

The more things change, the more Perkins' 1993 address rings as

As Australia enters the decade of the 90's we find ourselves as a nation struggling to maintain our equilibrium in a rapidly changing world.

There is no doubt Australia has lost its relatively high standard of living and has become increasingly debt burdened, both to overseas creditors and within Australia itself.

It is also clear that other countries, particularly many of our Asian neighbours, have a booming and immensely competitive industrial and commercial society. From a layman's point of view something is drastically wrong with current economic policy and planning that has allowed this nation to become extremely vulnerable in an increasingly complex, competitive and fast changing world.

It is clear the time has come, in consideration of our high unemployment, high overseas debt, falling living standards, rising prices and decreasing productivity, for the Australian people to decide that in the future we must elect politicians of competence, vision and integrity.

Surely the greatest public health pollution that exists in Australia today can be seen in the conduct of a number of our politicians - past and present of all parties. They take up needed space. This is the pollution that is the most insidious and ultimately fatal to any society of people.

The many poor quality politicians operating in many of our parliaments is a disgrace. The irony is that we, the Aboriginal people, voted for them.

Aboriginal people like everyone else in Australia have felt the negative outcomes of the economic scandals that have affected and still affects most States in the Commonwealth in recent years. Subsequently such economic activity must have reverberations throughout the world, not only with our trading partners and our competitors, but also with the nations at large.

It must be difficult for them and as it is with us to understand the often unsavoury activities of some of our banks, previously of high reputation, and our many once high flying extravagant entrepreneurs. Surely our international reputation has been damaged for generations to come. Sad to say they are all whites. In this context is Mabo such a calamity as some suggest.

What bewilders me, as an Aboriginal, is how people who have power, education, authority and collective responsibility, could do this to our young and dynamic nation.

They are destroying our future - for both blacks and whites.

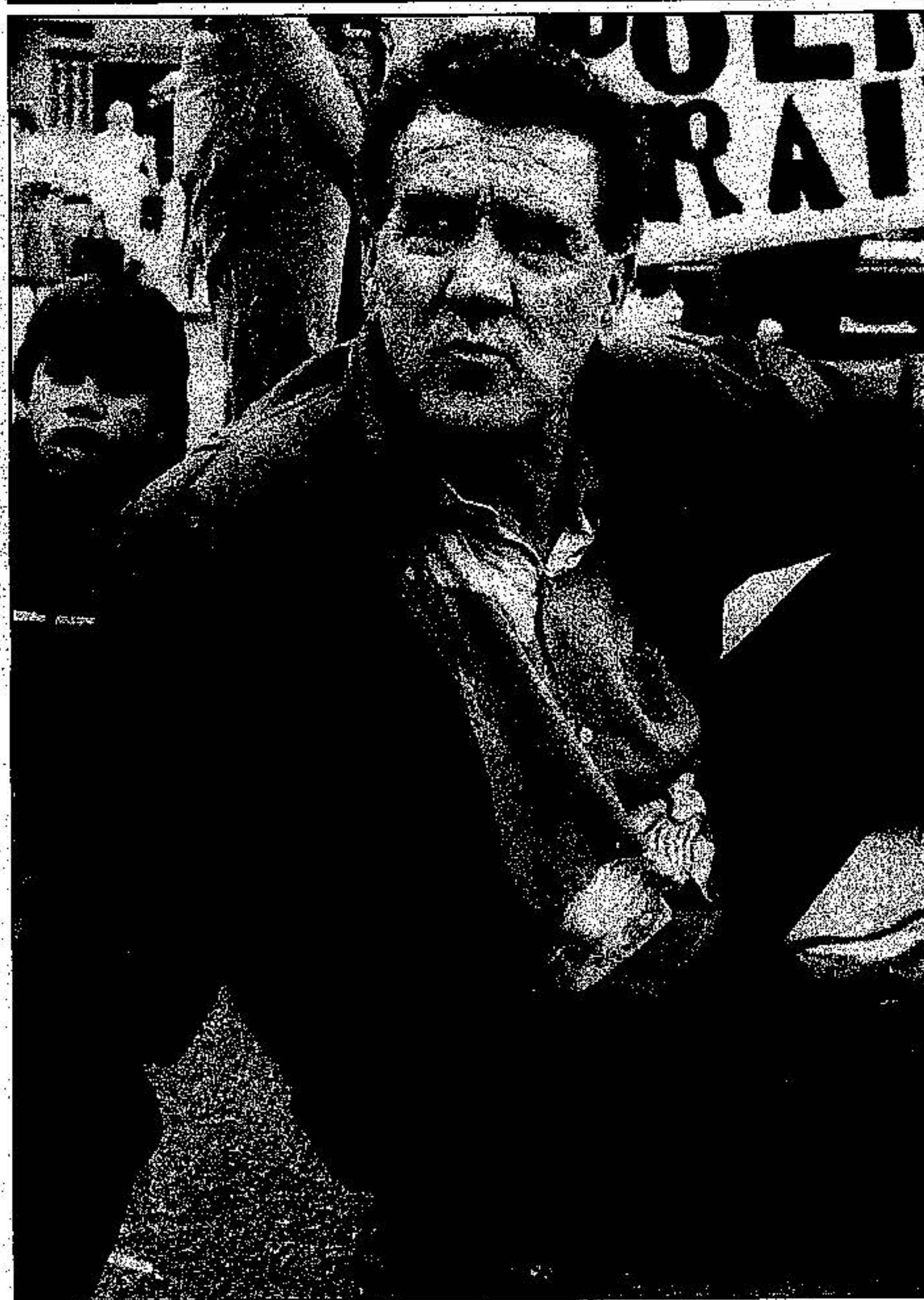
In all of this economic turmoil it remains patently clear that the Aboriginal people of this country are seeking remedies for the solution of our problems from governments, politicians and bureaucrats who cannot even manage their own responsibilities, even with the best of facilities, education, financial and personnel services.

