

Dear NT election candidate,

We write as a member of Amnesty International Australia (AIA)'s Alice Springs group. This email contains questions we are seeking to have answered by various candidates in the upcoming NT election. We are seeking answers to those questions by the 9th of August, with a view to distributing those answers to constituents soon thereafter.

AIA's report "The land holds us: Aboriginal Peoples' right to traditional homelands in the Northern Territory", released in August 2011, notes the critical importance of ongoing government support and resourcing to homelands in the NT. The report and its recommendations can be found here <<http://www.amnesty.org.au/images/uploads/aus/AI-homelands-report.pdf>> .

Approximately 30% of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory live on homelands, outstations and other small communities. (refer: W. Sanders Working Future: A Critique of Policy by Numbers CAEPR Working Paper No. 72/2010; available here <<http://caepr.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Publications/WP/WP72%20final.pdf>> )

We hope to ensure that homelands, and the current policy directions that impact on the lives of those who live on them, are given the consideration they warrant in the weeks leading up to the NT Election. Any forced movement of people from homelands is a clear human rights violation. A commitment is needed to adequately fund housing, infrastructure and services to support positive health outcomes, preservation of land and culture, economic development and the self-determination of homelands communities across the Northern Territory. Certainly, any inadequacy or inequity of funding would suggest a conscious contravention of the protection of people's rights under a number of conventions of which Australia is a signatory.

There are a number of key issues that local constituents, especially those who reside on homelands, outstations and other smaller communities, are keen to hear candidates speak about. We believe the following messages are crucial to any further deliberations on governments' support of homelands.

On this basis we are sending letters to all candidates for the Arnhem, Barkly, Braitling, Namatjira, Nhulunbuy, Nightcliff and Stuart electorates. We seek your considered responses to our questions below so that community members can be better informed of candidates' positions on homelands; we will be presenting these to constituents in the weeks to come.

The benefits of living on homelands

Opportunities for self-determination and governance on homelands

Living on homelands supports self-determination and people's self-worth. In 2009, the Commonwealth Government endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which clearly recognises this.

The Federal Government's endorsement of the UNDRIP suggests an ongoing support for people to be on country. Article 8 of the UNDRIP notes:

"2. States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for:

(a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities;

(b) Any action which has the aim or effect of dispossessing them of their lands, territories or resources;

(c) Any form of forced population transfer which has the aim or effect of violating or undermining any of their rights..."

Further to this, Article 21 of the UNDRIP states:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including, inter alia, in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security.

2. States shall take effective measures and, where appropriate, special measures to ensure continuing improvement of their economic and social conditions. Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities.

Question 1:

Does your party support Aboriginal people's rights to live on their traditional country?

Question 2:

If elected, what plans do you have to support Aboriginal people's rights to live on their traditional country in the next 4 years? And the longer term?

Preservation of land, culture and knowledge of sacred sites on homelands

Supporting people to live on homelands enables looking after country, strengthens communities and family ties, and helps to maintain culture including language. The maintenance of people's access to sacred sites and cultural practices is critical. We also recognise that when people are forced to live on other people's country they have diminished cultural rights. Movement away from being on country also potentially opens up their country for exploitation by other parties.

The support of Aboriginal languages, including through formal education opportunities provided on homelands, are a responsibility of the NT Government. The commencement of a new NT parliament provides a key chance to strengthen the provision of equitable education opportunities to homelands.

This would include a focussed investment in the delivery, via the School of the Air, of teaching to children in their first language, with curriculum informed by local community forums.

Question 3:

Does your party support School of the Air delivering education in people's first language to homelands communities?

Question 4:

If elected, what plans do you have to support this in the next 4 years?

Better health outcomes

A number of studies have demonstrated improved health outcomes for Aboriginal people living on homelands. Statistics such as 40% lower mortality rate for adults, and 50% lower mortality from cardiovascular disease in Aboriginal people living in Utopia compared to Aboriginal people within the Northern Territory in general, are hard to ignore.

Refer, for example, to:

CP Burgess et al, 'Healthy country, healthy people: the relationship between Indigenous health status and "caring for country"' Medical Journal of Australia, 190 (10): 2009, p 567-572.

K Andreyan et al, 'Patterns of Mortality in Indigenous Adults in the Northern Territory, 1998-2003: are people living in remote areas worse off?' Medical Journal of Australia, 190 (6): 2009, p 307-311.

KG Rowley et al, 'Lower than expected morbidity and mortality for an Australian Aboriginal population: 10 year follow up in a decentralised community' Medical Journal of Australia, 188 (5): 2008, p 283-287.

Importantly, Aboriginal people themselves also report improved health when on homelands.

These studies and responses from Aboriginal people reinforce the need for ongoing, properly funded and resourced health care to Homelands people.

Question 5:

What is your party's position on providing health services to homelands, outstations and smaller communities?

Policy directions on homelands

The recent funding announcement for homelands is not good enough

Announcements by Federal Minister Jenny Macklin on 28 March 2012, and more recently by both the NT Labor Government and the Country Liberal Party, regarding continued funding for, and municipal and essential services for homelands, and maintenance and repairs to housing, are welcomed.

As suggested in AIA's public statement from 2nd August, these announcements signal 'that there is support across the political spectrum to ensure the long-term viability of homelands communities.' However the \$300 million commitment over 10 years, of which \$94 million is from the NT Government, merely maintains the status quo of inadequate funding that in no way reflects the broader needs of homelands. Certainly, there is no sign of much needed investment in new social housing to go some way to meeting demand.

Similarly, the Country Liberal Party (CLP) announcement in response, committing to provide funding for repairs & maintenance works to outstation dwellings to the value of \$5,200 per dwelling each year is inadequate.

Question 6:

If elected, what housing outcomes will you support for families who have homelands as their main place of living?

Question 7:

To what level would these be funded by your party if in Government?

The forced movement of people from homelands is a human rights violation

The Homelands movement was supported by successive Federal governments from 1972 to 2007.

It aligned with the intentions that informed the drafting of the UNDRIP, and the positive social and health outcomes that result from Indigenous people being able to live on country.

A shift from supporting people to live on homelands to a focus on service delivery in growth towns will effectively force people from their traditional lands to seek services, housing, and opportunities such as employment. Such forced migration is clearly counter to Articles 8 and 10 of the UNDRIP, as endorsed by the Commonwealth Government in 2009.

Question 8:

Do you agree that homelands, outstations and smaller communities need increased funding, as is in place for growth towns?

Question 9:

To what level would homelands and outstations, as well as smaller communities, be funded by your party if in Government?

Thank you for your time and consideration. Could you please provide concise written responses to these questions by no later than Thursday 9th August. Please do not hesitate to contact us should you wish to discuss any matters further.

Yours sincerely,

James Milsom and Rachel Toovey

Members of the Alice Springs Action Group of Amnesty International