

Australia tries tough love to heal Aboriginal woes

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In this May 29, 2009, photo, locals sit on the street side in downtown Wadeye in the Northern Territory in Australia. Wadeye, with a population of 2,500, the largest Aboriginal community in Australia's remote Northern Territory, is a reminder of the tortured relationship with its oldest inhabitants, and the government's endless failed attempts to right the wrongs it's wrought.(AP Photo/Kristen Gelineau)

(AP) -- Along the dusty red road that leads from the lonely airstrip into town, the signs flash by: "No alcohol," says one. "Petrol sniffing kills," admonishes another. "Don't bring gunja into our town," warns a third. And then, one more: "Welcome to Wadeye. Give every Aboriginal kid a chance."

Up the road, a dozen people slump across the porch of a tiny, graffiti-stained house. Inside, a ceiling fan loses a battle with the rancid smell of

the garbage and feces that litter the bathroom floor. Palm-sized cockroaches skitter across the shower, and the two bedrooms are crammed with tattered mattresses where some of the home's 18 residents sleep.

This town of 2,500 is the largest Aboriginal community in Australia's remote north, so isolated that it can only be reached by air for half the year when monsoonal rains flood the main road. For years, Wadeye was a drugged-up, crime-ridden wasteland and a painful reminder of Australia's tortured relationship with its oldest inhabitants - a relationship it has tried to both fix and forget.

Now this battered town is in the middle of Australia's latest attempt at a fix: a tough set of policies known as The Intervention. In the past two years, the government has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into Aboriginal communities across the Northern Territory - and forced upon them strict new rules. Residents are now required to spend half their welfare checks on family essentials like food. Welfare payments are suspended if parents in some settlements don't send their kids to school. Pornography and alcohol are banned - although in Wadeye, many white people are allowed to drink in their homes.

But what is pitched as tough love has a downside. A 2008 government review of the intervention found feelings of betrayal and resistance. Many Aborigines complained of "intense hurt and anger at being isolated on the basis of race and subjected to collective measures that would never be applied to other Australians."

So is tough love enough? Or is it doomed, like past approaches, to fail - condemning Aborigines to a third-world life in a first-world nation?

Walter Kerinaiaua leans against the porch railing of a newly-built, four-bedroom house, where the buttercup-yellow walls still smell of fresh paint and the linoleum floors shine bright. It sure beats his sister-in-law's rusted, steel-sided home a few streets over, where possums, rats and deadly snakes creep through the missing windows after dark.

Kerinaiaua is an Aboriginal leader in Nguiu, about 300 miles (500 kilometers) northeast of Wadeye. He's thrilled with the 25 new homes built in his community, but he still struggles to describe his feelings about the intervention. Finally, with a sigh, he settles on one word: "Frustrating."

The new rules were confusing at first. Eventually, Kerinaiaua says, most residents warmed to the program, understanding it was meant to help.

But how and whether to help Aborigines has been a loaded issue since the first white settlers came to [Australia](#) in 1788. British colonists brought diseases that wiped out vast numbers of Aborigines; and those who survived were driven off the land they had lived on for generations.

For much of the 20th century - through the 1970s - the country forcibly removed Aboriginal children from their families, creating what is dubbed the "Stolen Generations." Australia claimed it wanted to protect children from neglect or abuse. But in most cases, children were taken with no evidence of mistreatment, and were instead abused by their adoptive families and in orphanages.

Aborigines now make up around 2 percent of the country's 22 million-strong population. In recent decades, billions of dollars have been thrown into community programs, housing and education. Yet Aborigines remain the poorest, unhealthiest and most disadvantaged minority, with an average life span 17 years shorter than other Australians.

In June 2007, a government-commissioned inquiry concluded that child sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities had become an issue of "urgent national significance." Australians were horrified by the revelations: an 18-year-old high from huffing gasoline fumes sodomized and drowned a 6-year-old; another teen raped his 7-month-old niece.

One week later, then-Prime Minister John Howard announced his government would use its constitutional powers over the Northern Territory to impose strict measures aimed at protecting children. Along with banning alcohol and pornography, the government pledged to improve schools, homes and health care, and create jobs. The initiative cost 687 million Australian dollars (\$543 million) in the 2007-08 financial year alone.

Some Australians were outraged, calling it paternalistic and unforgivably racist. But officials argued they had to do something in the face of so much suffering.

The government is sensitive about the program.