From an Aboriginal view point, our mistake over the years has been to look towards the white people in positions of influence, to solve our problems. This has been our fundamental error. Recent history tells us what we should have known over 200 years ago. It is amazing to me, that we, the Aboriginal people, have not yet absorbed this fundamental fact. The point is that white people in responsible positions are no better than us, in fact worse, considering educational background, at managing or solving difficult individual or community problems.

In regard to Aboriginal groups in Australia it is clear that since the early 1980s Aboriginal organisations have become preoccupied with following agendas established by others.

For example, the economic agenda has been established by the Federal and State governments, while the political agenda has been set by the media and other sectional interests. In the case of the bureaucracy, it is obvious that where once Aboriginal groups were able to display a self-interest separate from the mainstream Australian society, today

Dr Charles Perkins opening address at Australia's First International Indigenous and Economic Conference in 1993 in Alice Springs as part of the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples is a fascinating insight into how this leader of Australia's First Peoples believed Indigenous Australians could advance and grow. His address was at a time when Paul Keating was Prime Minister of Australia and Dr Perkins' address highlights that despite everything, and more than 20 years later, nothing much has changed. However, his seven steps to addressing the inequality suffered by First Nations Peoples remain as relevant today as they did then. The challenge is where are the First Nations leaders to follow in Dr Perkins' footsteps?



Dr Charles Perkins ... A vision for First Nations People. His seven point plan in 1993 is as true today as it was then but who is going to follow in his footsteps?

their social consciousness has been totally absorbed by the government and as such, by government processes.

In that sense, it seems that we Aboriginal people have lost both our identity and our purpose and have contributed to our own alienation and dependency.

This is due, in part, to the pursuit of survival economic goals. In addition, the blame is partly contained within the role monopolised by government (consciously or otherwise) which determines the political processes which purge the political and democratic aggression from those organisations and individuals through which it most achieves its goals.

Likewise, the silence from many Aboriginal organisations and individuals, most able to protest on a broad range of issues, shows clearly their dependency on government monies for their survival. The later effect of such a coercive process is that, Aboriginal affairs policies, are not properly debated, and, as such impossible to articulate. We are a captive peoples as never before in our history.

A clear expression in the negative of this point is the lack of a national representative independent organisation for our people.

Considering the previous scenario let me now suggest some strategies for consideration which may assist to create a template for our future the healthy Australia.

