



The Hon. Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister

TRANSCRIPT
STATEMENT TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES - CLOSING THE GAP
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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PRIME MINISTER: Mr Speaker, as we always do in this place, we meet on Ngunnawal land.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to Ngunnawal Elders past, present and those emerging.

I pay my deepest respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today and right across our land.

I acknowledge our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders who are also the democratically elected representatives of the people:

- The Member for Hasluck and Minister for Indigenous Health and Senior Australians and Aged Care, the Honourable Ken Wyatt. The Member for Barton, the Honourable Linda Burney. And Senators Patrick Dodson and Malarndirri McCarthy.

I welcome the co-chairs of the Indigenous Advisory Council Andrea Mason and Roy Ah-See as well as all who have travelled to be here for this occasion, including Warren Mundine.

I also acknowledge the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Scullion.

I also wish to acknowledge the Member for Warringah, both as Special envoy and as someone who has a profound impact on my understanding and appreciation of indigenous Australians and the challenges they face in our country.

I want to acknowledge his long standing compassion, advocacy, commitment and dedication to the first peoples of our nation.

I want Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to have the same opportunities as all other children growing up in Australia.

But this is not true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia today. It's never been true. And I don't know when it will be true. And that is the truth we must confront again today.

I remind myself of this truth each day as I walk into my office, as I have done for many years.

In my office is a photo of a plaque embedded in a rock memorial at a remote outstation in Central Australia that I visited with the Member for Warringah and Senator Scullion many years ago, outside a small school that was attended by Shirley Ngalkin.

When Shirley was away from her community, she was brutally raped and drowned by teenage boys in Hermannsburg in 1998. She was six years old. She would be a young woman now, probably raising her own family, perhaps her own daughters.

On her memorial it says "I am Jesus' little lamb", with the prayer that she now rests in His care. I pray that is true, because we certainly failed to provide it. And we still do.

I'd like to tell you that this no longer happens. But we all know it does, even though we are often told we shouldn't say so, but we should.

Young girls are taking their lives in remote communities, so are young boys. Lives are being consumed in a hopeless dysfunction that seems to defy any sensible response.

While I am not going to pretend today that this situation does not remain in an unforgivable state, I am going to say that we can never rest as a nation until we change this for all time.

And I am here to say that there is hope. That progress is and can further be made.

So that one day we can say that a young indigenous boy or girl growing up in Australia will have the same chances and opportunities in life as any other Australian.

That is what Closing the Gap is all about.

Mr Speaker, in 2008 we began this process of Closing the Gap.

Successive Prime Ministers have reported since on our progress on meeting these national goals.

Born out of the National Apology, Closing the Gap was recognition that words without deeds are fruitless.

The process that began in 2008 was born of good heart.

It recognised that accountability is vital if we are to bring about a change and meaningful progress that has eluded our nation for two centuries.

But I must say, that while guided by the best of intentions, the process reflected something of the hubris of this place.

It did not truly seek to partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

It believed a top-down approach could achieve the change that was rightly desired. That Canberra could change it all with lofty goals and bureaucratic targets.

It was set up to fail. And has, on its own tests. And today I am calling that out.

This was not a true partnership – not with the states and territories, or with Indigenous peoples themselves.

Yes, there was more funding, programs, workers, and accountability – but this was just another version of what we were already doing, so often unsuccessfully, in different forms, for generations.

So, while there has been incremental and meaningful progress on many fronts – as of 2019 only two of the seven Closing the Gap targets are on track.

What we're doing has to change and our Government is leading a process to change it.

That is why, two years ago, we embarked on a Closing the Gap refresh – because our efforts were not meeting our worthy ambitions.

Late last year, a Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Bodies made representations to me about Closing the Gap.

They came to me seeking a partnership.

One where we listen, work together and decide together how future policies are developed – especially at a regional and local level.

This is a message I've also heard from the Indigenous Advisory Council.

At COAG in December last year, all governments committed to share ownership of, and responsibility for, jointly agreed frameworks, targets and ongoing monitoring of a refreshed Closing the Gap Agenda, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at its heart.

