

## Practical steps closing the gap

*It is too early to relax hard-won alcohol restrictions*

SINCE 2008, the Rudd and Gillard governments have tied indigenous policy to metrics rather than the symbolism and rights agendas pursued by earlier Labor administrations. Australia still has far to go in redressing indigenous disadvantage, but the benefits of a long-term, practical approach to reconciliation are emerging slowly, as shown in the fifth Closing the Gap report.

Australians will be encouraged that improvements in antenatal care, access to health services, immunisation and neonatal care have reduced indigenous infant mortality and that 95 per cent of indigenous children in remote areas will be enrolled in preschool this year. Disappointing literacy and numeracy results, however, which declined in remote areas of the Northern Territory last year, highlight the difficult challenges remaining.

Improved education and job opportunities being accessed by thousands of Aborigines stem largely from the private sector and indigenous-run initiatives such as Noel Pearson's Cape York Partnerships. Led by the private sector, the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation is providing scholarships to educate

hundreds of indigenous students at leading schools and universities. Participation in the mainstream economy, including the mining industry, is the key to overcoming economic disadvantage. To that end, Andrew Forrest's Australian Employment Covenant has placed more than 10,000 Aborigines in jobs and secured commitments from employers to provide 60,000 jobs.

In a rare, united front yesterday, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott both pledged action against any moves by the Territory and Queensland governments to water down alcohol bans. As Queensland Premier Campbell Newman says, such bans are discriminatory. Anti-discrimination law, however, allows special measures to secure the advancement of particular groups. And as Mr Pearson said five years ago: "Ask the terrified kid huddling in the corner when there's a binge-drinking party going on down the hall. Ask them if they want a bit of paternalism." In redressing indigenous and white disadvantage in areas of entrenched unemployment and social dysfunction, alcohol and income management are useful tools where other measures have failed.