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**Disrupting the New Orthodoxy: Emergency Intervention and Indigenous
Social Policy**

This article develops a critical analysis of the ideological framework that informed the Australian Federal government's 2007 intervention into Northern Territory Indigenous communities (ostensibly to address the problem of child sexual abuse). Continued by recently elected Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, the NT 'emergency response' has aroused considerable public debate and scholarly inquiry. In addressing what amounts to a broad bi-partisan approach to Indigenous issues we highlight the way in which Indigenous communities are probelamtued and therefore subject to interventionist regimes that override differentiated Indigenous voices and intensify an internalised sense of rage occasioned by disempowering interventionist projects. We further argue that in rushing through the emergency legislation and suspending parts of the Racial Discrimination Act, the Howard and Rudd governments have in various ways perpetuated racialised and neo-colonial forms of intervention that override the rights of Indigenous people. Such policy approaches require critical understanding on the part of professions involved most directly in community practice, particularly when it comes to mounting effective opposition campaigns. The article offers a contribution to this end.

Introduction

After eleven years of Federal Government experimentation with 'practical reconciliation' the previous Prime Minister, John Howard, and Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough in June 2007 shocked many policy observers when they announced a 'national emergency' in the NT and sought to override the authority of the NT government to intervene in remote communities. Officially, the purpose of the intervention was to address the problem of child sexual abuse identified in Rex Wild and Pat Andersons' (2007) report for the Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 'Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: The Little Children are Sacred'. The report was cited by government ministers as evidence that Indigenous communities were in deep crisis and that sexual abuse was a major symptom of family breakdown occasioned by alcohol and drug abuse and the erosion of law and order (Abbott 2008; Brough 2007a,b).

Rather than highlighting the 'national emergency' intervention as a breach with policy tradition this article considers these recent Australian government policy developments as part of a continuum of policies affecting Indigenous Australians. The Northern Territory (NT) 'emergency intervention' (NTER¹) is coterminous with measures that denigrate 'welfare dependency' in Indigenous communities, and which increase the surveillance and regulation of such communities. This approach is examined critically in terms of its direct implications for Indigenous people and the challenge it poses to social welfare academics, workers and professional associations who, broadly speaking, are

¹ Commonly referred to as the NT Emergency Response.

committed to the articulation of social justice, human rights and empowerment principles in relation to cross-cultural community intervention.

Below, we signpost what social welfare associations, workers and academics should consider in terms of developing the foundations of a comprehensive critique of the NT intervention.

The 'emergency' intervention in the NT – Pretext and context

Written in a conversational style and passionate about the challenges that face all Australians when confronted by the issues of Indigenous communities, Wild and Andersons' report noted a range of considerations central to any governmental response to child abuse. At the very least the report observed the need for policy makers to engage with the historical complexity of issues confronting Indigenous communities and the everyday problems that blight the quality of life of community members. Specifically, the report observed that: "...it must be said that the public health and safety issues thrown up by this inquest are truly tragic in their proportion and have an urgency which ... Government and Government Agencies cannot ignore". It was further noted that "... the issues are complex and there are no magic solutions and certainly no "quick fix" options which can deal immediately with the gravity of the underlying problems". These underlying or causative factors that Wild and Anderson highlighted might have been a logical emphasis for any response to issues highlighted within report.

Although noting the urgency of the situation and the fact that millions of dollars had already gone down the “plughole”, the report repeatedly emphasised the complexity of issues and the futility of simple or quick-fix solutions to the challenges faced by Indigenous communities. The report noted a range of underpinning problems requiring immediate attention, including alcohol and marijuana abuse, domestic violence, family breakdown, “a weakening of the traditional and cultural values [in] modern Australian society”, and a lack of employment. The report noted a pervasive sense of “hopelessness and low self-esteem, especially among young men” (Wild and Anderson, 2007 np). It also among other things, noted that:

- Child sexual abuse is serious, widespread and often unreported [in Indigenous settlements in the NT].
- Most Aboriginal people are willing and committed to solving problems and helping their children.
- Much of the violence and sexual abuse occurring in Territory communities is a reflection of past, current and continuing social problems over many decades.
- The combined effects of poor health, alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment, gambling, pornography, poor education and housing, and a general loss of identity and control have contributed to violence and to sexual abuse in many forms. (Wild and Anderson, 2007, p. 1.)

