

Reporting Back: The Northern Territory Intervention One Year On

Address to Aboriginal Support Group, Manly Warringah Pittwater

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“The road to emancipation is a very long one,” Charles Perkins once told me. “Be patient,” he said.

As I travel often through the heartland of Australia I think of his words and of how we are going to lift our nation to the unity of purpose that will make us a truly great society.

Equality right now is a hope, not a reality.

The Governor-General, Major General Michael Jeffery, who recently left office after five years, was on the front pages of the newspapers suggesting that Indigenous disadvantage is confined mainly to about 100,000 Aborigines mostly living in the remote north.

It is a careless choice of words by a well-intentioned man who has travelled remote Australia with his wife and has a very good idea of the distressing conditions so many Aboriginal families endure in remote communities.

The grave error is to imply that integration by the vast majority of Indigenous people has created such normalcy that we never hear from them.

If you walk in the shoes of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander you know that whether you live in the city, regional Australia or a remote community your life expectancy is 17 years less than the rest of Australians. Your health, housing, education and employment opportunities are also far worse. Your social stress and the racism and discrimination you endure occur in most parts of Australia. You belong to an underclass of disadvantage that allows escape only by the most extraordinary or fortunate minority, who against so many odds are able to fight for and achieve that elusive equality.

In the tougher housing estates of Sydney’s west, more than 45,000 Indigenous people are still struggling with this huge disadvantage. They are in that trap of underachievement in education, chronic unemployment, long-term poverty and welfare dependency. On the outskirts of Perth, Brisbane and Cairns, in Alice Springs, Katherine, Dubbo or most other large towns in western NSW, Queensland and Western Australia, the story of disadvantage is very similar.

Integration and assimilation have not brought Indigenous people equality. In those Sydney housing estates I speak of, from Campbelltown to Mt Druitt, an estimated 60% of the Aboriginal people have a white partner, but they don’t miraculously climb the ladder of opportunity. Their children too often inherit the grim social disadvantage.

I have sat with many such families and listened to their problems. I see them struggling like their extended families in regional and remote Australia. There are programs that can create better opportunities for Aboriginal children in all parts of Australia but we must recognise the folly of assuming the old misguided logic of integration and assimilation.

This kind of thinking is pushed relentlessly on our Federal Government by the former Treasury official, John Stone, the

ANU academic, Professor Helen Hughes, Dr Gary Johns of the Bennelong Society and others, who want Aboriginal people to give up their right to Cultural autonomy.

The resort to social engineering and pressuring Aboriginal people off their traditional lands and towards the suburban housing estates is the kind of intervention that comes when our nation fails to live up to its responsibility to create equal opportunity for Australians wherever they live.

When you have failed to deliver to some Australian communities what all of us need to bring up our children in safety and good health, you have the pre-conditions for a radical intervention.

I choose these words now, very carefully.

The Northern Territory Intervention was conceived as a policy of Shock and Redemption. John Howard needed the political shock and he wanted the personal redemption.

In her book, “The Shock Doctrine”, Naomi Klein examines the fondness of governments for radical interventions.

The political opportunity for a shock intervention occurs when the public is disoriented or distracted. This is precisely what happened in Australia in 2007 after the release of *The Little Children are Sacred Report* on the abuse of Aboriginal children.

The Howard Government had its opportunity to impose federal management on 73 remote communities and begin a program that was intended to radically alter these traditional lands.

Unethical, unjust and unlawful from the start, this is the most ill-conceived policy inflicted on Aboriginal people in my lifetime.

Rather than protect them, the Northern Territory Intervention cynically exploited the vulnerability of Aboriginal children. A Government that had scornfully ignored years of pleading by health services and community organisations for the counselling, the primary health care and the preventative programs needed, suddenly ordered parents to submit their children to mandatory inspections for sexual abuse. This very important fact has disappeared from most of the one-eyed assessments of the Intervention one year on.

To put this in a personal context that all Australians could understand I said publicly at the outset of this Intervention that my wife and I would never allow our children to be herded in for mandatory inspections for alleged sexual abuse. Some doctors soon pointed out that such inspections could not be enforced. As first announced by the Government, this would have amounted to a sexual violation of the children.

Instead, the Big Lie machine remade the propaganda message. The rallying cry of the Intervention became “health inspections” for all Aboriginal children in 73 prescribed communities.

