New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2011.01469.x

Intervention in Aboriginal Life

John Hilary Martin OP

Abstract

John Howard the then Prime Minister of Australia introduced a series of measures (June 2007) to regulate the life of Aboriginal peoples in the Northern Territory, an action that became known as the *Intervention*. The measures were introduced as emergency measures designed to control the widespread physical and sexual abuse of children, the excessive use of alcohol, poor levels of education and unemployment rife among Aboriginal people in the Territory according to a government sponsored report, *Little Children are Sacred*. The local councils of aboriginal communities were immediately dissolved, their property acquired by compulsory leases for five years and business managers appointed to administer them. After an initial occupation by army units and police to stabilize the situation in Aboriginal communities and settlements, the Federal government introduced a number of measures designed to channel welfare money for purchase of wholesome food, to limit access to alcohol and it made a commitment to refurbish schools and clinics and to build houses to ease overcrowding. These were all good things to do and cost the government hundreds of millions of dollars, but were imposed from without in a bureaucratic manner with little consultation of local people. Construction programs were conducted largely by non-aboriginal workers and school curricula were not revised with an eye to Aboriginal cultural needs or interests. The ancient culture of Aboriginal people depends upon the land, family relationship and upon the *Dreaming*. The bureaucracy dealt with Aboriginal communities as if it were dealing with a particularly difficult city suburb that required a new master plan. Instead of this, Aboriginal people must resolve their communal problems in their own way. For that to happen there is a need to encourage initiative and creativity and conversion of life. The *Intervention* and what followed did not deal well with the cultural side of its program and it did more to smother Aboriginal initiative than to encourage it.

Keywords

Intervention, Intervention 2007, Australian Aboriginals, The *Dreaming*, Indigenous People, The Rex Wild – Pat Anderson Report

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2011.01469.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

There has long been a latent suspicion that affairs were not going well among in the Aboriginal communities and settlements in Australia and in the Northern Territory (NT) in particular. Communities of Aboriginals live on land reserved for them, their *Dreaming* land governed by small town councils or by traditional leaders who represent them to government agencies, to the employees they hire and to the outside world. At first sight these communities resemble a small rural town with its grocery store, a petrol bowser, a school, a hall, a sports oval, a church building perhaps. They are, or they were, enclosed communities and it was necessary to get permission to enter them although that was not too difficult to get. The communities were assumed to be poor and dependent for support on various government entitlements (child endowment, old Age pensions, unemployment, the dole). Since the communities were isolated and if you were not working with one of the various government agencies that were busied with Aboriginal affairs, it was easy to believe what you were told about them. A description of the desperate situation within Aboriginal communities in the NT was made public by Rex Wild and Pat Anderson in their Report, *Little Children are Sacred*.[1] The publication of their findings became the trigger for the preemptive action that would be taken by the Federal government soon after. At the end of the session of the Australian Parliament, 21th of June, 2007 the then Prime Minister, John Howard introduced a series of measures that would become popularly known as the *Intervention*.[2] As Prime Minister he was intervening in the normal running of the government in the Northern Territory (NT), something he could do because Territory affairs, unlike those of the six states, were under the ultimate control of the central government. It is tempting to begin by analyzing the motives, political or otherwise of the Australian government action in the NT (2007 to the present), but this is not the place for that. Political motives are complex and always hard to judge, especially since both major parties have become responsible after the change of government in 2008. The shape of the Federal intervention into Aboriginal communities is a complex matter raising many questions although we can discern two different agendas, one social and one economic. The national emergency, as it became known was, and is, something like a boil that has long festered. This particular boil needed to be lanced for a long time. Surprise was important apparently since no one outside the Cabinet seemed

[1] *Ampe Akelyeremane Meke MeKarle*, "Little Children are Sacred," Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 2007, report sgned by Rex Wild and Pat Anderson'

[2] Northern Territory Emergency Response Act 2007, see Hansard [Australian] June 21 2007

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to have expected it, not even the Northern Territory government in Darwin. There was, the Prime Minister said, a national emergency that demanded immediate and decisive action, action that had been too long delayed. Let us look at some of the symptoms and later review some of the actions taken by the government to straighten out the mess that it found.