In response these concerns about Indigenous society, families and children Wild and Anderson argued for better ‘government programs to help Aboriginal

people break the cycle of poverty and violence’; better ‘coordination and communication between government departments and agencies’, ‘Improvements in health and social services’ with more ‘funds and resources and a long-term commitment’ by government (Wild and Anderson, 2007, p. 1). These recommendations were consistent with a systemic response to the underlying problems in the community, Significantly however, the vast majority of recommendations contained in the Wild and Anderson report were ignored by the Howard government when implementing its NT emergency response (NTER). Now, irrespective of recommendations to the contrary by the October 2008 NTER review Board, the NTER remains, and its income management regime (Macklin 2008, np) persists, offending a wide range of Indigenous observers who argue it is discriminatory and impractical (Hlnkson; Rundle 2007). The report of the NTER Review Board recently argued that “one of the impacts of the NTER was to fracture an already tenuous relationship with government” (NTER Review Board 2008, p.7).

New Initiative or an Extension of Policy?

Though the NTER is perceived as radical (Rothwell 2007), the Howard government had from 15th November 1996, already challenged widely held assumptions about Indigenous social policy, including those about ‘cultural rights’ and the promotion of ‘self-determination’². The Commonwealth government’s relationship with Indigenous people significantly weakened in the 1990s when it diverged from a long-held Indigenous specific (self-determination) service delivery model and focussed upon a ‘mainstream’ (that

² Through prescriptive and paternal intervention methodologies had long characterised the policy mix (Thompson 2004; Thompson and Wadley 2007)

is, non-Indigenous) health, educational and economic development approach which it saw as needed to solve the then problems in Indigenous communities. This policy revision was presented as a more practical model for “economic independence and restoration of self-esteem” than was the previous symbolic reparation and ‘self-determination’ model (HRSCATSIA, 2007, pp. 4-5)³. Instead of promoting a more resilient Indigenous identity through empowering and strengths based policy approaches, the ‘practical model’ assumed that economic independence was the core of self-worth and that ‘mainstream’ economic integration was the only long term answer to the self-esteem problems that underscored Indigenous social problems (Thompson and Hil 2007; 2008).

The Commonwealth policy approach was however abruptly and dramatically revised by the introduction of an overtly paternal, economically prescriptive and racially-specific NTER intervention that seems to many incompatible with the development of feelings of competence and worth (Greer 2008). The self-esteem that was the focus of Howard’s ‘practical’ policy model is widely seen to be derived from socially endorsed feelings of competence and worth (Cast and Burke 2002, p1042), yet it was highlighted by Wilde and Anderson (2007) as a core problem requiring government support and help.

The intentions of the NTER were described in three phases: (1) “stabilisation [in] the first year to 30 June 2008” (2) “normalisation of services and infrastructure [in] years 2 to 5” and thereafter, and (3) “longer term support to

³ Senator John Herron, Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, stated the Government position

close gaps between these communities and [mainstream] standards of services” (NTER Review Board 2008, p.6). In effect, members of John Howard’s neo-liberal government (Robison, 2006, p. 5), had for eleven years applied their ideological gaze toward Indigenous communities, ignoring, as politically unimportant the many problems in poverty, health and market exclusion that a surfeit of reports told them were the worst in Australia (Hunter 2008, 4). These were relegated as individual or ‘state’ government responsibilities, yet in an election year they unexpectedly responded to a child protection ‘emergency’ in the NT by recognising ‘gaps’ in services. After nearly 11 years they loudly announced an urgent need to ‘stabilise’ and ‘normalise’ the Indigenous communities that had previously ‘needed’ economic independence and self-esteem.

