



Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd.

Head Office:
6 Alexandra Parade,
P.O. Box 218
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Phone: (03) 9419 3888 (24 Hrs)
Fax: (03) 9419 6024
Toll Free: 1800 064 865

**Media release: We say it again- Listen to us, Work with us!
8 August 2007**

The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Limited released a media release titled 'Listen to us, work with us' on 27 June 2007. The media release was in response to Prime Minister John Howard's announcement of an emergency response to sexual abuse in the Indigenous Australian community in the Northern Territory. It is with disappointment that VALS finds itself having to say again 'listen to us, work with us'.

VALS welcomes the commitment of Mr Howard and Mr Rudd to better protect Aboriginal children. However, the Bills relating to the emergency response that are currently before Parliament suggest a 'tough' approach to sexual abuse is appropriate when in actual fact a smart and sustained approach is required. It appears that the Government is rushing the Bills through Parliament without sufficient opportunity for Parliamentary debate or discussion by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

If the Government was to turn around and ask Indigenous Australians how to attempt to deal with problems in the Indigenous Australian community many community members would say the following:

Fundamental to success of the emergency response is how the commitment the Government is making will be managed and implemented. In order for this commitment to become truly effective it is vital that the Government and Opposition acknowledge the importance of working in partnership with Indigenous Australians. Also, it is important to acknowledge the work done so far by Indigenous Australians to tackle child abuse and its causes. This is commonsense.

Honest acknowledgement by the Government of the effort of Indigenous Australians to address problems, and a commitment to work in partnership with Indigenous Australians, is essential to any successful plan to better protect children. Commitment to working cooperatively is a way of avoiding reinventing the wheel and not repeating past mistakes. It is a way to ensure child protection improves sooner rather than later.

Recently the extent of community knowledge, skill and commitment to better protecting children has been reaffirmed by the work of the following and many others:

- Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory Preliminary Response to the Australian Government's proposal;
- Secretariat of the National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Association;
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations which is showcased in a publication titled 'Communities Working for Health and Wellbeing: Success stories from the Aboriginal community controlled health sector in Victoria'.

We disagree that a racially based withholding of Government benefits to parents irrespective of any wrong doing can be justified legally or morally. Punitive sanctions should be a last resort, based on a verifiable behaviour or omission (not skin colour or community membership) and be appealable.

Measures to improve child protection need not include changes to land ownership or the permit system. Changes to land ownership and the permit system, temporary or otherwise, are more likely to reduce community safety than increase it. The Government has not explained the rationale for such changes which suggests that they are peripheral to the child safety objectives at best and a significant handicap at worst.

Child protection and community safety objectives are too important to be compromised by Government land rights hobby horses or by a failure to work respectfully with Indigenous Australians.

For further comment contact:

Frank Guivarra (Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Limited) - 03 9419 3888