

# Jobs count, not noble gestures

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**ON May 27, 1967, a referendum was held to change the Constitution.**

It meant Aborigines would be counted in the census and to empower the federal government to make laws for members of the Aboriginal race.

Although all political parties supported the changes, those involved in the campaign were staggered by the yes vote of 90.77 per cent. It meant that Australians wanted the federal government to make a supreme effort to raise the standard of living of Aborigines.

The campaign had highlighted the appalling conditions under which most Aborigines lived. How bad became obvious to those of us who made the effort to visit the outback areas. As a member of the federal ALP caucus Aboriginal affairs committee, I toured western NSW to see how bad things were.

Arriving at Collarenebri in February 1970, we were taken by a local doctor to a settlement on the banks of the Barwon River where humpies made of corrugated iron, hessian and scraps of linoleum housed the local Aboriginal community. It shocked us to the core.

The doctor told us, "The children are fine while being breast-fed. When that ceases, mothers, knowing little about nutrition, feed them rubbish. They get sick with a range of illnesses that have them in and out of hospital so often that by the time they're five they are a couple of years behind their white contemporaries, physically and mentally. Their parents are invariably unemployed, heavy drinkers and gamblers with a limited vocabulary.

"This cultural backwardness invariably flows on to the next generation. When the children go to school they can't compete. When at home they don't have electricity to enable them to study. We have to break the cycle of poverty."

That was 40 years ago and, despite considerable improvement, too many still live like this. We would never permit this if they were non-indigenous children.

Those who argue that nothing has changed since 1967 weren't there. One example of improvement will suffice. In 1965 the first two Aborigines to graduate from university were Charles Perkins and Margaret Valadian. Now there are more than 20,000 with university degrees and tertiary qualifications.

That's little consolation to the tens of thousands who live in abject poverty, with appalling accommodation, poor health and no jobs.

It's worse if they suffer from physical and sexual abuse and are addicted to alcohol or drugs. Too many Aborigines have a much lower standard of living than the average Australian.

Whatever the cost, we owe Aboriginal people the best possible health care, nutrition, accommodation, education and employment opportunities.

Since the referendum, despite the best efforts of Labor and Coalition governments, the gap between the standard of living of Aborigines and mainstream Australia is still far too wide.

While governments must bear responsibility for that, the Aboriginal community must also recognise that it, too, has contributed to the huge gap in their standard of living.

They must cease living in a mythical paradise that they imagine existed before the arrival of Europeans. They are angry that their lifespan is 20 years less than non-Aborigines, but in their nirvana it would be 50 years less. They have the right to choose any lifestyle they desire, but they cannot expect governments to provide the essential facilities to hundreds of tiny remote communities.

They must decide their own future. If they want a semi-nomadic life in a netherworld then they will have to do it with minimal government help. We are fooling ourselves if we pretend otherwise.

Opportunities are opening up for employment for Aborigines, particularly in northern Australia in mining, cattle raising and tourism, but not enough. Aborigines must relocate to areas where they can obtain employment and where they can also find accommodation and receive adequate health care.

We must provide them with the best education possible. There are schools in remote areas but they vary in quality from ordinary to awful.

If hundreds of top schools can be built for Australia's wealthy elite then surely we can provide a dozen top-quality schools in outback Australia for the most underprivileged Australians.

As many will have to be boarding schools, some will ask: will this alienate children from their parents? It's very likely, but there is nothing new about that.

Every wave of immigrants to Australia has had the same experience. We must stop pretending that Aborigines can live in two widely diverse cultures.

They must choose between a modern Western lifestyle and primitive subsistence similar to that which they enjoyed before the arrival of Europeans.

Some will argue that it will destroy their heritage and culture, but it doesn't have to.

They can preserve both while advancing their education in a range of areas.

That's what's happening throughout the rest of the world. It has been happening among the 20,000-plus Aborigines who now have tertiary qualifications.

It is 43 years since the referendum provided the incentive for governments to narrow the gap between the living standards of Aborigines and the rest of Australia. Unfortunately, much of what followed was mere symbolism. We had reconciliation and street marches followed by Sorry Day.

Now the Prime Minister is proposing a referendum to change the Constitution to acknowledge Aborigines as the first Australians.

It's a noble gesture but, regrettably, it will have the same impact as earlier gestures.

If Labor wants to show Aborigines it cares about them it can start by doing something it has failed to do since Federation: endorse Aborigines for winnable seats in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Only three have made it in 110 years: two Liberals and one Democrat. Labor could start with former president of the party Warren Mundine, an outstanding talent.

The time has come to end the symbolism and the politics of the warm inner glow. It may salve the conscience of non-Aboriginal Australia but it will do nothing to narrow the gap between Aborigines and the rest of Australia.

Unless this happens, Australia will be having the same debate in 2067.

Let's end the symbolism and get on with the job.

*Barry Cohen was assistant campaign director (NSW) for the vote yes team in 1967.*