If they had asked the health services who have to do the hard work (then and now) taking care of sick Aboriginal children, the Intervention leaders would have been told that what was needed urgently was treatment and preventative health care programs.

What hypocrisy to pretend that you are helping Aboriginal children when you have refused to fund the half-a-billion dollar annual shortfall to provide adequate primary health care for Aboriginal families. The insult to all those who work on health care for these children will be another long-term wound from this disastrous blunder. This is why so many health organisations have spoken in condemnation of the vast wastage of funds on the 'shock and redemption' Intervention strategy instead of committing to provide adequate long-term health care for these deeply disadvantaged children and their families.

In two very important appraisals of the impact of the Intervention on Aboriginal communities, medical specialists, rural health doctors and the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association have presented their own research findings that the Intervention has caused "immediate and long term damage".

Money has been wasted through duplication and existing medical services have not been consulted efficiently. Significantly, AIDA concludes that the Intervention has caused social and emotional harm, and a growing sense of powerlessness and anger.

There is no evidence anywhere in the world that radical social engineering and interventions of this kind truly benefit children unless their families and, indeed, whole communities are positively engaged in the way forward. From the very start the tone and priorities outlined by John Howard and Mal Brough made such community cooperation highly unlikely. So why would they do this?

Coming so late in the Prime Minister's dying days of power, the Northern Territory Intervention can also be judged fairly as John Howard's desperate personal attempt at redemption. He was trying to remove the stain on history of his government's institutionalised neglect of Aboriginal needs and rights.

Such a judgement is borne out by the Prime Minister's extraordinary speech in October 2007, in which he dramatically accepted the symbolism he had so bitterly opposed for over a decade, a promise of symbolic recognition of Indigenous people in a new preamble to the Constitution.

Remember John Howard's uncharacteristically nervous television appearance, pathetically pleading that if we would just be "kind enough" to re-elect him, then "probably, certainly", he fumbled, it would make sense for him to retire.

Tellingly, even his electorate finally had had enough of this double talk and ruthlessly self-interested politics, so often at the expense of the truth. Even members of his own party knew that the poison was to a large extent John Howard's doing.

We know that Peter Costello, Brendan Nelson and Malcolm Turnbull tried unsuccessfully to influence their leader towards greater understanding of why Aboriginal people longed to hear the truth from a Prime Minister's lips about their suffering.

Malcolm Turnbull resorted to using an analogy of the Papal Apologies for various injustices to try to convince John Howard that he needed to tell the truth and seek forgiveness.

Instead, one of Australia's longest serving leaders with a huge opportunity to improve the disadvantage of Aboriginal people, refused to walk in the Reconciliation marches. He

refused to say "sorry".

John Howard's personal and political motivations for the Intervention are transparent. Far less time has been spent examining why most Labor politicians silently accepted the inevitability of this federal grab for control of so many remote communities in the Northern Territory.

The Intervention, for Labor, was not only a blatantly political power-play but a true indication of the dysfunctional relationship of our federal system of government.

The Rudd team knew that the Howard Government's re-election strategy, for what it was worth, relied almost entirely at that point on bashing the Labor-held State and Territory Governments. Claire Martin had no effective answer to Mal Brough's belligerence. When one of her most courageous NT Ministers, Marian Scrymgour, travelled to Sydney University to speak out in condemnation of the Intervention, she was quickly silenced and pressured into an awkward explanation of her anguished and deeply personal rage against the Intervention.

Labor, of course, had its eyes on a federal election victory.

To avoid being politically wedged, Kevin Rudd's senior team gave qualified support to the Intervention. Only a handful of individuals, Democrats and Greens, spoke with any vigour in Canberra against the blatantly discriminatory aspects of the Intervention legislation.

When I scanned the 500 or so pages of the draft legislation, like others I noticed something extraordinary. In contrast to the hysteria whipped up by Mal Brough and some sections of the media that ought to have known better, the legislation was not focused on protecting Aboriginal children. It was a grab for administrative control of 73 Aboriginal communities.

This remains the difficult political problem for Kevin Rudd's Government. They backed the Intervention. They may unpack it, remake it and call it something else, but they too voted for this onslaught on Aboriginal rights, including the most basic right of Aboriginal families to control their own destiny.

You might think that as Opposition Leader, Kevin Rudd had given himself a very clever political option – a review of the Intervention twelve months on. This review, as you know, is due to be completed later this month.

