

## **A National Crisis: What John Howard Isn't Doing.**

I woke up this morning with a sense of doom. What was wrong? Yes. I remember!

The Prime Minister has announced that he is 'sending in the troops'. He has declared, in effect, a National Emergency.

Is it a National Emergency? Yes, to some degree it is. It has been, for twenty years. More importantly, it is a National Shame. Why was this emergency allowed to develop to the stage that ordinary Australians are outraged. And whose shame is it? The blame game, which I do not subscribe to, but which I will move into for this specific article, rests with government. How come the average Australian did not know when Government have known for many years? How do I know they have known. Because, apart from the reports I have been involved with, I have had ministers say to me: *well we know the problems. You tell us the solutions.*

I therefore must assume they knew the problems.

I have been looking for solutions since 1992.

This morning I asked myself: If I were Prime Minister, with all his powers, what would I have done? Firstly I would understand and respond accordingly, to the fact that this is not an issue isolated to "Aboriginal Lands" in the Northern Territory.

### **In the Short Term**

In the short term, I would focus on a child centred approach to building child centred, child safe communities.

**A Child centred approach:** My first question would be what child safe places are already within communities. How can I support them? Often the safe house in the community is inhabited by a grannie on welfare, who opens her door to any child in need. She is someone who, somehow, like the miracle worker with loaves and fishes, can feed many children from her welfare cheque. I would support those people who are already doing hard jobs with little or no resources.

Secondly, I would ask for Aboriginal peoples living in remote Aboriginal communities; rural towns; urban centres, to put up their hands if they wanted to be involved in a long term approach to building their futures, from within a child centred - child safe infrastructure. I would then, in the short term, begin to work with select communities from each region across Australia, to help build their capacity. I would do this with an understanding that each community I worked with, supported and resourced, would be obliged to work, in turn, with others near them.

In the short to medium term I would provide educational opportunities, to increased skill development which could be piggybacked from one community to another.

Third, following from my child centred approach I would immediately start to build networks of workers, already out there, on the ground, and I would build from their

knowledge and expertise, resourcing them to do their jobs without the stress levels they live with, on a day-to-day basis.

I would provide educational opportunities to workers so they feel capable for working with the child, who as described on page 67 of the report, saw his mother shot in the head and had to clean her brains up of the floor. I would ensure that workers have clear child trauma counselling skills by providing short courses for culturally safe crisis intervention.

These are both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers, who have as their fundamental work ethic, the rights of the child to live and learn in child safe, child friendly environments.

These workers would include police who are legislated to protect children from harm. Hence restricting access to alcohol and other drugs is an important part of their work responsibility. Social workers, and child protection officers who see the damage pornography does to the developing child would be encouraged to work with police to help restrict access to such material. I would charge mine workers, and mining companies for the behaviours of their employees, and others such as mechanics, school teachers, builders, who are found with such materials, on Aboriginal lands, in Aboriginal communities.

I would expect school teachers to embed in their class curriculum, modalities and activities which heal trauma.

### **In the medium term**

In the medium term, if I were the Prime Minister I would build into all that I do, a **community strengths based approach**, grounded in advancing education at all levels. The strengths based approach would provide educational opportunities for Indigenous Australians to acquire skills so they can work with their own people, and others, for healthy early childhood development; education for life long learning, and education for healing.

Such educational packages would be both community based and tertiary delivered. They would have formal accreditation so that graduates could work in any field that helps build a society where children will always feel and be safe. This approach is an Indigenous employment strategy, and I would build that into my government's employment and enterprise strategies.

### **A long term approach embedded in education and quality research.**

In the longer term, if I were the Prime Minister, I would embed in all that I do, research on the ground. Those researchers undertaking Professional Doctorates, with scholarships for Indigenous Australians, would work with those working on the ground, and would document the activities and processes, so that in five or ten years time, I could show the Australian nation, what works, why it works, and how it would work in the towns and regions of Everywhere.

I would expect then that we would be able to work together, all of us, to build a future for all people in this country. I would then be able to say to my senior bureaucrats: you now have the practice based evidence. Support these approaches, on behalf of all Australians.

But I am not the Prime Minister.

And I am sorry that I am not, for if I were this Prime Minister, I would ask of myself: am I now willing to say *sorry* for my government's inability to respond to this *long term* 'emergency', an emergency that has existed over the ten years that I have been Prime Minister of this country? Am I willing to say sorry on behalf of my ministers, who have known of this crisis for many years, for their lack of will to do their jobs? Their inaction has profoundly deepened this so-called emergency.

If I were the Prime Minister I would sit in deep soul searching about my lack of leadership in response to these critical needs, and I would acknowledge that in my mandate on behalf of all Australians, I have failed Aboriginal children today. And I would say: ..... **Sorry.**

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