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The real black economy — and who loses

If they win government on March 24, the Coalition parties will slash Federal spending on Aborigines by \$100 million, a move which has angered blacks but left the white electorate largely untroubled. Such a promise begs the question: where does all that money go? Twenty years ago the Federal Government spent less than \$10 million a year on Aboriginal affairs. This financial year Canberra will outlay \$915 million. The money will go on special projects for the 300,000 Australians who identify themselves officially as being of Aboriginal descent. Yet despite — or perhaps because of — all that cash, conditions in some parts of black Australia are much worse than when Aborigines were given formal recognition in 1967. BRUCE STANNARD reports

On the beach at Milungmbi, one of the Crocodile Islands 450km east of Darwin, a dignified elder of the Gupapuyngu clan, gaunt and black as a burnt stick, is sitting cross-legged beneath an enormous tamarind tree. Naked save for orange leathers in his tightly-curled hair and a bright red *ranga* around his loins, the Old Man is talking quietly to a semi-circle of whitefellas: a judge, court reporters, solicitors, fishermen and an anthropologist. Off to one side sit his fellow clansmen, their coal black bodies smeared white with kaolin, their hands clutching shovel-nosed *murrigny* (killer) spears. They are here to listen to the Old Man put his people's case for refusing public access to their sacred Dreaming sites in the Aratara Sea.

"Judge," says the Old Man, "I am going to tell you something secret, something sacred."

The Aboriginal Land Commissioner, His Honor Mr Justice Toobey of the Northern Territory Supreme Court, leans closer and the semi-circle tightens as the Old Man takes a bony finger, smooths the sand and draws an impressive S-shaped snake to illustrate the sing-song story he tells of the Rainbow Serpent, the mythical Dreamtime creature which, according to legend, swallowed two young boys, swam out to sea and then, when the grieving families were conducting their mourning ceremonies, returned and regurgitated them alive. Thus, he said, the Rainbow Serpent had become the clan's *ranga*, its most powerful and sacred symbol.



Former Senator Neville Bonner Galawrruy Yunupingu

The Old Man then made a bold, decisive gesture with his finger — a vertical line plunged down through the sandy snake to create a perfect dollar sign. The *balanda* (white man) also had a strong *ranga*, he said. Maybe even stronger than the Rainbow Serpent. If the Gupapuyngu could control the *balanda's ranga*, this would surely give them very great power.

In that little tableau on the dichotomy between Dreamtime mythology and the Almighty Dollar, the Old Man went to the heart of the issue which has created bitter social and political rifts within traditional Aboriginal ranks and also promoted angry bewilderment among white Australians, who see their tax dollars being poured into what seems like a black hole.

The perception — particularly among whites in the Top End — is that the vast amounts of money spent each year on Australia's most deprived people are at best largely wasted or, worse still, contribute sig-

nificantly to the marked decline in traditional Aboriginal culture. All the indicators show Aboriginal people stuck where they always have been — living in poverty at the bottom of the social heap.

So where does all the money go? In a report based on a three-month investigation among the Central Desert tribes, former Aboriginal Senator Neville Bonner estimated that barely one-third of the money spent on Aboriginal affairs actually reached the people it was designed to help. According to Bonner's report — which has never been made public — two-thirds of the money was soaked up by a vast white-dominated bureaucracy servicing what has become known as "the Aboriginal industry". (See box.)

Bonner's central criticism — that funds are being wasted on projects conceived and implemented by white social engineers and not always in consultation with traditional Aboriginal leaders — is echoed by two other prominent black spokesmen: Northern Land Council chairman Galawrruy Yunupingu and Charles Perkins, former head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and now a consultant to both State and Federal governments. (See Perkins interview, Page 140.)

Yunupingu is scathing when he says: "The white fellas says, 'All right, Aborigines got problems?' Throw dollars at them. But what are those white dollars for? To make us into white fellas; to assimilate us. That's not the answer. We won't be bought by dollars. Bob Hawke talks about a treaty as if that's going to fix the whole thing up. But a

treaty is not the complete answer. We don't want to be mocked by a piece of paper."

