

First Australians need a hand-up not more hand-outs

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/aborigines-need-a-handup-not-more-handouts-20110228-1bbsz.html>

March 1, 2011

Improving standards and opportunities are a start, writes Warren Mundine.

THE Aboriginal people of NSW are a resilient, adaptable mob: we've been coping with new governments for 223 years. In the spirit of that history, I'd like to offer advice to the next state government.

When it comes to Aboriginal affairs, the No. 1 priority must be to lift Aboriginal people's socio-economic standards to at least match those of the wider NSW population - and to make this change sustainable.

It's a tall order. But it must be done.

The policy shift that needs to happen to make this change is simple. The new government's policies and programs must be firmly rooted in a paradigm of economic development, not a welfare mentality.

The next state government needs clear plans to move Aboriginal people from welfare to employment; to create an environment that sustains the development of indigenous enterprise; and to give Aboriginal people the same opportunities to participate in the wider state, national and global economy. The end goal of "closing the gap" is not to create a separate, isolated community but to ensure Aborigines enjoy the same benefits as everyone else.

How does government do this?

The first step is one that state and federal governments have already recognised: improving standards of literacy and numeracy from pre-school onwards, to match the rest of Australia and ensure Aborigines are competitive in the employment marketplace.

The second step is to continue to build on that base and provide opportunities for vocational and higher education to equip students with the skills they need to enter the workforce. Innovative programs such as the "1000 Accountants" project show the way: you can't run a successful business without a good accountant and financial knowledge.

Business will benefit from these outcomes, so it's only fair that they play their part too, and offer the sort of on-the-job training and mentoring opportunities that can't be provided in a classroom.

These sorts of approaches require a new way of looking at the relationship between the public and private sector that harnesses the knowledge of both groups to drive innovative solutions for Aboriginal people.

It should go without saying that it's essential to retain a distinct minister and Department of Aboriginal Affairs. This is not just a symbol of the importance of Aboriginal affairs, but a practical recognition of the breadth and depth of the issues.

There are several important policies already under way. Whoever is elected on March 26 must honour the bipartisan support displayed last year in debate on Aboriginal cultural heritage amendments to the National Parks and Wildlife Act, and work closely with the Aboriginal Culture and Heritage Reform working party to develop and implement new stand-alone Aboriginal cultural heritage legislation for NSW, bringing us into line with every other state.

Finally, I'd like to see all parties commit to improving levels of Aboriginal representation in State Parliament. It's shameful that only one Aboriginal person, Linda Burney, has sat in the oldest parliament in the land.

Any parliament will have its own mix of new and old faces who bring their own issues, constituencies and life-experiences to Macquarie Street. To those elected to the 55th Parliament of NSW, I'd say this: we have much common ground, perhaps more than many of you realise. Finding that consensus requires an open mind. I urge you: make an effort, not just assumptions.

Warren Mundine is the chief executive of NTSCORP (Native Title Service) and chairman of the Australian Indigenous Chamber of Commerce. A Bundjalung and Gumbaynggirr man, he is also a former national president of the ALP.