COAG asked that this work be finalised by the middle of this year.

This is a major step toward the genuine and mutually respectful formal partnership between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians that will empower individuals and allow communities to thrive.

Governments fail when accountabilities are unclear. When investment is poorly targeted, When systems aren't integrated. And when we don't learn from evidence.

This is why clear accountability will be at the centre of a new approach to Closing the Gap, with states and territories and the Commonwealth Government and Indigenous Australians having clear responsibilities for delivering on targets.

This is also why the progress we jointly make will be subject to regular independent Indigenous-led reviews.

This is about delivering action on the ground.

And this is about giving us all the best chance for success.

Our communities need the jobs and economic growth that makes true aspiration viable – and we need a renewed focus on education so that the next generation of Indigenous men and women will have every opportunity to participate in and contribute to our economic prosperity.

As we commence this refresh of Closing the Gap, it is important to report on what has occurred over the past ten years of reports.

While it is important to acknowledge the gap that exists and the gap that must be closed, we must careful not to take a deficit mentality to our task.

This is a long journey of many steps. We cannot allow the enormity of the task to overwhelm our appreciation for what we are achieving.

If we focus only on the gap and not what is being achieved, we are at risk of losing heart. We may fail to recognise achievements and strengths that can be built upon.

Sure, those achievements are still not enough.

But in this space, every achievement is hard won.

Every child that gets into school and stays in school is a victory.

Every child born healthy is a victory.

Every parent in every town who gets a job and stays in a job is a victory.

Every woman or child who is kept safe from abuse is a victory.

Every night a family can rest their heads in a home that is clean, safe and not overcrowded is a victory.

This process must claim it's victories, while being honest about its shortcomings. Because it is the victories upon which success built, and our failings from which lessons are learned.

Over the past ten years the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians has increased – men born between 2015 to 2017 can expect to live for an additional 4.1 years and women 2.5 years compared to those born 10 years earlier.

This improvement is encouraging. It points to better work being undertaken drawing together the different threads of health: physical, social, emotional and mental.

This progress is the culmination of incremental progress in communities across Australia.

Across Australia there are hundreds of services making a meaningful difference.

In Queensland, the Institute of Urban Indigenous Health provides clinics, eye examinations, dental examinations and support to deal with addictions.

In Central Australia, the Purple House is taking dialysis services to patients - with a mobile dialysis unit, the Purple Truck.

And in communities across Australia it requires sustained effort. It's intensive and it's absolutely vital.

However, despite the progress, we are not on track to close the gap on life expectancy by 2031.

Since 2008 Indigenous child mortality rates have fallen by 10 per cent.

The child mortality rate is a rate per 100,000 children, and so with a small population, the rate moves around a lot from year to year.

That means we have to be cautious about any claim of improvement.

While the Indigenous child mortality rate has fallen, the non-Indigenous infant mortality rates have fallen at a greater rate.

While we welcome both falls, the gap has not narrowed.

But there are positive signs – the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers attending antenatal care has risen from 41 per cent in 2010 to 60 per cent in 2016; the maternal smoking rate has decreased from 54 per cent in 2015 to 43 per cent in 2016; and we are seeing significant increases in immunisation rates.

I acknowledge the work being done on the ground that is making meaningful differences.

In Queensland, the Apunipima Cape York Council's Indigenous health workers, through the One Baby program, are conducting health checks, immunisation and treatments in homes and through clinics.

In the Northern Territory, a team of Aboriginal women is helping young mothers through the nurse-family partnership program - and imparting an understanding of what contributes to good health and wellbeing.

This is work that is extremely targeted and helping families make the best choices when it comes to the health and wellbeing of their young children.

The target to have 95 per cent of Indigenous children in early childhood education by 2025 is on track.

In 2017, 95 per cent of Indigenous children were enrolled in early childhood education.

New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and the ACT now have enrolments at the 95 per cent benchmark rate or above.

