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MEDIA RELEASE

WE NEED A COMMITMENT TO ADDRESS EQUITY

The Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement (ALRM) notes the Prime Minister John Howard's comments regarding Reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples of this Nation. It is a welcoming change of attitude by the Prime Minister who also spoke of equal access to justice for all Australians.

However, ALRM's Chief Executive, Mr Neil Gillespie reminds the Prime Minister that ALRM continues to receive the same funding for Aboriginal Legal Aid as was the case in 1996.

"After 11 years of static funding, in real terms, this organisation's funding has been reduced by almost 40% over those 11 years. This statistic is alone worrying when mainstream legal aid has increased over 120% for the same period and the Australian Government continues to declare large budget surpluses - most notably \$17 billion earlier this year."

Aboriginal people continue to be gaoled disproportionately. Over 20% of those incarcerated are Aboriginal - yet Aboriginal people make up about 2% of the population. The incarceration rate is higher for Aboriginal women.

Mr Gillespie hopes that even though the Australian Government was one of only four nations to vote against the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Human Rights, that whichever political party wins the Election, the incoming government honours the UN Declaration and that real progress is made in increasing Aboriginal Legal Aid funding so that Aboriginal people can enjoy the same access to justice that is enjoyed by the rest of the Australian community.

"I remind both parties that Aboriginal people are citizens of this Nation and should not be used as a political football during elections. For a first world nation, Australian's track record in improving the quality of life for Aboriginal people is far less than most other nations," he said.

Mr Gillespie says politicians on both sides of politics continue to say that billions of dollars is committed to Aboriginal people, however if that is the case why is there so much disadvantage, marginalisation, high unemployment, appalling health standards, low education and unprecedented housing overcrowding.

"All Australians should be concerned that poverty and disadvantage continues to be a blight on Aboriginal Australia and it is not good enough that politicians continue the blame game that demonises and marginalises Aboriginal people."

I call on both Mr Howard and Mr Rudd to pledge real financial support for Aboriginal people so that real improvements can be made in all areas, thereby enabling Aboriginal people to enjoy the fruits of a booming economy that is enjoyed by other Australians.

CEO ALRM, Neil Gillespie is available for comment:

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FYI: The Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement Inc provides legal services and associated activities (legal aid and native title legal services, financial counselling, law reform and advocacy, the Aboriginal Visitors Scheme and community education) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in South Australia. ALRM is an independent incorporated Aboriginal community organisation.