



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Closing the Gap

SPEECH

Wednesday, 15 February 2017

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 15 February 2017
Page 1259
Questioner
Speaker Ryan, Joanne, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms RYAN (Lalor—Opposition Whip) (11:57): I rise today to speak on Closing the Gap. I open by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, and their elders past, present and emerging, and by acknowledging the Wathaurong of the Kulin nation from the electorate of Lalor. We measure what we care about. We measure what is important. We measure what we want to prioritise. We set targets and we measure our performance to test the effectiveness of strategies. The Closing the Gap targets are there to remind us of how important this journey is and how important the welfare, the education and the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are as a people in Australia. The *Closing the gap* report is therefore a positive and yet, annually, it feels like a reminder of what we have not managed to do. It gives all sides of politics an opportunity to affirm our commitment to addressing the disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders face every day in our country. We cannot read this report and let taking action lull us into a false sense of accomplishment because, as the report says this year and as we have heard, there are many areas where the gap is simply not closing; there are some, tragically, where the gap is increasing. Infant mortality is one space where that is the case, and that is a tragedy.

When we do our acknowledgements to country, it is not a tokenistic gesture; it is our sombre acknowledgement that these people were driven from their land, displaced, and since that time have been subordinated to non-Indigenous Australians. The disparity in opportunity manifests itself in what we call the gap. I grew up in Victoria in a small country town. I distinctly remember Paul Keating's Redfern speech and the awakening it gave me and brought to me. I know that in this place we are doing a lot of talking about the RECOGNISE campaign and we are doing a lot of talking about recognition around Australia. But, when I go back to that Redfern speech, I am starkly reminded of what our Prime Minister at the time, Paul Keating, said:

... the starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians.

It begins, I think, with that act of recognition—

And this, I think, is really important—

Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing.

We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life.

We brought the diseases. The alcohol.

We committed the murders.

We took the children from their mothers.

We practised discrimination and exclusion.

It was our ignorance and our prejudice.

And our failure to imagine these things being done to us.

I read that and I put it back on the record today, because it seems to me that we have moved from that notion that recognition is first about acknowledging the pain caused, before we move to recognition in the Constitution. We cannot have recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our Constitution until we recognise—across this nation—the journey to date. Ours is a dark history in so many ways. If you are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, that is an absolute certainty. We have failed and we continue to fail. Where we have made improvements they are modest ones.

One of the improvements that I would like to talk about, which is not listed in *Closing the Gap*, is that there is no target around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in this federal parliament. There has not been a target set for that, and it is a celebration, therefore, that we have exceeded what some would have imagined possible. It was a very proud day when we returned this year and welcomed the member for Barton, who is in the chamber today. Having given closing the gap speeches on several occasions, to have the member for Barton in the chamber while I speak today is incredibly meaningful, and I think it shows that we have travelled some distance. We welcomed, on the Labor side, two new senators, Malarndirri McCarthy and Pat Dodson. They have also shown us those things.

One of the most poignant moments for me, as the member for Lalor, came towards the end of last year when I attended a constitutional convention at one of our high schools with several of our schools. We talked about recognition and about the potential for a treaty. I shared with the students that day a part of the member for Barton's maiden speech in this place, where she said, so compellingly, that when the Constitution was changed to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australian citizens—she put it so starkly—that that was not the case; what that did was to remove them from the list of flora and fauna. The power of that image for the young people in my community was astounding—real and very necessary.

Looking at these annual targets takes us back to a place where we are prepared to shine a light on our dark history. If we are prepared to acknowledge, as Paul Keating called on us to do, that we need firstly to recognise that dark history before we can do the other things then I think that is a really important thing to do.

The other area that I want to talk about is the area where we have seen improvement, and that is year 12 completion rates. I note the Prime Minister's words yesterday, during his celebration, that there is no employment gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, when it comes to finding employment, if they have a tertiary qualification.

Yet I must stand here as a former educator and say: those are fine words. We have had lots of aspiring rhetoric across the last decade around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs but, in reality, it is the policies on the ground that make the difference. As an educator, I can draw on some of my very positive experiences in classrooms and in schools where I worked. I can call our Prime Minister to account and say: 'Don't cite that statistic while you're slashing Gonski funding. Don't cite that statistic while you're cutting the legs out from under the teachers who are making a difference on the ground.'

I also note—and I want this on the record—that I hear many members from the other side talk about the Gonski review and clutch onto parental engagement as their one driver of improved student performance. I have to say that we cannot be standing here talking about parental engagement while actively cutting funding that provides, in Victorian schools, positive parental engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through their individual learning plans. This came from an era in Victoria where we had what was called the Wannik initiative. The Wannik initiative did lots of things, but one of the things it did was mandate an individual learning plan for every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student in a state school. It not only did that but also put in place the requirement to create around that a positive engagement with parents. It cannot go unsaid: when adults think about school, they reflect on their own experience and undoing the negative perceptions they have about school engagement is the first step in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander's education outcomes. It needs to be done carefully, and it needs to be done in an incredibly positive way.

It is not all bad news from those on the opposite side on educational outcomes. I give credit to former Prime Minister Howard for in his time as Prime Minister introducing funding for tutors in schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In Victoria, that turned into career education support officers, who did some fabulous work not just in tutoring students but also in acknowledging Aboriginality in our schools and raising pride in children for their Aboriginal heritage. I look forward to continuing the work with my colleagues on this side of the House and improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.