We should note that attendance rates for Indigenous children were lower in remote areas – particularly Very Remote Areas – up to 16 percentage points lower than the rates for Indigenous children in other areas.

So there is still work to do.

Nevertheless, there is significant progress overall and this should be celebrated – because enrolment and attendance are precursors to improving developmental outcomes ahead of attending school.

Much of this work has been supported by National Partnership Agreements with the States and Territories - ensuring that every child has access to a quality preschool education in the year before school.

Since 2008, there have been improvements in schooling outcomes.

The Commonwealth, working with the States and Territories, through the National School Reform Agreement is bolstering these improvements with \$308 billion from 2018 to 2029, with a priority focus on driving improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The biggest improvement over the past decade has been in Year 12 or equivalent attainment.

We have witnessed an almost 18 percentage point jump in the proportion of Indigenous Australians achieving this milestone since 2006.

More Indigenous students are now graduating and moving into employment or further studies.

We can be particularly proud of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island young people who face the additional challenge of living in Very Remote Areas – they have achieved the largest leap in attainment, with rates rising from 23 per cent in 2006 to 43 per cent in 2016.

However, the target to close the gap in school attendance is not on track.

Attendance rates for Indigenous students are at around 82 per cent compared to 93 per cent for non-Indigenous students.

While there is a disproportionate share of Indigenous students below the minimum standards for reading and numeracy, we have made progress over the past decade.

The proportion of Indigenous students at or above minimum standards are 11-13 percentage points higher than in 2008 – for reading in Years 3 and 5 and for numeracy in Years 5 and 9.

This Government understands that one of the keys to transform Indigenous employment rates is to encourage Indigenous businesses to grow.

Indigenous enterprise means Indigenous jobs.

Since the commencement of the Indigenous Procurement Policy three and a half years ago, the Commonwealth has awarded almost 12,000 contracts to over 1,470 businesses.

Those contracts have a total value of over \$1.8 billion.

Last financial year, 366 Indigenous businesses won their first Australian Government contract.

The Commonwealth and all portfolios exceeded their three per cent Indigenous Procurement Policy contract target.

To ensure this growth continues, from 1 July this year, we'll introduce a three per cent target based on value, beginning at one per cent and phased in over eight years.

We'll also expand the reach of the mandatory minimum requirements for Indigenous participation in major contracts to include additional service categories from 1 July 2020.

It is through the development of small, family and medium sized Indigenous businesses that we will tackle the Indigenous employment gap.

I am aware that many have entered this place with grand plans and lofty promises. All soon forgotten.

As Prime Minister I am not going to add further well intentioned promises to what is a long and disappointing list.

The Closing the Gap initiative seeks to promote action across a broad range of fronts. It must and will continue to.

As Prime Minister I intend to have a more specific focus. To seek to make an impact in just one area that I believe can achieve generational change.

And that's education.

I want to get kids into school and to stay in school for longer.

Education is the key to skills.

It is the key to jobs.

It is the key to building enterprises – and giving young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians the opportunity to create their futures.

It's the key to a good life.

If you can't read, if you can't write, there is no possible way you can share in the prosperity of Australia.

I am yet to meet a person who says they regret studying.

Because even if we take a different path to our studies, it becomes a foundation on which to build.

As Ian Trust, the Chair of Wunan an Aboriginal Development organisation in the East Kimberley, puts it: “If you want to have things you have never had before, you must be prepared to do things you have never done before. For us, this will mean getting more of our people educated and into a job in order to break the cycle of poverty for our people”.

Education is the foundation: for skills, jobs, health, prosperity, and longevity.

As the Member for Warringah has noted: when Indigenous students finish school and complete a degree – they have much the same employment outcomes as other comparable Australians.

We are seeing good signs from around the country.

The number of Indigenous women enrolling in university education has continued to rise and Indigenous women are graduating in increasing numbers.

For example, only last month, five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women graduated as doctors from the University of Western Australia. This is a tremendous outcome and I congratulate these new doctors.

And last week, on the other side of the continent, in Port Macquarie, the first Indigenous graduate in the University of Newcastle’s Bachelor of Midwifery completed her studies.

