

# The Canberra Times

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## Treasury chief attacks welfare

*Canberra Times* - Wednesday, June 27, 2007

The head of Treasury has entered the debate over Aboriginal welfare, saying Australia's social security system has helped consign indigenous people to economic and social exclusion.

Delivering a speech to the Cape York Institute in Cairns at the invitation of Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson, Ken Henry said he was aware his statements were controversial, but "we will never make progress in any area of policy unless we are prepared to deal honestly and analytically with the underlying causes of the problems we face". "Indigenous welfare has been provided passively. It has encouraged a state of dependency.

And that dependency has contributed to the undermining of indigenous development," the Treasury Secretary said.

"Governments have allowed many income recipients to receive support without being required to seek work." He pointed to the granting in the past of remote area exemptions for many indigenous people; the fact people with disabilities only had to work if they could do so for 30 hours a week for two years at award wages; and that parents didn't have to seek work until their children were aged 16.

"Governments that designed these policies were no doubt motivated by compassion.

In practice, they were consigning many Australians to a life of economic and social exclusion. And there is increasing evidence of these impacts affecting successive generations in some families." Dr Henry spoke of the need for a changed set of incentives where Aboriginal parents were rewarded for ensuring their children stayed at school.

For its part, the Government had to provide good education and health care and do what it could to provide good jobs.

But in communities without jobs, indigenous Australians needed to be encouraged to move, at least temporarily.

"I know this is controversial, but it can't be ignored. Where remote locations simply cannot produce sufficient job opportunities for local people, there is no point in relying on miracles. A better strategy is to ensure that people have the opportunity to move to take up work if that is what they want to do." A sensible model would be for indigenous people in remote areas to spend part of the year working elsewhere and then returning to live part of the year on their country.

Meanwhile, community groups and indigenous organisations have said the Federal Government's "punitive" intervention into Northern Territory indigenous communities will weaken communities and families and ultimately fail.

Their warning came as NT politicians were told to go to remote indigenous communities to try to calm growing fears about the radical federal plan.

However, the Federal Government accused some Aboriginal leaders of scaremongering and bully-boy tactics over the reforms, which will see police and officials, supported by the army, sent into communities to tackle child abuse.

Advance teams will move into several communities today as part of the first phase of the plan, under which control of communities will be seized, alcohol banned and compulsory health checks introduced for children.