Certainly, Prime Minister Mr Rudd has the opportunity to refashion the Intervention into a policy of Australia-wide relevance. It will be equally necessary, to establish any kind of Government policy towards Aboriginal people on a basis that is cooperative, just and non-discriminatory.

So I ask the Prime Minister, the Review Committee and you, my fellow Australians, to think deeply about the single most profound effect of this intervention.

For over a year, through the heat of relentless political attention, our nation has taken a red-hot poker and branded Aboriginal people as the problem.

It is not Aboriginal children who have been the real focus of this intervention. Its crushing, long-term damage has been to condemn Aboriginal men and women as being generally irresponsible and incapable of managing their own destiny.

Aboriginal men have been branded *en masse* as wife beaters and child molesters. Aboriginal women have been judged incapable of feeding their kids or managing the family budget. Once more we have repeated the misguided logic of assimilation: that if whites manage the lives of Aboriginal people, somehow the problems will be over.

The year of the Intervention has been a lost year for Aboriginal children. Not only have we wasted time, money and human resources, we have failed to listen to, or understand, what Aboriginal people have been telling us.

Over a quarter of a century ago, after Aboriginal men, women and children marched in protest through the streets of Alice Springs, I carried a desperate appeal to the government from several remote communities, describing what we called then a “genuine health emergency” afflicting so many Aboriginal families. Since then, tragically, Australia has lost much of a generation of older Aboriginal people in an endless procession of funerals and tears.

After this trauma across the generations, the Intervention has caused even greater distress in many communities. It has left people feeling gutted. It has driven many away from their homes in smaller communities towards the towns. Everyone knew that the town camps would fill up and more men and women would head for the long grass. Is this what they wanted?

In Alice Springs, Katherine and on the outskirts of Darwin the fringe dwellers are more desperate. People have drifted across the Northern Territory border to Mt Isa in Queensland where young girls have been seen sleeping on the riverbanks.

In too many communities there has been a frightening increase in self-harm and suicide. The families I know are so deeply traumatised by these losses they can find no words to explain this. The Aboriginal Medical Services say this contagion of despair has grown worse during the past twelve months. There is absolutely no evidence that the Intervention has been hailed as an operation of hope and promise that will ease this pain.

When 35 traditional owners from Arnhem Land met Prime Minister Rudd their opposition to this Intervention was overwhelmingly clear. They acknowledged that the new federal government had brought some real hope of genuine consultation with a truly representative variety of Indigenous community leaders. They asked for an end to the Intervention’s wasteful spending on a new white management bureaucracy and they wanted an end to the blatantly discriminatory and unjust quarantining of welfare money.

By some published estimates it was costing about three thousand dollars per person to quarantine the welfare of about ten thousand Aboriginal people. This is absurd. On average, these welfare recipients are trying to survive on about ten thousand dollars a year. And we have been wasting three thousand dollars to manage their welfare, regardless of how they behaved and how they looked after their children.

I ask you, is this fair?

The first year of the Intervention rounded up everyone in these communities and branded them all as failures and problems. War veterans, teacher aides, hard-working men and women have been shamefully discriminated against. And this, of course, is why the legislation excised the impact of the Racial Discrimination Act.

The Intervention remains unfair and discriminatory. Instead of working with families on the kind of cooperative community programs that coordinate wise spending of welfare through school lunch programs and the like – programs that some Aboriginal communities have struggled alone to maintain – Government has taken its big stick and lashed out at

everyone.

This removed all genuine incentive for parents who do work hard and send their children to school. While punishing adults if their children do not attend school might bring cheers from some quarters, withholding money needed to feed and clothe those children is hardly guaranteed to improve their wellbeing.

I have been told by Aboriginal Medical Services treating children in many of these remote communities that anaemia levels have grown worse during the chaos of the Intervention.

The picture may appear confusing because in some communities you will hear some women say they have been able to set aside money for special needs but many others complain that the food voucher system is hard to use and wasteful. For many years some communities have been trying to establish stores that carry affordable, nutritious food. The most recent health assessments only confirm what the government has known for decades, that most families in remote communities cannot afford nutritious food for their children and most exist on damper, flour and sugar, and all the cheap, fast food that is pushed on them for profit. This is no way to solve an epidemic of lifestyle illnesses.

The truth is that these communities are very different, and trying to clamp one big, clumsy and confusing policy onto 73 communities was never going to bring improvement across the map because few people understood what was being inflicted on them.

