



Return to the Ration Days

The NT Intervention: grass-roots experience and resistance

A discussion paper

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Background and Acknowledgements

Research for this paper was undertaken on the lands of the Aboriginal people of the Central Australian desert, primarily the s, Warlpiri, Luritja and Waramungu. It was written on the lands of the Eora nation.

I have been active in the campaign opposing the Northern Territory Intervention since its announcement by the Howard Government in June 2007. This has included working from my home city of Sydney to bring speakers from affected communities down to southern cities to address public meetings and rallies.

From June 2008 – January 2009, I was based in Alice Springs, undertaking research for the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at UTS. My research was primarily focused on interviewing and collecting the statements of people living under the Intervention.

Return to the Ration Days is based around transcripts from a selection of these interviews. I also share some stories of my own experiences with the implementation of intervention policies.

The purpose of this work is to try and give readers an understanding of what life is like under the Intervention – how discriminatory policy plays out in everyday experience. There is also some analysis about the current policy commitment to ‘assimilation’ of Aboriginal people and its implications.

The coercion and racism of the Intervention is not simply being endured by Aboriginal people – they are challenging implementation at every step and fighting for control over their lands, lives and communities. Many of the transcripts are from meetings of protest.

This paper would not have been possible without the hard work and spirit provided by Aboriginal activists challenging the Intervention. Special thanks go to Barbara Shaw, Valerie Martin and their families and friends at Mt Nancy, Kunoth Block and Yuendumu.

The work also comes from the effort of the Intervention Rollback Action Group in Alice Springs, particularly the anchor Marlene Hodder. Some passages have been previously published, and honed, by the editors at *Solidarity* magazine. I must thank the Stop the Intervention Collective in Sydney, campaigners around the country and particularly my partner Nat Wasley for the ongoing inspiration.

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Welfare days – Ration days

One Tuesday in early December, I drove with some friends from Alice Springs to Yuendumu, a Warlpiri Aboriginal community about 350 kms to the North West.

I needed to get to Yuendumu to follow up on some research. Many of my Warlpiri friends had been trying to get back to the community for over a week. But cars had broken down and money was tight, so people were jumping at the opportunity for a lift.

Our plans for the day were supposed to be straightforward. Pick people up at 9 am, head into town to get Centrelink and other business done by mid morning and be out at Yuendumu just after lunch.

I went first to Kunoth town camp, a block on the Charles Creek, to pick up Valerie Martin and some of her family. She is a strong Warlpiri woman, a wonderful translator, agitator and community spokesperson, who I'd grown close to through the campaign against the NT Intervention.

We'd worked hard together speaking with her people in language, collecting stories that detailed the increasing hardship being faced due to the imposition of the Income Management system and the fears about loss of land and culture.

Valerie would always stress the need for people to be vocal and challenge the new laws, "if we don't stand up now - and fight - it will go on for generations to come".

When I arrived at Kunoth there was already a frustrated conversation bubbling about Income Management (IM)¹. Specifically, people were talking about the 'Basics Card' which had been slowly introduced over the previous few months.

Before the Basics Card, people on IM were required to physically go into Centrelink to negotiate access to the 50% of their social security entitlements quarantined through the Intervention.

Mostly people were given 'store cards' for Coles, Woolworths or K-Mart. If you brought in an invoice, Centrelink staff could also write out cheques to purchase 'approved goods' from local businesses like the mechanics or second hand shop, but this took lots of work and was rarely done.

The Basics Card could now, theoretically, be used at over 500 shops across the NT, just as a normal EFTPOS card is used. Credit could be transferred from an IM account onto the card with a phone call. Spending was still restricted to certain goods and services however, and cash-out was forbidden.

There had been some official talk about introducing the card to provide greater levels of "choice" to Aboriginal people forced onto IM. But all the public forums put on by Centrelink about the change were convened for the local business community and there was no consultation with people who were actually quarantined. This suggests that the Basics Card was more an attempt to ease pressure coming from many smaller business who were missing out on custom due to the provisions of IM.

¹ The *Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Payment Reform) Act 2007* passed through parliament alongside the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007*, establishing the "Income Management regime". This applies to all residents of prescribed Aboriginal communities in the NT receiving Centrelink entitlements. 50% of these entitlements, including aged and disability pensions, child support payments and unemployment benefits must be managed by Centrelink and cannot be accessed as cash. 100% of lump-sum payments distributed through Centrelink, such as the baby-bonus, are also managed.

At Kunoth there was frustration at the new problems that came with the card. Valerie's daughter had spent over an hour and a half on a public phone trying to get credit transferred, before the line unexpectedly cut out. "We almost used all of the credit on the phone card", said Valerie. "More than an hour, just listening to that music, and for nothing". Others explained that the credit they had put onto the Basics card was missing when they actually went to purchase food.

Relatives visiting from a community across the border in South Australia said, "back at home I'm been explaining what people are going through here. Everyone is really scared they're going to blanket the whole of Australia".

Hendrix, another friend of mine from Kunoth, was trying to get to Halls Creek in WA by bus. His partner was keen to come with us to Yuendumu. She had credit on her Basics Card and wanted to use it to buy the bus ticket for Hendrix before we left. After some discussion, people seemed sure that the Greyhound bus company accepted the card, so that would be our first stop in town.

We loaded up the car and headed off. Dropped people off at the bus terminal, then to the chemist and the supermarket. We were making good time.

Back at the bus terminal though there was trouble. The Basics Card wasn't working. With a silent patience it was accepted that Hendrix would miss today's bus, but we agreed to stay in Alice Springs until his ticket was sorted. Greyhound wrote out the \$90 invoice and we drove the young couple to Centrelink to ask them to write out a cheque.

When we arrived the place was quite full, but not bursting as I'd previously seen it. There were about 30 people waiting on benches, but only four in the queue. By this stage it was 11:30 am. Not thinking it would take too long, we left to collect the last passenger Harry Nelson.

Harry is another staunch campaigner and veteran of the fight for land rights. He'd been president of the Yuendumu community council until mid 2008, when it was abolished by the local government reforms which had been introduced by the NT Government on top of the Intervention.

On the drive back to Centrelink, Harry explained how he'd tried numerous times to get his Basics Card, but had abandoned the queue after being made to wait for more than an hour each time.

Walking into Centrelink for the second time, the atmosphere had become manic. The line had blown out to over 15 people and there were more than 50 sitting and waiting. Almost everyone was Aboriginal and trying to deal with IM. Harry gasped like he'd been hit, "God this is bloody inhuman treatment".

Hendrix and his partner had been told to wait, but had been given no indication how long it would take. We'd left Valerie's daughter and two grandkids in the car and the kids were already getting restless. Thinking to take some initiative, I braved the long queue to speak to Centrelink staff and explain our situation.

Valerie spoke to them with me. "We really need to get to Yuendumu by this afternoon. There are kids waiting in the car and its hot. All we need is a cheque for a bus ticket. Does she really need to stay here? Maybe Hendrix can just wait and collect it?".

"You see everyone waiting here?", said the staff, "they're all after the same thing". "You're just going to have to wait".

"Can you at least give us some idea of how long it will take?"

"It shouldn't be too long. Just sit down and wait".

It was 1:30. A quiet grumbling across the full bench seats was constant and sometimes broke out loudly, "this is bullshit". It was mostly young mothers with kids and elderly people. Valerie's comments were always with a raised voice, and the row of old ladies up the back nodded along. "We're being herded like cattle", she said. "And here's all the sacred little children - lining up crying for food".

A patronising minute long video about the Basics Card played on constant loop, providing the infuriating sound track of a monotone voice. "Do not throw away your Basics Card. Do not tell anyone the pin for your Basics Card".

At two o'clock we went to get some lunch and started talking about leaving. Much of the road to Yuendumu was unsealed and in pretty shocking condition. We wanted to get there before dark. Hendrix needed the ticket though, so his partner would have to stay behind.

Harry told us to wait some more, "this is what we are fighting against, this Income business, let's give them a bit more time".

I lined up for one more try pleading with the staff. "This is unbelievable. She just wants to get a bus ticket with her own money. We've been waiting almost three hours".

The man behind the counter had a distant look in his eyes. He shared my disbelief, but had become resigned to it.

"We are so understaffed. I've never worked in an office where people have to wait for more than two hours. It's this income management".

"It needs to change", I said. "It can't go on like this".

He half laughed and looked at the computer to check the progress of the bus ticket. "That's funny", he said, "She doesn't seem to be in the system".

"What do you mean she's not in the system!?"

The couple came over to see what was going on.

"I'm sorry. Its a system problem. You seem to have dropped out of the system somehow", explained the Centrelink man.

"Well can I just get my bus ticket?"

"Go and sit down. I just need to make some inquiries. Go and sit down I'll just sort this out for you".

I wanted to scream, to demand to see managers, to refuse to leave the counter until the issue was sorted. But there were so many people in the line behind us. I knew that everyone else was waiting for Income Management.

We sat down, fuming. Maxine Carlton, a legal aid worker from the town camp, had come up to see how everyone was.

"Nowhere else in Australia would people be treated like this", she said. "Just us Aboriginal people here in the NT".

By 3:15 Maxine had convinced us to leave. Hendrix's partner would get the 'bush bus' out to Yuendumu on Thursday. Another unnecessary cost of around \$80.

We had been close to four hours in the Centrelink.

"Here we are back in the welfare days again", said Maxine. "Forced to line up for our hand outs".

Geoffrey Shaw, who played a founding and ongoing leadership role in many of the major Aboriginal organisations in Alice Springs from the 1970s through to his recent retirement, shared some memories of life in his home the Mt Nancy Town Camp during the "welfare days".

My parents were out bush all the time, on the pastoral properties and so on and my brothers and sisters lived here at the dormitory there. We used to go to school from here. The base was here. All the men folk would go away, but all the women would stay here. But sometimes my mother used to go away long time ago, when I was a kid.

We were basically children of welfare. Native welfare times. We lived here and nobody worried about us because whitefellas, they don't see you. They know you are there, but they don't see that you're there.

That's prior to when they established the Bungalow (an institution set up near Mt Nancy). They brought people down to the Bungalow from up bush - Willowra, Yuendumu, Tennant Creek, Barrow Creek - and housed them there, even Pitjintjara people. And it was run by the Native Welfare. And a lot of those men folk and some women had some menial jobs in town. Some of them worked with construction companies like builders and so on.

See it was a ration post. Back in my day. They kept us out of town. We used to live along the creek here, a big mob lived over there at the Bungalow and down along the riverbed towards town. But just on the edge of town. And they fed us rations. We went to school there too. Used to go to school, before I went to main school. Go there and have a meal. But they used to provide rations every two weeks.

Aggie, these old girls, Georgina (who still live at Mt Nancy), we'd all go over there. Trip over there and get rations - big tins of beans and tea and this kind of thing. And big tins of bully beef. Fuckin army rations, they used to feed in the army, big tins.

I was watching Huey on TV, that cook? He was in the tropics somewhere and he opened up a tin, he reckon 'tropical butter'. And I was going to ring him up. Because we were having that back in the 50s. Tins of butter!

That was every two weeks. Just tins of meat and so on. And the only people that got some steak, every fortnight, was the workers. A big lump of rump or something. That was their pay. Meat was their pay for the fortnight.

They had a racist attitude to us mob. I can recall, they used to say to us, people of part-Aboriginal descent. They'd say, "you're better than him", which is the full blood. "You're better than him, but you're not better than me". This is how white fellas used to differentiate. Call part-Aboriginals second rate citizens, but calling our relatives, traditional people, at the bottom rung of the social ladder. "You're better than him. But you're not better than me".

Outside a Central Land Council Full Council Meeting in Tennant Creek, I met an elderly Gurindji woman, who was very angry about having her pension 'Income Managed' due to the Intervention.

She had participated in the famous 'walk off' at Wave Hill station with Land Rights leader Vincent Lingiari. The strike of Aboriginal stock workers began with the demand to be paid cash wages, equal to the white workers, but soon became a struggle for recognition of their rights to the land.

Back on that Wave Hill station we bin walk off. We bin strike. You know with that old man Vincent Lingiari.

You were there with Vincent?

Yeah! Gurindji. We talk all people from all stations down the river. We bin walk off there and sit down and Vincent bin get homestead, Dagaragu. He said, "you stay there".

What were you saying?

Talking from tucker. Talking from money, we never got good feed you know. And just beef and bread. No good. We bin Strike. You know union strike, long time? We really Gurindji. That's our old man. Striking people now.

No good washing clothes for whiteman. Make him bed. Make him drink of tea, maybe like two o'clock in the morning something like that. We bin working like slaves, poor thing. All the white people just chuck him clothes and we wash by hand. We didn't have washing machine or nothing. Washing and ironing, fold him up. Make bed.

Only rations for that?

Only for ration. Little bit tea and sugar. Flour bag. Little bit, not much. Every Friday and people been get hungry on the weekend time, go look around for bush tucker poor bugger.

And you mob said, "that's enough" and walked off with Vincent?

Yeah! Old man bin strike before now. Old Vincent. He said, "We don't live (like) white people. Its rough, we for money, we don't get money, we don't get proper food now nothing. Here look, they bin have on party time, Christmas time, they bin have grog. Our people don't have grog".

After strike won, they bin citizen now, all the blackfella. Poor bugger. And that old man bin passed away now and they still roughing people.

Roughing people. Like this one now where they giving me paper for tucker still might be. Only little bit money going on the keycard - \$150. I used to get \$400 every fortnight. But we don't get much money now. We get paper for tucker and not much money in the keycard. Might be old day again.

Tim Rowse, in *White Flour, White Power*,² analyses the practice of "rationing" as the key technique used by colonial authorities to control and socially engineer Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory throughout the 20th century, before the advent of the 'self-determination' era in the early 1970s.

