



# Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd.

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**Media Release:**  
**“Mr Howard listen to us, work with us”**  
**27 June 2007**

The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Limited (VALS) has a simple message for Mr Howard in relation to his emergency response to child abuse in the Indigenous Australian community: “listen to us, work with us”.

VALS is welcoming of the Government’s commitment to do something about abuse because this means that Indigenous Australian’s message that something more needs to be done about abuse has finally been heard. However, at the same time VALS is concerned that the Government’s proposal to attempt to address the issue ignores the Indigenous Australian voice. The Government did not consult Indigenous Australians about the proposal and there appears to be no role for local people to have a say about what measures are adopted.

VALS repeats its simple message to the Government “listen to us, work with us” in order to prevent a repeat of mistakes of the past. The past failure of the Government to listen to Indigenous Australians about abuse is an important reason why we find ourselves with a national emergency today.

VALS is not calling for a talk-fest. Suggestions by the Government that consultation, discussion and co-operation are negative, or backward looking, fly in the face of common sense. In a crisis you want all hands on deck. The Commonwealth Government, by telling Indigenous Australians, State Governments and non-Government organisations they are irrelevant, is suggesting that it can fix the problem in isolation.

In calling for the Government to listen to and work with Indigenous Australians, VALS is asking the Government to recognise that Indigenous Australians are experts on how to deal with issues that affect them. Consequentially, measures that involve the Indigenous Australian community are more likely to succeed than those that do not.

The prevalence of the following messages should be seen as an opportunity to get the balance of measures right:

- Indigenous Australians should be involved in measures to deal with abuse.
- More should be done in terms of stabilizing change and preventing future problems (eg: providing support services, health and housing etc).

The value of a balance of measures was recognised in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Report (RCIADIC). The RCIADIC not only made recommendations about the criminal justice system, but underlying issues such as health, housing and employment etc. The Government has ignored many of the 339 RCIADIC recommendations and VALS calls on all Governments to revisit and implement the recommendations of the RCIADIC in totality.

Governments listening to and working with Indigenous Australians is essential to getting safer and happier communities.

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**Media release: We say it again- Listen to us, Work with us!  
8 August 2007**

The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Limited released a media release titled 'Listen to us, work with us' on 27 June 2007. The media release was in response to Prime Minister John Howard's announcement of an emergency response to sexual abuse in the Indigenous Australian community in the Northern Territory. It is with disappointment that VALS finds itself having to say again 'listen to us, work with us'.

VALS welcomes the commitment of Mr Howard and Mr Rudd to better protect Aboriginal children. However, the Bills relating to the emergency response that are currently before Parliament suggest a 'tough' approach to sexual abuse is appropriate when in actual fact a smart and sustained approach is required. It appears that the Government is rushing the Bills through Parliament without sufficient opportunity for Parliamentary debate or discussion by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

If the Government was to turn around and ask Indigenous Australians how to attempt to deal with problems in the Indigenous Australian community many community members would say the following:

Fundamental to success of the emergency response is how the commitment the Government is making will be managed and implemented. In order for this commitment to become truly effective it is vital that the Government and Opposition acknowledge the importance of working in partnership with Indigenous Australians. Also, it is important to acknowledge the work done so far by Indigenous Australians to tackle child abuse and its causes. This is commonsense.

Honest acknowledgement by the Government of the effort of Indigenous Australians to address problems, and a commitment to work in partnership with Indigenous Australians, is essential to any successful plan to better protect children. Commitment to working cooperatively is a way of avoiding reinventing the wheel and not repeating past mistakes. It is a way to ensure child protection improves sooner rather than later.

Recently the extent of community knowledge, skill and commitment to better protecting children has been reaffirmed by the work of the following and many others:

- Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory Preliminary Response to the Australian Government's proposal,
- Secretariat of the National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Association;
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations which is showcased in a publication titled 'Communities Working for health and Wellbeing: Success stories from the Aboriginal community controlled health sector in Victoria'.

We disagree that a racially based withholding of Government benefits to parents irrespective of any wrong doing can be justified legally or morally. Punitive sanctions

should be a last resort, based on a verifiable behaviour or omission (not skin colour or community membership) and be appealable.

Measures to improve child protection need not include changes to land ownership or the permit system. Changes to land ownership and the permit system, temporary or otherwise, are more likely to reduce community safety than increase it. The Government has not explained the rationale for such changes which suggests that they are peripheral to the child safety objectives at best and a significant handicap at worst.

Child protection and community safety objectives are too important to be compromised by Government land rights hobby horses or by a failure to work respectfully with Indigenous Australians.

**For further comment contact:**

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