

Bad Aunty: Seven Years On, How ABC Lateline Sparked The Racist NT Intervention



By Chris Graham on June 21, 2015

A Howard government policy that decimated Aboriginal communities in 2006 is still reverberating today. Chris Graham takes a look at a scandal that the ABC would rather you not hear about.

Self-praise is really no recommendation, so, in 2011, when television personality Tony Jones described ABC Lateline's 2006 coverage of sexual violence in remote Northern Territory Aboriginal communities – reporting which led directly to the 2007 NT intervention – as among the best he'd ever seen, I was a little underwhelmed.

Jones, of course, is the former anchor of Lateline, now the face of the popular Q&A program.

My sense of unease wasn't helped by the fact that Lateline's coverage proved extremely popular with politicians.

Generally speaking, when conservatives get 'excited' about Aboriginal affairs, some blackfella somewhere in the country is going to get screwed. But excited they got, and few more so than Dave Tollner, Country Liberal Party MP, and the Member for Fong Lim, in the Northern Territory parliament.

In my career, I've only ever had one encounter with Tollner. It was in Alice Springs in 2009, when the Northern Territory parliament moved south to Alice Springs for a session, to 'bring democracy to the people'.

I sat in the public gallery directly behind Tollner throughout much of the proceedings. For several days I watched him surf Facebook on his laptop.

Occasionally, he'd leap to his feet to direct some class-clown barb at the Opposition, only to sit back down and resume the Facebook hunt.

In fairness to Tollner, while his internet habits ultimately led to the website being banned during sittings of NT Parliament, he does have a more serious side.

In December 2011, Tollner appeared on the Q&A program, filmed in Darwin and hosted by Tony Jones.

After lamenting that there wasn't a single hairdresser employed on either side of the Stuart Highway – evidence, apparently, that there was no economic development – he weighed in on the meaty topic of the Northern Territory intervention. It came after co-panellist and Central Australian Aboriginal leader, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks had suggested that government needed to properly engage with Aboriginal people, "not hunt us like dogs".

Jones invited a response from Tollner.

"Let's put some things into context here Tony, and I do acknowledge your role in the intervention..." said Tollner.

A clearly pissed off Jones interrupted. "I had no role in the intervention, that was done by a government."

“No, no, no, but it was your show that lifted the lid on many of the problems that occur in remote communities and I acknowledge that,” replied Tollner. “That led to the major inquiry that resulted in the Little Children Are Sacred report, so I do acknowledge your interest in this area.”

As with so many things that Tollner says, it drew laughter and ridicule from the audience.

Of course, Jones is right. The NT intervention was a government policy. The ABC is powerful, but it doesn't yet have the power to send in the army.

But Tollner was also partly correct. It was Lateline's reporting that led directly to the Little Children Are Sacred report, a landmark inquiry into sexual violence in NT Aboriginal communities.

And it was the Little Children Are Sacred report on which the federal government relied to launch an unprecedented assault on the rights of the nation's most disadvantaged people.

That, and the launch of their 2007 re-election campaign.



Figure 1 Mal Brough

It's now a matter of infamy that on June 21, 2007 – just a year after Lateline began a concerted campaign seeking to depict dysfunction, violence and paedophilia in NT Aboriginal communities – Prime Minister John Howard and Indigenous affairs minister Mal Brough staged an impromptu press conference at Parliament House in Canberra, at which they announced Australia was confronting a “national emergency”.

There had, of course, been a “national emergency” in Aboriginal communities in the NT and beyond since Howard won office in 1996, and well before.

That the PM and his Aboriginal affairs minister had only just discovered it was quite remarkable. But it was nowhere near as shocking as what the two men were about to unveil.

The NT government had failed to act on the recommendations of the Little Children Are Sacred report, said Howard and Brough, and so the federal government was using its executive powers to intervene.

The Australian Army would be used to ‘stabilise’ Aboriginal communities, with extra police brought in to tackle the ‘endemic levels of child sexual assault’.

Land in and around Aboriginal townships would be compulsorily acquired for five years, to ensure that Traditional Owners didn’t get in the way.

