

Australian government imposes military-police regime on Aborigines

By the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Under the cynical guise of protecting indigenous children from sexual abuse, the Howard government announced on Thursday a “national emergency” plan to take control of dozens of Aboriginal communities throughout the Northern Territory and impose virtual martial law conditions. Over coming weeks, police and troops will flood into as many as 60 towns and camps to enforce a series of draconian measures.

Welfare and family payments will be halved, with the seized portions transferred to food and clothing vouchers. All payments will be cut off if children fail to attend school, or are considered “at risk”. Forced labour will be imposed, via “work for the dole” programs, to “clean up” communities.

In “prescribed” zones across the Northern Territory, all children under the age of 16 will be subjected to compulsory medical checks for sexual abuse. Alcohol and X-rated pornography will be banned, with individuals as well as suppliers facing imprisonment.

At the same time, the existing permit system, which allows indigenous communities to restrict access to their lands, will be scrapped. Business managers—so-called “tsars”—will take charge of all public housing and government enterprises. These people will function as modern-day versions of the “administrators” and “protectors” who exercised complete authority over Aboriginal reservations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Federal parliament will be recalled for a special mid-winter session to pass extraordinary, yet-to-be-seen legislation to authorise the takeover. The proposal was immediately endorsed by the Labor Party, whose leader Kevin Rudd pledged to give Prime Minister John Howard whatever support he needed.

Howard insisted that the catalyst for his government’s “hardline approach” was a recently released Northern Territory government inquiry report, “Little Children are Sacred,” which found that child sexual abuse was serious, widespread and often unreported. But Howard and Minister for Indigenous Affairs Mal Brough have brushed aside the report’s findings and recommendations, which called for better education and family support services, together with empowerment of Aboriginal communities.

The report concluded that “most Aboriginal people are willing and committed to solving problems and helping their children”. Aboriginal people were “not the only perpetrators of sexual abuse”—it existed throughout Australia and internationally. In indigenous communities, the roots lay in social problems that had developed over many decades: “the combined effects of poor health, alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment, gambling, pornography, poor education and housing, and a general loss of identity and control”. Above all, “Improvements in health and social services are desperately needed.”

On the contrary, Howard’s package includes not a single

cent for health care, education, housing or social services. Such is the acute shortage of medical staff throughout indigenous communities, the government is asking doctors to donate their services to implement the mandatory medical checks. While the myth is routinely peddled that millions of dollars have already been “squandered” on Aboriginal welfare, every available statistic points to decades of chronic under-funding.

Less than three months ago, Oxfam Australia condemned Australia’s “health gap”—the fact that the federal government spent approximately 70 cents per person on the health of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders for every \$1 spent on the rest of the population. The “Close the Gap” report ranked Australia as the worst among wealthy nations at improving the health of indigenous people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders still died nearly 20 years younger than other Australians, and infant mortality was three times higher.

Dr Paul Bauert, head of pediatrics at Royal Darwin Hospital, denounced the government for ignoring the huge medical challenge produced by poverty-related illnesses. The indigenous children he had seen suffered “pus coming out of their ears, rheumatic heart disease, pus in their lungs [because] they’re living in a house with 20 other people, with three bedrooms and one bathroom and one toilet”. He said existing resources were “minimal,” with the Northern Territory having only a quarter of the doctors needed to conduct regular visits to remote townships.

Far from addressing this social catastrophe, Howard’s measures will deepen it.

What will happen to the families whose welfare payments are cut off? What will be done with those children who fail the medical checks? How many more Aboriginal men will be jailed, when the indigenous imprisonment rate is already 30 times the national average?

According to Aboriginal health specialist, Dr Ben Bartlett, conducting forced medical examinations would be traumatic and could, in itself, constitute sexual abuse. Another expert insisted that the inevitable result of the government’s “knee-jerk ... military response” would be increased suicide and violence. “There will be greater feelings of despair,” said Southern Cross University professor Judy Atkinson, the author of three previous reports on child sexual abuse in indigenous communities.

Child welfare workers are warning of a new “Stolen Generation” of children placed in institutions or foster homes. Already, figures released this month by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show that the number of children aged between 12 and 17 removed from their family in 2006 rose to 9,276, up one-third since 1998. Of these children, 1,170, or about 13 percent, were indigenous, although indigenous people make up just 2 percent of the population.

Howard’s political agenda

At Thursday’s media conference, Howard declared that

“constitutional niceties” had to be cast aside for “the care and protection of young children”. In the first instance, the new regime will be imposed in the Northern Territory, which operates under a different legal framework than the states. But Howard has called for urgent meetings with the six state Labor governments to adopt similar blueprints.

