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Media Release

GOUGH WHITLAM: THE FIRST PRIME MINISTER FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

The Indigenous Law Centre has paid tribute to former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam AC QC whose public memorial service was held in Sydney today.

Indigenous Law Centre Director, Professor Megan Davis echoed Noel Pearson's comments in saying that "we owe it all to him."

"Gough Whitlam was instrumental in creating change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples," she said.

"It was the Whitlam Government who sought to improve our mobs' access to justice by allocating almost \$8 million for the establishment of more Aboriginal Legal Services (ALS). During Mr Whitlam's prime ministership the ALS grew from just one small office in Redfern in 1971, to having offices in every State and Territory by 1974.

"He allocated funding to legal services with strong links to Indigenous communities; in fact it was that commitment which helped to establish the Indigenous Law Centre in 1981.

"We are a legacy of his policies and approach to Indigenous affairs—without his passion for justice the Centre would not be here today."

The Whitlam Government also passed legislation to abolish the discriminatory treatment of Indigenous people creating better representation, improved wages and working conditions, and putting an end to laws that restricted access to property rights.

"The passing of the *Racial Discrimination Act* in 1975 is also testament to the commitment that Mr Whitlam made to improve the lives of Aboriginal people," Prof Davis said. "It ensured that all Indigenous people had equal treatment before the law, and could not be discriminated against.

By creating a government policy of self-determination for Indigenous people, the Whitlam Government was able to improve the relationship between Aboriginal people and the Commonwealth.

"For the first time the Government was seeking to empower Indigenous people by allowing more input into policy-making decisions and creating a path towards the legal recognition of Aboriginal land rights, which later became the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* (Northern Territory)," Prof Davis added.

“Most notably, Mr Whitlam returned land to the Gurindji people near Wave Hill Station in the NT, pouring dirt through the hands of Vincent Lingiari—an iconic gesture symbolising the end of their long struggle to claim back what was rightfully theirs.

“All of these policies changed the lives of Indigenous people who had constantly been denied their rights for such a long time. He truly was a Prime Minister for Indigenous people.”

In healthcare, the Whitlam Government established the public healthcare system now known as Medicare. The creation of a new Department of Aboriginal Affairs, upgrading the area to a ministerial level, also saw investments in Aboriginal Medical Services which helped to improve the health and wellbeing of many Indigenous Australians. Many more Australians had better access to higher education with the abolishment of university tuition fees and extra funding was allocated for primary and secondary schools.

“While we have lost a legend and great man,” Prof Davis said. “Mr Whitlam’s contribution to Australia and spirit for championing causes, that make a real difference to people, can never be diminished.”

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The Indigenous Law Centre is based at UNSW and is the only law centre dedicated to Indigenous legal issues. To donate visit: www.ilc.unsw.edu.au