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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Indigenous Affairs

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

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Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt) (7.46 pm)—I start by saying that I represent the electorate of Leichhardt, which is the home of the Torres Strait. I have 19 Islander communities—14 of them in the outer islands and a couple on the mainland on the tip of Cape York. I have 13 Aboriginal communities dotted throughout Cape York and down around the Cairns area and very large Indigenous populations in two other Cape York towns, Laura and Coen. I have spent most of my life up there. I have been involved in the cattle industry for many years. A large number of the people I went to school with were Indigenous, and in my previous life in the grazing and the crocodile industry I had a large number of Indigenous people who worked for me as well. I have seen the deterioration of their quality of life, the problems associated with Indigenous Australia and the challenges faced in trying to deal with a lot of these problems.

I listened with interest recently when I heard the minister make a statement about achievements that she believed had been made in relation to policies associated with a three-word slogan, ‘closing the gap’. I was very, very disappointed, to say the least. I find it rather distressing when ministers come into this place, put their hand on their heart and gauge their commitment to Indigenous Australians by the amount of money that they have squandered, quite often without any sense of outcomes. If they squander the money—and we are talking large amounts of money—they feel that they are doing the right thing. The reality is that they are feeding bloated bureaucracies and they are continuing to condemn Indigenous Australians to a very, very sad future. Until such time as ministers and governments start to focus on outcomes and measure those outcomes by successes of programs rather than the amount of money that they have thrown at the insatiable bureaucracies that they tend to create, I think we are going to continue to stagger along and see some very, very depressing figures in relation to any sorts of achievements in Indigenous Australia.

When we start talking about closing the gap, the first thing the minister could do is deal with the insidious suggestion of locking up the entire Cape York community with the wild rivers legislation. I was in Cape York at a time when the Indigenous community started to fight to recover their lands. After decades of campaigning, they successfully started to recover large tracts of that land. They are now the largest single pastoral leaseholders in Cape York. I sat down and talked with Allan Creek, who got back his land near Coen, and he talked about his greatest aspiration. He said that with a bit of age he is a bit like me, a bit old and too fat to be tossing bulls anymore, but he would love to be able to sit on the top rail of his own place and watch his grandkids working their own cattle.

That is never going to happen, given the concept that is being pushed on them with wild rivers. At the end of the day, it should not be the southern based Wilderness Society which determines what people can and cannot do on their land. These people have campaigned for decades to get that country back. It may well be that the traditional owners who have got their leases may well want to have it as sit-down country. They may want to turn it into nature reserves. They may well want to do all sorts of things with it—run cattle, have agriculture or maybe even do a bit of tourism—but at the end of the day that determination should come from them. It should not be predetermined by the Wilderness Society. As Allan said, he has not got the education behind him to do comprehensive management plans. It may be another 10, 15 or 20 years before one of his grandkids has an education which gives the capacity to do that. I can tell you, many of the non-Indigenous people do not know how to do that up there; they would struggle with it.

We need to give them the time. We do not want to lock the country up so they cannot do a darn thing. It is just amazing that the government blindly follows the will of the Wilderness Society and ignores the needs and the aspirations of the Indigenous people, who are desperately wanting to make a future for themselves and demand a say in their own country. That is what will close the gap, not driving a wedge through them with the Wilderness Society.

I just put through an application to the minister which started last year—\$75,000 to have three leadership programs organised by the Regional Organisation of Councils of Cape York. This is something that represents every Indigenous council in Cape York. They wanted three leadership seminars for their young people. They

have already done a couple themselves and they have been an outstanding success, as reported by wonderful young Indigenous Australians like Tania Major. It was \$75,000 for three of these programs over 12 months. The minister tells me she cannot afford it; she has not got the money for \$75,000 for three years. They were offered \$30,000 and they said: 'Keep it. We can't do it with \$30,000. It's just another \$30,000 to be squandered.' And, of course, it will be the blackfellas who are accused of wasting the money. It was an insult to them. But the minister did say to me, 'Come back and apply again next year', so I did. They put in another submission. They actually cut it down by \$10,000. They went in for \$65,000. The minister came back and said, 'No. I'm sorry, we can't afford it.' But she can afford to put \$213 million into chosen bureaucracies in Cape York, and between them there is not a single outcome where there is any sort of economic future or success for Cape York. It is absolutely disgusting. Sixty-five thousand dollars to the Regional Organisation of Councils of Cape York is closing the gap. It is giving them an opportunity to take control of their own future.

The state government introduced the alcohol management plan throughout Cape York. They beat their chests. They said: 'Look at this. We're doing this for all the blackfellas. We'll get all the votes in metropolitan Australia', and everybody supported it. Could you imagine introducing total prohibition into Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra or Brisbane in relation to removing a methadone program? That is what they did up there.