Howard even noted he would introduce “mandatory” sexual health checks of Aboriginal children, apparently believing that at the time, his powers as Prime Minister extended to the legal rape of children.

After warning media the NT intervention would cost “some tens of millions” of dollars, and setting in train media coverage that would bounce around the globe, the serious business of unrolling the Northern Territory Emergency Response – more commonly known as the NT intervention – got underway.

The outcomes of the NT intervention are obviously important, and we’ll get to them shortly. But this story is really more about how it all came about.

Lateline’s interest began in early 2006, a full year before the intervention was unveiled, when it broadcast an interview with Central Australian prosecutor Nanette Rogers.

Ms Rogers, an experienced and respected legal practitioner, outlined shocking cases of sexual abuse of Aboriginal children which, over a period of more than a decade, had made their way through Territory courts.

She described toddlers and babies being raped; she described incest; men using traditional law to escape serious punishment; Rogers even referenced a case in which an 18-year-old petrol sniffer simultaneously drowned a young girl while he raped her.

For mainstream Australia, Rogers' interview came seemingly 'out of the blue'. It sparked massive media interest, some of which still endures today.

That's perplexing for anyone with even a brief knowledge of the history of government reports in Aboriginal affairs. Because the sorts of revelations that Rogers' had unveiled were nothing new.

In 1989, Professor Judy Atkinson wrote a landmark report on Aboriginal violence, and in particular child sexual abuse. She wrote another one for the then Prime Minister in 1991.

Professor Boni Robertson also completed substantial reports throughout the 1990s, and headed a major inquiry in 1999 which involved 50 senior Aboriginal women and represented every community in Queensland.

Between her and Atkinson, they warned politicians on numerous occasions of the problems in Aboriginal communities, and showed that the causes of family violence were rooted in a failure of government to provide adequate services and infrastructure.

Their reports were largely ignored, although, of course, they weren't the only ones trying desperately to focus national attention on the growing problems in Aboriginal communities.

ATSIC also completed numerous reports in the 1990s, and in 1999 Dr Paul Memmott released a major report into Aboriginal violence, revealing precisely the sorts of cases detailed by Rogers, including the rape of young babies.

Memmott's report went virtually unreported by media, due in no small part to the fact that when it was finally made public it was already old news.

The Howard government – courtesy of then Justice Minister Amanda Vanstone (later the Indigenous affairs minister) – sat on the report for 18 months.

A few years later, in July 2003, John Howard decided to stage a 'roundtable summit' of Aboriginal leaders to address the issue of family violence. It turned out to be another stunt, with no follow through.

Aboriginal communities themselves, of course, had been screaming for assistance for decades.

But for whatever reason, in 2006 the Australian media – and the Australian Government – suddenly found violence in Aboriginal communities compelling.

Maybe it was the fact that Nanette Rogers is a white woman, and Boni Robertson and Judy Atkinson are both black. But more likely, it was the way the stories were reported – with a level of sensationalism that rivals anything Today Tonight or A Current Affair have ever been able to cook up.

As Aboriginal violence gained more air-time, Lateline decided to turn things up a notch.

Night after night, Jones and his team revisited the issue, filing 17 stories in just eight nights. As they did, the media frenzy around sexual violence in Aboriginal communities grew. So did the mainstream frustration, and the political posturing from elected leaders, who had known of the problems for decades, but done little to address them.

It culminated in a June 21 report in which Lateline revealed perhaps the most shocking revelations of them all.

The story, headlined Sexual slavery reported in Indigenous community, took things to a whole new level. Lateline alleged that young Aboriginal children were being held against their will in Central Australia, and traded between communities as sex slaves, while other children were given petrol to sniff, in exchange for sex with senior Aboriginal men.

The story centred on the community of Mutitjulu, a tiny town of around 400 situated, literally, in the shadow of Uluru.

Lateline claimed senior men in the community had created an environment where a predatory paedophile was able to abuse women and children without sanction. The elderly man relied on his kinship connections for protection, claimed Lateline, and was one of the men trading petrol for sex with young children.

Media coverage had thus far been feverish, but with Lateline's fresh 'revelations' it went into overdrive. And so did the Northern Territory government, which was bearing the brunt of critical media reporting, while the Howard government – in office for more than a decade, and, until recently, primarily responsible for the funding of remote Aboriginal communities – was escaping largely unscathed.

