

## **Prime Minister JULIA Gillard**

### **Third annual closing the gap speech to the Australian Parliament**

**February 09, 2011**

"I acknowledge the first Australians, on whose lands we meet and whose cultures we celebrate as the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

And I believe that our debates are the stronger for our acknowledgement of country ... for this emerging Australian tradition of respect.

I remember so vividly Matilda House's words, speaking to all of us, when this 43rd Parliament began. She said:

I express the hope of a united, reconciled nation, the oldest living culture joined with the many diverse cultures of a modern successful Australia.

I believe that, for all the democratic differences between us in this place, this is a hope we do all genuinely share.

I also remember so vividly what Kevin Rudd said, speaking for all of us, when the 42nd Parliament began. He said:

Sorry.

With that one word, Kevin Rudd made wonderful history for Australia.

As an Australian, as a member of the Government, I was proud to be here that day.

And then Kevin turned his intelligence and determination to Closing the Gap for Indigenous Australians.

Setting six specific, ambitious targets for our nation to achieve.

Close the gap in life expectancy.

Halve the gap in mortality rates for children under five.

Ensure access to early childhood education.

Halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy.

Halve the gap in Year 12 attainment rates.

Halve the gap in employment outcomes.

And I am proud to be here now. Taking up the responsibility for the Australian Government in Closing the Gap.

So today, I make the third annual Prime Ministerial Statement to the House on Closing the Gap. And the Parliament should be in no doubt. Prime Ministers will be reporting on Closing the Gap for decades to come.

This work will go on.

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I do believe that Australians want our Indigenous people to have a better life. I also understand that many Australians wonder if our country can ever make that happen.

I feel the force of these two Australian emotions our deep dream of a better life for all, and our deep fear that we can never truly achieve it as I speak to the Parliament today.

I know our people think of the past, of the great policy movements and the passionate debates, of the money spent and the stubborn persistence of disadvantage, and I know they sometimes wonder ..... can we really make a difference?

I am an activist and an optimist. For me, the answer can only be yes.

The reality of change is never simple, our knowledge is never perfect and action is never easy. But Closing the Gap has allowed Australia to move beyond anecdote and intuition and instead to act on the best evidence we can get.

The Closing the Gap goals mean we know what we are trying to achieve: in education, in employment, in health.

The Closing the Gap strategy means we know how we are going to achieve it: improving investment, changing behaviours, working together with respect.

The framework is in place and delivery has begun.

Closing the Gap is the slogan of no party.

That is much of its power.

The community, particularly the Indigenous community, made Closing the Gap a campaign.

This Government has made Closing the Gap our policy.

And in my own work, first as Education Minister and now as Prime Minister, I've come to see ever more power in Closing the Gap as a way of defining, driving and measuring improvements in the lives of Indigenous Australians.

As a way of describing and understanding the Government's plans for the enormously difficult and complex social problems of Indigenous disadvantage.

Because I believe a fair nation creates opportunities for all ..... I see Closing the Gap as a genuinely important national goal.

That all Australians will have the same opportunities that demography will not be destiny that success will be defined by hard work not postcode. And that this will be true for any Aussie kid, whether they're from the red centre, Redfern or Rose Bay.

Because I believe in tackling the big challenges in the national interest ..... I see Closing the Gap as a way of understanding the problems.

It is evidence-based, accountable and transparent. It tells us what needs to be done first and fastest and builds a methodical approach. It allows us to build consensus in support of specific progress, instead of debating abstract ideas. To do what we can, with what we have, where we are.

Because I believe Australians judge Governments on delivery ..... I see Closing the Gap as a way of working on the solutions.

It is a way of making specific, measurable progress. It is practical and cumulative. It gives us new information which means we can invest where investment will make the greatest difference. Information which means we can be sure that the Government is meeting its responsibilities.

So Closing the Gap is a way of saying that Indigenous people should expect from the Government the same things every Australian expects.

The building blocks all people look to Government to provide.

The necessary conditions of opportunity in life.

And Closing the Gap is a way of saying that Indigenous people should expect of themselves the same things all Australians expect as well.

Because I also believe that with opportunity comes responsibility and individuals only achieve progress through work and effort ..... so I see Closing the Gap as a call for changes in behaviour.

A call to every person, to every family, to every community.

To take care of your children. To take a job when you find one. To create a safe environment. To send your kids to school, pay your rent, save up for a home. To respect good social norms and to respect the law. And to reach out to other Australians.

If I speak strongly, it is because I have listened to Indigenous people who do these things already, people who speak even more strongly.

People like Chris Sarra, the inspiring Indigenous educator whose creed high expectations, and whose words stronger, smarter stay with me.