The NTER was much more than a policy to ‘normalise’ conditions to protect children. It comprised the passage of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007, the Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Payment Reform) Act 2007, and the Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Northern Territory National Emergency Response and Other Measures) Act 2007. Together these laws reduced Indigenous control over the use of alcohol, computers, land, property-acquisition, business management systems in communities, bail and sentencing laws, and community stores (NTER 2008, p.63). The government unilaterally imposed changes to “law enforcement, infrastructure, the permit system” and introduced requirements that “all Aboriginal children under 16 would undergo

a child health check” irrespective of their current family health arrangements (NTER 2008, p.63). The ‘emergency’ (NTER) response to Indigenous child sexual abuse went a step further than previous policy changes in dramatically limiting Indigenous decision-making over a wide range of matters (Hunter 2007)

Child sexual abuse in 2007 apparently constituted a political crisis in remote communities (Wild and Anderson 2007) and required urgent, ‘normalising’, legislative actions, even though there had “been numerous other reports into [Indigenous] child abuse... over many years” (Hunter 2007, np). It was also evident that “rates of child abuse are higher among all disadvantaged groups” and, significantly, that “Victoria has the highest number of Indigenous child-abuse substantiations per 1000 children” compared with the NT which, tellingly, “had a relatively⁴ low rate of Indigenous child-abuse substantiations” (Hunter 2007: np). Though the Little Children are Sacred report specifically rejected the “notion that Aboriginal culture is the reason for the under-reporting of abuse” the emergency intervention implied a distrust of the ‘culture of dependency’ in these communities (Hunter 2007, np; Thompson and Hil 2008). Rundle argues that the Government perceived “what appeared to be a total cultural collapse” (Rundle, 2007, p. 38).

Evidently the pre-emergency ideological view highlighted an Indigenous cultural pathology, first requiring a ‘practical’ policy approach to support self esteem, and then in 2007 an urgent intervention to ‘normalise’ communities

⁴ Relatively low against disadvantaged communities.

so that children could be saved. The Government's actions in the 2007 election year presented it as the saviour of Indigenous children, while the NTER tended to view Indigenous men as if they were uncontrolled, dangerous and predatory criminals (Greer 2008). The net result was the representation of Indigenous communities as dangerous places that required extraordinary measures to protect the vulnerable – measures practically inconceivable in non-Indigenous neighbourhoods.

The Ideological Policy Context to 2007

The Government's emergency intervention approach was supported in news media articles by the Director of Cape York Partnerships and Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, Noel Pearson (Pearson 2007; 2008; Anon 2007); by Indigenous academic Marcia Langton (2007), and by journalists like Janet Albrechtsen (2007; 2008); Nicolas Rothwell (2007); and Patricia Karvelas (2007; 2008). Such accounts problematised remote Indigenous communities and perhaps even supported those members of the Howard Government – like Tony Abbott – who had been vocal in their desire for more control over Indigenous people and for welfare policies resembling a much earlier paternalistic ideal (Abbott 2006). This established an ideological terrain upon which previous self-determination based service-delivery policies were perceived as lamentable failures - ignoring the many complexities (and obstacles) involved in this approach (Thompson 2004; Thompson and Hil, 2008; Sanders 2007).

Importantly the imperative to introduce the NTER legislation was in part the outcome of a fundamental change to views about Indigenous affairs in Australia. The assault on self-determination (Sanders 2007) and Indigenous collectivism – both seen as ‘failures’ in terms of the delivery of specific outcomes to Indigenous communities (Sanders 2007) - had become central to the Howard Government’s efforts to introduce radical changes to Indigenous affairs. Enthusiastically supported by luminaries from the Centre for Independent Studies (Bradfield, 2005), the then Minister for Indigenous affairs (and ex-military officer), Mal Brough, likened Indigenous collective tenure arrangements in remote communities with communism, arguing that, in terms of its demonstrable outcomes relating to health, education and other service delivery, “collectivism didn’t work” (Hinkson⁵, 2007, p. 6). What was apparently needed was less expert opinion about Indigenous needs (Hinkson, 2007, 6) and more application of individual self-reliance in and through the dynamics of the market. Indigenous reformer, Noel Pearson, advocated for more self-reliant individualism in Indigenous communities – a view warmly greeted by the media and sections of the public (Rundle, 2007, p. 38). This support extended to Pearson’s other arguments in favour of surrendering control over certain aspects of community life in order to “reconstruct a social order” for the purpose of promoting self-reliance and market-integration (Rundle, 2007, p. 38).