The key elements are all interconnected in a total mosaic of Aboriginal affairs underpinned on the one hand with our culture and on the other with Aboriginal affairs economics.

1. The first is the Aboriginal economy specifically and what we can do to remove the concept and perception of "welfare" from Aboriginal affairs.

Obviously in the general welfare services area this is not entirely possible and nor should it be.

In almost all areas of Aboriginal activity we are funded by the government, or quasi-government bodies. We have scarcely moved away from the annual dependent and humiliating welfare budget process. Our economy is in reality a false economy. This arrangement can be terminated or drastically

reduced at any time by any government. We must therefore consider several options.

Importantly Aboriginal people should be aware of this false economy which forms the basis of Aboriginal affairs in this country. The economic lifeline is maintained only at the discretion of politicians and a fickle public. We must therefore develop and consolidate a viable economy for our various communities and organisations that will sustain us into the future.

We must create short and long term economic strategies now and thus create a more independent and secure base for ourselves and our children. The reality is that Aboriginal people under utilise, to put it kindly, their current economic and personnel resources. The potential for economic viability for our people is available now if only we could awake to the opportunity and not be blinded largely by employment survival economics.

My main point on this principle is that Aboriginal people must now begin to recreate the economic base that will provide the springboard for our very survival. We have no real asset ownership or financial control in the investment context. Assets now held by governments, State of Federal and government bodies such as the Land Councils in the Northern Territory, ATSIC, CDC and others - this means land, buildings, businesses, cash and pastoral properties must be transferred to local Aboriginal ownership freehold. This is real empowerment and real self determination for both communities and individuals.

An essential element in all of this financial rearrangement is the psychology and public perception, not forgetting the practice, of removing Aboriginal affairs funding out of the context of "welfare". The annual appropriation of over one billion dollars through the Federal Government should be placed under the direct control of Aboriginal people but obviously this body, (e.g. ATSIC), would have no connection whatsoever with the government.

Such an arrangement can be concluded between Aboriginal people and the Australian Government, in the context of a Treaty, that will provide for a "sunset clause" and of course democratic elections and appropriate accountability for funds expenditure.

A further point revolves around the need for a national program that allows for the employment for all Aborigines of working age, providing they are physically capable.

Aboriginal people should be given the opportunity to undergo relevant and proper training, where required, to allow them to obtain such reasonable employment that may exist. Most Australians would be surprised to realise Aboriginal people numbering some 18,000 in over 136 communities actually work for the dole. Aboriginal people are not lazy, have never resisted work opportunities and have always been fully cognisant of the benefits proper employment brings to health, happiness and general well-being of their own family and their community.

It is clear such an initiative would reduce alcoholism and its detrimental effects drastically. This is preventative health, not curative. There is a positive correlation as we all know between jobs and dignity, self respect and confidence.

2. My second major suggestion toward our survival as Aborigines, is cultural renaissance.

To survive as a nation within Australia we must re-establish our Aboriginal Cultural base throughout Australia. Aboriginal Culture is the *raison d'être* for our existence.

It was our anchor in the past. It should be our anchor in the future. It provides the purpose and the passion. It should be our uniting force. We need our Culture to bring us together once again as a people. Today we are divided and disorganised.

There has never been so much bitterness between Aboriginal people as there is today. We fight like hungry black dogs over a diminishing budgetary bone thrown to us by our white and black manipulators.

To this end of establishing our cultural base

they stay the same - Dr Charles true today as his words did then

nationally I would suggest traditional and urban Aboriginal people should engage in organised cultural/social exchange programs. This means Aboriginal people from the cities and towns should spend time living out bush with traditional groups to learn their law, dance, customs and songs.

The reverse, should of course apply. We can thus build up our cultural base nationally to give us confidence and greater credibility. For example, we should begin to learn our own, or other Aboriginal languages and further ensure such languages are taught as an accredited course in schools and tertiary institutions.

In addition, Aboriginal dance and music should be part of the general education curriculum throughout the nation in primary and secondary schools.

3. We must "free up", for want of a better word, our numerous Aboriginal organisations.

There are nearly 2000 operating in Australia today in a variety of areas. We should realise, as indicated previously, that many Aboriginal organisations have become so institutionalised they are just part of the oppressing system and as such resistant to change.