Many things were said in the Wild-Anderson Report, but let us concentrate on three issues. First and most alarming was the accusation that the physical and sexual abuse of children was common, even rampant in Aboriginal communities of the NT. Abuse was taken broadly to include sexual abuse of little children, physical abuse where children had been hit, beaten up or subject to grave fear and to that other type of abuse, passive abuse, where children were allowed to grow up without normal parental care and sometimes without proper nutrition. Secondly, the Report found that the root cause of this dreadful situation was excessive drinking of alcohol, *rivers of grog*, drunk by the young, by adults and Elders alike weakening normal family relations. In some communities this was compounded by use of drugs and petrol sniffing. To make matters worse this was being paid for largely by welfare money (unemployment benefits, child endowment and pension funds) diverted from what it was meant for to the purchase of alcohol and other drugs. A third cause mentioned in the Report was the problem was chronic *idleness*. The unemployment rate in rural Aboriginal communities in the NT was excessively high, particularly in the male workforce, 18–49 years of age. This meant that the adults, mostly the younger men, were hanging around all day with little to do. As the Report noted this led to the sapping of personal initiative, a loss of productivity for the nation if nothing else. Long term idleness plus alcohol and drugs and a lack of attention to children was the boil which had been festering for a long time. The government now warned that this was a toxic formula that would lead to total social disintegration if not checked.

The situation in the NT was clearly serious, but did it constitute a national emergency? Yes and no. Yes, it was national in the sense that the nation as a whole was indirectly affected by it; but no, it is not a national emergency since it was not in everybody's backyard and not even present in every Aboriginal community. Aboriginal communities in the NT where Aboriginal people form about 30% of the total population come in all sorts of sizes. Some very remote locations may contain less that 100 people, other remote locations are a bit larger with a population of perhaps 500–600, usually a single linguistic group, and there are a number of townships of 1,000 to 3,000 or more that are multilingual. While the inhabitants of these locations can be described as tribal, they describe themselves as members of a

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single people, living on the land given to them time out of mind by an Ancestral being in the *Dreaming*. The connection with the land is a spiritual relationship and their connection to their particular land is based on a particular relationship. Native title, i.e., ownership of the land arises from that. In larger communities, two, three or even more tribal families may find themselves living together on land at or near the land on which they originally lived. Larger communities, i.e., the towns of 1000 or more were formed artificially in the 19th and 20th centuries as white settlers took over land and forced Aboriginal residents to *move on*. Government policy herded together the survivors of broken tribes to form more viable communities, occasionally families settled on stations by free choice as when a mission or a government station provided safety, food, clothing and education that attracted people to come to a place. The origin of these communities raises problems for mixed tribal groups (and problems for the Courts) about who really has the spiritual claim to the land on which they were now living and about which group should move away to some other Dreaming place. Needless to say it also provides problems for any government and especially any administrative arm of government that tries to maintain order when distributing goods and services fairly to these different types of communities. This is not the place to enter into the various local claims and counter claims about who owns this or that land, but one thing that is clear a *one-size-fits-all* approach is not likely to have much success. In 2007 the Federal *Intervention* from Canberra adopted a *one-size-fits-all* line of approach. It dissolved the councils of all Aboriginal communities (72 or 73 of them), acquired a compulsory five year's lease on their property and assets, and appointed Government Business Managers (GBM's) over them. Troops were brought in to supervise matters and doctors sent in to test children. It is not surprising that a large percent of the Aboriginal population saw the government *Intervention* as an invasion, simply a return of older forms of white domination. The troops when they came were received politely and in fact did not remain very long, but the emergency situation described in the Wild-Anderson Report did not go away. What to do about some of Wild-Anderson's earnest recommendations – the rivers of grog, the inertia, the abuse of children? What steps to take?

Addiction to alcohol was recognized as a symptom of a deeper malaise, a malaise had been with Aboriginal communities since the 1960's and long before that. Removing the opportunity of buying alcohol and limiting the amount of money available to be spent on alcohol would seemingly be a good first step. Many Aboriginals were looking and hoping for an intervention that would accomplish this. It would be a *very* good step if it could be done, they said, without *whitefella humbugging*, i.e., without *whitefellas* effectively

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undoing the good again. (To the uninitiated, the word *humbugging* is a homey Australian word meaning to *see to one's self-interest using sharp practice*.) An Aboriginal community may be officially dry, but grog (alcohol) is made available to Aboriginals in sly ways, e.g., through purchases easily made in nearby super markets or at *off-license* pubs located just outside the community limits. There is a great deal of profit by liquor suppliers, virtually all of whom are non-Aboriginal. This, *humbugging,* is well known to Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals alike in the NT. As the *Intervention* unfolded Aboriginals asked themselves, 'will the licensing boards have the stomach to close the loop holes which allow alcohol to come into our communities or will the local authorities simply be *humbugging* as before?'

