



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Closing the Gap

SPEECH

Wednesday, 12 February 2020

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 12 February 2020	Source House
Page 969	Proof No
Questioner	Responder
Speaker Morrison, Scott, MP	Question No.

Mr MORRISON (Cook—Prime Minister and Minister for the Public Service) (11:01): by leave—I present a copy of the *Closing the Gap report 2020*.

When we meet in this place, we are on Ngunawal land, and I give my thanks and pay my respects to our Ngunawal elders past, present and, importantly, emerging, for our future. I honour all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here in this House and right across our great continent. I also acknowledge, as I always do, our service men and women and our veterans and particularly acknowledge our Indigenous service men and women and our Indigenous veterans, as we did just last week at the Australian War Memorial—service that, for so long, was not acknowledged, but who served not for recognition but because of their faith in who we could become as a country and as a people. We are still on that journey. And I thank them on behalf of a grateful nation for their service.

I also acknowledge and honour our Indigenous leaders who are also the democratically elected representatives of the Australian people: the member for Hasluck, the Hon. Ken Wyatt, our very first Aboriginal Minister for Indigenous Australians; the member for Barton, the Hon. Linda Burney; Senator Patrick Dodson; Senator Malarndirri McCarthy and Senator Jacqui Lambie. I also welcome convenor, Pat Turner, and all members of the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations. Welcome, Pat. I thank you for your partnership, for your strength and your leadership.

For 12 years, I have sat in this chamber and listened to Closing the Gap speeches. It's a tale of hope, frustration and disappointment—a tale of good intentions and, indeed, good faith. But the results are not good enough. This is, sadly, still true.

Last year I opened this address with what I believe is a national truth and a national shame—that our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia today do not have the same opportunities as all other children growing up in Australia. They never have in Australia. Never. This is the ultimate test of our efforts—that every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boy and girl can grow up in this country with the same opportunities and expectations as any other Australian boy and girl.

Over decades our top-down government-knows-best approach has not delivered the improvements we all yearn for. When it comes to the welfare and advancement of our Indigenous peoples, I don't doubt the good hearts and the goodwill of those in this chamber and those who have served here, including former Prime Minister Rudd, who began this process with the national apology, indeed, the day before I gave my first speech in this place 12 years ago. The national apology was an important milestone, but it did not pretend to be the solution. It was important for many reasons, but, for me, it was most important because it was important to our First Australians. It mattered to them, and so it mattered to me.

Despite our best intentions, Closing the Gap, as an initiative, fell victim to the same type of thinking that has hampered our efforts in the past. We seem to think that somehow if our aspirations were high enough the rest would just take care of itself. This is not a challenge of aspiration. It's not a contest of earnestness. It's not about who cares more. It's not about symbolism. There's been no shortage of money or will. The Productivity Commission estimates that in 2015-16 total Indigenous-specific expenditure of all levels of government was \$6 billion, and the share of mainstream programs that all Australians share was a further \$27.4 billion. Over the forward estimates we are providing \$5.2 billion for our Indigenous Advancement Strategy, \$4.1 billion for targeted efforts to improve Indigenous health as well as significant payments to the states and territories for Indigenous-specific programs.

Closing the Gap is a very practical challenge and a very difficult one. Getting people into jobs so they can lift up their eyes from seeing hopelessness and see a future that they can direct, and ensuring young children are healthy, in school and well-educated to realise their potential—that is how generational change occurs. And by ensuring that Indigenous Australians are safe in their homes and in their communities, where they can have the

same expectations of the rule of law to go about their own lives unviolated as any other Australian in any other part of the country.

Having watched and listened, we are now making the change to how we go about this task. It's not a judgement of our past efforts, but is an honest and humble learning. Despite the best intentions—investments and new programs and bipartisan goodwill—Closing the Gap has never really been a partnership with Indigenous people. We perpetuated an ingrained way of thinking, passed down over two centuries and more, and it was the belief that we knew better than our Indigenous peoples. We don't. We also thought we understood their problems better than they did. We don't. They live them. We must see the gap we wish to close, not from our viewpoint, but from the viewpoint of Indigenous Australians before we can hope to close it and make a real difference, and that is the change we are now making, together with Indigenous Australians through this process.

