

10 years after the intervention, it's time to admit it has destroyed Aboriginal communities

A decade of punitive government attention has brought a loss of knowledge and authority that is keenly felt in remote communities



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Once a month the Australian newspaper publishes a business affairs supplement called “The Deal”. The May issue was dedicated to what it called “The new agenda: celebrating indigenous success”. A series of short, up-beat, public relations-style reports spruiked Indigenous business ventures, startups and individual entrepreneurs.

Sponsored by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia and the Business Council of Australia, the magazine included some heavy promotion of the federal government’s Indigenous Procurement Policy as well as giving Andrew Forrest space to advance his own review of Indigenous jobs and training and the credentials of his Fortescue Metals Group.

The Deal’s vision of a newly staked trajectory for Indigenous persons via individualised, capital-led transformation coincides with significant media attention to the 25th anniversary of the Mabo decision, 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum and the Uluru statement culmination of Indigenous people’s caucusing on constitutional recognition.

The passing of another anniversary has however been strikingly absent from celebrations – the 10th anniversary of the Northern Territory intervention.

In June 2007, the Howard government's declaration of the Northern Territory emergency response put small remote communities squarely in the national spotlight as places and populations requiring intensive governmental attention. What commenced as a set of spectacular pronouncements and actions to urgently attend to concerns of child welfare quickly expanded into a raft of measures with far reaching consequences, including the transformation of land tenure arrangements, introduction of a new income management regime, and the disbanding of the community development employment projects (CDEP) scheme.

The Northern Territory government subsequently introduced a series of large-scale changes in the same spirit, replacing community government councils with regional shires and ending its already limited support of bilingual education.

Thus a dramatic political event morphed quickly into a cross-jurisdictional shift in policy approach, one that was consolidated over time with bipartisan support. While signs of this shift had been observable over a longer period, the intervention paved the way for the comprehensive application – at least at the level of intention – of neoliberal principles to the bush. Places known as “communities” with culturally distinctive ways of life were now to be addressed as “prescribed areas”, then “towns”, with individuals in need of reform.

The intervention gave rise to a remarkable spurt of government-funded activity, much of which did not directly involve Aboriginal people but rather went on around them.

Let's take just one example, housing: community housing associations were generally overlooked in the launch of an unprecedented national partnership agreement that injected \$2bn into housing construction and refurbishment over the course of a decade. At the outset the goal was to reduce residency rates from an average of 10.7 to 9.3 persons per house. Recent reporting suggests that this modest reduction in overcrowding will only be achieved with a significant further injection of funds and an expansion of the building program. Current budget projections include no funding beyond 2018. An additional \$500m was allocated to the NT government's public housing body, Territory Housing, just to build capacity to manage the properties – a luxury never contemplated for Indigenous housing organisations – with a new punitive regime of tenancy agreements geared towards transforming residents' ways of dwelling.

Another example is employment. Already limited opportunities for employment and meaningful activity in small communities were substantially reduced by the disbanding of the CDEP scheme as well as wider cultural shifts in the running of community-based organisations.

In place of community-based work programs, welfare dependent residents are now subjected to unprecedented multi-layered surveillance by inter-governmental agencies. Income management was the first step in a wider suite of punitive arrangements applied to the unemployed. Where life in the bush once allowed Aboriginal people some degree of relative autonomy, and indeed the possibility of

establishing places and activities beyond the reach of government, today such spaces of hope are difficult to find.

The comprehensive intent of the new surveillance landscape is marked by the building of new police complexes, Centrelink offices and residential compounds in larger communities to house the ever-growing volume of work generated for their expanding and extensive bureaucratic machinery.

Surveillance is nowhere more intensely practiced than in the arena of child welfare. Over the past decade, rates of youth detention have doubled, for female youth they have increased almost tenfold. Revelations of the brutal maltreatment of children at Don Dale has triggered a royal commission inquiry, but any implementation of recommendations will be unlikely to touch the “tough on crime” approach that has swelled the NT prison population. In 2016 the incarceration rate hit a 15-year high, the highest per capita rate in Australia, with 1% of its population – more than 85% Indigenous – behind bars.

In the aftermath of the intervention there has been a profound shift in the terms of national attention to Indigenous affairs. If the intervention was an interregnum, a dramatic moment of flux and chaos between shifting policy paradigms, what is most strikingly displaced in its aftermath is any vision of Aboriginal communities as places that sustain distinctive, valued ways of life and where futures might be optimistically imagined and creatively pursued.

The past decade of punitive governmental attention to remote communities coincides with the passing on of many of the last generation of men and women who knew a radically different way of life before the establishment of government settlements and missions. The loss of their knowledge and authority is very keenly felt as bush communities struggle to imagine and pursue activities that might revitalise their distinctive ways of relating to places and to each other.

The vision of commercial success promoted by “The Deal” is the new face of Aboriginality in Australia. Here metropolitan cosmopolitanism is no longer understood as one outcome among a varied set of historical, locational and personal experiences and choices but rather as the only game in town. Even in the current volatile times we are led to believe that exceptional opportunities for advancement are within arm’s reach for aspirant Indigenous entrepreneurs.

Yet the destabilisations of the present are leading some Indigenous activists to make an inverted observation, namely, that economic and environmental precarity means that “we are all Aboriginal now”. These equally alarming visions shield from view the particular experiences of creative destruction and the distinctive cultural orders that are at stake. Attention to both is vital if those communities, as well as our own, are to envisage viable futures.

** This is an abridged version of the editorial of Arena Magazine No.184 that focuses on the impacts of the NT Intervention launched 10 years ago on Wednesday.*