Alcohol and other drugs do damage to steady users and are a major and expensive health risk, but a far greater evil is the diversion of Aboriginal income into these things and away from what it was intended for. Unemployment benefits, child endowment money and pensions for the aged were being frittered away. This does not happen in every Aboriginal family nor in every Aboriginal town, but it happens far too often. Where welfare money is eaten up by grog or other drugs children grow up with poorer health, less well nourished and less able to do well at school, if they even to go to school at all. To restructure welfare payments and limit how that money might be spent is a good thing, this aspect of the *Intervention* was welcomed by many Aboriginal mothers and families. If the restructuring could be used as a stick to require parents to make sure their kids to school or loose that welfare money, so much the better. Such restrictions were not wanted by everybody, however. Since it was a regulation what applied only to Aboriginal people it was deeply resented as discriminatory, a return to the "bad old days" of the restrictions of station and mission life.

Beneath the problem of grog and the misuse of welfare money lay the problem of rampant unemployment, and if community make-work service jobs were excluded, the rate of unemployment was even higher. The *Intervention* seems to have made a major misstep at the outset by canceling all *Community Development Employment Projects* (CDEP) jobs, including the work of the well respected Rangers organisation, and placing such workers on the dole. Some wag has said that as well as rivers of grog there are rivers of unearned money in the NT handed out with little understanding of how to distribute the money in ways that might stimulate productive work by Aboriginals themselves. Unearned money breeds loss of self-respect, a disinterest in getting much of anything done and little sense of ownership or care for what has been given. The danger of idleness was noted by Aboriginals themselves when *sit down money* (as they called it) was first introduced in communities back in the 1960's. There are some

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self-sufficient Aboriginal communities in the N.T where the people have built their own homes even a small super market on the back of the profits made from their small cattle ranch. (This is a place, bye-the-bye where no incidence of child abuse has been reported.) The movement toward local self-sufficiency was in fact more advanced in the 1980's and early 1990's than at present as has been pointed out in the *Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*.[3] House building, brick making, clothes manufacture, a car repair shop, bread making, all of these small enterprises that did exist were gradually forced out of existence by market forces in the 1990's, as has happened to many businesses run by non-Aboriginal in the NT. They were judged to be too small to be efficient, better products could be brought in from outside, from Darwin, Brisbane or from cities down south. Aboriginal communities and families became dysfunctional victims of that globalization process

Another troubling sign of dysfunction pointed out in the Wild-Anderson Report was the lack of respect shown toward women, to the weaker men and children by the *big men* of the community, and the Elders were by no means the only *big men* in those places. Sending in more police and the army and providing more ready access to Courts were good moves following the *Intervention*, but if later when Federal budget constraints force downsizing and police presence is reduced, we can be sure that violence will return if the underlying malaise is left to fester.

What affect will this *Intervention* have in the long run? History may be a guide. This present action by government is only one of many interventions by the dominant white culture into Aboriginal life. It is said that there have been six distinctive interventions by government agencies affecting Aboriginals in the North, each intervention carrying in new programs and new plans. All of them been more or less paternalistic, top-down affairs conducted by self-confident experts speaking with a, *we know better than you,* voice. Their plans often been brought in with very little, if any, real prior consultation with local Aboriginal people. The June,' 2007 Intervention has been criticized on the same grounds. Not only were Aboriginal communities not consulted beforehand, but neither were the local governments of the Territory. Aboriginal people have had long experience with bright new programs and have seen them die away after a few years when agencies found that they are too expensive to run and discovered there were not enough expert staff available to carry programs out. The general criticism of interventions has been that they were

[3] John Hilary Martin, "#56 Australian Aboriginal Societies," *Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*, ed. M. Juergensmeyer, Oxford Univ. Press, 2006.

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paternalistic and when *papa* went away the local people were left as untrained as before, their own self-respect unnurtured and starved.

