

books **The Intervention**

review by Shelley Bielefeld

***The Intervention: An Anthology*, edited by Rosie Scott and Anita Heiss (Concerned Australians, 2015)**

Written in an engaging style, *The Intervention: An Anthology* is a captivating compilation of interdisciplinary critique of the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (the ‘Intervention’), and its extension for a further decade through the Stronger Futures framework. I thoroughly recommend the book to anyone interested in Indigenous social-justice issues. The importance of its key themes and its diverse body of contributors make it illuminating reading for those interested in the abuse of power inherent in Australia’s ongoing colonial project. It will also be of use to those working within fields of law, history, political science, cultural studies and critical race theory.

The book commences with an account of the bipartisan support for ongoing interventionist governance of Australia’s First Peoples as ‘the Intervention has morphed into Stronger Futures’. As Rosie Scott makes clear, for Indigenous Australians living in the Northern Territory, this means ‘the situation remains the same with only a few cosmetic touches’. The contributors point out that such bipartisanship has meant Indigenous peoples have been let down by both major political parties who have collaborated in the removal of rights for First Peoples. As part of this process, the dominant discourse has circulated benevolent language about concern for children amid horrific stereotyping of Aboriginal men as paedophiles preying upon the vulnerable. This was a crucial rationalisation for the suspension of the *Racial Discrimination Act* 1975 (Cth), which removed protection for domestic rights from racially discriminatory Intervention laws for Indigenous peoples living in the Northern Territory. The government claimed that removal of rights protection was necessary to make practical progress in targeted communities. However, as Pat Anderson, co-author of the *Little Children Are Sacred* report, states, ‘an approach to addressing Aboriginal disadvantage that is based on respect for our established rights is necessary because in the long term it is the only one that, practically speaking, will work’.

Significantly, *The Intervention* contains the voices of several Northern Territory elders who speak out against

the Intervention and Stronger Futures, advocating policies that foster self-determination, sovereignty and autonomy, as opposed to ‘top-down’ governance. The book indicates that the majority of First Peoples in the Northern Territory are opposed to the Intervention. This is reflected in various chapters by eloquent elders such as Rosalie Kunoth-Monks and Djiniyini Gondarra. Such voices provide a compelling counter-narrative to the dominant government discourse about the Intervention, which will interest those who work within a framework of critical discourse analysis. Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, for example, refers to the ‘tremendous trauma’ inflicted upon First Peoples through the Intervention and the ‘very deep sense of insecurity’ fostered by this style of governance, which forces Indigenous people to experience a ‘lack of control over their futures’.

In the context of the Intervention, such deprivation of control has manifested across several policy areas. Lack of Indigenous community control over day-to-day decisions can be seen in the government’s compulsory five-year leases of Indigenous lands from 2007 to 2012, and the stigmatising signage placed at the entrance to Aboriginal communities imposing alcohol and pornography bans. Community control is also undermined by legislation preventing judges from considering First Peoples’ customary law in sentencing processes for criminal matters. Lack of individual control over day-to-day decisions is evident in the ongoing imposition of compulsory income management on thousands of Indigenous welfare recipients, many of whom have found that the scheme greatly increases their burdens in terms of caring for their families.

A vivid illustration of such hardship is seen in the contribution by Yingiya Guyula from remote Arnhem Land. Guyula recounted in 2011 that the nearest government-approved store to the Mapuru homeland that accepted income-managed funds could only be reached via a \$560 return flight. Unsurprisingly, this created difficulties for those surviving on meagre welfare incomes. Recent evaluations of income management reveal that many problems persist. Nevertheless, both major political parties continue to be ideologically committed to income management, with its intrusive control over common consumer purchases. For numerous Indigenous welfare recipients this has been combined with work-for-the-dole requirements, resulting in coerced labour as a precondition for accessing income-managed funds through the BasicsCard. This is chillingly reminiscent of Indigenous peoples being forced to work for rations throughout Australia’s earlier colonial era.

The Intervention refers to the hollow hope that emerged from the apology to the Stolen Generations, where the remorse expressed over inappropriate interventionist laws and policies has been undermined by continuing like governance through the Intervention and Stronger Futures. The book also contains a healthy dose of scepticism regarding the current debate over constitutional recognition of Australia’s First Peoples. Some contributors express concern that the government will be keen to propose symbolic rather than substantive changes—a far cry from

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recognition of sovereignty or self-determination for Indigenous peoples. Yet, as the Intervention demonstrates so powerfully, more substantive constitutional change would be required to protect First Peoples from coercive and paternalistic governance. Several Northern Territory elders and community representatives remain convinced that a treaty is a far more appropriate and necessary mechanism for securing the rights of First Peoples.

This is a book that places the Intervention and Stronger Futures under much-needed scrutiny. Many of its contributors also offer suggestions for alternative Indigenous policy directions that warrant further attention by policymakers. For example, Larissa Behrendt maintains that Indigenous policy needs to be grounded in 'a collaborative approach that seeks to include Aboriginal people in the outcomes'. She states that the unilaterally designed and imposed Intervention adopted 'approaches that went against what the research and the experts on the ground said worked'. Her contribution makes clear that increasing bureaucratic controls over Indigenous communities does not equate to redressing 'cyclical poverty' with its associated problems. A different policy approach is required, one that is grounded in genuinely respectful treatment of Australia's First Peoples. Pointedly, Bruce Pascoe contends that 'Aboriginal people need to be central to the design and delivery of remedial systems so that fly in fly out non-Aboriginal workers do not absorb all the money set aside for the solution to a problem'. Significantly, elders highlight that there needs to be a policy approach that addresses issues 'on a case-by-case basis and preferably with assistance through the appropriate community channels' rather than 'negotiating...with the chosen few'. Culturally appropriate policy design and implementation are crucial.

While there are other excellent earlier books on the Intervention, such as *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia* in 2007 and *Culture Crisis: Anthropology and Politics in Aboriginal Australia* in 2010, *The Intervention: An Anthology* includes analysis of more recent policy developments and several current reports generated by government and other bodies. The book makes an important contribution to the existing literature on the Intervention and collects several striking voices on Indigenous policy in one highly accessible resource. It captures a vital moment in Australia's history of race relations, one that compels the reader to consider the distance between rhetoric and reality in the government's Intervention narrative. **a**

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