26.1.12

Dear Committee Members,
i appreciate the difficulty of the task that faces you as you seek to discern a way through the cacophony of voices that surround this issue. It is never easy to keep listening when there is such passionate opinion on different aspects of an issue.

However, all of us know that as adults, a solution imposed on us from above rarely achieves its aim. We resent it, we resist it, and it usually has the opposite effect than the one intended. The fact that it worked with another group in another setting is irrelevant if we have not had the opportunity to work out what will be best for us.

The NT intervention was a political ploy by the previous government. It did not respect the Territory leadership of Clare Martin, but was imposed without any discussion with her or her advisers. From the beginning it has affected all communities- those that were managing their own affairs well and those that were in dire straits. It has taken away community work programs and with them the self respect of those men who were struggling to regain some sense of purpose and dignity. I suspect it has not greatly reduced the serious abuse of young people where that was occurring.

Indigenous leaders do want education for their children. If there are really good teachers- able to inspire kids and relate with empathy to parents, education will happen without draconian pressures. Incentives to stay at school are needed, and if communities feel their local knowledge is also valued, this will be easier to insist on.

The fact that the basic ideas of the Intervention worked in northern Queensland ignores the years of patient preparation by their indigenous leaders. In the NT it was brought in without such respectful and grassroots preparation.

On this Australia Day, when we celebrate European arrival in Australia, and the Aboriginal people look back on the changes wrought on their lives since our invasion, I wonder how much they have to rejoice in? How will this current policy look in 20 years, in 50 years time? Will our children be as ashamed of it as we are of the Stolen Generation? I beg you as a committee to listen to those Indigenous leaders who ask for a more participatory and respectful approach, rather than insisting on this direction, regardless of responses.

Yours sincerely,
Christine Burke IBVM