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Macklin's indigenous welfare speech

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FIRST I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where we meet.

I also want to thank the organisers for convening this session.

Over the years I've been at many of these conferences but this is the first time as Minister.

Looking at the panelists assembled here I can see we're in for some vigorous discussion.

Yesterday I was in Cape York - in Aurukun - as tragic a place as you'll find.

Aurukun's reputation precedes it. It's a place where eight police and night patrols on the streets battle to keep order in a community of just over a thousand people.

Where alcohol abuse is rife and children are not safe. Where gangs of young kids, who've never spent a day in school, roam the streets trashing cars.

Where the school has an enrolment of 290 but on the day I was there only 48 turned up. And of those, next to no teenagers.

Aurukun is a place where a bright, articulate young woman with aspirations to save her community reveals a toothless smile - her teeth knocked out by a violent partner.

It's a broken community with the depressingly familiar symptoms of widespread breakdown in social norms - child abuse, alcoholism, suicide, welfare dependency, third world health and education. And above all, an abiding and pervading loss of purpose.

As one observer put it - "in Aurukun you can almost smell the rot of boredom"

Aurukun is not an isolated case. It is typical of the dysfunction and breakdown in social norms that exists in many, many Indigenous communities.

What's happened in these communities has been an insidious creeping decline. It's been generations in the making. Producing dysfunctional, despairing communities paralysed by violence, abuse, neglect and despair. It didn't happen overnight and it won't be fixed overnight.

But even in Aurukun there are those who are fighting for the next generation; those who refuse to allow the children of Aurukun to be condemned to such a bleak future. From the elderly women, elders and grandmothers to the emerging young leaders. From all of them the message is clear.

"Out of the chaos. We have to get the kids out of the chaos."

They want the kids out of violent, overcrowded houses where they can't sleep safely at night.

Away from the alcohol and drug fuelled violence where they are at risk of abuse. Away from the torrents of porn, which like grog, is poisoning and destroying these communities. This is the message from the elders and it is echoed by the new, young leaders.

They know parents should look after their kids, protect them, feed them properly and send them to school. These leaders want change and they're willing to give the welfare reform trials a go. They hope that through income management parents will look after their kids and get them to school. That people will look after their houses and pay rent so there's more that can be spent on maintenance.

But they're realists too. They know that theirs is a society so damaged, so broken down that in many cases parental discipline is zero. They know it will take more than just income quarantining to get kids to

school.

Let me tell you about someone I met in Aurukun. Gina Castelain is a traditional owner and Wik woman - inspirational, articulate - she's twenty four years old and a remarkable young woman who is a central figure in the Southern Trust. The Trust channels Rio Tinto Alcan royalties into local communities.

It has some impressive runs on the board including building the Aurukun Uniting Church and the Justice Group building, supporting community education and sporting programs and establishing bursaries for kids going away to school.

It's also a pioneer in Indigenous business. Among its enterprises - Aurukun Earthmoving, Western Cape Earthmoving and Wetland Charter which owns the MV Pikkuw - a fishing boat for charter.

Through the Southern Trust subsidiary Wik Projects, Gina Castelain is also a key player in the negotiations with Chinese mining giant Chalco whose proposed mining venture has the potential to deliver hundreds of jobs to locals. And that's just Chalco.

Just yesterday I was in Weipa for the historic signing of a regional partnership agreement between the mining industry, local business, local Indigenous people and government. Working together, 250 jobs will be created for Indigenous people by 2012. Large-scale work-readiness training programs will also be introduced across the communities of Aurukun, Mapoon, Napranum and Weipa.

The Western Cape agreement is the first of its kind outside Western Australia.

It's an indicator of the mining industry's enormous potential to give Indigenous Australians a share in booming regional economies and a sense of purpose.