There is prohibition today, in communities with huge numbers of alcoholics and no detox—and you wonder why we have a problem! First of all, they are spending huge amounts of extra money trying to buy illicit grog. When they run out of money, they start finding innovative ways of using boot polish and a whole range of other things, and we start burying them. Those who are a bit smarter end up in the towns like Cairns, Cooktown, Weipa, Mareeba and Mossman. They then become a social problem. Everybody looks at them as drunken blackfellas on the street. But they have been driven out of their own communities. There are no detox centres—there is no medical detox—and no rehabilitation centres up there. And these are the victims. But, of course, as far as the government is concerned—

Mrs Griggs—We are closing the gap.

Mr ENTSCHE—we are closing the gap, because they are getting rid of all the drunks, they are putting them in the mainstream; they do not exist anymore. It is disgusting.

Years ago, I organised \$1 million to put into renal units in Weipa, Bamaga and Cooktown. I fought the Labor state government; the minister did not want a bar of it because she was not consulted. Three units were built, but they decided not to put any nurses in them. So we had people with chronic diabetes being forcibly relocated into cheap motels in Cairns and living there for five, six or seven years until they carried them back in pine boxes to bury them in their communities. Those renal units are still sitting there empty. They have never been used—

Mrs Griggs—A waste.

Mr ENTSCHE—It is an absolute waste—but that is closing the gap!—because they cannot afford to put a renal nurse in there to look after these people in their home communities.

I talked about \$22 million to fix six communities where 40-year-old seawalls have started to deteriorate to a point where every year houses are getting washed out. There is sewage, the water systems are being contaminated and kids are getting diarrhoea, Japanese encephalitis and the like. We are faced with the challenge. If nothing is done these people will have to be forcefully removed from their communities and we will have to find somewhere else for them to live. They are not going to like that. These people are standing on the edge of Saibai and watching their cemetery washed into the sea; about a third of it has already been washed into the sea. And they still will not spend the money to fix these walls. That is not closing the gap.

Take funding for even simple programs, like the \$250,000 to Apunipima Cape York Health Council. They wanted the money, and we actually committed it at the last election. This was funding to pick up people from remote communities who desperately needed help in the medical system in Cairns because the services were not available in their remote communities, provide a bus service, take them to their medical appointments and then back to the bus. It would have cost \$250,000 to run this service for a year. These people have not got the money to come down; if they do get down, they spend their money on taxi fares, run out of money and cannot get back, so they end up on the streets. They cannot afford to do it. These are the sorts of things to talk about: funding Apunipima to bring these people safely to their appointments to get treated for medical conditions. Many of them will not even come out of the communities because they know they cannot get back. That is closing the gap!

We have the Bushlight program up there. I had a look at that recently. It is an absolutely sensational program, a highly successful program. It is putting in alternative power. We are talking about carbon trading and the greenhouse effect. Here we have a group, the Centre for Appropriate Technology, that has been going in and putting in hybrid green systems at remote outstations. I have 12 of them in Cape York. People are escaping from mainstream communities into these outstations so that they can have a much better quality of life—and, of course, get away from the grog, the violence and all the rest of it. They are looking to expand that program significantly. Funding that is closing the gap. But no hope—at this stage there is no commitment for that money whatsoever.

Douglas House, the Aborigines and Islanders Alcohol Relief Service in Cairns, has 20 beds. People enter voluntarily and pay for themselves to stay there for alcohol rehabilitation. The Rose Collis Haven in Mareeba has another 22 beds. They were defunded by this federal Labor government. They are sitting empty at the moment. While we have alcoholics sleeping in the streets, these purpose-built places are sitting empty. That is not closing the gap. At Rose Collis Haven a year or so ago they had just completed a 20-bed Indigenous aged-care facility—brand, spanking new and not a bed has ever been slept in. The only things living in those rooms are the spiders and cobwebs. That is not closing the gap, I have got to tell you. It is unbelievable that that type of attitude exists.

We talk about putting your hand on your heart and saying, ‘We are committed to Indigenous people,’ yet all of the initiatives put up by Indigenous people to have real impacts and make positive changes in their lives—whether it be education, health, opportunity for private enterprise, or whether it be an opportunity just to build a better community—get knocked back every time. This federal government is only interested in pouring bucketloads of money in, getting recognised for the amount of money they spend, while they are feeding self-serving bureaucracies that have absolutely no interest of making sure that the programs are economically or socially successful. I fear that the reason for this is that as these communities start to get economically or socially successful or independent, these bureaucracies would lose the opportunity for this government funding. So while they have them totally reliant, they are quite happy. While you have governments feeding the self-serving bureaucracies, they can claim that they have that commitment because they are pouring bucketloads of money into it, but at the end of the day the people out there in the communities continue to suffer and to be totally frustrated by the fact that, no matter what they put up, they are totally ignored. I think that it is an absolute tragedy, and I think this government needs to hang its head in shame and start looking seriously at making some real difference to these communities. At this stage the problem is only getting worse.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Stephen Jones**) adjourned.