



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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**STATEMENT BY SNAICC CHAIRPERSON DAWN WALLAM**

### **Self-determination is the key to Closing the Gap**

SNAICC welcomes the encouraging findings in Prime Minister Gillard's latest progress report on Closing the Gap, and in particular her strong, ongoing commitment to meeting all targeted areas within the set timeframes.

The report has positive news, particularly on infant mortality rates and access to early childhood — although it does reveal slower progress on school retention, employment and life expectancy rates.

SNAICC also welcomes the Government's efforts to gather more detailed and reliable data as the basis to measure improvement. This is especially relevant in the area of early childhood development which, as highlighted in the Productivity Commission's *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage 2011* report, suffers from a paucity of data.

As the Prime Minister noted, the foundations for overcoming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage have been laid.

SNAICC strongly maintains that to build on these foundations, "to keep improving and to improve more quickly" in the Prime Minister's words, will require genuine engagement and partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and communities.

In this context, SNAICC is encouraged by the tone of the Prime Minister's speech, imbued as it was with a desire to listen, to pursue a partnership approach and to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are willing to meet their responsibilities to improve their own circumstances.

The Prime Minister made the point that both practical and symbolic measures of reconciliation should be pursued to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — as citizens and as First Peoples.

One of the fundamental rights of First Peoples across the globe is the right to self-determination — that is, the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have control over their lives and future including their economic, social and cultural development.

SNAICC has consistently asserted that self-determination is the key to overcoming the serious and chronic issues faced by many of our communities — to meeting the Closing the Gap targets.

SNAICC recently highlighted two issues on which more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander autonomy is needed to find solutions: the alarmingly high and increasing number of our children in out-of-home care; and the next phase of the Australian Government's measures to improve outcomes in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

The issue is central to how strategies and programs are developed and implemented to “close the gap”. The Prime Minister highlights the need to specifically design mainstream services to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

SNAICC certainly supports this as an urgent need. However, governments should also look to improve support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based and driven services to enable them to better respond to community needs.

This is the most effective, evidence-based service model for outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In the report, the Prime Minister states that the “Government is trying hard to find solutions.” We implore the Government to entrust Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in partnership, to find and share the solutions to the issues we face.

The Prime Minister made the crucial observation that decades of under-investment are a major cause of disadvantage, especially for the very young. It's a point that governments at all levels need to keep at the forefront of their efforts in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs.

SNAICC supports the Government's efforts to gather more detailed and reliable data as the basis to measure improvement. This is especially relevant in the area of early childhood development which, as highlighted in the Productivity Commission's *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* 2011 report, suffers from a paucity of data.

Finally, SNAICC congratulates the Leader of the Opposition for his gracious reply to the Prime Minister's report. Mr Abbott showed the kind of bi-partisan spirit that is essential if we are to improve both the quality of life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and recognition of our status as First Peoples.

**For more information: Frank Hytten, SNAICC CEO, on (0432) 345 652**