



## **Magistrate Sue Gordon, AM National Indigenous Council Chairperson**

In November 2004 Magistrate Gordon was appointed Chairperson of the recently established National Indigenous Council, an expert advisory body providing advice to the Australian Government on policy and service delivery issues affecting Indigenous Australians.

**The title of Mrs Gordon's presentation is 'Family Violence and Indigenous Communities'**. Mrs Gordon will be presenting on the new arrangements in Indigenous affairs currently being implemented in Australia and the many challenges she faces as Chair of the National Indigenous Council. Mrs Gordon will also discuss family violence in Indigenous communities – in particular the outcomes of the Inquiry into the 'Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities' (Gordon Inquiry), that she chaired and what is being done across Australia to combat family violence in Indigenous communities.

Dr Gordon is a Magistrate in the Perth Children's Court. She was born in 1943 at Belele Station near Meekatharra, Western Australia. At the age of four, she was taken from her mother and placed in Sister Kate's Home in Perth. This was under government policies of the period, thus making her one of the 'Stolen Generation'. In 1961 she joined the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps, and after leaving the army had various administrative posts around Australia.

In the early 1970s she began a long association with the Pilbara region, working mostly in Aboriginal affairs with traditional people. In 1986 she was appointed as Commissioner for Aboriginal Planning, becoming the first Aboriginal person to head a government department in Western Australia.

In 1988 she began her appointment to the Perth Children's Court, becoming the first full-time and first Aboriginal magistrate in the State's history.

In 1990 Mrs Gordon became one of the first five appointed Commissioners to run the newly established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) for a period of one year.

In 2001, the State Government appointed her as chairperson of the 'Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities', often known as the 'Gordon Inquiry'. The inquiry reported in August 2002, making numerous recommendations to government.

The Gordon Inquiry was established following the Coronial inquiry into the death of 15 year old Susan Taylor, and looked at the causes, prevalence and effects of violence and examined how each government department responded to family violence and child abuse in Indigenous communities. The focus of the Inquiry was on sexual abuse of children and young adolescents, and on government agencies' responses to this abuse.

The 642 page Report was extremely comprehensive, making 197 recommendations and providing best practice models and a community-focused systematic response. Recommendations specific to sexual assault include: the expansion of sexual assault services in metropolitan, rural and remote areas; better data collection; and mandatory reporting of STDs in children under 13 years.

The Inquiry did not attempt to provide one correct definition of family violence or child abuse, and rejected a gendered analysis of family violence. Instead it explored a multiplicity of factors that contribute to the violence and focused in particular on "resource systems" in order to "assess the needs of men, women and young people in domestic violence".

In 1993, Mrs Gordon was awarded an Order of Australia – Australia Medal – for commitment to Aboriginal people and community affairs. She has a Bachelor of Laws and in 2003 received an honorary doctorate from the University of Western Australia.

As already noted, Mrs Gordon currently chairs the National Indigenous Council (NIC), an expert advisory body to the Australian Government. The NIC provides advice to government on improving the socio-economic status of Indigenous Australians, including improvements in government programs and services for Indigenous people. The NIC alerts the Government to emerging issues and advises on the appropriateness and effectiveness of programs within the Indigenous community. The NIC also promote constructive relations between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations.

### **Background on the New Arrangements in Indigenous Affairs in Australia**

On 15 April 2004, the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Senator Vanstone, announced major changes to the administration of Indigenous Affairs in Australia. On 1 July 2004, the Government introduced most of its proposed structural changes to the administration of Indigenous Affairs. This involved the Government's Indigenous programs being administered by mainstream agencies or departments, but under a 'whole-of-government' approach. This means that mainstream departments are required to accept responsibility for the Indigenous services delivered by their department and will be held accountable for outcomes.

Whole of Government Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs) have been established and are the front line for Government presence. These ICCs offer a coordinated one-stop-shop service as many departments are represented in these centres. There are thirty ICCs in metropolitan, rural and remote areas across the country.

An Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) has been established within the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs to coordinate Indigenous policy development and service delivery across the Australian Government. They are also responsible for overseeing relations with State and Territory governments on Indigenous issues and monitoring the performance of Australian Government programmes and services for Indigenous people.

A Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs (MTF) has been set up to provide leadership and strategic direction at the national level, and is advised by the Secretaries Group on Indigenous Affairs and the National Indigenous Council (NIC).

#### ***Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs***

The Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs (MTF) has been established to provide high-level direction to Australian Government policy development, as well as coordination and flexible resource allocation to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The MTF is comprised of 10 Ministers that have portfolios that include Indigenous services or program delivery.

The MTF meets at least 4 times each year including 2 meetings with the NIC. The NIC has had two meetings with Ministers since the NIC's appointment in November 2004. At its first meeting on 16 June 2004, the MTF articulated its long term vision for Indigenous Affairs, that over 20-30 years:

*Indigenous Australians, wherever they live, have the same opportunities as other Australians to make informed choices about their lives, to realise their full potential in whatever they choose to do and to take responsibility for managing their own affairs.*

The MTF Charter also identifies three urgent priorities, that have been sharpened by the NIC, for immediate attention. The priorities read:

There are many urgent priorities and milestones to be met to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians. The issues that must be addressed are interconnected and progress needs to be made across all key areas, particularly health, housing, education and employment which are essential to Indigenous well being.

Taking account of urgent priorities and the Government's long term vision for Indigenous Australia, the Taskforce will focus on three key areas of intervention for the development of coherent, cross agency approaches over the next 12 months.

The priorities are:

- early childhood intervention, a key focus of which will be improved mental and physical health, and in particular primary health, and early educational outcomes;
- safer communities (which includes issues of authority, law and order, but necessarily also focuses on dealing with issues of governance to ensure that communities are functional and effective); and
- building Indigenous wealth, employment and entrepreneurial culture, as these are integral to boosting economic development and reducing poverty and dependence on passive welfare.

### ***Secretaries Group on Indigenous Affairs***

The heads of departments administering the Australian Government's Indigenous programs form a Secretaries Group, which meets regularly and is chaired by the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The Secretaries Group provides advice and support to the MTF, leads coordination across government agencies, and prepares a public annual report on the outcomes of Indigenous specific programs.

### ***Role of the NIC***

A National Indigenous Council (NIC) has been appointed to advise the Australian Government on Indigenous issues and strategies. It will meet at least four times a year and is chaired by Mrs Sue Gordon. The NIC is a 14 member advisory body who were appointed based on merit, experience and expertise in particular areas, such as health, education, employment and law.

The NIC's charter requires it to provide expert advice to government on how to improve outcomes for Indigenous people, including improving program performance and service delivery in a whole-of-government environment. The NIC will advise on the appropriateness and effectiveness within the Indigenous community of programs across government and promote constructive dialogue and engagement between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations. It will also advise on national priorities and alert government to current and emerging policy, program and service-delivery issues.

Members of the NIC do not represent particular regions, organisations or agencies. The NIC is not a replacement for ATSIC and not intended as a representative body. It will not be involved in specific funding proposals or specific planning or program matters related to individual communities or regions.

While the NIC will be a major source of advice to the Australian Government, the Government will also consult other Indigenous boards and committees, community organisations and leaders.

### ***Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs)***

Shared responsibility is fundamental to the Government's new arrangements for Indigenous affairs and SRAs are a means for government to engage with communities.

The emphasis on shared responsibility recognises that:

- Governments alone cannot bring about all the changes necessary to overcome Indigenous disadvantage; and
- Indigenous people and communities must be involved in planning and building their future.

Shared Responsibility Agreements are agreements that spell out what all partners – communities, governments and others – will contribute to bring about long term changes which will achieve better outcomes for Indigenous communities.

SRAs consist of one or more priority issues identified locally by Indigenous people and are closely linked to the community's (and Government's) 20-30 year vision. For example, increased school attendance, healthier kids, stronger governance and initiatives to tackle family violence in communities.

SRAs can be developed in remote communities, regional areas or discrete parts of urban areas if Indigenous people locally decide they want to make changes in this way. Within a year of the new arrangements being implemented 76 SRAs have been signed in communities right around Australia.