The morning after Lateline's scoop, Clare Martin announced her government would hold a major inquiry into violence against children in Aboriginal communities.

The resulting report, Little Children Are Sacred, took almost a year to complete, ran to more than 300 pages, and contained 91 recommendations.

It was released publicly on June 15, six weeks after it was completed. The Howard government, which had sat on the Memmott report for 18 months, pounced.

On June 21, 2007 – less than a week after the public release of the report – the Howard government announced the NT government was dragging the chain on child abuse, and so the feds would have to intervene.

It was exactly one year to the day since Lateline had broken its 'sexual slavery in Central Australia' story.

And this is the point at where things begin to fall apart from the national broadcaster.

Lateline's Mutitjulu story was a ruse almost from start to finish. While it contained aspects of truth – that Aboriginal people were desperately poor; that Central Australian communities suffered significant levels of violence and abuse; that women and children in particular were vulnerable – the real devil was in the detail.

And to say it was lacking, doesn't quite do justice to the level of misreporting.

The story began – and continued – with old file footage of Mutitjulu, and vision from other communities (including Roper River, 1,700km away), which was passed off as being from Mutitjulu.

There was a simple reason for that. In the course of their major investigation into alleged sexual slavery in Mutitjulu, Lateline never once actually set foot in the community. What followed – the total collapse of Lateline's story – was an almost inevitable consequence of that.

In its defence, Lateline has claimed it was denied entry into Mutitjulu by the community council – the very people who were the focus of Lateline's allegations about protecting a predatory paedophile.

That claim was dismissed by Parks Australia, managers of the National Park which surrounds Mutitjulu, which revealed that Lateline's "attempts" to visit Mutitjulu was in fact a single phone call inquiring about filming in the Kata Tjuta National Park, with no explanation of what they intended to film, and no subsequent formal request.

Lateline described its chief witness in the story as a 'former youth worker' who was once based in Mutitjulu, working in a joint community development project for the NT and federal governments.

He was interviewed at his new home on the outskirts of Canberra. In order to protect his identity, the man's face was filmed in shadow and his voice was digitized.

There was, however, one fairly major hole in the story: he was never a youth worker.



He was Gregory Andrews, an Assistant Secretary in the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination, and the senior public servant who was advising Mal Brough specifically on violence and sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities, and in Mutitjulu in particular.

Lateline knew Andrews worked for the minister, and chose to deliberately lie about his real identity. The interview had originally been negotiated through the media unit of Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination, and he was to have appeared as 'Gregory Andrews, government bureaucrat' in the story.

For reasons still unknown, Andrews instead appeared anonymously. And it's that cover of anonymity afforded by Lateline that sent the story spinning out of control.

Andrews wept openly on camera as he described how he'd made repeated statements and reports to police about sexual violence perpetrated against Aboriginal women and children during his time in Mutitjulu. But, he claimed, he'd withdrawn those statements after being threatened by men in the community.

Despite now living several thousand kilometres away in Canberra, Andrews claimed he feared for his safety, and that of his family.

NT Chief Minister Clare Martin later revealed in parliament that during his employment, Andrews never once made a single report to police about violence against women or children.

His ‘withdrawn police statements’ weren’t the only part of his story that collapsed.

As government documents now reveal, prior to his interview Andrews provided Mal Brough a ministerial brief on what he intended to say to Lateline as a government representative.

He told the Minister that he would tell Lateline that there were predatory men in the central deserts region who were preying on children; that things were so bad in the community that he saw women coming to meetings with broken arms.

But when Andrews appeared on camera with his face blacked out, the story departed wildly from the ministerial brief.

Andrews instead told Lateline this: “I saw women coming to meetings with broken arms, *and with screwdrivers or other implements through their legs.*”

And his claim that “there are predatory men in the central deserts who are systematically abusing young children” instead became this: “It’s true that there are predatory men in the central deserts who are systematically abusing young children. I’ve been told by a number of people of men in the region who go to other communities and get young girls and bring them back to their community and keep them there as sex slaves and... exchange sex for petrol with those young petrol sniffers.”