In effect, policy planning had by 2007 shifted away from welfare-based self-determination-ism towards a market model of ‘social order’ which

⁵ This view was evidenced in Hinkson (2007) not supported by her.

paradoxically required government interventionism. This simultaneously proposed self-reliant entrepreneurship while reactive emergency measures severely restricted individuals' control over their decision-making (welfare spending, etc). This NTER strategy concentrated power centrally when Commonwealth legislation prevailed over State legislation and it ignored any perceived need to consult with Indigenous community members, or to acknowledge the wisdom of stakeholders who had long worked in NT remote communities. In reflecting on the legislative process that led to the emergency legislation the retiring President of the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), John Von Doussa (2008): 15) noted that:

“We [the AHRC] frequently scrutinise the human rights compatibility of new bills. I saw major legislation - including ... the package of bills to enable the Northern Territory intervention – rushed through parliament with grossly inadequate consideration of the impact of these laws on basic rights”.

Though self-determination and rights are fundamental to market functioning, in a return to 1960s assimilationist thinking the preconditions of market independence were to be forced upon Indigenous people and the NTER was a convenient mechanism for establishing these preconditions by suspending rights and restricting Indigenous collective control over community land and organisations.

The lead-up to the NTER intervention was important as assertions about self-reliance and market-based solutions to 'welfare dependency' were pivotal to the logic of the new policy regime. Market-individualism had been explicit in

Noel Pearson's (2007, p. 28) contention that "Incentives matter more than has been acknowledged in the history of Indigenous policy-making". Pearson was an influential advisor to the Howard government on Indigenous affairs – a privileging of one particular Indigenous voice to which others in the Northern Territory and beyond strenuously objected. Although the evidence for such 'incentives' was never clear (Calma 2007, np), Pearson viewed these incentives as crucial in combating welfare dependency and socio-economic disadvantage. For example, he (2007, p. 28) suggested there should be increased emphasis on a labour market and lower rates of youth pay (within the CDEP work-creation scheme) so that young people would be more likely to attend school or work fulltime. In effect, this promoted the view that mainstream economic priorities were more important to solving the 'welfare-dependency' related problems in Indigenous communities than were other Indigenous priorities. Pearson argued that the payment of 'welfare', rather than promoting self-determination, acted to reduce individuals' 'economic incentives'. By contrast, he suggested that reductions in welfare payments would help to 'motivate choices' and push people onto the ascending 'staircase' of ever-increasing material gain (Pearson, 2007, p. 28). The CDEP –work for the dole, scheme and its community infrastructure building program were to be sacrificed in favour of a set of market values, against which community values were perceived insignificant.

In 2007 Pearson was assisted by Treasury officials to complete *From Hand Out to Hand Up*, "a sophisticated, fully neo-liberal plan for the future of his people" (Manne 2007: np). His plan recommended that welfare payments be

conditional on sobriety, rent-payment, adequate care of children and familial responsibly (Manne 2007, np). Like the NTER this approach was underpinned by perceptions that Indigenous behaviour was unsatisfactory and that individuals should be forced to change in accord with mainstream expectations. Pearson's prescription aligns with and supports the intentions of the NTER as a platform for market integration and also in reducing the cultural independence of Indigenous communities.