Colonisation had severely disrupted traditional means of sustenance, and Aboriginal people were denied access to full payments in cash for either waged work or social security. They were provided instead with rations of basic foods and clothing.

Station owners, missionaries and welfare board officials all distributed rations. Supplying or denying rations was used to establish settlements and control movement, but also to force particular kinds of work and behaviour, disciplining people out of their own cultural practices.

Rowse argues that, "in Central Australia the rations based apparatus of 'assimilation' grew out of policies to control the extent and manner of the urbanisation of Indigenous people. In... (this) vision, a few generations would see the Indigenous people emerge from training they received on missions and settlements and then move into the mainstream of Australian life".³

The NT Intervention is the culmination of the re-emergence of 'assimilation' as a dominant philosophy guiding government policy in Aboriginal affairs. The ongoing poverty and profound social problems facing many communities are again blamed on an inability of Aboriginal people to manage their own affairs, their failure to integrate in "mainstream" society and the regressive nature of Aboriginal cultural practices.

Thoroughly documented government neglect and deep, institutionalised racism are ignored as problems. "Social engineering" strategies that compound this racism, used through the previous assimilation period, including rationing, are being deployed again.

From "bucket loads of extinguishment" over Native Title, through to the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the systematic wind-back of

² Rowse, Tim, *White flour, white power: From rations to citizenship in outback Australia*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1998

³ *ibid* at 184

structures of 'self-determination' by the Howard government has been thoroughly analysed.⁴

Clearly apparent also is the commitment of the Labor party leadership to this agenda. Labor tailed most of Howard's moves against Aboriginal people and was the first to flag the closure of ATSIC. They voted for the Intervention while in opposition and have been the face of its implementation for most NT communities, also pioneering new attacks such as harsh restrictions on bi-lingual education.

Through the work of influential think-tanks like the Bennelong Society, the philosophy behind this current policy consensus is most clearly articulated. Bennelong is committed to assimilation and has played an important role shaping the Intervention. Their June 2008 conference included leading Intervention bureaucrats Sue Gordon and Major-General David Chalmers, along with its architect Mal Brough.

The writings of the Bennelong society combine fierce denegration of Aboriginal culture with calls for punitive controls to force migration and the adoption of "white" lifestyles.

In *Lands of Shame*,⁵ key Bennelong figure Helen Hughes describes Aboriginal culture as "stoneage" and discusses "the urgency of the evolution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions to reasoning from evidence". The Intervention took up many of the policy recommendations outlined in *Lands of Shame*.

In some Bennelong conference papers, even 'biological' ideas about assimilation, which formed the basis of child removal policies, are beginning to be championed. For example, Joseph and Maria Lane, in *Hard Grind - the Making of an Urban Indigenous population*,⁶ presented at the 2008 conference, praise "opportunity oriented" Indigenous people, who are "much more likely to marry working non-Aboriginal people" and have "planted the seeds of possibility for an open society".⁷

In the introduction to a republished 1966 NT welfare board report, written "in the height of the period of assimilation", Bennelong society President Gary Johns writes, "(we) hope that students of Aboriginal politics will read documents that describe the period prior to the fatal experiment with self-determination... the work of 1966 must start again".⁸

For Aboriginal people in the NT, the life of 1966 is starting again.

⁴ See for example, Hunt, Janet, "Between a rock and a hard place: self-determination, mainstreaming and Indigenous community governance", *Contested Governance: Culture, power and institutions in Indigenous Australia*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU, 2008 or Behrendt, Larissa "Back to the Future", *Arena magazine*, 75, 2005

⁵ Hughes, Helen, *Lands of Shame: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'Homelands' in Transition*, Centre for Independent Studies, 2007

⁶ Lane, Joseph and Lane, Maria, *Hard Grind—The Making of an Urban Indigenous Population*, Bennelong Society conference papers, 2008 at <http://www.bennelong.com.au/conferences/pdf/JandMLane2008.pdf>

⁷ Ibid at 4

⁸ Milliken, EP and Wilson, PL *Employment Arrangements for Aboriginals in Government Departments and on Settlements*, The Bennelong Society Historical Reprints Series, No 1, August 2008

Rowse's study shows that the dreams of twentieth century assimilationist social engineers could never be realized through rationing. While their ideas of white supremacy and the traumas of dispossession and punitive control left deep scars, Aboriginal people took all steps possible to use available resources for their own life goals.

The rationing system eventually collapsed due to the growing movement for Aboriginal rights and under the weight of its own contradictions, which forced official "recognition of the limits of a certain kind of government intervention into Indigenous life".

Today's Intervention is reopening old wounds. Its layers of racist bureaucracy, purporting to teach people how to behave like "mainstream Australians", the new "apparatus of assimilation", is in crisis.

The following series of interviews demonstrate the disastrous impact of the re-introduction of "rationing" policies in the form of Income Management. They are a small selection, which highlight most clearly the problems outlined through the more than one hundred statements and interviews collected through this research. There are also strong voices speaking against the many other re-hashed colonial policies that have come with the Intervention – the imposition of government administrators to oversee communities, the seizure of Aboriginal lands and the strong police powers to enforce race-based alcohol prohibition.

The white-picket-fence dreams of the politicians and bureaucrats are a nightmare for people living with their policies. But they are a people who refuse to be broken – and are fighting hard to claim control over their lives.

Freida Jarrah from Yuendumu talks about her mother's experience on Income Management 1/10/2008

She's really old. She's about 100. And she wants to stay here in Yuendumu, but this Income Management.

I always have to travel from Little Sisters camp (in Alice Springs) to pick it up. Have to go to Tangentyere Council and Centrelink just to pick it up. And she doesn't walk. That's why I was talking to the Centrelink people - "this old lady. Can you put her back to money? And same for carer, so they can get their money?"

My daughter is looking after her. I'm her daughter. That's why I always go there, in to Little Sisters camp to pick it up. And when I get ready to go to Alice Springs from here, it takes all day. Really old lady. She must be hungry now.

Her two legs are swelled up. She can't stand up - she always just crawls now, can't stand up and walk. You know, the old people, when they are really old, they can't stand up and walk. That's why I'm upset about Centrelink.

Valerie Martin (VM) translates during an Interview with four elderly ladies from Nyrripi community, who spoke mostly in Warlpiri

How did you find out about the Intervention?

VM: Centrelink mob went there. First notified them.

Leena: When I went to Centrelink with my daughter. They said no cash, only purchase order. And I got surprised. They said 'we haven't got it', not cash - only purchase order.

Kids money, Centrelink mob said, you won't get cash, but you'll get a card.

Molly: And for pensioner. Same. Just paper.

How did you feel?

VM: She cried. She cried when they told her that. Instead of getting money like before, she got surprised and just cried when they told her all the money was in that card. Quick changeover.

Molly: Even pensioner too. So quick it changed from just money to purchase order.

VM: They were confused and are still very confused about it. Here today. They are saying they don't understand why.

Does it make it harder looking after family?

VM: Everyone says yes. Its hard. Not like before.

Molly: My daughter. Him cry. Him worry about money. Kids money, for kids money. True.

Alice: We never get him money - I've got grandchildren, and I look after my sisters daughter. Might be \$4,000 but no cash, Lowa (nothing).

VM: (translating) Like my grand-daughter, the other day, everything on that card. She didn't see the money. She has seen it in the computer, she went to Centrelink, They showed her. In her mind, she's been thinking a lot. How come?

Leena: I bin get angry then. I don't like you know.

Alice: I'm not drinking woman!

VM: (translating) we don't drink. We know how to look after the kids. That's what she's saying.

Leena: Is it for one year?

At the moment the government is talking about pushing it out longer.

(Very angry response.)

VM: It's not working. We don't want it!

Working for rations in Tara

“We are going back to the ration days” is a constant refrain across all communities. Feeling an acute loss of autonomy, many older people compare the long lines going out the door in Centrelink for Income Management to the old queues for station rations. Similarly, supermarket ‘store-cards’ and the new ‘basics card’ are a reminder of food tokens and ‘dog tags’ given out by the welfare board.

But for many in the bush, such as the small community of Tara, about 3 hours drive from Alice Springs, the “return to the ration days” is not metaphorical. Under the “bush orders” system, introduced alongside Income Management, boxes of food are being sent out to communities in place of Centrelink entitlements and some people are being forced to work for these rations.

I traveled out to Tara with Barbara Shaw, a strong campaigner against the NT Intervention from Mt Nancy town camp, to investigate stories of hardship we had heard from visitors stopped at her camp.

We arrived in Tara at the same time as the “bush orders” vehicle, which left as soon as locals had unloaded the boxes. A number of full boxes didn’t arrive for people and items were missing from other boxes.

Nathaniel Long explained that this was common, “Sometimes people just miss out, maybe they have to wait like a month or even two months for any to come in. Today they’ve had to leave for town, a couple of families. They can’t wait any more for food. They’ll spend the day traveling. Then when they get there, maybe Centrelink says come tomorrow. Then they rely on family in town to stay, to get a feed off.”

Kevin Thompson outlined the barriers stopping people accessing their Income Managed funds in town. “Today they’ll be battling because they have no ID. They never needed ID to get their money before this Income”. He said that people in the community all pull together to deal with the new challenges posed by the system, “we don’t have much, but we just share it out when this happens”.

Similar to many other people on Income Management, Tara residents thought that Centrelink was mismanaging their funds and losing their money.

Joanne Nakamarra explained, “sometimes we go to Centrelink over there and they don’t know where our money went. Like last time I went in there, there was about \$400 and then the next thing when I rang up they said only \$174 was there”.

There was real disbelief when Barbara explained that Aboriginal Affairs minister Jenny Macklin was telling the rest of Australia Income Management meant more food for bush children.

Kevin said, “It’s got harder here. We have to get into town more, chasing that Income. We got family coming in, coming to visit and sometimes we don’t even have money to give them for fuel to get back”.

“Its really hard to get food in the community. We don’t save money any more. And see long time, until last year, we used to give that other half money to family”, said Joanne.

“We used to give em for Nanna, others, now I don’t get it any more with Income. None for sharing. And we got little kids crying. Specially with the kids, they need cold things, cold

drinks, Especially cause there is no power to keep things cool, we got no money for that now”.

Selma Thompson is really frustrated, “It’s so much harder now. They make big promises about doing things for the community. But all they like to do is cut off money. That’s it. Cut off your money so you won’t register your car, so you won’t get more clothes for your kids. Lot’s of things, sometimes we’re in the store at Ali Curung. We were looking at things we wanted but no money, all the money was gone to Income Management”.

Selma works between 8-12 hours every week sorting out the “bush orders” deliveries and following up mistakes. Her and another worker were initially paid for this, “but the pay stopped on September 16. They don’t explain why it stopped, so we are working for nothing”.

Stories of unpaid “Intervention work” are too common. In winter the Intervention-installed Government Business Manager from Ali Curung visited Tara to oversee the start of the “community clean up program”. This included organising local men to paint the outside of Tara’s houses.

Nathaniel was one of the workers. “We worked from 8am to 4pm every weekday for a month and a half. Sometimes on weekends too. They kept telling us we were going to be paid. We filled in time sheets. But we haven’t been paid anything”.

According to Michael Hayes, a resident who has done lots of work trying to encourage employment programs in Tara, “Ten fellas worked doing that painting. And then they just said it was work for the dole. But they never set up contracts, activity agreements that you need for work for the dole”.

Selma says that no government official or agency is willing to take responsibility for the problems the Intervention has caused in Tara. “We have had meetings here. All these government people, they keep pointing at each other, like ‘we don’t know whose really supposed to do that”.

“Because we have the community real strong here. We speak up. And when we ask the hard question that we really want to know what’s going to happen and all that, they wouldn’t give us any answer”.

Michael Hayes said the pressure is on from Centrelink for more work for the dole projects.

“There’s things that need to be done in the community, so why can’t they pay people properly? Not this Income Management. The young fellas could be doing plumbing, carpentry, ranger work. They’re willing, people have filled out so many forms, with Job-find and Centrelink. They promise training courses but it won’t happen”.

Some young men say Centrelink is threatening to cut them off unless they take work at the local station. But Michael Hayes explained, “the station only pays \$50 a day – no one wants to work for \$50! That’s why these young fellas say no”.

“We’ve gone back 60 years. Working for rations in the new millenium”.

Jimmy from Ti-Tree talks about the Bush Orders system operating in his community. Interviewed outside Centrelink in Alice Springs 25/8/2008

They're sending food that people don't want. They're sending the wrong food, they're sending the wrong brands. We've had problems down there with the meat going off. With detergents getting packed with edible foods. The wrong orders going to the wrong people. All sorts of problems you know.

The first few times they started they actually mucked it up that bad they had to give emergency rations out. Just boxes of rations because they never got the bush orders right, they weren't rocking up at the right time, they weren't finding the people who actually had the orders.

Up until 8 o'clock at night they were still delivering, out to the station. Up til 8 o'clock at night trying to find people to drop that stuff off.

You've got to go through a check list on every box that's dropped off. The old people don't even understand what they're getting. They don't understand what's being ordered for them - they can't do their own ordering, they don't know how to read.

And the people that are doing the ordering for them are talking them into buying things that they don't even need, that they don't know what they are buying. You see those people they don't need tooth brush and tooth paste. They've got good teeth they don't need that rubbish.

Plus it's a 100% mark up on their items, whereas out on the farm its only a 60% mark up. Where they are used to doing their shopping. So they are probably losing 20% straight up just doing their bush order.

What was the Initial reaction from people when they were told that they were going to be moved on to this bush orders system?

They don't want it. People like to do their own shopping and they like to shop when they need the food. They don't buy a pound of flour, they buy a drum of flour. And a few people out there getting the bush orders, their flour just ain't turning up. And that's their main diet - flour for damper - and they just aren't getting it.

