

A Children's Revelation and Revolution from the Northern Territory



SNAICC Aboriginal Child care organisations peak CEO Gerry Moore, Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Member for Nhulunbuy, Lynne Walker, and Leader of the Opposition Michael Gunner at Garma today. Gerry is holding SNAICC's report "Family Matters".

After a harrying 4 Corners expose this week it was a relief to get some positive news from the Northern Territory. In fact the policy to create a new [Children's Ministry](#) with wide cabinet power and a whole of government approach to children's welfare is a first for Australia. Even better the policy designed over several years is spearheaded by new potential Children's Minister and Deputy Labor leader Lynne Walker, a widely loved and respected figure from North East Arnhem land, who has done a solid political apprenticeship in government and opposition.

There have been some miraculous and moving moments at [Garma](#) over the years. Yesterday's session on education was one such moment. It began with stories from teachers past, present and possibly future about the way the previously segregated town of Nhulunbuy is coming together more closely with its sister town of Yirrkala around educational goals. It was inspiring to hear how now Yolngu participation at Nhulunbuy high school is approaching 30 per cent and next year, with the completion of the new boarding school, it will rise much higher. But more than this it is clear that Yolngu culture and education is enriching the educational culture of the region and offering something that is unique in the world. It is not too much to imagine families coming to Nhulunbuy so that children can experience the riches of a true Australian bi-cultural education. It is as if the closure of "the monster" -the aluminium refinery at Gove - has yielded and given way to a much richer reward.

But the show stopper of the day for me was the announcement that Lynne Walker would be Deputy Chief Secretary and Minister for Children if the Gunner Labor Government were to come to power in the Northern Territory on August 27. It may seem given the events of the last week and the revelations of 4 Corners that this was manufactured for the political cycle. In fact Lynne is a true

product and facilitator of the educational renaissance in Nhulunbuy and North East Arnhem land which has been slowly emerging over the past decade.

Lynne is loved amongst the European and Aboriginal population of North East Arnhem land. It is rare that someone could command so much respect particularly among the Yolngu women. This comes partly because Lynne with her husband and family came to Nhulunbuy as teachers. She is a truly grass roots person and people know that children's and women's issues are her passion. She was a tremendous partner and supporter of the late Ms. S. D. Gurruwiwi who has also been a crusader for education and children's issues.

After high school teachers from Nhulunbuy and Lynne and Michael Gunner had given their speeches some of the elder statesmen of Australian politics spoke. In an extraordinary moment Fred Chaney rose to his feet and said that one of the proudest moments in his life was seeing the election of Pat Dodson as Labor Senator for Western Australia. A conservative party representative had crossed the floor to acknowledge and embrace a wonderful event. But not only did Fred do this he acknowledged the need for change in the Northern Territory and the fact that the events identified by 4 Corners this week are but a tip of the iceberg. He greatly welcomed the announcement of a Children's Ministry and the work done on bi-cultural education in Nhulunbuy.

If ever there was an over-due policy then a Children's Strategy for the Northern Territory is it. The audience reacted with enthusiasm to Opposition Leader Michael Gunner's announcement and this caused Garma veteran Professor Marcia Langton to say "finally we are all on the same page". Quite a statement.

Gunner promised that:

"An incoming Northern Territory Labor government will redesign government to place children at the centre of attention and action. An Early Childhood Strategic Plan will be put in place and we will report annually to Parliament on our progress. There will be a Minister for Children, the first in Australia."

After the historic discussions Gunner and Walker met with CEO of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander (SNAICC) Gerry Moore. Moore greeted the idea of a Ministry for Children with very warm enthusiasm:

"It would be a very, very positive development and could be a precedent for other States and the Commonwealth. We already have children's commissioners but this would be a wonderful supplement and model for good government", Moore said.

Explaining how the Ministry of Children would work Ms Walker said:

"The Minister for Children would be a full cabinet Minister and chair a subcommittee of Cabinet charged with coordinating government policy and children's initiatives and policy. I will ensure that there is a whole of government integrated approach to children".

Mr Moore responded: "Our organisation would genuinely look forward to the formation of a Minister for Children where we can speak directly to the whole of government through the new Minister."

Ms Walker explained: "The idea is that it draws things together and lessons reactive and short term responses to children's issues"

“We hope to have a very active partnership with non-governmental organisations”
“We would like to use forums perhaps twice a year or quarterly so that we can hear from organisations that are at the coal face”.
“We will take advice and listen and respond to the evidence”.

Mr Moore outlined SNAICC’s campaign to reduce the over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care.

“We have five principles of our campaign. Applying a child focused approach, ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families participate and have control over decisions that affect their children, protecting Aboriginal children’s right to live in their own culture, pursuing evidence based responses and supporting, healing and strengthening families”

“I can see that the formation of the Territory Children’s Ministry will greatly help us in our Family Matters: Kids safe in culture not in care” campaign”.

It is clear that an incoming Gunner government will adopt a completely different approach to consultation than the current Giles government. Gunner noted that this week he had written to the Prime Minister asking him to consult with APONT – the coordinating body for Aboriginal organisations across the Northern Territory. “The Prime Minister missed a cultural step in not consulting with APONT”, Gunner said.