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Speaker Ramsey, Rowan, MP

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Mr RAMSEY (Grey) (20:26): I rise to speak on the *Closing the gap* report. I thank the Prime Minister for his remarks earlier in this debate.

I have spoken before in this place on a number of occasions about the great divide between urban and remote Aboriginal communities. In so many cases I think that in urban Australia we are making progress, even though for many of us it is not as fast as we would like. But I look at some of my communities, like Port Augusta, Ceduna, Coober Pedy, Whyalla—where the member for Brand, sitting at the table, comes from I know: a famous son of Whyalla!—and Port Lincoln, and I think that the Indigenous population is measurably better off than they were, say, 20 years ago. We saw much more engagement in community and I think we see people making a better fist of raising their families and getting their children educated. And while there is still a long way to go, if I look at those communities then I think the next great barrier we have to pass is on the employment front.

When I say that, the rates of employment are rising and they are getting stronger. But in my mind many of those jobs are government jobs or in the Indigenous industry. I will celebrate the day when I walk into all the shops and businesses of the area and we have Aboriginal workers working in all of them, because this is when we will know that they have really crossed the final barrier, as it were.

But in remote communities it is a much more difficult task, particularly in those where English is a second language, despite efforts by both sides of politics at the state and federal levels. Many of these remote communities have far better housing than ever before, they have great health clinics, they have fantastic school buildings and they have good shops—even though often in the remote communities they are fairly expensive. For instance, I will speak of the APY Lands—they are probably the most famous group of remote communities that I have in my electorate, and quite well-known around Australia. It is 1,000 kilometres from Adelaide, for instance, before you get to the turnoff and then you can drive another 500 or 600 kilometres across the Lands. That is the route that all the groceries take. There was a time not very long ago, in fact, when the trucks were going to Alice Springs first, being decanted onto smaller trucks and then backtracking 500 kilometres to the same turnoff. You can understand why goods in the shops are expensive there, just as they are in many of my more remote farming communities.

They often have in these communities a challenging road. But they also have a breathtaking array of personal and family services, so many in fact that many do not know what the others do, even if they are operating in the same communities and even if their programs cut across each other. I welcome the comments and the intentions of Minister Nigel Scullion, who is determined to see all these services delivered into five common service areas, which I think should go some of the way to at least addressing these problems. These are small communities. They have subsidised arts centres, for instance, which are probably the most successful business model in remote areas. They have a raft of fully funded environmental jobs. When you sum all that up, it sounds like paradise. But unfortunately it is not. It is far from paradise.

I was not surprised when the Prime Minister expressed great disappointment with the number of Closing the Gap indicators that have not improved and that, in a couple of cases, have gone backwards. I spent seven years as a member representing these remote communities. While I have seen investment in the physical structures and investment in the human effort to try and bridge the gap, I have actually seen little improvement in individual outcomes. It is the old adage that we have missionaries, mercenaries and misfits, and I am pretty confident that in my seven years as member I have met all of these.

On the balance, most of the people working in these remote communities are there for the right reasons. They believe that they are making a real difference. When I sit down and talk to them individually, they tell me about their programs. I think, 'Gee, that is good. That ought to be making a difference. I can understand how you feel good about your program.' Yet if these myriad services in these remote communities are making a difference,

why are not the individual outcomes better than they were 10 or 20 years ago? We seem to be making so little progress. We have to ask ourselves the question: why?

I come back in the end to the fact that we are maintaining communities where they have no chance of economic development. There is no natural economy. When I sit down with the leaders of these communities, they say, 'We want jobs for our children.' I say, 'What you want them to do?' There are no real jobs. There is a cattle industry there of sorts. If it was fully operational and running well, it might employ 50 people. There is a small arts industry. But after that there is not a natural economy and that is a problem.

We certainly cannot close down these communities. These are people's homes and we should support them there. But we really do have to make that step of educating a generation that has the ability as Noel Pearson would say 'to walk in both worlds'. We need a generation of remote Indigenous people that feel comfortable going into the white man's world, into the outside world to work. We can only do that through education.

I am a great fan of Minister Nigel Scullion's school attendance program. I just spent some time on the lands with Senator Scullion a few weeks ago. We visited two of the communities where the school attendance program was operating. On the day we were out at Pitjantjatjara, there were 51 out of 57 students at school. That is not a bad number; that is a pretty good number. If you are there and you go around the town with the attendance officers in the morning, typically they will pull the bus up outside of each house, toot the horn and say, 'Come on, you have got to get going.' Then they will come back in 10 minutes time. If no-one has emerged then they knock on the door and if no-one comes out then they will go out go inside and tell the parents, tell the guardians, tell the children they need to get out of bed because it is time to go to school. So 51 out of 57 is pretty good until you take into account that the six children who were not at school at Pitjantjatjara that day were not in community. They were somewhere else. Their parents are taken to taken them to the south and they were still away. I think three children were on cultural practices. So that means the school attendance program, if it was properly assessed, would have achieved one hundred per cent attendance on that day.

The next day we went to Indulkar and saw pretty much the same thing. I accompanied the school attendance officers around the town. When they worked out who was in community and not in school, their names were read out on the town speaker system so their aunties down the street could say, 'You get to school. It is a school day.' There is a lot of peer pressure starting to be applied. At Indulkar we had a lot more families still away. It is closer to the highway so they were still down south or wherever they might be for the summer. But we had close to one hundred per cent attendance for those children in community. Once again, that is a great outcome for the school attendance program.

But it still meant there were a lot of kids who were not at school on the day. That is about parental responsibility, about making sure that the parents are in community when school is in session. That is why I look forward to the rollout of the revamped RJCP program in July when those people on the RJCP program will have to attend five hours of work a day, five days a week. I have spoken to the minister about how this might be implemented. It was my suggestion that they should be given some time for cultural practices—maybe a week or two a year—so they could go to funerals just like the rest of us and during those periods they should be forgiven that non-attendance. But not for too long.

All the work periods should coincide totally with the school terms. So if families are away when school is in session, they will find their money will run out. They need to get back home into their communities to get back on their RJCP payments. That is the other side of the pendulum. When we can get those kids educated well enough to go away to high school and learn to walk in both men's world, that is when, I think, we will make real progress. I look forward to that day.

Question agreed to.