Its a high mark up and a lot of embarrassment. Its downgrading people, because they want to do their own shopping. Those old women, its reminding them of when they were kids and they used to get passed out rations out on the stations. This government is trying to do virtually the same things. There's no ifs and buts about it that's exactly what's happening.

We had a meeting down there with the head of this financial management thing. And he pretty much said to me - "they're just going to have to get used to it". He was very rude about it.

What's the reasons they are providing about why this change is happening?

Because they reckon that the kids weren't getting looked after properly. And when he actually came out there, there were a lot of kids there at the meeting, when he was addressing the people. And I said, "can you see one kid that looks unhealthy or skinny to you"? He said, "well no, but in a lot of communities..." and I said, "well you can't just say

like that!"

Could all those resources have been better used in the community?

They should have actually went out and seen where the problems are. Pick on the problem areas you know? Don't just put everyone in the same basket. Those people are mostly Christian at Ti Tree. The men, they've only got 2 hours of drinking there in the daytime.

There's no take away alcohol, so there's no problem with that part of it. They can't come shopping here any more (Alice Springs) because you have to go through what I just went through - to get a \$90 cheque to get a pair of jeans with my own money - I was there for an hour!

Its even hard for me and I understand what Centrelink is doing. And many of those people don't understand and they have to go through all that garbage. To get a cheque with their own money to do a little bit of clothes shopping.

People are actually going hungry out there now. They get a two week bush order, in one go, they've got big families. That family comes in and eats to. So the food's gone in two days. Then they've got nothing. They've got to wait for the next person to get their bush order before they can go and eat again.

It's costing the tax payers millions and millions and dollars that they didn't need to spend. Centrelink mob out there, some of them are doing 14 hour days with this bush order. Delivering it and then there was no need for that. Let people do their own shopping. Its taking people's rights away. Everyone who I've talked to doesn't want this.

*Interview with Central Land Council delegate from the Murray Downs community
26/11/2008*

My name is Mr Kelly. I am working in the Murray Downs community. Work for the night patrol but my wife, she is a sick woman. She had three operations in Adelaide. Sometimes she misses out on Income. Sometimes she will get it, but sometimes she misses out, I don't know how it happens.

So you try calling and ask where the money is?

Sometime, she always get on to contact someone, might be Centrelink or someone. Sometimes they bring all that stuff from Alice Springs to Murray Downs. They get a cooler there, bring boxes of stuff. Bush orders. Sometimes she misses out.

Sometimes others miss out too. That's the way this income business works. People that are under that Income Business, they should get that stuff all the time you know, because my wife, she's a sick woman.

Sometimes the income stuff doesn't come in. We worry where the money goes. The bush orders are supposed to come in every fortnight. We've got caught up with income. They should sort something out.

How did you find out about it?

They just come in and got stuck into everyone in the community with that Income business. Saying, "this is a better way to work something out". But some of our children that go to high school, you can't even send them away, might be Darwin or something. We haven't got no money to send them away.

Government is saying it is making it easier to look after children. Would you agree with that?

Some of us, we can't even buy clothes for the kids to go out training, to high school. We haven't got no money to buy their clothes, bag and stuff.

Intervention got us down. The Income. If we're lucky we'll get through. Gotta be together.

Everyone is getting sick of that card! People should get paid cash!

Barbara Shaw from Mt Nancy Town Camp in Alice Springs discusses Centrelink's mismanagement of her Income Managed funds 6/1/2009

Well with Income Management right, it doesn't pay enough to pay my bills. And now, I've fallen way back. So they're going to repossess my fridge. So when I go shopping with my basics cards, where am I supposed to put my food?

When I was on Centrepay I was always in credit because I nominated a certain amount myself - and then come income management I fall behind and don't keep up with the payments.

And OK - I've been going to Tangentyere (shop) looking for my food vouchers that go there out of income management and there's nothing there. They're missing money. Misplacing my Income Management food vouchers that are supposed to go to Tangentyere. Three weeks of it. I get it every week out of both payments - out of my family allowance and out of my parenting payments.

I reckon that's happening to a lot of people where money is going missing. And you know that so many people are always saying that Centrelink is losing my money and now its actually happening to me!

If they're losing our money in Income Management then why can't they give us cash?

The Return of the Superintendent

The NT Intervention has imposed new figures of authority on 'prescribed communities', the Government Business Managers (GBMs)⁹.

⁹ Most of the powers exercise by GBMs are granted through the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007* under Part 5 - "Business Management Areas" (section 65-89)

The 5-year leases compulsorily acquired over township land give the federal government extraordinary powers to determine what happens in communities without any consultation with local people.

GBMs are the instrument through which these powers are exercised. They can seize assets, fire staff, sit in any meeting and direct local organisations.

Overwhelmingly though, people in communities we visited had experienced little or no interaction with their GBM.

In Santa Teresa, staff at the clinic said they had never received a visit. Imelda Palmer, a teacher in the local school said, "We don't know him. He only came to the school once, but never came again". Elaine Gori said, "They don't go around and talk to the people. They just stay in their office. They go from town to there".

In Yuendumu the GBM has earned the nickname "Nyirripi", Warlpiri for "egg". As Valerie Martin explained, "Business Manager sits in his big nest, people gotta come, come to the nyirripi. He doesn't go out talk to us, nothing. Since the intervention started, nothing's been done in the community".

There were profound feelings of disempowerment, knowing that there was someone "in charge" hidden away, who people never got to speak to, while simultaneously local councils were being lost through reforms initiated by the NT government.

There was also frustration at wasted resources. GBM salary packages were understood to be over \$150,000 per year and while the Intervention had promised housing for community members, all that had been built were imposing compounds to house the GBMs, which were ringed with barbed wire.

Imelda Palmer explained, "That's the Intervention village. That's their little thing. They came here, picked out a spot - bang. No consultation with traditional owners. Nothing".

Frank Baarda, longtime resident of Yuendumu, took a group of inter-state supporters to the GBMs house to tell the story of its construction.

"This compound here is the Government Business Manager's thing. It started off with one unit and then they had to add on it more. Now you may all recall when Mal Brough announced the Intervention, to "save all the little children", that was over a year ago, he said one of the things that had to be fixed was the housing for Aboriginal people. Now the only housing that's been built by the Intervention is this, what you see in front of you. I don't think there is a single Aboriginal person inside by the way".

"Anyway this compound was plonked here... Now over there was a whole heap of Aboriginal people living in that house (points to a nearby house) and it was full up, so this young lady and her husband and their newborn baby decided to camp nearby their parents, see, so they camped themselves down there (points to site of GBM compound). They had a windbreak, and they picked the only bit of shade nearby, then suddenly one day these contractors came from town and they pushed the little camp aside".

"The father of these people came down here and said, "what are you doing?", and this contractor had a map, and they put this fence around here and they captured one of the mulga trees, and the protests from the family went completely ignored".

Alongside the re-introduction of "rationing", the imposition of GBMs is the clearest indication for Aboriginal people that the government is bringing back its old paternalistic, colonial methods.

Santa Teresa had previously been run as a mission. One of the old ladies said that, "we have gone back to the mission days. Its all just white people in charge again now".

Before Land Rights, Yuendumu had been governed by Native Welfare. Explaining the GBMs position to a community meeting in Yuendumu, I had heard Warlpiri leader Ned Hargraves say, "I call them superintendent. Like we had in the 50s and 60s".

I asked him to explain why he drew this comparison, and what life was like in those times.

Interview with Ned Hargraves 18/12/2008

Way back in 50s and 60s. As I was growing up, its one of the things that crosses my mind all the time. My old man. I have this limp because the polio. My old man was with me all the time. The government at that time, they didn't let him get on the plane with me. Because no shoes and also, because he was yapa (Aboriginal). He couldn't come with me and put me on the plane. Just even for that seconds, you know, for that minute. That was the time that was really really rubbish.

And the superintendent at the time, when I was growing up. My father would leave about 7 or something. Really early to work. Doesn't matter whether it was freezing cold, it was raining, they had to go, they had to get to the office and sign up.

Sometimes they would salute to them - to the superintendent.

If they were fighting with family members, the penalty was you weren't allowed to get ration. At the ration depot down here . One full day. The superintendent at that time were really bad.

They had to supervise people and make sure they all came to work. Everyone had to tuck their shirts in and wear boots and stuff you know? No kids at that time were allowed to go with their father to work. We would only go to school. If I didn't go to school, my father would suffer for that, wouldn't get ration. The superintendent was really hard at that time. Making everyone to get wood, yards, fence, orchard and vegetables. But it wasn't a blessing time, it was no good.

Did people get paid cash or ration for their work?

Well, there was a bit of a ration and a bit of a cash. Those were the times when there was some payment in pounds. \$7, \$10 something like that.

So, like now, with some money for your pocket and some in the ticket for rations?

Exactly. (laughs). Its back like that one now, today. And its not good.

Can you remember the change, when the superintendent left?

Oh when he left - everything sort of, you could see the change. Everything was like, to us,

more free, we could be in charge of doing work and not saluting the superintendent all the time.

You could work in your own way - but we still came to work. When he left it was good. Really different. We could feel that change. For us it was flexible you know, we didn't have to feel somebody like looking over us.

When they said that community - you demand yourself you know, self-determination. But what does this mean to Aboriginal people? Still people not giving us our fair go so that we can make a go of these things.

A lot of those things that happened at that time were about to make us live like a Cardia (white person) and also to give away our culture. And that really sort of hurt us very very deep.

If I had to go away to a college, in one of the homes, I wasn't allowed to speak my language there. They didn't want to know about it. They were saying to us - you are going to have to live like Cardia! Like us! And I just - I thought always, this isn't right. I was born black and that's the way its going to be. You know? That's what I think.

Anyway, the superintendent. I'm glad they're gone and we never want to go back to the same things again. Sadly with this Intervention thing, I think its bringing it back. It's not really good to live those memories back.

It's brought hardships and our family members found it very difficult to work with superintendent, specially, because there were things they didn't want to do. They couldn't argue with him, because he was over-ruler. If you didn't do it, that was his penalty, you weren't allowed to get ration.

Getting back to this one - yes its exactly like way back in the 50s.

Santa Teresa – 'We've had this problem before'

Santa Teresa is a community of about 400 people, 90 kms South East of Alice Springs (check details).

In early November, Barb had bumped into her aunty from Santa Teresa, who had brought a number of elderly ladies from the community into Centrelink to deal with their Income Management.

They were very angry about having to make the trip and wait for hours. Barb spoke about the work she was doing documenting stories and we were invited to come out and speak more with people.

Our first stop was at the local school to speak with a teacher, Imelda Palmer, and a number of other staff.

Imelda was furious at the Intervention.

"We got no say. No power. Who do we go to?"

"Its getting harder you know. Everyone has to follow their rules. Just whiteman way. Everyone is struggling. It is really turning people into living a poorer life than they used to".

"The government is crying about school attendance now. They've got to look at the housing! You look at these houses and you think that maybe a married couple and a family living there hey? Its got about 20-30 people living there! Could have built 20-40 houses here with that money they've spent on the Intervention".

Other teachers explained that many people were on the 'Basics Card', but that it could not be used in Santa Teresa.

"You've got to go into town. Old people got to go into town, to do your shopping. They want to stay here in the community. You know its just wrong".

"And some people can't go into town to do shopping because they've got no car. Or the price of fuel is too high. So sometimes they miss out on food. Lots of families hungry, poor things. And no cash to buy power card".

The teachers spoke of the recent storm, and how the road became impassable when it was raining, leaving people stranded and hungry with their Basics Card.

Imelda took us around to a number of houses in the community to speak with people, mostly local women who were trying to look after children and grand children on Income Management.

Two young mothers were facing problems, "We don't want that card eh? No cash". The women talked about how much harder it made it trying to look after children, because there was no money to send them to social events, to football, or traveling on school excursions.

They said it was possible to direct some Income Management credit to the local shop, but that there was less choice there since a change of management that had come alongside the Intervention. "Its all diet stuff hey, and Black and Gold. And we can't buy takeaway food any more with that Income".

We went to Elaine Gori's house, where three other women shared the familiar story. "We have to go once a fortnight into town and wait three hours just for that little card".

"Last month, we traveled all the way in. We called Centrelink and they said that the money was there, but we traveled all the way in and there was nothing. So we couldn't do shopping".

Imelda said Income Management had made it harder to keep up with cultural obligations.

"They didn't consider culture when they made this legislation. Like people like on sorry business (the period after a death), like the widows. Widows have to stay in one place. They can't go into town to get their income, basics card, anything. They just stay at home and live on families food".

The lack of employment was a massive issue. We were told that between 150-200 CDEP positions had existed before the Intervention cut the program completely. Labor had only restored a tiny fraction of these, at most 40, and most young people were being told to

work for the dole.

Nailene said to us, "Lot's of young people are just walking around since they scrapped CDEP. They used to do everything, pick up the rubbish. Gardens everywhere. Go and check on the old people and make sure they had things".

Imelda added, "Now people told to do that work for the dole. They don't get paid much. And half of it goes into that card, basics card, or some to the shop. But its not much".

"You know we've had that problem before", said Elaine.

"Just a hand out - ration - given out, without any money. Now its just like going back you know. The government's using all that money for Aboriginal people through Centrelink".

"People were suffering with John Howard. He made all these decisions. They should have changed when they new government came in. But they're letting Aboriginal people suffer".

Interview with Jason, manager of the health clinic at Santa Teresa

The sad thing is it feels like we are going backwards. Other people tell me its like when they used to work at the station and were getting tucker, tea milk and sugar, rather than getting paid properly like everyone else.

What has been the impact of the CDEP cuts?

A lot of money went down when it first started. Because it's become work for the dole now, people don't get top up or anything. CDEP needed work itself. They were supposed to train people to prepare for work in the community. But employers came to rely on CDEP. Instead of putting people on CDEP for a year for training, then putting them onto full time work, it just stayed on CDEP. CDEP became the way to pay people. Instead of paying the right amount and on salary. It was easier to keep them on CDEP.

