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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Closing the Gap

SPEECH

Tuesday, 12 March 2013

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Questioner
Speaker Chester, Darren, MP

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Mr CHESTER (Gippsland) (19:57): I also appreciate the opportunity to speak in relation to the Prime Minister's fifth annual statement on Closing the Gap. In doing so, I would like to commend both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for the manner in which they contributed to the debate in February this year. Both the tone and the content of their respective speeches to the parliament reflected very positively on them and on their efforts to address Aboriginal disadvantage throughout our nation.

Much has already been said by other speakers about the successes and the failures in reaching the ambitious targets set in 2008 in relation to life expectancy, mortality rates, early childhood education, reading, numeracy and writing, year 12 achievement and employment outcomes. I would like to acknowledge the Prime Minister's comment that this will be the work of an entire generation of Australians. We should not become disheartened by any early setbacks or indeed become complacent about any of our successes. Every gain in this space will be hard won and it will be difficult for us to consolidate those gains. As the Prime Minister said:

Let's always remember: closing the gap is not inevitable. Keeping it closed is not inevitable either. We must guard our gains and never allow a backward step.

Similarly, the Leader of the Opposition remarked in his speech that this must be a national project with a focus on results on the ground. As he is a member who above all others in this place has lived the creed in terms of going out and working in the Indigenous communities and delivering practical results on the ground, I will quote from a speech by the Leader of the Opposition in which he said:

... the sad truth is that it is easy to spend money but it is hard to make a difference. That is why it is so important that we focus on not just what is happening here in his building, what is happening here in the administration, but what is happening on the ground. The focus should not be on what Government is doing but it must also be on what people are doing in response to the initiatives of government, because it doesn't matter what we do in this place. All our fine words, all our noble sentiments don't matter if adults aren't going to work and if children aren't going to school.

I endorse those comments from the Leader of the Opposition. This is about making a real difference in the lives of Aboriginal people throughout Australia.

I have said repeatedly in my time in this place that you do not need to travel to rural or remote communities in the Northern Territory to witness Indigenous disadvantage in Australia. Regional towns right throughout Victoria, including in my own electorate, and right through New South Wales and Queensland provide examples of Indigenous communities struggling to meet ends meet and get ahead in their lives.

I do endorse the building blocks of the Closing the Gap initiative, which have been supported through the COAG process. It is about early-childhood development, schooling, health, economic participation, healthy homes, safe communities and governance and leadership—governance and leadership from this place and also from the communities themselves. These building blocks are very easy for us to talk about because they do make sense. It is a matter of getting the kids to school, healthy, at an early age and making sure that they are actually attending school by giving them that good start in life so that when they reach those early years of education they are ready to learn. It is helping them and their families to value an education with the prospect in the longer term that at the end of their education or training journey there will be a real job for them, and they can have their own economic independence.

I believe that we have a role in this place to help provide the leadership, but it has to be in partnership with the communities that we are talking about. There must be a level of responsibility accepted by the community leaders themselves, by the individuals and by the Aboriginal elders to help their own communities. I think we have a very important role in this place by helping to provide the framework to ensure that there is a safe living environment for those people.

I want to talk about a slightly different gap from the nature of other speeches that have been made this evening and earlier, and that is the gap in Aboriginal participation in the social and civic life of our communities. I would argue that the relationship of most white Australians with Aboriginal people does not really extend beyond the abstract. We might cheer for them in their sporting pursuits, whether it be in the AFL or in rugby league, and some of us may have the opportunity to work with Aboriginal people in their professional capacity. We do get the opportunity to read about their issues in the media, in particular the *Australian* has done an extraordinary job in recent years of highlighting areas of Aboriginal disadvantage in our nation. I would argue that most of my colleagues in this place—and, in fact, most of my white Australian friends—would not have a single Aboriginal person they could say is their personal friend. I would argue that most of us have never actually sat down and had a cup of coffee or shared a meal with an Aboriginal person or their family outside, perhaps, the professional role they may have in the community. There is a real social and civic life gap in the lives of Aboriginal people and the relationship with white Australia. I think there is an enormous gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and there are very few opportunities at the moment for that social engagement, particularly, I would argue, in our city or suburban locations.

It is probably a bit different for us who are fortunate enough to come from regional towns. We are often involved more directly in our communities, whether it is through our sporting or community activities. I would argue, still, that it does not always extend to a friendship or a social engagement between white Australians and Aboriginal Australians. Once the footy game is over there is very little actual social interaction. I think it is to our enormous loss as a nation that we do not find the ways to bridge that gap. It is a gap that, I think, all of us can address in our daily lives. There are simple things like making sure that the young Aboriginal children in our communities are involved or included in our sporting clubs, that we actually invite the young Aboriginal children to our own children's birthday parties and go out of our way to make sure that those bridges are built across the cultural divide. I think we can extend the hand of friendship beyond the grand speeches that we might make in this place or the grand gestures of the Apology by the member for Griffith. These are all important gestures but, unless they are backed up by practical action on the ground by each and every one of us, it will all be for naught. It is all about taking some small and practical steps to understand each other and to show respect for one another.

I had the good fortune as a young person growing up in Gippsland to know many Aboriginal people and to still regard them as both friends and family members. My family link, if you like, is through my dad's cousins, Jack and Edna, who fostered and provided safe homes for many Aboriginal people. In times of great need they provided refuge for young Aboriginal people. Theirs is quite a remarkable story. My Uncle Jack was prisoner of war in the Thai-Burma Railway. He was a POW for several years yet, when he returned, despite experiencing all the atrocities endured on the Thai-Burma Railway, he harboured no ill-will towards his Japanese captors, which I find quite staggering. When he returned to Australia he had a renewed commitment to serve others who were less fortunate than himself.

