

Looking to simple justice for our children

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In normal circumstances, my discussion this morning would – or perhaps should – have been a routine one. I have been invited to speak to you – as a service organisation – as minister responsible for child protection.

An important subject.

Important because we in the Northern Territory are not alone in this nation in experiencing a rapid increase in the number of cases of abuse coming to the attention of authorities.

There is no single reason for this. Undoubtedly it is due to an increased incidence of child abuse and neglect; expansions to what we consider to be abuse and neglect, as seen now with the greater recognition of the damage done to children exposed to domestic violence; a lowered tolerance for the abuse of children; and a greater community awareness of abuse, and willingness to report concerns.

Within the broader community, the situation for Indigenous children is particularly alarming. In the Territory, Indigenous children now represent the majority of cases dealt with my department. Such kids account for much of the growth in child protection service demand. One third of the population under the age of 16 account for around 60 per cent of notifications, and three quarters of substantiations.

The only heartening thing about such figures is that they might provide evidence that the abuse of Indigenous kids is now being identified and acted on, as opposed to being ignored.

Child abuse is only one part of this broader picture. Across virtually all indicators, there are wide gaps in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Territorians.

My people have poorer health, are less likely to succeed in school, are less likely to be employed; are far more likely to do gaol time and far more likely to be the victims and perpetrators of crime.

However, such an apparently routine discussion is not really possible under current circumstances: I was explicitly invited this morning to discuss the important issue of child protection in light of the so-called “national emergency” relating to Indigenous kids declared on 21 June this year by the Prime Minister Howard and his Indigenous Affairs minister Mal Brough.

I don't mind telling you that the declaration of this “national emergency” was a shock – especially as the stated objective of this emergency was the rescue of victims of child abuse on our remote Aboriginal communities.

On the one hand, Aboriginal women in particular had been drawing attention to the endemic problems of family violence and child abuse on our communities for well over fifteen years. I myself had been part of that campaign in my previous existence as an Aboriginal health administrator; the Prime Minister had been told exactly this six years ago by a delegation of Aboriginal leaders.

On the other hand; not only had *nothing* been done at a federal level, we have actually seen a decline in federal outlays to groups such as women's centres and night patrols.

So, on the face of it, we welcomed aspects of the sudden national concern; the promises of action; and the promises of increased resources being applied to the problem.

We welcomed the approach to alcohol. We welcomed increased resources in policing. We welcomed the approach to pornography.

Since 2003, we here in the Territory – through our major *Caring for our children* reform – had been rapidly upgrading our response to child abuse.

Over the last four years funding to the area had been quadrupled to over \$33 million; we had established things such as a 24 hour centralised intake unit for people to call.

We had set up a combined Police-Family and Children's Services task force to respond to complex cases of sexual and physical abuse involving multiple abusers or multiple offenders. We had created additional child protection positions.

In fact, we were well down the track in signing an agreement with the Commonwealth which would have involved increased federal resources to Indigenous child protection coming into the Territory.

What has been fundamental to our approach – and fundamental to *my* approach in both my stints as Family and Children's Services minister – is developing long term solutions to what is a developing crisis in Aboriginal affairs in the Northern Territory.

It is why – over a year before the declaration of the “national emergency” – Chief Minister Clare Martin had approached Mr Howard with a proposal to work together on a generational, 20 year approach to Aboriginal affairs.

It is why, although initially in response to media revelations about child abuse, the *Little children are sacred* report was commissioned last year.

We *know* there are no silver bullet fixes to the problems we face. We *know* that solutions must be long term; we *know* that solutions must seriously tackle the totality of social dysfunction that Aboriginal Territorians face, and not just the symptoms.

It is *why* we introduced a 20 year plan in parliament two weeks ago entitled *Closing the gap* as a generational plan of action with that plan backed up by political will – and at \$286 million over five years – the largest systematic social spending in the history of the Northern Territory.

It is a systematic, long term approach, to the endemic material poverty Indigenous Territorians face every day of our lives.

In parliament a couple of weeks ago I drew attention to the fact that over the next 20 years – the life of the plan – over 30,000 Aboriginal kids will be born. It is to them that we owe our commitment through *Closing the gap*; it is their lives that we hold in our hands – not just as politicians, but as a whole community.

It is those 30,000 kids of the future that we must dedicate ourselves – a responsibility that bears heavily on all of us.

Yet none of this is being achieved by the so-called “national emergency”. Thus far, not a single thing action carried out through the national emergency has benefited a single child.

Quite the opposite.

It has been a direct attack on the decent, loving parents of Aboriginal families throughout the Territory who have been universally tarred with the same brush by the federal government. All Aboriginal parents on our remote communities are now apparently regarded by the Federal Government as uncaring, incompetent and incapable of looking after their children.

It has also been an unwarranted slur on the hard work and dedication of our child protection workers, health professionals, policy and community workers throughout the Territory who dedicate their professional lives to the care of children and strengthening of families – and that includes those working for NGOs such as Anglicare.

In the last few days I have been told that certain agencies of the Federal response of 21 June have been explicitly told not to use the words “national emergency”, but to prefer the term “intervention”. This is no mere quibble about words, but reveals the deepening disquiet about the ideological and cultural foundations of the “emergency”.

And I speak here of the linking of child protection by Howard and Brough with that of the abolition of the permit system and the compulsory acquisition of leases over Aboriginal land. Without *any* evidence, the claim is made that these overtly political and ideological actions are vital to the protection of children in the Northern Territory.

It does not explain why child abuse is endemic in areas of Australia where the Aboriginal Land Rights Act does not exist; or in areas where permit systems are not in place.

To the contrary.

The removal of the permit system – as recognised by the Northern Territory police – *increases* the vulnerability of our communities.

The removal of our right to say – to paraphrase the Prime Minister – who can and who cannot come on to our country, does not strengthen our families or protect our children.

When or where – throughout history, I ask you – have increased vulnerability and disempowerment led to strong families in which children are safe?

Friends.

I will keep this brief, and am quite happy to discuss this with you after my remarks. As I said, this is not the place for a routine discussion that might be the usual fare for a politician speaking at a conference such as this.

As a politician, my minders should probably have advised me to appeal to a group such as yours to ideas of morals and morality.

Perhaps.

But instead I would raise an issue that is often divorced in these troubled times from notions of morality, and that is justice.

And it is simple justice that I seek, and try to work towards, for the Aboriginal kids of the Northern Territory.

It is simple justice that arises from a commitment to a long term future for the kids of today – and the tens of thousands that will be with us in the decades to come.

And it is simple justice that arises from a commitment to applying real resources to that long term future, and not the application of narrow ideologies to the lives of those kids.

In my view, the real “national emergency” is a cultural emergency. In the name of ideology, simple justice has been abandoned.

And – yes – our national morality has suffered enormous damage.

Thank you.