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NSW Department of Education & Training

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## Debatable success

By ZEA VARGAS  
1 November 2010

When Paul Kelly sings *From little things, big things grow* he could be talking about the Aboriginal Secondary Students' Great Debates competition held recently at NSW Parliament House.

Now in its fourth year, the competition has grown from an event that involved six students debating one topic in 2007 to one that recently brought together 40 students from 13 schools debating six topics.

Students who debated in previous years assumed leadership and mentoring roles for this year's event.

Alicia Johnson, school captain of Dulwich High School of Visual Arts, and Kingsley Dennison, from Endeavour Sports High School, conducted proceedings; while Corey Smith, now a first-year law student at the University of New South Wales, returned to mentor the students from Rose Bay Secondary College.

Students, teachers and Aboriginal Education Officers began preparing for the debates in Term 2, when they first gathered at Parliament House to reflect on this year's NAIDOC theme, *Unsung Heroes, Closing the Gap by Leading Their Way*, and to develop the topics for the debate.

After heated discussion they agreed to debate *six matters of public importance*:

That anybody can lead the Aboriginal people

That intervention is needed for Aboriginal people to adjust to today's society

That government policies assist in closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities

That remote Aboriginal communities are the key to closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people

That we need Aboriginal figureheads to inspire the Aboriginal population to achieve higher

That there is enough media coverage of Aboriginal achievements

Government and Opposition teams argued their cases with style and conviction, persuading the audience (families, peers, teachers, principals and other departmental staff), to swing their opinion, in some cases, by more than 50 per cent.

"We have noticed the standard increasing each year with the students now showing more confidence, researching their topics to a greater depth and using a variety of techniques to get their points across," Sydney regional director Dr Phil Lambert said.

"It is so great to see them on their feet in Parliament House - one can only imagine the potential that is there and it is our responsibility to support their further development as leaders in the community."

Larissa Behrendt, director of research and Professor of Law and Indigenous Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney, opened the debate.

"When I walked into the room I felt I was looking at a group of young men and women who were the most valuable assets that the Aboriginal community has," she said.

"I was impressed at the support showed to them by their families and carers and that they showed to each other.

"I found the event inspirational. I felt like the future of Aboriginal Australia was in excellent hands and that I could go and plan my retirement knowing that such a talented generation is coming through the ranks."

The event is held in partnership with Parliament NSW, and supported by Keepad Interactive and Values Exchange.

Schools involved in 2010: Alexandria Park Community School, Dulwich High School of Visual Arts and Design, Endeavour Sports High School, George River College - Penshurst Girls Campus, Gymea Technology High School, Matraville Sports High School, Newtown High School of Performing Arts, Port Hacking High School, Rose Bay Secondary College, South Sydney High School, Sydney Secondary College - Blackwattle, Balmain and Leichhardt campuses.

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Debating with passion ... Newtown High School of Performing Arts student, Benjamin Dennison

Photo by MATTHEW BURLEY

**"It is so great to see them on their feet in Parliament House – one can only imagine the potential that is there and it is our responsibility to support their further development as leaders in the community."**

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Page last updated 28 October, 2010 08:20am