

To close gap, we'll take brumby workhorses over show ponies

Indigenous equality can be achieved only by hard work and measuring outcomes for taxpayers

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AUSTRALIA is in desperate need of some mongrel. The shallow and toxic culture of populist, celebrity show ponies is eating away at the fabric of our national psyche and undermining the serious business of nation building and addressing serious areas of policy failure such as indigenous affairs. We desperately need more work horses and fewer show ponies.

Only days into this election campaign, there's been a lot of talk about funding cuts, including in indigenous affairs. But if we consider the wasted money in indigenous affairs, anyone proposing to cut useless programs and spend more on things that work should be given a medal, not ridicule.

The wastage in indigenous spending over the past 20 years is notorious. Government officials and departments themselves say that the outcomes of billions in spending has been dismal.

A Finance Department report commissioned by Kevin Rudd said "the history of commonwealth policy for indigenous Australians over the past 40 years is largely a story of good intentions, flawed policies, unrealistic assumptions, poor implementation, unintended consequences and dashed hopes. Strong policy commitments and large investments of government funding have too often produced outcomes which have been disappointing at best and appalling at worst".

The report found that spending of about \$3.5 billion annually, maintained over many years "has yielded dismally poor returns to date". This figure is just for spending by the commonwealth each year. Multiply this across the states and territories and the horror of this wastage should be an indictable offence.

Rudd is to be congratulated on

commissioning this report. Any political leader who talks about cutting this wastage deserves a medal, not ridicule, because in the end, you pay on outcomes so that taxpayers always get best value for their scarce dollar. If the spending is not achieving its intended outcomes, it is nothing more than waste and should not just be cut, it should be terminated.

In general the "closing the gap" results to date show very little improvement with poor results particularly in education, housing and employment.

Opposition indigenous affairs spokesman Nigel Scullion hit the nail on the head when he said that "progress in tracking indigenous disadvantage cannot be judged by good intentions or the amount of money that is spent. Governments should be judged on results."

But there is some good news.

Recently we have been hearing about progress in some indicators. For example, more indigenous children are gaining access to preschool or kindergarten than ever before, and encouraging signs are emerging in infant mortality. This is great news, and Labor's claim is that after "years of underinvestment and neglect", its investments are making a difference.

But with these encouraging green shoots of progress starting to emerge, now is exactly the time that we need to step up our efforts to attack indigenous inequality with fierce urgency. We need to be mongrel enough to strangle wastage and complacency and put our foot firmly on the throat of indigenous inequality. This is not a task for soft-headed flaky show ponies. We need hard-headed and courageous reformers with elbows out and a bit of mongrel. Any complacent policymakers, charity workers, politicians or others who approach indigenous inequality as business as usual and who strut around approaching this issue by doing nothing because they can't do everything need to get out of the way and make room for more workhorses who want to achieve hard, tangible, genuine outcomes. And this is where government pol-

icy and investment must be focused. We need to shut down what the opposition describes as the bureaucratic paradise in indigenous affairs, crazy experiments and miserable outcomes.

Leadership and success require hard heads and tough calls.

At the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, our core values include authenticity, tenacity and passion. We aim to be workhorses, not show ponies. Our charter of values makes it clear that we won't achieve anything worthwhile by plodding along going through the motions and doing what everyone else does. We are in a serious business and our focus is on results — we don't have time for feigned niceties. This is our "go hard or go home" mantra.



This hard-headed approach to our work has led to strong results in indigenous education — an area historically littered with well-intentioned expensive failures. AIEF has a retention and Year 12 completion rate of more than 90 per cent compared with a national average of 50 per cent for indigenous students. Federal education department statistics show that AIEF has the highest rate of year 12 completion in Australia, and almost 100 per cent of our Year 12 graduates transition into further study or employment.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that Year 12 attainment at secondary school leads to far better employment outcomes for indigenous Australians. Over 72 per cent of indigenous Australians with Year 12 attainment are employed, compared with only 42 per cent of those without Year 12 completion. At AIEF, nearly 100 per cent of our students who finish Year 12 transition into employment or further study. Unambiguous results that outperform all other metrics.

Our results have been achieved through the hard work of indigenous students, their families, teachers and schools around Australia.

The Rudd government says we won't close the gap without the certainty of long-term invest-

ments, or without partnerships between government and indigenous organisations like AIEF.

In 2009 the Australian government began investing in AIEF's indigenous scholarship program. AIEF has in turn more than matched this government investment by working closely with the private sector.

Our goal is to raise \$140 million to help us educate 7000 indigenous students, and to do this in joint venture between the Australian government and the private sector. This means we need an additional \$40m from government.

Almost every prime minister in our generation has regretted they didn't do more to address indigenous inequality.

We have a Prime Minister who made history through the apology to the stolen generations and backed it with tangible actions such as investing in AIEF. We also have an Opposition Leader who has pledged to spend time each year living in an indigenous community and announcing he would shift top-line responsibility for indigenous affairs to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, making him a "prime minister for indigenous affairs".

This is all great, but prime ministers will be judged by actions and outcomes. What Australians really want to see is what actions our future prime ministers plan to take to address indigenous inequality, and what results are achieved without wasting billions.

Up to now, we have had little in the way of indigenous policy or funding announcements in the election campaign. On the other hand, we have a groundhog day of failures in indigenous policy for 40 years, an endless stream of announced programs that don't deliver results and continual stories of wastage.

Australians will be closely watching the policy announcements for indigenous education in the election.

We will see whether tangible and scalable evidence-based programs like AIEF get the support they need to be able to educate thousands of indigenous children. We will see if workhorses prevail over show ponies.

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