Yunupingu says the white attitude is "silly blackfella, bloody ignorant. No good talking to him". In white terms, Aborigines are ignorant, he says, and because they are ignorant they are powerless. "The result is we've got a lot of white advisers up here who think they know what's good for us poor black fellas," he says. "They say... 'You want a roof over your head? No bloody fear. mate. Can't have a roof. We'll build you a house, mate. (with windows, doors, the lot. Whether you like it or not, you (are) going to get a house.'"

Travel through northern Australia today and you are confronted again and again by Aboriginal communities mired in wretchedness and squalor that make Soweto's tattered shanties look luxurious. Social dislocation has bred violence; chronic health problems and alcoholism on a scale unimaginable for most white Australians.

The kind of Third World slum conditions that reduced Justice Marcus Einfeld to tears when, as a human rights commissioner, he



Garungu elders Old Dick Kingston and Jumbo Collins, Elliott, NT

visited Aborigines at Toomelah in northern NSW last year are typical of black communities throughout the country. There are hundreds of Toomelahs out there, beyond the consciousness of white Australia. Out of sight, out of mind.

It is because of that, according to Yunupingu, that more and more Aboriginal communities will be demanding what he calls independence: the right to operate on their own without outside interference. An independent life, he says, is one with no

The killer alcohol

men, the traditional leaders, Australian voter will have grown heartily sick and tired of seeing all this money going down the drain."

Too many of the hanging deaths in custody investigated by his Royal Commission were caused by what he calls "mindless drunkenness" and a combination of resentment, anger and despair.

After all his years on the bench, he says, he can recall only one case in which an Aboriginal accused was sober at the time of the alleged offence.

So much of the money Aborigines receive from governments is spent on liquor. "The result is that some Aboriginal kids are suffering from malnutrition. The community stores are well-stocked with food but the kids are forced to get by on damper because mum and dad have

blown their cheques on booze. A teacher in Alice Springs spoke to me of an Aboriginal child who brought a rock wrapped in brown paper to school each day and pretended it was lunch.

"Not a good start for self-esteem." Muirhead says we need a national task force to deal with Aboriginal problems with liquor. A few Aboriginal communities have declared themselves dry but other communities are beleaguered, threatened by liquor and its social consequences.

"It's one of the great human tragedies in this country. Alcohol is killing Aboriginal people."

"In a few years we won't have the proud leaders with the great cultural traditions, the knowledge of the ceremonies and the tribal authority behind them."

It is precisely because Aborigines refuse to conform to white stereotypes that so much of the funding seems to be wasted. At a Pijantjatjara outstation near Armatia in northern South Australia, Bonner's investigation came across what was meant to be an Aboriginal aged persons village perched on the edge of the Great Victoria Desert. Bonner found that the bizarre scheme — the antithesis of traditional tribal life — had never been proposed to the tribal elders with the result that the huddle of white suburban-style cottages built around a central dining hall had never been occupied.

At an outstation in north-west South Australia he found that, on instructions from a white adviser, a \$200,000 four-bedroom brick veneer home had been built to house an Aboriginal family, Bonner said. "I had all the mod cons you would expect in suburbia — a power generator, insulation in the roof, the lot. But the family was never asked whether they wanted the place with the result that, except during cold or rainy weather, they preferred to live outside under cool, traditional hush shelters."

That example was, he says, by no means isolated. He saw the same basic mistakes all over Australia. Bonner's report was commissioned by former Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Clyde Holding but was not taken up by his successor Gerry Hand. Bonner and Hand do not see eye to eye on Aboriginal matters. But Bonner wants to see his report not only published but also made compulsory reading for all politicians. "If they read it," he says, "they would learn that Aboriginal people are quite capable of making their own decisions as to where they want to go and how they want to get there. More attention has to be paid to the old men and women, the law-makers, the people responsible for the tribe. If you ignore their views you are bound to waste money. If only the bureaucrats would listen, I reckon they would save half the money that's being wasted."

