



ACSJC

AUSTRALIAN ♦ CATHOLIC ♦ SOCIAL ♦ JUSTICE ♦ COUNCIL

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The recent National Reconciliation Week ran under the theme 'Let's Talk Recognition'. It was a week when all Australians were invited to pause and think of the contribution that Indigenous people have made to our society, and the ways in which we can reach out to each other, recognising our strengths and achievements and acknowledging the areas where there is still a great deal of work to do.

If we sit down and 'talk recognition', we have to ask ourselves exactly how much recognition is to be found in the 'Stronger Futures' legislation that is before the Senate at the moment. Many Indigenous people and their advocates are deeply concerned about these Bills, which would continue many of the policies put in place by the 'Intervention' in 2007 and later – in particular, policies of compulsory income management, prescriptive welfare procedures and attempts to link welfare payments to children's school attendance.

Earlier this year, the Elders of Ramingining, in NE Arnhem Land, told the Senate Committee that was considering the Stronger Futures legislation:

... we feel that Balanda (Europeans) are not listening. Government doesn't listen to Yolngu; has no second thought. They hear, they ignore, forget, go back home, write what they think.¹

It's hard to imagine a better description of *not* recognising someone.

The Yolngu Nations Assembly, representing the people of eight Aboriginal nations in Arnhem Land, have issued a statement registering their strong objections to the proposed legislation and calling on the Senate to reject it.

We have clearly informed you that we do not support the legislation.

The Australian Federal Government can achieve all its aims through partnership in our communities. They have no need to grant themselves the continued and new powers contained within these Bills.²

Indigenous people from Australia's Catholic communities have heard the voices of Northern Territory Aboriginal leaders and spoken in support of them. 'The statement by the Yolngu Nations Assembly cannot be any clearer', said Mr Graeme Mundine, executive officer of the Aboriginal Catholic

Ministry in the Archdiocese of Sydney. 'The Yolngu have consistently asked for partnership and self-determination, not intervention and discrimination.'³

Mrs Vicki Clark, coordinator of Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, said: 'The disrespect shown to traditional Aboriginal governance structures and traditional custodians has been staggering and is set to worsen under the proposed legislation.'⁴

These Indigenous voices have found strong support from church organisations throughout Australia. Among Catholic groups are the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, the Edmund Rice Centre, Catholic Religious Australia, the Sisters of St Joseph, the Presentation Sisters Victoria and the Sisters of Mercy. Other Christian groups include the Uniting Church in Australia National Assembly and the Religious Society of Friends in Australia.

In May, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia issued an emphatic joint statement. It says in part:

We urge the Federal Government to abandon this legislation and develop strategies based on trust and respect which will promote collaboration with the Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory in decision-making relating to their future ... The legislation before the Senate extends many aspects of "the intervention" and continues to raise serious human rights concerns.

We need to listen to the Aboriginal people. They are asking for their rights as human beings and citizens of this country to be respected.⁵

The Yolngu Nations are calling for a different approach to the one imposed upon their communities since 2007. They are calling on Government for a renewed commitment to a partnership characterised by genuine engagement and promoting equality in decision-making and self-determination.

An alternative to the 'Stronger Futures' legislation must be found – one that ensures the wellbeing of individuals and communities is achieved without undue social control or unwarranted interference; one that ensures public policies and programs engage and empower those who are directly affected.

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¹ http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate_Committees?url=clac_ctte/strong_future_nt_11/submissions.htm

² http://stoptheintervention.org/uploads/files_to_download/Stronger-Futures/Yolngu-Statement-2-5-12.pdf

³ http://stoptheintervention.org/uploads/files_to_download/Stronger-Futures/ACM-Sydney.pdf

⁴ http://stoptheintervention.org/uploads/files_to_download/Stronger-Futures/ACM-Melbourne.pdf

⁵ http://www.catholic.org.au/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=1254&tmpl=component&format=raw&Itemid=355