Twelve years on, a community reflects on the costs of ‘the intervention’, writes Nick O’Malley.

When the federal government arrived in Muttijalu, an Aboriginal community in the shadow of Uluru, it did so out of the blue and took hold but force a dozen years ago this month. Police and soldiers turned up in trucks and four-wheel drives and sacked the local governing corporation on the spot.

Some residents, particularly those whose memories extend to the removal of children by distant authorities, simply fled into the red dust, says Dorothée Randall, a Muttijalu resident and community advocate who spent time in the area with The Sunday Age last month.

She says the wounds of the moment still run deep, especially among the community’s men, who felt that they had been collectively and unjustly accused of terrible crimes against their children.

This was the start of the so-called Northern Territory National Emergency Response, now known universally as ‘the intervention’, a hard-headed response to allegations of rampant child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities.

By sudden decree, then prime minister John Howard and his Indigenous Affairs minister, Mal Brough, suspended the Racial Discrimination Act and effectively seized control of about half the Northern Territory from its then Labor government.

It took over direct governance of all remote Aboriginal communities on declared Aboriginal land, banned alcohol and pornography, excluded customary law and cultural practices from sentencing and bail decisions and replaced welfare payments with a card system.

Police were given powers to enter homes and vehicles on Aboriginal land without a warrant to enforce the new prohibitions.

As many observed at the time, no government would have considered imposing similar measures over Australia’s non-Indigenous people.

At the time, even accusations that the government’s actions could not help but note the political context. “The Howard government’s actions were a response to a decade after a decade in office. The PM who had been branded the man of state’ by his friend, US president George W. Bush, who had stood up to Indonesia over East Timor, who had bailed out the Port Arthur massacre and turned back refugees around the Tampa, was beginning to look like yesterday’s here.”

Here was a wrong he could right with the sort of tough love that had made him so popular in the first place.

“Yes, I think I’m doing the right thing,” he told The Bulletin magazine at the time. “I don’t want to invest it with any other meaning. I really believe it is right. It is one of those occasions in public life where you feel you can strike a decisive blow to make things better for a weak and vulnerable section of the community. We haven’t changed our policy in relation to land rights generally. But whatever is needed to be done in the process of healing the mindset and society for Indigenous children will be done.

That is more important to me than anything else. It is more important than any doctrine or philosophy.”

The intervention was bipartisan political support and was endorsed by many Indigenous leaders, who felt that the living circumstances of many Aboriginal children in the NT warranted dramatic action.

Basu Price, who has served as a chair of the NT Indigenous Affairs Advisory Council and as a Country Liberal MP, was one of those who supported the intervention despite a lack of consultation with the communities.

In 2011 she told the ABC, “we’ve had so much consultation here in the Northern Territory with people coming out to various communities, consulting people about everything and anything... It was an emergency and our people’s lifestyle needed changing.”

Her views on the issue have been trenchantly opposed by other prominent Aboriginal commentators since, but at the start of the intervention were not entirely uncommon.

Also speaking to The Bulletin in those early days was Marie Allan, a Warmun woman from west of Katherine. “I’m sorry it had to come to this but it was bound to happen,” she said at the time. “There’s been too much pussy-footing for too long. No one is protecting the children.”

In the months and weeks leading up to the intervention, the people of Muttijalu could not have known what was to come, but the Sydney-based human rights lawyer George Newhouse, who represented the community, says he had become the focus of the government’s plans.

Muttijalu is easily accessible to outsiders and prominent due to its close proximity to Uluru, with its airport and resorts. Further, it lies in a national park and as a result comes more closely under federal authority than other communities in the NT.

Using that authority, Brough sacked Muttijalu’s Community Aboriginal Corporation well before the intervention, because of concerns it had not done enough to prevent a paedophile attacking children in the community.

Sacking the corporation for this reason, says Newhouse today, makes as much sense as sacking, say, Randwick Council because of child abuse in Randwick. Either way, Newhouse believes the government was trebling legal and political tactics in Muttijalu.

After an ABC TV Lateline report alleged that a paedophile ring was operating in the community and that children were being trafficked, the NT government commissioned a board of inquiry, which handed down the Little Children are Sacred report. Later the allegations in the Lateline report were credibly challenged, by, among others, Chris Graham, the former editor of the National Indigenous Times. But by then the story was national news.

The Little Children Are Sacred report showed little evidence of child sexual abuse in the NT, but a crisis of neglect that its authors said should be designated as an issue of urgent national significance by both the Australian and Northern Territory governments.

By then, though, the federal government was determined to respond to a sexual abuse crisis. Many of the measures, such as welfare income-quarantining and alcohol bans introduced by Brough and Howard remain in place, having been adopted by subsequent governments under legislation known as Stronger Futures, even though a 2009 Crime Commission report found no evidence that the paedophile rings that prompted the intervention existed.

Further, there is now little evidence they have had significant benefit for Aboriginal people in the NT, with crime and incarceration rates increasing. In 2008 there were 4870 Indigenous people in NT prisons. Last year there were 5270.

An SBS Investigation found government monitoring reports looking specifically at ‘deserted communities’ under the intervention showed attendance rates dropped in both primary and secondary schools, with overall rates declining from 62.3 per cent just before the intervention in 2007 to 57.6 per cent in 2011.

Today the Muttijalu community is larger, with new residents attracted by the prospect of work and income from the nearby resort. As a result overcrowding is rife, but in many ways Muttijalu fares better than other communities, while still struggling with the same issues that Aboriginal communities battle across the country. Too many of its young people die from suicide and its elders from preventable diseases.

Though the community has built a pool with its share of proceeds from entry fees to the park, a recreation centre that was a hub before the intervention is now a shell, allowed to fall into disrepair when the federal government seized control. Local say little changed here after the first dramatic days of the intervention, save from the imposition of outer authority. The promised increase in community resources, in medical and educational facilities, never turned up.

Marie Allen, herself a member of the stolen generation, a woman who once welcomed the measures, says she has seen no improvement in the lives of people in communities around her, and an increase in the number of children being removed from families in Katherine, sheltering yet more families.

Indeed, it is hard to find anyone who believes the intervention worked.

Professor Megan Davis, director of the Indigenous Law Centre at the University of NSW, notes it is clear that the intervention was at best a blunt response that appears to be an attempt to keep up with the complex problems raised by the Little Children are Sacred report.

“Bringing in the government was never going to bring about the sort of behavioural change the government sought,” she says. “The only thing the intervention did was make the determination a fundamental principle of democracy.”

But in Muttijalu, Randall says the intervention shattered the community, set back the growth of its own leadership by a decade and broke the hearts of its men.

A spokesman for Howard this week rejected the allegations that the Northern Territory intervention was for political reasons rather than for the welfare of Aboriginal people.

He said: “In large measure it was a response to the Little Children are Sacred report, which was highly critical of the lack of proper law enforcement and social welfare measures in the Northern Territory. In assessing the impact of the intervention, it should be remembered that aspects of it were altered by the subsequent Labor government.”