"When," asked Yunupingu, "was the last time anyone asked a blackfella what kind of house he wanted? No one ever does. So what happens? Nice suburban white fellas' houses are built out in the scrub. (They have) showers, toilets, kitchens, the lot. Then the kids start smashing in the bloody windows, kicking in the doors, wrecking the places,

there were five vacant Homeswest (State Housing Commission) homes in Northampton, near Geraldton, the Aboriginal Housing Board built another for an Aboriginal family which was already living in a Homeswest house.

At Kellerberrin in the wheat belt east of Perth, three different agencies — all State and Federal — funded — provided rental accommodation for Aborigines. In East Pilbara, where summer temperatures often reach 40 degrees, funds were wasted building Aboriginal homes designed so badly that the verandas — and the homes — were useless. Electricity meters were installed even though the residents were not required to pay power bills. The committees found that Aboriginal people were not consulted.

Without consulting the West Australian Government, the Commonwealth established Aboriginal health service facilities in Wiluna, Roeburne, Halls Creek and Carnarvon alongside identical services funded by the State Health Department. The committee criticised the wasteful duplication and pointed to the confusion and frustration created in the Aboriginal community by having to deal with two different service providers.

"You get these white advisers straight out of the universities," Bonner says, "who go into the (Aboriginal) communities and ingratiate themselves with the young turks who are maybe breaking away from traditional ways and they usurp the authority of

end you are able to fly into Darwin, stay in five-star hotels, drive hire cars and spend thousands of dollars. Then there are overseas 'business' trips — first class all the way, of course.

Collins says one Northern Territory community lost more than \$500,000 over six months when its white adviser used community funds to purchase run-down second-hand equipment from a Brisbane-based \$2 million company.

"This fellow took a financial health association and plunged it well and truly into the red with absolutely no

the elders and make decisions for them, decisions they reject. "They are conducting social experiments with Aboriginal lives and they are using government funds to do it. The money is not being used wisely and the people who are supposed to be the recipients are not benefiting at all. All these grand schemes result in the rise of a black bureaucracy which is no better — and in some cases much worse — than the white bureaucracy. This is going on not only in the Northern Territory. It's happening in Western Australia, South Australia and I'm sure it happens in Queensland too."

People in six tribal areas west of the Stuart Highway told Bonner that within an average 12-month period they could expect to be visited by no fewer than 70 separate groups of white advisers wanting to plan and control their lives.

"They blow in in an air-conditioned four-wheel-drive vehicle at nine o'clock in the morning, muster as many people as they can, sit down for an hour and then go away convinced they know exactly what they want."

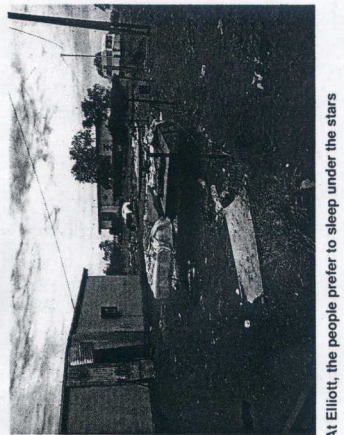
Bonner is highly critical of the way in which funds are wasted because of the overlapping nature of so many of the Federal and State programs. "It's a matter of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing and the right hand ignoring the left hand anyway," he says.

Bonner told each of the six communities — which comprised on average about 200 Aborigines — had its own doctor regard for the welfare of the Aboriginal people, he was meant to be serving," he says. "The frustrating thing is that these crooks continue to turn up in other communities. Two months after this fellow was ejected from that community, he turned up 1600 kilometres away in Central Australia employing the same stunts."

Collins says the most frustrating and dangerous thing about the financial problems in Aboriginal society is that the Aborigines are exploited ruthlessly by people who want a return to the days when Aborigines had no land rights. Financial scandals are impossible; he points out, if people have no money.

"I've lived in the Northern Territory for 20 years," Collins says, "and when I came up here Aboriginal communities were run by white superintendents from the Department of Welfare. There was no such thing as Aboriginal decision-making. Aboriginal people literally had nothing. Then along came Cough and with him the Whitlam revolution in Aboriginal affairs. When you consider that Aborigines have had land rights for only nine years they haven't done too badly."