While there has been progress, we need to accelerate our efforts, particularly in our work in remote areas.

We must start with incentivising and rewarding teachers in remote communities.

I know you can’t be a teacher in a very remote area without having a deep commitment to teaching and making a difference.

If you are a teacher in a very remote area, what you are doing is more than a job, it’s an expression of love.

We should never take advantage of that great act of love. If anything we should reward it.

That is why the Government will provide incentives to teachers working in Very Remote Areas to help them pay their Higher Education Loans.

For these teachers, their HECS debt will be frozen. From today, teachers working in a Very Remote Area will not have one cent of interest added to their debt whilst they are working in a Very Remote Area.

For teachers, who from today, work for four years in a Very Remote Area, their HECS debt will be scrapped.

As well, the Minister for Education, the Special Envoy, and the Minister for Indigenous Affairs will work closely with a small number of communities to improve attendance rates.

Community by community. School by school.

This could include providing additional school facilities such as community infrastructure or learning centres helping disengaged students return to school. The goal being supporting and addressing school attendance.

We have seen the success of organisations that provide scholarships and mentoring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boys and girls.

The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, the Clontarf Foundation, and so many other programs are producing great outcomes and we need to invest in that success – helping indigenous boys and girls choose the futures they aspire to.

The Government will provide an extra \$200 million in support over the forward estimates for scholarships, academies and mentoring support.

The Indigenous Youth Education Package will provide further certainty for scholarships, academies and mentoring of Indigenous students.

This is an area which is working, and we are investing in success.

Mr Speaker.

There is change happening in our country: a shared understanding that we have a shared future.

The change is manifesting itself in thousands of small ways, each cascading to create change.

I remember being a boy, just 12, and travelling with my older brother Alan to a property 30 kilometres east of Cloncurry in North West Queensland, that property is under water today.

It was the family property of my late uncle Bill. The grandson of Dame Mary Gilmore who sensed and wrote of the yearning and mourning of Indigenous Australians long before most others.

I remember being in awe of the land – and marvelling at seeing a horizon on land rather than just at sea. I'd never seen that before, I grew up on the coast.

There was a large Indigenous family working on the property.

They were skilled stockmen.

I had had almost no interaction with Aboriginal people in my life – and my first reaction as a young boy – was to withdraw.

We too often withdraw what we do not know or understand.

My uncle sensed my unease. So he helped me to connect, to see, to appreciate and understand.

During the days that followed I came to learn about their deep connection to land and country, and got to know a family that was beautiful, generous and kind.

I fast forward a generation – to the evening before Australia Day this year.

And I took my family to the shores of Lake Burley Griffin to spend time with representatives of the Ngunnawal people.

My girls are just a little younger than Alan and I were when we went on our country trip.

But my children had no apprehension, only enthusiasm – and they already have an understanding and appreciation of Indigenous culture that I didn't have as a child.

And on the shores of our man-made lake, they encountered the same beauty, generosity and kindness that we had a generation before.

That afternoon, all of our faces were painted by our hosts – and we danced – some of us not that well – and we laughed and we listened.

We listened not just to the Elders, but to the very country that is home.

That afternoon, I again saw the great grace of Indigenous Australia.

Despite the dispossession; the loss of identity; the renaming of their lands; the ignominy of our history, including the crimes and the misguided good intentions; there was a good and open-hearted grace.

There was an offered hand where you might not expect any.

The miracle worked in any Apology is not when it is offered, but when it is accepted and that forgiveness takes place. That is when true reconciliation occurs.

In an age of offence, and where the bonds between us are under strain, there is much we can learn from our Indigenous brothers and sisters.

So we draw strength from their grace and renew our efforts to address the gaps in health, education, safety and housing.

We owe it to history, we owe it to the country that we share, to work together and to make the difference that is vital to so many lives.

Mr Speaker, I present the 2019 Closing the Gap Report.

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**Contacts: Press Office, (02) 6277 7744
The Hon. Scott Morrison MP, Sydney**