Is there many people doing work for the dole?

Yes there is now. Not many people are keen on working, because it's managed. And the fellas don't like it, because a lot of single fellas should have the right to work, get their money and then go and have fun, because they have no family there, just responsible for themselves. Not the government telling you how to spend your money.

Barb: Have you seen any government officials come and talk to people here about the Intervention?

Well I work at the health centre. And we don't see anyone out there. Business Manager - he hasn't even been to the clinic yet. And he's been here ever since those buildings were put there. They just came in and built them! We were like, "oh look at those dongas they've put up". And this huge yard around it.

People weren't happy so they had to lower the yard a bit. People were feeling - why do they need this huge yard with barb-wire. Don't they trust us? Just coming in, worried we

are going to be running in and eating them like cannibals! We're not that starving!

That's the mindset they are coming in with though, 'this community is out of control, we are going to come in and take it over'.

Yeah they think all communities are out of control. It's just sort of going into somewhere with this big fear.

How did you all feel at the clinic when news came through about the Intervention health checks?

Well we kind of fought so we could do it. When they came over, we put all our clinic workers over there, so that we could do the checks and all that. We wouldn't support it if it was mandatory. That is abuse in itself forcing a child to get that check, especially the genital check, that's abuse in itself.

The whole Intervention is disempowering.

Barb: You know because you mob were at the clinic, you do the checks all the time. Did you think it was a waste of time all their checks?

Yes that's what we thought.

Barb: Do you think they should have properly resourced clinics?

Yeah, all that money, that could have gone to the health centre. To hire staff ourselves.

Barb: How do you feel about the big 'prescribed area' signs they put at the entrance here? As a man in this community. Because back at home many of our men feel that behind that sign they're all classed as alcoholics and pedophiles.

Yeah I come through there with people. When I bring people in, they say "stop, have a look at that sign" and they got the same feeling as that.

When the shire came in, they brought paint, painted all the houses! Because now there's no permit system, they are worried people will come in and see all these dirty houses, so they want to just do the outside fix up.

What really gets me is its not happening in any other state. The Canberra government has decided this will happen.

The shire, they have no idea what's going on themselves yet. Because all these bills from prior haven't been paid yet. We've got a lot of phone calls asking about bills, but we don't know who is responsible, who are we supposed to go to to get these bills paid. Who's taken over from the council? Like we need this equipment, some people haven't been paid and it's been more that 6 months now and we're still waiting for it. One person have worked for a week before 30 June and hasn't been paid. Who is supposed to pay her?

Its a disaster what they've done. There's a lot of support interstate, because people see this as racist.

Well it is. There's that law that they won't bring back.

The Racial Discrimination Act

Why won't they bring that back! Its so obvious! Isn't anyone in the government speaking up? Can't they see it? Well I suppose they can see it. It just puts them into control. There's no rights. Its ridiculous.

And what about the police issue? They've been out there. Like way out of town. Stopping cars and taking alcohol off people, out of their cars. And I just thought - isn't that a public road?

I've been thinking about the Intervention. Its just too obvious it's racist. We need as many people as possible to just go to Canberra (for protests). We need the whole Territory to go!

Segregation

When I first moved to Alice Springs in July, I was on the dole.

Study of history had taught me about segregation in the United States, in South Africa, and also in Australia, through stories about the "freedom rides" in NSW in the 1960s.

Racism is still so deeply built into our social system that dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are influenced by race in most social processes, from access to education or different restaurants to the function of immigration detention centres.

But it wasn't until my first visit to Centrelink in Alice Springs, 2008, that I first felt the reality of an open, formal segregation.

When I walked through the door, it was immediately apparent where I was supposed to line up. I felt sick.

On the left was a queue of five people, four white and one African. On the right, sixteen Aboriginal people were in a separate line. Many more were seated on the benches, waiting to be served.

I noticed the small sign above the counter of the Aboriginal queue, "Store cards".

I hovered nervously for about five minutes, muttering, looking around and catching the eyes of people in the queue who were clearly concerned.

I remember one Aboriginal woman walking assertively through the doors and straight into the middle of the waiting area with anger in her face. She stopped for 30 seconds, surveyed the scene with steely eyes, then walked out again.

Feeling ashamed, I shuffled over to put in my dole form. I tried to justify it to myself, "maybe making a fuss would just embarrass lots of people". "It's no point just doing

something by yourself. Come back with more people and have a proper protest".

I tried talking. The man in front of me was from Sudan and had just started working at the supermarket.

After some small talk I said, "I don't like this. I'm actually not comfortable at all".

"No its no good here".

I wasn't sure if he understood what I was referring to. Centrelink is, after all, rarely a good place for anyone to be.

"I mean, there shouldn't be separate queues like this. We should all be together."

"Yes and you should see it in the supermarket", he answered. "People just aren't treated well".

Almost at the front of the queue, we didn't say much more. But we both seemed happy we'd at least marked the issue. The conversation also gave me confidence to raise it with the Centrelink staff.

I thought I'd wait until my form had been approved to ask any hard questions.

The woman processing me apologised for the wait. "We are just so busy".

"It really looks like you need some more staff. Has it created a lot more work since, since they started with that Intervention stuff?"

She paused for a second.

"Oh yes. I'd say we get at least three times more people coming through. Its very hard".

"Three times! That's crazy, you poor things".

It looked like my form was done.

"Yeah. Well we're not really supposed to talk about it... Here that should be fine. Just come back in a fortnight".

I'd already assured her I had a job lined up, but that it would take a few weeks. The whole process had been far easier than in Sydney.

"I'd have to say, it's very different for me coming in here. I haven't really seen separate queues like this before".

"What do you mean?"

"Well, people all over to one side..."

She interrupted - "Oh no its not like that. That's just for the store cards that's all. This line

is for people who just need to put a form in".

"Yes, but its all Aboriginal people lining up there."

"No, it's not like that at all. It's just that there's so many people come in for store cards. So they take a long time".

I tried to slow it down. I really didn't want to make it sound like I was attacking the staff.

"But its only people from Aboriginal communities who get store cards though. Right? It's pretty much like segregation". I wasn't quite sure how much to push.

"It's quicker for them this way too".

Seeing me grimace "them", her tone quickened again.

"Oh well I mean every Centrelink would have its different problems. You're from Sydney. I couldn't work down there. They need security guards on the door down there!"

Less than two months later there were security guards in Alice Springs as well.

I called Barb and told her about it all.

"So you've seen our big line hey? You know sometimes it comes all around, like coming out the door".

I said I thought we should organise a sit-in style protest.

"Yeah, I've been saying we should do something like that for ages. We need everyone in there to just say 'we're not going to line up like this'".

4/8/08

Dear Centrelink Manager and members of staff,

The Intervention Rollback Action Group is made up of people from 'prescribed' Aboriginal communities under the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) and their supporters. We feel that the welfare provisions enabled under NTER legislation are racially discriminatory. We are currently engaged in political campaign demanding an end to the Intervention.

We write in regards to our particular concern that federal government policy has led to the creation of segregated queues for service delivery in Alice Springs Centrelink.

People from 'prescribed' Aboriginal communities, who receive the same Centrelink entitlements as others across the broader community (such as a pension or parenting allowance), are being instructed to form a separate queue to receive these entitlements.

We understand this practice may currently be legal due to provisions of NTER legislation

which suspend the operation of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) and the NT Anti-Discrimination Act (1992).

However, it represents an affront to basic principles of justice and human equality. It also contravenes a number of international human rights charters Australia has signed. For example;

- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), "Ensures the right of access to social security systems on a non-discriminatory basis, especially for disadvantaged or marginalized groups".

- The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) states, "governments undertake not to engage in any act or practice of racial discrimination and must ensure that all public authorities and public institutions act in conformity with this obligation"

We request the immediate de-segregation of service provision in Alice Springs Centrelink. People from 'prescribed' Aboriginal communities must be able to stand in the same queues as others attending Centrelink to speak with staff about receiving their entitlements.

We understand that the NTER has created enormous pressure on people working in Centrelink and we in no way hold staff responsible for the "income management" system currently in place. We believe the government should be providing more resources and better conditions for staff.

However, as this matter is causing considerable distress, we request a timely response. We will be initiating a more public campaign against this practice to ensure it does not continue.

Intervention Rollback Action Group (Alice Springs)

William Armstrong from Alice Springs 9/8/2008. Interviewed outside Alice Springs Centrelink

Its another form of apartheid, but its just worded differently. Apartheid is what I say because we still can't even think to ourselves, we still can't even get that right of deciding for ourselves how we are going to spend that money, that income that we have. We are just going back into the system anyhow.

I see that as an affront to basic human rights. Now days, the government is just coming in and saying, "you've got to do it this way". Just like the old days when people can't even think for themselves - lining up for the old ration day and things like that.

Its still creating that division, strengthening that racist element here. We're not in a very unified situation here because of this whole thing of "anti-social behaviour". We are bearing the brunt of that racism, because of these decisions made somewhere down in Canberra or where ever they are being made from. We still don't have that right of having a voice and raising our concerns, its being done from somewhere else.

There is a lot of anger out there and I think that is why we need to channel it out, because of all the issues that the Intervention has raised. At the moment it's being channeled out in Alice through the alcohol, through the anti-social behaviour, the abuse that you talk about and self-inflicted injuries to our people basically. That's what it is, its going internalised, there is no outlet here for the Aboriginal people in Alice Springs except getting on the grog. So why don't you talk about those sort of issues - tackle those sort of issues head on?

One thing I'd like to say is about getting more support from Interstate. Its not us here the Aboriginal people really. We are caught up because of the methodologies that are being implemented here in Alice Springs. A lot more needs to be done with the politicians and all the Aboriginal 'leaders'. Are they affected? I doubt very much. Its always us here in the street. Putting it back down on us.

You know - they've got to stop passing the buck and do something to stop this racism and bring back equality and justice. Its sadly lacking here in the Centre.

Interview with Geoffrey Shaw (continued from page x)

Racism existed in those days, back when I was a kid. Oh blatant racism.

They'd have two movies. We'd walk from here. Me and my relatives over here at Bungalow. We'd walk along the river to go to the movies. In those days I didn't know about racism assimilation, nothing.

But there was segregation in the movie theatre there. Everybody had to sit down at the floor in the front. And the other one too they made a sand pit for us, while the whitefellas sat at the back in cushioned canvas seats.

As soon as the movie was finished we had to get out of there. And that's the only time we had to stay in town was movie nights. Once a week. So we were allowed to stay there til late. But all the other times, we had to be out of town by 6 o'clock. So the racism was there. But because I was young I didn't see it, but now I know about the racist attitudes. "You mob have to go, you might cause trouble" and so on.

Back in them days they had prohibition too. The only people who were allowed to drink were people "of Aboriginal decent", the likes of me, part-Aboriginals.

And all them old blokes. Those old fellas here, some used to work here. What they used to do, they liked to have a drink. Closing time in pubs I think. They'd go down with a hessian bag. They'd go along with a matchbox. What them old blokes would do is put a 5 pound note in there, walk along the street past the pub. The old blokes sitting at the bar would come out and say g'day. They'd walk past, drop the match box and say, "the bags over at that gum tree there".

So prior to 6 o'clock what the old blokes would walk along, pick the match box up and go and buy the alcohol. They'd go and put it in the bag. Other ones who were allowed to drink in the pubs used to do that. Then they'd go and get the alcohol or the fortified wine and take it up into the hills to drink.

They couldn't drink at the Bungalow because that was under native welfare so that had to go and drink in the hills and hide away. And a few of them old fellas, they got caught. Back in them days they'd do 3-6 months day for providing alcohol. But that's what happened. All the way through.

Racism and Daily Life

The racism at the heart of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) legislation has become progressively structured into the daily life of Alice Springs.

The quarantine brought open racism into the shops, new police powers saw it intensify on the streets and the entire process gives confidence to racists in town.

Valerie Martin explained, "its getting worse now. People shout from the car at me. Our old people have had glass bottles thrown at them, just while they are sitting there. It's not on".

While the local newspapers have always been full of anti-Aboriginal vitriol, the Intervention has given them renewed vigor and focus.

One issue of the Murdoch owned *Centralian Advocate* published an editorial headlined, "Indigenous drunks go home", while simultaneously carrying a photo celebrating the ingenuity of a local sports team, white people wearing hats that could carry beer cans. Another editorial favourably quoted a call for the "bulldozing" of Aboriginal town camps.

The introduction of the multi-million dollar 'Basics Card' system in shops through out Alice was a massive bureaucratic operation, designed essentially to solidify the public division between two classes of customer – the normal and the 'prescribed'.

Many shops now have big color posters, with pictures of items "prohibited" on the card. This reinforces the same negative stereotypes as the big blue road signs outside every town-camp and community, and littered along the highway, which warn of entry into a "prescribed area".

Using the Basics Card takes far longer than paying in cash. There is no way to check the balance either at an ATM, or in the shop. The only way to do it is to call up Centrelink, which costs money and takes time.

Even when people think they know the balance, the credit could be missing. As a result, 'prescribed' customers are often left with no choice but to shop through 'trial and error'.

Barb outlined one experience.

"At the shop one day there were these two young girls in front of me. I knew who they were and that they had kids".

"They brought up \$40 worth of food to the check-out, mainly food for kids. And the worker said 'No, not enough'. So they put items back, two at a time. 'No still not enough'".

"When they come down to it, only \$9 or \$10 was left in that card. And I thought, 'Oh no'.

Lucky I was behind and I had extra money in my Basics Card I could give them".

Along with leading to shame and embarrassment for people trying to shop with the card, this also creates a nasty, frustrated atmosphere at the shop counter, which easily takes on a racist quality.

