

26 June 2007

## Open letter to The Hon. Mal Brough MP

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Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra  
ACT 2600

Dear Minister Brough

The undersigned organisations write this joint and open letter in order to convey our views on action required to stop the abuse of children in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, and our concerns about aspects of the Australian Government's response to this problem as outlined in your statement of 21 June 2007.

The safety and well-being of Indigenous children is paramount. We welcome your commitment to tackling violence and abuse in certain Indigenous communities. We are deeply concerned at the severity and widespread nature of the problems of child sexual abuse and community breakdown in Indigenous communities in the NT, catalogued in the Little Children are Sacred Report.

We wish to work collaboratively with Governments and the communities affected to ensure that children are protected. We would like to see greater investment in the services that support Indigenous families and communities, the active involvement of these communities in finding solutions to these problems and greater Federal Government engagement in delivering basic health, housing and education services to remote communities.

There is general agreement among the communities affected, Governments and service providers and in the wider Australian community that urgent action is required to address the abuse and neglect of children and to assist those affected by it.

We note that the services which most Australians take for granted are often not delivered to remote Indigenous communities, including adequately resourced schools, health services, child protection and family support services, as well as police who are trained to deal with domestic violence in the communities affected. We endorse the call in the Little Children are Sacred Report for the Australian and Territory Governments to work together urgently to fill these gaps in services.

There is also a need for a longer term plan to address the underlying causes of the problem, including community breakdown, joblessness, overcrowding and low levels of education.

Successfully tackling these problems requires sustainable solutions, which must be worked out with the communities, not prescribed from Canberra.

We are committed to working with the Government to ensure that in developing and introducing the proposed measures, support is provided to Indigenous communities' efforts to resolve these problems. The proposals go well beyond an 'emergency response', and will have profound effects on people's incomes, land ownership, and their ability to decide the kind of medical treatment they receive. Some of the measures will weaken communities and families by taking from them the ability to make basic decisions about their lives, thus removing responsibility instead of empowering them.

In their present form the proposals miss the mark and are unlikely to be effective. There is an over-reliance on top-down and punitive measures, and insufficient indication that additional

resources will be mobilised where they are urgently needed; to improve housing, child protection and domestic violence supports, schools, health services, alcohol and drug rehab programs. These issues have been raised by many Indigenous leaders over many years.

We offer our support to Indigenous communities and the Government in:

- developing programs that will strengthen families and communities to empower them to confront the problems they face;
- consulting adequately with the communities and NT Government, and community service, health and education providers;
- developing a long term plan to address and resolve the causes of child abuse including joblessness, poor housing, education and commit the necessary resources to this.

Yours sincerely

Mick Dodson