

On Medals and the Children of the Sunrise

Ian Thorpe and Jeff McMullen reflect on this week's awarding of the Australian Human Rights Commission's Human Rights Medal to a great Olympian.

All children should have the human right to live a healthy and fulfilling life. This is surely common sense. We would like to think that every Australian would agree on this simple human dignity, making it our national priority. So why are the *Children of the Sunrise*, Aboriginal children, still denied an equal opportunity for well being?

Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth is a small effort given the scale of the poverty and disadvantage faced by Indigenous children and their families. We support Aboriginal communities to improve health and education, supplying literacy backpacks to provide reading in bookless homes, building or enriching libraries, working to help small businesses and Cultural Centres create a viable economy in isolated areas.

For more than a decade we have shared the Struggle with remote Aboriginal communities and with Indigenous organisations in the cities trying to focus our nation on action to improve the lives of our most vulnerable children.

Australian complacency over our national literacy and maths standards, highlighted this week by ACER's Geoff Masters, further exposes the damaging disregard in our nation's failure to ensure that Indigenous children have the same educational opportunities.

We have both travelled the world and seen that poverty can be a trap for children, holding them back with no chance for their talents to shine. Yet against the odds, some kids do rise above the seemingly overwhelming problems because they know who they are and that someone believes in them.

Empowerment and knowledge are the crucial factors for change that can turn disastrous health situations into hopeful communities within a single generation.

For this reason we have concentrated our advocacy at *Fountain for Youth* on trying to convince Government that disempowerment and discrimination are the biggest threats to the genuine advancement of the First Australians.

The *Close the Gaps Campaign* led by a great Australian, Dr Tom Calma AO, raised our hopes for a bi-partisan political effort to focus all branches of government across the country on a coordinated effort to improve housing, health, education and employment, creating the road to a brighter future.

With a fellow Olympian, Catherine Freeman, we shared a dream that educating our nation on these challenges would inspire everyone to believe that we could get this done without more Stolen Generations or seeing the heart cut out of Aboriginal Culture.

Instead we see more Indigenous children being removed from their families than during the worst decades of the Stolen Generations. Suicide among young Indigenous people is now a terrifying contagion across the Top End communities. Incarceration rates are higher than in the dark days of apartheid in South Africa. All of our nation's displays of concern over the safety and well being of Indigenous children have not altered the Northern Territory

Government's grim assessment that more children are now at risk of neglect than before the *Intervention*.

The bitter partisan politics surrounding the Northern Territory Emergency Response in 2007 blinded our nation to the real needs of these Aboriginal children. It is why we had no choice but saw it as a responsibility to raise our voices against the removal of the protection of the Racial Discrimination Act for these 73 targeted communities.

The Intervention prompted a speech in London entitled *Dirty Little Secret* (by Ian Thorpe) and countless attempts on a long tour (by Jeff McMullen) with Aboriginal leaders to voice the concerns of communities overrun by this sweeping disempowerment.

After five years of imposing a *State of Emergency* on the NT communities the Government feigned re-instatement of the Racial Discrimination Act but kept intact its most discriminatory provisions for another ten years. No one else in this country would stand by and see their communities smeared and stereotyped in this way, but the great Australian Silence continues.

The Human Rights Medal is awarded to one man. We ask you to see it as recognition of the work of all at the community level who strive to improve the human rights of the First Australians. It is time for more serious reflection on the challenges that remain. Make it personal and use every breath for this is our nation's most urgent task.

We want you to hear the voices that have been silenced. Aboriginal elders in the Northern Territory including Rosalie Kunoth-Monks OAM from Utopia and Dr Djinyini Gondarra OAM from Elcho Island have this week reminded us in important speeches that we have not respected the human rights of Indigenous Australians.

Twenty years after Paul Keating's historic Redfern speech urging Australians to "*open our hearts a bit*" Aboriginal people are still waiting.

An Aboriginal child born in 2007 in the Northern Territory will spend the first fifteen years of his or her life living under a prolonged state of emergency that deprives them of rights and has done so little to put food in their belly, improve their health or education, let alone assure them that we have counted them as our own precious children.

The truth is that Australia is still a nation *officially* discriminating against just one group of citizens.

[Ian Thorpe is the Founder and Jeff McMullen Honorary CEO of the not for profit health and education organisation, *Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth*.]