In a policy context in which government advocated the 'modernization' of society (in line with global imperatives) and alongside the supposed disintegration of Indigenous culture, ideas of cultural rights and 'self-determination' – especially regarding collective community ownership - appeared an anathema. In this context welfare-based self determination had already been painted as a failure, as Indigenous communities apparently had not met the economic expectations of external observers, nor had decades of social policies achieved expected standards of health and well being - (Sanders 2007; Thompson and Wadley 2007; Thompson and Hil 2007). Values regarding sobriety, rent-payment, and adequate care of children are understandably important to mainstream Australia. This is why some in the Indigenous community perceived social policy under the Howard Government as disempowering (Anonymous, 2004, p. 1) as it included a mix of ideologically palatable interventionism and cautious desires to implement

popular ideas about free market advancement to welfare and wealth creation⁶ (Robison 2006, p.5; Sanderson, 2007, p. 32).

By contrast, the academic literature about welfare noted the negative impacts of punitive family intervention, the disempowerment of unilateral community intervention (Thompson and Hil 2008; Leonardsen 2007), the damage to self-esteem by 'othering' or stigmatising individuals and groups (Waters 1998 Leonardsen 2007) and the importance of participation in problem definition and solution formation (Thompson 2005). Pitted against such knowledge, the government was assisted by the mainstream press with increasingly confident assertions about market universalism and the superiority of market paternalism in answer to Indigenous community problems. It was in this ideological climate that public debates relating to Indigenous affairs (including welfare policy) became increasingly dominated by the neo-liberal assertion that "possessive individualism" was an essential feature of human nature (Rundle, 2007, p. 41). Such appraisals ignored the awkward facts that the Indigenous communities which were now perceived to be characterised by a 'culture of dependency' had survived better in the past by using a system of collective ownership and reciprocity and that they were now constructed in marginal locations and lacked the services or resources required to achieve the expected market independence (Thompson and Wadley 2007). When viewed through Howard's fusion of neo-liberal individualism and interventionist market-evangelism their fate was set, and the report on Indigenous child sexual abuse can be seen as merely the opportunity to limit

⁶ In an effort to promote a more 'self-reliant' and market driven approach the early Howard government had cut \$400 million from the ATSIC budget (Dodson, 2007, p. 26) impacting heavily on many family support, sports and cultural services.

Indigenous independence and to forcibly expose this previously 'collectivist' population to more individualism and market forces.

Were there warning of the immanent NTER in 2007 there might still have been a conceptual battle where complex academic argument posited that Indigenous social conditions require cautious problem analysis, consultation, and the application of empowering processes (Thompson 2005). There was merely a powerful conservative government and media desire to punish abusers and implement a much loved capitalist ethos in Indigenous communities. The urgent need to punish and to extend the market-economy won hands-down and the NTER was implemented irrespective of its impact on policy that was supposedly building self-esteem by dealing practically with feelings of worth.

Emergency and self reliance: A New Indigenous Policy Orthodoxy

By maintaining and building on the policies of Pearson and the previous government, the year old Rudd administration has endorsed previous ideas about coercive cultural change through regulation of benefits (via a system of 'quarantining') and supported market-centred rather than rights-based approaches to community development (Thompson & Wadley, 2007; Macklin 2008b, np). Further, the Rudd Government

“will proceed with a trial of welfare payment conditionality and income management to combat poor parenting and community behaviours... investing \$1.6 billion to address Indigenous housing in remote areas ...

and insisting on appropriate security to underpin major housing investment” (Macklin, 2008b, np).

The Rudd Government intended to “continue most NT Emergency Response (NTER) measures in full until a comprehensive review [wa]s undertaken after 12 months of implementation” (FaHCSIA 2008, np). This review is now complete and the government is maintaining most of the NTER for another 12 months including the retention of one of the NTER’s most controversial elements, the income management regime that its own review argued should be stopped (NTER 2008).