We all have in our own way sought to grapple with the consequences of 2¼ centuries of Indigenous disempowerment. What I know is that to rob a person of their right to take responsibility for themselves, to strip them of responsibility and capability to direct their own futures, to make them dependent, is to deny them their liberty, and slowly that person will wither before your eyes. That's what we did to our First Nations peoples, and, mostly, we didn't even know we were doing it. We thought we were helping when we replaced independence with welfare. This must change. We must restore the right to take responsibility, the right to make decisions, the right to step up, the opportunity to own and create Australians' own futures. It must be accompanied by a willingness to push decisions down to the people who are closest to them—where the problems are and where the consequences of decisions are experienced. That is what we must do.

On the afternoon before Australia Day my family and I once again visited a group of Ngunawal elders, this time down by the lake, for a water blessing. It was hot, and there was smoke from the bushfires in the air. I was grateful for the generosity and grace displayed by the Ngunawal people in hosting a Prime Minister and his family at a poignant time when they reflect on their own long history since time immemorial. Yet, on that afternoon, my Ngunawal friends were more concerned about what they called my 'sorry business', my sorry business time, and the recent passing of my father. They were concerned for my girls and their loss. They had words and space for grief, and we sat together. I want to thank Aunty Agnes Shea for her hospitality and her kind words. Be it grief; the protection of our lands against bushfire; an understanding of our native ecosystems; or the intergenerational responsibilities to the land and to each other; there is so much we learn from Indigenous communities and peoples.

So I ask: what have we been too proud to learn? What must we learn so that we can grow together? Our new approach to closing the gap provides some of the answers to this question. It is an approach that is built on partnership; on giving back responsibility; of listening; of empowering; of government providing the capabilities so that Indigenous Australians can make their best choices; of all governments accepting their own accountabilities; and of owning up to a path that, despite the very best of intentions of all governments, hasn't worked.

Today I make the final report of an old approach as well as the first report of a new era. Here, then, are the results against the targets set since 2008. Two of the seven targets are on track to be met this year and in 2025. We are on track to halve the gap in year 12 attainment. That is a tremendous achievement. What that means now and in the future is more Indigenous doctors, nurses, teachers, tradies, police officers, engineers, scientists, mathematicians, farmers, IT specialists, musicians, artists, and CEOs and business leaders—excelling in every field of endeavour, lifting our communities. Indeed, this is the biggest improvement over the past decade. The proportion of Indigenous Australians reaching this milestone has jumped more than 20 per cent in 12 years. The biggest leap forward has been in our major cities, where 85 per cent of Indigenous 20- to 24-year-olds have attained year 12 or equivalent.

We're already doing more to close that gap. In last year's statement I announced \$200 million in extra support for Indigenous students through the Indigenous Youth Education Package. Already, funding agreements for 30 projects valued at \$190 million are in place. This year the package will assist over 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to stay engaged in secondary school through mentoring, cultural and other supports. We're also working in partnership with local communities in remote and very remote communities to identify community projects that encourage school attendance. These projects are being developed.

This year we are also on track to have 95 per cent of Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025. The preschool years are so important in preparing kids for their school journey and beyond,

and we're seeing more Indigenous kids getting that advantage. In 2018, the figure was 86 per cent, an almost 10 percentage point rise on 2016 and well ahead of where we needed to be to hit that target in five years time. So, at both ends of the school spectrum, we have made great strides in getting more kids into school and through school.

Nothing should diminish how significant these gains are. However, the four expiring targets that were supposed to be met by 2018 were not met: halving the gap in child mortality; closing the gap in school attendance; halving the gap in child literacy and numeracy; halving the gap in employment. The final target, closing the gap in life expectancy within a generation, is not on track to be met by 2031. This is a stark and sobering report that I have tabled. I welcome the gains. I honour the hard work across every front. We must be careful not to speak of our First Australians as a broken people, because they are not. So many of our First Australians are out there, making their way despite the disadvantages that they have faced and overcome: setting goals, making choices, living their lives and bravely showing the way to others.

