

Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (every child matters) Bill 2026

My name is Doctor Richard Fejo and I am a Larrakia man of Darwin who has worked for North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service (NAALAS) in the 1990's. I have also worked for the North Australian Aboriginal Family Violence Legal Service (NAAFVLS) in the 1990's before moving to Perth where I became a Family law and civil law paralegal at the Western Australian Legal Aid Service but more importantly I have been a Larrakia and Warramungu leader in Darwin caretaking the wellbeing of the Darwin community from the days of observing my father and mother, Uncles and Aunties in the way they supported struggling families and mentored me to do the same today. While I act as an individual I have also worked towards healthy striving communities dedicating over thirty years of my life to working for my First Nations peoples from visiting the old Don Dale Centre to working with habitual criminals in Berrimah prison. This work formed the basis of my commitment to my service to the Darwin and broader Northern Territory First Nations people. This early work led me to becoming the Chairman of the National Cultural Educators and Cultural Mentors Network, Chairman of the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, Chairman of the Australia Day Council of the Northern Territory, Chairman of the Darwin Waterfront Corporation and the first and only First Nations person in history to become a board member of the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) as I earned my Flinders University Honorary Doctorate in doing so.

I have lived experience from my mother and father of their stolen generations stories and have experienced first hand the irreversible damage and intergenerational trauma that they both took to their graves as their secrets of their experiences of being separated from their families as stolen generations. In addition, my uncle's would tell me the stories of my other uncles and aunties who were forcibly removed from their Larrakia families and forcibly relocated into missions and over time I would understand how their forced removals eroded their cultural authority on Larrakia land as the strength of our culture, languages, ceremony and knowledge of country and practices slowly reduced and became replaced by religion for some, alcohol and drugs for others. It took a lifetime to understand that our dreamtime was on the brink of extinction replaced by Australian laws and other belief systems not originating from our lands. I watched my whole life as the great leaders sunk into misery and my heart sunk with this heartbreaking observation. Yet somehow knowing who they were and where they came from was enough for them to keep their heads high. Sharing the stories of the bravery of their father's, my grandfather Djuma Fejo and his brother Samuel "Smiler" Fejo who both served and survived the bombing of Darwin on February 19th 1942. The stories of how we declared our Larrakia heritage long before Land Rights were ever heard of because my grandfathers both joined the army in 1940 defending their land, this

Larrakia land where refusing to acknowledge Larrakia and other First Nations enlisted men who fought and gave the ultimate sacrifice defending the very lands of which today's Country Liberal Party are making laws and I personally find incredibly offensive, that acting against all expert advice and reports written about closing the gap, further disadvantage Larrakia and First Nations Territorians in the most tasteless fashion, at the hands of a deceased First Nations child which the government were quick to politicise so they could rush through yet another law without consultation beyond police and correctional services or their little cohort of supporters behind closed doors and under the table politics to hide that they never acted in the first place when they were already in power but neglected to implement proactive measures. The approach to the introduction of these amendments to the existing child protection legislation should not be entertained by any civilised society because it is unpalatable, beyond disgraceful and unworthy of any tactic every pulled by any politician let alone political party simply because it is nothing short of rock bottom sickening politics with the only objective of still fuelling the culture wars.

Given my historical background, I need to make it very clear that while every First Nations person and families have their own stories of challenge and success, many more are still living day to day on the fringe begging for handouts attempting to survive and being forced towards criminal behaviours as a means of survival under this neglectful and uncaring government. We are born into historical disadvantages from a history of occupation and neglect where our possessions have been stolen from us including our lands, our recourses and everything that would give us the opportunity to live stronger and longer has been snatched from under our very noses and this has been an Australian wide phenomenon for First Nations Australians. The few of us that had our families around us to raise and support us were encouraged to study and work hard and those of us who were able to survive the educational institutions that never wanted us to succeed then faced the system that was never designed for us. This also means that as under 4% of the Australian population, we need to consider what percentage of our population of that 4% has chosen to fight on and carry the burden of their people whether they choose to or not because the discrimination we face as leaders will always become an ongoing challenge that we carry the burden of so many while trying to survive ourselves. Then we need to think about what percentage of this less than 4% have given up fighting and chosen that it is easier to abandon their First Nations status and turn away from the challenge of being a First Nations person because it's easier to survive by swimming with the current than swimming against it as they willingly allow their history and heritage to disintegrate right before their eyes allowing them to integrate by choice much more easily. They no longer carry the burden of their people. Finally we need to not omit the percentage of the 4% who have no place in either place because opportunity was never afforded to them and so without any direction, they are

only left with helplessness. Bound by so many obstacles they see no way out but to escape reality through alcohol and other drugs which as we know leads to increased potential of family violence, community violence, crime, hospitalisations, lateral violence, intergenerational violence, incarceration, suicide and lower life expectancy rates.