They have become in fact an end in themselves and not as originally intended, a means to another end, this being the well-being and economic independence of Aboriginal people. To put it bluntly, some of the organisations live for themselves alone. They have not evolved with time. They no longer serve the basic needs of the Aboriginal people to the degree that warrants their existence.

Reference made to multiculturalism in Australia is institutionalised and resistant to change.

Clearly Aboriginal organisations in the 1960's and 1970's and early 1980's were established to help Aboriginal people overcome disadvantages in identified areas of concern.

It should be said that many have basically performed creditably over the years and served the Aboriginal people and Australia well. However, the last 10 years have seen a withering away of effort and commitment.

Many, including some leaders, have lost their commitment, purpose and the "fire" in their organisational belly. They have become areas of employment per se and ultimately conservative and somewhat reactive - once again survival economics.

What we desperately need is for the passion and commitment for the course of our people in the 60s, 70s and early 80s to be re-ignited. Clearly not all Aboriginal organisations or individuals are at fault, or sections of the media, unions and governments. However, there is no doubt the scenario condemns us all.

We must go back to the basics and the grass roots, we must build up at the local level and then move to the state and then national. Perhaps a revamped, reorganised, streamlined ATSI may be our salvation. Once again the quality of people is the key element.

4. The future is ours to create. Today is our tomorrow

Fourthly as we are all aware this is The International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples which was launched in December, 1992 in New York at the United Nations. It is a significant beginning to this decade of the 90s. The time is right, the scene is set, our people are ready and willing. This is or could be the decade for the renaissance of the Indigenous people in this country we now call Australia. History is a guide but still a memory.

The future is ours to create. Today is our tomorrow. All societies have it seem to have one or two opportunities to fulfil their dreams and ours has arrived. We are on the threshold of our great national dream. The just, the good, the compassionate, the prosperous society.

The catalyst to move our people collectively towards this greater future has been granted to us the High Court in the recent Mabo decision. It could not come at a more opportune time. It



The famous Freedom Rides ... Dr Charles Perkins, highly respected Elder, Lyall Munro Senior and many others confronted and beat the racists and let the world know about it.

is our once in a lifetime chance to recreate the society that we all desire.

As the Prime Minister stated in Sydney in December 1992, "We need these practical building blocks of change."

The Mabo judgement should be seen as one of these. By doing away with the bizarre conceit that this continent had no owners prior to settlement of Europeans. Mabo establishes a fundamental truth and lays the basis for justice.

Mabo is an historic decision - we can make it an historic turning point, the basis of a new relationship between Indigenous and non-Aboriginal Australians. The message should be there is nothing to fear or to lose in the recognition of historical truth, of the extension of social justice, or the deepening of Australian social democracy to include Indigenous Australians".

Within this context the Federal Government must pursue, as they promised some years ago, the concept of a treaty.

This government must keep its promise to enter into a Treaty with the Indigenous people, particularly in this United Nations Year of the Indigenous People. This would demonstrate to the world that Australians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, can exist in cultural harmony and celebrate our common humanity.

History must not be a cross we should carry as a nation, into the future. Our children must inherit a society better than the one we inherited. A Treaty is not so much a matter of dollars and cents, it is more spiritual and symbolic. It can be a catalyst which binds us together as a nation, respecting our past but building for the future.

Australians must never forget that Australia was Aboriginal land and still is Aboriginal land. A Treaty is the appropriate mechanism for such negotiations. Naturally, such a Treaty can be one of the basic principles for discussions and conclusion with the framework of the recent and further Mabo High Court decision.

As is public knowledge, on June 3, 1992, the High Court made the great leap forward in recognising that Australia and the Torres Strait Islands were not empty "terra Nullius" before the British invasion of 1788 but were peopled by hundreds of Aboriginal nations, each with a distinct, rich and complex Culture. The Mabo decision thus takes recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture at its starting

point and establishes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have rights which have their source in traditional customary law rather than the British common law imposed on us in 1788.

In this respect, the decision is empowering, as Aboriginal people are not starting with nothing and waiting for rights to be handed out piecemeal at the political whim of the government of the day.