His calling, as he described it to me once, was to work with Indigenous people. He moved his family to a little place called Newmerella, which is on the outskirts of Orbost, not far from the banks of the Snowy River, and during his lifetime he either fostered, adopted or provided refuge for up to 20 Aboriginal children. It is an extraordinary life story. He was able to provide for them with his wife, Edna, and their own children a stable, safe family environment for these young Aboriginal people who could not, for whatever reason, live with their blood relatives in the township.

Those young Aboriginal people were part of my formative years growing up. We spent a lot of time with them quite often because, obviously, with a large number of children in his own house, Jack and Edna needed a bit of respite and some of the young Aboriginal people would come and stay at our place in Sale in the school holidays. So we had a lot of exposure and a lot of experience with young Aboriginal people, and we regard them as our cousins. I am sure there was no actual blood relationship at all, but we regard them as cousins, and to this day I still regard them as my cousins. Many of those young people went on to achieve good educations, they went on to achieve stable jobs and they have been able to fully participate in the economic and social lives of the Gippsland community. At the same time, they have been able to retain their cultural identity. This is a microcosm of what can be achieved by working in partnership with Indigenous people in their own communities—making sure that they are healthy, making sure they have had the chance to go to school and achieve an education or training and then have the realistic aspiration or expectation of achieving a job at the end that time.

Just a month ago, I introduced the Prime Minister to one of those kids—one of those young Aboriginal people. I should not call him a kid because—his name is Lionel Dukakis—he is actually 50 now. When the Prime

Minister visited Heyfield, I dragged Lionel out of the crowd and made him come over and say g'day to the Prime Minister. It was a great moment, and Lionel got his photo taken with the Prime Minister, and I am hoping that Lionel still votes for me in September. Nevertheless, he had his photo taken with the Prime Minister and it was a lovely moment. Lionel trained as a builder, he has gone off and worked in the mines and now he works as a cultural liaison officer with the Department of Sustainability and Environment. He has been a terrific role model for other young Aboriginal people in the Gippsland region. He has raised three successful children who have all done well in both their education and their employment. I wonder many times, when we see the extent of Aboriginal disadvantage and Indigenous disadvantage in my community, what he would have achieved and what his brothers, sisters and kin would have achieved without Uncle Jack and Auntie Edna's guidance.

What was great about that relationship was that it provided structure to their lives, and for a lot of Aboriginal people in my electorate there is a lack of structure. They lack positive role models. There is, unfortunately, an intergenerational welfare dependency which has developed over 20 or 30 years, and it is a blight on our community that we have not been able to help these people and rescue these people from their perilous situation. So I welcome this opportunity in this place to talk about the Closing the Gap initiatives but in doing so I hope that we continue to remember that these fine words we hear in this place need to be backed up with action on the ground.

It concerned me as I prepared my notes for this evening's comments that, with the exception of the member for Hasluck, we have a lot of white voices in this place talking about Aboriginal issues and not enough Aboriginal people themselves in this building making a contribution to our nation's great democracy. I thought rather than just have me talk about the Closing the Gap initiatives, I would ask a few of the Aboriginal people in my community for their comments on how they thought we were progressing after five years. I asked several people in the community for their responses, and they were generally quite positive in the fact that they thought we were making progress and that we were actually heading in the right direction with the Closing the Gap initiatives. But there was, of course, a cautionary note that more needs to be done.

One of the young men I spoke to was a fella by the name of Will Carter. Will, typical of a lot of the Aboriginal boys in my community, is a gun footballer. In fact, I think he has won quite a few club best and fairests and a couple of league best and fairests as well. Will now works in the employment industry for young people, not just Indigenous people but other young people as well. He says, in relation to Closing the Gap, that it does have the right intentions—he is heartened by that. But he says that there needs to be more of a focus on the placement into jobs with the generous employers that have been so willing to be part of something so big and there are other ways it could be better approached in terms of getting the major multinationals like Coles and Woolworths involved more directly in our community. I take up Will's suggestion that the major multinationals have a lot more to offer in making sure Indigenous young people have the opportunity to get casual work and then go on to full-time employment.

He also makes the point, and I think it is a very good point, that Reconciliation Week and other activities need to be driven by the young Aboriginal people in our community. The best place to start is the education system. He believes there are great opportunities to ensure that young Indigenous people still appreciate their own culture but also have the willingness and expectation they will gain paid employment.

Some comments I received were from a lady by the name of Auntie Phyllis Andy. Auntie Phyllis is an absolute doyenne of my local community and an elder of the local Aboriginal people. She works with the Lakes Entrance Aboriginal Health Association and makes the point that the East Gippsland region is going from strength to strength but trying to deal with the demands of health, housing and education has become very difficult for the Lakes Entrance Aboriginal Health Association. She calls on both state and federal governments to renew their focus in the growing health needs of our community.

The last person I consulted was a fellow by the name of Wayne Thorpe, who does some great work in my community. I will quote directly from Wayne's brief email to me.

As my uncle said to me, which way is best for Aboriginal people? One way open the gap. Culture will close the gap for our people. Kids need to learn culture as well as adults. We have tried the Australian western values. It is Aboriginal culture that will fill the empty void created in our lives. When our cultural beliefs are respected and are part of our daily lives then we can engage in the other cultures of Australia.

That was from Wayne Thorpe, who is a traditional custodian of the Gunai people. These are wise words from people in my community. The general response I receive is that we are making progress. It has been a long journey and it has been extremely painful at times, but we must continue to work together for the benefit not just of Indigenous people but of the broader Australian nation. I commend the motion to the House.