



MEDIA RELEASE

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NEW RECONCILIATION THE REAL THING OR JUST AN ELECTION STUNT?

Of course we welcome what is now bi-partisan support for a referendum to put something on Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders into the preamble to the constitution. The exact nature of that something is of course going to be very important.

However if Mr Howard thinks this will win him votes I am afraid those of us involved in providing services at the grassroots are not fooled said Mr Henry Councillor, the Chairperson of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO).

If Mr Howard is serious about his “new reconciliation” he and his ministers need to sit down with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups and start to listen to us. Dialogue and partnerships are required not emergency interventions and taskforces. Real funding that reflects need and supportive government departments, that acknowledge, respect and understand how we need and want to do things, are the real keys to reconciliation said Mr Councillor.

Neither party has committed to invest the estimated shortfall of \$460 million a year into primary health care that is needed (plus of course the catch up for the many years of under funding). Mr Howard you have always spoken of practical reconciliation where are the practical dollars we need so we can pay our doctors, nurses and health workers a fair wage and develop our service and thus improve the health of our mob?

This lack of investment in health services is a violation of Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights by the Australian Government. Article 12 is the “right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health”. The UN Committee who monitors the implementation of this binding covenant states that a “state which is unwilling to use the maximum of its available resources for the realization of the right to health is in violation of its obligation under Article 12”.

Mr Howard, as a gesture of good faith, will you now sign the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples?

Unfortunately after more than 10 years of a Howard government we have no reason to believe that “new reconciliation” is anything more than an election stunt. There is no evidence that there has been a real change in attitude. In fact quite the opposite.

Yesterday, as well as announcing “new reconciliation” Mr Howard also released a document on Australian History which he calls a road map for the teaching of Australian History in Years 9 and 10. Why Mr Howard is there no mention of the removal of Indigenous children from their parents in this document? Why is much made of the 2000 Sydney Olympics but no mention of the historic march across Sydney harbour bridge?

Despite this history I would like to take Mr Howard at his word. Believe that this really is the beginning of significant change. With support from all Australians we can make this promised Referendum as important a milestone in Reconciliation as the 1967 Referendum and the Wik decision.

So in spite of my doubts today is a day to celebrate because whichever government is in power after the election we will have a Referendum. I look forward to working with my fellow countrymen to make this a turning point. We have reached the bottom and can now only go up.

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