You can pick your social determination detriment across income and social protection, housing amendments and the environment, education, housing, health care, unemployment, life conditions, food security, early childhood development, social inclusion and non-discrimination, structural conflict and access to affordable health services of decent quality (WHO 2023) when we know they are already interrelated to each other. My question would then become, why would any government apply more pressure to add to already strained lives of only 4% of the Australian population which in the Northern Territory equates to 30.8% of the population (NTG), why would they carelessly and recklessly drive that disadvantage further down because to me they are not worthy of holding any of their seats in government when they have used First Nations people in the Northern Territory to create greater division while almost every other state and territory is watching the NT's reputation go down the drain.

My point in this paper is that while many people are calling this amendment the new stolen generation, I tend to agree with them and in doing so I would like to highlight the damage in reputation the Northern Territory Government and the Northern Territory people. These amendments mean nothing changes for us but instead becomes worse because as long as we continue not to address the root causes on the cycles of disadvantage, nothing changes for us. Every First Nations person living in Australia has a lived history of some form of trauma simply for being born First Nations Australians and we need supporting governments and governmental systems and policies and not dismissive and destructive governments systems and policies to work proactively with First Nations people both inside and outside of the Northern Territory to decolonise our historical and lived traumas of today to repair and reconcile all Australians. From the history of my grandparents, parents, older siblings and for every other First Nations families across the Northern Territory and Australia that not only are these amendments going to impact on 30.8% percent First Nations Territorians, these laws will be experienced from the First Nations families who live in other states and territories and the vicarious trauma will be felt and impact every First Nation person in Australia alongside with our allies. These law amendments are not progressive and destructive to the First Nations people of the Northern Territory. History has already shown us this path and history already had told us that those who attempted to follow this path in the past have failed and will fail again.

The impacts these proposed amendments will have on the future of First Nations children of the Northern Territory and their families never was and never will be a solution to disadvantage but instead, marks further disparity against First Nations Territorians, our children, our families and our communities. The cycle of reinventing the wheel so a politician can once again use the NT as a doorstep perhaps into federal politics is a fad that we have seen before. We know the culture wars are funded activities assumingly used as a diversion to take more wealth out of the NT and we get left with the “now we need to fit it up again” scenario. We know that forced integration does not work but what we fear is that we loose our children in the process as government are willing to apply more pressure to those who will feel it most, our children who will loose their families and their identities are lost and I should know because from the moment I was born with one arm, I was told the doctors wanted to place me with another family. Thankfully as my mother was stolen generation, she never let me out of her sight because she had been removed and never saw her mother again. If I was removed from my mother, there’s a strong argument that I would not be a two time Australian Rugby Union Schoolboys representative or who I am today and this is my lived experience, just one story and every First Nations Australians hold stories like this in their histories.

While I agree that the safety of our children must come first, the forced removal of children in todays social backdrop threatens to revisit the same outcome where 30.8% of the 4% population creates future leaders through resistance, abandonment of Aboriginality through cultural genocide and finally the third group who have no hope because they have no place because they have been forcefully and intentionally displaced. As long as First Nations people remain a political football the cycle will never be broken. The way to break the cycle is to follow the evidence of the 330 services opposing these punitive measures and I hope my submission offers a reasonable consideration as to why the Northern Territory Government to reconsider consulting with the 330 services to offer an optimistic outlook into how the through government partnering with such knowledgeable and experienced services, following the evidence and reconsidering grass root solutions, there may possibly be a path that can break the cycle of disadvantage resulting in tangible change to positively influence the social determinants as opposed to negatively influencing the social determinants.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that every living First Nations family has a history of trauma whether they are aware of it or not. Government has an obligation to govern for all Territorians and for the benefit of all Territorians. Removing the Aboriginal child placement principle is a reaction to an already traumatised family, community and nation of people and supporters. The long term results and not only going to become

damaging to individuals but risk individual safety through increased crime, harm and suicide. In addition, there is an increased risk of institutions developing youth into hardened criminals as they become products of their environment and this in turn creates greater increased community risk. The opposite approach yields the opposite outcome.

I am happy to be contacted in person at a public hearing to give further evidence, information or advice and can be contacted by mobile on [REDACTED].

Sincerely

Dr. Richard Fejo