

## **Northern Territory is a failed state**

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Stop listening to politicians and start listening to the Aboriginal people.

I believe that the Northern Territory is a failed state. Some people may only have just come to this conclusion such as the WA Premier. Others have known it for some time. This is because the NT government seems incapable of governing for all Territorians.

The NT government was always the wrong governing system for Aboriginal people, who represent about a third of the territory's population, own about half of the land base, and who remain the permanent residents of the NT. It is the wrong system of governance for people who have been working to their own governing system for thousands of years.

The idea of the Northern Territory style of government was never established through consultation with Aboriginal people, and I would very much doubt that many would have given it their blessing then or now, even if they do go and cast a wasted vote on election day. This is not a great endorsement of democracy for us.

It is very strange that the Commonwealth legislation through which the Northern Territory government operates, the Northern Territory (Self-Government) Act 1976, has never been tested to see if its governing arrangements work for all Territorians, especially Aboriginal Territorians. An inquiry into how the Northern Territory has governed on behalf of Aboriginal people is long overdue, and also requires an urgent royal commission.

I have believed the Northern Territory needed a far more appropriate and fairer form of governance for and by Aboriginal people ever since I worked in central Australia in the 1980s as the Northern Territory executive officer and senior researcher for the peak Aboriginal political body at that time, the National Aboriginal Conference.

When I researched and wrote the book *Grog War* for Aboriginal people in Tennant Creek in 1997 to tell their story about the extraordinary difficulties they endured in a 10-year battle to try to reduce the amount of alcohol available in this town that was harming so many lives, it was also obvious to me then, as it should have been clearly obvious for anyone else, how difficult it was for Aboriginal people to achieve simple reform for the greater good in the NT.

I then saw the extent of this failure in the Territory governing system again when I was the senior research manager of a National Health and Medical Research Council Collaborative Central Australia Community Initiatives Prevention Project in 2001-02. The research revealed the extent of the structural violence that was creating deepening intergenerational injury in the lives of a great many Aboriginal people.

No matter what the NT style of administration did, it just continued to make matters worse for Aboriginal people. The evidence and data from the injury project was clear, just as it has been through countless studies that have been conducted over several decades in the NT, including the royal commission on black deaths in custody.

Many of the recommendations of the vast majority of all this research, including the royal commission, were never followed through, and Aboriginal people ultimately have been left with a situation that is growing increasingly harder to manage, in looking after and caring for our own people.

There have been thousands of Aboriginal people who have worked hard through their organisations and communities in the NT to try to make their world a better and safer place, and they keep doing this better than anyone else, but it is in the overall governing system that the power remains, and this is the crippling factor, and it keeps pulling us down.

The Aboriginal boys who were shamefully, cruelly and brutally abused in the Don Dale Youth Correction Centre over a long period of time, under the watch of various NT governments, have been paying the price for this very wrong and injurious governing system. They pay the price for people unfit to govern. They pay the price for a deeper endemic problem created by a system that has become a basket case in the way it governs, and treats, Aboriginal people.

It has only been the effective action of senior Aboriginal men and women on various advisory boards that has cushioned some of the effects of a government that seems to not care about the amount of harm they cause Aboriginal people.

This was evident last week as we watched politicians sacrificing each other, to deflect the blame from themselves over what had happened to these boys.

The only thing that I have seen that has worked well in the territory for Aboriginal people has been the other twin of Commonwealth legislation for the Northern Territory, the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976.

Why was this? It was because of the consistent, focused and extremely hard work and vigilance by Aboriginal people from the communities, and their land councils to make land rights work. It was never easy. There were always challenges. Always battles. Always threats.

Most of the cause of so much difficulty in this hard work came from the Northern Territory government itself, which was always attacking Aboriginal people, rather than actually doing the job of creating a good, decent and fair governing system that might support them.

I had also worked as the co-ordinator for two major Aboriginal constitutional conventions in the Northern Territory: the 1993 NT Aboriginal Constitutional Convention Today We Talk About Tomorrow, and the 1998 Kalkaringi Convention. They involved more than a thousand Aboriginal people, the best of their communities, who worked together to create a vision for the future, the vision that they wanted to work for, and take responsible for achieving.

These senior Aboriginal people were never listened to. Instead, all we ever got were inept people designing more failures for us to endure.

If Australia wants to never see any Australian child treated in the way that they saw on the ABC Four Corners program last week, speak to the most respected,

experienced and long-standing Aboriginal leaders working with their people in the Northern Territory.

These are the people who share and are directed by the vision of their people, know how to build strong and lasting ideas for the future, and have compassion for their people. I think the Central Land Council would be a good place to start. There cannot be any more violent solutions. Stop listening to idiots.

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