



Aborigines facing 'social disaster'

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A NEW form of government is required to manage Australia's mineral-rich Kimberley and Pilbara regions, with the Pilbara resembling something from *Mad Max* and a "social disaster" looming for remote Aboriginal communities soon to be flooded with mining royalties.

Former West Australian governor John Sanderson, co-convenor of Pat Dodson's Australian Dialogue to move Australia into a post-reconciliation era, said the federal Government's Northern Territory intervention had "stuck the knife" into the heart of Aboriginal communities and bold reforms were required to include indigenous Australians in the governance of Western Australia's northern regions.

He nominated the Kimberley and Pilbara as the initial target of the Australian Dialogue, which will be launched at the Australia Unlimited conference in Melbourne today with Governor-General Quentin Bryce as patron. The Australian Dialogue seeks to elevate constitutional and structural reform to the centre of Aboriginal affairs.

"There is a whole range of issues at stake in the Kimberley, not the least of which is that the Aborigines want to be sufficiently empowered where they don't have to come cap in hand to us and beg us for money," Lieutenant General Sanderson told *The Australian*. "They are sick of begging us for money; the experience of begging us for money hasn't been very good."

He said the Pilbara was barely governed and "like a scene from

a *Mad Max* movie", and with mining boom royalties set to pour towards Aboriginal communities, "potentially we are on the verge of a huge disaster" unless steps were taken to give Aboriginal people a more active stake in the region's future.

Attacking the federal Government's extension of the Northern Territory intervention, General Sanderson said Aboriginal people had been told "stand by your beds, we're going to do this thing to you, it's racist, but it's going to be good for you".

"We've stuck the knife so deep into the heart of those communities, it's going to take us a long, long time to climb out of it," General Sanderson said.

He also criticised Cape York leader Noel Pearson for suggesting at the weekend that Aboriginal school leavers should be compelled to take jobs more than 90 minutes from home, saying "I'm not up for the enforcement stuff", and said Warren Mundine's focus on jobs and education was ultimately "an economic rationalist approach".

General Sanderson, a special adviser to the WA Government on indigenous affairs, has said previously that settler society inflicted a "holocaust" on Aborigines and he had joined Mr Dodson in pursuing a "new philosophical framework of engagement that will guide the action of government, corporate and civil society to halt the annihilation of indigenous culture".

A vision statement for the Australian Dialogue calls for a new relationship "based on principles of mutual respect, equality and love".

"We have never really shown that sort of sentiment towards Aboriginal people in this country," General Sanderson said.

He said Aboriginal policy appeared to be based on the idea of disconnecting Aborigines from the heart of the continent.

"There is no vision for the development of remote Australia," he said. "There is no transcendent vision."

He said he was struck by a recent conversation with a young Aboriginal man from Kulumburu, in the far northern Kimberley, who was working in a meat works in Wonthaggi, Victoria. The young man chose to work in Wonthaggi rather than deal with the strife in his community, yet Kulumburu is "a beautiful place, that sits on the edge of one of the greatest gas deposits that Australia has ever had access to".

There was something fundamentally wrong, he said, when a young Aboriginal man preferred the Wonthaggi meat works to life in Kulumburu.

The Australian Dialogue, he said, was aimed at building on the national apology to the Stolen Generations to design a new future through national and regional discussions across economic, cultural and social areas.

"The question is, who designs the future? Who owns the future? Do we impose the future on people who live in the continent, or do we ask them to participate in the design of the future?"

The Australia Unlimited conference is a two-day roundtable presented by the Global Foundation and *The Australian* and focusing on the big issues facing the nation in an uncertain world.