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Indigenous kid won't be PM? We'll see

EXCLUSIVE

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When barely one in four Australians don't expect to live to see an Indigenous prime minister, how do you rise to that daunting challenge?

The answer rests with the next generation of Indigenous go-getters – scholarship students such as Alana Sibley, 15, a Kalkadoon and GuGu-Yalanji girl from north

Queensland's Palm Island, and her Year 11 classmates at St Patrick's College, Townsville: Torres Strait Islander Taisie Sailor and Destiny Bedourie of Boulia.

The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation cheekily invoked the question of whether the nation was ready for a black PM in a full-page advertisement in *The Australian* on Wednesday, aimed at renewing debate on the advancement of First Nations people. The ad, featuring the painted image of a prime ministerial-looking Indigenous woman

standing alongside the Australian, Aboriginal and Islander flags, declared: "This will never happen."

It was a nod to the finding by The Australian's pollster, Newspoll, that only 23 per cent of voters believe an Indigenous person will get to The Lodge in the foreseeable future, down from 31 per cent in 2013. One-in-two say an Indigenous prime minister won't be elected during their lifetime.

Undaunted, Alana said: "It's really unfortunate to hear that, because I definitely do believe that we're just as equal as anyone else.

Nowadays, schools and different types of education have opened up to accepting Indigenous kids so that Indigenous children are getting more education that they need, that they deserve, to fulfil those big roles in the community.

"There is really no excuse that we can't have a voice in our community because we've checked all the boxes and it's just ignorance at this point ... if people still think that we're not capable."

The girls board at "St Pat's", which has a proud history of well-

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coming Indigenous students from some of the nation's most far-flung outposts. Alana hopes to study zoology at university. Taisie, also 15, wants to join the navy and perhaps become the first Indigenous woman to captain an Australian warship. And after that? "I just want to become a good leader for my friends, my family," she said.

Destiny, 16, of the Pitta Pitta and Waluwarra people from central west Queensland, aspires to qualify as a mechanical engineer, one of the more demanding courses at uni. "I think anyone can con-

quer their dreams," she said. AIEF executive director Andrew Penfold conceded the bar was set high for Indigenous young people, but he hoped the uber-reliable Newspoll was wrong. "We know that Indigenous Australians continue to face significant disadvantage in this country, but education is the game changer," he said.

"Not every Indigenous student wants to be prime minister, but everyone deserves the opportunity to succeed."

The AIEF is currently assisting more than 1500 Indigenous students, from 400 communities nationwide, to complete Year 12 or

tertiary studies. Some 90 per cent of them graduate from high school at a minimum, exceeding the national average.

Tremane Baxter-Edwards, 19, is upfront about his ambition to enter politics and become Australia's first Indigenous prime minister. As the young Ngarininy-Walmajarri man told *The Australian* in 2024, speaking from his traditional country in Western Australia's Kimberley region: "I want to be prime minister because that's the best way to change people's lives for the better. I'm not here to impose myself on others. I'm not here to, you know, to

sugar-coat things. If you want to take me seriously, then please take me seriously."

"I very much represent the values of a lot of forgotten people. I certainly represent the values of a marginalised person, because I've come from that position of marginalisation. Whether it's me as the first Indigenous prime minister or, hopefully, someone sooner, we should give that proposition the title it deserves."

The Newspoll findings on Indigenous leadership, arising from polling conducted last October, confirm the electorate is divided on whether First Nations people

face significant disadvantage. Some 46 per cent agreed they did – 43 per cent disagreed. Labor voters (60 per cent) were more likely to accept the hardship proposition, than Coalition voters (25 per cent). Women (49 per cent) were also more likely to agree with it than men (43 per cent).

Asked whether Indigenous advantage would be overcome in their lifetime, 48 per cent of respondents said this was unlikely compared with 34 per cent who thought it was likely. The split when the question was last polled in 2013 was 52-48 per cent in favour of "unlikely".