



## The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council

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### **The Government's \$3.5 billion per year is Not Getting Value for Its Money**

#### **Dr Neil Johnston is right**

#### **The Government Should Speak to Those Who Know What is Wrong and How to Fix It**

"The report by Dr Neil Johnston into the effectiveness of spending on Indigenous Programs is to be welcomed as a wakeup call, not as an opportunity for division and rancour", said Ms Thelma Parker, Chairperson of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC).

Former Department of Veterans' Affairs Secretary Dr. Neil Johnston's 470 page report to the Department of Finance details the Government's inability to turn good intentions into tangible results.

Dr Johnston found "a huge gap between policy intent and policy execution, with numerous examples of well-intentioned policies and programs which have failed to produce their intended results because of serious flaws in implementation and delivery".

Dr Johnston found that "The history of commonwealth policy for indigenous Australians over the past 40 years is largely a story of good intentions, flawed policies, unrealistic assumptions, poor implementation, unintended consequences and dashed hopes." He wrote. "Strong policy commitments and large investments of government funding have too often produced outcomes which have been disappointing at best and appalling at worst. Individual success stories notwithstanding, the circumstances and prospects of many individual Australians are little better in 2010, relative to other Australians, than those which faced their counterparts in 1970."

"Dr Johnston is correct" said Thelma Parker. "The life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is much less than other Australians. Hepatitis A is almost 12 times more common among remote Aboriginals than among other Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are 28 times more likely to be in jail than other Australians. These are third world statistics that, as noted by Dr Johnston, have changed little since 1970".

"Government programs and funding in recent years have shown a willingness to 'bandaid' the problem. Unfortunately, as noted by Dr Johnston, this willingness has not been matched by an ability to fix the problem. There are many dedicated people who would like to do something but the main impact of recent, well intentioned programs, has been to provide career paths for middle class bureaucrats within Western cultural frameworks." Thelma Parker said.

"Anyone connected with remote Aboriginal communities knows the stories of remote communities of a few hundred people being visited by hundreds of bureaucrats. The cost of replacing a solar hot water system on the roof of a house in a remote community was \$17,000, including the travel costs of the white contractors. A study found that 26% of houses in desert communities are so hot in summer that they endanger the lives of inhabitants. The houses were designed for urban housing in temperate coastal locations. Such houses are also too small and inappropriate for extended Aboriginal families. The report *Little Children are Sacred* led to the NT Intervention. Exactly how many children at risk were identified by the Intervention? There are many other such examples"

So what is the solution to the problems identified by Dr Johnston?

“Of course, not all of the many problems identified can be solved by one simple solution. But an obvious failing, such as in the examples mentioned above, is that most of the blunders were because the locals, who had the answers but not the resources, were ignored by those who had the resources but not the answers. “

“Housing in remote areas illustrates this ignorance and lack of consultation. The requirements for houses in remote Aboriginal communities are well known in such communities. Appropriate natural ventilation, larger bedrooms, outdoor cooking areas, substantial verandas and external toilet blocks (so as to not overcrowd living areas) are all obvious and fundamental requirements. The use of appropriate building materials is also important. But suburban type houses continue to be imposed by architects and bureaucrats upon such communities. Then, when the houses are damaged by overcrowding or because they are inappropriate, the communities, not the architects and bureaucrats, are blamed. They would not build a house from the tropics in the Snowy Mountains. Why are they allowed to build houses from a temperate climate in the desert?”

“Housing is not the only problem, but it illustrates the difficulties. There needs to be genuine consultation. But consultation is not a Canberra-style working group or think tank or focus group type of exercise. Such concepts are from a different world and a different culture to remote Australia. There is a glaring need for flexibility in the way in which communities are engaged and ways in which they can contribute to the conversation. Oral reporting, use of appropriate interpreters and very importantly a line of feedback as to the outcomes of the consultations are all key issues” Thelma Parker said.

“The irony of the situation is that if the Government really listened to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on issues of housing and health services for example, the costs of delivering these services could be reduced. Culturally appropriate housing would utilise local materials and the use of local labour (via innovative building techniques) would provide a medium term employment strategy for the community. “

“Dr Johnston is correct. But will the Government and the bureaucrats listen? Where has this report been since February 2010?”

“The Catholic Church and its agencies work with many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in communities across Australia. The Church is willing to work with Government, especially in facilitating consultation with some of the most vulnerable people in Australia. The Government has more than 3.5 billion reasons to get it right”

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