

## “Emergency mission” in the Northern Territory

By The Hon Mal Brough MP, Minister for Families,  
Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

The Australian Government’s intervention to protect Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory from abuse has been welcomed by the majority of Australians, because it is the right thing to do. Many are volunteering to put their shoulder to the wheel to help the effort.

When confronted with a failed society, where basic standards of law and order and behaviour had broken down - how do we respond? Do we respond with more of what we have done in the past? For too many years there has been insufficient effort to prevent a cycle of devastation. But we need to do more than admit failure. We need to change direction, and it needs to be a dramatic change to match the dramatic nature of the problem.

It was my judgement to call for a political answer to the human tragedy of addiction, abuse and dysfunction unfolding in the Northern Territory.

I have become increasingly frustrated that, despite numerous reports and increasing investments by the Australian Government, there continues to be an atmosphere of denial and little effective action. The release of the recent report to the Northern Territory Government ‘Little Children are Sacred’ underscores, yet again, the need for firm action. Make no mistake, we are intervening because the Northern Territory Government has failed to protect these children, and because we have the constitutional power to do so in the Northern Territory.

We are determined to make a difference, and will not shy away from the hard decisions that need to be taken. We will be providing extra police, stemming the flow of

alcohol, drugs and pornography, assessing the health situation of children, engaging local people in improving living conditions and offering more employment opportunities and activities for young people. We will limit the amount of cash available for alcohol, drugs and gambling for all income support recipients for twelve months before they will transition to the new welfare reform arrangements which will apply to other Australians. The local people are the real stakeholders and they will need to be engaged every step of the way. Of course some people are questioning elements of our emergency response including the acquisition of five year leases and the lifting of the permit system in relation to Aboriginal townships.

One of our important objectives is to improve basic living conditions and to reduce overcrowding. Most of the housing and other infrastructure in these towns has been funded by the Federal Government. Taxpayer funded, but on private land. The result is that these facilities have been gifted to private land holders, and upkeep and maintenance is controlled by local groups. We need to control the assets that we are repairing and upgrading, rather than persevere with the blockages and inefficiencies caused by the current system. In this emergency period, we cannot afford to go through lengthy approval processes and rely on others to fix up houses and change conditions - that would be like having a ball and chain around your leg.

Our proposal for five year leases only relates to the major townships where most of the residents are usually not the traditional owners. This involves only about 0.1%

of Northern Territory Aboriginal land, and traditional owners would still hold the underlying title to it. It is a temporary lease and just compensation will be paid for that period. We are not after a commercial windfall here - there is none to be had.

The permit system prevents people travelling on Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory unless they have a permit to do so. After a review and consultation with communities in the Northern Territory, I decided to maintain the permit system, but remove the requirement in relation to townships and road corridors or about 0.2% of Aboriginal land. On balance I thought an open township like other Australian towns will be a safer and more prosperous town.

This is an emergency mission in the Northern Territory and we will not compromise on what needs to be done to save children, stabilise communities and invest in a longer term strategy to help Indigenous Australians to build a better future for their children.

As the story fades from the front pages of the press, we must avoid watering down the commitment and goodwill that is generated so far. The requirement to help will grow as our work continues in the Northern Territory. People can make contributions in many different and positive ways. I urge readers to contact 1800 333 995 for information or to volunteer (02) 6243 4855.



*A remote Indigenous community*