

Press Release re “Stronger Futures” 27 June 2011

On 22 June 2011 the Prime Minister and Jenny Macklin announced a new round of consultations with Aboriginal Communities. It was accompanied by a 28 page discussion paper “*Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory*”.

We are now advised these consultations are beginning tomorrow. What is the reason for this unseemly haste? A 28 page document written only in English is incapable of being fully understood and absorbed by Aboriginal communities in the time that the government has allegedly made available. In many communities the document should be translated into Aboriginal languages.

If discussions concerning the future are to be meaningful and productive, they must be real. Previous discussions have been designed to persuade Aboriginal communities to accept that which has been pre-determined by the government or government departments in Canberra. The discussions must treat Aboriginal communities as full partners in the process. If discussions are to be real they need to be undertaken with interpretation and with a full recording of events so that there can be a proper audit and understanding of the outcomes.

The 28 page document published by the government provides no adequate measure of what has or has not been achieved of the 4 years of the Intervention. It does mention the numbers of houses constructed or being constructed, but it does not say where. It gives no measure of school attendance. Are all Aboriginal schools fully staffed with permanent teachers on a full school schedule, or are there still communities that are serviced by fly in and fly out teachers for only one day or part of a week? It gives no measure of progress in health and healthcare. It gives no measure of a reduction in alleged child abuse or in drunkenness. Is there any measure of closing the gap in life expectancy? It provides no adequate measure of improvement which the government claims has accompanied income management. It does not measure the task still remaining.

How can the government embark on consultations for the years ahead when it is not prepared to lay out the facts of what has happened over the last 4 years. We recognise that is quite possible that in some communities’ progress has been made, while others have fallen behind. Therefore the facts which we are asking for need to be related to particular communities.

In other words to talk sensibly about the future we need a full and proper audit of what has happened over the last 4 years of a paternal and Canberra centric process. The one thing the document does seem to admit is that the condition of Aboriginals in the Northern Territory is worse than in other states. That one admission makes it all the more urgent to have the facts fully on the table.

Rt Hon Malcolm Fraser AC CH GCL, former Prime Minister of Australia

27 June 2011