The Intervention: An Anthology, edited by Rosie Scott and Anita Heiss (Concerned Australians, 2015)

In 2009, an undergraduate student undertaking an Indigenous topic I was convening at a South Australian university mistakenly referred to the NT Intervention throughout her essay as ‘the interference’. Similar views were already surfacing about the NT Intervention, and the logic and rhetoric behind the legislation that brought the army to remote Indigenous communities to restore order and improve conditions. Fuelled by a story on the ABC’s Lateline, and by a comment the Queen made to then Prime Minister Howard on the occasion of her visit to Australia in March 2006 about Australia’s treatment of Indigenous Australians, the federal government declared an ‘emergency’ in May 2007. As police and army personnel moved in to restore safety to ‘dysfunctional’ Indigenous communities, concerns were quickly raised that the Northern Territory Emergency Response Act failed to mention the children it was designed to ‘protect’. Texts such as Coercive Reconciliation: Exit, Normalize, Stabilize (2009) appeared, charting the problems of the NTER, including the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975), the quarantining of welfare payments, and the attempted acquisition of Aboriginal lands through lease arrangements in exchange for housing and health improvements.

The misrepresentation of the ‘problem’ in remote communities, and the ‘special measures’ hastily enacted in 2007 by the Howard government, are the subject of The Intervention: An Anthology, edited by writer and academic Rosie Scott and Wiradjuri writer and academic Anita Heiss. The anthology brings together twenty prominent non-Indigenous and Indigenous writers voicing opposition to the Intervention in essays, memoir, poetry and fiction, alongside communiqués issued by Elders in affected communities that have been largely ignored by mainstream media. Tellingly, The Intervention did not find an Australian publisher, despite its impressive list of contributors, which includes Pat Anderson (one of the authors of the 2007 ‘Little Children are Sacred’ report used by the Howard Government to justify the legislation), Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, whose electrifying speech on the television program Q and A is excerpted here), journalist Jeff McMullen, legal researcher Larissa Behrendt, social commentator Eva Cox, historian Bruce Pascoe, and acclaimed Indigenous fiction writers Melissa Lucashenko and Alexis Wright.

For many of the writers, critics and Elders whose voices resonate throughout The Intervention, the key question is this: how does the Intervention align with a policy framework of self-determination ushered in by the 1967 Referendum? What is being ‘protected’ in the communities the legislation was designed for? And who is listening to the affected communities? In her introduction, Rosie Scott points out that important Australian works opposed to the Intervention have attracted overseas and local recognition and acclaim. Yet, despite ‘eloquent protest’ by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and petitions to the United Nations by community leaders and Elders, the controversial Intervention continues in 2016 (3).

As Anita Heiss argues, Indigenous leaders opposed to the Intervention consider it a form of neo-assimilation reminiscent of the old mission days (9). Similarly, Brenda L. Croft argues the Intervention comprises a twenty-first century program of assimilation (178), a point reiterated in several essays in the collection. Prominent Arrente leader Rosalie Kunoth-Monks states that when the Intervention and its attendant military personnel arrived in Urapuntja/Utopia, the community thought they ‘were going to be rounded up and taken’ just as they had been under formal policies of segregation and assimilation that ended only in the 1970s (16). That these policy measures are
enacted ‘supposedly for the betterment of us Aboriginal people’ only underscores the parallels between the past and the present (23).

The opponents of the Intervention argue here that policy frameworks based in Indigenous self-determination are critical to ensure Indigenous human rights, address structural disadvantage, and redress historical injustice. As Larissa Behrendt explains, the ‘emergency’ in remote Indigenous communities had been neglected for thirty years by both Northern Territory and federal governments when the ‘Little Children are Sacred’ report was released in 2007 (64). However, the measures announced by the Howard government contained no reference to the report, nor to its recommendations, as Pat Anderson, the co-author of the report, testifies in her personal reflections on the Intervention (27-41). She points out that the federal response was ‘neither well-intentioned nor well evidenced’, and therefore was ‘unlikely to be helpful’ in resolving problems in Indigenous communities. Behrendt agrees, arguing that the ‘top-down, paternalistic’ policy approach is a ‘recipe for failure’ (66). Like many other writers here, she acknowledges that problems exist in Indigenous communities, but argues that it is poverty, disadvantage, and sustained under-funding that cause social breakdown.

