THE SENATE

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION (TARGETED ASSISTANCE) AMENDMENT (2008 BUDGET MEASURES) BILL 2008

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 19 June 2008

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
This bill amends the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000 to provide funding that will deliver two major budget measures.

The first is to provide an additional $56.4 million to expand literacy and numeracy programs and support teachers to develop individual learning plans for students.

This will be of enormous benefit in improving education outcomes for Indigenous students. Improvements in literacy and numeracy skills will flow over into other subject areas, into secondary education and employment prospects.

The second measure is to provide more secondary schooling options for Indigenous students in the Northern Territory through the provision of a Commonwealth contribution of $28.9 million for the building of boarding facilities to enable remote students to access secondary school.

This project will be carried out in partnership with the Indigenous Land Corporation (who will contribute a further $17 million), Indigenous communities and the Northern Territory Government

This latter proposal will clearly be to the benefit of a number of rural and remote communities in the Northern Territory enabling students to gain better access to secondary schooling.

Despite the efforts of the Territory Labor government in expanding secondary schooling into remote communities (something the previous CLP government failed to do in 27 years in power) there are still many remote students who have no secondary schooling locally, and these boarding facilities will enable them to attend secondary education in a safe environment.

Under Territory Labor, there are now several of the larger Indigenous communities with secondary education facilities. These include for example Galiwinku, Maningrida, Ngukurr, Kalkaringi and many others.

However, these are still limited in size and therefore cannot offer full secondary education range of courses or resources which would be found in the secondary schools of the major centres.

Many students do already leave home to attend existing secondary education in Darwin, Katherine or Alice Springs, but these proposed additional hostels will open up the road to full secondary options for up to another 150 students.

I would be confident these places will very quickly be taken up.

All leaders at national, state and territory levels have agreed to a national goal of halving the gap in literacy and numeracy achievements between Indigenous and non Indigenous students within the next decade, and to halve the gap in year 12 and vocational outcomes by 2020.

The gap is common knowledge and I will not go into detail about it here. It is a gap which has long existed and failed to close under the previous government. Although outcomes for Indigenous students did improve, they did so for non Indigenous students as well, so the gap still yawns wide.

The measures proposed in this bill are a part of the suite of programs to achieve the aim of closing this gap in education.

The $54.6 million builds on literacy programs such as the National Accelerated Literacy Program and represents yet another significant addition to the programs working for improved literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous students.

The gaps in years 3, 5 and 7 reading, writing and numeracy national benchmark testing in 2006 were significant, being between 13 and 32 per cent across the subjects and age ranges. Clearly more was called for to work towards closing this gap.

The previous government answer to improving literacy and numeracy had been to cut funding for in class tuition until and unless Indigenous kids actually FAILED the year 3 benchmark test, which of course they did in great numbers. These cuts were made with no real consultation or educational evidence that such in class tuition was not working and was a waste of resources.
This Government however will work with schools and education into other schools. We already know that there certainly are some very successful literacy programs being used in our schools and they have significant results —identifying and recording these will provide a sound base for education providers to make informed program choices based on evidence.

This measure will also provide teachers in some 6000 schools with Indigenous enrolments with extra materials to support and assist them in preparing and maintaining learning plans for individual Indigenous students. This support for teachers will include whenever possible pre and in service training.

Individual student learning plans will identify each student’s learning needs so that clear intervention strategies can be devised and implemented on an individual basis.

Three additional boarding facilities are to be provided in the Northern Territory through the contribution of $28.9 million from the Commonwealth and a capital amount of $15 million from the Indigenous Land Corporation.

These new facilities will enable Indigenous students from more remote areas to relocate to access secondary education not otherwise available to them in their home locations.

The proportion of Indigenous students living in remote areas who complete year 12 is only about half that of their urban peers. Improved and supported access to secondary education will help to raise that.

Of the three new facilities one is planned for 2009 catering for 40 students, and the other two are planned for 2010 for a further 112 students.

Sites for these boarding facilities are being negotiated with potential communities, NTG and the ILC.

They will provide safe and supervised accommodation for young Indigenous students who, with family support, decide to relocate to gain access to secondary education.

The boarding facilities will provide appropriate support for both the students and their families.

Again the objective is to assist Indigenous students to gain access to better education and improve their outcomes and close the gap in the number of Indigenous students going through to complete secondary education.