But I don't shy away from the failures. I see the shortcomings. The targets that were set for Indigenous Australians, not by Indigenous Australians, do not celebrate the strengths, achievements and aspirations of Indigenous people. They don't tell you what's happening on the ground or stirring under it. They don't tell you how realistic or achievable these targets were in the first place. They reinforce the language of failing and falling short and they also mask the real progress that has been made. We must be careful not to adopt a negative mindset, because on most measures we have made progress.

I am saddened that we have not met the target for child mortality, but I draw hope and resolve from the fact that we are making progress in tackling the risk factors. More Indigenous mothers are attending antenatal care in the first trimester and more are going to at least five antenatal sessions. Fewer Indigenous mothers are smoking during pregnancy. We know that if we can shift these risk factors we can keep more Indigenous babies and children alive. We may not be on track to fully close the life expectancy gap in a generation—always an ambitious target—but mortality rates have improved by almost 10 per cent. This is mostly because we've made progress in tackling the leading cause of death, the big circulatory diseases like heart disease and stroke. This is progress. But, as I said, we have not made as much progress as we should have by now.

There remains much to do. We will do it differently: by working together; by moving from a fixation with what is going wrong to a focus on strength; by going from good intentions and sky-high aspirations to local practical action that's driven by local leaders and local needs, with clear accountability and responsibility, with a clear line of sight to the community. We're acting on a commitment by all levels of government to work together; for federal, state, territory and local governments to work together—not just the Indigenous portfolios but whole governments at every point of contact, because every minister in my government is a minister for Indigenous Australians and the Minister for Indigenous Australians is the first amongst equals in this cause—most importantly, for governments to work with local communities in partnership with the coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks—known as the Coalition of Peaks—and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We are making that commitment real.

That is what our Closing The Gap refresh is all about. It is what all governments agreed to at COAG a little over a year ago. It is what we agreed to in March last year, in our unprecedented partnership agreement on closing the gap between the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, the Coalition of Peaks and the Australian Local Government Association. It's what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been saying for a long time. They want a partnership where we listen, work together and decide together how future policies are developed, especially at a regional and local level, a partnership that respects their expertise and acknowledges their place as the First Nations people of this continent.

So we're bringing more people into the process. We're finalising a new national agreement on closing the gap, a formal agreement between COAG and the Coalition of Peaks. We expect this to be considered in April during joint council in Western Australia. Just last month, the peaks and I sat around the cabinet table and talked about how we're making this commitment real. Even meeting together like that, I'm advised—the ministers and me, along with the heads of 14 community controlled organisations representing almost 50 different community controlled organisations—was unprecedented. It was historic. But it shouldn't have been. This partnership is generations overdue.

At that meeting, I listened. The Indigenous leaders were telling us where the gaps are, where the needs are, where the strengths are, the success stories, the empowering stories, the stories of hope. Our shared priorities

are clear: expanding the opportunities for shared decision-making; building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled services sector; and making sure all mainstream agencies provide high-quality services to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In days that some in this chamber will remember, the government had absolute control over Aboriginal people's lives: where they could live, where they could travel, who they could marry. Government files held details—often brutal in their brevity—that the people themselves were not allowed to know. I have one such file here with me from the Department of Native Welfare. File 1690/68: a file of the native welfare department. The file is for a boy, a teenager. In this file there are notes about funding for school uniforms. There is a memo to the Commissioner of Native Welfare about whether the boy should be provided pocket money of 75c a week. It was bureaucrats making decisions for what they paternally called 'a good type of lad'.

Think about a life where even the most basic decision-making is stripped away from you—by governments thinking they know better. Fortunately, that boy was bigger than the times, and I'm honoured that he now sits behind me as the Minister for Indigenous Australians. He knows that responsibility and empowerment are freedom. He is one of almost 800,000 Indigenous Australians—in the west, in the east, in Tasmania and in the Top End.