It’s pretty spectacular stuff, and all of it since dismissed by the Northern Territory police, and the Australian Crime Commission, both of which conducted extensive investigations into the allegations made by Andrews.

As publicity around Andrews’ real identity gathered pace, it emerged that he’d grossly mislead a Senate Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing conducted a few months earlier, giving evidence about Mutitjulu that made his Lateline embellishments look almost honest.

During his appearance before the Senate, Andrews told parliament that life in Mutitjulu was so bad that “children were hanging themselves from the church steeple on Sundays and their mothers were having to cut them down”.

It never happened. Not once.

Andrews also told the inquiry that he lived in Mutitjulu for nine months – he never lived in Mutitjulu a single day – and, most seriously, he misrepresented the findings of a coronial inquiry into a series of petrol sniffing deaths to federal parliament.

With the Labor Opposition circling, Andrews’ was summonsed to appear before a Senate Estimates hearing, to explain himself. The government initially agreed, then withdrew. Andrews became the first bureaucrat in parliamentary history to avoid a Senate Estimates grilling on the grounds that he was “too stressed” to appear.

With Andrews’ story collapsing, Lateline claimed that the central interview in the report was not Andrews (after whose claims the headline was based). Rather, the central witness was doctor who served in the Mutitjulu community for several years.

Dr Geoff Stewart had appeared briefly in the story, and then again after the story aired in a much lengthier interview with Jones. Dr Stewart also backed Lateline’s central theme – that men in the Mutitjulu community had created an environment where an elderly paedophile was able to rely on family connections to abuse children.

His story would also fall apart.

The health records of the elderly alleged paedophile at the centre of the Lateline story found their way into the public domain. The revelations contained within them were staggering.

Dr Stewart had begun prescribing Viagra to the man, aged in his 60s, in late 2000. On several occasions, he’d documented concerns the man was misusing the drug.

In April 2001, months after first prescribing the drug, Dr Stewart wrote in the man’s notes: “Is using Viagra to have sex with young females”.

Despite this, he continued to prescribe Viagra for another 10 months, before finally cutting the man off in February 2002. Upon leaving the community for a new posting, Dr Stewart marked

the front page of the man's health record with a warning that he should not be given further prescriptions of Viagra.

Subsequent doctors who worked in the community ignored the notes, and for at least another two years the drug was provided through the Mutitjulu clinic.

It's worth noting that to this day, there remains no evidence that the elderly man was targeting children. He was certainly in a sexual relationship with a younger woman, but she was aged in her late 20s. And there is certainly some question about the morals of the relationship – the woman was mentally impaired from years of petrol sniffing. But of course, consensual sex with an adult is not only not illegal, it's not paedophilia.

Even so, that Dr Stewart prescribed Viagra while he believed the man was using it to target young females is extraordinary. But that he then appeared on a national current affairs program and blamed Aboriginal people for creating the environment where the elderly man was able to target young women beggars belief.

Lateline's handling of that revelation, however, was even worse.

In the original story, Lateline revealed details of a leaked report to the Northern Territory government which, viewers were told, backed the theme of Lateline's claims – that powerful Mutitjulu men were protecting the elderly paedophile.

What Lateline declined to disclose is that the report also alleged that doctors in Mutitjulu were prescribing Viagra to the man, against the wishes of the local community.

Why Lateline chose to keep this information secret, and why it chose to give the very doctor who was doing it air-time to allow him to blame the community for the alleged abuse, remains unanswered.

Unfortunately, the problems with Lateline's reporting went beyond its two chief witnesses.

Kumuntjay Randall was a respected Aboriginal film-maker and the writer of *Brown Skin Baby*, an anthem of the Stolen Generations. He passed away last month, but was running the Mutitjulu Health Clinic during Dr Stewart's reign.

Lateline accused Mr Randall of harbouring the elderly alleged paedophile, and of protecting other violent men.

In the lead up to Lateline's 2006 story, Mr Randall was touring the nation promoting Kanyini, a film about his life. He was approached by Lateline for an interview about the film, but once on camera he was ambushed with the allegations about Mutitjulu.

