

Supplementary
Submission
No 71a

INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

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Submission to Inquiry: Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage

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Causes of Indigenous disadvantage stem from the "othering" and exclusion of Indigenous peoples and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their country. The opposite of exclusion is inclusion through, not assimilation, not equality, not tolerance, but acceptance (including acceptance of difference) and belonging. The latter cannot be assumed, or subsumed, amongst other policy measures, it must be an explicit policy aim and it must be pursued with heart.

**Supplementary Submission to Interim Report of the NSW
Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues
Committee: Closing the Gap - Overcoming Indigenous
Disadvantage in New South Wales (June, 2008)**

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14 AUG 2008

**By the Authors of Submission 71: Dr Robyn Bartel and Dr Helen Edwards,
*Aiming for Advantage: Education, Acceptance and Belonging***

We greatly appreciate this opportunity to assess the interim report and provide further feedback to contribute to the final report.

The authors would like to commend the Inquiry's recognition of education, especially long term funding of education and culturally appropriate education for all students, as well as expectations and culturally relevant learning for Indigenous students as key areas. Commendable attention has also been paid to Indigenous mentorship, employment, leadership, empowerment, capacity-building and partnership and ownership of problems and to problems with government service provision. However we feel that insufficient attention has been paid to several other important problems and deficiencies in government attitudes and the wider Australian society, and barriers to Indigenous advancement which are created thereby, that infect service provision with a certain perspective that assumes white dominance and white normality, whilst "othering" Indigenous peoples and Indigeneity. Without addressing more basic questions of acceptance and belonging most service provision will be doomed to failure as it is configured and understood to be something that a white "we" (or "us") does to an Indigenous "them", for "their" own good, and is situated within a wider society which may see Indigenous treatment as special and undeserving. The greatest disadvantage that Indigenous peoples may indeed experience is to be viewed by the white majority as disadvantaged, historically racially and now socio-economically. Human respect and dignity must come first, and human respect and dignity demands acceptance and belonging first and foremost. Acceptance, for example into employment, does not follow from access to education and health, acceptance is a pre-requisite for health, education and employment.


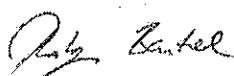
Noel Pearson describes the situation in a recent article in *The Australian* (August 9-10, 2008 p 27): "For too many indigenous people the Australian private sector is an unwelcoming place ... In order to get our people off welfare and to start the process of recovery and strengthening as a people, we need to believe that the doors leading to opportunity are open." For too long these doors have been shut by people who have not been able to see that "The normalisation of indigenous Australians in private-sector workplaces [and the authors would submit, all avenues of life] is a necessary breakthrough." To experience lack of acceptance, lack of respect and lack of belonging, and to inherit generations of abuse through the same negative treatment, is to endure anger and self-blame that has no other outlet but rage directed internally through self-harm (for e.g. drug abuse) and externally to physical abuse of others (frequently those closest and least deserving of such punishment). It is this treatment that leads to poor health and educational outcomes, to incarceration, and to lives compromised by criminal records and recidivism. It is important also to recognise that racism and Indigenous disadvantage puts all of Australia at a disadvantage, and presents all Australians with a moral challenge that we must meet with honesty and courage.

13/08/2008

The authors therefore find it startling that there is not a single mention of the concept of “belonging” in the Interim Report; not in the executive summary, summary of issues, nor in the categories discussed for further work in Chapter 10. Nor is there any indication that the Inquiry recognises that racism, mentioned several times by experts quoted within the report as critical, is an issue that requires attention. This is an astonishing omission for a report which is attempting to address problems that without exception stem from the “othering” and exclusion of Indigenous peoples and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their country. The opposite of exclusion is inclusion through, not assimilation, not equality, not tolerance, but acceptance (including acceptance of difference) and belonging. The latter cannot be assumed, or subsumed, amongst other policy measures, it must be an explicit policy aim and it must be pursued with heart.

There are a number of instances that the Interim Report misses the links between so-called causes and consequences, and thus misses the point. For example, at 6.84 the report states that “(t)he following section looks at some of the main causes of low attainment and retention rates amongst Aboriginal students” and then goes on to list attendance levels, but does not enquire why attendance might be low. It does discuss important factors such as expectations, relevant learning and community links, but does not discuss why expectations have not been high, why learning has not been relevant and education has not had community links. It is these reasons that need to be brought into the light, examined and addressed. Making racism and associated processes of “othering” invisible through denial or omission does not render them invisible in effect, and reinforces past atrocities. “Othering” and dispossession is the most complete method of exclusion possible, short of outright extermination (which of course has also occurred), and the failure to recognize these wrongs, along with their antecedents and their consequences, is a grave omission indeed. Denial must give way to acknowledgement, and exclusion must give way to acceptance and belonging. The authors are hopeful that these areas will receive appropriate and adequate attention in the final report in November this year. It is vital that the report’s recommendations identify acceptance and belonging as fundamental issues which require thoughtful and explicit attention if Indigenous advancement is to be achieved.

Yours faithfully,



and

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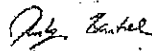
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Supplementary Submission - Bartel and Edwards

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