



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

DOCUMENTS

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

SPEECH

Monday, 23 February 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Monday, 23 February 2015
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Questioner
Speaker Neumann, Shayne, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (18:45): I acknowledge the Ngunawal and Ngambri people, the traditional custodians of this land on which we are meeting and pay my respect to their elders past and present. I rise today to speak on the *Closing the Gap: the Prime Minister's Report 2015*, the seventh annual report. It is a sombre read. As I stand here today there remains an uncomfortable and unacceptable truth in this country of two Australians—one, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person; the other a non-Indigenous person. One is more likely to die at a younger age. One is more likely to suffer trachoma, a Third World disease all but eradicated in developed countries—except Australia. One is up to 15 times more likely to be imprisoned and 31 times more likely to experience family violence. One will find it twice as hard to get a job.

Seven years ago, Australian governments of all levels and political persuasions created the Closing the Gap framework, acknowledging that the perpetuation of Indigenous disadvantage was unacceptable. It remains so today. This year's Closing the Gap report is a serious wake-up call for all of us who share responsibility to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to end intergenerational disadvantage. We are on track to meet just two of the seven Closing the Gap targets. Though there has been some modest improvement in life expectancy, our efforts must be strengthened and accelerated if we are to Close the Gap in life expectancy within a generation.

The disparity in educational outcomes remains, with no overall improvement in Indigenous reading and numeracy since 2008. We did not meet our early education target, with an alarming backward slide in early education enrolment. Sadly, the gap in employment rates has widened. In challenging times, it is easy to question whether we can really make a difference. The answer is a resounding yes. There are wins and it is important to acknowledge them. The report shows that we are on track to halve the gap in infant mortality rates, following sustained investment in maternal and child health over the life of the Closing the Gap framework. There are more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students completing year 12 or equivalent and we are on track to halve this gap by 2020. It is through the commitment and dedication of individuals, organisations and governments working together that we are beginning to see improvement.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the thousands of front-line services, their hard-working staff and supporters for their tireless efforts in Closing the Gap: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services; Family Violence Prevention Legal Services; children and family centres; community controlled health services; and drug and alcohol services.

Even now as we stand in this place, thousands of critical Indigenous front-line services continue an agonising wait to see whether they will be funded into the future. Now is not the time to scale back our commitment. The *Closing the Gap* report presents a startling reality and the warning signs are clear. If the government continues its funding cuts and the upheaval and uncertainty, we will not Close the Gap at any level beyond this year. The government must not continue down this path.

This is not the first report to express concern about our progress in Closing the Gap. The *Social Justice and Native Title Report 2014* from Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda characterised this past year as one of deep funding cuts, uncertainty and upheaval in Indigenous affairs. The findings of his report were significant and serious. The massive budget cuts and radical reshaping of existing programs, determined without meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, have resulted in corresponding loss of services to the community, despite the promises of the Minister for Indigenous Affairs that cuts would not affect front-line services. The time for fine words from the Prime Minister and the minister has passed.

If we are serious about Closing the Gap, we must look to our actions. The Prime Minister's *Closing the Gap* report clearly shows that we cannot afford the Abbott government's massive cuts to Indigenous affairs. You cannot rip more than half a billion dollars from Indigenous programs without dramatically reducing the capacity of front-line services. You cannot rip \$165 million from Indigenous health programs and expect to close the life

expectancy gap within a generation. You cannot create funding uncertainty for more than 5,000 organisations and expect that they will have the capacity to continue to maximise their efforts to Close the Gap. I could go on and I will.

There has been \$13.4 million ripped from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services; \$9.6 million cut from Indigenous language programs; the prisoner Throughcare and antirecidivism programs have been cut entirely; \$15 million cut from the only national representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples; the Indigenous and Remote Eye Health Service is gone; and the National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee axed without warning. The impact of these cuts is devastating. The casualties are our most vulnerable people.

Family Violence Prevention Legal Services are at the coalface of family violence. Its centres provide culturally safe, holistic services for vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children escaping domestic violence. Anyone who knows Antoinette Braybrook would know her to be a passionate advocate for the protection of women and children and the prevention of family violence. Her commitment and tireless advocacy has seen the service grow over the past 12 years. Nationally, in 2013-14 the Family Violence Prevention Legal Services have helped 5,330 clients, more than 90 per cent of whom were women and children fleeing family violence. The service was cut by \$3.6 million initially, and last year was pulled within the scope of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, effectively defunding it to the tune of \$20 million. That means that more than 5,000 Indigenous women and children escaping family violence may have nowhere to go in the future, nowhere to get urgent legal assistance and nowhere to turn for early intervention. Staff relying on incomes to support their families have been forced to make incredibly tough decisions to leave in search of secure employment.

The chaos and uncertainty created by this government continues to take its toll. These are the human costs of their cuts. I stand here today as I did last year I stand here today, as I did last year—and as I will again next year—to call on the government to honour its commitment to develop a justice target in closing the gap. We cannot stand by as our First Peoples continue to be among the most imprisoned in the world. The incarceration epidemic will undercut our efforts to close the gap in education, employment and health. It will not be addressed, as the government would have us believe, simply by working towards the other Close the Gap targets. The evidence says otherwise.

While we have made modest improvements over the years in closing the gap in health, education and employment, incarceration rates have continued to increase. We had two landmark reports last year. The Productivity Commission's *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage* report found a 57 per cent increase in Indigenous incarceration rates between 2000 and 2013. Mick Gooda in his *Social justice and native title report* said:

It is shameful that we do better at keeping Aboriginal people in prison than in school or university.

The fact remains that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander adult is 15 times more likely to be imprisoned than a non-Indigenous person. These statistics should horrify everyone in this House.

After 12 months of misleading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about his commitment to a justice target—and certainly in opposition said so—the minister, Senator Nigel Scullion, simply walked away from it late last year from this bipartisan commitment to develop a justice target in closing the gap.

I say to the Abbott government: if you are serious about closing the gap, walk back. Walk back. Let us sit at the table together both sides of politics, state governments, stakeholders, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and work together to close the gap in incarceration and victimisation rates.

There is a real disconnect between what the Abbott government says and what it does. This was picked up on in the recommendations of the Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee's *Progress and priorities report 2015*, which found that the government's shambling Indigenous Advancement Strategy was not adequately connected to the Close the Gap framework. Instead, the government seems to have substituted its own priorities without regard to the holistic nature of the Close the Gap framework.

The inconsistencies do not stop there. The report points to the massive cuts to the tackling smoking and healthy lifestyles program. The government cannot credibly claim to be committed to closing the gap in life expectancy while gutting funding for a program reducing Indigenous smoking rates.

I do commend the government for its commitment to implement the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan developed by Labor in office by the member for Lingiari when he was the Indigenous health minister. I urge the government to look beyond short-term budget fixes and understand that these cuts will be felt for many years to come. You cannot cut your way to closing the gap.