The Mabo decision represents an opportunity for some measure of justice to be gained for Aboriginal Peoples who are the most dispossessed of Indigenous peoples of all former British colonies, who are the most jailed race in the world and who have suffered and continue to suffer cultural genocide. However, Mabo is very limited in its "context". It only addresses the narrow concept of Native Title and thus is defined in traditional areas.

It is also important to recognise the limitations of the case. Firstly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sovereignty is a demand by Aboriginal people that the courts and Parliament of Australia recognise and acknowledge that the "acquisition" of sovereignty by the British in 1788 was illegal under English law at the time and also international law.

And that the acquiring of the land was by dispossession, genocide, ethnocide and it was consequently unlawful, illegal and immoral. Plus the demand that the government of Australia as the inheritors of the British Crown, compensate Aboriginal people for the loss and the damage done to our land and our Culture.

It is not a demand upon Australian individuals to surrender their land but rather a demand for recognition and compensation by the community as a whole. Sovereignty was not argued by the plaintiffs in Mabo and therefore Commonwealth and State governments, according to the decision, have ultimate power to extinguish Native Title at will, subject to the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth).

Given these limitations, the hysteria and scare mongering currently seen in the media is put into perspective. Australians will not lose their homes and backyards. One of the most basic principles of Mabo is that once a State Government grants freehold title to a third party (i.e. a person or company) and Native Title to that area is automatically extinguished. In lay language, once any person buys a bit of

land, Native Title is completely wiped out.

You can see that far from Australia being on the brink of a black coup d'état, Native Title is actually quite limited and vulnerable.

The question then arises, where do we go from here? The notion of Native Title coinciding with other interests in land points us toward the answer.

Mabo is about working together, about balance and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture as a source of strength and wisdom from which all Australians can learn.

Mabo is also about self-determination, giving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples the space and resources to enjoy our Culture, work out our own solutions and control our own lives. The imposition of successive waves of government policy has not solved anything for us but only created more problems.

Some of the most difficult aspects of post-Mabo relations will stem from competing land use in the form of resource development and Native Title. I do not believe that Aboriginal and TSI peoples are anti-development, if it is done in a way which respects them.

The history of conflict between mining companies and Aboriginal people has largely resulted from the former's deceit, lack of proper consultation and negotiation, marginalisation of Aboriginal people from benefits flowing from projects undertaken on their land and disrespect for the wishes of Aboriginal people, for example; in relation to the protection of sacred sites.

Today, Aboriginal people must be equal partners at the negotiating table, we must have our say and governments and resource developers must listen and work out with us proper solutions to these vexed problems in a fair, reasoned and balanced way.

I believe that Mabo gives Australia the opportunity to mature as a nation. Just as there is no economy without environment, development must include justice and human rights.

I am not supposing a utopian dream where in all parties are completely happy and negotiate the perfect solution but a way ahead toward fair and just solutions which all parties can live with and which do not sacrifice the interest of one over the other.

Mixed views on WA's hard-line eviction policy

In recent times the hard-line approach of Western Australia's housing eviction three strikes rule, mandatory sentencing, along with mining billionaire, Andrew Forrest's propositions that welfare payments be banned to school "dropouts" have been heavily criticised by rights advocates and community members.

Advocates such as Marianne Mackay, Professor Len Collard, Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation's Robert and Selena Eggington, Chair of the Narrunga Nation, Tauto Sansbury and Western Australian Parliamentarian, Kija Elder, Josie Farrer describe how these hard-line measures compound social ills and devastate lives.

But Noongar Elder, Dr Robert Isaacs and Kimberley Elder and Western Australia's Indigenous Person of the Year, Ian Trust believe otherwise – they believe in a "tough love" approach.

Dr Isaacs, is the former chairman and administrator of the long gone Aboriginal Housing Board.

He argues there has to be a level of responsibility among individuals and families that must be met.

But he does concede there must be more done to support families and guide them before any prospect of eviction becomes the probable outcome.

Dr Isaacs said he was concerned for those children who finish up homeless because of evictions.

Ms Mackay said so he should. "Thousands of our people are evicted at rates that others aren't. People shouldn't be evicted period and we should be doing everything we can for one another, not giving up," Ms Mackay said.

