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Indigenous issues top to-do list as super-rich urged to dig deep



Hamish Balnaves.

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- **EXCLUSIVE**

HELEN TRINCA

MANAGING EDITOR

[@helentrinca](#)

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Indigenous groups and programs are at the top of a list of causes that need funding, according to Hamish Balnaves, the general manager of one of our most active philanthropic organisations.

“What has happened (to indigenous Australians) is a disgrace,” he said yesterday. “It’s the biggest stain on our history for 230 years. We talk about reconciliation but we have not even got to truth telling yet, let alone reconciliation”

Mr Balnaves heads the Balnaves Foundation set up in 2006 by his father, Neil, the founder of the Southern Star media group and former chair of Ardent Leisure. The \$47 million foundation distributes about \$3m a year, with an emphasis on arts, health and education.

Hamish Balnaves said a key intent now was to support indigenous development. “I don’t think our country will really have its own strong identity till we have looked back at what happened,” he said. “We have a long way to go and so many other countries are so far ahead of us.”

Among other programs, the foundation funds scholarships for indigenous medical students at the University of NSW, and supports a five-year project at the Menzies School of Health Research to address hearing problems among indigenous people in the Northern Territory.

The initiative is co-led by ear, nose and throat specialist Kelvin Kong, who is profiled in this month’s *The Deal* magazine.

The foundation’s passion for indigenous issues dates back in part to 1979 when Neil Balnaves published the book *Australian Dreaming* by Jennifer Isaacs.

Hamish Balnaves is optimistic about a culture of philanthropy growing in Australia but said it needed to be “normalised” as in the US and Britain where donors were “not shy” about talking about giving. “I think it’s better if people don’t give anonymously, so that when people who have a lot of money give, it is just regarded as what you do rather than anything amazingly special,” he said.

He added that it was important for philanthropists to back causes they were passionate about because they were well placed to know what was needed.

In *The Deal* tomorrow, Dr Kong talks about his career as Australia’s first indigenous surgeon and the position of indigenous people.

“A lot of people are frightened of Aboriginal Australia, frightened about things they are not sure of,” he said. “One problem is our unconscious bias we have, which puts things in your mind about Aboriginal people which might be negative — alcohol, not going to school, uneducated, no work — when in actual fact in my group of friends, my Aboriginal friends, most of them are university-educated.”

Asked whether he experienced racism, he said: “All the time. To this day. There’s overt racism that you certainly see and there’s also unconscious racism that you may not see.”

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