



CONFERENCE OF LEADERS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES IN NEW SOUTH WALES CLRI(NSW)

Prophetic. Pro-Active. Prayerful.

The Honourable Kevin Rudd
Parliament House
Canberra

24 August, 2009

Dear Mr Rudd,

Re: Intervention in the Northern Territory

We write on behalf of the CLRI Justice committee, a group representing the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes in NSW. CLRI numbers approximately 3,500 Catholic Religious women and men and their associates. The congregations have a long history of involvement with Indigenous families and communities, particularly in the areas of education, health and welfare.

The visit of Professor Anaya to Australia has highlighted the conflicting views that currently surrounding the Intervention in the Northern Territory.

'Special measures' were imposed on Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory by the Howard Government in 2007. These measures do not comply with human rights principles and clearly contravene the Racial Discrimination Act. They are discriminatory and as such are robustly opposed by many Indigenous communities and leaders.

We urge the Australian Government to take immediate action to reinstate the Racial Discrimination Act, and re-engage with Indigenous communities as a fundamental step in the attempts to 'close the gap' and reduce Indigenous disadvantage. A solution to the problems faced by Indigenous Australians cannot be reached through the breach of their human rights. Our concern is not in getting around the technicalities of the suspension but the reality of people being able to be re-empowered by the actual reinstatement of the mechanism of this democratic right to appeal against these punitive controls which affect so many aspects of their daily lives.

The Government has introduced a review of the current situation, and has committed itself to the principle that 'one size does not fit all'. Ongoing blanket income management however, and the disempowering of people so that they have no real control of their own lives in their own country – income, employment, communities and land – contradict that commitment.

Moreover, the current consultation process, based on the Future Directions Paper, has not sufficiently engaged Indigenous leaders and communities. Many groups have requested 'negotiation' as distinct from 'consultation', regarding policy and programs which they believe have already been decided on.

SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

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In the Native Title debate the unfounded fear by mainstream Australia was that their land be taken. Legislation ensured that their freehold title was protected. However this same protection is not ensured for 'Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory' and now in South Australia as mentioned in Minister Jenny Macklin's letter to one our Sisters of St Joseph- Michele Madigan. The statement 'Aboriginal land means Aboriginal land' is puzzling particularly in view of the imminent threat of compulsory acquiring of lands of the Alice Springs Town Camps.

We are impressed with the allocation noted of \$5.5 billion over 10 years and commend the Government for this commitment. Our question – Where are the houses currently as we understand that as yet there are none so far built for Aboriginal families?

We affirm your efforts to overcome Indigenous disadvantage. We believe however that human rights and justice, combined with serious negotiation (rather than short-sighted consultation and inevitably temporary measures) must underpin Government policy.

Yours sincerely,

(for CLRI NSW)