

## **THE BIG READ: 2008: The NIT Blacklist**

ISSUE 168, December 11, 2008: 2008 was a year of highs and lows for Aboriginal Australia. The high was, undoubtedly, the national apology in February. But the lows were... well, take your pick. The federal government's failure to endorse the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, its handling of the NT intervention, the NT government's axing of the bilingual education program. And the list goes on. In no particular order, AMY McQUIRE and CHRIS GRAHAM take a look at 101 of the 'less impressive' moments of 2008.

1. In November, NT Deputy Chief Minister Marion Scrymgour, who is the most senior Indigenous politician in the country, announced that English would be taught in the first four hours of the school day in bilingual schools, effectively ending bilingual education in the NT. All of the available evidence - both in Australia and internationally - shows that bi-lingual education is the best way to teach children whose first language is not English. The NT government's decision to abolish it will undoubtedly lead to poorer literacy outcomes, and reduced school attendance among Aboriginal students.
2. Federally, Labor promised to make the "protection, preservation and revitalisation" of Indigenous languages a "major priority".
3. Kevin Rudd's sorry speech inspired a nation. Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson's speech in reply did not. And nor did the conduct of quite a few of his Liberal colleagues. About 1,000 people listening to Nelson's speech in the Great Hall of Parliament stood and turned their backs on him, including two of Rudd's own staffers. Why? Because Nelson seemed to mistakenly think the day was all about him and his own troubled childhood. He also thought it was about reminding everyone of child abuse in Central Australia.
4. Member for O'Connor, Wilson Tuckey couldn't help himself either. After loudly reciting the Lord's Prayer, Tuckey walked out of the chamber and boycotted the apology.
5. Other Liberals who boycotted the apology included West Australian MPs Don Randall and Dennis Jensen, NSW MP Alby Schultz, Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells and Victorian MP Sophie Mirabella.
6. Which ironically turned out to be a heck of a lot better than the stunt pulled by Chris Pearce, Member for Aston. As Rudd and Nelson both delivered their speeches, Pearce sat on the Liberal backbench flipping through a magazine and ignoring the whole event, while metres away sat dozens of tearful members of the Stolen Generations. Pearce refused to join the Parliament in a standing ovation at the conclusion of Rudd's speech (Nelson, not surprisingly, didn't get one) and as Rudd spoke of the terrible impact on children, Pearce could be seen smiling and joking to a very uncomfortable looking member sitting next to him.
7. Former Prime Minister John Howard also boycotted proceedings (despite the fact all other living former Prime Ministers attended).
8. Mirabella tried to spoil proceedings afterwards by later questioning the existence of the Stolen Generations saying: "It sickens me that two-year-old Aboriginal children are still being diagnosed with sexually transmitted diseases... It has been reported that an Aboriginal-led taskforce on the Stolen Generation in Victoria could not identify one truly stolen child."
9. Overall, a thoroughly 'Liberal' (not small 'l') response to what was otherwise a momentous day in Australian history.
10. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd may have delivered an apology to the Stolen Generations on behalf of the Australian government, but it doesn't look as if victims will be receiving compensation any time soon. The Senate knocked back an amendment by Greens Senator Bob Brown to offer compensation on the day of the apology. The Greens' bill (based on an earlier bill by former Democrat Senator Andrew Bartlett) is now floating around the halls of the Senate.
11. It was ALP policy prior to the election to compensate members of the Stolen Generation. In its National Platform, the ALP promised if elected to government it would provide "a comprehensive

response" to the Bringing Them Home report, a key recommendation of which included monetary compensation. Both Rudd and Indigenous affairs minister Jenny Macklin have refused to provide any valid reasons why compensation should not be paid.

12. Also in the ALP's 'National Platform' it promised to supporting the international human rights instruments to which Australia is a signatory, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The NT intervention - which the ALP has continued unchanged - breaches about half of the Declaration's 30 articles.

13. Labor also promised to reinstate the full publication of statistics in relation to black deaths-in-custody. Since being elected, it's ignored the issue.

14. Labor also promised to introduce a 'national whole-of-government' social justice approach to reducing the over-representation of Indigenous people in the justice system. Since coming to power, it's made no attempts for a coordinated response.

15. The Rudd government neglected to answer dozens of questions submitted by NIT in relation to how it intended meeting its 100-plus election promises to Indigenous Australians. The questions were submitted to the government in April, but many remains unanswered by December.

