
Black Kids' Tampa

Aboriginal women from the Top End have expressed their support of Aboriginal MP Marion Scrymgour's attack on the Federal intervention in the Northern Territory. Minister Scrymgour used the 2007 Charles Perkins Oration at Sydney University to blast both the motivation and implementation of the intervention, attacking it as a 'vicious new McCarthyism'.

She warned that the federal Government's intervention in the Northern Territory would go down in history as "the black kids' Tampa".

Ms Scrymgour condemned the federal government's motivation saying that "John Howard and Malcolm Brough, this evening I am doing far more than merely criticising you and your Government's assault on Aboriginal Territorians; I am condemning its motivation, I am condemning its operations and I am condemning - outright - its moral basis and the moral authority you purport to exercise in 'saving the children'. You are doing nothing of the sort."

While agreeing that some action was necessary to address the violence and problems with housing and alcohol in Aboriginal communities, her complaint, and that of the Women for Wik, was with the implementation and the lack of consultation with Aboriginal communities.

A host of inquiries in Queensland, Western Australia and NSW had investigated child abuse and neglect in Aboriginal communities over the last decade or so and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed their concern in strong terms in the 2005 Concluding Observations. But there has been little action from the states or from the Commonwealth to solve the problems.

Aboriginal women had been begging for action from Howard over a raft of social problems for the best part of a decade - entreaties which he had ignored or paid lip-service to".

"Women's shelters, night patrols, kids' programs had

been dumped by the commonwealth over that decade, a process which had been accelerated since the abolition of ATSIC (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) after the 2004 election."

The Minister was particularly critical of the abolition of the Commonwealth Development Employment Projects, and was concerned about the effect on a large number of projects and the Aboriginal art industry.

"Aboriginal enterprises that have been built - sometimes over many years - on the basis of subsidised wages through CDEP now face ruin or drastic reductions in their capacity and effectiveness," Ms Scrymgour said.

Aboriginal women in the Top End supported Ms Scrymgour and expressed concern about Mr Brough's attack on Ms Scrymgour. Eileen Cummings, former policy advisor to the NT Chief Minister on Women's and Indigenous Affairs said "I absolutely disagree with Mr Brough, and I support Marion Scrymgour all the way. She knows what is happening in the communities she represents."

Ms Cummings is part of the Women for Wik group, which is monitoring the Federal Action in the NT. Olga Havnen, CEO of the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the NT and Anne-Marie Lee, Vice President of Barunga Community also supported her.

"This is why people voted for Marion, because she is strong and speaks out", said Anne-Marie Lee, Vice President of Barunga Community. "We need people like her, and Barbara McCarthy. They know what is going on and they represent us. They have strong voices to speak on behalf of countrymen."

"They are our people as well. If we don't have those kind of people sitting on those seats in parliament, none of us will know what is going on." said Anne-Marie Lee. "We need more information from the government. Everyone here is confused, and worried, especially about the abolition of the CDEP program, and the revoking of the permit system."

Ms Scrymgour also received support from Irene Fisher, CEO of Sunrise Health, which has responsibility for health service delivery to 10 remote Aboriginal communities in the NT, said "My first

response when I heard about this was to send an email to Marion saying ‘Thank God someone has the courage to stand up to these bully boys.’

Ms Fisher continued “This intervention is characterised by poor planning, poor communication a disturbing lack of transparency. This lack of transparency is an issue for all Australians.”

Aboriginal women are not alone in their condemnation. Elder Harry Jakamarra Nelson also condemned the intervention and the various measures involved, including seizing control of communities for five years. He said that the Warlpiri desert people are angry.

“This intervention has hit us like a ton of bricks,” says. “There’s been no consultation with us ... We don’t know what is expected of us and we really believe that our future is under threat.”

Mr Nelson chaired a meeting of Warlpiri elders who issued a statement attacking the Federal Government’s intervention in 73 remote Northern Territory communities. Their statement said the Warlpiri strongly supported action to tackle child abuse. But the statement said “We are worried with the lack of respect the Federal Government has shown us as the first Australians. We are not satisfied with the communication and information from the Federal Government to our communities.”

The elders spoke of their anger at the decision to quarantine half people’s welfare payments, which must be spent on food and other essentials in a designated shop. They also spoke of their opposition to the abolition of the permit system.

According to the Age, Yuendumu elders were furious when they learnt the Government was taking over culturally sensitive areas — including a men’s ceremonial area and the cemetery. One of the elders, Ned Hargraves, said Centrelink’s quarantining of the money in the half-dozen communities where it had been introduced had only caused problems.

Mr Nelson, president of the Yuendumu Community Council, said a government-appointed business manager, who lives in the community, had not made clear what he wanted from the elders. “Is he a watchdog here to inform Canberra what we are up to? I don’t know,” Mr Nelson said. “He has not spoken to us as a community.”

Mr Nelson said Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough had never visited the community, one of central Australia’s largest.

We acknowledge the sources for this article: The press release from the Women for Wik and The Age 24 October 2007

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/desert-elders-lash-out-at-intervention/2007/10/24/1192941153102.html>

HEALTH: Child mortality ‘at record low’

Fewer children under the age of five are dying thanks to immunisation programmes and anti-malaria measures, according to the UN children’s agency, UNICEF. Worldwide, the number of young children who died in 2006 dropped below 10 million for the first time, it said. The UNICEF figures are based on government-conducted surveys in more than 50 countries in 2005 and 2006.

Measles vaccinations, mosquito nets and increased rates of breast-feeding were said to have contributed to the fall. However, experts said most of the deaths were preventable and that more needed to be done.

UNICEF said 9.7 million children under five died in 2006, down from almost 13 million in 1990.

The decline was particularly marked in Morocco, Vietnam and the Dominican Republic, where the number of children dying dropped by a third, UNICEF said.

The Latin American and Caribbean region is on course to achieve the millennium development goal of reducing child mortality by two-thirds by 2015 - it registered 27 deaths on average for every 1,000 live births in 2006, compared with 55 in 1990.

The majority of deaths occurred in sub-Saharan Africa (4.8 million) and south Asia (3.1 million). Rates were highest in west and central Africa, where HIV and Aids are prevalent. In sub-Saharan Africa, deaths from measles have been reduced by 75 per cent due to increased vaccination coverage.

In Vietnam, child mortality dropped by about 40 per cent after 30,000 people were trained as health workers and paid to treat people in their own villages, UNICEF said.

Mortality rates facts

Worldwide: 72 per 1,000 live births
Developed world: 6
China: 24
India: 74
Latin America and Caribbean: 27
West and central Africa: 186
Source: UNICEF