

Australia: Olympic gold medalist Ian Thorpe speaks out against Aboriginal “intervention”

Richard Phillips
29 July 2009

Corporate media promotion of sports stars is an all-pervasive feature of contemporary life—until, that is, the celebrities start speaking out about social injustice or publicly criticising government policy. When that happens, they are either denounced or—if the individual happens to be widely respected and popular amongst broad layers ordinary people—subjected to a media blackout.

Retired Australian swimming champion, 26-year-old Ian Thorpe, previously hailed by the Australian media as a national hero and role model, was recently treated to the latter.

Thorpe, a particularly popular Australian swimmer, is a multiple Olympic gold medal and World Championship winner and the first person to have been named World Swimmer of the Year four times by *Swimming World Magazine*.

At the age of 15 he was the youngest ever male world champion and a year later broke four world records in four days. In 2000 he was made Young Australian of the Year and, in 2001, awarded the Order of Australia Medal. The media could not get enough of him.

This month, however, the situation changed. The reason? The former champion had spoken out at a Beyond Sport summit meeting in London about the nation’s “dirty little secret”—the ongoing poverty and social oppression of Australia’s indigenous population.

Thorpe’s speech, which is worth quoting at length, was a damning indictment of the decades of government mistreatment and neglect of Aboriginal communities.

Thorpe began by explaining that, having fulfilled his sporting ambitions whilst still a teenager, he could now use his profile to assist others less fortunate. At the age of 18 he established his own charity, Fountain for Youth. Among other things, Thorpe’s institution works with community organisations to improve the health and education of Australian indigenous children.

“I realised my value to organisations trying to bring positive change lent enormous weight to these causes. I must say though this should be an outrage, because as an athlete I am not as qualified to comment on health or education as the health professionals and educators who daily tackle the big issues. In fact, it is a bit disappointing that a teenager’s opinion garnered more attention than those who had been working on their chosen causes before I was even born ...

“I started to think of what impact my effort could have in places like Africa or South East Asia. I then visited some of the world’s neediest communities, places without access to planes and cars that seemed to be a world away ... but now they were truly at my back door [in Australia].”

Thorpe went on to cite some of the problems confronting the indigenous communities with which his organization works: 93 percent of residents are illiterate; 80 percent of children have hearing impairments from curable infections; malnourished mothers give birth to seriously underweight babies; diabetes affects half of all adults; and kidney disease is at epidemic proportions.

“Rheumatic heart disease among the children in these places,” Thorpe continued, “is higher than in most of the developing world. But I was not visiting communities in the developing world, I was in the middle of Australia. Remote, yes, but this is Australia, a country that can boast some of the highest standards of living of any nation in the world ...

“Australia’s grim record on health care for Indigenous

people is by far the worst of any developed nation. Developed? How can a country be ‘developed’ when it leaves so many of its children behind? Australia has not provided its citizens with an equal opportunity for primary health care, education, housing, employment, let alone recognition and a life of dignity.”

Thorpe told the Beyond Sport summit he once believed that sufficient government finance was provided to its indigenous citizens.

“Like many people in Australia, I was completely unaware of the huge gap in health and education outcomes, let alone the differences of life expectancy. I, as many had, made an assumption; Australia is a rich country, don’t we throw a lot of money at that problem? It disgusts me to speak those words now, but that was what I thought,” he said.

Thorpe voiced the naïve hope that pledges by “all sides of government” to “close the gap” between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, were “not another hollow promise that falls short”. He noted, however, “The truth is that none of the problems I have mentioned can truly be rectified until our government and my fellow Australians recognise the injustice faced by Aboriginal Australians and how they are denied so many human rights.”

The Olympic gold medalist then went on to direct his fire against the Northern Territory “intervention”, the program initiated in June 2007 by the former Howard government, with Labor Party support, under the false claims that it was aimed at protecting Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory from child abuse. The raft of punitive measures that have since been introduced include compulsory income management of all Aboriginal welfare and pension recipients, suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) and the seizure of Aboriginal controlled land. Elected to power in November 2007, the Rudd Labor government has maintained these retrogressive social policies in the face of growing Aboriginal opposition.

“The intervention,” Thorpe said, “was constructed by the previous government and has since been reported to have been assembled in the space of just one day. The irony is that Aboriginal people had been campaigning for decades about the living conditions and the neglect of their children within their communities.

“The programs to protect and nurture the children had been grossly neglected and underfunded by government over the last decade. What appears to be a political stunt and a grab for government control over Aboriginal people

continues to this day under the new government.

“Once more an Australian government has claimed it is doing its best for Aboriginal Australians by taking over their communities, appointing white managers, more government bureaucrats, promising all kinds of things, if Aboriginal people will just sign over their communities under forty-year leases to the Federal Government. And politicians wonder why Aboriginal people do not trust them. The truth is for over 200 years Australian governments have neglected and patronized Aboriginal people.

“The intervention is unlikely to provide any lasting benefit to Aboriginal people because it tries to push and punish them, to take over their lives, rather than work with them.”

While Thorpe concluded his speech with a promise that he and his charity, which works in 20 remote Australian communities, would fight to overcome the devastating poverty and health problems, his decision to speak the truth about the “intervention” and other dirty secrets of Australian capitalism were taboo as far as the Australian media were concerned.

The former swimming champion’s speech, which was delivered on July 9, was not reported by a single major news outlet until July 24, more than two weeks later, and then only in one brief article in the *Australian* newspaper. No other mainstream newspaper commented on the speech.

Given that Thorpe’s heartfelt comments puncture the ongoing government and corporate media lies about the intervention’s “success”, this should come as no surprise. It is yet another expression of the deeply anti-democratic character of government/media policy towards Australia’s indigenous population.



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