This is in line with international evidence on government interventions that try to cajole families and whole communities through the so-called “tough love” approach. It’s an Orwellian phrase that in truth is inflicted on people out of exasperation and lack of empathy, not love. It is heavy-handed social engineering and it has not succeeded in Canada or the United States.

On the contrary, the best economic evidence on earth shows that creating positive incentives for people to change their behaviour and supporting families in trouble achieves far more progress. The break-up or breakdown of families is one of society’s most vexing problems and everyone who works on this healing process understands how patient and understanding we need to be.

Let no one pretend that this year-long federal Intervention is a real response to the genuine emergency in the heartland of Australia.

When any so-called intervention to protect children can tick off some basic rights, such as an adequate home for these children to live in, with a stove, a fridge and a bathroom that works, with nutritious food on the table, a quality education that they can relate to, protection, safety, recreation – just a childhood really – then I will say that here is an intervention I can support. The truth is that Aboriginal people would have rushed to join in such a program if we had ever truly worked together to build better communities for all of our children.

I would like to hear all supporters of this Intervention admit that in the Northern Territory today there are fewer houses available to Aboriginal people than there were five years ago. Despite the money promised for housing, the prefabricated shelters erected near Alice Springs airport have been headed to the bush to house the newly appointed white managers and other government staff. Of course these paid workers require accommodation and the serious shortage has always restricted

the workers who try to improve life in remote communities. But the Intervention has done nothing so far to change the fact that fifteen to twenty people, including young children, are forced to share each of these hovels we call public housing.

Nationwide, over the past five years, housing available for Aboriginal families increased by just 2% – a mere 21,000 houses. In the Northern Territory during this period the housing crisis has grown worse because the Intervention has increased the crowding in some of the most overstressed places. Aboriginal people go without a decent roof over their head while this rich country enjoys a so-called Golden Era, as minerals are dug from what is still Aboriginal land.

Slapping a coat of paint on old houses and building higher fences is not the way to build better communities. This is not “nation building”. This is expecting Aboriginal families to live in conditions that no federal member of parliament would put their own family through.

This goes for the wretched state of other services provided. Would any federal member of parliament from any political party expect their family to make do without access to a GP or a pharmacy? Would they let their families live in a community without a library, decent facilities for healthy recreation and adequate education from pre-school to high school?

Just 75 Aboriginal students completed high school in the whole of the Northern Territory’s government schools in 2006.

Julia Gillard has acknowledged that there are up to twenty thousand Aboriginal children not in school when they should be.

Jenny Macklin has added that at least two thousand Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory have never even been enrolled for school. The truth is that there are probably thousands more Aboriginal people who have never even been counted in our census.

Put bluntly, Australia does not know these people or understand who they truly are.

A child born in the first month of the Intervention in most of these communities will not have the care, safety or early learning opportunity of a well run pre-school. So, in four years time, that child of the Intervention will be at risk of starting school far behind.

In a brilliant American study of why disadvantaged children under-achieve, Paul Barton writes in *Parsing the Achievement Gap* that, of the 14 factors contributing to this gap, eight occur even before the child gets to school. High on his list is poverty, malnutrition and being born at a dangerously low birth-weight. This is the pattern of life in Australia’s remote communities. Children, even in utero, are being programmed for failure because of our profound neglect of mother and child. So it is no surprise that in many of the communities I work with we find an illiteracy rate as high as 93 per cent and a life expectancy gap 17–20 years less than the rest of us.

Kevin Rudd has pledged this year to pursue the goals of the Close the Gaps strategy drawn up by a voluntary task force of many of the finest health and education professionals in Australia. This offers a clear blueprint for genuine First Nation Building, crucially with consultation all the way.

Patrick Dodson has hailed this new season we have entered as the time for a new dialogue. This is our nation’s greatest immediate challenge.

I ask you now to make this personal and lend a hand to work

with Aboriginal families to improve life for their children.

With patience and persistence we need to work together on many fronts.

The Rudd Government has rightly identified improving education as a crucial part of Closing the Gap in Aboriginal life expectancy.

For many years I have drawn on the research of Canada’s Dr Fraser Mustard and others who calculate that for every additional year of education we create for a whole community of young women, we add up to four years to the life expectancy of their first child.

The Australian Indigenous health researcher, Professor Ken Wyatt, adds that this extra year of education will also reduce, by seven to ten per cent, the chances of those young women losing their infant soon after birth.

