

A Statement from the Stolen Generations Alliance Malcolm Fraser, Lowitja O'Donoghue, Brian Butler

The Prime Minister has declared a state of emergency in the Northern Territory to introduce arbitrary measures for Aboriginal Australians. While we must all hope that any measures introduced will assist Aborigines achieve their rightful place within the Australian community, a place that recognises their own history and culture, we must at the same time ask how the Government has come to this point?

The Government has been in power for over 10 years. Over that time there have been many reports about the dire effects of alcohol and substance abuse affecting Aboriginal communities. Thirty years ago Aboriginal communities, on their own account and with the support of their people, did not allow anyone to bring alcohol into those communities. Over many decades there has been awareness of the damage that alcohol can do – and that awareness has been not least amongst Aboriginal leadership.

These latest measures have been introduced without any overt sign that there has been consultation with Aboriginal leadership or with Aboriginal elders from different communities. Without respect, without discussion and agreement it is difficult to see any measures working as effectively as we would all want. And there are other elements significantly lacking in this latest statement.

Two of the greatest needs for Aboriginal communities, especially in remote communities, are improved health and better access to education. There is a health component to the Government's current program but primary healthcare at the very least needs to be available on a continuous basis. Better availability of health care is needed for all communities and much better availability of education for all Aboriginal children – an education that gives some hope for a future, that there will be jobs, there will be respect and the promise of the 1967 referendum fulfilled.

Despite popular perceptions, funds provided for both Aboriginal education and Aboriginal health are far less than they should have been, far less generous than policies adopted by the Canadian Government and far more paternal in their application in recent times. Surely a return to paternalism is regressive.

One telling statistic is that there are fewer Aboriginal students at Australian universities today than there were when this Government came to office. Quite apart from adequately providing the common and ordinary services which most of us take for granted, the Government has said that if people want to live on remote communities it will not provide services. Is that a policy of starve them out? Take the example of School of the Air. That was a remarkable initiative for remote white communities. Is that the end of our enterprise?

ATSIC did not meet the high expectations many had of it but its abolition, supported by the Labor Party, further eroded hope and belief in the future for many Aboriginal Australians. ATSIC by no means distinguished itself but it could have been very substantially reformed. Elected leadership from specific regions could establish Aboriginal councils with responsibilities to their own communities. Those councils could elect a representative to a national body to advise governments more broadly. This is just one suggestion of a framework that might work.

Instead today there is an appointed advisory council, a throw back to past years, to past paternalism which assumed superiority of government and its instruments. That approach did not work then.

We believe we are the only western democracy with a significant indigenous minority that has no elected representation of any kind. Trachoma, the leading cause of blindness worldwide, is entirely a disease of third-world countries – except for Australia where it is the scourge of remote Aboriginal communities. Our governments pretend to be generous with aid to the third world. There is a third world living within Australia, to Australia's shame.

We can be pleased that the Government accepts there is an emergency which requires action. But their first step needs to be a broad-based approach based upon respect, upon self esteem and on the recognition of a real partnership.

Rt Hon Malcolm Fraser and Prof Lowitja O'Donoghue are Patrons of the Stolen Generations Alliance. Mr Brian Butler is the Chair.