Behrendt notes that the NTER’s focus on restoring order in ‘dysfunctional’ communities masks other policy objectives to ‘open up Aboriginal lands to non-Aboriginal interests’ (66). The Anthology resounds with stories from community leaders in prescribed areas forced to sign over their lands in exchange for health and housing improvements. Djiniyini Gondarra, spokesperson for the Yolngu Nations Assembly in Arnhem Land, travelled with Gurindji and Arrente Elders to the 2010 session of the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Committee to seek international support to stop the NTER and restore Indigenous rights (Gondarra, 45-49). The Australian government had ratified the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2009, following its National Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, suggesting progress in the vexed question of contemporary race relations. Tellingly, the compulsory acquisition of Aboriginal lands directly contravenes Article 3 of the Declaration.

By 2009, as the potent images of tanks rolling in to restore law and order in remote Indigenous communities faded from the nightly news, the Intervention was rebranded as a Labor policy measure to ‘Close the Gap’, accompanied by the ‘Stronger Futures’ package passed in 2012. This policy platform has successive governments issuing annual reports detailing the improvements, or more precisely, the lack of them, in Indigenous health, education, employment and housing outcomes. A number of writers question the Labor approach, including journalist Jeff McMullin, whose essay charts the Intervention’s abuse of Indigenous rights from the launch of the NTER in 2007 to 2013, when Tony Abbott, the self-styled ‘Prime Minister for Aboriginal Affairs’, cut $500 million in federal funding to Aboriginal programs. This led to the 2014 campaign to close ‘unviable’ Indigenous communities in the NT, WA, and SA (115-138). McMullin argues the ‘Empowering Communities’ framework actively disempowers communities, redirecting the funding available to a ‘carefully controlled cabal of corporations’ poised to take over the administration of resource-rich Aboriginal lands (136). Historian Bruce Pascoe argues that the Intervention’s failure has been ‘absolute’, as almost all the money allocated to the problems in the NT has been spent on accommodation for fly-in fly-out workers, administrators and bureaucrats before a single house for Aboriginal people was ever built (152). Eva Cox’s article, ‘The Intervention—Bad Policy and Bad Politics’ is sobering reading: the evidence is that Indigenous communities targeted by the Intervention are now ‘worse off than before’, so the policy will further ‘widens the gap’ it is intended to close (196). Nicole Watson asks supporters of the Intervention to explain how the NTER measures ‘protect’ women and children from abuse and sexual assault when income management and the

refusal of crisis payments to women escaping domestic violence curtail women’s and children’s freedoms (100).

Stories, poems, statements and media releases from concerned leaders in other prescribed communities are interspersed with the academic articles, acting as a chorus of voices critical of the attempts to wrest control of Aboriginal lands in the name of ‘equality’. That equality should be statistical, a quantitative closing of the gap, is the focus of P.M. Newton’s story, ‘567,000 kms Driven’. Newton takes the point of view of an army officer, who in Uruzgan, built schools and clinics, put the power on, and built airfields. The traumatised narrator asks his therapist why the army is building police stations in the NT (55). Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers and poets such as Arnold Zable, Ali Cobby Eckerman, Alexis Wright, Samuel Wagan-Watson, Lionel Fogarty and others offer keen insights into the failings of the Intervention, so that the anthology offers both creative and critical responses to this most expensive of policy failures.

As of early 2016, the special measures in Indigenous communities continue under a new Coalition government, with threats to close communities in WA and SA sparking widespread protest last year. Almost a decade since the legislation was announced, The Intervention: An Anthology offers a timely reminder to Australians that successive Australian governments continue to champion a suite of policy measures, many of them racially discriminatory at worst and ineffective at best, that underscored the Howard Government’s hastily enacted Northern Territory Emergency Response Act (C’th 2007).

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