

Sorry Day- National day of Healing 26th May 2006

Mayors speech at Grafton Regional Gallery – Official opening of Historical Images of the Clarence.

At this time we reflect upon the critical Australian challenge of Reconciliation through participation in "Sorry Day – National Day of Healing".

Back in 1997 the watershed "Bringing them Home" report was released. That year an inaugural National Reconciliation Conference took place in Melbourne. In 2000, Australians witnessed the spontaneous, historic Sydney Harbour Bridge walk for reconciliation.

Six years have since slipped by. We should now examine what real Reconciliation progress has been achieved. Without doubt there is a greater awareness of Indigenous issues as well as genuine regret for past wrongs that have been perpetrated upon Aboriginal Australians. Yet has there been a tangible on ground difference or has there been more talk and insufficient actions by governments and the Australian community?

An indigenous mate occasionally asks me to explain why aboriginal persons live on average about 20 years less? He also cajoles that his people don't bother with superannuation because they often don't live long enough to enjoy retirement. Do ordinary Australians in good conscience accept this continuing, tragic situation? I believe not.

The current media frenzy about the appalling occurrences and conditions in some remote Aboriginal communities should awaken us all to the critical importance of urgently and effectively addressing the plight of these fellow Australians.

The answer in my view isn't Mal Brough's call for greater policing, nor is it Clare Martin's additional housing plea. These measures will help but they will not provide sustainable long term solutions.

The issue at the core of this problem I believe is that very few remote aboriginal communities have sound local economic bases. Thus there are few jobs. Therefore feelings of hopelessness and despair have become the norm and are being expressed in the terrible ways we read about and view from our lounge room TV screens.

Surely it is a basic human right of all peoples to have work. Meaningful jobs I believe is the commencement of a real solution. Why not aboriginal police officers and housing construction by indigenous persons as occurred a few years back in Maclean indigenous community?

Real jobs will do much to connect indigenous peoples to their communities, give them a sense of place and of belonging and have indirect flow-on benefits by addressing anti-social behaviour and other social issues.

All Australians should demand immediate action from our Governments if we truly seek to be an egalitarian nation.

We know that there is large scale unemployment among our indigenous citizens in the Clarence Valley. As a community we need to address this situation. The challenge rests firstly with indigenous people to secure jobs training through Tafe and on the job training schemes available through Tursa, Catchment Management Board and other Agencies. The greatest challenge however I suggest, is for employers in our wonderful Valley to play their part in positioning these people in mainstream and ongoing jobs. A responsibility in turn for the newly employed would be to genuinely commit to valuing their jobs and being loyal, reliable and conscientious employees. This can be achieved if we as a community possess the resolve.

I argue that your Council is playing its part. Since signing off on a comprehensive Reconciliation Statement one year ago after only two months in office Council has been active in formation of the Clarence Valley Aboriginal Consultative Committee (CVACC). This group comprises locally elected indigenous representatives of the five aboriginal communities in our Valley. They have regular, direct face to face contact with the Mayor, General Manager and Director of Community and Cultural Services.

We are getting things done. CVACC has already secured some good wins. For example it was able to negotiate successfully with Corrective Services for aboriginal employment at the soon to be built "second chance" prison farm near Ewingar. Council will continue to engage through CVACC to secure practical Agency and other assistance to the local communities.

Council is currently supporting an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage training project with great support from Tursa, the Catchment Management Authority and Nungera Cooperative. 11 male Aboriginals are now doing riparian revegetation between Harwood bridge and Maclean. The challenge for us all will be how our community secures mainstream employment for these lads in a few months time at the conclusion of the training project.

The Reconciliation Statement referred to earlier, foreshadowed that Council would commit to developing strategies that improve the level of participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in local government at all levels. Work has commenced on this commitment and strategies will be addressed by Council after the three year post-amalgamation jobs guarantee concludes in February 2007.

Respected Aboriginal leader Patrick Dodson recently penned: - Quote "The opportunity remains for both our peoples to be a nation at peace with itself and our past. If we avoid the issues of reconciliation then the monster of racism and denial we have created will devour us, and our children will be left a flawed legacy". End quote.

On this Sorry Day let us undertake together to build a better Clarence valley and a better Australia.

Ian Tiley
Mayor, Clarence Valley Council.
26th May 2006.