It was the kind of 'foot in the door' reporting that might you expect from commercial television. It also happens to be a clear breach of both the Journalist Code of Ethics, and ABC policy.

Lesley Calma, Randall's nephew, was also targeted in the story. Lateline reported that he had "two convictions for assaulting a female". What Lateline did not disclose to viewers is that the convictions were around four decades old. It's an offence in the NT to publicly disclose a spent conviction (more than 10 years old).

Finally, it later emerged that the old man at the centre of Lateline's story had actually been forced out of the community more than half a year before the program aired, because of his behavior towards women.

The whole premise of the story – that Mutitjulu men had protected this alleged paedophile – collapsed.

Yet Lateline followed up its original report with a story inferring the man had fled the community "recently". Any reasonable viewer would have been left with the impression it was a direct result of Lateline's reporting.



Tony Jones was right to correct Dave Tollner. The Northern Territory intervention was a policy launched by a government, not by the ABC.

But the Howard government could never have enacted legislation described by the United Nations as “unique” and “striking” in its racism, without the comfort and cooperation of Australia’s media.

While the mainstream media largely came along for the ride – these cartoons by Bill Leak appeared in *The Australian* at the time – Lateline was the Howard government’s chief ally.

To this day, however, Jones, Suzanne Smith (the journalist who filed the story), Brett Evans (producer of the story) and the ABC more broadly have never accepted any responsibility.

Not for the intervention that came as a direct result of their reporting, and not for the atrocious reporting itself. Instead, they’ve maintained the fiction that Lateline’s reporting was ‘journalism at its best’.

If Lateline's coverage of 'sexual slavery' in Central Australia is the best journalism the ABC can deliver, then I shudder to think what their worst looks like. And I shudder to think how the ABC would confront 'its worst' journalism, given how it dealt with 'its best'.

After the Lateline story aired, the Mutitjulu community submitted a lengthy complaint to the ABC. It was referred to the ABC Complaints Review Panel, an instrument described by the ABC as "independent" despite the fact it was appointed and funded by the ABC.

Having thoroughly investigated itself, the ABC found that it had done nothing wrong, save for the minor oversight of failing to label vision from communities other than Mutitjulu as file footage.

That's it. The sum total of the ABC's concession.

It had no problem with the fact Lateline faked the identity of its chief witness. This was done to protect Andrews' identity, found the ABC, ignoring the fact that not only was Andrews originally willing to appear as Andrews, but that shortly after filming the interview he spent several days in the Mutitjulu community on behalf of the Howard government without protection, and without incident.

The ABC also found no fault with the ambush journalism employed against Mr Randall, nor the fact Leslie Calma's criminal record was grossly misrepresented.

It had no problem with the fact Lateline never visited Mutitjulu, and never disclosed this fact to viewers.

But what is most concerning is that the ABC had no problem with Lateline's refusal to report almost all of the revelations that emerged as their story very publicly fell apart.

The allegations that children were being held as "sex slaves" and traded between Aboriginal communities sparked major police investigations, including an extensive inquiry by the Australian Crime Commission. The ACC – which enjoyed star chamber powers for the investigation – found no evidence of paedophile rings in Mutitjulu, nor Central Australia more broadly.

The specific claims by Lateline that petrol was being exchanged for sex with children in Mutitjulu, also sparked a major investigation by Northern Territory police. According to the federal government, up to 300 people were interviewed by police.

NT police Superintendent Colleen Gwynne staged a press conference, at which she reported that while there was some evidence petrol had been supplied to children, there was “no evidence whatsoever” to support Lateline’s claims that it was being supplied to children in exchange for sex.

Lateline refused to report Superintendent Gwynne’s statements, later claiming that it didn’t have the space to run the story.

It must surely be the first time in Australian media history where an outlet breaks a story that sparks a major police inquiry, and then refuses to report on the results of that police inquiry.

Lateline did, however, find space to run a story headlined ‘Indigenous community expresses thanks for exposing child abuse’ a self-congratulatory puff piece that quoted a non-Aboriginal woman from Yuendumu, a community some 12 hours drive from Mutitjulu, and not featured in the original story. That woman – Pamela Malden – has since been jailed for large-scale fraud committed against the Yuendumu Women’s Centre.

