

The state of indigenous housing is a national disgrace

NIGEL SCULLION



WHEN it comes to delivering for indigenous Australians the Gillard government is more about spin and rhetoric and feel-good symbolism than results.

In remote communities it is content to apply lower standards and lower expectations in health, housing and infrastructure, and education than it would dare to adopt for other Australians.

It is not a term to be thrown around lightly, as some do, but no other label can fit. Having a separate, different and lower standard and lower expectations for Aboriginal communities is racist.

Indigenous Australians have had enough of Labor's empty gestures. The Northern Territory election result reflects a growing groundswell of discontent among indigenous people across the country. They don't want to sit back anymore and swallow the Labor reality: "This is as good as it gets."

When the government fails to meet its targets, rather than working harder it simply moves the goalposts and lowers the standards to be achieved. It measures its performance against the lower standards and then crows about the outcome.

I see it when I visit indigenous communities across the Territory. Shoddy workmanship, inadequate everything, neglect, malaise and poor outcomes.

I have inspected more than 30 house refurbishments and rebuilds completed under Labor's hopeless Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program. The workmanship is poor and none of the work is worth anywhere near the government's target average for the program of \$75,000 per refurbishment and \$200,000 per rebuild.

I have seen paintwork in these houses that six-year-olds could do better: holes in walls have been painted over, big gaps around light switches and lots of paint on the grass instead of on buildings.

One Wadeye rebuild had a small strip of concrete added around the veranda and some minor work such as plugging up a hole in the roof with silicon, which, to be generous, might add up to \$20,000 — nowhere near the pro-



STEVE STRIKE

Lena Cavanagh outside her Santa Teresa, NT, home, which has been refurbished under the troubled SIHIP scheme



RENEE NOWYTARGER

Rebuilds suffer from low-grade products and workmanship

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gram minimum payment of \$100,000. The kitchen sink and cupboards were replaced with metal shelving with no cupboard doors and nowhere to safely store food. The bathroom was a mish-mash of different coloured and different shaped tiles, the practice being to replace broken tiles with whatever is handy, not a matching tile.

In any normal public housing estate the builder would be told to do it again, but not in Wadeye.

I discovered that refurbishments do not include floor cover-

ings, leaving families to live on bare cement floors. Labor said it would make houses safe, healthy and liveable, but are cement floors with no tiles or floor coverings safe and healthy?

In 2009, SIHIP featured in the national press as it lurched from one disaster to another. Two years after it started not a single house had been delivered, the overall project manager had been suddenly sacked and NT Legislative Assembly member Alison Anderson had resigned in disgust from the Labor Party over SIHIP waste and mismanagement.

Under fire from all directions, Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin tried to take shelter by commissioning one of the program's managers to conduct a review. Instead of rebuilds and refurbishments it was to be a mat-

ter of "fix and make safe". If the house doesn't kill you, it's OK.

Speaking at the World Indigenous Housing Conference in June this year, Macklin said: "All buildings funded through the agreement must be designed and delivered in line with the requirements of the National Indigenous Housing Guide, the National Construction Code and all Australian standards and construction legislation."

But Macklin's department told me the only standard they attempt to meet is the NT Residential Tenancies Act.

Each rebuild and refurbishment requires a scope of works to be completed by the builder. Why is it that in the documents I saw for houses at Wadeye whole sections of the NT building code requirements were marked as not applicable? This Labor government is paying top dollar for second-rate outcomes. Indigenous Australians don't get value for money under Labor.

At Maningrida I was appalled to see a new access road to a subdivision built under SIHIP with three deep crossings, with only cement bases and no pipes or culverts to handle run-off from the Territory's monsoon rains. So we have a new housing subdivision that will be isolated during the wet season. This standard of road would not be acceptable for a new subdivision in other country towns.

In addition, the new suburb was built before power was connected; that sort of reverse logic would not

happen anywhere else in the country.

In indigenous communities, there are low standards or no standards at all. Expectations are lower as well. Aboriginal children in remote areas aren't at the same educational standard as other Australians. Just 3 per cent of indigenous students demonstrate the education skills required for their age. The target for indigenous students regularly attending Year 7 to Year 9 in the NT is 27 per cent and a school is lauded when it gets 50 per cent or better. Nothing less than 100 per cent should do.

The former NT Labor government shared the same problem. Last week in the Central Australian community of Ampilatwatja I found a half-completed sewerage system that was abandoned several months ago. The "temporary solution" was to dig a hole in the ground and pump raw sewage into it. There were dog paw prints going into the raw effluent and the dogs would then go into houses, and kids would play with them. This would not be tolerated anywhere else in Australia. There would be a huge outcry and the real possibility of criminal prosecution.

Everything in these communities smacks of low standards, low expectations and continuing neglect. Dropping standards won't help close the gap; it will simply leave indigenous Australians further behind.

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