

Focus on beating disadvantage

The referendum should be a unifying, symbolic step

AT his visit to Arnhem Land yesterday to mark the 50th anniversary of the bark petitions that helped spark the land rights movement, Kevin Rudd backed Tony Abbott's previously announced support for a referendum to recognise Aborigines as the first Australians in the Constitution. Despite the political argy bargy, yesterday's commemoration was poignant. Following the Yirrkala petitions, the 1967 referendum saw the Constitution amended to include Aborigines in the census. A further symbolic amendment would make many Australians proud. But it would not diminish the harsh realities of indigenous disadvantage.

In his apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, Mr Rudd committed the commonwealth to a metrics approach to practical reconciliation, setting goals to close the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. These included halving indigenous infant mortality rates and the gap in literacy, numeracy and employment within a decade. He also aspired to closing the appalling 17-year gap in life expectancy within a generation. More than five years later, efficient policy implementation must remain the focus of the government and opposition, which share a philosophical commitment to practical engagement and private-sector involvement to help indigenous communities help themselves.

The most recent Closing the Gap report shows some of the 2008 targets are on track. This year, 95 per cent of young indigenous children are enrolled in preschool. Improvements in immunisation, and antenatal and neonatal care have reduced infant mortality. More students are completing high school. But better

attendance rates, especially in remote Northern Territory schools, will be essential to achieve acceptable literacy and numeracy standards.

Improvements in Aborigines' adult life expectancy are falling short of what is needed. And, unfortunately, resources have been wasted on white-run service providers and bureaucrats, for limited outcomes. Much of the improvement achieved has been driven by the private sector. The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, established with the backing of private companies in 2008, supports more than 400 indigenous students. Almost 100 per cent of its scholarship recipients complete Year 12 and move on to further study or productive work. Andrew Forrest's Australian Employment Covenant has helped place 14,000 indigenous people in jobs. But, regrettably, a recent report by Commonwealth Auditor-General Ian McPhee found the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations had not sustained its initial contribution to the AEC. Too many indigenous people's homes remain inadequate, especially in the NT. But a recent independent review of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing found it had exceeded expectations and was on track to provide 4200 new houses by 2018. Despite significant changes since 1963, the Yirrkala community that was again the focus of national attention yesterday is wracked by substance abuse and unemployment. Rightly, Galarrwuy Yunupingu is calling for a reserved seat at the development table for Aborigines, encouraging his people to co-operate, pick themselves up and pull themselves out of poverty. That is the surest path to the imperative of practical reconciliation.