In 2011, there were 519 evictions of Aboriginal families in Western Australia. That's the highest rate in the nation.

The 519 evictions were double the rest of all remaining evictions but First Nations Peoples make up only less than 3 per cent of the State population but are more than 70 per cent of evictions.

The 519 evictions are from the State's three-strike policy evictions but the Department of Housing has not released details on how many other Aboriginal families have also been evicted after one or two alleged breaches.

The 519 evictions translate to more than 2000 children evicted, many in their first year of life.

Ms Mackay said she does not understand why whole families are being victimised. She said if there were any issues to be addressed they should be contained on a person by person basis.

"It is like the Intervention in the Northern Territory where accusations were made, now proven unfounded, in certain communities but the Government launched a whole of Territory Intervention on the basis of those false claims," she said. "It is the same with the Swan Valley Nyungah Community-in-Perth. Accusations against one person saw the State Government evict all the residents."

"Most of them now homeless and some of them have died on the street. We are sick to death of the discrimination."

By National Indigenous Times reporter Gerry Georgatos



Under the three-strikes policy, introduced in Western Australia in May 2011, tenants can be evicted after three offences in 12 months, which includes "offences" such as excessive noise.

Western Australia has the highest homelessness rate in the nation and yet Western Australia is the wealthiest jurisdiction in the nation. More than half of Western Australia's homelessness is First Nations Peoples.

Last year, Ms Josie Farrer criticised the Department of Housing for trying to evict an 86 year old Kimberley woman over a water bill dispute. Ms Farrer remedied this one in favour of the lady.

"Department of Housing are harsh far too often and need to understand they cannot just make judgments. This is about people's lives," Ms Farrer said.

In State Parliament last week, Parliamentarian, Peter Tinley said the three-strikes policy was used without compassion and without any substantive positive recourse.

But Housing Minister, Bill Marmion champions the three-strikes policy and claims it is working. He points to a recent decrease in second and third strikes as compared to 2011 and when compared to first strikes.

In 2012, the Department of Housing issued 941 first strikes, 328 second strikes and 127 third strikes under the policy.

Dr Isaacs runs a scheme helping First Nations People into their own homes and he would like to see more First Nations People in private ownership but most of the people he has assisted were not previously in State Housing.

He said in his own time working with the Department of Housing he saw far too many properties in rundown and deplorable condition. Dr Isaacs has recommended education programs to assist tenants how best to look after their homes and manage their monies.

He said more Aboriginal staff should be working within the Department of Housing and it should be they who visit Aboriginal families, not non-Aboriginal workers.

But Department of Housing State General Manager, Steve Parry did not agree with Dr Isaacs. Mr Parry said the Department had education programs and early intervention is provided. He said the Department does do everything it can.

In recent times families numbering 15, 14, 12, 11 and 9 have been evicted. Most of these families had a number of children under the age of 10 years of age.

Australia has a shameful record regarding homelessness. The record is worse when considering children. At this time there are more than 18,000 homeless children who are under the age of 12 years. To the north of the State, and WA's Indigenous Person of the Year, Ian Trust of Wunan Foundation fame said radical action was needed to significantly reduce disadvantage. He spoke along the lines of ensuring all children receive an education



WA's Indigenous Person of the Year, Ian Trust ... radical action was needed to significantly reduce disadvantage.

by attending school at all times.

Mr Trust wants government support for a welfare reform program he hopes to initiate in the East Kimberley.

"We have to do something we have not done in the past 40 years," Mr Trust said.

He emphasised the Closing the Gap policies were not bridging the divide in life expectancy and employment. He wants the Wunan Foundation, which he Chairs, to be supported in trialing a program in Halls Creek where a panel of community leaders would "reward" or "penalise" residents based on whether they meet certain responsibilities such as school attendance rates for their children and the regular payment of their rents.

Ms Mackay said we must be wary of more punitive measures.

"They only compound problems. Families may not have enough money to go around and that is why people fall behind in rent," she said. "School attendance should be achieved by working with families and not with treating them like Pavlov's dog."

Ms Farrer said incentives can assist but punitive actions only add to the problems.

