Transcription of the speech given by the Hon Alastair Nicholson at the launch of
*A Decision to Discriminate: Aboriginal Disempowerment in the Northern Territory*
November 7th, 2012

[Acknowledgement to country]

It’s my chance today to participate in the launch of this book *A Decision to Discriminate*. I’d like to, first of all, make a few acknowledgements and perhaps the first of the acknowledgements must be to Michele Harris and her work in ‘concerned Australians.’ She’s done a huge amount of work as part of this campaign over a considerable time. She’s done some excellent work in the preparation of this book and I think that we’re all very much in her debt for the contributions that she’s made over the years, and certainly, since I’ve known her, I know how significant those contributions are.

I’d also like to acknowledge the assistance of the Mary MacKillop Foundation. That foundation, and indeed the Josephite sisters, have given strong support to the Aboriginal people in relation to these issues and that’s not really a big surprise given their dedication to justice and justice for people in our community.

I’d also like to acknowledge Craig Stevens from Vega Press who gave enormous support in the layout and assistance of the book. And Becka Mezzatesta for her enormous photographic contribution which required her travelling up to Maningrida to film the Senate Inquiry.

But I suppose I also should acknowledge and give a very big thank you to, the people who participated in this book because it’s their voice that you hear, it’s their voice that you read about. And it’s absolutely essential that their voice be heard. Unfortunately it’s not being heard. It’s not being heard, I believe, because of what’s really an unholy combination of the Liberal and Labor Governments, both former Liberal and then the Labor Government, pursuing the same hopeless policies and seeming to be completely unaware of the need to speak to the Aboriginal community to actually involve them in decision making about their matters. Instead of that we’ve had the spectacle that started with the Howard Government and continued via the Rudd and Gillard Governments of white people sitting in Canberra deciding what the Aboriginal community should do and how they should be governed, and going through what we all know are sham consultations for the purpose of pursuing the Government policies that had already been decided.

Today, I heard yet another quote from the Minister’s office for the same tired old statement of hundreds of meetings and consultations all over the Territory,
whereas we know that they weren’t genuine consultations, they didn’t take place in the way that consultations should take place, that people weren’t asked to contribute to the decision making process, that people were told what the decision was and at best asked to comment on it. And then the Government has never come clean on what they said, even to the extent of a summary. It’s never come clean on the degree of opposition that was expressed, and it’s never given any of the figures other than talking in terms of hundreds of meetings and the like. And it’s a disgrace.

The Senate Committee, strangely enough, uncovered the disgrace probably more than anyone else because even it found the consultation process too much to stomach. And it’s one of the curious ironies of the Senate Committee Report into the Stronger Futures legislation that while supporting the Stronger Futures legislation it didn’t have the wit to put together its other findings that the consultations were quite unsatisfactory. In fact the Senate Report goes into quite a lot of detail about how useless the consultations were and how bad they were. And yet no one seemed to think that having made that finding, and if that be correct, then the probability is that the legislation is illegal because it clearly would contravene the Racial Discrimination Act if proper consultations didn’t underlie it. And yet the Committee went happily off and made the recommendation to pass the legislation.

The legislation was really never considered by the Department in any real sense. I think it passed the House of Representatives without debate, with about two people in the chamber – a wonderful picture of that episode – and it got scant attention in the Senate.

I’ve said before, and I’ll say it again, that the only politicians of any party, as a party, who took a principled stand in relation to this were the Greens. I’m not a supporter of the Greens particularly but I do take my hat off to them for the principled stand they’ve taken on this and indeed on other issues like asylum seekers. And it seems to me that the party that should have been defending people in this area, the present Government, should hang its head in shame for its contribution. It’s extremely disappointing that it doesn’t address these issues properly.

Now you haven’t of course come here to listen to me. There are much more significant speakers than me today but I just wanted to quote briefly to you from a web site for Overland Magazine. There’s a very good quotation by Michael Brull who starts, I think....I read this as a tribute to ‘concerned Australians.’ He said, ”I think that ‘concerned Australians’ are wonderful. They’re a group of volunteers across Australia including Georgina Gartland and Michele Harris. The latter prepared this book. They produced amazing and important work on the Intervention in the Northern Territory producing reports, UN submissions and
books. The work has been impeccable and particularly valuable in bringing to a broader Australian public the views of indigenous communities under the Intervention whose voices may otherwise have gone unheard." I think actually that says it all. It’s very much to the credit of this organisation that it’s done that.

Now at this point I’m particularly pleased to invite Muriel Bamblett, the CEO of the Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency and one of the 2010 panel members of the Northern Territory Child Protection Inquiry which involved her visiting many of the areas of outback Northern Territory that’s been under discussion. And we’re very honoured to have her today to speak to us and I’ll ask her to be the first speaker.

**Alistair continues after Rosalie’s speech.**

Thanks so much Rosalie for that inspiring address. Michele and I had some discussion about the order of speakers today but we felt that we had to ask you to speak last because no one could follow you. (clapping)

It was a very inspiring address. It was something that I think tugged at the heartstrings of everyone here in the way Rosalie put those issues.

I sometimes wonder why it is that Australians, white Australians tend to...some of them tend to look down on Aboriginal people. We often hear that we’re a young country with a very limited history. Sometimes when people say that I say “hey, wait a minute, there’s about 40,000 years of history or more than that.” We ought to be proud of that, we ought to be proud of our First Australians. We shouldn’t be taking that sort of limited approach. I think it goes back to an attitude that that history is not important. I hope that’s changing. I’m sure that people like Rosalie and Muriel will do their best to make sure it’s changing. So, thank you very much (clapping)...Yeah, the book is launched...it’s well worth reading and well worth distributing...