I spoke with Maxine Carlton at her town camp, who had just finished work, surveying people in different camps who had complaints about the card.

"This Basics Card is really bringing out the racism in Alice Springs. The way we are being treated in shops, being spoken to like dogs - 'Go and line up over there!' 'No, you stand back and wait!'"

In some instances, shops responded to complaints from staff and other customers by simply segregating the queues.

At the IGA supermarket in Eastside, a sign stayed up for many months, "Attention customers. Basics Card may only be used at this register". It was only removed after consistent complaint.

The paternalistic ideology of Income Management has been internalised by shopkeepers, who take it upon themselves to decide what Aboriginal people can and cannot buy with their Basics Card.

"They like telling us what to buy now. This one fella was told he could buy a pie and drumstick, but wasn't allowed chicken and chips!", said Maxine.

"An old lady said to me - 'are they going to lift up my clothes and tell me what bloomers to wear!'"

Her husband Donald had recently been given a Basics Card.

"I can't find anywhere that will sell me phone credit. The only place is Kmart. I could buy a mobile phone from this one store - but not any credit!"

Police have stepped up persecution of Aboriginal people through the Intervention. Houses in prescribed areas can be entered without warrant, all that is needed is suspicion some alcohol could be inside. Unopened alcohol can be confiscated on the street – again, police need only suspicion it will be consumed in prescribed areas.

The sight of Aboriginal people having beer cases taken, and sometimes smashed in front of them, is a common one.

Dianne Stokes described problems with the police in Tennant Creek, "They've got a strong law behind their back, the law that came in through Intervention. Every time people get caught (with alcohol) by the police they gonna get fined for that. They get taken into jail".

"And that's sad, seeing our people going back into jail, you know. Without having violent problem, it's just the problem through grog, just for the police fining them in one spot".

Selma from Santa Teresa complained about police behaviour, searching cars for alcohol

on the highway.

"Instead of just putting them cans in the police car you know, they smash all the grog on the road. When they pull over people... smash it on the road and say, 'OK you fellas clean it up'. They got the badge, that's what's making them feel high you know. Why can't they tell people, 'take your few cans home and drive safely'".

At Kunoth there are constant complaints about police. They barge through the houses. They have ridden through camp at speed on new dirt bikes, sometimes close to children playing.

One evening I was told that they drove through a group sitting in the creek bed cooking Kangaroo tail. When people protested there was tail under the coals, they doubled back to ride over it repeatedly.

Early this February I got a call from a friend Robin Granites, who often stays in Alice Springs. "I just wanted to tell you that the police reckon there is a curfew now, for us Aboriginal people".

"I was just standing in the Todd Mall with others. Selling paintings you know? And this copper came up and said. 'Right - all of you people, you have to be out of here by 8pm. Home by 8pm. The Sergeant has given new orders. Noone out after dark".

"And I reckon, 'I don't have to leave. I'm going to stay here. What are you going to do, arrest me?' But many people left".

One legal aid worker I spoke with talked of the compounding effect the quarantine had on the new police powers. When taken into lock-up, people were often finding it harder to afford both bail money and any fines they may be given, due to a shortage of cash from Income Management.

Concern about the racism of the Intervention is routinely dismissed by its conservative champions. The Australian newspaper particularly loves to print such dismissal from its Indigenous spokespeople.

Warren Mundine argues criticism of racism is "the concern of the latte-sipping set in Sydney", while Marcia Langton derides it as being, "entangled in the 50-year-old abstractions and ideology of the sanctity of the individual versus the collective rights of groups".

Always, the "action" of the Intervention is contrasted to the "bleating" of privileged people unable to move on from a "failed rights agenda".

But the racism of the Intervention is not an abstraction. In the words of people living under the policy it is the reason they can't access food to which they are entitled, why whole days are spent dealing with cruel bureaucracy as the pressures of life pile up and why even more people are going to jail. It is breaking down health, crushing self-esteem and exacerbating cycles of self-destruction.

Anti-racism is not just an ideology held in cities. It is an everyday practice demanding food at the supermarket counter, dignity in life's endless queues and protection from the violence of police. It brings people together, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in

relationships of solidarity and struggle against a government set on enforcing bitterness, hunger and division.

Interview with Uncle Kevin Buzzacott, long-time Aboriginal rights activist now 'quarantined' through the Intervention. 30/8/2008

I think the Intervention is like many of the policies, many of the tricks over the years, over the last couple of generations, how to control Aboriginal people. It is to nail people, to scare people, to get the land off people. The full control.

I think people of Australia - they better watch this. Because if they get away with it here in the Territory, they are going to do it all around the country. So your freedom, whatever freedom you think you might have, its going to go down here. The Intervention, they can pin you for drinking, pin you for whatever they want to pin you for. You'll end up in their jails, you'll end up a criminal.

You get a mother in a car, with their kids, driving home from the shop or somewhere. The cops lights blair - the sirens going. They pull the car over. They breathalise the mother. The kids are screaming in the car, they're terrified because they're scared of the cops and they think they're going to arrest their mother or whoever else is in the car.

I've seen people spread-eagled on the back of the car and strip searched. They even take you to the jail if you speak your rights to them - all in the name of the Intervention.

They bust into your homes, whether there's grandmothers or grandfathers, baby sleeping in the house. They arrest you. They hassle you.

It's insulting as well, you get pulled up on the main street or in the community. Its insulting. Other people looking at you getting arrested or pulled over. No respect towards who we are, what we are.

Some of these police. I don't know how they're trained or taught. But they don't care what age you are, if your sick, anything. They just scare you, really freak you out. Now people, just driving into town, as soon as they see a police car, they start shaking and carrying on. Even the mothers, the way they've been spoken to.

The control - this is no monkey business. This is full on. Terror - its a terror attack.

Taking half of your pension. The money - people don't know where to go. You've got to chase Centrelink again to get your food vouchers, this sort of thing is just crazy. I've never dreamed that they'd pull us back 50 years or more, back in the old mission days, its just crazy. I've never seen this before.

What this is doing - racism has always been an issue in this country. This is going a bit more, because this is creating racism more amongst a people. Its not a good solution for peace.

I've said I think there's going to be an explosion - I don't know how long people can sit back and take this bullshit by the coppers. They chase you off the road, they run you off

the road. There's been accidents where the police has chased people on the road. There's all sorts of pressure and fear.

Everyone really needs to look at this, they really need to get together and be really strong about it. There's rallies coming up, there's meetings coming up. I really think people need to get down there, with the people that are organising it, and have their own say about how this Intervention is, what it's doing to you. And if you don't nail it now, you're going to be wearing it the rest of your life. And when you die, your kids are going to be wearing it and so forth.

You have your rights. Your human rights. You gotta be strong. Don't be scared of these mob. Go to these rallies, speak strong. You gotta speak the truth. The truth will get us there.

Police raid Kunoth camp

On the night of Thursday October 9, a large number of police participated in a raid of the Kunoth town camp in Alice Springs.

Police jumped over fences to enter the camp, displayed rifles, pushed and abused residents and trained a laser on the chest of one man.

Police claimed they were looking for weapons, following a tip off from the fire brigade that there were guns in a car that drove back to the camp. A miniature toy gun was later found on the dashboard of the car.

Protesting at the police station on Monday October 13, Kunoth locals blamed the Intervention for the incident. The Intervention has given police new powers to enter "prescribed areas" without warrant (cite power) and seen the deployment of police from interstate with no experience dealing in Aboriginal communities.

Their protests came just one week after accusations by Yonglu people that heavy-handed behaviour by Intervention police was responsible for the death of a young man in Arnhem Land.

I interviewed Kunoth residents with other members of the Intervention Rollback Action Group.

Donald Kunoth, vice-president of the town camp, explained the danger of the raid, "there was a big mob of police here. They come running in like they were looking for terrorists. We've never had that here before. I have a heart condition and my parents too".

"Apparently there were guns stolen in Alice Springs earlier in the week. And they just assumed it was our Aboriginal kids. It's so scary to see your kids get harassed like that. At gun-point. One of them could have been shot by accident. They even had bullet proof vests on. Lights were shining into the camp from outside and that blinded us. What if someone came walking out with a stick? They could have been shot".

Maxine Carlton had spoken to me many times before about the increased police

harassment suffered through the Intervention. “We were just watching a TV program about the death in Arnhem Land after police actions. Little did we know it was going to happen in our yard”.

“One copper that I took in to search the rooms was stationed in Alice and he said to me ‘we know you mob Kunoth family that live in this block, we know you mob sort your own problems out’. That’s why I think it’s the intervention cops who organised raid, like Chris Burns (NT Justice Minister) said, they get chucked in there and they don’t have the training. We’re not living freely like we used to in our town camps, you know, we have to keep looking over our shoulders.”

Eva Kunoth lives at Utopia, but stays at the camp when she comes into town with her husband. “We’ve got two out there also at Utopia from this intervention thing...they don’t know what they’re doing out there. They don’t know what they’re role is, they don’t know who to talk to, they don’t ask either, the Intervention just put them there and that’s it. That’s how that one died up there in Arnhem Land. They don’t know who to talk to”.

Robbie Petrick lives in a humpy, built in the back yard of his uncle’s house at Kunoth. “This little girl was sleeping and the police just came in and shake the humpy (where little girl is sleeping), and we live in the humpy, the police come in with rifles, pointing them at my uncle, they was like a sniper with red light, laser come on his chest, pointed, just for no reason. Like soldiers, just like a soldier”.

His partner Josephine was furious. “The local cops come in and ask where the grog is hidden, and we just tell them the others, intervention mob, they just come raging in you know. It’s just outrageous. A disgrace.”

“We need human rights you know. That’s why we feel sad. Its been just like we been chained up again, like our ancestors did in the past. They were chained up and dragged like animals. We don’t want that to happen again, for our children, and their children you know. We gotta stand for our rights”.

Valerie Martin was staying at Kunoth at the time of the raid. She helped encourage the residents to stand up and protest against the raid. “The Intervention was supposed to protect children. But the children are more scared now because of these police. I have been calling the Intervention an invasion since the start. And now here it is – they invaded our community”.

Invasion isn't 'closing the gap'

Speeches from public demonstration outside the Alice Springs police station. Monday October 13, 2008

Barbara Shaw

We have had raids on our town camps for a long time. This is the latest one - and we're going to make an official complaint. Because a lot of our people, who are affected by the Intervention, are sick of it. Especially invasion into our homes.

We have a lot of sick and elderly people on our town camps and this is what the police do. Without any respect or knowledge of our people. So yeah its all about respect and working together. If they want to talk to us they should knock on our doors and respectfully talk to us. Its all part of consultation.

They brought the intervention out as an emergency response - now its far more than an emergency response. And this is not closing the gap either for our people by invasion of our homes.

Donald Kuno

My uncle had a red laser dot his chest. I don't know what it was - a gun, one of those tazer guns? It was like commandos back over there. They was jumping over the fence and one of them made an arrest to my nephew. Grabbed him, without talking to him properly. He co-operated. We all cooperated there, but the way they did this was pretty scary you know? Frighten our kids. It shouldn't be like that. Can't we just get along?

Eva Kuno

I'm the grandmother of those kids that they arrested... I'm a woman that's got a heart condition. I live out bush. And my grandchildren never carry guns. This one (holds up the toy gun), it belonged to my three year old grand son.

Eileen Hoosan

I have a statement here on behalf of town camp women in Alice Springs - in prescribed areas.

We are calling for a full investigation of the use of force by police in this case - the Kuno military style policing.

This is not the first time that police have acted in a way that could be called police brutality. The use of excessive force. Confrontation by police in our camps has replaced investigation.

Case one surrounding our south camps - home invasions. No one could come in or out of our south camps. The police systematically conducted home invasion on each house, resulting in frightening women and children, scaring and frightening old people.

Our communities are now being subject to psychological intimidation by police and there is an atmosphere of terror.

Town Camp women will comprehensively document, statistics on the use of force by law enforcement on the town camps and all prescribed areas.

We believe if we don't do this, there could be a possible shooting on the town camps in Alice Springs. If police need to go in there is a right way to do it. We are worried that there will be a shooting by police of our people on the town camps.

Valerie Martin

That's what I was all about - invasion. Right from the start. Its not on. It's got to stop.

Please, show us some respect! We are human beings too!

I hope we can live side by side here. This is not the way to go. We call this place Australia home. We should all live in harmony and share this land.

Cracking the Plastic

In November, the NT Council of Social Services (NTCOSS) organised a forum in Alice Springs for affiliates and the general public about the progress of NT Intervention.

NTCOSS had lined up management level workers from the range of government agencies overseeing the Intervention to give presentations and field questions.

Most people who came to the forum were from front line service organisations, working everyday with people affected by the Intervention.

A handful of people were from 'prescribed areas', including Elaine Peckham, who lived at an outstation on the Iwapatuka Land Trust and was a member of the Intervention Rollback Action Group (IRAG) and her son George, an experienced community worker.

The presentations were cheerful and plastic. The session on the Basics Card couldn't have been more disconnected from reality.

"So you would have all seen out new Basics Card. Isn't it a lovely green?"

The Centrelink presenter forced a smile through the entire 15 minute powerpoint and referred three times to the, "beautiful new green card".

"We have had such good feedback, everyone says they love their new green card. That's what they call it, 'their little green card'".

Except when discussing a new employment program being launched within Centrelink, the word "Aboriginal" wasn't mentioned.

When question time started, the plastic quickly cracked and the smiles disappeared.

Criticism fired from all over the room.

"My clients are disabled. This has created massive levels of work for us. We don't have the resources to always be taking people into Centrelink."

"We have received a number of complaints that money continues to be taken out of Income Management for the school lunch program, even though children are no longer attending that school. Sometimes more than \$50 a week".

"There are signs up in shops telling people to form separate queues".