These are great opportunities but a lot needs to be done to get local Indigenous people ready for work. And to do this we have to get young people out of chaos and into a controlled, disciplined environment where they learn the basics. Things like setting the alarm to make sure you're on time for work, getting enough sleep and getting your clothes ready the night before - sounds ridiculously simple but these are the habits these kids need to learn.

That's what they learn though Myuma, which operates from a large construction camp in Camooweal. It's currently training 30 young people, 10 of them from Aurukun, in pre-vocational/job readiness programs. The day starts at 6.30am and it's a 36 hour week - lifting kids out of chaos and into an ordered routine that prepares them for the workforce.

As well as a job, everyone needs a safe roof over their heads. It goes without saying that no child can expect to broaden their life chances in a house where 15 people are sharing three rooms with no running water; where the adults are drunk and violent, where they can't get a proper night's sleep.

The Joint Policy Commission with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition will be addressing these challenges. Of course housing, health services, income management and welfare reform are essential. But on their own, none is sufficient. What I know, and what I saw again in Cape York, was further evidence that you can deliver all the services you like into a community. You can quarantine all possible incomes but unless these measures are under-pinned by strategies to deliver jobs and restore self-esteem and pride, they won't deliver the long-term results we so desperately need.

We all know that having a job is the key to unlocking personal, social and economic progress. A job brings purpose and meaning to people's lives. It's the reason to get out of bed in the morning. It means financial independence. And seeing their parents going out to work each day is the best role model a kid can have.

To get there we need to go back a few steps. It's obvious that if we give kids a decent primary and secondary education we'll have a better chance of getting them job-ready. In Aurukun there are a bunch of dedicated teachers but they're up against considerable obstacles. They're committed to turning around school attendance and improving student achievement in local schools. But there also appears to be growing community support for children to have the option of continuing their education in schools outside Indigenous communities.

People in Aurukun know there is a world of difference between government policies removing children on

the basis of race, and voluntarily seeking out schools to expand children's life opportunities.

This is what community leaders told me and it was echoed by the Director of the Western Cape College, Ian Mackie. Western Cape College, located across three campuses has 1350 students - 850 of them Indigenous. Last year half the Year 12 students who graduated at the Weipa campus were Indigenous.

To give more Indigenous children the opportunity to go to this school I announced yesterday that the Australian Government will build a secondary school student hostel in Weipa that will be home for more than 120 children from Cape York communities. The hostel will give children a good education in a school relatively close to their parents and communities. This is in addition to our election commitment to build three new boarding colleges in the Northern Territory with the Indigenous Land Corporation at a total cost of \$40.9 million as well as funding 200 additional teachers.

We all know that the chaos is not confined to one part of Australia. Social breakdown in remote communities in the NT means that the emergency response is essential to protect children from abuse. It gives us the structure we need to fight child abuse, to crack down on the flow of booze and porn.

Because of the Northern Territory Emergency Response we now have:

- * Police in communities that had never had a police presence before.
- * Communities like Galiwinku - with a population of 2000 now getting three police officers and a police station being built in April.
- * 53 extra police with a total of 66 to be gradually stationed in the territory.
- * 8,175 health checks for kids and follow up medical services being rolled out.
- * 500 children being bused into Alice Springs in April for urgent ear, nose and throat surgery; another 200 will receive follow-up dental treatment.
- * Nearly \$800 million for housing and infrastructure in the NT.
- * And over 7,000 people being income managed across 25 communities and outstations and four camp town regions.

And today I can announce that income management has this week been rolled out in another three remote NT communities - Galiwinku, Atitjere and Engawala. Last month we also announced the roll out of out income management in the Kimberley with the WA Government. So we now have three different income management models - in the NT, WA and Qld - to give us the evidence we need to find out what works.

It is now 43 days since the Australian Parliament offered an apology to the Stolen Generations, to the Indigenous people of Australia. Recognising the wrongs and mistreatment suffered by them but never underestimating the job that lies before us - restoring a sense of purpose to the lives of many Indigenous Australians. No matter what, we can't give up - there's too much at stake.

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