity, his approach of riding roughshod over Indigenous communities was severely flawed.

"Releasing such lengthy and complex legislation only the day before it was to be voted on is the action of a government that has become arrogant, unaccountable and out of touch," Mr Highland said.

"Minister Brough's problem isn't that he doesn't care, it's that he doesn't listen. Unless he starts working in partnership with Aboriginal people, he will go down in history as another Minister who sought to impose his will on Aboriginal people with disastrous consequences."

Mr Highland said that by supporting the legislation, the Opposition had abandoned the sound Indigenous Affairs policy approach it had adopted over the past two years.

"Beginning with Chris Evans and continuing under his successor, Jenny Macklin, the ALP has said it wanted to replace old doctrines with a focus on what works as the basis for policy."

"However, the fear of being 'wedged' has led it to suspend this approach and support extreme ideologically driven legislation that lacks any evidence base," Mr Highland said.

Mr Highland said the ALP should replace 'me tooism' with the leadership it had previously shown in Indigenous Affairs by releasing its own comprehensive alternative plan for ending child abuse. This should draw on the Emergency Response and Development Plan developed by the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory as well as the expertise of Aboriginal people like Prof Judy Atkinson who are successfully tackling this problem around Australia.

"Little children are sacred. They shouldn't be sacrificed because an alternative government ahead in the polls is fearful of being wedged," Mr Highland said.

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Background

The Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory is made up of more than 60 local and regional Aboriginal organisations including medical, children's and legal services, land councils and other service providers.

The Combined Organisations' Emergency Response and Development Plan is a comprehensive approach that gives priority to protection from immediate physical or emotional harm but also addresses underlying issues including housing, health care and education.

Unlike the current Government approach the Combined Aboriginal Organisations' plan builds on the recommendations of the *Little Children are Sacred Report* and programs that are already working in Aboriginal communities. It adopts a partnership approach between Government and Aboriginal people and would strengthen the governance and capacity of Aboriginal communities.

It envisages the creation of a national lead agency to implement the plan and an independent monitoring and evaluation body to report on progress.

There are 68 actions in the plan ranging from developing an emergency response in conjunction with Aboriginal community representatives, boosting child protection services, proper training of a permanent police presence in communities, tackling alcohol take away sales and buyback of existing hotel licenses and improved schooling strategies to trauma counseling for victims of abuse.

A full copy of the Combined Organisations' Emergency Response and Development Plan as well as ANTaR's concerns about the new legislation are available at: www.antar.org.au