"What you are doing is in direct breach of the Racial Discrimination Act. Its racist. The government's own report showed that. Isn't their disquiet in your departments about what you are doing to people?"

George was upset that, despite all the focus on 'Income Management', many well functioning financial management programs coming from communities had not been supported through the Intervention and were needing to "water down their programs to fit with what the government is doing".

"I see a complete lack of accountability in the services that are hitting communities right now. There is so much money being spent and we can't see anything to show for it."

The staff sat shuffling their feet. Certainty and confidence turned quickly and a sense of shared frustration. Things "weren't supposed to be happening like this". Our issues would be "taken into consideration... but we have no idea where the government is going with this".

This wasn't good enough for a young woman from a local town camp.

"Tell me why this is just happening to Aboriginal people".

A woman from FaCHSIA started the standard defense. "Well, there are many people from affected areas who aren't Aboriginal..."

"So why was a white lady from my town camp told she didn't have to be on Income Management because she wasn't Aboriginal?"

"That's not supposed to happen..."

"That's what they told her. The staff in Centrelink. She's getting her full cheque now so why can't we!?"

"No that's not supposed to happen at all. We'll look into that".

Someone from Centrelink took over with another well worn line. "The NTER was a response to the Little Children are Sacred Report, which was an inquiry focussed on Aboriginal communities..."

"But there's a lot more people drinking in my camp now and a lot more domestic violence".

"More domestic violence because people can't access money through their Basics Card and this causes fights. More drinking, everyone is always coming in from the bush".

"I can't sleep until four in the morning. Before this I used to go to bed at nine at night. Now its 100 times worse. People supporting this - have they ever lived in a town camp!"

She was very angry, and starting to cry.

"Is the government taking into account what they are doing to our elders? This is killing them. Back in the old days they fought really hard for black people to get their rights. Now they have to see their grandkids going through this".

The room was silent. A Centrelink worker tried a response.

"As difficult as it is to hear that... we will take your stories back".

The young woman walked out.

Elaine Peckham took the chance to speak.

"This Intervention has brought us right back to a ground level. Its taken everything away from us. Our journey, everything that we've gone through to get where we are today."

"You say its going to get better - its never going to! How are our young ones supposed to come up with happening all around us?"

"We were working from 14 and 15 years of age. We went out and got an education. For what? For the government to do this to us? Now all of a sudden, I feel we are just empty again."

"We have to survive again. We survived getting land. Old people going out with swags to get it back. Now they are taking it away from us. We are being victimised for living on the land by the Income Management".

We heard no more talk of the "beautiful new green card".

Dennis Nelson from Yuendumu discusses 'White Australia' 1/10/2008

From the start, when the first government was formed in Australia, every Australian government, every policies has always been based on the white Australia policy.

The white Australia policy was born out of the fact that, when white people started fighting to build a nation in Australia, they saw that Aboriginal people as a dying race. They said to themselves, "they'll die out in 100 years. Let's make a White Australia policy, only for white people". And that gave them the legitimacy to own Australia.

That's why all the lands have only been given to white people, everything has been removed. Mineral rights. Land and Sea Rights, they've all been taken off us by the Australian government and now they're still making these laws against Aboriginal people. Their policies have always been to take away self-determination from the Aborgiinal people because, they think we are still a dying race.

From the start, since the birth of the Australian government its been a white Australia policy only. And they are still making these laws to take away everything from the Aboriginal people just so that all the policies will always support white Australia.

Rudd's New Assimilation

Through late October and early November, a raft of new policy, from both the Federal and NT government, crashed into communities already struggling with the Intervention.

All of this policy seemed driven by the same agenda guiding the Intervention - breaking up Aboriginal control and Aboriginal culture, moving people off their lands and forcing assimilation into "mainstream" Australia.

First came a growing awareness of the implications of the NT government's new discussion paper into the future of outstations and homelands. The paper said that no new housing would be built on outstations and that ongoing support for all currently existing outstations would not be possible.¹⁰

Mark Lane, from the Kalumpurpa homeland near Tennant Creek, attended a public consultation about the new policy, put on by the NT government.

"They reckon that they'll just give us funding money for two years and then they don't know what will happen there. Maybe we have to go. That's not right. Felt bad really. How can they do this to us, pushing people?"

"We told them - Every outstations here in the Northern Territory everywhere, they live next to a sacred site. They dance that sacred site, they sing that sacred site".

"We are connected to the land like that. And no one can come from the outside and tell us 'move out from there' you know, 'you've got nothing there, you've got nothing to do there'. They're wrong. They don't even come out you know, them government people".

"We been going on that for 40,000 years you know! First Aboriginal people, we bin look after the land. Doing all the work on the land, looking after the land, looking after the sacred sites. Now this fella wanna come over and say, 'we'll break it up now!'."

"We sat on that land and we are going to stay there. Rudd, we thought he was going to take the old laws out, but nup. He's sticking on with Howard's law".

Following the news about outstations, came an announcement that there would be severe restrictions placed on the teaching of Aboriginal languages in schools.

Comprehensive bilingual programs operating in ten remote government schools would effectively be abolished and teaching in language would only be allowed in the afternoons.

Rhonda Inkamala, the cultural principal of the Yipirinya Aboriginal school in Alice Springs said that her school's programs would not be immediately affected, because of Yipirinya's classification as a non-government school. However, future funding was uncertain and she was very worried about the policy change, which she saw as clearly connected with

¹⁰ *Northern Territory Government Outstations Policy Discussion Paper, 2008*
http://www.action.nt.gov.au/outstations/docs/Outstations_Discussion_Paper.pdf

the NT Intervention.

"I think the government is trying to change the Anangu (Aboriginal) way of life. So they are able to only learn about Western culture. You can't just change Anangu just like that - over night and tell them that they have to do this. This has been their lifestyle all this time. Its been past on, from their ancestors. They need to pass this cultural knowledge onto their children. Aboriginal people need to continue to live in that lifestyle, otherwise they lose their identity, their language and culture. Who are they going to be?"

Imelda Palmer, a teacher at an independent school in Santa Teresa was in a similar position.

"We are shocked. And confused".

"The Intervention first, and then the shire came in and now they are talking about the bi-lingual education. And the homelands, it's just continuing. On and on. What next? What are they going to take away from the people now? Are they going to start taking kids who don't come to school?"

Through all of this, pressure was intensifying for a select number of communities to sign away leases over their land for between 40-90 years under the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP).

SIHIP is particularly insidious. Housing is desperately needed in communities. This need has already been used cynically once by government - to justify the Intervention. The need to cut through red tape so that housing could be built promptly was the key rationale provided for the compulsory 5-year leases. Of course, none have been built.

SIHIP is a major investment program. \$647 million is being committed to Aboriginal housing in the NT, in a joint venture between the Federal and NT governments.

But this money is being used as a weapon - to further break up community control, push people out of remote areas and entrench the NT intervention.

Despite overcrowding being a serious problem in virtually all 73 communities "prescribed" under the NT intervention, only 16 have been offered any new housing, along with the town camps in major population centres like Alice Springs and Darwin.

In Central Australia, only three communities have been earmarked for new construction - Yuendumu, Lajamanu and Hermansburg.

Even many larger communities of more than 500 people are excluded, such as Papunya and Ali Curung, with on average 12 people living to a house.

SIHIP is a further step in the government strategy of "population concentration".

The Northern Territory Emergency Response task force, in their June report, recommended precisely such a restriction of resource provision to communities deemed

“economically viable”.¹¹

Speaking about the Central Australian communities selected by SIHIP, one Central Land Council delegate argued, "You see those communities are big communities, where the mining industry is already established. So if the government is going to take it over for 40 years and build houses - what about the smaller communities?"

Minister Jenny Macklin has made it clear that any housing will depend on communities signing long term leases. Through November people were being increasingly threatened - unless they signed soon, they will be left to rot.

Community control of township land was won through decades of struggle for Land Rights. It signaled a break with the days when Aboriginal lives were controlled by paternalistic welfare boards and mission managers. It ensured that local people had input into what developments take place on their land and played a central role in service delivery.

The five-year leases taken through the Intervention were a huge attack on these gains. They have already facilitated a major asset grab that forms part of SIHIP, being used in many places to forcibly transfer all existing community owned housing stock to the Australian government, to be managed by the NT department of housing.

This will mean higher rents, more restrictive tenancy conditions and easier eviction.

Elaine Peckham explained that this would make it harder to live on her outstation.

“As well as the hardship from the intervention, the NT government is also taking control of tenancy management away from the community. We are facing rent increases that I can’t afford as a pensioner”.

Elaine Gori from Santa Teresa said that Aboriginal control of tenancy management was necessary to ensure respect for cultural practices, like the need to move house if someone passed away.

"They own the houses now. We can't just go into houses now. We have to see the person. Its a Territory house now. You can't change when you want."

"This makes it harder on the cultural side. We can't stay in a house when someone loses a son you know? Or daughter. We have to get out because you can't stay in that house. It will be hard eh".

Geoffrey Shaw explained why the Tangentyere council had been so strong resisting attempts by NT housing to take over tenancy management in the town camps.

"We need to practice self-management. Determine who gets a house, who moves into the

¹¹ *Northern Territory Emergency Response Taskforce: Final Report to Government*, June 2008 http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/nter_reports/final_report_2008/Pages/default.aspx at page 15

community. In that way you've got control over your own life".

"They say culture is a problem. But it re-enforces the administration of this place. Because you've got the structure there of people and how they fit in, how to control the affairs of this place."

"NT housing, they can't even look after Aboriginal people in there own state housing!"

"If we go towards NT housing taking over and they maintain control over these houses it will be 'upmarket rent' I suppose. And I can't imagine these people paying \$250 per week."

William Tilmouth, the current executive director of Tangentyere, outlined further fears that inform ongoing opposition among town campers to the provisions of SIHIP in an interview with CAAMA Radio in Alice Springs on March 27 2009.

"One of the questions that remained unanswered is, what will happen to people living in tin sheds? There are 70 tin sheds and they represent people's accomodation and also the need for housing. Those tin sheds will be bulldozed and I don't think they'll be building 70 new houses. In my estimation that's a question the government hasn't thought of and hasn't put money forward to accomodate those people".

"The NT government, they create a lot of homelessness through failed tenancies in urban housing and the people always come and live on town camps, that's their fallback position. If the NT housing management takes over the town camps and applies the same rules and regulations, where's your fallback position if you get evicted from a town camp? You don't have a fallback position. Especially if you are a renal patient and you need to be in town."

"The only fallback position is back into the scrub, from whence you came. This is how Aboriginal people started, by living in humpies and car bodies and tin sheds in the scrub first. Its a push back to the old days 30 years ago. That's how Tangentyere came about because of the need to accommodate these people".

Contracts for construction under SIHIP have already been signed with multi-national construction and infrastructure consortiums.

For example, Parsons-Brinkerhoff, who have made millions from reconstruction contracts in Iraq, are now following the troops into NT Aboriginal communities. They have a guaranteed place on the SIHIP operational steering committee.

Many of the communities being pressured to sign leases have said they will not be held to ransom for basic entitlements.

David Ross, Director of the Central Land Council said, "Aboriginal people are being delivered ultimatums—sign a lease with Canberra before Christmas or forget about any further funding... of course people are resisting."

Hermasburg community leader Gus Williams came out strongly following a meeting with the federal government, who were pushing hard for leases. He called the apology a sham

and denounced Kevin Rudd for continuing with Howard's agenda (CAAMA radio 6th November 2008).

When Aboriginal Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin visited the Central Australian community of Yuendumu, she was presented with a petition signed by 236 residents denouncing the intervention and stating, "We want the Government to stop blackmailing us. We want houses, but we will not sign any leases over our land, because we want to keep control of our country, our houses, and our property".

Harry Nelson from Yuendumu told a demonstration in Alice Springs to mark Human Rights Day in December, "I'll tell you point blank. We will never sign... the elders who have fought so hard for land rights cannot sign".

Yuendumu Fights Back

The most consistent, vocal and organised opposition to the NT Intervention coming from the bush has been based out of Yuendumu.

Yuendumu is proud of many successful independent organisations that provide services and employment opportunities to local people, built up over many years by the community.

Yuendumu women were the founders of the Night Patrol Service for example, which has been replicated in many communities across the NT.

Relatively large in terms of remote communities, the Yuendumu community has a strong Warlpiri identity that is, for many, fiercely political.

The local PAW media organisation, which broadcasts over a massive area covering the Warlpiri language group, allowed me to watch some footage of community meetings held with government officials in the early days of the Intervention.

The hurt and anger were raw. So too was the spirit of defiance. But it was eloquence and sophistication of the critique of the Intervention, coming from a broad range of voices in the community, that seemed most intimidating for the visiting bureaucrats.

On 30 October 2007 Major General Dave Charlmers, Operational Commander of the Northern Territory Emergency Response and Brian Stacey from FAHCSIA went out to Yuendumu to face a meeting.

Charlmers, stood in front of the crowd in full army fatigues and tried to sell the Intervention.

"There is \$587 million in the NT for remote communities. \$100s of millions of additional money... We want to work with the Warlpiri people to see how you can make the most of that money and make the most of that opportunity".

From the start he tried to distance himself from the government who had made the decision to Intervene.

"I apologise. I am sorry that the consultation didn't happen. Can I ask that we acknowledge that was not right but we need to move forward. How can we consult? How can you take control of what the government is offering? Take control of those \$100s of millions".

"I want to hear you. We have a Government Business Manager (GBM) - Noel - who you can talk to at any time and he can talk to me."

Ned Hargraves translated for Charlmers. Relaying the point about the GBM he added, "I call them 'superintendent'. Like back in the 50s and 60s".

At the end of the translation he asked, "Are we dog face? I don't know", then shouted - "Give us our permit back!"

Denis Wilson spoke about the 5-year leases.