The national emergency action stemming from the Wild-Anderson Report introduced a number of administrative reforms designed to handle symptoms, and symptoms were certainly there to treat, but over long term more is required than handling symptoms. The Reconciliation process needs to be dusted off and tried again. Australians can be proud of the work done toward promoting reconciliation since 1967. Aboriginal people and other Australians do live together socially now in ways they would not have even considered in say, the early 1920's or 1940's. They can live together because they have found that a common humanity is much the same. Yet differences in social customs and deeper values between Aboriginal and Non-aboriginal cultures do exist and it would be naïve to deny that there is still some way to go before we can easily live together maintaining respect for each others' differences.

It is now time to turn to a second objective of the government's *Intervention* of 2007, an objective far more ambiguous and less tied of the concerns of the *Little Children are Sacred Report*. In 2007 the government took over the administration of at least 60 or perhaps all 73 Aboriginal settlements taking a mandatory lease to last for a period of five years. The terms of this takeover were muddy even as the legislation was pushed through Parliament to give it legality. To avoid claims of discrimination it was necessary, for example, to modify the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* (ALRA) of 1976 which for a generation had been a stable fixture. Another suggestion made by officials in the government was that individuals be given power to lease and then to buy small segments of community land in order to build (and then to own) their own home and/or to establish a small business. The importance of *owning your own home* is a desire familiar to the average Australian *down south*, but carries, to be frank, a certain unrealism in the Bush. Some questions also needed to be answered. Who would be responsible for the upkeep of the house and its surrounding bit of land if the owner was unable to pay or became unemployed? What would be regarded as a small business? The location of the business would presumably be on Aboriginal land, but *who* would grant permission to start such an operation? Where would the capital come from to run such a business? Where was the market for the goods that were produced? Would non-Aboriginals be invited in and be allowed to run and operate the small business? These were important questions and the *Intervention* left answers hanging in the air.

Normally Aboriginal land is *Dreaming* land (i.e., the land on reserves and on which native title has been established) it is owned collectively by the particular group *who* (sic!) received that land

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from a Dreaming ancestor. As such it cannot be parceled out to outsiders on a permanent basis. The traditional land-owners would argue that land cannot be alienated from the collective group and any attempts to do so will meet with resistance if not in the present generation, then in the next generation and in the one after that. The *Intervention's* informal proposals about private ownership and small business became unpopular with Aboriginals because they raised the specter of non-Aboriginal enclaves within an Aboriginal community and the possible dismemberment of collective control.[4]

The initial *Intervention*, and the government's policy afterward did not tackle, as should have, the third issue alluded to in the Wild-Anderson report, *idleness*, i.e., unemployment. How will it be possible to go about making a living in a small remote community in the Australia's rural Outback? This is perhaps the major social issue which faces Aboriginal communities today as it always has, and is at the root of the present malaise. The romantic image of a hunter-gatherers' life consisting of a brief work day gathering foodstuffs with much leisure time left over for conversation and ceremonies is a fantasy that Aboriginal communities in their real world probably rarely enjoyed, if at any time. Before the advent of Europeans there was work to be done, a living to be made. Aboriginal communities did have exchange arrangements, they did engage in business as well as hunter-gathering. Along the north coast Moccasin traders made contact with coastal Aboriginal groups and there were inland trading routes that existed for the exchange of ochres, spear points, axe heads. The walking paths are stamped into the land and traces can still be found today if you look for them. Message sticks were carried from what is now Darwin to Broome, down to Perth along the south coasts. It was economy on a small scale, to be sure, but it was an economy, it was making a living. Generating an economy in the Bush nowadays must be done, of course, in quite a different way. Hunter-gathering is no longer a viable way of life and Aboriginal people recognize this fact very well. In the first place there are not enough plants or animals to feed their growing population, nor in the Bush are the much desired items like autos, TV's, washing machines or computers lying around waiting to be picked up. Every economy, even in the Bush, is dominated now by the pressure of money, credit, prices, savings, building of capital and the like. Aboriginal leaders are aware of these pressures and they are well aware that they are living in Australia largely out of the market. They are forced into what might

[4] Since the *Intervention* attempts have been made to force communities to agree to extended leases in return for special funding for housing. To insist that what is being imposed is merely *leasehold* makes little difference since a lease on land for 99 years, or even 40 years, effectively removes that property from community initiative and control and dilutes tribal structures.

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called a *remittance economy* –that is, an economy based on gratuitous external payments coming from government, from grants and from the churches and humanitarian organisations. To be frank, Aboriginals have been placed in a position of living largely off welfare payments under some guise or other. Their land and its resources is their one tangible asset and they are rightly very nervous about any moves, however well intentioned, that would weaken collective ownership or control and compel them to lease to outsiders.

