

Everybody Counts

 Samaritans  
your local **ANGLICARE**  
election 2010

## **Closing the gap between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians**

In February 2008 former Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd delivered his much anticipated apology to Indigenous Australians for past injustices, in particular to the members of the 'Stolen Generation', those people who had been taken away from their mothers because of the colour of their skin over a sad period of Australian history from 1920s until approx 1970. This scandalous process led to a loss of family, language, culture and country and the damage has lasted for generations.

This Apology was an emotional time for many, particularly for Indigenous people but many non-Indigenous people were also moved to tears as they listened to the Prime Minister's speech.

Many Australians have no contact with Aboriginal people and it was as if the Prime Minister was communicating with Indigenous families on our behalf.

Australians often wonder if there is something they can do to assist in the journey towards Reconciliation. The Apology seemed like a beginning particularly as the Prime Minister promised to Close the Gap between Indigenous Australians and the rest of us. He mentioned particularly;

- life expectancy; Aboriginal people die 17 years earlier than other Australians
- educational achievement - Aboriginal children are less likely to be in pre-schools or Year 12 than other Australian children
- employment - unemployment rates for Indigenous people are double.

Aboriginal people makeup only 2.5% of the population. Many live in regional or remote parts of Australia (67%) compared with only 30% of the non-Aboriginal population. 30% of Aboriginal people live in NSW and this is the State with the highest numbers. However, many people particularly in large cities have no social contact with Aboriginal people even though many of us join in major events, such as the screening of the apology / the walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The Government has set targets for Closing the Gap and has undertaken to present annual reports to Parliament outlining progress towards achieving these targets.

Progress since 2008 has been slow but we should acknowledge that the Federal Government did have to respond to the Global Financial Crisis during this time. Most effort so far seems to have targeted the 15% of the Indigenous population who live in very remote communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

These areas face enormous problems in terms of lack of infrastructure, child health, housing, employment and family violence.

Even though the progress has been slow and reportedly overly bureaucratic we should recognise that developing infrastructure to improve communication, health and education in very remote areas will take time.

Aboriginal organisations have also expressed concern about the weakening of services which are controlled by Aboriginal services themselves. There has been a shift-back to mainstream services in recent years, but if we are to Close the Gap, Governments must ensure that Aboriginal people are actively involved as full partners in the development of strategy, with every opportunity to design, deliver and control health and social services themselves.

Here in the Hunter we have a range of Aboriginal organisations all doing a great job providing services to local Aboriginal people and working in partnership with more generalist organisations as the need arises. These include Awabakal co-op, Wandiyali, Hunter Aboriginal Childrens Services, Yarteen, Mindaribba and Barkuma. These local organisations deserve support from their local communities.

Aboriginal communities have suffered devastating loss of culture, pride and land over the past 200 years and we can all do something to put things right.

In addition to supporting local Aboriginal agencies as outlined above, we could:

**1. Change Australia Day**

On Australia Day, 26 January we celebrate the birth and beginning of European settlement. Some Aboriginal people call this Survival Day – a testament to their resilience that they have not been totally destroyed by 200 years of dispossession and discrimination. Perhaps in the Hunter we could bring the two events together as a day when we recognise the past and work together towards a vision driven future where all people enjoy equal chances and opportunities.

**2. Celebrate at the Football**

There has been much discussion this year about racism in NSW Rugby League. Perhaps we could have a welcome to Country at home games of the Newcastle Knights? What about a Warrior Dance at NSW Origin matches? After all NSW and QLD have 58% of Australian Indigenous population.

**3. Sponsorship**

Local businesses could sponsor a team at the October long weekend State-wide Indigenous Rugby league knockout competition. This festival is a great opportunity for Aboriginal people to reconnect and celebrate their culture and their achievements.

**4. Local Culture**

We could organise events at work during occasions such as Naidoc week to check out our knowledge of local Aboriginal traditional owners, Aboriginal languages, the meaning of Aboriginal place names in our region. You could even make it a fun event like Trivia!

**5. Partnerships**

Social welfare agencies should form partnerships with Aboriginal organisations to address the shocking numbers of children in need of child protection, the families who are homeless and the dramatic number of Aboriginal young men who see prison as a stepping stone to community life.

**6. Recognise Achievements**

We should celebrate and recognise the achievement of Aboriginal People in our region both past and present. The Hunter region is rich with Aboriginal history and we should be proud of this history. It also has heros that have achieved in sport, business and community work.