As for the revelations that the other chief witness in the Lateline story – Dr Geoff Stewart – had prescribed Viagra to the alleged paedophile up to 10 months after expressing concern he was using the drug to target young females, as you can probably imagine, the story got a healthy run in mainstream media. It did, after all, feature paedophiles, blackfellas and Viagra – a ‘made for mainstream media’ yarn.

To this day, there remains only one major news organisation in the country that has refused to report the story. And I’m not just referring to Lateline.

Despite the story breaking nationally, not one ABC outlet in the country – no radio station, no TV program, no online forum – ran a single syllable of the revelations.

Journalists in ABC Darwin’s newsroom later complained they’d been prevented covering the collapse of Lateline’s story by management. And for the record, to this day, *ABC’s Media Watch* program has still never uttered one word about the entire issue.



Dysfunction and poverty in Aboriginal communities is confronting, and heart-breaking.

But therein lies one of the great dangers in Aboriginal affairs policy-making, and media reporting – a belief that sometimes the ends do really justify the means, and that things are so bad in Aboriginal Australia that basic media ethics and standards can be suspended.

It's thinking that comes from the 'at least we're doing something' school of government policy, a belief that action – any action – is better than what we've collectively been doing, which is nothing. But what if 'what we're doing' is making things worse?

The Little Children Are Sacred report noted, "... It is a very important point and one which we have made during the course of many of our public discussions of the issues that the problems do not just relate to Aboriginal communities. The number of perpetrators is small and there are some communities, it must be thought, where there are no problems at all. Accepting this to be the case, it is hardly surprising that representatives of communities, and the men in particular, have been unhappy (to say the least) at the media coverage of the whole of the issue."

For obvious reasons, that 'unhappiness' is particularly acute in Mutitjulu, where local elders say their community has virtually emptied since the program.

"They just couldn't stand the shame of the way they were all cast as paedophiles and abusers," said Mr Randall, before his passing.

It's an unhappiness that is also palpable across the rest of the Northern Territory. A subsequent federal government review of the NT intervention released found that incidents of attempted

suicide and self-harm in Aboriginal communities had more than quadrupled in communities since the launch of the NT intervention.

It's not hard to imagine the public response if a government policy had achieved the same result in, say, Sydney or Melbourne.

More broadly, school attendance rates across NT intervention communities have actually dropped, down across the board on pre-intervention numbers.

At the same time, starvation rates and anaemia rates spiked immediately after the intervention was launched, and reports of alcohol-related violence have more than doubled.

The federal government review conceded that child neglect is a much bigger problem than abuse in remote communities, which is hardly surprising if you understand the grinding poverty that is the daily reality of Aboriginal life in the Territory.

The review reported 272 referrals for child neglect to welfare agencies in 2010-2011, up from 100 at the start of the intervention.

That neglect is getting worse under the NT intervention surprises no-one who is aware of the policy, and its impact on the ground. But that Aboriginal mothers and fathers are being blamed for it, while their own needs have been neglected by government for decades, is simply staggering.

As for child sexual assault, the report found the number of convictions remained steady at around 11 per year – the same figure from the start of the intervention.

The report notes: "The number of convictions for child sexual assaults committed in the NTER communities in 2006-07 was 11. In 2007-08 it was 10, in 2008-09 it was 11 and in 2009-10 it was 12. The total number of child sexual assault convictions over the period 1 July 2007 to 30 June 2010 is 33."

Curiously, it adds: "The conviction rate for child sexual abuse is likely to understate the actual level of abuse and it is misleading to view it in isolation."

No explanation why, but a remarkable concession none-the-less. Wasn't the whole point of the NT intervention – the 'national emergency' that required the suspension of the Racial

Discrimination Act and the intervention of the army – designed to expose the abuse and catch the perpetrators? And wasn't that the point of Lateline's reporting?

Seven years on, and billions of taxpayer dollars later, we're supposed to accept that it's all made no impact at all? And that in key areas like education, health and violence, things have actually gotten worse.

And that's the central point of this story: Lateline's style of reporting might get attention, but it does not fix the problem.

