



National Commission for
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Children and Young People



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

COMMISSIONERS CALL FOR INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO SYSTEMS DESIGNED TO PROTECT THE TERRITORY'S CHILDREN

The Northern Territory Children's Commissioner, Shahleena Musk, joins the National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People, Sue-Anne Hunter, in urgent calls on the Northern Territory Government to immediately halt proposed legislative reforms that will affect the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.

It is clear the Northern Territory's Child Protection system needs significant attention but rushed changes to laws risk unintended consequences and will not create meaningful systemic change to ensure children's safety.

Shahleena Musk, Northern Territory Children's Commissioner, said this is an opportunity to fix the systems, including child protection, that have been failing Territory children for decades.

"We call on the Northern Territory Government to immediately halt legislative reform planned for this week and instead engage with both myself and National Commissioner Hunter" said Commissioner Musk.

"I offer my leadership with support of the National Commissioner, who has deep expertise in this space, to lead this independent Inquiry" she said.

"This is not just about the Child Protection system; there are many other systems outside of my legislative remit that are failing vulnerable children and families and must be included within the review. Currently, I do not have the resources and legislative powers to undertake a systemic Inquiry to the level that it is needed" said Commissioner Musk.

"The NT Government has the power to stand up a Board of Inquiry that has the legislative powers, met with commensurate resourcing, to examine not only the child protection system but interconnected systems including housing, family violence, criminal justice and policing as it relates to vulnerable children and families."

The Northern Territory Children's Commissioner should be appointed to lead the Board of Inquiry with support from other experts, including the National Commissioner, and have the independence and resourcing to engage experts, researchers and staff to ensure a robust and effective Inquiry into interrelated systemic issues.

Terms of reference and scope should be determined through consultation with Commissioners and key stakeholders, including children and young people with lived experience, Government and Aboriginal leaders. It is essential that this work is empowered, adequately resourced and has the authority to compel and access information, to leave no stone unturned in overcoming systemic issues.

Sue-Anne Hunter, National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People, said the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle exists because the forced removal of our children from family, community and Country caused intergenerational harm that this country is still reckoning with.



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“Weakening the Child Placement Principles through rushed legislation, without a completed review foundation or genuine engagement with Aboriginal leaders, risks repeating the very harms it was designed to prevent,” said National Commissioner Hunter.

“Decisions about our children must be made with our children, our families and our communities at the centre, in line with Australia’s obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”.

“Rushing legislative reform in the absence of a robust and independent review is short-sighted. Instead, we need to pause amendments and undertake an independent systems-wide inquiry to fully understand what aspects of current systems need the most immediate attention and whether legislative reform is indeed required”.

Commissioner Musk stands ready and willing to lead this essential work.

“Any review or Inquiry that is not adequately resourced or given independent statutory powers will be set up to fail. This is not about one case in isolation – but rather a system in crisis that requires comprehensive systemic investigation and critical oversight. Any review that falls short of this is a missed opportunity to create true, transformational change,” said Commissioner Musk.

“The NT has a strong history of failing to implement recommendations from a multitude of inquiries, including *Little Children Are Sacred*, *State of Denial*, and the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory. An independent systemic Board of Inquiry would include critical analysis of previous recommendations made in these reports and consider their application in the current system” she said.

“We call on the NT Government to work with us, Aboriginal leaders and other experts to establish a Board of Inquiry as a matter of priority. It is time our Child Protection system and related systems have the essential coordinated attention they deserve. We know we can and must do better for the Territory’s most vulnerable children” said Commissioner Musk.

ENDS

Media contact:

Commissioner Musk – occ@nt.gov.au

National Commissioner Hunter – Madi West - 0433 583 011