"After the 5 year lease I think the land will be taken away from us. Land is our mind, place, that holds everything. That belongs to us... land's got the dream site, ceremony, everything. That's why we want our land. Not to touch or take away from us".

Encouraging him, there were shouts from the crowd - "This is Aboriginal Land"

"This place belongs to the community is not for sale. Government can keep the millions there. We want the land"

Charlmers responded, "That leased area is so government can invest money in public housing, to make sure that you have the houses and services in the community that you should have and they can be properly looked after. That's why government is leasing the land so it can become the landlord of new public housing in the community".

Of course this proved to be a lie. Now the government is demanding 90 year leases to build housing.

Jeannie Egan outlined the detailed plans that the community had made for its own future and their incredible frustration these were not being supported. "We had so many meetings about that 5-year plan. We talked about education and we talked about police... we went to so many meetings, what happened to this?"

Harry Nelson backed up the point, "The 5 year plan. We got a 5 year plan worked out... It got thrown in the rubbish bin."

"This Intervention has put us back 30 years. Self-determination has been knocked on the head. Self-government knocked on the head. ATSIC was abolished. Why? because they were too brainy! They talked up for rights, on behalf of Aboriginal people in Australia".

"During the 40s, very few of us mixed with white people. I didn't know half of the teachers. Lack of consultation - same as the Intervention".

James Japangardi Marshal spoke too of the parallels with the past.

"I want you to think back to the assimilation policy. Back in those days... the same thing with this Intervention is happening right now for us. In the past, way back, the government, I'm talking about the Labor party, gave us the right for self-determination. Gave us everything. Slowly the government step in, bit by bit... now today the government has taken everything. The rights of our people."

"We are like a puppet on a string and you mob will be telling us what to do. We haven't got any rights. Back in the old days, when the assimilation policy was on. We've got a Superintendent here - he's like a watchdog. We're like animals or something like that. It's been done way back in the assimilation policy. Now you've got Intervention here - right here against us".

Otto Jungaarayi Simms was one of many people who spoke about the pain caused by the propaganda about Aboriginal people used to justify the Intervention.

"Are we bad? You see those old ladies, are they bad? Your telling us how to live. We know how to live! We are law abiding citizens. You know? That's why we've got to talk up strong."

"This mob come up here, they're telling us how to live. How to work. We have been screaming out for work. For health. Lowa (nothing). And now they come up. Because there's an election looming. They want to tell the mob in the southern cities they are helping black people."

Robbie Jungala Walit said, "All the men here. Are they pedophiles? None of us! This is a shame job for Yapa... We have been trying to protect our kids from invaders like you!"

Robert Simms was furious that the government was using the Little Children are Sacred Report to justify the Intervention.

"The thing that makes me so upset is that based on that child report you just chuck in all those things. The permit system has got nothing to do! You just stick to that child abuse report... I sat on the oval speaking to those consultants who made that report."

"What I told Rex Wild was that we needed more professional help, not taking the permit system away! We need work, training, that's what we wanted. Up there at the school - education. And what has the government done? They wrote that report and now take the permit system away. 5-year lease. That's your idea. You didn't listen to what we said."

"Instead of listening to us, when we were kind enough to invite the QC Rex Wild and Pat Anderson to talk to community members... we were kind enough to invite them to tell them we need help in areas such as education and employment and getting social workers here... what you have done is completely the opposite! So who is wrong here? Are we wrong? I think its you mob who are wrong."

"You didn't listen to the people who are living with the problems. Where we live day by day. Daily. You come in here - with 5 million bucks to tell us how to live and to upgrade the housing. When we've been screaming for 20 years to get more houses. You know? You tell me - I'm so upset you know."

Charlmers again fell back on what proved to be lies about what the Intervention would deliver.

"I understand that you're upset and you're not wrong. Respectfully I'd say to you that what you say, 'education and housing and jobs are important solutions to these problems', government did listen to that and government does want to repair and maintain the houses in the community and build more. Government does want to ensure that the school has enough teachers and enough classrooms so that all the children can go to school. Government does want to address health problems in your communities."

Robert saw straight through him. "Dave Charlmers - I'm sorry about that. I get so upset because every Aboriginal people in the NT will be classed as a pedophile and child abuser or women basher you know? The government should have programs to help people like that and you know".

"I tell you Dave Charlmers. You start building a bigger jail. There are so many Aboriginal people in jail and the jail will get full up. The crime rate will go up. Instead of helping the Aboriginal people you just make it harder."

Valerie Martin translated for me his final comments in Warlpiri. "All the people that are facing fines, they can't pay this fine - Charlmers, would you want to chuck in your \$75,000 to pay this? Throw a few bob in?".

On the 15th October 2007, workers from the Department of Workplace Relations (DEWR) and Centrelink came out to explain the abolition of the 'Remote Area Exemption' for Centrelink payments and field questions about the Intervention.

As the sun set on the Yuendumu basketball court, they put up signs, shuffled feet and distributed fruit.

Adam Riley fronted the meeting.

"I have brought some of my friends from Centrelink. No one is here to stop your Centrelink money. The main reason we are here is to talk about this poster. It's only a small poster".

The poster showed the new processes people would have to go through to claim unemployment benefits.

"We understand you have had many visits from the Australian government. There are a lot of big changes happening. Many people are not only fearful, they are very confused. Its important that people here take back all your concerns."

Speaking about the remote area exemption, Adam said, "people recieved their Centrelink money but didn't need to do anything in return for that. This process is now changing".

"They have to contact Centrelink on the phone within 2 weeks or their pay will stop... If you break your word 3 times, your pay will be stopped for 8 weeks".

People were furious. A man stood up and said, "See these kids here. They've got parents that are 15-16 years of age. If you stop their Centrelink payments, how are they going to feed them? That's what this enquiry was about - look at these kids?!"

Adam tried to be brave. "No one from Centrelink and no one from the Australian governments want people to be hungry".

"My name is Valerie Martin. If someone is on the leave or sorry business, how are they going to survive through that 8 weeks if that money is taken away? How are the kids going to survive?"

"The government is jumping up and down about the kids - the sacred kids. So this is what I'm concerned about. The rules have been set down on us without any consultation. Without letting us know, working with us about all these things. That's why I ask you that direct questions about the kids. We are concerned, each one of us".

Many people asked the same question and were assured, "At no stage will anyone be in a position where they can't get food for there kids".

Adam said that even if people were cut off, there would be food available.

"There are people in my department that are working out the easiest way for that to happen in remote communities. No matter what happens the kids won't go hungry. You might not get the cash - but you will have access to those things".

This immediately raised questions about the quarantining of money people had heard about on the news. What was this going to look like? How was it going to happen?

Adam tried to explain that he only really had information about the remote area exemption.

"At the moment the information is not very clear to us. From the media we were initially told 50% - but we will get back to you with the final figure."

What if people go interstate?

"To be completely honest, its too early. We can't answer that question yet".

People shouted from the crowd - "Give us some answers! We need answers!"

Ned Hargraves took the microphone again.

"Excuse me Adam. When we spoke to Peter he said clearly you have to talk to people who know the information. So I am asking you. Give us some answers otherwise we are going to be sitting here all night thinking 'what's going to come next', what are you going to make out of us? Next step is probably lining up and shooting us!"

"We are urging you and your government - this thing sucks! It sucks! Our life is in your hands. We need to know this!"

Adam was almost in tears. "I quit my job in Canberra because I want to work with remote communities. I respect that this is an issue but I am only going to give answers I know".

Christopher Poulson pushed harder. "Adam. You shouldn't be here. If you don't know you shouldn't be here. You are killing me. You are not a little boy - you listen. Is this law only for blackfella and the government is treating us just like a little boy. Like a student in boarding school. 'There's \$20 for a pen, some stationary'. How long are you going to teach us?"

"What you've described might be the case", he replied. "I don't know. My boss isn't here".

"You shouldn't be here then! Go. Get off the microphone!"

People spoke strongly for more than an hour about the problems facing the community, how they were going to get worse with the new changes.

Occasionally, Adam worked up the confidence to say something.

Harry Nelson asked a question. "Adam. This Intervention is only happening in the NT. A lot of people in other states are abusing their children. Why isn't it happening in Sydney? The home ground of the Prime Minister?"

Adam started to speak about the Little Children are Sacred Report.

Harry interjected - "Did the report talk about taking rights away?"

"No", he conceded. "It did not talk about taking rights away".

Harry finished the meeting with a call to action.

"Is there a march in town end of the week - there is a rally in town, thursday, friday?"

"We go into town everyone, one time, march! We'll ask the Intervention mob for 20 buses - that's for a start!"

The strong stand taken through the numerous community meetings held through late 2007 transferred into a more organised opposition to try and hold off the Intervention taking over the community.

Staff from the Yuendumu 'Old People's Program' have told me stories of a period of intense harassment from Intervention bureaucrats late in 2007, who made explicit attempts to take over the program. These were only stopped through people literally standing their ground and defying the visiting officials.

At the same time, many in the community started to develop a strategy for holding off the welfare quarantine.

Frank Baarda explained, "The two stores in Yuendumu, the Mining store and the Social Club store resisted applying for a license because they didn't agree with the idea of Income Management".

"What the Social Club committee, who had a lot of pressure put on them to adopt income management came up with was, a public position that said 'we have got mixed messages about income management, so we would much prefer if it was deferred until such time as the governmentt review', which was promised. What they asked was 'hold off on Income Management until such time as the review comes out'. But that was not enough".

Not having a store licensed to deal with Income Management severely held up its implementation. Many times, Centrelink set dates for introduction of the system in Yuendumu, only to push them back.

Desperate to break the community opposition, Intervention bureaucrats began trying to find a wedge into the community.

Frank Baarda explains, "So the Intervention made an agreement with the Women's Centre, talked the Women's Centre into opening up a third shop, and a large amount of money was spent opening up this other store. So to me that tells me what their agenda, that their agenda is more important to them, pushing their ideas, rather than to actually think about it and going, hey, hang on, here's a bunch of people who don't like income management."

Valerie Martin, who was working for the women's centre until the time of this decision, said it caused a bitter division amongst women associated with the centre.

Valerie left her job and remains insistent that the proposal had support of only a handful of women, and that most of the initiative had come from the manager. She also raises concerns that the Centre, which was once a place which provided services for women, is now just a shop.

Nevertheless, the fact that it was the women's centre which eventually allowed the quarantine to come into Yuendumu was a serious coup for the Intervention, one which would be further exploited by Jenny Macklin when she visited the community for the opening of a new swimming pool.

The way the visit unfolded demonstrates, not only the consciously racist strategy being used by government to implement the Intervention on unwilling communities, but also the extent to which this relies on open deception.

Whitewash

The news that Indigenous affairs minister Jenny Macklin would visit Yuendumu on Monday 27th October in 2008, to open the local swimming pool, sparked a flurry of activity among local residents opposed to the Intervention.

One common complaint about the Intervention process had been the lack of opportunity to communicate community concern directly to the high levels of government.

Minister Macklin had been consistently quoted in the press arguing that there was widespread Aboriginal support for Intervention measures, particularly among women. I

had heard people from Yuendumu often explain these comments as arising from an ignorance of the realities on the ground, that the minister had simply been “told the wrong information”, or had been “listening to the wrong people”.

The experience of Macklin’s trip to the community hardened a more cynical suspicion – that she was both perfectly aware of the hardship being suffered through the Intervention and taking measures to distort the message of community opposition.

During the weekend before Macklin’s visit, despite widespread participation in ‘sorry business’ following a tragic death, 236 local residents signed onto a petition. 140 of these were women.

The petition outlined opposition to imposed controls such as Income Management and called for an end to the Intervention, the immediate reinstatement of the Racial Discrimination Act, support for community control and for the government to stop blackmailing the community into signing an ongoing lease over township land. It was prepared collaboratively by many local people, including Warlpiri women Valerie Martin and Peggy Brown, a deeply respected elder who had received the Order of Australia Medal for her work establishing the Mt Theo Program and ridding Yuendumu of serious petrol sniffing problems.

Harry Nelson, along with a strong delegation of Warlpiri including Peggy Brown, presented the petition to the minister during a ‘community meeting’ prior to the pool opening. The Warlpiri controlled PAW media association, who had filmed numerous, similar meetings with government representatives, were instructed to leave the meeting by Jenny Macklin.

Harry explained later that Minister Macklin accepted the signatures with sympathetic words, but said there was little she could do to make any real changes, due to Labor’s lack of control in the federal Senate.

Speaking to media however, the Minister made no reference to the petition, or Labor’s ‘problem’ with the Senate. “The division between men and women over income management could not have been sharper”, she told Russell Skelton from the Fairfax press, “I explained to the men that it was going to continue.”¹²

Peggy Brown, whose photo appeared in *The Age*, unwittingly became the face of “the women” in Yuendumu who, in all corporate media reports, were presented as a homogenous block, battling “the men” to retain the Intervention.¹³

Brown was quoted by Skelton saying, “it’s working, there’s no doubt about it”. Her strong comments in a speech opening the pool were not printed. “This is our land! Government has got to support Yapa (Aboriginal people), we’ve got to keep control of our land!”

¹² Skelton, Russell, “Intervention is working: Warlpiri women tell Macklin”, *The Age*, October 28 2008

¹³ see also Robinson, Natasha, “Locals buoyant as NT outback gets an inground pool”, *The Australian*, October 28 2008

Peggy was furious. She immediately issued a public statement, written in Warlpiri and translated into English by Valerie Martin. "My name was used telling lies. I did not agree with the Intervention.... Intervention is rubbish and isn't working in any way at all for us".