The new government, in maintaining the ‘emergency response’, appears heavily influenced by the approach to Indigenous affairs adopted by its predecessors. Given that the Howard government’s approach was predicated on ideas of ‘cultures of dependency’ (Abbott 2007), suspension of key parts of the Racial Discrimination Act, and what was seen by many commentators as an attempt to wrest control of communities from Indigenous people (Hinkson 2007), it must be assumed that by continuing the intervention the current government has, in effect, endorsed such measures. Integral to this interventionist project is a deeply racialised sub-text which proposes that contemporary Indigenous culture is inherently violent, irresponsible and pathological when judged against ‘mainstream’ European cultural values and lifestyles (Sutton 2001; Murphy and Brigg, 2003, p. 1). The Commonwealth Government’s view is that:

We do want to make sure that what this is all about is the protection of women and children from violence. And the evidence shows that

compulsory income management has been very helpful in that regard. I'd have to say to you too that from the women that I've spoken with, they have pleaded with me to keep compulsory income management. They want it for their own protection. (Macklin 2008, np.)

Alternate views of this policy seem to be ignored or even, it seems, deliberately misrepresented, as in the case of the well respected remote Indigenous Territorian Peggy Nampijimpa Brown (OAM) regarding the intervention ⁷(2008, np).

The NTEI is underpinned by a discursive logic that homogenises and therefore fails to differentiate Indigenous communities. It has also involved the recruitment of police officers, army personnel, community development [workers](#), medical parishioners and paramedical staff and others in teams designed to impose order and enforce medical and other checks on Indigenous people in remote communities. The intensified professional attentions of those who have been examining all Aboriginal children (under 16 years) in prescribed communities irrespective of their family's views, or previous medical arrangements may have achieved no more than the modest improvement in child health that, long requested, better services might have achieved. Though the heightened medical, police and welfare scrutiny has resulted in no significant charges against the abusers of children (NTER 2008) its likely impact is significant disempowerment and damage to self worth (Leonardsen 2007). Various organisations, including the Australian

⁷ Brown (2008) contradicted a Ministerial press statement and stated in a strongly worded personal press release: 'My name was used telling lies. I did not agree with the Intervention.' Available from <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/stoptheintervention/>.

Council of Social Services (ACOSS), and the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the NT had recommended a process that supports community-based protective, rather than coercive and militarised emergency methods (CAONT, 2007). This approach, as noted below, is consistent with established community development and social work practice and empowerment principles (Leonardsen 2007), yet this voice is largely unheard because it falls outside the expectations of the current view of indigenous communities.

The emergency and some of its early effects

The current emergency intervention has been met with various responses across Indigenous communities. Evidence suggests that in some communities there has been a general reluctance among Indigenous people to come forward and, fearing arrest, removals and other outcomes, some have fled their communities (Anon 2008,np). While some Indigenous people have welcomed the emergency intervention, others fear that police and welfare intrusions may lead to the covering up of abuse that is well recognised by any experienced child protection workers. In response to the Wilde and Anderson (2007) report, the CAONT (2007) report expressed concern that families would hide abuse if a punitive regime of intervention was established in communities. Significantly, there is evidence that the intervention has thus far failed to achieve the expected number of charges laid against child abuse perpetrators and that attention has shifted among the police to cases where young people have engaged in sexual acts – with many of such relationships having the approval of Indigenous people under the auspice of customary law

(Brockie 2008; Price 2008, np). Thus this coercive and punitive policy framework has, in a re-enactment of earlier colonial policy regimes, increased the difficulties between government agents (including police) and Indigenous communities where there is a perceived clash in values.

