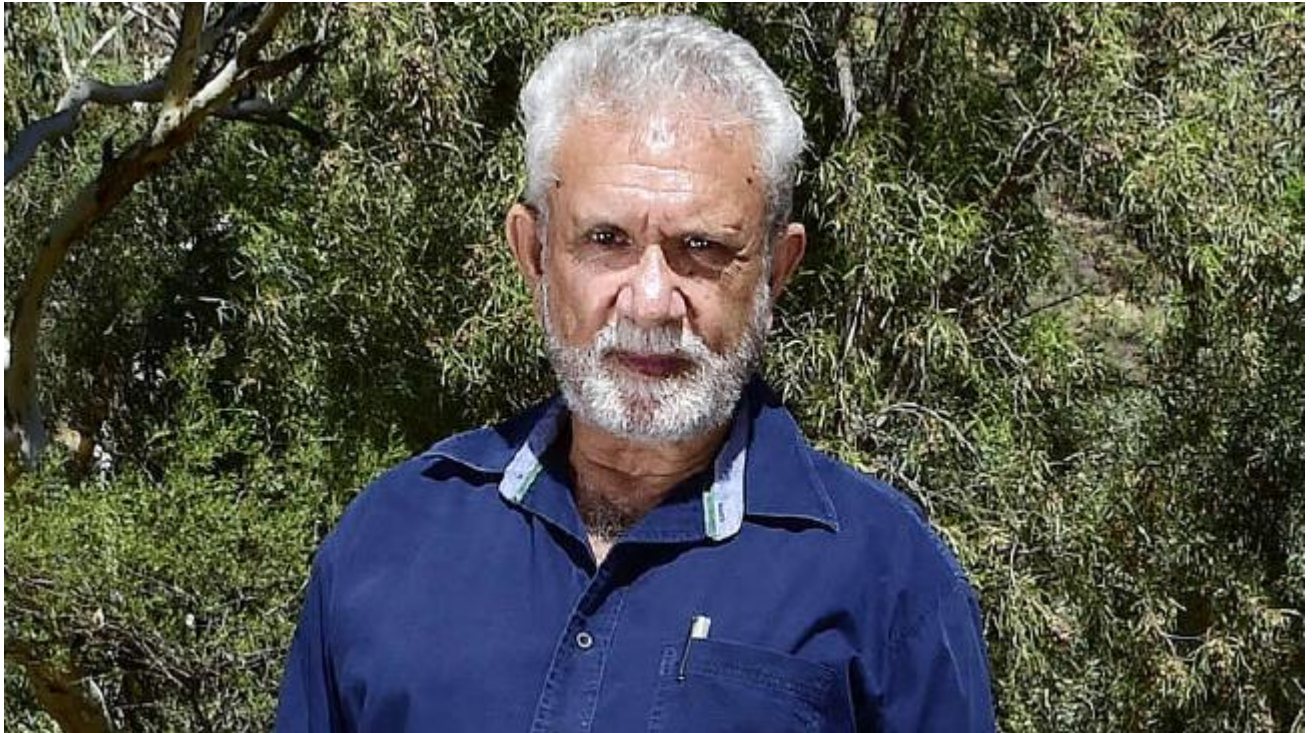


# Northern Territory intervention just 'another form of abuse'



*Central Land Council director David Ross. Picture: Chloe Erlich*

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- STEPHEN FITZPATRICK

The Northern Territory intervention has failed the people it was supposed to protect and 10 years on has become “another form of abuse”, says the Aboriginal academic who co-wrote the study on which it was based.

Pat Anderson, who has long decried the Howard government’s use of her Little Children Are Sacred report to justify its rolling-out of troops and police in 2007, was speaking at a central Australian indigenous constitutional recognition meeting.

Ms Anderson, the co-chair of the Referendum Council, which is running regional talks ahead of a constitutional convention at Uluru next month, said it was understandable that many of the roughly 100 delegates at the weekend meeting at Ross River, outside Alice Springs, had railed against the policy.

The extraordinary laws, which include income management and alcohol restrictions, were supposed to protect vulnerable women and children but speakers at the weekend decried the fact that Aboriginal men had been unfairly labelled pedophiles and wife bashers, and the number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care had increased.

“This has to stop now, sir, Prime Minister,” Ms Anderson said. “This is killing us, it is decimating NT communities, it’s another form of abuse.” Organisers said Central Australians were attuned to the nexus between constitutional change and the intervention, as it was the commonwealth’s extraordinary powers over the Northern Territory, in a way not applicable to the states, that had let it stage the move.

David Ross, director of the Central Land Council that hosted the summit, said that “if people think the intervention is over, that’s bullshit”.

Mr Ross said it had been “an invasion of people’s rights and privacy, people who had barely 20 or 30 years earlier won back their land under the Land Rights Act”.

Others said a proposed indigenous body to the parliament, one option being considered in the constitutional reform process, might have halted the Howard government legislation.

With translators for four different Aboriginal tongues taking part, the Ross River gathering is thought to have been the first time constitutional deliberations have taken account of first languages.

There was no indigenous participation in the conventions leading up to the 1901 Constitution, one of the key reasons Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are not mentioned in the founding document.

“Many people in Central Australia understand English as a second, third or fourth language,” Aboriginal Interpreter Service director Colleen Rosas said.

“The English of constitutional law is very complicated and our interpreters were there to break that language down into its meaning, so that participants could fully understand and express their worries and ideas.”

Language and culture were at the heart of discussions, with participants expressing the view that traditional kin-based Aboriginal law was in fact closer to a conventional constitution than it was to Western legislation, which can be changed by governments.

“I think this understanding could be a key to all of this, that we already have a complex legal system, which puts us as equals, not inferiors, to the Western system,” Ms Anderson said. “It could be a matter of changing the narrative to catch up with what we ... know.”

Ross River co-convenor Barbara Shaw said the large number of youth delegates, with a “learn today, lead tomorrow” approach, boded well for the future.