So sensitive that even basic facts such as how many Aborigines and communities are affected (about 60,000 in 83 settlements) are offered "on background only."

So sensitive that the intervention's commander, Mike Zissler, is not allowed to discuss it.

The most sensitive issue of all remains child sexual abuse, a subject that is utterly taboo in Aboriginal society. Many Aborigines say the inquiry's report painted them all as predators.

But when it comes to measuring the problem today, information is unavailable, uncollected or unreleased. The communities are too small

for the Department of Justice to bother tracking data on them. The Australian Crime Commission is preparing a report - but has no plans to release it publicly.

"We know that women are still being bashed," acknowledges Alison Anderson, the Northern Territory's Minister for Indigenous Policy. "We know that certain children are still being abused."

But how many? And is it fewer than before?

Anderson, like other government officials interviewed, says she simply doesn't know.

William Parmbuk, one of Wadeye's elders, stands outside his town's health clinic, where a sign featuring a cartoon superhero offers tips on eradicating scabies.

Parmbuk sees the good in the intervention: more money is flowing in, more jobs are opening up.

He also sees the bad - particularly, the ban on alcohol. Wadeye has technically been a dry community since 1988, but the intervention did not strike down a local rule that allows some people - overwhelmingly white - to get permits to drink in their homes. To Parmbuk, the disparity smacks of racism. No one here, he says, should be allowed to drink.

"The government just like pushing us around," he says. "But the government need to start listening to us - what we want."

He doesn't dispute the town needs help. A few years ago, long-simmering rivalries between clans erupted into violence, with spear and

machete-toting men roaming the streets. Some residents now say reports of the melees were exaggerated, but the damage to Wadeye's reputation was done.

Today, the streets are quiet - but problems remain.

An average of 17 people live in each house. On what should be a school day, hundreds of children roam barefoot through town. Playing cards litter the ground; gambling is big in this community.

"Really," explains town store manager Mark Hoy, "there's nothing else to do."

Some believe the government's strict approach has led Aborigines to feel even more hopeless.

"Tough love alone will not deliver outcomes," says Jon Altman, director of the Center for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at The Australian National University in Canberra.

Altman questions how the government measures progress. For example, he says, officials ask store owners if people are buying more food, then claim that as proof the welfare rules are working.

Pat Rebgetz, who spent more than three years serving as Wadeye's doctor before quitting in December, also questions the government's rosy portrayal of its efforts. Rebgetz says the town he left behind is still a mess: Women continue to be raped, most kids can't speak English, housing is abysmal.

"I don't know how many millions have been spent," Rebgetz says. "Meeting after meeting, reports, investigations - all involving white bureaucrats. And yet nothing hits the ground - nothing changes."

He acknowledges there have been some improvements - particularly, fewer riots in the streets. So can the intervention succeed?

His laugh is bitter.

"All the young men," he says wearily, "to me - they're lost."

On the other side of Wadeye, seven Aboriginal men smooth out pools of wet concrete into slabs for new homes. For most, this is the first job they've ever had.

The intervention has created 1,700 jobs in fields such as child care, education and art. Anderson, the territory's Minister for Indigenous Policy, cites other successes: Communities have seen a decrease, albeit slight, in alcohol abuse. Night patrols and extra police keep the streets under control.

But progress is slow.

Anderson, who is Aboriginal, says her people are accustomed to surviving on welfare, with up to 30 people living under one roof. A job or a new house alone won't change their mindset, she says.

Still, she is adamant the intervention will work. In the past, she says, sensitive race relations scared officials away from making hard decisions.

"Tough love has always worked, you know?" she says. "It's worked in my life and it'll work in anyone's life."

Up in the nearby Tiwi Islands, Barry John Puruntatameri, the deputy

mayor, says it's all a matter of perspective. School attendance rates, for example, are only between 30 and 40 percent. But before the intervention, they were 10 percent.

The region has traditionally had one of the worst suicide rates in the country. About 10 years ago, the problem got so bad, officials installed spiky steel barriers on power poles to keep men on suicide missions from climbing them.

But in the past five months, he says, there hasn't been a single suicide.

"We'll get there; we'll make this place good, clean and healthy," the mayor says. "It just takes time."

Nearby, grinning students fill the playground of the local school. In the center, a group plays tug-of-war with a rope thicker than some of their arms. Cheers suddenly erupt as one team wins - the children whoop, laugh and leap in the air. For a few moments, they revel in their victory.

Really, the victory is that they are there at all.

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