As I have stated, it is time we define the gap that we want to close from the viewpoint of our Indigenous Australians. They are the Australians who should be setting these goals. A vital part of empowering Indigenous communities is giving them the data and information to inform their decision-making. That's why we've just committed \$1.5 million to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led data project. It's about supporting local decision-making. It's about supporting the Coalition of Peaks in partnership with the Indigenous Data Network at the University of Melbourne to develop regional profiles for Closing the Gap targets. It will mean having richer and more localised data to inform programs designed by and for local communities. It's about commitment of states and territories, all governments, to report publicly on Closing the Gap into the future. These new arrangements underpin the future of Closing the Gap.

One of the things we've learned from the last 12 years is that the way we deliver services matters as much as what's delivered. That's why we changed the funding model for the Indigenous Australians' Health Program. The new design is focused on delivering primary health care that's appropriate to the unique languages, cultures and circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I'm very hopeful that a new approach that's more locally led and more collaborative will take us much further down than the top-down, one-size-fits-all, government-led approach ever could.

We know that when Indigenous people have a say in the design of programs, policies and services, the outcomes are better—and lives are changed. For a young mother, it's the difference between antenatal care that's too far away or not culturally competent and getting the care she needs from a local Indigenous service. For a young child, it's the difference between getting a patchy education and getting the right support to stay in school. For a jobseeker, it's the difference between giving up on getting a job and finding a service provider that won't give up on them. For an older person with a chronic health problem, it's the difference between missing treatment and turning up to a friendly face and a familiar touch and getting the care they need in the way they need it. That is our goal: services that make a meaningful difference.

Last year I said we must make an impact on one really important area, and that was education. Get the education right and the skills, jobs, security, health, prosperity and longevity all follow. And it's the area where, as I've already noted, we've been seeing the most encouraging signs. Think about those four-year-olds just starting early childhood education this year—on the very threshold of a whole life of learning. In 2020 the government has committed almost half a billion dollars to preschool education so that every Australian child can have access to quality early childhood programs in the year before school. That includes every Indigenous child.

One program in particular is having an impact on helping those kids get that good start. The Connected Beginnings Program is in 15 Indigenous communities across Australia. In Alice Springs it's seen more kids actually enrolling in preschool, shifting from around half to three-quarters. In the Jordan River community more Indigenous kids are participating in child care and play groups and more are getting referrals to the health and specialist services they need. In Doomadgee teachers are seeing year 1 students who are now much better prepared for school. Together we need to accelerate our efforts in these early years to make sure that every Indigenous child across our country grows up safe, resilient and ready to thrive throughout life. That is why I've asked the Minister for Indigenous Australians to lead the development of a national Indigenous early childhood strategy

this year, to design a new way of working together to achieve our shared goal; to prioritise these actions, that matter most to parents and carers, the ones who live the experience; to partner with experts, families, frontline services and communities; and to have a more coordinated effort across the Commonwealth and with our state and territory colleagues.

We are also seeing great connectedness between our universities and our young Indigenous students. For school-leavers in regional areas, it's sometimes hard to see where the path leads next. It's harder to go on to further study if that means uprooting from everything you know and trust. That's why regional university centres are so important. They help Indigenous students in regional places take on certificates and degrees through any Australian tertiary institution they choose. In the Northern Territory, the Wuyagiba Bush Hub saw nine students successfully complete their university preparation course this year. Five of them have been offered places at Macquarie University and four at the territory's Bachelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. In 2020 the bush hub is expanding its applications so that more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can study on country. It's run by a Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation—I apologise if my pronunciations are not accurate. Together with a local elder and an academic from Macquarie, it's a real success story.

Then there's the Indigenous Student Success Program, giving nearly 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students access to scholarships, tutoring, mentoring and other cultural support to help them succeed at university. With the support of this program, Griffith University in Queensland has helped more than 300 students get degrees in the last couple of years. It also supports about 160 regional and remote students to succeed. We know that whatever we can do to get more kids in school, finishing school and going on to further study, all helps to set them on a path for a better life.

