

## A better future starts with indigenous history

*Tim Goodwin*

**YOU** know the story. Don't pretend you don't. Indigenous Australians are behind on virtually all socio-economic indicators compared with non-indigenous Australians. Indigenous Australians have a life expectancy 17 years lower than that for the total Australian population. Indigenous people are three times as likely to have diabetes. Indigenous students are half as likely to complete year 12. Indigenous babies are more than twice as likely to have low birth weight, similar to many African countries experiencing extreme poverty.

The phrases almost roll off the tongue nowadays. Not all, but most of the shock factor has gone. That's a sad situation considering the devastating nature of the statistics. My point is not to say people no longer care but simply to highlight how much we have become desensitised to the information.

I can't distance myself from those statistics. They are about my mother and sister. They are about my grandfather, my goddaughter and godson. They are about my cousins. They are about my aunties and uncles. They were about my grandmother until she died, partly due to the diabetes that plagues our communities.

I often hear my elders speak of their pain, how they fought for everything in their lives against the odds. My mother would hide under a bed with all her sisters and brothers when a police car drove around the mission where she lived. I heard an elder speak about how the only reason she was taken away from her mother was that a white man had raped her and therefore the child was a "half-caste" in the eyes of the authorities. She never saw her mother again.

Part of the reason why indigenous people need to share these stories is because for so long there has been no recognition of their truth. By telling those stories, we remind ourselves they happened.

One of the greatest barriers to change in indigenous affairs is the lack of knowledge among all Australians about the true history of the indigenous experience. How many of you know the traditional owners of the land you live on? Were born on? How many of you have read the *Bringing Them Home* report into the stolen generations? How many of you have heard the life story of an Aboriginal person in jail — and from their own words, not from a news report?

Those questions are not accusatory, they are simply asked to prove that we all don't know each other enough. Until we do, the statistics we often hear regarding indigenous disadvantage will be without context.

However, if Australians have greater knowledge about indigenous Australia it will be harder to distance ourselves from working together to find solutions. It will also mean that government will be more accountable for its actions in the face of a more knowledgeable electorate.

There are many things that can be done to enhance knowledge about indigenous Australia. More indigenous history must be taught in all schools at all levels. Take a look at the efforts of Trinity Grammar in Melbourne to see a role model of this behaviour.

A major investment must also be made in the negotiation of a treaty between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. There are no guiding principles governing the way

indigenous policy is debated, expressed, created and implemented. If real, lasting and meaningful change is to occur in indigenous affairs, we must create the foundation whereby indigenous Australians are an equal part of Australian society.

There is a lot of justified confusion in the community about what a treaty would achieve. Many remember some of the statistics I discussed earlier and think "why would we worry about a bureaucratic document when the education, health and employment conditions of indigenous people are so bad?" Ultimately, I believe a treaty will create two major opportunities for Australia.

First, we will all finally have the chance to have a comprehensive discussion about our nation's history, about how it has affected all of us.

Second, a treaty will have great practical effect. It will set the guidelines for how indigenous policy should be made, based on what we know are the fundamentals of making good indigenous policy.

Central to the negotiation of a treaty must be the involvement of young people. Among the indigenous population, about 63 per cent are under the age of 30. If we are to create sustainable solutions in indigenous affairs, young indigenous people must play a leading part because they are the majority of our community.

Indigenous people must not allow our own barriers to hinder the ability to work together. The divisions in our communities must be overcome. The public slanging matches between our leaders must end. Young indigenous people do not want a place at the table because of intergenerational jealousy. They just want to help their communities.

So find out who the traditional owners of the area you live in are. Find out what happened to them through history. Find out where they are now. Learn more. And then act on that knowledge.

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<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/a-better-future-starts-with-indigenous-history-20090316-8zvt.html?page=-1>