16. In a memo to staff, Taree liquor store owner Tim Leonard banned groups of Aboriginal or "coloured" customers from his store. It read: "If any group of aboriginals mixed or otherwise comes into the shop you will ask them to leave... say to them they are not allowed in - but can come in individually if they are willing to be searched on their way out." After the story was published in NIT and picked up by The Sydney Morning Herald, Mr Leonard claimed his new store policies were based on advice from police. Taree police denied they had offered any advice relating to race, and Mr Leonard later admitted the racist policy was his after all.

17. Documents from the Commonwealth Grants Commission revealed the NT government received \$218 million last year for Indigenous services but spent only \$110 million. It was hardly a revelation to people working within Indigenous affairs - successive NT governments have been accused of precisely the same thing. Central Land Council director David Ross accused the NT government of "disgracefully rotting the system" and demanded a high level inquiry into government spending in the NT. The federal Senate established such an inquiry, which reported in December. It came to no firm conclusion, blaming problems on a succession of failings by past governments.

18. Former public servant in the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) Tjanara Goreng Goreng was found guilty on five charges of leaking confidential federal government information in emails to the Central Australian community of Mutitjulu. While in Opposition, the ALP leapt to Ms Goreng Goreng's defence by attacking the government during Question Time for its part in the ABC Lateline scandal. But in government, the ALP did precisely nothing to assist Ms Goreng Goreng, ignoring requests for assistance and allowing the prosecution to go ahead. The debacle cost Ms Goreng Goreng her job, and more than \$100,000 in legal fees. Meanwhile the ABC journalists responsible for the farce escaped any sanction, as did former 'anonymous youth worker' Gregory Andrews.

19. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd addressed the UN General Assembly, but did not mention the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Endorsing the declaration was an election promise of the ALP.

20. The review into the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) was handed down and recommended that the intervention should continue, but with the reinstatement of the Racial Discrimination Act so that it met international human rights standards. It also recommended that compulsory income management should become voluntary. But Minister for Indigenous Affairs Jenny Macklin ignored its key recommendations. Acting on anecdotal evidence, she said compulsory income management would remain in NT communities because, she claimed, some Aboriginal women (unnamed) had pleaded with her to keep it. Former Howard government minister and current shadow spokesperson on Indigenous affairs Tony Abbott joined the circus, denying the NTER was racist and calling on the Rudd government to ignore the review's recommendations.

21. The Queensland government announced the fate of its controversial fund to compensate Aboriginal workers who lost, in some cases, a lifetime of wages. While a portion of the leftover money would be handed out in topped up payments to eligible applicants, the rest would be channelled into an Indigenous education fund. Despite protests from those who had their wages stolen, the Queensland government went ahead with the scheme, launching the Indigenous Queenslanders Foundation in November. At the launch, the elder invited to conduct the Welcome to Country ceremony, Valma Coolwell also became upset, telling the function that "my heart is aching because my people are out there on the street. They are not happy. They tell me that government is still controlling them and my

heart is heavy."

22. Earlier this month, the Queensland government was caught trying to hide a report that found it was not doing enough to keep Indigenous foster kids in touch with their culture. So Queensland Premier Anna Bligh did what any politician would do... she attacked the report and its author by claiming it was overly-focused on process. And then she played the race card. "I certainly don't want to see Aboriginal children being disadvantaged by people being slavishly attached to following steps and there's a perfectly good white family that can take them if that is better for the interests of the child."

23. Outgoing Governor-General Michael Jeffery claimed that most Aboriginal people were living "integrated, normal" lives and claimed that disadvantage was mostly restricted to remote areas. New Governor-General Quentin Bryce is reportedly quite a bit more up-to-date on Indigenous issues.

24. The inaugural Queensland Closing the Gap report for 2007-08, released late this year, revealed there was a 17.7 year gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous men, and 19.4 years for women. Indigenous children are 2.1 times more likely to die before reaching the age of five than non-Indigenous children. Among those dying before the age of five, 80 percent were aged under one. And that's just restricted to Queensland.

25. The Two Ways Together report into NSW Aboriginal affairs was released, and found that Aboriginal people in the state die 16 years younger than non-Indigenous people and suffer infant mortality rates 79 percent higher than the wider population.

26. The report also found that the Aboriginal population in the state's jails had increased to 20 percent of all adult male prisoners, and 33 percent of female prisoners.

