

# AMPE AKELYERNEMANE MEKE MEKARLE 'LITTLE CHILDREN ARE SACRED'

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Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse

Co-authored by Pat Anderson and Rex Wild

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*Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle* 'Little Children are Sacred' (the Report) confirms that sexual abuse of Indigenous children is extensive; indeed, the Report characterises the level of abuse as a crisis. The authors, Pat Anderson and Rex Wild, acknowledge that the Report comes after a long line of reports with similar findings and does not purport to expose a new phenomenon. Rather, the Report details the magnitude of abuse, the reasons contributing to it and its effects.

Importantly, in light of recent events in the Northern Territory, the authors do not state that the abuses the Report documents constitute an 'emergency'. While pornography was identified as a major issue, a ban on such material was not part of the Report's recommendations. Similarly, while noting that school attendance is a major problem in the Northern Territory, Anderson and Wild point out that linking attendance to welfare payments was one of a dozen other options available to address the problem.

The Report is firmly based on concepts of partnership, healing and community development. Many of the recommendations are aimed at improving Northern Territory Government services like child protection, health care, sexual assault prevention and treatment and education. The authors emphasise that it is essential for any reform proposals to be culturally secure, effective and made in consultation with the communities involved.

The Report analyses the barriers to reporting child sexual abuse, outlines a typology of offenders and makes 97 recommendations, which can be broadly summarised as follows:

- Leadership: the Australian and Northern Territory Governments should establish a collaborative partnership with long-term funding arrangements to address child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory. This requires genuine consultation with Aboriginal people.
- Government responses: the Commonwealth should develop a whole-of-government approach to child abuse involving policies promoting child safety, senior executive officers for children and mandatory screening. The Report also recommends the creation of a Commissioner for Children and Young People.
- Family and Children's Services ('FACS'): increased investment in FACS is needed. This should involve separate branches for parenting/family support and involving FACS in responding to abuse. The Report recommends an increase in child protection workers, urgent upgrades and expansions of Sexual Assault Referral Centres and the development of victim and community support programs.
- Health crisis intervention: appropriate guidelines and training on the management of children's sexual health should be provided to government and non-government health care providers.
- Police, prosecutions and victim support: the Report recommends better implementation of the Child Abuse Taskforce, the recruitment of more Aboriginal officers, greater and more meaningful consultation, the review of witness legislation, and recruitment and training of interpreters.
- Bail: section 24 of the *Bail Act* (NT) should be amended to consider child victims.
- Offender Rehabilitation: more culturally appropriate sex offender programs, both community-based and in jail, are required. Alternative sentencing models are also recommended.
- Prevention services: comprehensive long term strategies aimed at preventing child sexual abuse are needed.
- Health care: greater access to pre-natal and maternity
- Leadership: the Australian and Northern Territory Governments should establish a collaborative partnership with long-term funding arrangements to

support is required, as is a general increase in funding, programs dealing with intergenerational trauma, counselling and treatment.

- Family support services: the Report recommends the establishment of youth centres and programs and men's and women's groups focusing on education and the prevention of abuse. In addition, the Government should provide increased crisis accommodation, healing and education services.
- Education: strategies for increasing school attendance are crucial. The recommendations of the Learning Lessons Implementation Steering Committee in its *Learning Lessons Report* should be implemented.
- Alcohol and substance abuse: a Government-driven shift in family and community attitudes is needed. This requires urgent implementation of the Alcohol Framework, consultation on culturally effective strategies, changes to liquor legislation, ensuring alcohol counsellors visit communities and the establishment of rehabilitation centres.
- Community justice: the Report recommends a Government-facilitated dialogue between law-men and women and the legal and justice system, along with recognition of aspects of Aboriginal law and the establishment of Community Justice Groups and language-specific courts.
- Role of communities: the Report argues that the Government must actively support community-based responses to Aboriginal family violence, involving management strategies with communities and local child safety/protection plans.
- Employment: there is a need for innovative employment training, community development workers and local workforces to address health and welfare issues.
- Housing: the Report highlights the need for mass housing construction in targeted communities. This should involve training local Aboriginal people in construction/repair work.
- Pornography: there should be an education campaign to inform communities of film and television classifications along with legislative prohibitions on exposing minors to pornography.
- Gambling: the Report recommends the implementation of education campaigns to target gambling. It also recommends counselling in communities, research on the impact of gambling on child safety and wellbeing and the development of local regulatory laws.

The authors strongly argue that abuse is linked to a range of social, economic, cultural and historical factors. Some common themes raised throughout the interviewing and investigation process were: alcoholism; lack of access to, or participation in, education; poverty; inadequate housing; low standards of health and health outcomes; substance abuse; gambling and pornography; high levels of unemployment; responses by government agencies; the justice system; and rehabilitation of offenders.

The authors also propose 'rules of engagement' for working with Indigenous communities. They outline nine key principles which ought to be borne in mind in the process of policy development and implementation:

- Improve government service provision to Aboriginal people.
- Take language and cultural 'world view' seriously.
- Effective and ongoing consultation and engagement.
- Local focus and recognition of diversity.
- Community-based and community-owned initiatives.
- Recognition and respect of Aboriginal law, and empowerment and respect of Aboriginal people.
- Balanced gender, family and group representation.
- Adequate and ongoing support and resources.
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

*The full text of this Report is available at <[http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/inquirysaac/pdf/bipacsa\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/inquirysaac/pdf/bipacsa_final_report.pdf)>.*