



Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd.

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Media Release:
Bad news about the mainstream media's reporting on Indigenous Australians
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The practice of using bad news to sell newspapers disadvantages Indigenous Australians. Often the bad news is all that is presented in media sources. The mainstream media spotlight on the Indigenous Australian community in the Northern Territory surrounding child abuse is a case in point.

Aboriginal people constitute 2.4% of the Australian population and 0.6% of the Victorian population. This means that any claim for justice, or a fair go, will require mainstream support if it is to be sustainable.

On those rare occasions when Aboriginal people win recognition in the Courts, or in legislation, the political power of the majority can reverse, or water down, the effect of that decision. The recent Commonwealth Government Northern Territory legislation to roll back the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth) is a recent example.

The bad news for Indigenous Australians is that unless the voting population is informed about Aboriginal Affairs in a balanced manner then the voting population will not question the Government and demand justice for Indigenous Australians.

VALS acknowledges that some mainstream newspapers have published opinion pieces of Indigenous Australians about the Northern Territory intervention relating to child abuse. However, none of these pieces have featured on the front page. VALS argues positive pieces about Indigenous Australians should have a prominent place in the media to help counter a power imbalance between the Government and Indigenous Australians in the use of the media. Unfortunately, Indigenous Australians are not only misrepresented by the Government in the following manner, but also the mainstream media:

- Indigenous Australians are inherently bad and cannot be trusted to make decisions for themselves.
- Indigenous Australian organisations are wasteful and corrupt.
- Aboriginal culture is irrelevant.
- The flaws in the Northern Territory intervention should be overlooked because of the emergency status of the problem of child abuse in the Indigenous Australian community. Calling something an emergency justifies the Government doing whatever it likes.
- The stance of Indigenous Australians who are questioning the Northern Territory intervention and calling for consultation and community involvement is a stance against the protection of children's rights. Critics of the Government are soft on child abuse. Consulting Aboriginal people wastes valuable time.
- Indigenous Australians in Victoria are less important, or even less Aboriginal, than Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory. The Commonwealth Government

only has responsibility to assist remote Aboriginals. Aboriginals in the South-East States, or in cities, are not really Aboriginal .

- The valuable contributions that Victorian Indigenous Australian organisations make is irrelevant to a discussion of Aboriginal Affairs.

Australians deserve to know that just as there are problems in the Indigenous Australian community, there are problems in the Government handling of such problems. Rather than the above incorrect messages being publicised, the following messages should be given prominence:

- Racism (direct, indirect and through ignorance) is the cause of policies and laws that target Indigenous Australians only.
- Consultation is important in order to avoid mistakes of the past and intervention based on community involvement is more likely to work.
- The mantra that the old ways did not work should not be a license to ignore successes stories, ignore critics of the Government and make a mockery of democracy.
- The Government's label of emergency status of a situation is not justification for throwing the human rights of others out the window.
- If people took the time to enquire into the positive things that are happening in the lives of the Victorian Australian community, often as a result of the work of Indigenous Australian organisations, the vast majority of non-Indigenous Australians would be overwhelmed. See the following for further information:
 - Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation publication 'Communities Working for Health and Wellbeing: Success stories from the Aboriginal community controlled health sector in Victoria' (2007) available at: <http://www.crcch.org.au/publications/downloads/VACCHO-Successes-Booklet-hi-res-screen.pdf>;
 - Message Stick on ABC TV: <http://www.abc.net.au/message/>;
 - Koori Mail: <http://www.koorimail.com/>;
 - National Indigenous Times: <http://www.nit.com.au/>;
 - 3KND (3 Kool 'N' Deadly): 1503 AM.

VALS is alarmed by the constancy of imbalanced messages about Indigenous Australians in the mainstream media. VALS calls for all mainstream media sources to provide a much more balanced representation of Indigenous Australians so that the Australian public can make up their own minds from an informed perspective.

VALS calls on non-Indigenous Australians to think twice before they believe that mainstream media representations of Indigenous Australians, that perpetuate negative stereotypes, represent both sides of the story. Also, VALS calls on non-Indigenous Australians to stand up and be counted for supporting the cause of Indigenous Australians. VALS calls on funders to consider directing their money towards promoting positive images of Indigenous Australians and home truths.

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