

All Australia's children have a right to be protected

April 7, 2008

TWO months ago, the Prime Minister led Federal Parliament in apologising to the stolen generations. This newspaper hailed that event as a new beginning for the nation: an opportunity to revive the push for reconciliation between indigenous and settler Australians by acknowledging historic wrongs. We still believe that this is so. But we do not pretend that the apology, powerful act of symbolism though it is, is more than an start. And in the past week, Australians have again been reminded that indigenous people, especially those living in remote communities, continue to be subject to forms of abuse that began with the earliest European settlements on this continent.

On Friday *The Age* reported that Aboriginal girls as young as 13 were being sexually exploited by non-indigenous men in the Northern Territory mining town of Nhulunbuy. The men offer the girls cash, alcohol, drugs and free taxi rides as inducements for sex, and openly boast about these activities in the town's pubs. The fact is horrendous enough; what is even worse is that it was already known about. The *Little Children Are Sacred* report prepared for the Northern Territory Government referred to allegations of a rampant sex trade in Nhulunbuy, and it is that report that prompted the Howard government's intervention in the territory's remote communities, an intervention the Rudd Government has continued. Aboriginal elders, including the former Australian of the Year Galarrwuy Yunupingu, have demanded to know why, eight months after the \$1.5 billion intervention began, the abuse continues.

That a leader of Mr Yunupingu's standing should be taking the initiative on this matter, and encouraging family members to report what they know of the abuse to police, is an indication that the intervention has not been a total waste of effort. It is testimony that the community and its elders will no longer silently acquiesce in the practices that oppress them.

The question raised by the Nhulunbuy report is not about the merits of the intervention, which will continue to be debated, or about the attitudes prevailing in indigenous communities. The deep, profoundly disturbing question is rather about the attitudes of non-indigenous Australians, some of whom are evidently learning anew habits of abuse that characterised the colonial past.

Sexual abuse of children is not, of course, confined to Aboriginal communities. It happens in the prosperous middle-class suburbs of Australia's cities, too. But in those suburbs the abusers do not feel free to boast openly of their exploits in the local pub, and when their activities become known they are quickly dealt with by the criminal law. That different standards apparently apply in Nhulunbuy — and similar communities across remote Australia — is evidence enough that we do not live in a reconciled nation. It may be that the abuse of children will never be eliminated completely, either in remote communities or in Melbourne's wealthier suburbs. Nowhere in the world is crime-free. But the people of remote communities should at least be able to expect that the safety and the innocence of their children will be respected and protected, just as the residents of our suburbs are able to do. The anger felt by Mr Yunupingu and the elders of Nhulunbuy is fully justified, and their demand that the abusers of their children should be brought to justice should promptly be satisfied.

A sad irony is that the elders' call for justice for their children was made at the same time that the federal Arts and Environment Minister, Peter Garrett, indicated his resolve to protect as many as possible of the Aboriginal rock carvings on the Burrup Peninsula in Western

Australia. The minister has authority over the Burrup, which was listed as a national heritage site by the previous government, and opposes a transfer of some his powers to the WA Government, which wants the right to approve development proposals. The carvings on the peninsula, some of which are older than the Pyramids or Stonehenge, older even than the famous cave paintings at Lascaux in France, are an extraordinary cultural heritage and Mr Garrett is right to insist on their preservation. Yet the controversy over the threat to the carvings is a reminder of just how difficult it is to overcome some of the problems experienced by indigenous Australia.

The rock carvings can be protected by executive decision, which appears to be happening. It is simply a matter of an individual's resolve. Whose resolve, however, will protect the children of Nhulunbuy? The indigenous elders have declared where they stand; the non-indigenous residents must do so, too.