

Australia: Labor moves to shut down remote Aboriginal settlements

By Susan Allan
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The federal and Northern Territory (NT) Labor governments last month unveiled a series of free-market measures that will deepen the poverty and suffering in indigenous communities.

Working Future, announced by the NT government on May 20, seeks, under the auspices of the federal government's NT intervention, to force the estimated 10,000 Aboriginal people living in some 580 remote "homeland" settlements into 20 special settlements or so-called "economic hubs". The homeland communities have been defined as "non-viable".

Echoing both the former Howard government, and the current Labor government, which has adopted Howard's 2007 police-military intervention as its own, NT chief minister Paul Henderson claimed that his government would end "indigenous disadvantage" by creating "reservoirs of opportunity" in the 20 hub towns.

In reality, *Working Future* is aimed at clearing the way for mining, pastoral and tourism interests at the direct expense of Aboriginal communities. The policy flows directly from the Rudd government's earlier decision to prioritise 26 indigenous communities across the country for new housing and infrastructure, marking a drive to shut down many settlements.

The homeland or "outstations" movement emerged in the 1970s when small groups of Aboriginal people began establishing settlements on traditional lands in an attempt to escape the social dysfunction, alcoholism and substance abuse prevalent in many camps on the fringes of larger towns. Recognising that this movement could be utilised to ease social tensions and isolate indigenous people from the working class, federal governments granted the settlements minimal funding for basic dwellings.

The NT government will now freeze funding for existing settlements at \$36 million and axe grants to homelands not occupied for more than eight months of the year. Homeland residents requiring regular access to health, education and other basic social services will have little option but to leave.

While the NT government claims it will provide transport to pre-school, primary and secondary schools in the hub towns, scores of remote homeland schools are expected to close. Students who live further away from the hubs will be sent to boarding schools or hostels.

The already overcrowded and grossly under-resourced settlements defined as "hubs" **will be funded** by a miniscule \$160 million grant over the next five years. This represents just over \$1.5 million per year for each community, nowhere near enough to provide the social facilities required for the anticipated influx of people.

Henderson declared that the hubs would be successful only "if private businesses can get secure tenure on Aboriginal land". Private investors, he said, would be given security of land tenure and generous tax incentives. All of the hubs are located on traditional Aboriginal lands and government funding is conditional on traditional owners and land councils signing long-term leases in favour of the territory government. The hubs will be run by business managers previously installed under the Howard government's intervention.

Federal indigenous affairs minister Jenny Macklin congratulated the NT government for driving "fundamental reform" and then announced that the Rudd government would compulsorily acquire 15 town camps on the fringes of the central Australian city of Alice Springs. Currently managed by Tangentyere Council, a local Aboriginal body, the camps are home to about 2,000 indigenous residents. The camps' average home occupancy rate is 10 people.

Macklin ordered the acquisition because Tangentyere Council refused to sign over a 40-year lease to the government in exchange for federal funds for new houses, repair and maintenance of existing dwellings, road upgrades and some infrastructure. Decades of government under-funding have ensured that basic social services are largely non-existent in the town camps.

Labor's acquisition of the camps sends a clear message to Aboriginal communities, including those in the "economic hubs", that they will receive similar treatment unless they

conform to government dictates. Macklin declared the acquisition was not temporary or under a 40-year lease, but “forever”.

Tangentyere rejected similar lease demands from the Howard government in 2006, when residents feared their rents would be raised beyond their capacity to pay and they could face eviction. These concerns increased in February this year when Macklin directed state and territory housing ministers not to spend federal funds on public housing in remote Aboriginal communities until “tenancy management reforms” were implemented.

Major mining, agribusiness and tourist corporations have long demanded unrestricted access to Aboriginal land, an end to communal ownership and a ready supply of cheap labour.

The move to disperse homeland settlements replicates proposals elaborated in 2007 by Helen Hughes from the Centre for Independent Studies, a right-wing free-market think tank. Hughes’s book *Lands of Shame* called for drastic cuts to Aboriginal social welfare and an end to all government funding of so-called unviable homelands.

Announcing *Working Future* last month, NT indigenous affairs minister Alison Anderson told the media the government could not “put infrastructure in every community” and previous attempts to “fill gaps with money” had “failed and will continue to fail”. Homeland residents would be taken “out of the welfare cycle” and would “have to get used to it”.

The fraud of the Rudd government’s 2008 parliamentary apology to Aboriginal people for past injustices could not be clearer. Just over a year after officially expressing regret for the removal of previous generations of indigenous children from their families, the Labor government and its NT counterpart are embarking on a program of herding entire communities off their traditional lands.

Working Future has encountered opposition from NT Aboriginal communities, legal rights organisations and medical academics. Many fear that dislocation from the remote homelands will produce more homelessness, petrol sniffing, alcoholism and other social problems.

The Laynhapuy Homelands Association, which manages outstations in Arnhem Land, denounced *Working Future* as another crime against Australia’s indigenous population. Association official Waturr Gumana told ABC radio: “The stolen generations—this is happening again. People are going to be taken out of their homes and we know what they are doing. The government only wants the dollars from our land. And our kids, our people who will be taken back to the main communities ... history is going to repeat itself.”

The Barkly Shire Council, which is directly responsible for maintaining 26 of the 89 small communities within its

area, said it could not provide basic services to outstations with capped funding. The council’s chief executive officer Jeff Sowiak told the media: “The council’s belief is that the categorisation of some communities as outstations is just a means of denying people who live there access to basic levels of services, or a lesser standard of service.”

In the face of this anger, sections of the Aboriginal leadership have begun criticising *Working Future*, including ex-NT deputy chief minister Marion Scrymgour and former federal government commissioner Patrick Dodson, who both earlier participated in its drafting. Scrymgour was in charge of drawing up the plans and commissioned Dodson to hold consultations with homeland residents.

On June 4, Scrymgour resigned from the Labor Party in protest, ending the NT government’s one-seat majority. She told ABC television that the policy was “insulting” and that Labor had “lied to Aboriginal people”. Dodson told the media that *Working Future* was “not just brutal but a ‘die on the vine’ policy” aimed at “forcing people into the major towns against their wishes”.

The record shows, however, that Dodson and Scrymgour have no fundamental differences with Labor’s measures. Dodson has proposed that homelands with more than 100 residents should be designated as communities and serviced to the same level as other similar NT communities. This would still force the closure of many smaller settlements and merely perpetuate the existing under-funding for the remainder.

While medical surveys suggest that homeland residents have better health results and lower mortality rates than those living in town camps and urban centres, social conditions remain desperately inadequate for all Aboriginal people.

The working class as a whole has a fundamental responsibility to champion the basic democratic right of remote area Aborigines to live wherever they choose, with full access to the requirements of modern life—employment, education, health care and decent housing—that should be available to all. If the homeland settlements are finally shut down, this will constitute yet another chapter in the shameful history of dispossession and dispersal of Australia’s indigenous population—carried out to clear the land for capitalist exploitation.

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