People like Noel Pearson, who pioneered the arguments for social and personal responsibility as a driver of Indigenous opportunity.

To borrow a phrase from President George Bush, we must reject the "soft bigotry of low expectations".

It is not only well known Indigenous Australians who are driving behavioural change.

It is the mother in the city who feeds her children and gets them ready for school.

The aunty in the country town who tells the stories to the young.

The father in a remote community who sets an example of strength and gentleness to his sons.

These are the hidden heroes of Indigenous Australia the people who are leading the change more than anyone else.

I am certain that Australia will never Close the Gap without all of us committing to the change.

When this campaign began, the truth is this: the most remote community and the most respected leader, the smallest shop and the biggest corporation, and the Australian Government itself, we all needed to change.

And we needed not to change alone, but to change together.

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Saying sorry was vital for so many reasons.

One that I want to reflect on today is the chance it gave us to break the cycle of blame between Australian Governments and Indigenous Australia.

In the worst moments of this cycle, Australian Governments have sometimes seemed to say to Indigenous Australia, let us know when you have got your act together.

And in the worst moments of this cycle, Indigenous Australia has sometimes seemed to feel, the Australian Government has to invest before our behaviour can begin to change.

Both attitudes are destructive and wrong. Bad behaviour by individuals is never an excuse for Government failure. The failures of Government are never an excuse for bad behaviour by individuals.

If Indigenous kids in this nation aren't getting a fair go, we share the responsibility for change.

I don't mean as Indigenous people, I don't mean as non-Indigenous people. I mean as adults. Politicians, bureaucrats, local communities, schools, teachers and parents. Us.

All of us and each of us ... we share the task ahead.

I really think we all now see it that way. In the past three years we have genuinely come together with respect and worked together with shared responsibility and genuinely broken the cycle of blame.

Because Closing the Gap is now more than a public policy.

Closing the Gap is a national goal.

In the same way, I believe recognising the unique and special place of our first peoples in the Australian Constitution can be a wonderful national goal.

An opportunity to recognise, in the founding document of our nationhood, our shared pride in being Australian and our shared pride in Australia's continuing Indigenous culture.

When that happens, it will be a wonderful, uplifting, uniting moment for our nation ... a day of great national pride.

I look forward to working with the expert panel, with all members of the Parliament, and with all Australians, as we approach that goal together.

But the work can't wait until that day and we won't let it.

Since 2007, our nation has been working together to Close the Gap: in health, in education and in employment.

To overcome decades of under-investment in services and infrastructure. To encourage and support personal responsibility as the foundation for healthy, functional families and communities.

And to build new understanding and respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. We have done an enormous amount of work together.

First, we've invested in what we call the "building blocks".

Those necessary conditions of opportunity.

Early childhood and schooling, health and healthy homes, safe communities and economic participation, as well as governance and leadership.

Reversing decades of under-investment in services and infrastructure. Delivering the things all Australians expect.

So we've invested in early childhood ...

Delivering infrastructure, staff and programs in remote communities and town camps. Making community based preschools more affordable. Hiring extra full-time teachers to support Indigenous kids.

Last year nearly 15 000 Indigenous adults and children visited one of the 45 Communities for Children services sites to receive assistance with early learning and literacy, parenting and family support and child nutrition.

10 new child and maternal health services have been approved for funding across Australia. Two of these services have already commenced in Warburton, Western Australia and Ceduna, South Australia and up to 11,000 Indigenous babies and their mothers will be helped by 2013.

More than 6000 children and parents meet regularly in 69 supported playgroups operating across Australia. Supporting children's development and giving parents a hand as well.

We've invested in schooling ...

The Government is building new classrooms, science centres, libraries and resource centres in 29 remote communities across Australia. These projects are due to be completed this year.

Last year, more than 3500 Indigenous young people who were at risk of not completing Year 12 or an equivalent were personally helped under the Youth Connections program which encourages young people to stay at school, get back to school or take up training and achieve their goals.

More than 5000 students were supported in academies such as the Clontarf Foundation football academies, the Former Origin Greats Queensland academy and other sports-based academies in 2010.

These academies reach out to school students at risk of not completing school. They teach and promote self-discipline and self esteem, life skills and the importance of education, particularly through close mentoring and participation in sport.

More than half of participants reported improved academic performance and positive changes in attitudes and behaviour.

We've invested in health ...

The Indigenous Chronic Disease Package is training and expanding the Indigenous health workforce and tackling chronic disease risk factors.

