

Show of unity in closing the gap

GREGORY ANDREWS

When NSW Independent Rob Oakeshott revealed he would back a Julia Gillard-led Labor Government he referred to the need for changes to the constitution to recognise indigenous people.

Viewed as a conservative, Oakeshott has supported the Labor-Green alliance – although he maintains he will ensure that Labor's actions are carefully scrutinised. As the deal was being done – an Aboriginal leader for whom I have much respect, Noel Pearson, was warning that a Labor-Greens alliance could hinder Aboriginal wellbeing.

However, it seems that with the Labor-Greens alliance, Oakeshott has managed to get things moving for indigenous Australians. It was heartening to hear him say that "we've managed to get a process over the next three years that at the very latest we'll see a referendum question put at the next election on indigenous recognition in the constitution. Something that is part of the social fabric of this country that's been left behind for too long."

Some argue that any changes to the constitution to recognise indigenous people are largely symbolic, but our experiences at Indigenous Community Volunteers prove otherwise. Such actions have a profound effect and lead to a change in attitude.

What happened after the Rudd-led Labor government's apology is a strong indication. Post apology, ICV suspended all active recruitment of volunteers because ICV received more unsolicited applications from people wanting to volunteer, leading to a situation where it couldn't cope with processing the people wanting to contribute.

Pearson has at times also rightly lamented a need for more leaders in the present generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Through ICV, real progress is being made on indigenous leadership. And this investment in our people is being built from the grass roots up.

More and more indigenous people are working closely with their people to close the gap while not getting too wrapped up with trumpeting their achievements.

With our communities and volunteers, ICV shares a vision where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will enjoy the same opportunities, rights and future as all Australians. We are all working together enabling leadership in communities in remote, urban and regional Australia. The work is helping people turn their lives around, and those individuals also provide leadership.

Ian Appo is indigenous and a former long-term prisoner who has successfully moved on with his life and now works with the Queensland Department of Main Roads. Having experienced himself the many barriers ex-prisoners have to re-establish their lives in society, his long-range goal is to establish better support for indigenous ex-prisoners in Queensland.

He is being helped by ICV volunteer Ross Allen, now 62, who has worked in international aid and local communities, and for territory and Commonwealth governments. "There's a lot to admire about Ian," Allen says. "I've spoken to ex-prisoners before. Typically they are bitter about the world and don't use their time in prison to change. But Ian took ownership of his actions and how he decided that on his release he would work to make life better for others."

Another example of people developing leadership skills through ICV projects is Jacob Cassady who manages Mungalla Aboriginal Tours set up by the Indigenous Land Council in North Queensland. After living in Redfern for many years, Cassady, a father of five boys, headed back home to assist in the business which involves cattle agistment and development, land management, education and tourism.

Cassady invited ICV to work with him. "Closing the gap' are only words until indigenous people have working businesses," he says. "The legacy I want to leave is a viable business for my children and a sense of pride about what's been done on our country." Through ICV, he says "we've learnt quickly and are really working towards that common vision of empowerment for Aboriginal people. Having the capacity then to pay people and provide jobs and training for indigenous people that are not relying on government hand-outs."

It is actions like these that will help provide the impetus for the push to recognise indigenous people in the constitution. That is leadership.

■ Gregory Andrews is the chief executive of Indigenous Community Volunteers.