

A Further Conversation with Elders

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As the Northern Territory Intervention continues it is often hard for those of us in other parts of Australia to really understand how it impacts on the daily lives of Aboriginal people. We often hear in the media about such things as the increase in numbers of teachers; that law and order has improved; that there are improvements in health; that so many jobs have been created and so many houses have been built. We may also hear from those who question these reported benefits. We may hear from welfare bodies; from inquiries such as a recent NT inquiry into child welfare; from shadow ministers who question Government claims; from academics; from International Human Rights bodies and experts; from Churches and from organizations such as NATSIEC. These other sources of information are important and often highlight contradictions, they challenge Government claims, and they criticize the policies that are having such impacts on the communities. Rarely though do we have the opportunity to hear directly, without interpretation, from Aboriginal people themselves.

This happened on Monday night when, thanks to the efforts of 'concerned Australians', a large audience in Melbourne had the opportunity to listen directly to Elders from the NT. Also, two important statements were released. One was from the Elders themselves, and highlighted the pain they and their communities are experiencing as a direct result of the Intervention. In this statement they appeal to all Australians to "walk with us in true equality" and help put an end to the "nightmare that Northern Territory Aboriginal People are experiencing on a daily basis".

The second statement was signed by several leading Australians. This statement called for the Government to start afresh and to comply with our international obligations and also to reinstate the Racial Discrimination Act in an unqualified form.

During the evening, in conversation style with Jeff McMullen, the Elders told us how they and their communities had experienced the Intervention. The following is a summary of what I heard.

Revd. Dr. Djiniyini Gondarra OAM from Galiwin'ku said that the Intervention made Aboriginal people feel like a special class of beggars. He also reminded us that the Elders there were people who have received the Law and that leadership comes from being initiated. It's important to understand that Aboriginal people live with two systems of Law and that despite sovereignty being taken away from Aboriginal peoples and despite the introduction of a second system of Law, the original common Law of this land remains. Revd. Dr. Gondarra said that often people talk about Aboriginal Law as "lore", but he doesn't believe that - he believes it is Law and that we can not deny that prior to colonization they were a nation with laws which talked about peace, order, good government and that every member of the community was a member of the law. He also told us that Aboriginal Law was given by the Great Spirit of the Land, it does not change. It's not like the Westminster system where you see a problem and create a Law for it. Revd. Dr. Gondarra said that the Western system and the Australian Constitution provide an opportunity for dialogue. Importantly, he reminded us that we are the people, we shape the Government and we can shape the laws.

Rosalie Kunoth Monks OAM, from Utopia, started by saying that she did not know how to express the pain she felt about the control and loss of rights. She told us how she had travelled to Geneva to talk to the UN and that for the first time in her life she felt that she was part of

the human race; that she had to leave Australia to leave behind that control and to be treated like she was fully human. She met people there that did not treat her as a child or as if she was brainless. She told us how the Intervention had caused so much pain, and had destroyed so many families. Also, that the Intervention had caused destruction of infrastructure and that services previously provided by the local council were now not being undertaken.

Harry Jakamarra Nelson from Yuendumu, told us of the pressure he felt in his community and how the impact of the Intervention had been exacerbated by the introduction of the new Shires. The consequence of these two things is that the local community now has no say in how their communities are run.

Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, AM, from Nauiyu agreed that in her community the introduction of the Shires and the Intervention had contributed to disempowering the community. This disempowerment is causing depression in the community and there have been many suicides. They don't feel that there is anyone there that they can trust and talk to. Many people are saying they want the Church back to help educate the kids and simply to be able to give trusted advice. Ms Ungunmerr-Baumann also talked about how when things go wrong it's always seen as their fault. But they are not being listened to. They need partnerships, but there is no opportunity given to develop these partnerships.

Djappirri Mununggirritj from Yirkala, said that before the Intervention Yirkala was the strongest community in Arnhem Land; that they had strong leaders and good initiatives. She also told us how they had resisted the introduction of the Intervention because they were worried about how it would affect the community. She told us that the Intervention had brought about brokenness in family life and that young people are depressed because they are lost. Someone else's culture is interfering.

Dhanggai Gurruwiwi also from Yirkala talked about education. She said that the kids learn first at home; they learn who they are, where they come from and who they belong to. By the age of 3 or 4 they know how they are related to everybody in the community. But the education system doesn't recognize what is already there, their languages and ways of learning.

George Gaymarani Pascoe from Milingimbi said that he was puzzled when he heard the former Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Amanda Vanstone talk about how homelands will become cultural museums. For him, this talk about homelands and the Intervention reminded him of the 1920s and 1930s when the Chief Protector and others talked about a dying race. For him the Intervention is bringing back history. He said, we don't want it, it hurts. He said "we are the first nations as you can see us. We are fighting for the justice of the land, the justice of the people".

Towards the end of the evening there was some talk about the Intervention legislation also causing problems in the legal system such as the inability for the judicial system to take culture into account. Alistair Nicholson said it only applies to Aboriginal people and that it was the worst piece of legislation and was racist and offensive. Former Prime Minister of Australia, Malcolm Fraser, commented on the lack of protection of human rights that exist in Australia. He told us that the Australian constitution doesn't protect the basic rights of anybody and that what is called for is appropriate amendments to the constitution, not just changes to the preamble, as well as a Charter of Rights.

The forum finished with the seven Elders presenting their statement. Rosalie Kunoth-Monks summed it up by saying we need to accept each other as human beings and be proud of the diversity of cultures; be proud of the oldest living culture right here in Australia. She challenged us to enter into dialogue with each other and to listen.