"There are many families who can't cope with cost of living, everything is going up and where a family is on a Centrelink payment, well, they are already behind the line.

"How do you think a father feels when he cannot afford to pay for everything his family needs, can't pay for what his children need to keep up, can't put all the food on the table?"

"This is why we have breakdowns and

suicides, so let us step back and understand the context before coming in with the broom."

Mr Trust believes if his program, Living Change, is successful in Halls Creeks it could be rolled out in other remote communities.

At this time, the Federal Government has rolled out its compulsory student participation requirement and has engaged Student Attendance Officers (all of them First Nations People and mostly locals) to 40 schools, predominately remote schools, across the nation.

Andrew Forrest and Professor Marcia Langton have delivered an interim report to the Office of the Prime Minister calling for welfare payments to be prohibited to teenagers who "dropout" out of school if they do not engage with a trade or training activity.

Mr Trust believes the community panel should be a statutory body so it is not undermined.

"We do not make any bones about this. It will be tough love," he said.

Western Australia has among the lowest school attendance rates in the nation for its First Nation children. Seven per cent of the Kimberley is homeless and 90 per cent of that homelessness are First Nations People.

The 25 to 29 years age bracket of First Nations males commit suicide at 10 times the overall national rate. They are the nation's most vulnerable group to suicide. We need to work with people, stand alongside each other. It is not as simple as sweeping away a crisis or a suite of issues.

Dr Charles Perkins' vision remains as true today as it was then

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Most important of all, in the Federal Constitution it is necessary that there be a recognition of Sovereignty as by that recognition and resulting compensation so that Aboriginal people can regain our dignity and be treated as equal partners in any future development of our land.

5. A major element which would allow us to move away from the dependency situation, is free education for all Aboriginal people at all levels.

This would give us the basis for true self-determination. This free education would be from preschool, though to the tertiary level. As I have previously indicated, in other places, the current education and training policies of the Federal Government are not effective. The costs are too high and the results very poor. We must have flowing through the universities and the schools, educated and competent Aboriginal people, young and old. Men and women who can lead us.

We need articulate, intelligent community based leaders. This is not entirely the case at the moment.

At least 3000 Aboriginal graduates per year will dramatically change the face of Aboriginal affairs within five years. It will cost more in the short term but less in the long term. The cost benefit to the Australian economy over 10 years will be enormous.

Education at an appropriate level can provide our people with the confidence, the competence and ability to compete with white Australians on an equal basis. We can eyeball other Australians with dignity and respect. We can create our own options in whatever sphere of activity we so wish.

6. My sixth point is that there is an urgent need to establish an effective, independent, non-government sponsored national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island organisation.

This organisation should be funded by the Aboriginal people and others through voluntary subscription with a charter to express strongly the political, social and cultural opinions of Aboriginal people, free of any government or other sectional influence.

This is no adverse reflection on ATSIC. ATSIC is government, this is not. The both bodies can complement each other. At present there is no national organisation since the demise of FCAATSI in the 1970s. It should, obviously, be democratically elected and thus accountable to the Aboriginal people.

It has been clear for some time that Aboriginal people in Australia have no focal point of reference for independent opinion on our issues. Our opinions are largely reflected to the nation by our need for economic survival in the workplace as funded by government or by churches, sectional interests, unions, media or a nervous general public.

There is no doubt we need a national independent body as never before in our history.

However, critical to the establishment of this independent political voice for Aboriginal people must come the realisation that we now in Australia operate within the framework of a dynamic multicultural society.

We, Aboriginal people, must now cultivate vigorously the understanding and support of the many ethnic groups in this country. We cannot stand alone. Their support is vital and a natural development.

7. My seventh point is Health, Sport and Recreation.

Despite the world wide recession the majority of Australian people live in relative affluence. This cannot be said of the Aborigines living in Australia whose life expectancy still remains comparable with that of countries like India, Papua New Guinea and Ghana.

It is this indicator more than any other that clearly summarises the extent of Aboriginal health disadvantages.

Finally unless the approaches to Aboriginal health are broadened to include greater attention to the health problems of adults and are matched by broad ranging strategies aimed at redressing Aboriginal social and economic disadvantages, it is likely that overall mortality will remain high.