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media release

NEW SOUTH WALES ABORIGINAL LAND COUNCIL

State should appoint Aboriginal Children's Commissioner

19 May 2010

The Chairwoman of the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, Bev Manton, today urged Premier Kristina Keneally to appoint an Aboriginal Children's Commissioner – a move warranted because of the appalling incarceration and removal rates of Aboriginal children throughout the State.

“The situation is getting worse – we must avoid the possibility of creating another Stolen Generation,” Chairwoman Manton said.

“In the juvenile justice system alone the high incarceration rate of young Aboriginal people is deeply worrying, and I applaud Juvenile Justice Minister, Graham West's announcement that he favours a major overhaul of the juvenile justice system.

“I acknowledge Mr West's courage in flagging the need for such an overhaul.”

Chairwoman Manton said she appreciated the State already had a Commissioner for Children.

“Most states do. What we don't have is a specific, independent Commissioner for Aboriginal children.

“God knows we need one.

“If such a position was created it would, I believe, work as a realistic and positive move by the Government to close the appalling gap in Aboriginal disadvantage.

“In NSW the situation is a disgrace.

“Aboriginal children account for 31 percent of those living in out-of-home care, for example, which is more than seven times higher than for other Australian children.

“And this statistic is even more alarming when you consider Aboriginal children make up only 4 percent of the total child population in NSW.”

Chairwoman Manton said Aboriginal people were appalled that last year over 4,300 Aboriginal children had been taken from their parents.

“I know the State Government is trying. I know it is doing much to change the situation. But quite frankly the situation is getting worse – not better.”

Chairwoman Manton said the appointment of a specific Aboriginal Children’s Commissioner would be a first in Australia.

“But it would be a courageous first,” she said. “I believe the appointment of an Aboriginal Children’s Commissioner guided by a properly appointed and resourced permanent Aboriginal Advisory Group would, over time, make a valuable contribution to policy development to address the very serious and too often systemic issues that are impacting on young Aboriginal people throughout the State”.

Chairwoman Manton said one immediate task would be for the Children’s Commissioner to work with appropriate agencies to conduct a State-wide audit of long-standing community programs that helped young people.

“While the Federal Government is being urged to establish a National Commissioner for Children and Young People as the Chairwoman of the State’s major Aboriginal representative body, I am arguing for an initiative that will help our young people in Australia’s most populated State, the state where most Aboriginal people live.

“We have a Premier who has already shown she is not afraid to make courageous political decisions. This is one such major opportunity to help some of the most disadvantaged residents of New South Wales.

‘I urge the Premier to consider it as a matter of urgency. It will, after all, save lives’.

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