Dr STONE (Murray) (1.41 pm)—I rise today to speak to the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment (2008 Budget Measures) Bill 2008. I am pleased to inform the House that the coalition understands the significance of any measures that are going to further advance the life chances of Indigenous Australians. As many in this House will recall, it was the coalition government under the leadership of John Howard and the then Minister for Families and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, who responded heroically to the Little children are sacred report from the Northern Territory. That report identified, not for the first time, the most extraordinary distress and victim status of families, particularly those living in remote settlements in the Northern Territory.

We understood that the causes of those dysfunctional communities and the violence, disease, oppression and lack of employment in the people’s lives were a combination of a whole range of factors but key amongst those was the lack of educational opportunities for Indigenous Australians. We, therefore, support very much the measures in this bill, particularly the targeted assistance. The minister called the measures ‘Closing the gap—expansion of intensive literacy and numeracy programs and individual learning plans’ and ‘Closing the gap—contribution to Indigenous boarding colleges’ and they are described in Budget Paper No. 2 of 2008-09.

We know that in order to be employed today in Australia—as a driver, in a kitchen, as a teacher or in any job—you need literacy and numeracy. Without literacy and numeracy in English, our major language, you are going to be substantially disadvantaged and perhaps locked out of the workforce for all time. Therefore, the additional funding that is to be made available for intensive literacy and numeracy programs is going to be money very well spent in assisting Indigenous Australians.

We also understand that one option for helping Indigenous Australians attend school is to establish boarding colleges. It is not the silver bullet and it is not the only option of course. In some of these remote Northern Territory communities, the community families themselves have said that, if there could be established places where the children can sleep and have their meals and then attend school, the chances are there would be more regular attendance and less opting out of school at a very early age. As a consequence more Australians would have the opportunity to have a decent education.

So we are most pleased to support additional funding for education. This, as I say, continues on the excellent work of the coalition government, which was absolutely determined to close the gap and to make sure that Aboriginal Australians had the same life expectancy as others, that Aboriginal children were as likely to be disease free and have proper nutrition as others, and that there was no longer the very strong possibility of children being deaf before they even attended preschool or experiencing violence in their young lives.

In the Northern Territory—in fact, right throughout Australia—we have a program called Community Development Employment Projects, or CDEP. One of my big concerns is that of helping all Australians have independence, self-esteem and a real sense of choice in their lives, and this is all about employment. Welfare dependency disempowers an individual; it deprives any Australian of the opportunity to enjoy their leisure time as they want, to live where they would like, to travel as they would and to take on the full responsibility of a family.

Employment is a foundation of and fundamental to a good life in Australia. The CDEP program was developed many decades ago as work for the dole for Indigenous Australians. As with a lot of Aboriginal programs many years ago, it was designed with very good intentions, but, in the many years since, it has proved not to be a stepping stone to employment. In fact, what it did was lock a lot of Indigenous Australians out of real training and education opportunities. It locked them into dysfunctional communities where there was little work. Locally, this program came to be known colloquially as ‘sit down money’.

We are therefore most concerned that the CDEP program be replaced with real education and training opportunities for all Indigenous Australians who reach working age. One of my serious concerns is that this new government has chosen not to continue our rolling back of CDEP but has instead, I suggest, bowed down to the
pressures of those who were exploiting CDEP by obtaining cheap, government-subsidised labour for the 20 per cent who were in real jobs and enrolled in the CDEP program. In the case of the Northern Territory prescribed communities area, this 20 per cent—we think about 2,000 people—were doing real jobs in schools as teachers’ assistants, in night patrolling, in health centres, and with the local government in areas such as town maintenance and rubbish collection.

It is of critical importance that we do not lose sight of the fact that Aboriginal Australians deserve to have the same job-seeking support and opportunities as other Australians. The CDEP program did not require any person in that program to actually seek work or to attend literacy, numeracy or other training programs in return for the welfare they received. In other words, it was a debilitating program with no mutual obligation or shared responsibility. That is why I say that we will be disappointed if this government, which is currently reviewing CDEP, chooses to maintain that debilitating program when we know that it has done nothing to change the very serious levels of unemployment throughout communities, in Northern Australia in particular, where there are jobs but also significant unemployed Indigenous populations.

In supporting this bill today I want to repeat that it is important that we understand that without a decent education in Australia, particularly in English language literacy and also in numeracy—without all Australians having the opportunity to attend school—we cannot expect there ever to be a closing of the gap between those who have and those who have not. For a very long time Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory have been exploited by the CDEP program, which saw some of them working, but for a welfare wage, not for a real wage, when in fact they should have been on the payroll of the Northern Territory government, for example as professional teachers, not teachers’ aides.

The John Howard government understood so profoundly the effect of welfare dependency on the human condition that we put some $70 million from our budget into the emergency response to transfer people off CDEP into real jobs, including some $30 million to the Northern Territory government in particular, to transfer their public servants, such as teachers assistants, into their professional teacher workforce. In talking to the minister today I was disappointed to hear that that transitioning work is going very slowly. I have to ask: why is the Northern Territory dragging its feet when it comes to putting teachers’ assistants, previously on CDEP, onto their payrolls with superannuation, career opportunities, real training and professional development? Failing to do this comes at the expense of educational advancement for their students and stymies their own personal career development. How can these Indigenous teachers be role models for the rest of their communities if they are treated as second-rate citizens by the Northern Territory government?

The Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment (2008 Budget Measures) Bill 2008 is a very important continuation of the John Howard government’s determination for Aboriginal Australians to have a better go, and I certainly commend this bill to the House.