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Time to recognise urban Indigenous identity: Dodson

Defining Indigenous people by location, descent or appearance does not reflect the complexity of Indigenous experience and identity, AIATSIS Chairperson and Australian of the Year Professor Mick Dodson will tell the AIATSIS Conference tomorrow (29 September).

“Identifying people as Indigenous by the way they look is an outdated, racist concept. It doesn’t acknowledge who people really are and is an absurd stereotyping on this issue of culture and identity,” Professor Dodson said.

“We still see attitudes and assumptions from some people, including public figures and commentators that show little or no understanding of Indigenous identity and needs, particularly in urban settings.

“I hope this conference goes a long way to foster understanding of the complexities of Indigenous identity.”

Professor Dodson noted that urban Indigenous identity is an issue of considerable concern in Canada, New Zealand and the Americas. The Sami and Inuit of the Arctic are meeting this challenge as well, he said.

“Paradoxically, the urban context can be a lonely, confronting place for Indigenous people. If you are not careful, you can lose touch with your people, your culture, your identity and community. However, this same context can be a source of opportunity, of new connections, inspiring enriched cultural exchange.

“There are lots of economic and social issues influencing Indigenous urban identity – as distinct from cultural issues. Like Indigenous people elsewhere, urban Indigenous people face racism, isolation, marginalisation and failure to connect with the community. In spite of these challenges, Indigenous identity and culture have survived and thrived in urban environments.”

The AIATSIS National Indigenous Studies Conference *Perspectives on urban life: Connections and Reconnections*, is being held at the Manning Clark Centre, Australian National University. More than 220 presenters will discuss themes including community partnerships, culture and heritage, demography, education, health, housing, language, mobility and migration, reconnecting urban and remote communities via new technologies and representation and cultural expression.

Conference website <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/conf2009/conference2009.html>

Media contact:

Chris Ryan

E: chris.ryan@aiatsis.gov.au

M: 0408 688 026