



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Closing the Gap

SPEECH

Monday, 22 February 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Leigh, Andrew, MP

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Dr LEIGH (Fraser) (17:47): I note at the outset that only two of the seven targets in Indigenous health, education and employment are on track to be met on time. Halving child mortality by 2018 is on track. As to ensuring 95 per cent of Indigenous four-year-olds are in preschool by 2025, that is not clear. Halving the gap in reading and numeracy by 2018 is classified as 'mixed'. Halving the gap in school attendance by 2018 is not on track. Halving the gap in year 12 attainment by 2020 is on track. Halving the employment gap by 2018 is not on track. And closing the gap in life expectancy by 2031 is not on track.

I turn to each of those targets in detail. On the issue of life expectancy, the report notes that meeting the goal of closing the life expectancy gap by 2030 remains 'a significant challenge'. The data is only available every five years, but the report found that between 2005-07 and 2010-12 the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians only shrank by 0.8 of a year for men and 0.1 of a year for women. Indigenous Australians still continue to die about 10 years earlier, on average. And, while Indigenous mortality rates have declined 16 per cent since 1998, this will not be enough to meet the target. Indigenous deaths resulting from cardiac disease have fallen, but deaths from cancer are, as the report notes, increasing.

The aim of closing the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade is on track, the Indigenous child mortality rate having fallen 33 per cent since 1998. It is, however, the report notes, not clear whether progress has continued over the past eight years.

On the issue of education, year 12 attainment rates among Indigenous Australians have improved, but the number of Indigenous students finishing school is still relatively low: around 60 per cent compared with 85 per cent for non-Indigenous students. We know a great education is the best antipoverty vaccine we have yet devised, and so it is absolutely critical to close that gap. School attendance rates for Indigenous students barely moved between 2014 and 2015, with rates still below benchmarks. As the report notes:

Progress will need to accelerate from now on...

In terms of the particular question of attainment gaps, the report notes that this is close but not on track. Four areas—year 7 reading and years 5, 7 and 9 numeracy—are on track, but the rate of progress is not currently fast enough for year 3 numeracy and years 3, 5 and 9 literacy to meet the 2018 goal. In terms of increasing higher educational attainment, between 2004 and 2014 there was a 70 per cent increase in Indigenous students enrolling in higher education. Improving the share of low-SES Australians attending universities was a key focus of the previous Labor government, and the lack of focus under this government on making sure that our university population reflects the full diversity of the community is disappointing to me.

In terms of early childhood education, in 2013 just 67 per cent in major cities and 74 per cent in regional areas were enrolled in early education programs. There is a higher rate in remote communities but, since most Indigenous Australians live in urban and regional Australia, that still is not enough to get us there.

It is important to note that needs based funding is particularly critical for closing the gap. As my colleague the shadow minister for education, Kate Ellis, puts it:

This report is just more evidence that if Australia is to improve our education system and close the gap, our schools need investment, not Malcolm Turnbull's \$30 billion cuts.

She points out that there are 195,476 students receiving the Indigenous loading under Labor's school funding agreements.

One thousand, seven hundred and sixty-eight of them are here in the ACT, but because the government has walked away from years five and six of the Gonski reforms those Indigenous loadings are under threat, and with them the potential for closing the education gaps.

The report notes that the progress on halving the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade is not on track. As the report puts it:

No progress has been made against the target since 2008.

It acknowledges that the Indigenous employment rate fell from 53.8 per cent in 2008 to 47.5 per cent in 2012-13. Over the same period, the overall employment rate fell only from 73.4 per cent to 72.1 per cent, resulting in an employment gap which has widened rather than narrowed.

Labor has argued for the inclusion of an incarceration target in the Closing the Gap targets. We understand that Indigenous Australians represent three per cent of the Australian population but 27 per cent of the prison population, and that Aboriginal men are 15 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Aboriginal men. The Prime Minister said on 10 February 2016:

It's certainly something we'll look at.

But, when asked the same question on the same day, Senator Scullion said:

So it's just a pretence to say, 'OK, let's have a justice target,' that's the end of that end of the story, that's the end of the effort.

As quickly as the Prime Minister offered bipartisanship on an incarceration target, Senator Scullion was quick to scuttle that bipartisanship. As the Close the Gap Campaign notes:

The Campaign remains particularly concerned about imprisonment rates and community safety (particularly family violence)—which are only getting worse. In 2013, the age-standardised imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was 13 times greater than for non-Indigenous Australians in 2015. The year 2016 marks a grim milestone in the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being held in custody. Under current projections, for the first time over 10,000 will be in custody on the night of the annual prison census, 30 June 2016.

We believe that incarceration must become one of the issues covered in the Closing the Gap reports. Here in the ACT, we have had a surge in the prison population. The Alexander Maconochie Centre population has risen from 322 a year ago to 413 in the latest numbers, with an increase in the Indigenous share of that population.

In the brief time remaining, I would like to acknowledge the work being done in the Wreck Bay community part of the electorate of Fraser. I recognise the importance of that community, which occupies 403 hectares in the Jervis Bay Territory. Looking out over the ocean, it is a part of the world which is as beautiful as any other you will visit. I acknowledge the board members who served in 2014—Craig Ardler, Annette Brown, Julie Freeman, Tony Carter, Joseph Brown-McLeod, Beverley Ardler, Leon Brown, George Brown Jr and Jeff McLeod; those who continued to serve in 2015—Craig Ardler, Annette Brown, Julie Freeman, Tony Carter, Beverley Ardler, George Brown Jr, Jeff McLeod, Justine Brown and Clive Freeman; and Mal Hansen, the CEO of WBACC. Their work is critical to making sure that that great community continues to do well.

I also want to acknowledge the work of the Indigenous Marathon Foundation, a terrific grassroots leadership program with which I had the pleasure to be involved last year. I ran the New York Marathon alongside 10 Indigenous Marathon Project participants: Daniel Lloyd from South Australia, Chris Guyula from the Northern Territory, Dwayne Jones from the Northern Territory, Aaron West from New South Wales, John Leha from New South Wales, Jessica Lovett-Murray from Victoria, Harriet David from Queensland, Jacinta Gurruwiwi from the Northern Territory, Alicia Sabatino from Queensland and Eileen Byers from New South Wales. I would love to spend more time talking about each of them, but I should acknowledge in particular Eileen Byers, the toughest woman I have met and an extraordinary inspiration to chat with; and John Leha, whose picture with an Aboriginal flag has literally made him the poster boy for the Indigenous Marathon Project. Coach Mick Rees and founder Rob de Castella are extraordinary Australians. It is three decades since Deek ran 2.07 in the Boston Marathon, and no Australian has yet run faster, but his greatest inspiration is what he is doing for Indigenous Australians in helping to close the gap.