

Welfare cuts 'hurt mothers'

REBECCA GREDLEY

A GOVERNMENT program which forces parents to complete training for welfare payments unfairly targets single mothers and should be scrapped, legal groups say.

The Senate is reviewing ParentsNext, a compulsory program for some parents on welfare which aims to help them get a job but cuts off payments for not completing required activities.

In a joint submission opposing the program, the National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services Forum, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care and the Human Rights Law Centre say 95 per cent of those captured by the program are women.

In the second half of last year parents had their payments suspended more than 16,000 times, with indigenous parents more at risk than non-indigenous families.

Convener of NFVPLS Forum Antoinette Braybrook says the program is setting up Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to fail.

"It will cause the most pain for mothers escaping family violence, dealing with homelessness and in other distressing circumstances," she said.

'Buggery' man found guilty

A PROMINENT Aboriginal man was yesterday found guilty of the historic sex offence of buggery, committed against his nephew nearly 40 years ago.

Jurors delivered a unanimous verdict after almost six hours of deliberations.

The man abused his nephew in December 1979 or 1980.

The victim confided in his parents in the years since.

The man's lawyer, Peter Maley, said his client had been the victim of institutional child-sex offending.

Justice Peter Barr remanded the man in custody for sentencing at a later date.

We need 'real'



Sean Bowden

OPINION

NOW that the Inpex project is complete, and as the economy of the Northern Territory reverts to the worst in the nation, it is time to decide whether you're a Territorian or not.

In the past you could call yourself a Territorian if you came here and liked the place.

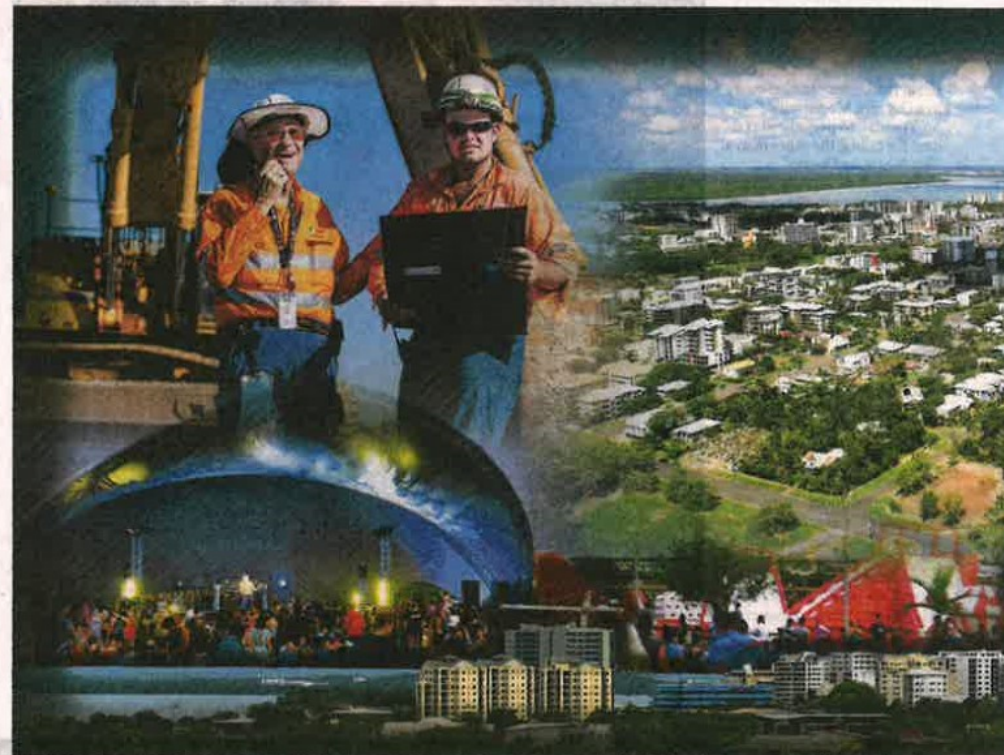
No commitment was required, no down payment nor solemn pledge; just a willingness to "love the lifestyle" while you earned the sort of money, or lived the sort of life, that was unavailable to you down south.

And if it got a bit hot, or you missed your mum, or your mates, or you couldn't understand why Aboriginal people lived homeless and reckless in parks and on streets yet no one batted an eyelid; or you got grog poisoning; or things just didn't turn out so good - well you left and no one cared.

This Turn-Up-And-You're-A-Territorian definition was coined in the early 2000s, when the Territory was the place to be with mega-projects everywhere you looked - the Alice Springs to Darwin Railway, the Conoco Phillips Gas Plant, the \$4 billion Gove Alumina Refinery upgrade, the Blacktip Gas Plant and pipeline, a series of reborn or start-up iron ore, manganese and gold mines bursting to life, and, of course, the great Inpex project.

No matter that there was screaming social and economic need outside the capital city and its airconditioned offices - we got a multi-billion dollar Commonwealth Intervention to deal with these issues and we turned that into a Darwin-based goldmine as well.

A few southern building companies got the lucrative gig to build houses on Aboriginal communities; and bureaucrats



and service deliverers flocked in such droves that Qantas started the Intervention Express - a direct flight twice a week from Canberra.

From 2001-02 the GST money from Canberra had begun to roll in and suddenly, after having had to beg for tied grants each year for decades, the NT was getting more than \$3 billion a year in untied funds from Canberra. The GST payment was inflated up to 500 per cent over the average due to the social and economic disadvantage of the Territory's Aboriginal regions and population, but we could spend it as we saw fit - and spend we did.

