

## **WALK WITH US – BOOK LAUNCH**

The book launch of “Walk With Us” was held at the University of Melbourne on Tuesday, 30 August 2011. The book articulates the views about the intervention, of Aboriginal Elders who gathered in Melbourne in February 2011 as well as those of other leading Australians. Elders are calling on the ‘People of Australia’ to walk with them as they seek the return of their basic human rights.

Following the acknowledgment of country by Auntie Betty Pike and the speeches of the two people who helped launch the book: The Hon Sally Brown AM: Retired Justice of the Family Court of Australia, Formerly Chief Magistrate, Magistrates Court of Australia & Melissa Brickell, NATSIEC (Victorian Commissioner)

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

As I am a Nyoongah woman from the SW of WA I am privileged to be here today to continue this ancient Aboriginal custom of acknowledging the Spirit of the ancestors of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations.

Their descendants, the rightful custodians of this land, are still here and are playing an important role as they continue seeking justice for their own unique culture, that proclaims all creation as a sacred gift from the Great Creator; this must be respected, for the general well being of this nation.

It is essential, that this ancient custom must not become a tokenistic gesture. It must serve as a constant reminder to us all, that this land and its people are confronted by a crisis never before experienced because of the greed and exploitation of powerful corporations and politicians who simply will not listen to the wisdom of our traditional First Peoples.

The voice of all concerned Australians must continue to be loud and strong.

{Could we now stand as an expression of respect and willingness to continue on this journey of listening and continuing the pursuit of justice, compassion and caring}.

---

### **Speech by The Hon Sally Brown AM**

Reasonable to ask: why me? Take any measure of privilege - family stability, education, housing, health, autonomy, financial security - and you will find me with those who fall into the top 1% of the Australian population. By contrast, most Indigenous Australians will find themselves within the 1% at the opposite end of the scale. Further, I spent almost 25 years as a member of the judiciary, an institution which few Indigenous Australians have reason to love. And it could be said that my privilege means it is easy for me to talk about individuals' rights & responsibilities, choices and freedoms, without noticing that, to quote David Runciman, "individuals are like confetti in the face of the whirlwind power of money". And that when I talk, I have a professional weakness for abstraction, preferring concepts to concrete experiences and talking of ideals like justice, equality and fairness, as though power resides in the very words themselves. To quote again, people from my background can "prefer nice ideas to real people".

On 7 February, 2011, a 400 strong audience at Melbourne University was addressed by 7 Elders from NT Aboriginal communities, 7 real people whose common premise was that the NT Intervention is an unfair imposition on the lives of thousands of Aboriginal people, effectively branding them as lesser citizens. They did not speak in abstractions. They detailed the fundamental issues, such as the impact of compulsory land leases which attack the very heart of Aboriginal connection to land; the failure to consult with the real leaders of the Aboriginal

Communities, the Elders; and the failure last year to fully reinstate the Racial Discrimination Act, as called for by the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

They spoke of the quarantining of welfare, the abolition of language in schools, the imposition of the shire structure, government refusal to maintain basic conditions in homelands; and of artificial hubtowns creating conditions for more violence and despair.

It is not only those who are adversely affected by the Intervention who have been critical of it. And some of those within the Indigenous community who have supported measures said to be similar to some aspects of the Intervention, like Noel Pearson, have pointed out the significant differences between them, most notably the lack of consultation and voluntariness.

In late 2009 or early 2010 the federal Department of Finance commissioned an independent report to assess how well the then current array of Commonwealth Indigenous programs and associated coordination arrangements served to support the achievement of the Government's Indigenous policy objectives, in particular the objective of reducing Indigenous disadvantage. In February 2010 the author noted that "the history of Commonwealth policy for Indigenous Australians over the past 40 years is largely a story of good intentions, flawed policies, unrealistic assumptions, unintended consequences and dashed hopes. Strong policy commitments and large investment of government funding have too often produced outcomes which have been disappointing at best and appalling at worst."

You might call that report an audit and it was an audit that found widespread waste and duplication in Indigenous programs, costing taxpayers an estimated \$3.5 billion a year. According to the audit, many programs produce "dismally poor" results.