27. The Australian Medical Association issued their annual health report card, revealing that Indigenous babies are three times more likely to die in their first year.

28. A West Australian study found that rates of dementia in the Kimberley region were among some of the highest in the world. The study found dementia rates amongst Indigenous people was five times higher than non-Indigenous Australians.

29. A leading Indigenous health service in Cairns - the Wuchopperen Health Service - was forced to turn patients away due to a doctor shortage.

30. Experts raised concerns that the Burrup Peninsula in Western Australia, home to some of Australia's greatest Aboriginal rock art, was still in danger of being destroyed or damaged because of the resources boom. Like the Liberals before them, Labor has done little to protect it.

31. Australian entertainer Rolf Harris apologised for a racist term in his hit song "Tie me kangaroo down sport". In the process, he unleashed a whole new string of racist abuse: "You sit at home watching the television and you think to yourself: 'Get up off your arse and clean up the streets your bloody self' and 'Why would you expect somebody to come in and clean up your garbage which you've dumped everywhere?' But then you have to think to yourself that it's a different attitude to life."

32. And there was this, in relation to Aboriginal children and discipline: "... They have a totally carefree life to do what they want and that quite often involves smashing everything that they have."

33. And this, about Aboriginal traditional ways: "The attitude is that in their original way of life they would really wreck the surrounding countryside that they lived in and they would leave all the garbage and they would go walkabout to the next place...the traditional attitude is still there, and I wish there was a simple solution but I'm not certain."

34. Minister for Indigenous Affairs Jenny Macklin delivered some good news as 2008 kicked off - the Howard government's handpicked National Indigenous Council (NIC) would be no more. But sadly, the most loathed Indigenous organisation in the country didn't go quietly. Several former members warned the government against creating a body that allowed Aboriginal people to elect their own leaders. A year on, the federal government appears to be heading their advice, with no signs yet of such a body.

35. The promise of an Indigenous elected body to replace ATSIC was first made by the ALP in 2004. In almost five years, the ALP still has not delivered.

36. A paper published in the Australian Journal of Rural Health warned that climate change and global warming would heavily affect disadvantaged Australians, such as Indigenous people in remote regions.

37. Prominent stolen wages campaigner Yvonne Butler tragically passed away on July 31.

38. Old Wilson 'Ironbar' Tuckey objected to the presence of traditional Aboriginal dancers opening the 42nd Parliament. "I'm horrified and concerned that we're going to turn the Parliament of Australia into a dance parlour," Tuckey, aged 73, said.

39. A report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare revealed that rates of tooth decay had increased among Indigenous children in recent years, with those six and younger worst affected.

40. While Indigenous populations in Canada, the US and New Zealand made inroads, the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians was going backwards, another report found.

41. Police in Townsville were investigating a video that described Aboriginal people as in-breeds. It was entitled "Townsville Fun" and featured a man in a Ku Klux Klan suit shouting obscenities towards Aboriginal people.

42. The NT government's health department released figures showing a disproportionately high number of Aboriginal people with STDs, with NT Australian Medical Association President Peter Beaumont saying he was horrified by the data.

43. The Queensland Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) described her decision not to lay charges against Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley, the man responsible for the 2004 death-in-custody of a Palm Island man, as "emotionally difficult".

44. A respected WA Aboriginal elder collapsed in the back of a prison van on Survival Day from heat exhaustion, after a long drive through the western desert region. He subsequently died in hospital.

45. Former Northern Territory MP Loraine Braham raised concerns that some pensioners in Alice Springs were being threatened with having their welfare payments quarantined because they are wrongly assumed to be Aboriginal people living in town camps.

46. In the wake of a rape case in the far north Queensland community of Kowanyama, Brendan Nelson called on the government to stage an intervention in Queensland's Cape York, and other parts of Australia.

47. WA Aboriginal woman Jeanie Angel spent two years in jail for a murder she didn't commit after an all-white jury convicted her in 1989. She was acquitted in the early 90s but was this year knocked back for compensation. The West Australian government supported the decision.

48. Former ALP president Warren Mundine again voiced his opposition to the NT permit system, calling on it to be dropped to promote economic opportunities for Indigenous people. Mr Mundine did not comment on why Aboriginal communities without a permit system (in NSW, WA and Queensland, for example) were also dirt poor.

49. The abolition of the permit system effectively came into place in February, with Central Land Council (CLC) director David Ross calling on visitors to still respect it.