A property boom followed, with apartment blocks shooting up on every corner. Government jobs and wages

exploded and shiny new offices uptown with wall-to-wall water views appeared. We got a new Waterfront and, seemingly, a water park in every suburb. Every Christmas party was on the house, and a government grant was something that just appeared in the mail. It was party time and it was going to last forever it seemed.

But of course nothing like that lasts forever and you can't see the bust coming when you're in the boom. Today, as we look around us, we could be forgiven for thinking that we've been at one of Jay Gatsby's famous parties and, just like in the book, Gatsby is gone, disaster is seemingly everywhere, and we've got a cracking hangover.

Let's survey the wreckage:

The property market has shrunk 20 per cent plus and has further to fall. The tourist industry is at record lows, as are the retail and hospitality industries. People are leaving in numbers because the work isn't here and the GST is falling further as a result; another small business closes every week. The only things that keeps rising are the cost of living and the number of public servants: we employ 20 per cent more NT bureaucrats over trend and now we can't seem to get rid of them - they cost us an extra \$400 million a year for no realisable benefit.

These are the immediate problems. The structural problems are much more serious. The Ranger uranium mine has finished production and is

closing, and with it Jabiru. In eight to 10 years time the Gove bauxite mine will be depleted, as will be the town of Nhulunbuy.

Soon after that, the super-manganese mine at Groote Eylandt will be over and, if not, it'll just as surely be a fly-in fly-out operation. Goodnight Alyangula. These nation-building projects gave the highest wages in the nation, top-line royalty payments to Treasury and plenty of payroll tax. They're all but over.

As these economic jewels fade to grey the social dysfunction found at all levels of Northern Territory society - and in every town or community - continues to ramp up.

The awful crimes at Tennant Creek recently reflect the

Territorians to lead



social ills that stalk us throughout the Territory. Dislocated Aboriginal people - Territorians - come in to town from the bush, lacking education, being largely unemployable and falling into the sort of dysfunction, addiction and vulnerability that makes life unbearable for those around them.

Alcohol and drug abuse are at chronic levels - across all demographics; Darwin is the ice capital of Australia and Alice Springs is the murder capital.

In the remote regions we have a mix and match of the Third World. Some places do better due to leadership, or economic opportunity, or persistence. Other places are deserts of opportunity and bereft of hope. There is a day-to-day

cost in administering this need, as well as the cost thrown away of not having able-bodied men and women who can join the economy, or who, as traditional owners, can add their asset base to the economy.

There seems to be a realisation in government circles that the Territory is indeed at a perilous time in its history, where further Commonwealth intervention, or a Commonwealth takeover, could be a very real end point. The fundamental, systemic problems must therefore be gripped immediately. And we should not expect government to do it for us - politicians follow public sentiment: let's change our sentiment and refocus the Territory.

First, we need to identify the men and women out there, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, sweating it out developing the Territory, and back them up: local companies have invested millions in developing businesses and enterprise: broadscale cropping, crocodile industries, sand mines, quarries, aquaculture farms and, of course, our world's best broad-acre cattle stations.

We have Territory civil construction and building companies that can do the job better than interstate carpet baggers; we have a developing forestry industry; commercial and recreational fishing that is unmatched; we have the gift of the world's oldest and most vibrant living culture represented by Aboriginal people

who are never-say-die Territorians: there is untapped potential everywhere you care to look.

Let's put these people front and centre.

Second, we must convince Canberra to invest deeply in the economy of our regions, outside Darwin. Serious investment in economic infrastructure in the regions is long overdue and the Territory cannot develop without this infrastructure. We immediately need new all-weather arterial roads into North East Arnhem Land and to Wadey; and we need to upgrade municipal facilities in every major regional town with more than 500 people. You can't open up economic zones without transport corridors, or power and water

services, and these regions, which hold the future mining, pastoral and agricultural provinces, lack these basics. Beef roads need upgrades and internet transmission corridors need urgent attention also.

Third - and we all know this - the public service has to be reformed and refocused. We need public servants that are strategic and development-minded, and we need to reduce numbers and redirect the funds to development projects.

At the same times we need a grand bargain with the Land Councils - the four Land Councils control almost all of the undeveloped lands and waters in the Territory: for all intents and purposes they are the Crown - we need to mandate the inclusion of Land Councils

and their landowning members as participants in every discussion.

Fourth, we must hook the nation in to our cause. In the Territory we are at least 100 years behind the rest of Australia in terms of infrastructure and the development of our regions - we need the funds to build the transport corridors and basic infrastructure that can support regional economies, and we need to convince the Australian people of the urgency of this task. Would the Australian people approve of us looking to China or Indonesia for support?

I think not, so we need to remind Canberra of its obligation to develop our non-urban regions to Australian standards, just as the southern states were developed in post-colonial times.

This infrastructure deficit, left to us by the Commonwealth in 1978, requires a multi-billion dollar investment - let's go and get it, instead of whining about GST payments. And let's get the sensible tax incentives for our regional economy that the Commonwealth periodically waves in front of our noses.

Finally, we need new projects that involve Territorians and not multinationals. Everyone will have their favourite project - whatever we do we must aim at developing the economy, provide jobs for local people and be focused on the long-term.

Which brings me back to where I started.

A Territorian is not someone who just turns up and likes the place - a Territorian is a person who builds a life in the Territory; who puts down roots; raises a family and takes a stake in the future. The next decade will be tough, but if you're a Territorian you'll be happy to take the challenge and you'll stay here and be in for the long haul - you'll build something for your children and your children's children, and they'll thank you for it.

Sean Bowden is a Darwin-based lawyer