She expressed similar sentiments in a video, posted on the PAW media website in response to the incident. Here she spoke in Warlpiri, angrily banging the newspaper articles on the table, also taking aim at journalists who had "doubted the authenticity" of her statement and implied pressure from outsiders:

"Nobody told me what to do. These are my own words, what I said in Warlpiri, it is here in Warlpiri and at the bottom is translated into English. Nobody never tell me, it is all my own knowledge from my mind and from my heart. Leave us alone, don't tell us what to do."¹⁴

Many in the community were angered that the petition was not reported in the corporate press. Francis Jupurrula Kelly from PAW Media, said he had suspected unfair play when Macklin ejected camera's from the meeting where the petition was delivered.

"I just want to ask (Minister) Macklin, why did (s)he throw those media, especially Warlpiri Media, out... We had a bad feeling that she don't want to tell the truth, she just want to play games with us. That is why I think Macklin didn't want to be caught on local film on (Warlpiri) Media side".¹⁵

Anita Thomasson, from the Intervention Rollback Action Group (IRAG) based in Alice Springs, was in Yuendumu thorough Macklin's visit. Using IRAG's media contact lists, she had helped send out the press statement's coming from Yuendumu.

Thomasson said that racist assumptions skewed media focus on the day. Journalists had been willing to report community sentiment when it matched Macklin's stereotypes of abusive men, pitted against women needing strong controls for their own protection. But they were dismissive of political statements organised by the Warlpiri:

"I spoke to journalists doubting to the credibility of the petition, suggesting that people were unaware of what they were signing. This presents Indigenous people as ignorant or naïve, signing anything they are given. There was a refusal on the day to engage with women who had indicated to the press they were available to speak about support for the anti-intervention statement", Thomasson said.

Through the process of Intervention, the knowledge and aspirations of Aboriginal people have not only been ignored, they have been deliberately and systematically buried. And through the construction of Aboriginal women as hapless victims - needing government controls to protect them from abusive men - strong figures such as Peggy Brown are being further disempowered.

Following the whirlwind tour by Macklin and her media entourage, Warlpiri leaders were

¹⁴ Brown, Peggy and Kelly, Francis, *Yapa-kurlangu vodcasts*, October 2008

http://www.pawmedia.com.au/vodcast/?page_id=98.

¹⁵ *ibid*

dazed and angry. Macklin had staged a serious propaganda coup on their home turf. But any lingering illusions in the new Labor government were now gone and resolve had strengthened.

Mt Nancy

The first time I spoke with Barbara Shaw was on the phone in August 2007.

She had just organised a 100 strong meeting of women from 'prescribed areas' surrounding Alice Springs, who voted overwhelmingly for immediate repeal of the NT Intervention legislation.

This meeting had come off the back of a strong rally in Alice Springs the previous month, which had seen women burn a copy of the 500 pages of Intervention legislation.

I was trying to get a copy of the statement from the meeting. She read it to me, which took a while.

She was simultaneously getting a load of kids ready for dinner, growling unwanted dogs out of her yard and shouting across the camp to get gates opened for approaching cars.

Barb has been the backbone of the campaign against the Intervention and her house - no 5 Mt Nancy town camp, just past the big 'Prescribed Area' sign - has been its headquarters (of sorts).

Barb has four children in her care and looks after countless more.

In her activism she gets strong support from her family at Mt Nancy. Her Brother Walter Shaw is a brilliant speaker, who has toured the country to speak out against the Intervention.

Geoffrey Shaw and Eileen Hoosan, Grandpa and Nanna of Mt Nancy, have decades of experience in the movement for Aboriginal rights which they have imparted to their children. They also continue to speak out.

A pet hate at Mt Nancy are the constant assertions in the media that "women like the Intervention".

When Warren Mundine told ABC radio on August 15 2008, "I've not heard one woman complain about the intervention on the ground because they find themselves safe", Eileen and Barb came in swift media response, "If Mr Mundine had any meaningful connection to our communities he would know that women have been leading the fight against this racist policy."

Barb's fence is covered in banners painted for the numerous protests held in town.

'Stop Quarantining Our Money' - 'Re-instate the Racial Discrimination Act' - 'Strong Women, Strong Families'.

The banners have also hit the road twice - with Barb leading two large delegations to Canberra to join with thousands of people who have protested on the opening days of parliament in 2008 and 2009:

The Intervention Rollback Action Group met under the shelter in her yard for most of 2008.

We'd converge in cars to organise leaflet drops to town camps for upcoming protests. We meet before sun-rise to head out to remote communities for days of meetings and interviews.

In late September, the yard hosted more than 200 people who came from interstate to join a protest camp demanding an end to the Intervention.

We sat on the grass outside her front door and were welcomed, and told to keep fighting, by speakers in five different Aboriginal languages.

My Nancy has also been base camp for many people traveling into Alice Springs to attend the two meetings of the "Prescribed Area People's Alliance" (PAPA), held on September 29 and November 17, which have involved more than 130 people from different communities.

It is the constant agitation by Barb and people brought into the campaign that has ensured the overwhelming sentiment felt in communities - deep resentment of the Intervention - has been given some expression. Despite deliberate a deliberate whitewash of this opposition, from both the government and the media, it is starting to break through into broader public consciousness.

The first meeting of PAPA was crucial for giving this process a serious boost. It saw representation from all major communities in Central Australia and some delegates from further North.

But a key theme of the speeches at PAPA was the need to step up this campaign and dig in for a long battle to win genuine self-determination for Aboriginal people.

Excerpts of speeches from the Prescribed Area People's Alliance. Held in the Pioneer shed Alice Springs, 29/9/2008

Dianne Stokes, Kulumpurlpa outstation near Tennant Creek.

I reckon it's no good. White people want us to use our brains like them. We don't want our brains to be like them. We want our brains to be the way we want to see them. We got our own things to think about. We got our culture, we got our country to think about, we got our stuff to think about, our law, we got our own things back home to think about.

We should be looking at these things, we should be backing each other up. We all the same, we all got culture, we all go law, we all the same, we all humans, and we gotta stand up for our rights.

Ross Jakamarra Williams, Tennant Creek

Since the Intervention, its created problems! More problems than what we realised. Now in the 70s, we went down to Canberra. Lotta people passed away now, and me and my brother Mr Shaw sitting over here went to Canberra, and we was marching for land rights. And now we're 2008 here, and we still having to march! But it's good, you know, it's about time we stood up. I think it's time we stopped talking too much and get up, get together, and show our faces, and show people who we are, and what we are, and be strong within ourselves.

Now I don't want to say too much because I've heard everyone say everything here today, and I think everything was positive and good. And it's just like repeating ourselves over again, hey. The time has come now to stop talking, get together and go out there and show our faces. Nothing's gonna happen unless we show ourselves, and tell people who we are, where we come from. Because we're all one! It's time for stop talking and a bit of action now, you know.

Phillip Willuka, Titjikala

This is the thing that we need to stand up on our feet and shout out to the Government, give us our right back! We wanna live our own life!

It's their promises, they are the one who put the promises there, we'll give you pay out, welfare system and all that. And our ancestors... had nothing. They were the wanderers of the land right across Australia. They knew where the rockhole and water, and surviving in the desert. They knew that!

But now with the Government being pull together over our neck, you come into my law, we gotta stand up for that... So we gotta stand up strong and be counted! We are the government, you the older people are the government of this land! The land that we own, that land we were born on! This is our land! The Government needs to understand that! Talk, be strong, and point out to them, leave us alone! Give our self determination back, self governance back! Give it back to us!"

Sorry about the Intervention?

Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations on February 13, 2008 contained clear condemnation of the assimilationist ideology that had guided the policy of child removal in Australia through the 20th Century.

He explored the ideology in vivid detail:

"One of the most notorious examples of this approach was from the Northern Territory Protector of Natives, who stated:
'Generally by the fifth and invariably by the sixth generation, all native characteristics of the Australian Aborigine are eradicated. The problem of our half-castes' - to quote the protector - 'will quickly be eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white.'"

As tears of hope and relief poured around Australia – finally the truth was being acknowledged – the Prime Minister promised, “A future where this parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again”.

But the day before the apology, 2000 people had marched on Parliament house demanding an end to the NT Intervention, one of the largest Aboriginal rights protests in a decade. Simmering through the protest was a belief that the “terrible history” outlined by Kevin Rudd was echoing in the present through the Intervention.

Walter Shaw, who had led a delegation of more than 20 people from ‘prescribed communities’ to Canberra, explained this sentiment to gathered media, “We hope the Government's apology to the stolen generation will draw people's attention to the consequences of intervention... This current intervention was done on the same basis. It was done to protect children.”

Mitch, a strong Arrente – Luritja woman, told the demonstration, “Kevin Rudd has said his apology will contain an affirmation never to repeat past wrongs, but this is exactly what his government is doing rolling out Howard's intervention. He is continuing the genocidal policy of the stolen generations.”

The Apology contained ambitious policy commitments. Massive investment in services and infrastructure in Aboriginal communities would begin in an attempt to eradicate socio-economic disadvantage, to ‘Close the Gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. These commitments, like the Apology itself, were greeted with enormous enthusiasm, and hope for real change.

But through ensuing year, the cynicism running through the February 12 demonstration in Canberra hardened considerably in the ‘Prescribed Areas’ and in Aboriginal communities across Australia.

Kevin Rudd delivered a ‘report card’, on the government’s commitment to ‘Closing the Gap’ was delivered on March 5th 2009. Despite the Apology speech promising “a new approach” in Aboriginal affairs, Rudd’s report card put the Howard-designed Intervention at the centre of his claims to ‘progress’.

“I know that income management is controversial, but we have maintained it for a simple reason – it has been shown to work in many communities. It helps to protect vulnerable groups such as women, children and the elderly by enabling the purchase of food and other essentials”.

The stories told through this paper, many by ‘vulnerable’ people the Prime Minister claims to be protecting, have demonstrated a very different reality.

But the brazen distortions advanced through his speech confirm that Rudd is not interested in reality.

“Progress has been made. Houses are being built”, he said.

“Since the end of 2007, 80 houses have been completed or are nearing completion in remote Northern Territory communities.”

No mention that more than 50 of these houses have been for the “Government Business Managers” and other public servants installed by the Intervention and the remainder are from pre-Intervention projects initiated under Howard.

The speech also made clear that the approach to housing being taken through SIHIP in the NT would be rolled out nationally.

“We are driving an aggressive land tenure reform agenda... This includes making funding for communities conditional on the reform of land tenure arrangements that obstruct new housing investment”.

Jenny Macklin was heckled as she outlined these plans to a statewide conference of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council on March 5. Only 26 communities nationwide, inclusive of the 16 in the NT, will initially be eligible for new housing funding, conditional on long term leases. Communities are being chosen on the basis of “economic viability”.

The delivery of the federal budget in May further betrayed the extent to which the assimilationist approach of the NTER had come to form heart of the government’s approach in Aboriginal affairs. The word ‘Intervention’ was not mentioned once in a ministerial press release announcing an ongoing commitment to measures such as compulsory Income Management – the entire policy had been rebadged ‘Closing the Gap NT’.

And on May 20, the term ‘Closing the Gap’ was used liberally by both NT and federal government spokespeople promoting the release of a new NT government’s discussion paper on outstations. This proposed severe restriction of services to 20 “territory growth towns”, leased to the government, adding four to the list of SIHIP communities.

Through the Apology speech, Kevin Rudd gave examples of the deep personal pain caused by previous government policies of forced migration. He told the tragic story of Nana Fejo from Tennant Creek:

“She and her sister were sent to a Methodist mission on Goulburn Island and then Croker Island. Her Catholic brother was sent to work at a cattle station and her cousin to a Catholic mission. Nanna Fejo's family had been broken up for a second time.”

Responding to the news of the outstation’s policy, Barbara Shaw argued the same destructive strategy was now being recycled:

“The government has named only 20 communities across the entire NT to be ‘service hubs’. What about the hundreds of other communities and outstations that will miss out on funding? They will be forced to move off homelands to get an education, for housing and services. It’s a return to the mission days where people were herded into towns so the government could assimilate them”.

Waturr Gumana, an elder from the GanGan homeland and member of the Laynhapuy Homelands Association, expressed a similar outrage to the ABC:¹⁶

¹⁶ *'Another Stolen Generation': elder slams homeland cutbacks*, ABC Online, May 19, 2009 at

"The Stolen Generation, this is happening again," he said.

"People are going to be taken out of their homes. Our people are going to be taken back to the main communities. History is going to repeat itself. This is not good."

Strong statements pledging resistance flowed out of Arnhem Land. Gawirrin Gumana, also from GanGan said:

"Government, if you don't help our Homelands, and try to starve me from my land, I tell you, you can kill me first. You will have to shoot me.

Listen to me.

I don't want to move again like my father moved from Gangan to other places like Yirrkala or Groote. I don't want my children to move. I don't want my family to move.

I will not lose my culture and my tribe to your games like a bird moving from place to place, looking for it's camp or to sleep in other places, on other people's land that is not our land...

I am an Aboriginal from mud, red mud.

I am black, I am red, I am yellow, and I will not take my people from here to be in these other places."¹⁷

The Land Rights and Human Rights of Aboriginal people are currently under siege on scale not matched since the days when assimilation was official policy.

The massive outpouring of public support for Kevin Rudd's apology shows the extent to which people across Australia hold a deep opposition to the idea of coercive government action based on conceptions of racial superiority.

Halting the new wave of social trauma being created by the Rudd government will require strong mobilisation of the public sentiment expressed through the apology – this time in support of people resisting the *new* assimilation, refusing the to go back to the ration days.

Improvements in the shocking social conditions facing Aboriginal Australia will never be made by a government beating people into submission 'for their own good'. The voices buried by a racist political system must be pushed into view. Aboriginal people must be able to control their own destiny.

We can't wait another thirty years to hear a politician say, "sorry about the Intervention".

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/05/19/2574431.htm?section=justin>

¹⁷ Gumana, Gawirrin, *Statement*, 21 May 2009 accessed from rollbacktheintervention.wordpress.com

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