



Tennant Creek Abuse & High STI Rates

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The recent alleged rape of a child in Tennant Creek and news of high STI rates identified among Aboriginal children have horrified all Australians, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait people and our organisations around the country.

Children and their families impacted by child abuse, disease and neglect need our full support. They don't just need protection though, fundamentally these children need to be with healthy families and to live in safe communities.

The debates in response to news coming out of Tennant Creek and about high STI rates in underage children have splintered. A narrow debate has centred primarily on whether or not to 'remove children who have suffered'. This dialogue is akin to the 'crisis talks' that sparked the Northern Territory Emergency Response under the Howard government. It essentially stops at the call to protect and punish, or to push more programs and promote more police.

A second broader ongoing debate, seemingly overshadowed somewhat by the former debate, acknowledges individual dysfunction and wrong-doing, but goes further in its attempt to understand how these individual situations are linked to broader policy, systemic failures and inter-generational issues. It essentially strives for a clearer understanding of causation and holistic solutions.

Removal

National Congress agrees that vulnerable children should be removed, but we are troubled by the knowledge from past Royal Commissions of the dangers of neglect and abuse perpetrated within institutions and of the failures of many out-of-home-care alternatives. We desperately need to know where we are removing our children to? Their new environment must allow them to thrive.

Countless Aboriginal children who have missed out on care and support have already been 'removed' – they are currently in juvenile detention centres and jails. These are the children failed by support 'programs', failed by distant policy-makers, failed by families in over-crowded houses and failed by communities where local control and self-determination have been frustrated.

Look at the bigger picture. Can we say after 10 years of the NTER and Stronger Futures policy that Aboriginal communities are measurably safer? Are families stronger? Are children healthier? Clearly not in some very instructive cases.

Aboriginal control of our own communities and the services in those communities have been greatly diminished. Appalling housing, health, education and employment statistics tell us that many Aboriginal people are experiencing great stress and hardship. They are struggling to take control of their lives. National Congress clearly heard accounts of extremely difficult living conditions in Aboriginal communities at the NT Aboriginal Housing Forum just this week in Darwin.

Wide Consultation

Over the last two weeks National Congress has been engaging with peak organisations with mandate to advocate for the well-being of Aboriginal children, develop appropriate policies and monitor what progress, if any, is being made.

These peak organisations are aware of what is happening on the ground within Aboriginal communities in urban, regional and remote communities. Leaders from these organisations can never be said to be silent on child abuse, poor health and family breakdown. They are tireless advocates.

Child abuse in any form, such as we have seen in Tennant Creek, requires that perpetrators must be brought to account in accordance with the law. Plus, it is important to help bring about appropriate responses, but those responses need to come in close consultation with Aboriginal people and organisations. Depicting our leaders as silent or 'uninterested' about what is happening in Aboriginal communities is not only counterproductive, but malicious.

Similarly, it is highly offensive and ignorant to link any form of child abuse with being acceptable in Aboriginal culture.

Shared Responsibility

We have a shared responsibility to ensure the rights of every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child to be safe and thrive in their families, communities and cultures.

To achieve this, Closing the Gap targets should be expanded to:

- ensure our children's safety by including an additional target to eliminate the over-representation of our children in out-of-home care by 2040, sub-targets that address the underlying causes of child protection intervention; and
- foster our children's wellbeing and development by strengthening the current target on education to eliminate the under-representation of our 0 to 5-year-old children in early childhood education and care services by 2040.

The position of National Congress is that Australia most certainly does not need another damaging 'intervention' in response to recent events that is likely to fail innocent children again.

ENDS

About National Congress

National Congress began operations in 2011 and has grown to become the largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation in the country, counting over 180 organizations and almost 9,000 individuals as members. National Congress continues to advise all levels of government in Australia; a process that has been greatly enhanced since 2016 by the Redfern Statement Alliance.

Established in 2009 with government support, National Congress is the fourth iteration of a national representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. It took eight years to establish National Congress and is the result of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community meetings held throughout the country, peak body deliberations, a national forum and countless written submissions.
