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6 April 2009

Australia Moves to Higher Ground

Minister Macklin's speech on the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was excellent.

I received immediate message from Indigenous Peoples representatives from around the world who praised the government's statement.

While words are not actions, there should be no doubt that the government has carefully chosen words to signify the changes in policies that we have been waiting for so long to hear.

Commissioner Tom Calma encapsulated this well; he described the statement as a 'watershed moment' in Australia's history.

Calma pointed out that the government has now committed itself to a number of key initiatives - making the National Apology; providing substantial funding boosts to close the life expectancy gap; and committing to the establishment of a new national representative body.

I will add to that list the commitment by the government to reintroduce the Racial Discrimination Act into operation throughout all of Australia, although that should happen immediately and not in September 2009.

My own analogy of the moment is that the government, having already taken the first step to apologise to the Stolen Generation and signal a new direction, has now taken the second step, thus beginning a journey.

While many of us will still want to criticise the government for what it has not done, and for being short on substance, I want to highly praise the commitment the government has given.

Having expected a begrudging acknowledgement of the Declaration by the government, if there was to be an acknowledgement at all, I am very pleased to see comments such as:

'Today, Australia changes its position. Today, Australia gives our support to the Declaration. We do this in the spirit of re-setting the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and building trust.'

I am not persuaded to my positive reaction because the Minister has personally mentioned me in the speech - I am too 'seasoned' now to be flattered by such things - I am pleased to see the government has decided to accept the rights of Indigenous Peoples as the basis for building understanding and trust.

Of course a lot has to be done, and this is only the second step of a long journey, but the government is open to partnership with the Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, and this is what we have been asking for.

The Declaration already carries with it a framework for partnership and development, in the context of indigenous self-determination.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we have to learn what that means and how to act as 'peoples' and not individuals.

The national representative body now assumes a new importance and its establishment and operations will be put to the test by communities who have struggled long and hard to survive to get to this stage.

Over the coming weeks and months we are going to hear a lot being said about relations between government and communities.

It is a time to listen, learn and contribute.

Most of all it is a time to encourage better government policies and practices through real engagement.

Having experienced of late classic bad government practice on indigenous policy, it is now time to 'make hay while the sun shines'.

The government has presented an open and honest position, stating 'We show our faith in a new era of relations between states and Indigenous peoples grounded in good faith, goodwill and mutual respect.'

The government knows that it will be held accountable to this new era.

Minister Macklin referred to Australia's international obligations under existing human rights treaties, such as the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The government accepts that 'Australia's existing obligations under international human rights treaties are mirrored in the Declaration's fundamental principles'.

In the past month Australia has been chastised by two human rights treaty bodies and chances are that it will be criticised again by a third treaty body next May, when it comes before the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

However I am certain that observer delegations to that Committee session are going to support that Australia be praised for its support for the Declaration and other related positive actions.

As human rights defenders, it is time for us to change tools from weapons of attack to our building tools.

There is no way the government is going to find a way forward without positive assistance from the communities and their leaders.

I even have the hope that the Government of Australia will now become a voice at the international level to advocate for Indigenous Peoples in other parts of the world.

This is one good way to keep the government accountable in Australia.

In conclusion, Australia has now unconditionally supported the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and has declared that it has taken 'another important step to make sure that the flawed policies of the past will never be re-visited'.

Here! Here!

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The Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA) is a community organisation owned and managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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