



THE NATION

■ EDUCATION

We're failing our kids: Dodson

Yuko Narushima

FOR too long Australia has failed its children by denying them the good education needed to stamp out inequality and drive reconciliation, an emotional Mick Dodson said yesterday.

By January 26 next year the indigenous leader and Australian of the Year wants all children, indigenous or not, to be attending school with the expectation they will finish high school.

That this was not happening now should be an "offence to our pride", he said.

Pausing to dry tears during an impassioned speech to the National Press Club in Canberra yesterday, Professor Dodson took a swipe at Government policies that had failed to deal with communities individually and recognise success stories.

"We fob off the failures by blaming the kids, parents or teachers. Or we look for one-size-fits-all solutions: silver bullets that just don't exist," he said.

The recent stimulus package also came under attack. Part of

the \$42 billion package was allocated to building school infrastructure. "They're worth bugger-all without people to teach in them and learn in those buildings," Professor Dodson said. "Billions of dollars set aside that never reaches teachers and the children, now that's mere symbolism."

At one school in the Northern Territory, he said, teachers were paid full-time salaries but only arrived to teach for half the week.

He said spending on school infrastructure, rather than on human capital, was based on an assumption that Australians would only tolerate funding for indigenous people if they could see bricks and mortar.

"Mere symbolism is the poisonous havoc of political spin, of grandstanding before the media, then walking away as if the mission is accomplished, just by saying it has been."

By contrast, the apology to the stolen generations by the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, a year ago

had a real impact.

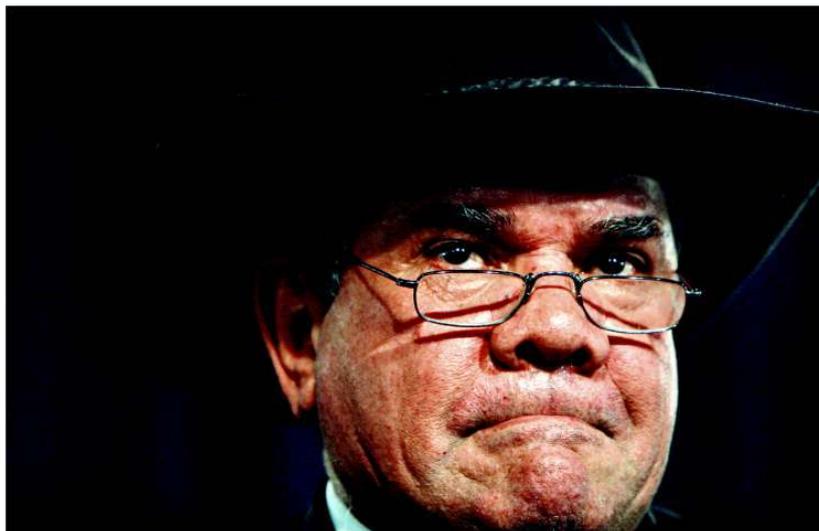
Indigenous people were able to look in the mirror and like what they saw, Professor Dodson said. That kind of self-respect had to be nurtured in children to improve outcomes for indigenous students at school who were stalled by "watered-down" expectations of them, he said.

While increased teaching of indigenous history and culture could help, he said, "a little bit of praise goes a long way".

However, the responsibility was not placed on government and teachers alone. Every Australian had to commit to universal education. Reconciliation was possible when Australians were all working towards the same end result, he said.

'Symbolism is the poisonous havoc of political spin.'

MICK DODSON



Emotional speech ... Australian of the Year Mick Dodson at the National Press Club yesterday. Photo: Glen McCurtayne