



AMOS AIKMAN

Aspiring Aboriginal politician and activist Philip Harris, 18, outside the Legislative Assembly in Darwin

Recognition, land 'first steps' to reconciliation

GINA RUSHTON

THE path to reconciliation might be paved with good intentions but little has improved for many Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders over the past decade, says 18-year-old Phillip Harris.

It's seven years today since prime minister Kevin Rudd apologised to the Stolen Generations, which included Mr Harris's grandmother.

"Kevin Rudd said in 2007 that for the next 10 years the focus would be on life expectancy, employment, education, health

and economic opportunities," said Mr Harris, who will begin a degree majoring in political science and indigenous studies at the University of Queensland this year.

"It's been seven years now and not enough improvement has been made."

The teenager echoed the findings of the seventh Closing the Gap report released this week, which showed the government was not on track to meet half of its committed targets and had failed to ensure that 95 per cent of indigenous four-year-olds in remote Australia had access to early childhood education by 2013.

Mr Harris left Darwin for Brisbane to attend St Joseph's Nudgee College on an Australian Indigenous Education Foundation Scholarship.

"Truthfully I didn't understand a lot about the Stolen Generations until college, where I actually learned about my culture and how unique it really is," he said.

Now committed to becoming an advocate for land rights, he believes the first step in practical reconciliation is constitutional recognition for the first peoples.

"I think it will give us more pride and political authority," he said. "I want to campaign for free-

holds because with these 99-year-olds we can't take care of future generations. It is a big deal for us economically and would give us more opportunities."

Recognise campaign co-director Tanya Hosch remembers being in the parliament on the day of the apology with her five-month-old daughter, Marley.

"I remember feeling grateful to have the confidence that I was not going to have to fight to protect her from being removed from me," Ms Hosch said.

She agrees that constitutional recognition is the first step towards true reconciliation.