That path must lead to a job. One of the success stories of recent years has been the government's Indigenous Procurement Policy. This policy is about encouraging Indigenous entrepreneurship and job-producing businesses. In 2018-19, Commonwealth portfolios and their major suppliers awarded contracts to 775 Indigenous businesses, with a total value of \$754 million. Since July 2015 the Indigenous Procurement Policy has seen \$2.69 billion in contracts awarded to 1,842 Indigenous businesses. This means more jobs, rising incomes and greater economic security for Indigenous communities. From 1 July this year we'll introduce a target of three per cent of the value of Commonwealth contracts to be awarded to Indigenous businesses. This will add to the existing target of three per cent of Commonwealth contracts that go to Indigenous businesses. This is consistent with our belief that strong local economies always underpin healthy communities. It is economic opportunity and a culture of responsibility and empowerment that provide the foundation for the transformation of local communities.

Sadly, in recent years Indigenous youth suicide has taken so many young lives. Indigenous young people are almost four times more likely than their non-Indigenous peers to take their own lives. Tackling suicide, all suicides, is a national priority. In tackling this national priority, we're using targeted strategies. We've unveiled Australia's largest ever youth mental health and suicide prevention package. Two of the 12 trials being funded are for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people specifically. In the last budget we committed \$4.5 million for Indigenous leaders to work on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention plan, a plan that recognises the value of community and provides services that are culturally safe and accessible and are well connected to each other and the broader community. Out of that came a body called Gayaa Dhuwi—proud spirit—that will support Indigenous leadership in suicide prevention.

We're also working alongside community members and frontline services who serve their community selflessly with strong and open hearts—rangers and community night patrols, Indigenous liaison officers and Indigenous doctors and nurses. In the last three years, nearly 5,000 people in more than 180 regional and remote communities have completed mental health first aid training, a program we expanded in the last budget. As well, 89 local people were supported to become accredited instructors so they can deliver that training. We are making progress: with solutions that empower and that are local and developed in partnership with Indigenous communities.

Finally, I want to be clear: as Prime Minister, I respect the honest yearn for constitutional recognition. In 2018 the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples delivered a bipartisan report. Our government adopted the four bipartisan recommendations in the report—in particular, recommendation 1:

In order to design a voice that best meets the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Committee recommends a process of co-design between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and government be initiated in communities across Australia to design a voice that can help deliver practical outcomes for that community.

This is our government's policy.

It is clear from the committee's report that more work needs to be done on a voice proposal. The government has always supported giving Indigenous people more of a say at the local level. We support the process of co-design of the voice because, if we are going to change the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the ground, we need their buy-in on the matters and policies that affect them. The committee did not make recommendations as to the legal form of the voice—constitutional or legislation. It recommended considering this matter after the process of co-design is completed, and that is what we are doing. We support finalising co-design first.

We also support recommendations about truth-telling. Australians are interested in having a fuller understanding of their history—the history, traditions and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and also the history of contact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Well over half a century ago, Bill Wentworth, a man called by some an 'incorrigible backbencher', began to build the case for a national institute to capture Indigenous languages, art and culture, which he feared would be lost for all time. Ultimately, that vision would become AIATSIS. His belief was that a loss of Indigenous culture was a loss to us all because Indigenous culture embodied our shared humanity. In time, Bill Wentworth would become our first Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. He had a belief that, as Australians began to understand and embrace Indigenous culture and our Indigenous people, it would transform the way Indigenous people see themselves—and, not only that: it would transform the way we see ourselves, as a people who share this continent. This goes to the heart of who we are.

In partnership with Indigenous Australians, with respect for their wisdom and capabilities and with appreciation for their grace towards their fellow Australians, we are beginning this next chapter in closing the gap—to see the gap, to see the challenges, to see the opportunities, to understand the hope, to see the way through Indigenous eyes. It's a chapter which allows us to believe in a day when the Indigenous children of this land have the same opportunities as every other Australian child.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!