

Intentional Intervening – or going backwards to go a different way? by Harry Scott

Harry Scott is the Executive Officer of Tapatjatjaka Community Government Council. Here he presents his observations on the intervention in the Titjikala community – what he thinks is working and what is not, and how the people of Titjikala regard it.

We are going back to ration days, was the first response from the people of Titjikala. The community is about 250 people and is 120 km south of Alice Springs and one of the first four to experience firsthand some of the intervention strategies. “We are all Australians” says the Government and then cancels our laws of equality and discrimination to create a new order in remote communities in the Northern Territory. You have to ask what is going on!

In Titjikala it is about having police, about having the law enforced. It’s about the right to live in a country where everyone is entitled to protection against abuse. It’s about living in a safe place and being with family.

In the mainstream culture it’s about stopping the violence, the rivers of grog, and abuse, especially of children.

After 100 days of Intervention at Titjikala there are still no police. The children are not protected by external agents. All we have accomplished is establishing control over a race of people within our own country; we have not succeeded in apprehending sex offenders of children.

It is hard to find criticism of the intervention in Alice Springs. People at Titjikala also support it; they recognise things have to change. But, there are many things that are not supported.

The abolishing of the work program CDEP (Community Development Employment Program) because it could not be income managed by the state has created much confusion and chaos. Taking control of the land through non-negotiable leases, controlling assets of Indigenous organisations, removing the permit system, and managing 50 per cent of all Centrelink payments, are all in the name of protecting children from abuse. It defies logic. Yet this is the only stated reason provided by the Government and its task force.

There is a chronic shortage of houses out bush. The overcrowding of 20-30 people in one house has been common for many years. One man at Titjikala said about the houses in 1989 ‘It’s all right for a young couple with two kids, not me and my wife, we have big family’. Nothing much has changed in twenty years, the overcrowding is a significant contributor to the dysfunction experienced by some families.

Surely our Government could not treat these people with such disdain? Is this a political act? Is it a new ideology? Is this more about the election? No information is delivered clearly and simply, and for each initiative there are public servants on the community, observing and reporting. This is being made up day by day.

Why not target offenders with 100% income management, and encourage those families doing the right thing by allowing them to manage their own money.

Put police in the communities for six months and build a relationship with the people and there will be no walls of silence. You will have an accurate intelligence assessment of each community. But no, the Army walks around communities in uniform getting their picture in the paper, people not in jobs 'work for the Dole', people now live in houses controlled by John Howard, the messages of dominance and control are everywhere. Stabilise, normalise, exit aboriginal Australia, is the strategy and if the people choose to stay in these remote communities then it must be a lifestyle choice, not something that is fundamental to who they are and their traditions. It will be interesting to see how the messages change next year. This is a military campaign, its outcomes are not yet revealed.

But my friends at Titjikala say relax Harry, slow down, calm down, it's just a thunderstorm, it will pass. I suggest it's more like a cyclone, but they crack a joke with me and I begin to see why they are still here. 'Maybe we need martial law to get police'. They frequently face adversity. These people are tough, much tougher than those who seek to control them. They have endured the extremes of their environment, the desert has taught them well, and they have endured the extremes of Government policies for many generations. Thirty five years ago my culture declared it was the age of self determination for aborigines, and promptly walked out and left the money at the gate. Sit down money has become the cultural destroyer. The Government has strong initial support from black and white communities.

The big story is their tourism joint venture 'Gunya-Titjikala'. Introducing tourists into their environment and their community, playing host, has been illuminating for everyone. The intervention has caused a hiccup, particularly with sharing the work around and the new grog laws. I don't know how you charge someone \$1300 a night and tell them they can't have a glass of wine, or a beer with their meal.

This unique adventure has shown the people what had been missing in their community, private enterprise, real jobs, work that lets you stand proud and meet anyone as an equal. The venture will find a way to survive because the people want it to survive; it has become an important social enterprise, with a commercial edge, but more importantly it represents a future for their children. In the last three years high school attendance at Yarara College in Alice Springs has gone from none to twenty four. This is a staggering outcome. This is

Titjikala's investment in their future, their childrens' future. This is the real change at Titjikala, the tourists have already intervened.

The growth of cottage industries in remote communities will succeed, because people grow in that environment, they become strong and stand up, rather than wait for the next Government person to fly in and tell them what they are going to do for the next year. Now the mob from Titjikala are saying to the Government, if you can spend three million dollars a day on the intervention, you can put police at Titjikala. Our children deserve protection the same as any other Aussie kid.

One cannot escape the view that things are being messed up, history repeating itself. How do you deliver the best outcome to protect the children and not consult with the people, or the police, or their representative organisations?

But, I talk to the locals and still they wait, wait for a Government to get serious about addressing the issues they need addressed, like the policing and housing. This is no small task and it won't be achieved in one election cycle.

The conditions out bush need to be made right, as one old friend said 'this time don't stuff it up'.