

**Talk at Arena on occasion of launch of *Arena Magazine 118* 'Intervention',
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I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of Melbourne; I would also like to acknowledge the fantastic work that the social movement “concerned Australians” does; and the publishing work of the Arena project and its particular attention to issues of injustice and racism: I single out for praise Alison Caddick who commissioned *Coercive Reconciliation* in June 2007 and is the lead editor of *Arena Magazine*.

Today was to be ‘liberation’ day when prescribed communities in the Northern Territory were to be exited. Instead it is a day of shame, when Indigenous Australians in the NT have to endure, yet again, another anniversary of the NTNER intervention as demeaned peoples—marginalized, disempowered, encapsulated in the Australian settler colonial state. I am proud to be sharing this forum with Barb Shaw, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, Les Malezar and Gary Foley, Indigenous people actively resisting attempts by the hegemonic Australian state to demolish their ways of being, seeking to convert them, via a draconian project of moral restructuring, into subservient normalized citizens.

What are the political masters and their compliant bureaucratic elites imagining with this top down project to normalize and close gaps—the imposition of unconscionable pain for what anticipated gain? Like long-discredited Washington consensus social engineers, Canberra proposes abstract utopian futures for remote living Aboriginal people: 95% employment in imagined real jobs; healthy living in public housing to be privatized and individualized, kids happily ensconced in quality schools with 100% attendance learning the formula for success in late modernity in the queen’s English; and adults enjoying unimpeded access to alcohol, pornography and gambling. This is all just Canberra dreaming—not Aboriginal Dreaming, Tjukurrpa, Djang, Mardayin or Rom, and it is intentionally destructive of Aboriginal societies with only one end game—assimilation!

Next week the National Partnership Agreement to Close the Gap in the NT, the Rudd and Gillard governments’ technician re-badging of the Intervention, ends. Yesterday with now standard provocative media spin we get the latest Monitoring

report on 'Closing the Gap in the NT' that tells us absolutely nothing about closing any gaps as it lacks any information about those outside so called 'prescribed areas'.

Careful reading of this report like countless others since 2007, focused on statistics rather than on the ground reality, still cannot conceal debacle after debacle, failure after failure, although the media spin tells us nothing of this:

- unemployment and welfare dependency remain extraordinarily high, 80% of adults are on some form of income support
- of these, 60% are on compulsory income quarantining with no evidence that this is doing anything besides demeaning
- school attendance is down to less than 60% despite punitive School Enrolment and Attendance Measures
- The housing national partnership program aims to house 10 per house, 4 x the national average, with new houses only to be delivered to 15 large communities out of over 600
- child hospitalisation is still running at a rate of 258 per 1000
- and suicide and self harm rates are five times higher than in 2007 increasing from 57 to 261, although we are informed that this may reflect better reporting because of better policing: if applied to Melbourne this would constitute 26,000 incidents per year!

The Australian state has done some things well: its panoptic technologies are probably unrivalled in the world:

- the expenditures of the income quarantined are electronically monitored
- school attendance is closely watched and is increasingly linked to welfare payments
- these payments are subject to 'activity testing' and 'no show no pay' rules, with rates of poverty-enhancing non-payment escalating and proudly interpreted as disciplining the unworthy and
- residents of public housing are carefully listed by housing authorities—and they include land owners who pay rent for houses, but receive no rent for public housing estates, on their traditional lands!

Such deployment of surveillance, to discipline as an apparatus of power, does not come cheap and has seen extraordinary waste:

- over \$500 million for the institution of the BasicsCard for income management
- up to \$500 million to Territory Housing to support property and tenancy management reform
- nearly \$200 million for the institution of the government business manager, the new 'superintendent'

There is no political accountability for such waste; only the Australian Greens ask questions, the Coalition opposition is pathetically acquiescent, just like the Rudd Opposition was when this farce began.

And it is set to continue for another 10 years with a set of measures called Stronger Futures in the NT—stronger, one suspects, for layers of bureaucracy and rent seeking businesses and contractors, with no evidence that any of this is working! Report after report from the ANAO, the Commonwealth Ombudsman, even government departments and their consultants are politely scathing. The Department of Education's in-house evaluation comparing so called 'SEAM' and 'non-SEAM' children [such terminology is deployed, I kid you not] was so bad that just this week the Queensland government has pulled the pin—education minister the Hon John-Paul Langbroek bluntly declaring 'SEAM [the school enrolment and attendance through withholding welfare measure] did not work'—this is a punitive measure about to be expanded and extended next door in the NT for 10 years! And also this week we hear, from News Limited no less, moral champions of the Intervention, that despite all the Commonwealth pump priming 'super shires in the NT [that replaced Aboriginal community government] are on the road to nowhere' with almost all operating with Budget deficits!

In the opening editorial to the special Intervention issue we launch tonight, Melinda Hinkson and I ask is the future 'Hope less'? Of course not! There is resistance smoke and it is starting to billow and where there is resistance smoke there will be fire! I see some hope, I saw it in Canberra earlier this week, in an emerging alliance between the non-indigenous precariat and Indigenous people uniting to challenge the IM institution, unique to Australia—an alliance that has been fuelled as a surprising unintended outcome of the government's

desperation to appear non-racist internationally. I see it in the heroic work of the Commonwealth Ombudsman's Office whose independent complaint and oversight role in relation to the Intervention is about to be defunded. I see it in the action of the Queensland conservative government—enough waste is enough.

And I see it in the precariousness of late capitalism, Indigenous difference has to be in the mix as we all face uncertain futures. Enough of this multi-layered debacle—the Intervention and the rebadged Closing the Gaps in the NT have been shameful failures, built on top down brutalizing paternalism: **it is time to re-empower community!** Thank you!