This collection of essays was published in response to the intervention of the Australian federal government under the previous Prime Minister John Howard in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities to address widespread allegations of child sex abuse. The National Emergency Response was announced on June 21st, 2007, just six days after the release of the report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, which was entitled Little Children are Sacred. This report concluded that sexual abuse of children in Aboriginal communities had reached crisis levels and suggested that it be designated as an issue of urgent national significance. The intervention was unmatched by any other policy declaration in Aboriginal affairs and involved a package of changes to welfare provision, law enforcement, land tenure and other measures, including alcohol restrictions, pornography filters, deployment of additional police, enforced school attendance, compulsory health checks, suspension of the permit system and the overall intensification of governance through the appointment of more government managers.

The emergency response legislation added up to some five hundred pages, but still it was introduced into the House of Representatives barely seven weeks after the intervention was announced, and it was also passed through the House, receiving bipartisan support, on the same afternoon as it was tabled. The political goal of the government’s intervention went well beyond the problem of child sexual abuse and became fully apparent in the course of the parliamentary debate. The response was not only introduced during the lead-up to the federal election, which Howard eventually lost, but the conservative coalition government, in office since 1996, also intended to regain control of Aboriginal communities that had been given some limited land rights in 1976, including the right to make visits to their land by non-Aborigines conditional upon a written permit issued by Aboriginal land councils. The government clearly used the publication of the Little Children are Sacred report to act on its wider aspirations and undermine the kin-based forms of collective ownership that characterize Aboriginal land title, and to substitute these with individual land ownership. For that reason, too, the government managers were given more power than the traditional owners had under the rescinded land rights legislation.

Coercive Reconciliation contains 30 short chapters written by a mix of academics, policy analysts, lawyers and community workers, some of Aboriginal descent, including a number of influential leaders. The main aim of this book is to deconstruct the political agenda behind the government’s intervention.
in remote Aboriginal communities. In addition, the editors and contributors cogently argue that the government’s new policy is doomed to fail because it was imposed from above without any grassroots support. The volume was compiled and published at the same speed as the government’s intervention, being available as early as late September. It indicates that the editors also intended to make a contribution to the political debate in Australia during the weeks leading up to the elections of November. In this context, the book undoubtedly made a compelling statement about the politics of Aboriginal policies at a crucial moment.

Reading this volume a few months after the elections took place and assessing it for an international audience, however, makes it inevitable to point out a few weaknesses. Obviously, this book has been compiled and produced at an incredible speed. Not that it abounds with proofing errors, but it does contain too many summaries of the report on which basis Howard’s intervention was founded, and also too many reviews of his policy measures and their supposed deficiencies. Apparently, there was no time to edit out these overlapping parts, which is regrettable since now the book as a whole leaves the impression that the contributors share above all a frustration with the prolonged government of the conservative Howard.

Another weakness of the book is that it does not systematically grasp the new focus on the plight of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory to discuss or offer alternative strategies to improve indigenous, socio-economic disadvantage and to enhance Aboriginal cultural aspirations. This objective is set out in the introduction, and some contributors mention small-scale, local initiatives to address the predicament of Aborigines in the Australian outback, but it is not until the final chapter by Jon Altman himself that an attempt is made to articulate a comprehensive framework to address indigenous disadvantage in all its diversity. Altman briefly outlines a so-called ‘hybrid economy’ based on a mixture of the market, the state and some customary dimensions of Aboriginal societies (see also Jon Altman, Sustainable Development Options on Aboriginal Land: The Hybrid Economy in the Twenty-First Century, Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, discussion papers, vol. 226, 2001). This model aims at a more realistic combination of employment and enterprise opportunities with Aboriginal aspirations and cultural strengths and should therefore provide more meaningful livelihood opportunities for indigenous people living on their remote ancestral lands. The discussion of this approach in the final chapter does provide this book with a powerful end.

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