The prime minister claimed he detected a new “mood” among “average Australians” who felt shame and anger about the sexual abuse of indigenous children, and expected governments to respond. With the enthusiastic assistance of the media, he is seeking to divert legitimate public outrage at the terrible conditions in remote Aboriginal townships away from those responsible—successive federal, territory and state governments.

Howard’s claim to be concerned for the plight of poor indigenous children is contemptible. In reality, he is using the social distress caused by decades of official neglect and deprivation, on top of two centuries of massacres, dispossession and forced separation of children, as the pretext for a new form of state repression. Alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence and sexual abuse are symptoms of deep and longstanding social problems: poverty, deprivation and denial of essential infrastructure and services, including health care and schools.

The government’s turn—with full bipartisan support—to punitive police-state measures against the most disadvantaged layers of the Australian population has far-reaching implications for the lives, social conditions and basic democratic rights of all working people. During his media conference, Howard revealed that federal cabinet is drawing up similar measures for all welfare recipients. Precedents are being established, using the most vulnerable members of society, that will be extended throughout the country.

At the centre of the new scheme is a massive land grab. The Howard government will override the 1975 Racial Discrimination Act and the 1976 Land Rights Act—which granted land tenure to Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory—in order to take over land, initially through five-year leases. No compensation will be paid to the current landholders, despite a constitutional requirement to do so. Instead, they will be paid “in kind”—through government services—a proposal reminiscent of the days when cattle station owners gave Aboriginal workers rations of tea, sugar and flour in lieu of wages.

To enforce these deeply anti-democratic measures, police will be mobilised from across the country, backed by military units. According to Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough, a former army officer, the police will arrive in military vehicles and the army will provide logistical backup for frontline policing.

Brough likened the situation to a community being struck by a cyclone or flood. “Certain things have to be put aside. Certain normalities have to be discarded.” But the epidemic of ill-health and abuse among indigenous children is not a natural disaster—nor has it emerged overnight. It is a social disaster, which is now being exploited to radically extend the domestic role of the armed forces.

While Labor is marching lockstep with Howard, and a whole layer of privileged Aboriginal leaders is collaborating with the government, significant voices of opposition have already emerged among health professionals, scholars, lawyers and local Aboriginal leaders. Among them is the winner of the 2007 Miles Franklin literary award, indigenous writer Alexis Wright. She accused the government of “riding roughshod yet again, trampling heavily, bringing down the sledgehammer approach”. This opposition will grow and broaden as the true character of the government’s takeover becomes clearer.

As numbers of commentators have observed, there is an element of desperate election politics in Howard’s announcement. Facing the prospect of defeat at this year’s election, according to opinion polls, Howard is anxiously seeking another reactionary diversion, like the 2001 “children overboard” refugee accusations or the 2003 “weapons of mass destruction” fabrications.

But the plan is part of a wider agenda. Throughout his political career, Howard has made a point of whitewashing the genocidal policies carried out during the past 200 years against Australia’s indigenous population. His government has dismantled representative Aboriginal bodies, such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and consistently blamed Aboriginal people for their own plight. He has also sought to abolish native and communal title. Under the Northern Territory takeover, entire communities are likely to be dispersed and their land cleared for unfettered exploitation by mining companies and pastoralists.

Virtually every media outlet, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, has adopted the government’s line. The Murdoch media, in particular, has hailed Howard’s announcement. According to Nicolas Rothwell’s “analysis” on the Australian’s front page, Howard moved with “rapier speed and devastating force” to sweep away “a generation’s worth of political assumptions” and impose a “completely new pattern of surveillance and control” on indigenous people.

While this assault has a distinctly racist component, it is directed against the entire working class. As the social polarisation produced by more than two decades of “free market” policies intensifies, the Howard government is erecting the scaffolding for a police state. At the same time as it turns to militarism abroad—in Iraq, East Timor and the South Pacific—to realise its economic and strategic agenda, the Australian ruling elite is trampling over basic civil liberties and democratic rights at home.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on the working class as a whole—indigenous and non-indigenous alike—to oppose Howard’s deeply reactionary plan and make a political break with the entire official political apparatus, including the Labor Party. What is required is the unification of the working class on the basis of a socialist program to completely reorganise economic and social life to meet human need, not corporate profit. Such a program must include the allocation of billions of dollars in resources to overcome the social disadvantage suffered by Australia’s indigenous population, and to rectify the historic crimes perpetrated against it.