

Aboriginal leader shines light on injustice half a world away

By Tyler Rhodes

Speaking in a baritone that was soft yet commanding, Mick Dodson's voice was the only audible presence for nearly an hour in a room of dozens Sept. 16.

In the poor acoustics of the elementary school commons, Nomeites sat still and silent, taking in every word of the visiting Australian's presentation. While Dodson spoke of the circumstances and trials of the Aboriginal population in the rural areas of a continent on the other side of the globe, many of his observations could have been applied to any number of villages in Alaska.

Dodson, an Aboriginal himself, spoke of some tough realities experienced in rural, Aboriginal Australia—higher incidences poverty and sickness, a lack of infrastructure and poorer educational results. "We are sicker, poorer and have more homeless than the rest of Australia," he said. "Our economic and social outcomes are not the best. Sadly, some of the outcomes here are identical as at home."

The similarities drawn between rural Alaska and Australia by the visiting professor of law from Australia National University were not all gloomy, however. Dodson also highlighted the revival of traditional cultural activities and language—again areas where a reflection can be seen on the other side of the globe here in Alaska.

A guest of Dr. Bill Cox and Janna Varrati, members of the Alaska World Affairs Council, Dodson was in Nome for a couple of days to tour the area and speak at the Sept. 16 public presentation. The Aboriginal leader was in Alaska to participate in lectures at the University of Alaska Anchorage after an invite from professor Dalee Sambo Dorough.

Dodson, who was named the Australian of the year for 2009, has worked on issues revolving around indigenous peoples' rights, most notably with the United Nations as well as through his leadership on a long list of commissions, universities and centers. In his work with the U.N., Dodson was involved in the drafting of the text used in The Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples. The declaration was adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 2007.

While in Nome, Dodson described a litany of transgressions against that declaration and Australian anti-discrimination laws in his country's federal intervention in the nation's Northern Territory. Under the pretense of rampant cases of child sexual abuse in the territory, Dodson said the federal government passed a sweeping set of legislation in 2007 that, among other items, suspended anti-discrimination provisions.

In the more than two years since the national emergency was declared that allowed the federal government to ex-

ecute a massive intervention in the largely self-governing region, Dodson not one child sexual abuse case has been prosecuted. Dodson said what has happened under the law, however, has allowed the federal government to enter nearly 80 communities and take over land with five-year leases without consulting landowners. Federal military and police units were sent to communities. Large signs were erected at the edge of dry towns warning of the consequences of bringing in liquor or pornography. "I find that very stigmatizing," he said. "It's damaging on the feeling of self-worth. Citizens are branded as drunks, child abusers and pornographers."

While Dodson said sexual abuse is a real problem, and one that should be addressed, he criticized the government's intervention as heavy-handed, misdirected and ineffective in addressing social problems. "They're very draconian laws," he said. "It's very disappointing. Given the long history of discrimination against Aboriginal people in Australia, it's actually quite almost soul destroying to see a modern country like Australia that's rich still practice discrimination."

Dodson said for all the money the Australian government has spent on the program, all that seems to show of the effort is infrastructure constructed for the bureaucrats who are supposed to administer the laws. "They sent the military in first. Then they sent in an



Photo by Tyler Rhodes

EMPASSIONED—Mick Dodson speaks of his home region in Australia and its troubles with the nation's federal government.

army of policemen. Then they sent in an army of doctors to check on all the kids. Then they sent in an army of bureaucrats," he said. "Not one house has been built for families. Not one safe-house for children or women has been built. They've built a lot of houses for government bureaucrat managers."

In addition to giving the public presentation, Dodson visited the high school and junior high campus while in

Nome. Dodson said he enjoyed the time with Nome's students, finding that many of their questions were based on food and subsistence issues. "They wanted to know what you do with animals. What kangaroo tastes like. Can you eat koalas?" he said. "It always lifts my spirits when I visit a school."

Following the school visit, while speaking with *The Nome Nugget*, Dodson asked why the high school

was located so far out of town. When he learned that the campus originally served as a boarding school for students from surrounding villages, he did not seem surprised.

The history of boarding schools and indigenous populations throughout the world have often had the same effect. For many they represented a place where families were split up, languages lost and traditions interrupted. In his evening talk Sept. 16, Dodson described a "stolen generation" of Aboriginal citizens through forced adoptions and boarding schools. "Colonial practices are all the same, really," he said.

Dodson also spoke of current positive trends in education, noting that currently many schools in Australia teach largely in the regional Aboriginal language. But that practice is in peril, he said, as the federal government debates the continuance of bi-lingual education.

Of the original approximate 250 Aboriginal languages, Dodson said 140 are still spoken with about 60 considered threatened with 20 or fewer speakers.

Summing up his visit to Nome, Dodson said he found the town welcoming and friendly. Like other foreign dignitaries brought to Nome by Cox and Varrati, Dodson also professed a desire Nomeites sometimes have a hard time grasping. "I'd love to come back in the winter," he said.

• Utility —

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Last time I looked, it seemed we did not fall within the parameters of their fuel program," Handeland said.

Board member Berda Willson suggested that if there were any word that the Alaska Gold mining operation was to resume, NJUS could save the expensive fuel for its power needs. The utility bought expensive fuel to cover extra generation for the mine's requirements, and was left with a surplus of the black gold when the mine shut down last year.

"We've had no indication of startup," Handeland said.

If the mine does start again, "I would hope the cost of fuel would be reflected in the power purchase agreement," board member Carl Emmons said.

You bet, Handeland agreed.

In other business:

NJUS has received a commitment from the Denali Commission funding facilitators to assist the integration of the 18-turbine Banner Wind Farm into the NJUS control system, both to enable NJUS to stop the Banner flow if necessary and to collect additional wind resource data from the Banner operation. City and utility employees went to Unalakleet in September to see the Unalakleet wind turbine and also meet with Denali Commission.

NJUS was in meetings with the contractor on the new NSHC hospital job on a temporary power supply agreement.

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