

Winners' message for Albanese: we want your job



NOAH YIM

Tia Rigney and Thomas King know what they would do if they were prime minister.

Tia is all about changing a system that's let down Indigenous Australian children and giving people "the tools and support" to break the cycle, while Thomas would zero in on the cost of living in regional communities like his on Thursday Island.

"If I was prime minister, I would focus on creating a global network of Indigenous populations to tackle present and future challenges together rather than separately," Tia said. "Think of everything we could learn by working together and listening to different perspectives."

Thomas points to the price of bread on Thursday Island—\$8.50 a loaf, he says—and rental costs that lead to "three to four families" sharing "a three-bedroom unit".

The two students put their ideas to the actual Prime Minister on Wednesday. They were with Education Minister Jason Clare, who was telling them about Barack Obama's visit in 2011, when Anthony Albanese walked in.

Tia, 21, who had flown in from Melbourne after winning the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation's "If I was Prime Minister ..." competition for its scholarship recipients, spoke of her excitement at meeting the Prime Minister. "He seems like a busy person," she said.

Thomas said: "He seemed kind, he was polite."

They were also invited into the Prime Minister's office, where they met Housing Minister Clare O'Neil. They had met Peter Dutton earlier on Wednesday and on the walk to the Prime Minister's office they ran into opposition Indigenous affairs spokeswoman Jacinta Nampijinpa Price.

Thomas, 14, whose grandfather's brother was Eddie Mabo, shook Mr Albanese's hand and told him he was a Year 10 student at St Augustine's College in Cairns. He said he would like to study marine biology at university.

Tia told Mr Albanese that she was majoring in anthropology at Monash University and that she had decided her life's mission would be to help protect children.

Mr Albanese reminisced about visiting the Torres Strait—Thomas told Mr Albanese his family was from Mer Island—and when Thomas raised the issue of price inequality in the regions, Mr Albanese talked about a recent government announcement about capping prices of essential products in regional stores.

"It's a big issue, there's no reason why you should pay more on Thursday Island than in Cairns—it's not fair," Mr Albanese said.

The AIEF's "If I was Prime Minister ..." competition has been running for 10 years, launched after a Newspoll found two thirds of Australians believed they wouldn't see an Indigenous prime minister in their lifetime.

Tia said after her meeting with Mr Albanese that she was not sure where her future would take her but that the experience made her see politics differently.

"On TV ... it seems very formal and scripted. But here—in this courtyard—people are having lunch," she said with a laugh.