Nor does the sorts of government policies that were made possible in an environment of media sensationalism and the demonisation of the nation's most disadvantaged people.

Bad things may happen when good people stay silent, but the sad reality of Aboriginal affairs is that really bad things can happen when good people speak up.

Sexual abuse is undoubtedly a problem in Aboriginal communities – I've never heard anyone actually deny that, despite the vulgar attempts of Lateline and others to portray those who question their methods as supporters of paedophilia.

It's also clear that sexual abuse occurs at higher rates in some Aboriginal communities than the national average.

There are many reasons for this, overcrowding being chief among them.

If you have, as is the case across the Territory, more than a dozen people living in a single dwelling (upwards of 30 is not uncommon) then the introduction of a single sexual predator to a household provides access to substantially more victims.

The intervention response to this fact was to promise new housing. Michael Brull, writing for ABC's The Drum, linked several government reports, with devastating and humiliating results.

The average occupancy rate of Aboriginal homes in the Territory prior to the NT intervention was 9.4, reported Brull.

The target post-intervention is 9.3. This despite expenditure on the NT intervention's housing program of around \$700 million.

In short, the whole policy – housing, education, you name it – has been a spectacular failure. It has made things worse. And yet the federal government – with bi-partisan support from the Liberal and National parties – extended it for another decade, through the ironically named Stronger Futures legislation.

Problems in Aboriginal communities in the Territory and beyond are complex and entrenched. They required a considered and calm response.

And as the Little Children Are Sacred Report noted in its first recommendation, what Aboriginal Territorians – among the nation’s most vulnerable people – need above all else is government policy made with the cooperation and consultation of Aboriginal people themselves.

What they got instead was bad government policy made with the cooperation of mainstream media who were more interested in sensationalism parading as serious journalism.

That our national broadcaster led the charge is a matter of enduring shame for the ABC.

The last word belongs to Lateline.

In the original interview with Nanette Rogers, Tony Jones asked, “Given what’s in your paper and what you’ve told us here tonight, are you worried that the information itself may be abused by tabloids and racists even, shock jocks – the sort of people who will take information like this and exploit it?”

‘Yes,’ answered Rogers.

POSTSCRIPT: By way of update, it’s worth considering where the various characters in this story ended up.

Tony Jones went on to host the popular Q&A program. He continues to defend the reporting, Suzanne Smith, the journalist responsible for the Lateline story, was never sanctioned for her reporting. Recently, she left the ABC, and is now working for Channel 7 as a Supervising Producer.

Brett Evans, the producer of the story, went on to serve a stint as Acting Executive Producer of ABC's Media Watch program. He has since left the ABC.

Gregory Andrews – the 'anonymous youth worker' – took leave without pay from the Australian Public Service. He worked as CEO for the government-funded Indigenous Community Volunteers. Last year, Andrews was announced as the Abbott Government's new 'Threatened Species Commissioner'.

Dr Geoff Stewart – who prescribed Viagra to the elderly alleged predator then blamed the community for the problems – went on to work as the Senior Medical Officer for the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the Northern Territory (AMSANT).

Mal Brough lost his seat in the 2007 election, but returned to parliament in 2013, after winning former speaker Peter Slipper's seat. That's despite being slammed by the Federal Court for his involvement in the Slipper affair.

ABC Lateline won a Logie for its series on Central Australia.

Tjanara Goreng Goreng, an Aboriginal woman who worked alongside Gregory Andrews and became a whistleblower in the story, had her home raided by Australian Federal Police. She was subsequently prosecuted and convicted for releasing Commonwealth information, and bankrupted as a result of a substantial legal bill.

Mr Randall – accused by Lateline of covering up paedophilia died last month. He never received an apology from the ABC, and told John Pilger in his 2014 film Utopia* that his community had not recovered from the ABC's reporting.

Mr Randall's daughter, Dorothea, and another Aboriginal man from Mutitjulu also had their homes raided by the Australian Federal Police.

Leslie Calma continues to reside in Central Australia, and has never received an apology or acknowledgement from the ABC for the misreporting.

* *Chris Graham worked as an Associate Producer on John Pilger's film Utopia.*