



BILL'S SPEECHES

CLOSE THE GAP - HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, PARLIAMENT HOUSE

WEDNESDAY, 10 FEBRUARY 2016

***** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY *****

Thank you Mr Speaker.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and the continent we share, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

This was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Now many of us in this place use these or similar words of respect.

Words that acknowledge the custodians of our national estate for over 40,000 years.

The keepers of the world's oldest cultures and traditions.

Our words acknowledge the resilience Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have shown in the face of more than two centuries of indignities and injustice, great and small.

And this acknowledgement, this respect, this recognition belongs in our Constitution.

Including the first members of our Australian family on our national birth certificate, should be the shared goal of all Australians.

It is well past the hour for our Constitution to speak the truth about our past, and to point the way forward for a more equal future.

The Referendum Council led by the collective wisdom of Pat Dodson and Mark Leibler, have begun crafting a question to be shaped by community conventions.

We hear a lot about the risks of rushing this process.

But when justice has been denied and delayed for so long - inaction is far more dangerous than urgency.

And whilst he's left the Chamber I wish to say that on the question of timing, we agree with the former Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

May 2017, the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 referendum, would be an auspicious time for a national vote on recognition, and if elected a Labor Government will deliver a referendum then.

But recognition cannot be a mere poetic sentence or two, stapled to the front of our Constitution.

Platitudes just don't cut it, do they?

It must be real, it must be substantive change. It must eliminate racism, and signal a declaration of national intent.

Equality in our Constitution must be twinned with a real world of equal opportunity: in housing, health, employment, education and justice.

And perhaps the most basic right of all; empowering our first Australians with the right to grow old.

Today, eight years after Prime Minister Rudd extended a hand of healing, grasped in friendship.

Supported by the then Leader of the Opposition, Brendan Nelson.

We now need to examine our progress in Closing the Gap.

Not in a spirit of self-congratulation, nor trenchant self-criticism.

But with clarity and honesty, with a determination to speak truth about what is working and what is not.

To recognise the progress we have made is uneven, and too slow.

And to redouble our efforts, in an equal, engaged and empowered partnership with the first Australians.

No Closing the Gap must in part, involve closing the political gap.

Mr Speaker, Senator Peris and the Member for Hasluck are great servants of this Parliament.

Along indeed with Senator Lambie and Lindgren.

But we must strive to attract more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into politics and into this place.

Not lobbying from outside, but making change inside.

With the ability to not seek to plead with the people who sit in this chamber and the other.

But to walk the carpet of this chamber and the other place, in order to have a voice in their own future.

My party has not done enough to encourage this in the past.

At our National Conference last year we vowed to do better - and we will.

Nowhere in our country though is the picture of diminished opportunity more stark or vivid, than in our justice system. At the first COAG meeting under a Labor Government, the first item on the agenda will be setting new targets to close the justice gap.

Tackling the appalling incarceration rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

And focusing on preventing crime, reducing violence and victimization and boosting community safety.

Not just in remote communities – but in our cities, suburbs and regional towns.

It is un-Australian that if you are an Aboriginal man, you are 15 times more likely to be imprisoned than a non-Aboriginal man. Half of all Aboriginal prisoners in custody are under the age of 30.

The re-imprisonment rate for Aboriginal young people is higher than the school retention rate.

In the last decade, imprisonment rates have more than doubled, growing faster than the crime rate.

And for Aboriginal women, there has been a 74 per cent increase in the past 15 years, meaning they make up one-third of our female prison population.

Far too many prisoners have poorly-understood disability, particularly cognitive and mental impairment.

Far too many young people see jail-time as a pre-ordained destination, part of the natural order of things.

It is not natural – these facts are more than uncomfortable, they are not the nation that we wish to see in the mirror.

It cannot be correct that the colour of your skin is a greater predictor of going to prison than any other.

And until we address this problem, we will never Close the Gap.

We cannot tolerate a criminal justice system built on processing people rather than administering justice.

The odds are stacked against people who go to jail young.

The risks of mental health issues, or substance addiction go up.

Their chances of finishing school, learning a trade or finding a good job decline.

So many children growing up with a parent in jail live with the pain of poverty and neglect.

So many end up in out-of-home care, where the Aboriginal population has grown by 440 per cent in the last 19 years.

So many of these children lead such different lives, lives of trauma.

Coming to school with mental health issues and other learning difficulties.

But it is not just these people, and these families who pay the price.

Every Australian pays a price for the failure of our justice system through higher crime rates, increased rates of family violence and reduced safety.

It is a national disgrace, it's not one which I believe anyone consciously signs up to in this Parliament.

But when we know the problem exists, to walk past the problem makes us part of the problem.

This is why Labor's new community safety policies will be shaped by the voices of people who truly know the justice gap: law enforcement, legal services, community sector experts.

And - above all - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their representative organisations.

Not the least of which, is the National Congress led by Jackie Huggins and Rod Little.

I look at places like Bourke, Cowra and Katherine, they're not waiting for Parliament, they're already engaged in justice reinvestment, to reduce crime and re-offending.

And as part of empowering communities to prevent crime, a Labor Government will support three new launch sites for the justice reinvestment model: in a major city, a regional town and remote Australia.

This is not a question of being soft on crime, far from it.

This is a plan to reduce crime.

Reducing the cost to the taxpayer, but to stop most importantly the waste of so many Australians from a better society.

Mr Speaker, four of the current seven Closing the Gap targets are focused on education.

Education as we know is essential to extending and improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

From properly-funded childcare right through to university and TAFE.

And I record the welcome of the Labor Opposition to the Government's announcement on supporting the retention and learning of Aboriginal languages.

But above all, future opportunity for Indigenous Australians will be defined in large part by their school experience.