Additionally, external intervention that impacts punitively on communities may reduce the capacity of families to support their members. For example, Indigenous stakeholders in child protection have argued that:

During the emergency response phase, the emphasis must shift from immediate child endangerment goals to the underlying and wider child protection goals of health, housing, education and ongoing community safety. Funding must be organised so that short term needs are met and long term development funding is also available. ... The response must be informed and led by local Aboriginal communities. It is only by strengthening the capacity of families and communities to protect and nurture children that the problems will be resolved. ...Otherwise it is likely that the emergency measures will have little or no long term impact. (CAONT, 2008, p. 3)

Such a strengths-building approach is relatively uncontroversial in contrast with the NTER approach. Indeed, by focussing on 'spectacular' issues such as child sexual abuse, it has been argued that even the Wild and Anderson report - which 'justified' the intervention - failed to analyse the more general and pressing issue of neglect, meaning that the fundamental disadvantages (lack of employment, decent housing, health and education services etc.) and their links to neglect were largely ignored (Flaherty and Goddard 2008). The

community of Welfare professionals has in this light failed in its critical role and been silent about supporting this disempowered community in this regard.

The failure also of the Howard and Rudd governments to consult fully with community members and practitioners who had spent many years working with Indigenous communities suggested a form of neo-colonial practice familiar to Australia's Indigenous population. Rather than consulting Indigenous communities about the issues facing them, the intervention turned on a sense of crisis, urgency and child saving that had been largely absent in Federal Government rhetoric since the 1960s. Significantly, opinion polls were in 2007 telling the then government that it was likely to lose the upcoming election. By the same token, the construction of a crisis and an emergency response to it had the capacity to re-establish perceptions that the government was underpinned by humanitarianism while furthering the neo-liberal change agendas and imposing popular ideas about life-style orthodoxy (Thompson 2004; Thompson and Hil 2007). When reflecting on the Indigenous health and welfare problem in only 2006 Tony Abbott was still compassionately asking: "How do you actually deal with this without pulling apart the traditional culture which is sustaining it" (Abbott 2006, np.)?

Abbott's answer to this question is in many ways a precursor to the NTER in first highlighting that abuse has occurred within 'traditional' marriage, and then in arguing that to the "extent that traditional Aboriginal culture enshrined exploitation and violence it must change" (Abbott 2006, np). "In

the long run”, Abbott (2006 np) argued, “modernity - with its benefits as well as its excesses - has been as inescapable for Aborigines as for the rest of us”. Thus he justified an assimilation project for acculturating Indigenous people into a market individualist worldview. In denigrating the world-view of Indigenous people, and in working largely without their cooperation, this approach was disempowering, undermining the previous priority for Indigenous self-esteem and ensuring its ultimate failure. The most telling failure of this story is the relative absence of criticism from the welfare professions and their professional bodies. This policy project is so reminiscent of historical excesses that professional principles of empowerment, social-justice, human rights, or strengths should have prompted a rapid analysis from these quarters. In effect, this article is a call to these professions to address perhaps the most significant social welfare intervention in Indigenous communities over the last 50 years. Minimally, the professional associations representing social and welfare workers – the AASW and the AIWCW - should be at the very forefront of critical analysis in respect of the NT intervention and its wider implications if only to ensure that the rights of Indigenous people are protected and that the shadow of neo-colonial governance is removed.

Conclusion

As professions, community development and social work possess the established intellectual and practical frameworks to advocate for a more empowering and consultative approach to social policy. This article has sought to alert these professions to the subtlety of value-based judgements

and to remind it about the historically proven dangers inherent in subsequent reactive and culturally assumptive approach to policy formulation, especially in respect of Indigenous communities. Such intervention was in the past demonstrably damaging to the self-worth of its subjects. The dominant lesson must be that any approach to policy formulation that does not, at its centre, involve direct consultation and dialogue with clients themselves is destined to fail and runs against the grain of well established approaches to empowerment and strengths based work.

The Northern Territory intervention, that began under the Howard government and which has been largely adopted by the new Rudd-led administration, presents a significant challenge to Indigenous Australians and to the community development profession, especially in terms of the latter's capacity to understand and respond to this policy. The construction of an 'emergency' after so many years of governmental indifference and neglect has served to legitimate actions that are inherently racist (that is, applied differentially on the basis of race) and which, in effect, ignore the views and opinions of the majority of Indigenous people themselves – many of whom have for many years worked under very difficult conditions to achieve positive outcomes for their people.

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