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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INDEPENDENCE

# media release

## NEW SOUTH WALES ABORIGINAL LAND COUNCIL

14 May 2010

### **Rudd government squanders first term in office**

The Rudd government has squandered its first term in office by delivering three federal budgets which have widened the gap between black and white Australians, says the Chairwoman of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council.

Ms Bev Manton noted that while Aboriginal people endure some of the worst life statistics on earth, the Rudd government budget handed down on Tuesday night delivered a cut in real terms to Indigenous affairs spending.

“Last year, the Commonwealth government allocated 1.42 percent of the total federal budget towards Indigenous affairs and ‘Closing the Gap’,” Ms Manton said

“This year the treasurer cut Indigenous affairs spending to just 1.38 percent of the total budget.

“The Rudd government appears to have raised the white flag in its stated aim of ‘Closing the Gap’ between black and white Australians.

“It’s no wonder the Prime Minister’s own annual report card on ‘Closing the Gap’ – which is supposed to be delivered on the first sitting day of the parliamentary year but has never actually made its own deadline – has reported year-on-year that the government is going backwards.

“A fifth grader would know that you can’t ‘Close the Gap’ in life expectancy, in health, in housing, in education if you don’t first close the funding gap.”

Chairwoman Manton said it was particularly disappointing the gap had widened under Labor, given the Rudd government’s stated focus on improving black disadvantage.

“This government’s mantra has been to ‘Close the Gap’. But under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s watch it’s actually widened.

“This is their final budget before the federal election. I’m sorry to say that the Rudd government has squandered the chance during its first term in office to make a real difference to the lives of Aboriginal Australians. This budget is yet another missed opportunity, particularly in NSW.”

Ms Manton said the Rudd government had made the same mistake as its predecessor – assuming that Aboriginal disadvantage only endures in remote areas.

“Aboriginal people living in remote regions like Cape York and Central Australia have real problems, but has the Prime Minister had a look at the challenges confronting Aboriginal people in NSW lately?”

“If the Prime Minister wants to see disadvantage, he only has to drive through any discrete Aboriginal Community, any former Mission or Reserve close to any town or city.

“The problems confronting Aboriginal people in NSW are enormous.

“It’s why the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, in partnership with the NSW Government, has allocated \$200 million to providing basic water and sewerage facilities.

“It’s why we’ve allocated \$30 million to an Education Scholarship fund. So that Aboriginal people in NSW have a better chance at a reasonable start in life.”

“These initiatives from the NSW Aboriginal Land Council should be complementing services from the federal government. But as the Rudd government’s third successive budget shows, we’re supplementing them.”

### **Mining super profit’s tax**

“There is one group in Australia which have not benefitted from the mining resources boom – Aboriginal people.

“While mining companies have made record profits, Aboriginal people have died at record rates, and endured record levels of disadvantage.

“Aboriginal people around Australia would welcome a commitment from the Rudd Government that if it should receive Senate approval for its resources super profits tax, a specified amount should be set aside to boost the funding provided to Aboriginal people across all areas of government.”

### **Smoking tax**

“I am a non-smoker, but I’m in the minority. More than half the Aboriginal population smokes.

“A further tax on smokers will impact disproportionately on Aboriginal people, and not just on their hip-pockets.

“Aboriginal people are far less likely and able to access programs that assist smokers to quit.

“A fair and equitable proportion of the additional revenue raised by the Rudd government in a smoking tax should be directed to Indigenous-specific programs aimed at assisting Aboriginal people to quit.”

### **National Congress of Australia – Establishment**

“The Rudd government has provided \$29 million over five years for the establishment of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples,” Ms Manton said.

“Not only is the funding inadequate, but the way in which it is being provided is inappropriate.

“A drip-feed funding model is designed to ensure that Aboriginal leaders who seek to make a difference for their people remain under the control of government.

“Any Aboriginal organisation reliant on federal funds to exist cannot effectively advocate in the interests of its people. Organisations in this situation that speak out do so at their peril.

“The original model put forward by Aboriginal people asked for a single injection of funds to enable it to establish itself as a genuinely independent body.

“This budget provision is further evidence of the refusal of government to allow Aboriginal people, genuine self-determination.”

### **Income quarantining**

“It is regrettable that the big ticket item in the federal government’s budget is \$410 million to extend income management across the Northern Territory,” Chairwoman Manton said.

“This money will go to bureaucrats – not Aboriginal people - for the sole purpose of escaping charges from Aboriginal leaders and the United Nations that the Northern Territory Emergency Response is a racist measure.

“It’s a big price to pay for better publicity, but income management will still be used to target Aboriginal people for political reasons.

“ It’s distressing that the Rudd government has still not had the courage to abolish a policy brought in by its predecessors for political reasons, despite the fact the evidence shows income quarantining is harming Aboriginal people.

“It’s also distressing that the government would direct so much extra money towards it given the outcomes. Imagine the good that \$410 million could have done in Aboriginal communities in NSW, who still suffer without proper access to housing and infrastructure?”

### **Boost to Home Ownership Program (HOP)**

The transfer of \$56 million to the Home Ownership Program is a positive initiative, said Chairwoman Manton.

“The Home Ownership on Indigenous Lands program (HOIL), launched by the previous minister Mal Brough, has been a complete disaster,” said Ms Manton.

“You can count on one hand the number of people who’ve accessed HOIL in the past four years.

“\$107 million of taxpayer’s funds have been quarantined for Aboriginal people in remote regions who have no capacity, and in many cases not even a desire, to purchase a home.

“It speaks volumes about a lack of government understanding of the needs of Aboriginal people in remote Australia.

“At the same time, you’ve got hundreds of Aboriginal people sitting on a lengthy Home Ownership Program waiting list in urban and regional areas who’ve been unable to access a program that will help them purchase a house.

“Transferring at least some of that money to shorten the waiting list of the Home Ownership Program would be welcome, if not long overdue.

“It will enable more Aboriginal people in NSW, who have jobs and who participate in a real economy, to build a brighter future for themselves and their children.

“After almost three years in office, it’s nice to see Minister Macklin has finally plucked up the courage to make alterations to a disastrous Liberal Party policy.

“Let’s hope she doesn’t stop there.”

### **Boost to Aboriginal legal Aid**

“The Rudd government has provided a \$34.9 million boost to Aboriginal legal services.

“This is a very welcome development, and congratulations should go to Attorney General Robert McClelland and in particular Neil Gillespie, the head of the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement and the man who has advocated on this issue so strongly for several years.

“It was a government promise prior to the election to boost funding to Aboriginal Legal Aid. It took the Rudd government three budgets to do it, but I’m pleased they’ve finally done so.

“The incarceration rates of my people are a national disgrace – black males in New South Wales are locked up at a rate five times greater than black males in Apartheid South Africa. In Western Australia, the figure is eight times greater.

“The NSW Aboriginal Land Council has recently launched our Books Behind Bars initiative, aimed at reducing incarceration rates. It’s heartening to see the penny has finally dropped for the Rudd government as well.”

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