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Indigenous Social Justice Association — Melbourne

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SUBMISSION – STRONGER FUTURES IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY BILL 2011

Our group works on the issue of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and must express grave concern at the Federal Government's proposal to extend the Northern Territory Intervention under the 'Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory'.

It is well known that the Northern Territory Intervention/Emergency Response thus far has had a devastating impact leading to worsening social indicators in many Northern Territory Aboriginal communities resulting in an alarming increase in both imprisonment rates and the incidence of self-harm/suicide. Yes, politicians definitely have blood on their hands – while this may not be palatable it is a fact that cannot be denied.

Any extension of the intervention or similar discriminatory policies cannot be supported by our group when we know of the horrendous negative effects the existing intervention has had on communities/people many of whom have dealt with more than their fair share of pain, trauma and stress due to bad government policies throughout their entire lives.

It is to the shame of this country and many of its politicians that First Nations' people in this country -

- are now incarcerated at a rate 14.3 times greater than non-Indigenous people
- comprise merely 2.5% of this country's population while making up approx. 25% of the prison population

Outrageous statistics which can only worsen under any continuation and/or extension of the Northern Territory Intervention or implementation of Stronger Futures which are in direct conflict with the recommendations of the Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths In Custody.

Recommendations of that Royal Commission i.e. that arrest/imprisonment be of the last resort seem to be ignored as the 5 January 2012 Aboriginal death in custody of Mr Terrance Briscoe in Alice Springs confirms.

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(Information relating to Aboriginal Death In Custody – Terrance Briscoe – 5 Jan 2012 – a death that may well be attributed to the N.T. Emergency Response/Intervention
And why was Terry arrested at all. Is the Northern Territory zero tolerance policy on public drinking, just a policy for locking up Aboriginal people? If the intervention is forcing Aboriginal people to migrate off their homelands and come to Alice Springs, that's not a reason to lock them up in protective custody. And how protective is protective custody? Since the Northern Territory Intervention did away with the Community Development Employment Program, it has reduced the capacity of local Aboriginal communities to support their members in all of their situations and difficulties, including support and help for those who are drunk.)

This country can and must do better – our First Nations' people need to be respected and consulted in a genuine way. People who have lost so much since European occupation of this country – culture, language, children and country – deserve the support of government and community-run much-needed services such as the Community Development Employment Program. First Nations' people know what is needed in their communities and know what will work – it is time to listen, hear and respect their wishes.

Many of us saw former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology to members of the Stolen Generation as a positive step in the right direction – that it was to be the first step to improvement in the lives of long-suffering First Nations' people. Unfortunately, the question being raised all too frequently these days is 'what's changed since the apology?' Stronger Futures/NT Intervention makes a mockery of the apology.

We call on all members of the Senate to act with conscience and exercise their powers to ensure the Stronger Futures Bill is not enacted and further we call for the end to the Northern Territory Emergency Response/Intervention – there is no room for racism towards and dispossession of First Nations' people in this country in 2012. Everyone in this country is entitled to their human rights – human rights should not be reserved for those who are privileged and/or be based on colour, creed or position in society.

INDIGENOUS SOCIAL JUSTICE ASSOCIATION – MELBOURNE

8th January 2012