

Five steps to a better black life in Australia

Life for our indigenous communities is getting worse in many ways.

Chris Graham looks at what you can do to help.

THE Australian Productivity Commission's recently released biennial report — *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* — was the fourth in a series produced since 2003.

The report looked at 50 key areas of disadvantage, including health, housing, educational outcomes, Year 12 retention rates, child mortality, imprisonment rates and even child-abuse notifications.

It found that in 40 of the areas, the gap between black and white had actually increased over the past decade.

Here are five suggestions on how you might start to improve things.

1 Educate yourself and others and accept a few "home truths". The problems in Aboriginal Australia are entrenched. They came about as a result of decades of government neglect. They will not be solved quickly or easily.

Facts about Aboriginal disadvantage are all over the Internet and readily accessible. Make an effort to become informed.

I think once most Australians make an earnest start, they'll find it's almost impossible to look away.

The annual excess mortality rate of Aboriginal people in Australia (that is, the number of Aboriginal people whose death each year is avoidable) is worse than it was for Iraqis during the first Gulf War.

2 The solutions might not be politically palatable, but that doesn't mean they're not the solutions. The international experience is very clear on this: Aboriginal people must own and drive the solutions. If they don't, it doesn't matter what the government "intervention" is, it will fail. Guaranteed.

The US, Canada and New Zealand, for example, have been practising this principle for decades, but Australia is heading in the opposite direction.

We send in the army when we want to fix Aboriginal problems. We need to stop and think why?

The US, Canada and New Zealand all



Decades of neglect: Hundreds of Aboriginal children aged under five die avoidably each year

have treaties with their indigenous peoples. Australia does not.

Aboriginal people in the US, Canada and New Zealand, but not Australia, have, or are actively assisted in having, strong political representation (New Zealand's Maoris have their own seats in parliament).

3 Stop the denial. As a nation, we have a problem with racism. We need to stop and think on this front, too. We're a country that only four years ago argued with the United Nations against the removal of the word "Nigger" from a sports oval grandstand in Toowoomba, Queensland.

We're a nation that doesn't understand the offence caused to Aboriginal people when we climb Uluru.

This is regardless of the fact that we also accept the place as being of great spiritual significance to Aboriginal people.

Yet can you imagine the reaction if a bus load of blackfellas turned up to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and began abseiling from the roof?

Why can't we put ourselves in other people's shoes?

Why can't we see our hypocrisy on these issues? It's bleedin' obvious. Our denial will get us nowhere.

4 Ultimately, politics is what kills Aboriginal people. When the Productivity Commission's report hit the streets, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, was straight out of the blocks, claiming that the report reflected badly on the Howard government years.

Of course, Ms Macklin was right. It does. But it reflects worse on the Labor years.

Over the past decade, our states and territories — where most of the work is done to improve most of the key social areas for Aboriginal people — mainly have been governed by Labor administrations.

A day after Ms Macklin's criticism, the Liberals, not to be outdone, fired back that the federal Labor Government was racked with infighting on how to address black disadvantage.

Can you imagine the Government or the Opposition playing the same political games over, say, the Victorian bushfires?

A total of 173 people died in those fires — a horrendous figure. But more than that number of Aboriginal children aged under five die avoidably every year.

The major parties know that governments have lost seats — and maybe even elections — because they have been

seen to be providing too much to Aboriginal Australia.

The fact is, until politicians actually begin losing seats over Aboriginal disadvantage we'll continue to see negative reports like those from the Productivity Commission.

5 The media are there to keep the bastards honest. But sometimes the media are the bastards. The Productivity Commission report ran to hundreds of pages and looked at 50 areas of Aboriginal disadvantage.

But do you remember which area dominated Australian media coverage?

Child sexual abuse.

We're a nation that cannot have a mature public discussion about this issue. Too many commentators in the media are prepared to exploit it for personal gain.

Child sexual abuse is a terrible problem in Aboriginal communities, just as it is a terrible problem in white communities.

But if we're to tackle this and all the horrendous problems in black Australia such as suicide rates, diabetes, heart problems, neglect, lack of education, poor housing — the list goes on — then we need the media to better scrutinise politicians.

Imagine Prime Minister Kevin Rudd getting away with standing up at a press conference and telling a room full of journalists he was "devastated", before announcing: "We must redouble and triple our efforts..."

Well, that's just what he did in responding to the Productivity Commission report. And a week later, the media had already moved on.

Our media has the attention span on this issue of a goldfish. Unless that changes, there's very little to motivate politicians to change.

MANY people have suggested to me that if I don't like Australia — if I think it's so horrible and so racist — I should just leave.

I don't because I love my country enough to want to stay and fight to make it better.

I don't want to be a citizen of the country that has the worst human rights record (and indigenous life statistics) on Earth.

I don't want to leave that country to my children and their children.

And black, white or brindle, neither should you.

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