

**By Makinti Minutjukur**



Today the Indigenous Affairs Minister makes a flying first-time visit to the Pukatja Community in South Australia's APY lands. This is an open letter to the Minister from Anangu woman Makinti Minutjukur  
12 August, 2008

Dear Minister

We welcome you on your first visit to our community at Ernabella/Pukatja.

We are happy to hear that the Government will pay for the repair of the Ernabella Church. That church is part of our present day heritage. Our fathers and grandfathers built it with their own hands. It is a place that helped to keep our community strong.

We are also happy to hear that the Commonwealth and State Governments will help the Amata community to have a new art centre building for Tjala Arts. Community art centres are like the hub of a wheel. They are a fixed point where people work and make money to feed their families; pass on their knowledge to young people; get training in art skills and business skills; and have a quiet safe place to be where they make beautiful things that make them feel proud and happy, as well as giving pleasure to the people who buy their work.

We are also pleased to hear that both your Government and the South Australian Government will do something to help with more houses in our communities.

We appreciate the help the governments are giving with these things. We believe that you know that they are the tip of the iceberg. Hiding under the water are the same old problems - bigger than ever.

First though, step back 30 years. In those days we had a community garden supervised by Ungakini's husband, and which supplied our fresh fruit and vegetables. The community bakery run by Peter Nyangu supplied all our bread. Rodney Brumby ran the building projects, supervising the brick making for houses and community buildings in which my father also worked, just one of several of his

community jobs. My mother worked in the women's learning centre where she and other women made clothes, home furnishings, and all sorts of practical goods which people bought with the money they earned from their employment in the community.

I worked in the clinic and was trained there by Robert Stephens and others. Many Anangu received health worker training then; few do today. We had the responsibility of doing the jobs that made our community. We earned our living and we did work that was interesting and worthwhile. We were learning in a good way how to be together in one place all the time, and how to start making so many changes in our lives. All this was new, since as you know, only 30 years before that most of us were still living in the bush and living from the land.

I believe the reason why all our lives out here have become so difficult and painful over the last 30 years is that governments, who have the power over us because they have the money we need to make the changes from old ways to new ways, have stopped listening to us. Listening properly. Taking the time. Working with us. Trusting us to be responsible for our own lives - since we know them best.

It's true that many people have come from government for visits: politicians like yourself, very senior and important public servants from Canberra and Adelaide, and all sorts of other experts and advisers. That's good of course - but not one of them has ever stayed long enough, or come back often enough so that they can really understand, and so that we can help them understand what is the reality here - and the other way, so that they can help us understand what the government can do.

You know and I know what some of the problems are: not enough money for people to live and eat properly, and so an increasing health crisis because of bad diet; no proper work for most adults and so a rising sense of hopelessness from young people who can see no future; a terrifying marijuana problem (since Opal fuel it has replaced petrol as the substance abuse of choice) which is a main factor in most suicides among its many other destructive effects; many old "slum" like houses, and not enough houses anyway, so babies, children, everyone gets sick.

The strength of Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara is in our relationships with each other. That is how our society and our communities work - through our relatedness. Our communities can remain strong only as long as our relationships can be strong, instead of melting away because of no work and no meaning, sickness and sadness. We need to build up those relationships again and we need a different relationship with governments.

I want to ask you, for all Anangu: will you listen to us? As a participant in the 2020 Summit I felt very hopeful that your Government might listen to us.

I understand that governments change, that politicians come and go and so do public servants. We've been here all along, and long before that. Our lives were much better 30 years ago. In the years since there have been many changes, some big, some little. Our money has gone up but mostly down; the places we could work in the community changed, and/or disappeared - that is, they weren't funded any more (such as Wali K which only two years ago employed young men making building products). This is just one example of all the changes that are imposed on

us in which we have no part, and no choice. Part of the reason is that the various groups, committees and individuals who make the decisions that affect us all are not properly representative of Anangu tjuta - all Anangu. This is a serious problem and needs urgent attention with full Anangu participation and understanding every step of the way.

Surely we can work together to understand each other properly, to make good plans together that will last, and not change every few years when governments change and officials change. I don't believe it has to be like that. We are a very patient people but none of us has much more time to wait before our communities disappear under the sea, with the rest of the iceberg.

Yours sincerely

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<http://newmatilda.com/2008/08/13/open-letter-jenny-macklin>