



Dodson leads education drive

By Emma Macdonald

Australian of the Year Mick Dodson will use 2009 to push for an indigenous education revolution, calling for an end to the division between “symbolic” and “practical” reconciliation.

Professor Dodson said in his first public address since being named Australian of the Year education was key to improving outcomes for indigenous people and allowing them a roughly equal chance at happiness.

Australian National University’s Centre for Indigenous Studies director told the National Press Club he would spend this year talking to teachers, bureaucrats, indigenous people and politicians about the changes necessary to turn educational disadvantage around.

“On 26 January 2010, every child will be geared up for the start of the school year. They will have a school to go to with chairs and tables and blackboards; with teachers ready, confident, determined, equipped to impart knowledge and confidence. Shoes on kids’ feet, breakfast in their tummies; well-rested, ready to learn, willing to learn, able to learn,” Professor Dodson said.

“That’s my hope and I am going to do my very best to make it real.

“Some may say I am naively ambitious, but let’s have a crack.”

Believing it was time to get rid of the “start again syndrome” that

plagued indigenous affairs for so long, Professor Dodson said many schools were doing good things in indigenous communities.

But the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies chairman wanted the Rudd Government to match its schools infrastructure funding with appropriate injections into “human capital”. Buildings, computers, gymnasiums and science labs were all essential to education revolution but were worth “bugger all” without people to learn and teach in them.

He called for greater investment in teacher training, a more relevant curriculum, reporting standards “that parents and pupils can understand” and for “common sense to be brought to bear, not education theory or bureaucratic fashion.”

“Education is something we’ve let slide miserably in recent decades. We’ve failed a lot of children in that time – a disproportionate number of indigenous children.”

Professor Dodson lashed out at the political debate on “practical” and “symbolic” reconciliation.

“I want to do my best to put an end to this misguided notion that reconciliation comes in two discrete and opposing forms – practical meaning worthwhile and effective, and symbolic, meaning near enough to useless,” the Yawuru man said.

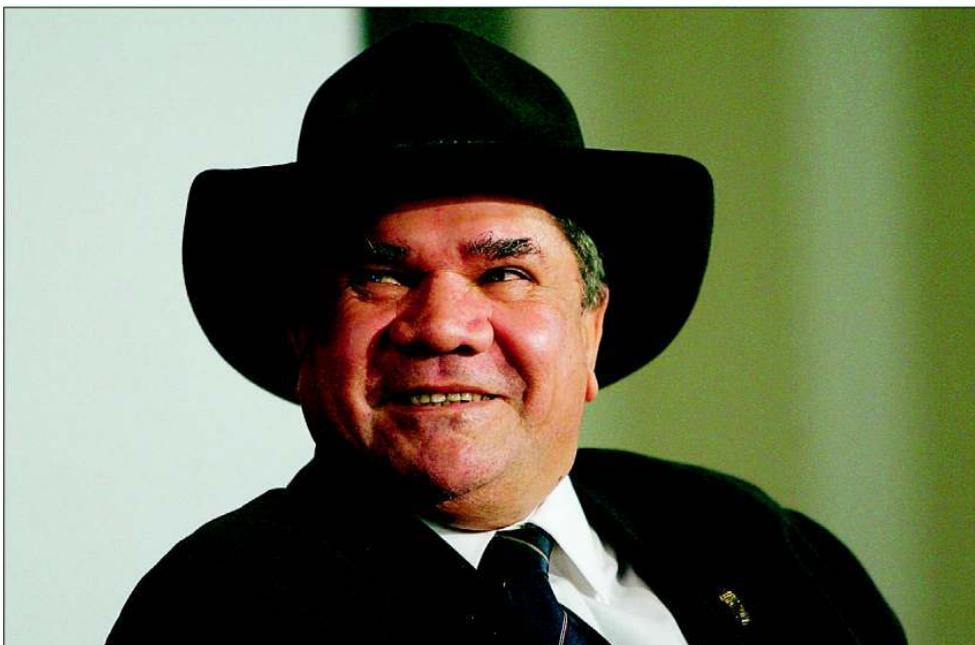
“It never made any sense but nonetheless provided an easy way of dividing people who are essentially working towards the same end result.” Former prime minister John Howard advocated practical reconciliation during his four terms in power, while Professor Dodson and other prominent indigenous activists argued reconciliation had to include symbolic gestures such as an apology for past injustice, finally delivered by Labor a year ago last week.

Professor Dodson said the apology, acknowledging country and recognising the first Australians in the constitution, were “practical things that change the way we think, feel and act”.

He said there would be little disagreement education was the foundation for real reconciliation.

“I think we can all agree that a good education is a right that all Australian children have. I think we can all agree that education also bestows dignity. And I think all of us agree that this right and this dignity are a bit more, a great deal more, than merely symbolic. They have profound practical effects.”

He acknowledged the “hollow symbolism” of past policies which never translated into on-the-ground help and described as shameful money slated for education that never reached some communities.



EQUALITY PUSH: Australian of the Year Mick Dodson says education is the key to improving outcomes for indigenous people. Photo: ANDREW SHEARGOLD