The promise by Julia Gillard to guarantee every Australian four-year-old a pre-school education is a perfect place to start. In the Northern Territory, the Federal and Territory governments will share a two-million dollar pilot program to create early learning in about ten remote communities.

At Ian Thorpe’s Fountain For Youth we are working with seventeen remote communities to improve literacy and learning. A skilled educator supervises Aboriginal mothers in playgroups using the rights books and early learning toys to introduce these children to a lifelong love of learning.

It is not only a shortage of buildings, housing and resources that have prevented so many attempts to improve early learning, Aboriginal organisations desperately need more skilled workers – people with a high level of education and life experience – to share this crucial teaching.

The teaching ranks are thin, too often inexperienced and heading towards a crisis as more and more baby boomers retire. I urge Australians with tertiary education and the right life experience to contribute to Aboriginal education across Australia, in remote, regional and urban areas.

In the Sydney metropolitan area I am one of the board of directors of a most promising four-year-old initiative by a group of young, highly educated Aboriginal men and women. Jack Manning Bancroft, a Sydney University graduate, was the founder of AIME, or Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience.

Right here in the suburbs of Sydney, in the largest enclave of Indigenous people in the country, Jack and his friends could see that so many Aboriginal students were disconnecting from education mid-way through high school. AIME connects 100 university undergraduates on three campuses as mentors for Indigenous high school students from year nine to year eleven.

AIME is showing that this positive support increases retention and can lift these young people to believe in themselves, going on to higher education as well. The university mentors volunteer a year of their time, and many I have spoken to say they have drawn so much from really getting to know Aboriginal people.

The Indigenous Summer Schools, run by Engineering Aid Australia, is another long-term project I strongly support. By giving Aboriginal high school students an introductory program on what university life can offer we have seen the first engineering graduates join the Aboriginal doctors, educators, writers and film makers. This changes Aboriginal children’s view of what is possible.

Dr Chris Sara's Indigenous Education Leadership Institute similarly raises the expectation of our educational establishment for what Aboriginal children can achieve through education. I spoke recently with white principals who had been through this training and all said it was the singular, most important phase of their entire, life-long education. It had opened their eyes and empowered them.

The Aboriginal Employment Strategy, headed by Danny Lester, has made an extraordinary contribution to solving one of the biggest challenges for young Aboriginal people. This one organisation, with its main office now in Glebe, has created over ten per cent of all new employment offered to Aboriginal people. This is the inspiration for all job creation schemes. Know the people you are working with by employing well-trained and committed Aboriginal people, trusting them to manage the destiny of many other lives.

When Australian corporations like the ANZ Bank vigorously promote employment for Aboriginal people, you also find that more Aboriginal people in the workforce are prepared to be open about their Cultural heritage. So many in urban Australia have known that even in the public services it can be seen as a factor that brings into question their loyalty or commitment. Ending discrimination and racism is about us all, wherever we live and work.

Telstra's boss, Sol Trujillo, tells the story of how after graduating from an American university with an MBA he gained entry to his first workplace because affirmative action laws removed the barriers to Hispanic Americans. If he had knocked on that door of AT&T the year before, he said he would not have got the job. Yet through his talent he was able to become the first native-born Hispanic American to be CEO of AT&T, the world's biggest company at the time. It was not about talent, it was about opportunity.

I work closely in support of a group of Indigenous Australians who are showing that they can create a new strategy for developing their people's brightest opportunities and ending disadvantage. Michael McLeod, the founder of an IT company called Message Stick, has led this group to create a minority business supply council. It is along the lines of the American and Canadian minority business supply councils that have created access to millions of dollars worth of business by building a network of contact and cooperation between some of the biggest companies in the world and minority business.

In September, the Aboriginal group will host the leaders of the United States and Canadian minority business strategies and we will all travel to Canberra to ask the Rudd government to support his approach to Aboriginal development across the country.

Wherever you live and whatever you do there are ways that you can help improve life for all Australian children until they all enjoy the brightest opportunities.

Here on the Northern Beaches, Jack Cannings and his friends from Variety The Children's Charity are always coming up with projects to help build a better community somewhere out west. Jack's motto is "Don't just talk about it". Get some mates together, get to know the people and start building together.

At my children's surf club at North Palm Beach earlier this year, the community hosted a visit by twelve young Aboriginal people and four elders. Most of them had never been away from their remote communities in the Northern Territory and they

arrived on the day of Kevin Rudd's Apology. It was a moving and very hopeful time as we all gathered within sight of the magnificent Barrenjoey Headland – Aboriginal land – and as all of our children plunged into the surf together on those blue sky days, everyone, black and white, could see the promise.