But Collins, who is married to a Bathurst Islander and who knows the Territory's Aborigines better than anyone else in Federal politics, concedes that there are enormous problems, not least among the growing



At Elliott, the people prefer to sleep under the stars

assisted by a matron, two fully-qualified nursing sisters and five or six Aboriginal health workers. Despite that, he said, health standards were no better than in other communities which had no such facilities.

Federal and State governments have spent millions of dollars on health care facilities for even the most remote communities. Yet largely because many Aborigines simply fail to present themselves for treatment there has been no significant impact on a wide range of health problems. Aboriginal life expectancy remains 22 years short of the national average — 76 years while Aboriginal infant mortality is more than double the national rate.

Statistics gleaned from Department of Aboriginal Affairs publications paint a bleak picture of Aboriginal education, employment, housing and involvement with the white justice system. One in eight numbers of young Aborigines rejecting traditional tribal authority.

There are, he says, "rafts and rafts of them sitting down, doing nothing." They have no jobs and no prospect of jobs. "It's very difficult for white Australians to grasp this point," he says, "but Aboriginal people are refugees in their own country. It's their land but we're in charge."

"They resent it. They know there are no jobs for them. They know their communities will be controlled substantially by non-Aborigines for their lifetime. Aborigines for their lifetime to booze. Faced with all that depression there is a pretty fair chance that I would become an alcoholic myself."

"I'm not angry but it makes me wonder: how can human beings be so thoughtless, so arrogant? Two hundred years later Aboriginal people are still faced with the same thoughtlessness, the same arrogance. Even now, Aboriginal opinion is not being sought."

"Knowledge is power. If Aboriginal people have learnt one thing about white fellas over the past 200 years it is that they got power. They got money and money is power. We've got no money. We've got no power. We get handouts. But we're told, do this, do that. That's why Aboriginal people are so frustrated. Because our people aren't articulate, because they can't read and write, they can't plug into that white fellas' power."

"We are people without power in our own land. Don't talk to me about frustration until you understand that."

Aboriginal children aged between five and nine do not attend school or pre-school. Chronic middle ear infections lead to absenteeism and subsequent learning difficulties. One in six children aged 10 to 15 do not have access to appropriate schooling. Access to and participation in education beyond the age of 15 is from three to five times lower than for the general community.

Thirty-five per cent of the Aboriginal workforce is unemployed. The national rate is 9%. Income, on an average, about two-thirds those of the general community. Unemployment has led to a dependence on welfare. About 30% of Aborigines depend on welfare employment benefits. Seven out of 10 who have jobs work for governments. It is estimated that a third of Aboriginal people live in what the DAA describes euphemistically as "inadequate housing" — dwellings that lack essential services such as drinking water, power, waste disposal and sewerage.

The 1987 prison census conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology showed that Aborigines were imprisoned at the rate of 1459 per 100,000 compared with 100 per 100,000 for non-Aborigines.

Yunupingu explains the underlying causes: "For many years now," he said, "Aboriginal people have been powerless in their own land. (Do) you know the loss we feel? For 200 years we've been fighting and we've lost. We've lost our land, our culture, our law, our own sense of power. You fellows came and hoisted a flag and you claimed our land. No consultation, no deal, no nothing."

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The white robbers

Bob Collins, the ALP Senator from Darwin, says much of the responsibility for waste and abuse of Aboriginal funding rests with the white advisers appointed to administer Aboriginal settlements. Collins says they are often either corrupt or incompetent. Either way, he says, the result is the same. Aboriginal communities are being drained dry.

Collins points to the myth of consensus in traditional Aboriginal groups. In fact, he says, the important decisions are taken by a small group of middle-aged or old men whose power and influence is

derived from ceremonial knowledge. "So if you are a cold-blooded bastard and you're determined to go in there and rip off the community, you single out these key people and you ensure that you get them on side," Collins says.

"If you are the local town clerk or the store keeper you are in a position to do that very easily. You do people favours. You stack up the obligations people have towards you. You make sure everything you do is carefully monitored and approved by the community. So every other week-