This has funded more than 300 new positions in the Indigenous health workforce: outreach workers and health project officers, regional tobacco coordinators and tobacco action workers, healthy lifestyle workers, practice managers and other health professionals.

To tackle petrol sniffing, there are already 108 sites across regional and remote Australia supplying low aromatic Opal fuel.

Eleven new Indigenous communities in the Gulf region of Queensland, East Kimberley in Western Australia and the Top End of the Northern Territory, home to nearly 9000 people, will be getting access to Opal fuel through 39 new retail sites. This begins in 2011 and will be complete by 2013.

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Opal fuel has delivered a 70 per cent reduction in petrol sniffing across communities, with improved health outcomes, family function and community safety.

We've invested in healthy homes ...

The Australian Government is making an unprecedented long-term investment to reverse decades of neglect. Tackling overcrowding and homelessness, poor housing conditions and the severe housing shortage in remote Indigenous communities.

People need a decent house to cook a healthy meal, to sleep at night, for children to wake up the next day ready for school, for parents to wake up the next day ready to work ... that means the houses have to be built, and we're doing that.

We have listened to communities and are building housing to cater for different sized families houses that cater for singles, young families and the elderly and houses that allow privacy.

Last year 316 new houses and 828 refurbishments were completed. New and refurbished dwellings are subject to new tenancy agreements, which help tenants transition to rental arrangements in line with other public housing, and ensure regular repairs and maintenance.

We've invested in safe communities ...

The Australian Government is helping protect Indigenous children from neglect and abuse.

We are helping develop new family support services for families at risk, increasing the number of child protection workers, and strengthening alcohol controls.

The Australian Government has paid for the construction of three permanent police stations in the APY Lands in South Australia.

These began operations late 2009 and early last year, bringing a permanent police presence to those communities for the first time.

66 Australian Federal Police officers have been deployed to the Northern Territory since June 2007. We've funded 45 extra Northern Territory Police recruits who have graduated since 2009 and commenced their duties within the Northern Territory Police Force in 16 communities from Maningrida to Yuendumu. Another 15 recruits should graduate in April.

And in child protection, new national standards for Out of Home Care, which apply to formal care arrangements including residential care, foster care and kinship care, will ensure children get proper care, no matter where they live.

We've invested in economic participation ...

Over 16,000 Indigenous Australians started employment and around 12,500 began training in 2010 with support from the Indigenous Employment Program. As part of the Tailored Assistance element of the program, work began on construction, retail, hospitality and mining projects valued at over \$180 million.

Nearly 2 000 Indigenous Australians were supported into employment over the last twelve months through the Community Development Employment Projects program.

Since starting in September 2009, the Australian Indigenous Minority Supplier Council has generated over \$4 million in contracts and nearly \$3 million in transactions between its members and certified suppliers.

The Council links corporate and government purchasers with certified Indigenous suppliers of goods and services. Demand is growing, not only for Indigenous workers, but for Indigenous business as well.

And we've invested in governance and leadership ...

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples provides a central mechanism with which Government, the corporate and community sector can engage and partner on policy design and implementation. In remote communities, we are supporting community capacity building and leadership initiatives such as engagement workshops, leadership development workshops and community development training.

Closing the Gap demands that the Australian Government meets our responsibility: to overcome decades of under-investment in services and infrastructure.

We are doing this.

Closing the Gap also demands personal responsibility: the foundation for the life of every family and community.

Indigenous people are doing this too.

Closing the Gap means change in people's lives.

And Indigenous people know that when the child starts attending school ... when the drinker stops abusing alcohol ... when the adult takes the job that is there ... then change begins.

And Indigenous people know these decisions are not made by Governments.

They are made by people.

The job of Government, of communities, is to support good decisions.

So when the child goes to school, there is a great teacher ... when the drinker stops, they find a great counsellor ... when the adult takes the job, they have great skills.

That is what we are doing across Australia.

In Fitzroy Crossing ...

The leaders of Fitzroy Crossing and the surrounding communities of the Fitzroy Valley in Western Australia requested alcohol restrictions and these were first imposed in 2007. Since 2008 the alcohol restrictions have been evaluated and reviewed annually. The reviews are good news.

There is less tolerance for domestic violence and more willingness to report it.

Families are purchasing more food and clothing and parents are taking more care of their own health and wellbeing and that of their children. Fitzroy Crossing is a quieter and more peaceful town for families to live in and a better place for children to grow up.

In Alice Springs ...

The Australian and Territory Government Alice Springs Transformation Plan is designed to meet very specific local needs. It is funding work on new roads, curbs and gutters, new power and water infrastructure and street lights.

