

Crikey / Thursday, 21 May 2009

Rudd turns his back on closing the gap

Health economist Professor Gavin Mooney writes:

On Monday the ABC reported under the heading of "[Indigenous homelands reap health benefits](#)" that a study by the Menzies School in Darwin had shown that "Indigenous Australians living and working on their traditional homelands are significantly less likely to develop diabetes and chronic kidney and heart disease".

So these "cultural museums", as Amanda Vanstone called them, are actually good for Aboriginal people's health!

Mind you this is not really news. Previous studies have reached similar conclusions over a number of years. One by Roybn McDermott and colleagues [found](#) that "Aboriginal people who live in homelands communities appear to have more favourable health outcomes with respect to mortality, hospitalisation, hypertension, diabetes and injury, than those living in more centralised settlements in Central Australia".

But the Howard government ignored that evidence and rubbished the idea of culture and land being important to Aboriginal health. They wanted "practical reconciliation".

The Rudd government in office has made The Apology and that has to be a plus. They have established the policy of Closing the Gap between black and white life expectancy of 17 years. And that has to be a plus ... well sadly, no.

On Tuesday, just 24 hours after the ABC ran their report on the health benefits of the homelands, the NT Government was [reported](#) in *The Age* as planning to introduce a policy under which "thousands of Aborigines living on their remote Northern Territory homelands will be forced to move to larger communities to receive key government services".

This will bring the NT "into line with the Federal Government, which announced in March that only selected larger communities would benefit from initial funding in a 10-year program to build 4200 houses in remote indigenous communities across Australia."

What on earth will this do to close the gap?

With Howard, Vanstone and co at least Aboriginal people knew where they were -- outcasts in their own lands. With Labor the rhetoric is one thing; the reality from Rudd and Macklin is no different from Howard and Vanstone.

The statement that Rudd promised would be made each year on closing the gap on the first day of parliament was delayed. That statement was horribly bereft of imagination or

strategy and seriously lacking in real dollars aimed at closing the gap. The budget threw a few more dollars at Aboriginal health and one wondered whether Rudd, Macklin and co were serious about their government really getting to grips with the issues.

These moves to close the homelands gives us the answer. The close the gap policy of the Rudd government is not just delayed; it is dead.