

Governor-General's Optimism About The Next Step

The recent Australasian conference "Children's Rights: The Next Step" was officially opened by the Governor-General, Sir William Deane. His Excellency highlighted the progress that has been made, and the reforms that are still required to advance children's rights.

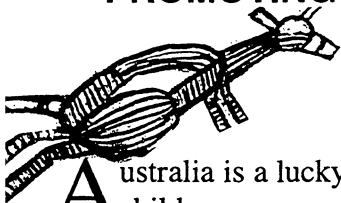
In his opening address, Sir William said that progress has been made during the course of this century in defining and establishing the concept of rights for children which exist separately from those of their parent or guardian. The significant steps have been the Convention on the Rights of the Child and advancements in children's health and education.

He also recognised that "in Australia, as elsewhere, we still have a considerable distance to travel...before there is adequate protection of the best interests of all children in all situations." Sir William especially highlighted the experiences of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children in our society, including those physically, sexually and emotionally abused, homeless children and indigenous children.

Sir William praised the valuable contribution that non-government organisations like DCI-Australia make in promoting children's interests. He assured us of his optimism that the "next step" can be taken in advancing children's position in society and thus set the tone for an informative and successful conference."

PROMOTING THE RIGHTS OF AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS CHILDREN.

From a paper by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Dodson, at the Australasian Children's Rights Conference, Brisbane, 5th April, 1997.



Australia is a lucky country. Most Australian children can expect sound housing, medical attention, an education, protection from the law, and a life free of poverty, neglect and discrimination. Not all Australian children enjoy these rights. Some children have no access to medical care and can expect to live 20 years less than others. Their homes do not have running water or sewerage. They are denied a basic education and are harassed by the police. Their lives do not meet the criteria of UNCROC.

These are our indigenous children. If we continue to deny historical truths and to insist that indigenous people forget our past, then the future will be bleak. If we continue to alienate our people from their lands and cultural property, to use welfare and juvenile justice systems to break up families, and to deny children access to basic

health care and essential services, then a bleak future is guaranteed.

The alternative is to advocate on behalf of aboriginal children. A just future will be forged through principles of remembering and respect. This means acknowledging the contemporary repercussions of our nation's past, and recognising indigenous people as whole and competent peoples. Many non-indigenous Australians are committed to creating a society underpinned by such principles. Australia is called a lucky country. If it also to be a just and decent country, protection of the rights of all young people is the very least we can expect.

If this is to apply to ALL Australian children then vigorous action to promote the rights of indigenous children is the highest priority.