Those conclusions are not surprising. What will probably not surprise those who are adversely affected by the Intervention but should concern us all, is the effort made by government to keep those conclusions secret. This report was, to use the journalist Russell Skelton's words, prised from the bureaucracy by the Seven Network under freedom of information laws. Astonishingly, officials wasted taxpayer's money fighting to keep it secret. Call that, as Skelton does, bad judgment or evidence of "official disconnect" but what one cannot call it is evidence of either good intentions or good faith.

With good cause we should be cautious about attributing malign motives to others; in business and universities and courts one can find initiatives which were embarked on in good faith but which produced poor outcomes. But how can one see that obstruction as bona fide?

Since the Intervention was introduced in 2007 there has been no shortage of protest; those involved in the discussions with the Elders at Melbourne University have been part of that, through, amongst other things, open letters to the minister and a subsequent meeting with her. Some amendments have been made to the terms of the original Intervention. On 22 June this year the government released a discussion paper called Stronger Futures. You will recall earlier complaints about the lack of consultation with the Indigenous communities prior to the imposition of the Intervention in 2007. Good faith requires an honest attempt not to repeat earlier mistakes. 22 June was a Wednesday. That day it was announced that consultation on that discussion paper would commence on 28 June, the following Tuesday. The original Intervention in 2007 came less than a fortnight after the release of the Little Children Are Sacred report; in 2011, 6 days was the period the government allowed for consultation on matters which are seen by those affected by them as matters of life and death.

At that point, the discussion paper was only available in English, itself a barrier to genuine consultation for many Indigenous Australians, and there was no provision for interpreters. How can one see that time-frame, and those omissions, as bona fide?

In response to concerns expressed by many, including Dr Freier, former bishop of the NT, the government decided to include interpreters in the consultation but when I last enquired, his call to make available a summary of the paper's key points in Indigenous languages had not been met. How can one see that response as bona fide?

Earlier this month, Amnesty International published "This Land Holds Us", a report of Aboriginal peoples' right to traditional homelands in the NT. Homelands for many are the birthplace and anchor of identity, language and culture. About one third of NT Indigenous people live on homelands; the Amnesty report notes approximately 500 homelands in the NT but those homelands receive far less than one third of government funding for essential services, much of which goes to the 21 "growth towns".

By way of illustration, NT Government Department of Housing guidelines (the full reference can be found in the Amnesty report) record a \$7.1m budget allocation for housing (all maintenance only) in the homelands, in which live about 35% of the relevant population, and a \$672m allocation, plus another \$100m from the NT government, in the growth towns (for new housing and maintenance) which house about 24% of the population.

The report quotes the special Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights on the lower levels of social problems such as domestic violence and substance abuse in homelands and the growing body of evidence of significantly better health outcomes, compared with Aboriginal people who live in more populated or urban centres.

In the book to be launched one can learn of the destructive effects of the Intervention in practical, emotional and spiritual terms. In emotional terms, it seems to me, that a major casualty is optimism. **It is incontrovertible that optimism is vital in building resilience and countering depression in individuals and in communities.**

Much of my professional work has been with youth. If you want to learn more of the importance of optimism to youth in addressing adolescent health risks, read Prof. George Patton's recent findings of a 3 year study of 5,634 students across 50 schools in Queensland, SA and Victoria. The despair and frustration which were so powerfully expressed by Rosalie Kunoth-Monks and Rev. Dr Djinyini Gondarra when they appeared before the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination last year is as dangerous to mental health as small pox was to the physical health of Indigenous people after the arrival of the First Fleet.

So let us stand with Indigenous Australians who seek that we honour our commitment to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which the Commonwealth government endorsed in 2009. And let us walk with the Aboriginal Elders whose voices we heard in the Law School in February and whose voices cry to be heard from the pages of this small but important book. Walk with us, they ask, in their quest for justice. **Justice is one of those abstractions which can sometimes distract us from the real work to be done. But here it is a powerful call to arms, made by those who speak with eloquence of their disempowerment and pain.**

It is a great honour now to launch Walk With Us and hope that through it, many hundreds of Australians will do just that.