In the NT we have Aboriginal groups living on lands that have quite valuable resources. They include coasts for fishing, grass land for raising cattle, mining for exotic minerals and not least petrol and natural gas. While it is true that only some Aboriginal communities have access to a wide range of resources- and good luck to those who do- most groups have access to at least some of them opening the way for different lines of development from community to community. The different possibilities open to communities reinforces the truism, mentioned above, *one-size-does not-fit-all*. A general template for future Aboriginal development is not likely to be successful everywhere, if indeed anywhere. Best results, in fact any lasting results will require lots of consultation (it need not always take a long time) based on local initiative. Much of what this and other interventions have done is to sap Aboriginal initiative, to disparage it, to cut down what was there. We can hardly expect initiative to return where communities are not allowed to decide what they can do with their land or with their resources. The *Dreaming* does not preclude all development, but caring for the land in new and appropriate ways is what is critical.

Once there were *village industries* in larger Aboriginal communities and towns. As was mentioned above, communities have built their own houses, designed and tailored their own clothes, done commercial fishing, ran cattle and improved their herds, repaired cars, made bread, entertained tourists and created new styles of painting and music. What happened to all this activity in the past thirty years, where did it all go? This was a delicate matter, but needs to be brought into the discussion when looking back at 'what has worked and what has not' in the past five years of *Intervention*. In Aboriginal communities today a lion's share of skilled and semi-skilled work –beyond simply sorting and sweeping- is still being done by non-Aboriginal people, by non-local people. The teachers, the medical professionals, the miners, plumbers, electricians, the road workers, the mechanics, grocery clerks, book keepers, are predominantly non-Aboriginal. These outside workers are paid salaries and their pay packets contain a lot more than an Aboriginal welfare check. In many instances these *guest workers*, have followed an honest impulse of wanting to be of help to Aboriginal people and they have expended time, energy and sympathy on their Aboriginal *charges*, but mixed with idealism there

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has been a vested interest in wanting to have and to maintain a job in one or other of these outback communities. The bottom line -they have taken work from the peoples of the land.

To return to the government's stated purpose for *Intervening* in the NT which was its determination to stamp out addictions and get the able bodied off welfare roles and back to work. As has said at the beginning there are symptoms and there is dysfunction underlying the symptoms. *Interventions* whether by government, by family or simply personal will begin by dealing with symptoms. Caring for an alcoholic or drug user requires *drying out*, counseling, confrontation at times by family and friends, the restructuring of a sick person's lifestyle. This in turn not infrequently demands the treating of a psychologically dysfunctional family, or even a dysfunctional community. All these efforts require ongoing support, with adequate money and personnel and they require time. More importantly, however, they require a change of *will*. Can a policy focused simply on closing pubs and cutting off the supply of alcohol, the excising small pieces of to allow individuals to own and develop their property affect a change of will? Won't a policy of managing assets externally impair individual initiative? Won't the leasing of land end the ability of a community to control where it wants to go? To insist that what the *Intervention* imposed merely *leasehold* makes little difference since a lease effectively removes that property from community initiative and control dilutes tribal structures.

The issue remains how can initiative be recovered when it appears to be lost? Those who are addicted, require a conversion, *their own conversion*; dysfunctional communities require more than policing to come to a collective conversion, *their own conversion*. All too much of the discussion surrounding the *Intervention* has been talk of regulations, limitations, supervision, new buildings, new administrative structures. The main streets of larger Aboriginal communities are lined with derelict buildings built one after the other over the years generated and financed by well meant schemes by outsiders. These building are haunted by the ghosts of past governmental projects and other interventions. The buildings either stand empty, locked up, or are now being used for some quite different purpose.

After a long series of counseling sessions, after the causes of a problem are surveyed, after the options are laid out to and by the patient, a psychologist will often conclude that the patient must *decide* to do something about it by themselves. One of the steps of a well known program, the AA, is for the addict to admit their own inability and to accept the help of an interior power greater to enable them to reshape their own life. It is perhaps not the government's place to offer *spiritual* advice, but in all *Intervention* policy there has been little discussion of personal faith, hope and grace. A wise

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Aboriginal Elder has said *it is not fundamentally about policy, it is about how you value Aboriginal people as human beings*.

John Hilary Martin OP
230 Vine Street,
Berkeley, California,
United States 94708

hilary.martin@op.org.au,

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