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Editorial: Stark numbers on black deaths

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NEW figures on life expectancy from the Australian Bureau of Statistics highlight the practical, as against symbolic, problems facing Aborigines.

The ABS estimates the life expectancy for Aboriginal men born between 1996 and 2001 at 59.4 years, and for Aboriginal women at 64.8 years. For the general population the numbers are 77.8 years and 82.8 years respectively – despite decades of welfarism and symbolic victories aplenty, Aborigines continue to die 20 years earlier than other Australians. And the statistics on infant mortality are more depressing. In Western Australia, where a mutual obligation contract stressing care and hygiene of children in the remote Mulan community has aroused controversy, an Aboriginal baby is three times as likely to die as a white baby.

In recent years no category of Aboriginal mortality has been more prominently canvassed by white activists than deaths in custody. The Australian Institute of Criminology estimates an average of 6.3 Aborigines died in prison annually between 1980 and 1998. But a pocket calculator applied to mortality rates in an earlier publication by the ABS can begin to reveal what is really killing Aborigines. In 1998-2000, nearly 2500 Aborigines died who would have lived if the rate of cardiovascular disease was the same for blacks as for other Australians. A further 1200 or so Aborigines who died in those two years would still be alive if rates of death from external causes were the same as for non-Aborigines. Included in external causes are the extraordinarily high rates of death by murder among Aborigines. This is part of the pattern of lives scarred by violence that ALP vice-president Warren Mundine referred to this week when he described Aboriginal men flogging their wives with sticks.

None of this suggests we should turn a blind eye while young Aboriginal men die in prison. None of it suggests we should condone the kind of systemic racism of which the West Australian public housing authority was accused yesterday by the state's Equal Opportunity Commission. And none of it suggests there is anything wrong in Tasmanian Premier Paul Lennon's plan to apologise to the stolen generation. But while sorry days, bridge walks and a focus on white racism have done no demonstrable harm, they have done no demonstrable good. The sea change that is sweeping across this debate, symbolised by the new compact between Noel Pearson and Pat Dodson that was first reported in *The Weekend Australian*, is the result of the recognition that policies based on welfarism and rights have not helped Aborigines and it is time to give new policies based on mutual obligation and responsibilities a try. While there are those who have labelled approaches such as the Mulan contract "racist", indigenous policy should not be based on name-calling or moral posturing. It should be based on a rational assessment of what is really killing Aborigines – and a determination

to do something about it.

Test driving a life-saving plan

THIS Christmas will be blighted for far too many families by fatal car crashes. And a disproportionate number of the victims are likely to be young drivers, and their passengers, who fall victim to inexperience and exuberance behind the wheel. Australian road deaths fell from 21 to nine per 100,000 people in the two decades to 2002. But fatalities among young drivers remain disproportionately high. In 1982, drivers aged between 17 and 25 accounted for 15 per cent of the population and 35 per cent of road deaths. In 2002, their population share was 12 per cent but they still made up 26 per cent of deaths on the roads. This is simply not acceptable and there are, quite properly, all sorts of restrictions on novice drivers designed to reduce self-inflicted risks, including an absolute ban on drinking and driving. In Victoria, beginners are barred from driving specific high-performance cars. In NSW, a similar ban will be adopted next year, as well as restrictions on the number of passengers young drivers who have lost their licence can carry when they are allowed back on the roads. These are all sensible schemes that stop short of some of the draconian ideas in circulation, such as the civil-liberty sapping suggestion of banning young people from driving at night.

But experience is always the best teacher and the more training young drivers receive the better their chances of staying alive. Which is why the federal, NSW and Victorian state governments are right to trial a \$5 million training program for newly-licensed drivers. The course will cover basic safety information and involve students driving their own cars while accompanied by an instructor. Overall, it will provide participants with the equivalent of a day's training.

This may not sound like much and there are questions on the effectiveness of training programs. In *The Australian* yesterday, ANU academic Andrew Leigh pointed to a survey of 24 driver-education trials, all but one in the US, which found no conclusive evidence remedial education prevents car crashes or road injuries. But while the omens are not especially auspicious, at very least a test program in Australian conditions will do no harm. And in conjunction with alcohol limits, graduated licences and vehicle restrictions for inexperienced drivers it may give us another way to reduce the road toll among the young. When it comes to practical ways to save lives on the roads, every little bit counts.

State budgets under increasing pressure

FOR years, NSW Treasurer Michael Egan has conspicuously worn a fiscal hairshirt, never failing to remind us that unlike the other state treasurers, he takes infrastructure borrowing into account when balancing the state's books. But now those books are sliding ever more deeply into the red, Mr Egan has decided to change shirts and shift from a net lending to a net operating result. By this simple measure, Tuesday's announcement of a blowout in the state's budget deficit of about \$680 million became a far less alarming easing of the surplus to about \$600 million.

It is a desperate measure for increasingly desperate times. In his April mini-budget, Mr Egan introduced a new 2.25 per cent duty on the sale of investment properties. It was narrow-based and punitive, and as a transaction tax appeared designed to inhibit economic activity. This it has achieved, mugging the investment property market as it was already heading downwards, and contributing to a 15 per cent drop in sales and prices in 2004. By taking a club to the market when it was already groggy, Mr Egan has undermined the revenue-raising potential of his own tax, which has raked in \$290 million less than anticipated. Hence the new budget hole.

With property prices easing across the nation, a golden period for public finances has ended. Victorian Treasurer John Brumby announced an increased surplus in his updated budget forecast yesterday, but that was entirely due to the GST: he warned that a dip in stamp duty receipts meant rocky times ahead. But the inability of the state Labor governments to control public sector wage rises will come back to bite them and reduce their stock of political capital when they most need it. In NSW, the reduced supply of rental properties caused by Mr Egan's investment property exit tax is eventually going to hit the pockets of those who rent. By 2007, renters will be primed to punish the Carr Government – but they will need to join a queue behind hospital patients and rail commuters.

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