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New NT Legislation must comply with Human Rights Obligations

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (Congress) says the bills to continue the Intervention in the Northern Territory must be withdrawn and reintroduced so they will be subject to the same human rights scrutiny as other bills.

The Congress Co-Chairs say the bills were originally tabled before the *Human Rights (Parliamentary Scrutiny) Act* passed late last year and cannot be debated without being subject to those conditions.

"We are concerned that key provisions of these bills may be in contravention of the Federal Government's human rights obligations," said Congress Co-Chair, Les Malezer.

"We therefore remain strongly opposed to compulsory income management, in favour of a voluntary scheme, and are concerned about the provision enabling a wider range of government agencies to refer people for compulsory income management.

"Congress is also concerned that there is not a clear case of free, prior and informed consent to these measures. More time and effort is needed for the Government to explain the policy so people understand its impact. We need to make sure our people know what is going on and understand what is proposed and how it will affect them," he said.

Congress's submission to the Stronger Futures Bills Senate Inquiry acknowledges some measures in the policy are an improvement on the previous Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER). However, it also says that key measures will not hit their targets, and money spent on the government administration required would be better focused on community-driven front line programs as well as building strong community governance.

"While we acknowledge the Government's increased effort in consultation, research and evaluation in regard to its NT policies, we believe certain measures in the Bills are overly punitive, with insufficient evidence that they will achieve the Government's objectives," said Congress Co-Chair, Jody Broun.

"The education measures (SEAM) as outlined in the Bills lack evidence to show that a punitive approach will result in sustained improvements in attendance and performance. Congress believes the resources allocated to SEAM would be better directed at alternatives such as changing the school environment.

"Congress is committed to stay involved in the consultations to find solutions to the issues left unresolved by the proposed legislation and calls on the Government to continue to engage with Northern Territory communities, Congress and its Members," she said.

Read the Congress submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs on the proposed *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill (2011) and accompanying Bills* here:

<http://nationalcongress.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/CongressStrongerFutures.pdf>