Our group ‘concerned Australians’ (cA) was formed at the time of the Northern Territory (NT) Intervention. We are an independent advocacy body which creates opportunities for First Nation (FN) voices to be heard, especially those of the NT.

Through our work in supporting FN traditional peoples in the NT, it is clear that funding needs to be directed to FN Clan/Nation groups and Aboriginal controlled organisations that understand the needs of their local communities. It has been proved, time and again, that policies, however well intentioned, when implemented from a remote government administration, are often ineffective and even counterproductive. This has been the case with the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response* (known as the Intervention) and later iterations, introduced in 2007 by the Howard government in response to the *Little Children are Sacred* report. Since then, communities have lost control of access to their land and assets, and been forced to surrender communal ownership to lengthy leasing arrangements in return for services to which they are entitled; and have also lost the ability to protect their sacred sites.

Replacement of the CDEP program with the punitive CDP has exposed welfare recipients to more onerous conditions than the general population on Newstart allowances, resulting in disproportionate fines being imposed for noncompliance, increased levels of poverty, and reduced opportunity for local initiatives. CDEP boosted successful FN community led programs, services and work initiatives. We commend the work of Professor Jon Altman of Deakin University in this area.

We believe the Commonwealth has particular responsibility for funding FN programs in the NT because of its imposition of Intervention/Stronger Futures and other assimilationist policies on FN communities – policies that the statistics show are failing. Massive shortfalls need to be addressed, particularly in housing, education and preventive and justice reinvestment initiatives.

It is Government policy to ‘close the gap’ but this is impossible unless communities regain control over responses to their needs. Again this is 'top down' policy. Statistics show negligible improvement since it was introduced. There are exceptions to this criticism and such exceptions should be enhanced and extended.

It is also noted that former Prime Minister Abbott in 2014 reduced funding to community led organisations by over $500m, mainstreaming services, with damaging impact on them.

Examples of needed positive responses are:

Land care

The ranger program is very positive and should be extended for the following reasons:

* FN Peoples know their country well, and can teach others many skills, including how to use firestick burning at the right time to prevent destructive bushfires, thus helping to reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere;
* Biodiversity is preserved in this and other ways such as the elimination of weeds and feral pests;
* Border security is reinforced by local knowledge and surveillance of country, as was demonstrated during WW2. The next challenge may come from an influx of climate refugees.
* Employment opportunities are opened up for people in remote communities to do meaningful, essential practical and cultural work that benefits them and their communities as a whole, thereby reducing government expenditure on welfare, health, and legal and custodial remedies. (That Australia has the highest Indigenous incarceration rates in the world per capita is a national disgrace.)

Local employment

The design and development of local employment opportunities in response to community needs and initiatives is dependent on culturally relevant education and training, and respect for FN ability to understand and resolve their own issues. This would result in:

* community people being trained as tradespeople, teachers, health and aged care workers, land care workers, tourist guides etc., avoiding the need to fund expensive 'fly in fly out' (FIFO) workers;
* communities being strengthened to avoid displacement to overcrowded cities far from traditional homelands and cultural roots;
* reduction in numbers in custody, particularly for young people, thereby creating a lifeline to the future as an alternative to crime or suicide;
* budget savings for law enforcement, custodial centres, medical facilities, welfare etc.;
* reduction in the shameful and tragic statistics on suicide.

Funding is therefore needed for appropriate education and training in consultation with local communities in accordance with their own priorities and cultural practices, and languages, with particular emphasis on bilingual education in schools from primary level.

Housing and Infrastructure

FN people living in remote communities and on outstations have strong cultural and spiritual responsibility for living on their country, and are therefore committed to their location. They should not be forced to move to find work, which also causes significant adverse health impacts. They have the right to live on country. For this reason and (for the reasons given above in relation to land care) it is in the interests of Australia nationally that they should have the option to remain there. Remoteness does create additional expenses that are beyond the capacity of the NT government, and must therefore be further subsidised by the Commonwealth.

* adequate and appropriate housing is fundamental to wellbeing of all Australians, and has flow-on effects for health, education, wellbeing of children, and community life as a whole. Overcrowding of FN housing in the NT must be addressed. Appropriate housing will be a more urgent necessity as climatic conditions become more severe, impacting more heavily on these vulnerable people;
* Infrastructure such as internet (for education, medical consultations etc.), roads, air strips (for flying doctors and relief in emergency as well as border security), is also essential.
* water supply is crucial, but some remote communities are running out of water, or reduced to using contaminated water with injurious effects on health, particularly for children. The problem is very likely to be increased if mining companies are allowed to apply 'fracking' techniques for gas extraction. This must be considered a Commonwealth budgetary issue.
* In addition, there are outstanding long-range issues such as those flowing from *The* *Statement from the Heart*. Even if Treaty and Voice are off the table for the time being, it would be a positive step if a Truth and Justice Commission (the third agreed issue) could be established and funded in response to the lengthy, demanding and expensive process of consultation which ended in disappointment and disillusionment, and would show that the government is not turning a deaf ear to every proposal. A FN designed body to provide true representation, thus enabling them to achieve a greater degree of self-determination, might be considered in budget planning.

All the issues outlined above must be considered in the light of obligations undertaken by the Commonwealth government when it signed a number of international legal instruments such as:

* *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights(ICESCR)*
* *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination(CERD)*
* *The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*

UNDRIP is particularly relevant as it relates to issues of self-determination: see Articles 3, 4 and 5, outlining the right to freely pursue economic, social and cultural development, and to self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, and their right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions. All this requires funding and local control of funding, and is therefore a budgetary issue for the Commonwealth and Territory governments.

20th December 2019