

Closing the gap, much yet to do

Improvements in Aborigines' life expectancy are welcome

PRACTICAL reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians was always going to be a long, complex road. Improvements — some incremental, others significant — in life expectancy, child mortality, employment and secondary schooling completion rates detailed in a new Productivity Commission report, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*, are welcome. They affirmed the value of the metrics-based “tough love” approach broadly supported by both major parties and the sterling efforts indigenous people are making to help themselves. The report found the most effective alcohol management plans were those negotiated at a local level. Such initiatives, and the work of non-government bodies such as the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation and the Australian Employment Covenant, should continue for as long as it takes if Aborigines are to enjoy the prosperity and opportunities other Australians take for granted.

The report highlighted serious problems in need of policy and practical reforms. These related to indigenous

crime, family and community violence, lack of improvement in basic literacy and numeracy in the early years of school and a rise in the number of psychological problems being diagnosed. While alarming, the spiralling number of indigenous child protection orders suggests authorities are doing more to combat the problem.

Data collected for the report should be a useful road map for state governments, the Northern Territory, and the commonwealth in allocating resources. Despite a marked improvement in housing, for example, more than half of Aborigines in the NT continue to live in overcrowded conditions. These, the report noted, undermined their physical and emotional well being.

The commission report shows the path to practical reconciliation often involves two steps forward and one back. Aborigines' rising life expectancies, increases in post-school qualifications, more jobs and reduced welfare dependency, however, are strong signs for hope. They are also good reasons to persevere and refine current policies.