---

### **Speech by Melissa Brickell**

Yorta Yorta – Wiradjeri Clans

NATSIIEC Commissioner - NATSICC Councillor

The Northern Territory Intervention is, as I see it, occurred just 6 days after the release of the Little Children are Sacred report was released, and as such is a knee jerk 'madness' that highlights Aboriginal social 'badness' in the Northern Territory. Society has a preoccupation with SDV, sounds like something you can 'catch', SDV or sex, drugs and violence. It is prevalent in all

spheres and exposure of communication, media, and all walks of life. Nothing, it appears, is sacred, let alone children. This preoccupation with SDV is not peculiar to the Northern Territory, nor is it particular to Aboriginal communities. It is consistently rife across the country in negative and powerfully suggestive ways that lend itself to the preoccupation with SDV.

The Intervention is, yes you guessed it, the most appalling response. Greater societal regulations are needed to prevent the appeal of such Sodom and Gomorrah in Australia.

This goes along with the societal ills of power and greed. The Intervention is colonial government thinking of continued oppression and assimilation, of power and greed over land and over people. The intervention is racist and destructive. Systemic racism is, what underpins the Intervention.

This will always be Goondawindaland – our land. We never ceded sovereignty. Aboriginal people are not children. Government action in the form of Intervention is racially discriminatory, and is NOT in our best interests. And, we are not children.

The 'Little Children are Sacred' report highlights the government's failure to provide basic services to address social problems. And the government failed to respond to other earlier, and previous reports in this area. This is largely an historic fact with government policies and practice over Aboriginal people. And yes, irrespective of 'good intentions'.

So too, the government overlooked the greater call of the 'Little Children are Sacred' report, which strongly recommended the empowerment of Aboriginal people. The Intervention is a total contradiction to this recommendation, with Aboriginal people totally disempowered.

The Intervention does not address many of the recommendations of the 'Little Children are Sacred' report, and it is what led to the Intervention in the first place. The government's own review of the Intervention in the 'Growing them strong together' report 2010, confirms the Intervention has had very little impact in addressing the issues the Intervention was supposed to do. And, over its four years enforcement, the Intervention has contributed greatly to widening the gap of Aboriginal disadvantage.

From an Aboriginal community perspective, it is clear that Aboriginal disadvantage is being chiselled away with the success of many Aboriginal community controlled services and programs across: early childhood, education, health, employment, housing and so on. Aboriginal people know what action is required, to empower their own communities to a position of best outcomes that address the issues at hand, and to address the disadvantage. With of course, support from governments, and the private and non-profit sectors.

I want to thank members and friends of Concerned Australians for the continued advocacy campaigns in culturally respectful ways that support the voice and especially as Djappiri (Mununggirritj) put it, the 'crying hearts' of Aboriginal people, to be heard across the nation and overseas.

Thank You Concerned Australians for, 'Will they be heard' in 2009, for, 'This is what we said', last year, and for bringing the Northern Territory Elders to Victoria in February (2010) to 'tell us', and for, 'Walk with us', today.

I feel sorry as an Aboriginal person, and I feel sad about this situation. Aboriginal people cannot cope with much more in this vein. As an Aboriginal Catholic I can only recommend prayer.

Our very own Pope Benedict XVI asked the Federal Government back in 2006, to have more compassion for Aboriginal Australians. And, he asked the government to consider the deep pain and suffering of Aboriginal people in Australia, and for Government to consider what the underlying cause of the social situation and disadvantage truly is. I ask you to pray for Aboriginal leaders that they might step up to the plate and take a stronger stand with government on this

issue. It's simply wrong, and it does not support the human rights of Aboriginal Australians. Aboriginal children need and must have rightful protection, but it must come from within Aboriginal family and community self-determination; in a collaborative and transparent partnership with government and others sectors of society.

I ask that you pray for Concerned Australians, that they continue to advocate for and with Aboriginal people; and that we all might walk with Aboriginal people and Elders of the Northern Territory, and other Concerned Australians to raise the awareness of all Australians, and the world for that matter, that they might see the plight and greater tragedy and disadvantage caused by the current Northern Territory Intervention; and to gain their full support to overturn its enforcement.

Finally, I ask you to find even stronger prayer, for those in government that they might see the light.

Thank You.

---