85 new houses are being built, with 18 new houses already completed and remaining work to be completed this year. This goes with normal tenancy management arrangements where residents are expected to pay their rent and maintain their homes.

In Alice Springs itself, there is now more accommodation for renal patients and people receiving other medical treatment and extra managed accommodation beds for homeless men.

Health checks and family assessments are being provided to make sure 300 Indigenous children are ready and able to attend school. And the successful dog control program has been extended for a further two years.

On Cape York ...

In Queensland, the Cape York Welfare Reform Trial is a partnership between the Queensland and Australian Governments, Cape York regional organisations and the four communities of Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge.

The trial encourages people to take responsibility for community well-being by improving school attendance and child safety, tackling alcohol and drug abuse, gambling addiction and family violence and improving tenancy management.

Noel Pearson has driven these reforms on the Cape over many years. But Cape York is a strong example of the way this Government is working with communities across the country and supporting local design and control.

In Brisbane ...

Chris Sarra's Stronger Smarter Institute at the Queensland University of Technology has delivered transformational change in Indigenous education.

Chris has also led the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities Project, supported by the Australian Government. This has brought new resources to drive improvement in schools which our transparency measures show need help.

Giving principals and teachers across Australia the tools to improve performance in their schools.

Not just the support, but the challenge: to set the highest expectations and for Indigenous students and deliver the best results.

I said earlier, Chris's creed of high expectations, and his words stronger, smarter stay with me.

By very definition, Government cannot deliver personal responsibility.

But modern Government creates many incentives for personal behaviour and has many opportunities to support good decisions.

This is what we are doing now. It is helping to Close the Gap.

So today the Government releases the third annual report on progress towards our Closing the Gap targets.

At their launch, we knew these targets were specific and ambitious.

Ambitious, because we chose targets that would be difficult to achieve ... specific, because we chose targets where we'd know if we didn't get there.

The report tells us that we must keep improving investment, keep changing behaviours, keep working together with respect, if we are to meet the targets to Close the Gap.

Here is what we know.

We can be most confident of meeting two of the six targets.

To halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018.

To ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities by 2013.

We should be confident these two targets are on track.

We see improvement in three of the six targets, and with faster improvement over time, we believe these can be reached.

To halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children by 2018.

To halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates by 2020.

To halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by 2018.

The final target is the most challenging of all.

Closing the life-expectancy gap within a generation that is, by 2031.

That means the life expectancy of Indigenous men will need to increase by over twenty years and the life expectancy of Indigenous women will need to increase by over sixteen years by 2031.

This is a thirty-year target. No one thinks it can be achieved sooner.

Indeed it will be extremely challenging.

I know we could never say mission accomplished three years into a thirty year process.

But the message of this report is clear.

Together, we can do this.

We have a plan for progress.

We do see change for the better.

And we know where we want change to continue.

This is the power of Closing the Gap.

We do not have a plan to do everything. Such plans rarely succeed.

We do have a plan to meet six targets.

Together, we can do this.

With this evidence of where we have more work to do comes a responsibility to do more work now.

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Closing the Gap is built on measuring improvement.

Measurement needs to improve as well so we always know what works.

For preschool access we use a new Australian Bureau of Statistics survey.

For literacy and numeracy we use NAPLAN, which is also annual. It is national data, rich and rigorous.

But our mortality, life expectancy, year 12 attainment and employment targets are based on the Census, which happens every five years.

So we need other ways to measure improvement between the censuses.

And the census itself hasn't always reached Indigenous people or identified them well.

So some targets are particularly difficult to measure today.

Extra resources for the Australian Bureau of Statistics and for the States are making a difference.

This year's census will tell us more about Indigenous Australians as a result. This is an area where more will be done over time.

Today, I met with leaders of the Closing the Gap Coalition here in Parliament House. Their campaign is approaching its fifth anniversary next month. They have a lot to be proud of.

The Closing the Gap Coalition have been important advocates for Indigenous health equality ... becoming a united voice on what should happen to improve Indigenous health. But they emphasised to me that advocacy on the outside is not enough.

The Closing the Gap Coalition, with the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, is not just arguing for action, but advising on what works where.

This practical effort to ensure services fit the conditions of specific people in specific places to work together to deliver the right investments and the right behaviour changes to translate good policy into real progress is the absolute essence of Closing the Gap.

This is the work which will go on.

Clear goals.

Measured progress.

Focussed on the targets.

Government delivering what all Australians expect.

Indigenous people doing the same.

Together, we can do this.

With passion and perspective.

Determined to deliver.

All sharing our pride in Australia's Indigenous culture.

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All sharing our determination to give everyone a better life.

We can Close the Gap.