In the Prime Ministers speech on the apology he said in part “...Our challenge for the future is now to..., embrace a new partnership between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians... the core of this partnership is closing the gap... on life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities ...”

This bill is a start, a part of moving to directly close the gap in education and with that open up better training and employment opportunities after school.

The two measures being funded under this bill are part of a total package of 37 measures in various portfolios grouped under the budget item “Closing the gap for Indigenous Australians” with total funding of $718.7 million over 5 years (source Bills Digest page 3).

One of the first of these measures was the provision of funding for 200 additional teachers to be recruited for Indigenous schools in my electorate of the Northern Territory.

I can report to the Chamber that the first group of these new teachers has been recruited and engaged in a ten week course of induction by DEET (NT) which has included topics such as cross cultural studies as well as life skills for remote areas ( like 4 wheel driving). I think my experience would say they will be the best prepared group of new teachers ever to hit the outback!

However, such preparation is very much needed. Living and teaching Indigenous kids in remote communities is so different to what anyone from “South” can really envisage. The fact that these teachers have been put through ten weeks of special preparatory training shows this difference requires special training and that the NTG is taking this program seriously too.

They will commence work in their new schools in term three while the NTG continues to recruit more, up to the 50 funded initially for this calendar year.

This to date then clearly demonstrates the determination of this Government in placing great importance on real actions beyond the Apology to assist Indigenous Australians.

Measures introduced both previously and in this bill focus on improving Indigenous education outcomes. They are making a commitment to halving the gap in literacy and numeracy, and in secondary education completion rates.

This program will help not only teachers and students but will also assist education providers in finding which literacy and numeracy programs actually demonstrate the best results with Indigenous students.
Funds will be used to establish an evidence base around successful programs to contribute to what the Minister referred to in the other place as a national menu of best practice.

These measures are all practical, positive moves and this bill should be supported.

Speaking to this piece of legislation about Indigenous Education, provides me with an opportunity to inform the Chamber of the untimely passing of one of the nation’s best known and respected Indigenous leaders and educators.

Dr Marika tragically passed away on 12th May just a few weeks short of her 50th birthday. She passed away at her home, in her home country while out hunting and fishing.

Dr Marika was a Rirratjingu woman, daughter of Roy Marika who was a pioneer of the land rights and had led his people to Canberra in 1971 to present the Yirrkala bark petitions which are still displayed in Parliament House for all to see.

Like her father, Dr Marika was a powerful force for her people, and a powerful force for reconciliation.

She was very dynamic, ever travelling the nation whether it was to Darwin, Canberra or wherever.

She was on the Board of Reconciliation Australia and a Director of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. She had authored or co-authored many publications about Indigenous education, many of these on bilingual education in which area she had first worked in the Literature Production Centre at Yirrkala School.

She was a frequent speaker at forums around the country about land rights, about Indigenous education, about reconciliation.

In 2006 she was awarded the Northern Territorian of the Year and last year was named NT Australian of the Year.

In 1984 she played a lead role in the establishment of the Yirrkala School Action Group which went on to develop the “Both ways” curriculum at that school.

“Both ways” brings together Indigenous knowledge systems with the western mainstream education ideas.

Dr Marika was one of those exceptional Indigenous people who truly lived “both ways”. Whether she was at home at Yirrkala among her family and people, or representing them at meetings in Darwin or Canberra dealing with high level government officers, she was always seemed at home. She handled the changing circumstances with ease and enthusiasm about what she was doing.

In this ability to live and work as a leader across both cultures she was an example to everyone who knew, loved and respected her.

Her knowledge of her culture was of course immense, but she also had a great western love which was that of Elvis Presley music.

Education was always a driving force behind her work—while she was continually learning herself, her main drive was for education of her people.

Dr Marika, at her recent memorial Service at Yirrkala was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters by ANU in recognition of her work. Her family accepted this award.

Her death at such an early age was a sudden and sad loss to all who knew her. It was a loss to us as a nation when she had so much more she wanted to do and achieve in education, in reconciliation.

If I may use the words of Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma in his statement of 12th May “Hers was a voice that burned and sparked and blazed. Her passing is an inestimable loss for all Australians.”

And a sad loss to all those Australians who believe, as Dr Marika did, that our two cultures can merge and blend and grow stronger just as ‘the salt water coming in from the sea meets the stream of fresh water coming down from the land’.