

Media Statement for Immediate Release

Using the Westerman Report as a springboard for child protection transformation in West Australia

Professor Andrew Turnell

As a Professor of Social Work and the principal co-creator of the Department of Communities' child protection practice framework, I am ashamed. The recent actions by WA government against an Indigenous Communities' staff member as reported in *The West Australian* this Saturday past were appalling. It is hard to find words to intelligently speak of the damage this action represents and will likely reap.

We in the professional child protection community are quick and courageous, however we could use this moment to springboard genuine change in our relationships with Indigenous communities, organisations, leaders and families and transform the lived experience of Indigenous and all staff within Communities.

To achieve this, we whitefellas need to face our fear of speaking openly about the continuing colonisation and systemic racism that bedevils statutory child protection and find the courage and humility to pursue Makarrata. As the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#) proposes:

When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country...Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

This will require we take responsibility for the completely obvious point that our western child protection system continues to serve the Indigenous community poorly. We simply have too many Indigenous children in care. Kevin Rudd apologised to the Stolen Generations in 2008 and since then the number of Indigenous children in care has more than doubled.

The Department of Communities did well recently to change tack and release the [Westerman report](#). Prior to that and since, the whole matter has been handled poorly. To transform this mess, I would suggest:

- There is much to be lost in pursuing the person who leaked the report and broke Departmental confidentiality. An immediate circuit breaker is needed. I would ask the Premier to apologise for the police overreaction and set the matter on a new path
- Rather than demonising the whistle blower, let's approach her action as one of courage, meet with and learn what distressed her so much that she leaked the report
- Communities' Director General Mike Rowe and staff immediately meet with and open dialogue with Dr Tracy Westerman.

More broadly, it will hugely benefit us to acknowledge the scale and depth of this global problem. Around the world, children of traditional and First Nations cultures are massively

over-represented in all our children in care systems. In the broader context of the 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the enormous international outpouring of grief this triggered, I would ask that we in statutory child protection consider the following question:

If we were to go to the leaders and elders of Indigenous communities around our state, which would they say is more damaging for their community, way of life and families: the police or child protection services?

In speaking out in this way I am not seeking to demonise child protection professionals, the Department of Communities or the police. That way leads to more defensiveness and damage. This problem can be turned around. In evidence I cite the fact that in the three years beginning June 30 2018, by systematically tackling the problem, Territory Families has reduced the number of Indigenous children in care by 10.6 percent from 1067 to 953. During the same period their renotification rates in the NT fell from 16 to 8 percent. This is the first time any state or territory has achieved any significant out-of-home care reduction over a succession of years since Australia began gathering nationally comparable data in the 1990s.

I have sought through my career to work alongside statutory child protection services to envision and enact participatory practice, so that the organisation and field staff can work in genuine partnership with children, parents, extended family and community even in the worst situations of child abuse. I am so sorry for what has happened, and to the extent I have influence I particularly apologise to the woman whose home has been raided and who has been criminalised by my government and the Department I have spent so much time working with.

I ask that we step away from defensiveness and use this moment as a springboard to transform child protection in our state to strengthen our journey toward Makarrata.

Further information Professor Andrew Turnell: +61 412 249 552 or andrew.turnell@elia.ngo

Andrew Turnell is based in Perth and over the past 30 years has worked closely with child protection systems across Europe, UK, North America, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Cambodia and Uzbekistan. Since 2016, Andrew's primary focus has been on whole system transformation in Ireland, the Northern Territory, Uzbekistan and Cambodia.

Andrew is Social Work Professor of Practice at Cumbria University, principal co-creator of the Signs of Safety, and founding CEO of Elia International. Andrew is well-known internationally for his ground-breaking work in researching, developing and applying safety-organised whole system methods to promote the transformation of statutory child protection practice and organisation. Andrew works closely with Professor Eileen Munro from the London School of Economics who led the 2010–11 UK government review of the English Children's Services. Professors Munro and Turnell work together to assist governments and statutory children's services agencies to align child protection organisation with the delivery of practice that relocates children, parents and all those with natural connections to the child at the centre of the child protection endeavour. More information at www.signsofsafety.net and www.munroturnellmurphy.com