This is why Labor is committed to making extra investments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Already, around Australia there are tens of thousands of Aboriginal students benefitting from the additional classroom attention funded by Labor's commitment to fund education based on need.

Last week I met with students from LeFevre High School in the western suburbs of Adelaide, where extra resources mean a stronger focus on literacy, mentoring programs and classes taught in Kurna language.

And Vincentia Public School in NSW, where attendance at their expanded homework centre has increased from 15 students a week to over 50.

This is what extra needs-based funding delivers. Real outcomes for every child in every school.

Only Labor's *Your Child, Our Future* policy will allow for the continuation and expansion of success stories such as these.

Labor's policy will guarantee the individual attention and targeted programs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students deserve to be at their best.

Your Child, Our Future will do more to close the gap in education than any policy decision in the last two generations.

Not just in some schools, not just for some students.

But every child, in every school, getting every opportunity.

And this opportunity must be extended equally to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

The next generation of young mothers, the generation who will close the gap, must be given the chance to make informed choices about their future.

This is why Labor is supporting the national roll-out of the Stars Program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls.

Stars is already operating successfully in seven schools in the Northern Territory using a similar model to the widely respected Clontarf program for young men.

As a matter of gender equality, I invite the Government to join us in funding Stars on the same basis as Clontarf.

In health we are making progress - albeit uneven - towards meeting the Close the Gap targets in health. Maintaining bipartisan support for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan and the resources to support its Implementation Strategy, will deliver more gains. Managing chronic disease is imperative, rolling out the NDIS nationwide is important. And tackling the social determinants of health: from incomes to housing is vital. But prevention in healthcare must be our priority, to ensure a healthier next generation. This means:

- Working for better maternal and child health.
- Better food security.
- Promoting healthy lifestyles and nutrition
- Targeting smoking, alcohol and substance abuse.
- And a more concentrated effort aimed at preventing suicide and improving mental health more broadly.

All of this depends on constructive, equal opportunity and partnerships - particularly with the Aboriginal Controlled Health Organisations. Australia, through the work of leaders such as Fred Hollows and organisations like *Vision 2020*, has led the world in improving eye health. Yet, shockingly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are six times more likely to suffer from blindness. 94 per cent of this vision loss is either preventable or treatable, with diabetic eye health, cataracts and untreated poor vision among the main causes. And we are the last, the last developed nation in the world where the infectious and wholly preventable eye disease of trachoma exists. It exists only among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples - where it is endemic in two out of three remote communities. With increased eye health services at the community level, many cases can be corrected overnight. And yet 35 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults have never had an eye exam. Addressing vision loss alone would close 11 per cent of the current gap in health. And every dollar spent in the area would return \$2.50 in economic benefit. This country is rich enough and generous enough to deal with this issue right now. So, today, I am pleased to announce that a Labor Government will commit an additional \$9 million to close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander vision loss. This will deliver

- Increased visiting optometry and ophthalmology services to address the gap in specialist eye health care service delivery
- And trachoma prevention strategies based on World Health Organisation recommendations

With this additional funding, we can and we will eliminate trachoma from Australia by 2020. We can begin to turn the tide on this endemic health problem. And we don't mind if the Government takes this policy this afternoon, and implements it tomorrow. It is as simple as making the decision. Mr Speaker, it's easy in the current political discourse to say *'throwing money at the problem won't solve it'*, and *'if money was going to solve it, it would have already solved it in the past'*. This is an alibi to justify cutting funding. Because pretending that money doesn't matter, pretending empowerment through greater resources just doesn't make a difference, is an arrogant falsehood. It is generally used by people for whom a lack of money and power has never been a problem. When an Aboriginal woman is 34 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of family violence, and 11 times more likely to die. When family violence is the number one cause of Aboriginal children being removed from their family and their community. When too many women seeking help from family violence face significant legal, psychological and cultural barriers. How can repeatedly cutting millions of dollars from Aboriginal legal and specialist support services possibly be part of the solution? There is no excuse for these cuts. You cannot cut your way to closing the gap.

Mr Speaker, in September 1842, as part of a five-night public debate on the *'rights of the Aborigines'*.
A Sydney barrister, wealthy landowner and aspiring politician, Richard Windeyer concluded his speech on the glories of colonial settlement with a haunting question:
*"How is it that our minds are not satisfied?
What means this whispering at the bottom of our hearts?"*

In the 174 years between then and now, that whispering has grown to a full-throated roar.
A cry for justice heard 50 years ago, when 200 Aboriginal stockmen, house servants and their families walked off Wave Hill station, not to return until they received a fair day's pay.

Or 41 years ago, when a tall stranger poured a handful of sand through Vincent Lingiari's fingers
31 years ago, when Uluru was formally returned to the people from whom we could never truly take it away.

28 years ago, when the High Court of Australia first learned the name Mabo.

22 years ago, on a sunny December day at a park in Redfern.

19 years ago, when Kim Beazley fought tears at this despatch box.

Or 8 years ago, when elders embraced in the galleries above us and on the lawns outside.

Yet for all this, our minds, our nation - cannot be satisfied.

Because the gap is still not closed.

The gap stands as an affront to our national sense of fairness.

Closing the Gap will demand the best of our collective energies and intellect - but that is what we should aim for, our best.

We can be not just the best multicultural nation in the world - but the nation best at empowering and respecting its first peoples.

One day, we will be able to talk of 'one country' - and mean it.

One day, we will be able to say racism is a relic of the past, that the fair go is colour-blind.

One day, we will be able to tell our children, and new arrivals and visitors to this land - that opportunity in Australia truly belongs to everyone.

One day, the Australian people will be able to sing with confidence the unofficial Australian anthem 'We are One' and it will be true.

This is not too much to hope for.

It is not too high to aim.

It is, in fact, the very least we must do.

ENDS

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