



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

**Funding of the National Congress  
of Australia's First Peoples**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 23 June 2014**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Entsch, Warren, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr ENTSCH** (Leichhardt) (11:06): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. Can I say from the beginning that there are many large and vibrant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the electorate of Leichhardt. We rate sixth-highest in Australia for Indigenous residents. Issues of effective advocacy come up fairly regularly in my office, and that is how I became aware of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples. I welcome the opportunity to clarify a few of the misconceptions around this organisation and what they do, and to explain why we should not be honouring Labor's \$15 million funding commitment.

Unfortunately, this is another example of the previous government splashing the cash without requiring accountability or real outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Here are a few points to consider. On its website Indigenous congress describes itself as 'a company limited by guarantee'. It is owned and controlled by its membership and its directors. In 2009-10 the congress received \$29.3 million from the previous government to support its setup and operations. Labor also committed another \$15 million over three years for the 2013-14 budget. That would have totalled united government funding of \$44 million, for an advocacy body of less than 8,000 members. That is a huge amount for an organisation that sees itself as fiercely independent of government and provides no advisory services whatsoever for government. Late last year, as a courtesy, Minister Scullion told the congress that they were unlikely to get the \$15 million that Labor had promised them. We did, however, extend their funding agreement until 30 June 2017 to enable congress to use its substantial cash reserves, some \$7 million, to support its operations and achieve financial independence, which was part of its commitment and charter. I find it somewhat hypocritical that congress is using some of its government provided financial resources to carry out a campaign against the government when we are effectively helping them become what they have always wanted to be: independent.

At the same time Indigenous people are questioning whether the national congress is truly representative and the extent of its community engagement. The *Indigenous Times* on 19 February 2014 reported that some members of congress were disappointed with the organisation. In the letter to the editor it stated:

Does congress truly represent us? Membership is so low, voting numbers even lower. ... They have taken their eye off the bigger, strategic picture. They should have been lobbying on issues, making the organisation relevant and bringing about change for our mob ... Instead they focussed on lobbying about themselves ...

I note that in early 2014 the congress held public meetings in a range of cities and regional centres to discuss the impact of the so-called funding crisis. Attendance ranged between 20 people and 40 people. At the same time, the congress started a letter-writing campaign asking members to email their local members and senators. They were aiming for 1,000 emails, but I am told that there was limited take-up from the communities or the media and the campaign appears to have fizzled out. As somebody who has the sixth-largest Indigenous population in my electorate, I received almost none. In fact, I do not recall receiving any letters or emails whatsoever. A further indication is that, at the latest election, when congress's co-chairs were elected, only 800 members voted. This is out of a membership of 7,500 individual members and 172 member organisations. To me, these factors raise serious concerns as to whether congress is a true voice of Indigenous Australia.

Over the past 12 months, this government has sought to go where no other government has gone before in terms of Indigenous engagement and driving policy that will better the lives of First Australians. In the 2014-15 budget, we are investing \$4.8 billion to support priorities of getting kids back to school, adults to work and community safety. We are consolidating more than 150 individual programs and services into five new streams, under an Indigenous Advancement Strategy. By targeting funding towards the key outcomes, organisations will be able to focus their time and effort on delivering services on the ground. We are also continuing to work on recognising Indigenous Australians in the Constitution and will release a draft proposal this year.

It is absolutely vital that the government stay attuned to the range of voices within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. We will continue to engage with Indigenous stakeholders from right across the spectrum,

including the national congress, when designing policies and implementing services that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For the reasons I have outlined, I certainly do not commend this motion to the House.