Surf clubs can be utilised for this sharing, learning and training around the country. So can universities.

In October, Ian Thorpe's Fountain For Youth is supporting another fine initiative by Burgmann College at the Australian National University in Canberra, to host an excellent education journey by ten young boys and girls from the far north community of Doomadgee. ANU students and staff have been travelling up to Doomadgee and now they get to the next stage with two-way sharing.

At Sydney University Women's College, Tania Major, last year's Young Australian of the Year, and other students have created an alliance with Cape York communities.

These may seem like small steps but I have learned over my lifetime that these are the ones likely to carry us forward.

Hard work, patience and persistence – that's what we need.

I have also learned that as much as we can share in this way with Aboriginal people, they have something deep and powerful to share with us if you accept their warm invitations to travel to their lands. All over this country I have smiled as strangers in a big extended family welcome families like mine who do a lot of travelling.

At the annual Walking With Spirits Festival, held at Beswick Falls, about 120 kilometres south of Katherine, visitors are encouraged to come and share, to listen and learn, and be part of an experience that will change their view of what it is to be Australian.

The more I have learned in my own education, especially through earth science and the state of the human family in a most fragile world, I have gained a deeper respect for the communal and custodial values of Indigenous cultures the world over.

In this age of global warming, with an estimated 25 million refugees already adrift and crossing borders, with people in our crowded cities already making a sea-change or a tree-change to escape the pressures of petrol prices, water shortages, housing shortages and other expenses of city life, the solution is not to herd more people into equally overcrowded unliveable conditions on the fringes of country towns and our biggest cities.

If we are wise we will look to the future and the long term, and plan for strong communities all over this land. We will recognise that decentralisation is better than more congestion. We will understand that tourism, Cultural programs, management of the land, rivers and national parks, and even helping preserve large tracts of Australia in its natural state to help reduce the impact of global warming, are options that can transform the current impoverished state of many remote communities. It is wisely proposed that we should increase the current 700 Aboriginal rangers to around 7000. But why stop there? Aboriginal people should be trained and paid to utilise the talents and resourcefulness they love to share.

This is not romanticising the past, the tedious claim by those who want Aboriginal people to betray their Culture and forget

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the perception that DADHC was 'taking sides' in terms of factionalism, by supporting one faction while neglecting another.

Many Aboriginal Organisations/Groups Are Already Providing Support Services Without HACC or DADHC Funding

Consultations with Aboriginal organisations and groups in the South West and Inner West Sydney regions found that many are already providing support services that comply with HACC service types, without HACC or DADHC funding. These services most popularly included social support, advocacy, and home and yard maintenance.

Organisations/Groups Need Additional Funds to Provide Quality Services

Many participants, both staff of Aboriginal-specific HACC-funded services and community members, reported that Aboriginal organisations and groups, whether they did or did not currently receive HACC or DADHC funding, required additional funding in order to provide quality services to clients. This included the need to utilise a suitable venue or improve an existing venue, conduct appropriate activities, gain transport, enable clients to engage in meaningful pursuits, provide outings and events. The Aboriginal Disability Network of NSW (2003) notes that Aboriginal disability services are under-funded and under-resourced, greatly limiting their ability to meet the needs within Aboriginal communities.

Conclusion

These findings are being utilised by DADHC to develop strategic responses that are specific to the South West and Inner West Sydney Aboriginal communities. While many of the needs and issues identified in consultation activities with members of Aboriginal communities within the South West and Inner West Sydney regions apply to the unique situation of these areas, the majority of issues have also been identified in various other consultation activities across Australia. Of importance, and interest in terms of literature and evidence base, is how such needs and issues are addressed, both in locally-specific and wider contexts.

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their very essence. Aboriginal people have been adapting and changing and learning for somewhere between fifty and eighty thousand years. These are the world's most resilient people. Let us celebrate this strength and knowledge!

Our true humanity demands that we respect the right of Aboriginal people to be themselves, that we share a pride in this Culture and that we recognise it is the shades of human

difference and creativity that give our species the best chance of survival.

We need to believe in the common good. Instead of a crude intervention into the lives of some children we need to take action as a society – community by community, family by family – recognising that every Australian child is deserving of our very best effort.

Yes, equality is still a hopeful dream, but if we work at it, we may be closer to it than any other nation on earth.