



Prime Minister of Australia
The Hon Julia Gillard MP

Prime Ministerial Statement: "Closing the Gap"

WED 15 FEBRUARY 2012

Prime Minister

Mr Speaker, in the long story of relations among the peoples of our nation – the story of our struggles with each other and of our struggles to reconcile – there have been some good days which we will not forget.

Days when a glimpse of a better time came briefly into view.

We have cherished them.

We cherished 27 May 1967, when Australians voted Yes.

To empower the Commonwealth to bring the resources of the whole nation to bear to address Indigenous disadvantage.

Perhaps the greatest was here, four years ago.

13 February 2008, when Kevin Rudd said Sorry.

Sorry on behalf of all of us, for the "grief, suffering and loss"; for the "pain, suffering and hurt"; for the "indignity and degradation".

A day we cherished, when we saw our nation as we wish it could always be.

Now we look forward to another such day – to the day when Australia's Indigenous peoples are recognised in the Act which constitutes the Australian Commonwealth.

And we look forward to the work that we will do together on all the days that lie between.

Every day, our conscience demands we work to Close the Gap.

Mr Speaker, that work, every day, is what this Government has done.

By embracing the targets of the Closing the Gap campaign, this Government deliberately leaves itself nowhere to hide.

Closing the Gap is a practical and empirical project and it is a project that should move us deeply, work which will make such a difference in so many individual lives.

We aim to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018, so more Indigenous babies live.

To ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities by 2013, so more Indigenous children are ready on their first day of school.

To halve the gap in literacy and numeracy achievements for children by 2018, so more Indigenous children know the love of books.

To halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020, so more Indigenous young people are ready for life and a job.

To halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by 2018, so more Indigenous adults know the dignity and benefits of work.

And we aim to close the life-expectancy gap within a generation – that is, by 2031, so every Indigenous Australian has the chance to grow old.

Measurement is central to this project of Closing the Gap.

Because the Closing the Gap targets are not meant just to challenge us to do more – they are designed to hold us accountable to our ambitions.

It is through the annual assessment of the independent COAG Reform Council that is published in June each year – and through the annual Closing the Gap Report which the Government releases today – that we are brought to book.

The targets we have set are specific and measurable tests of our improvement.

Last year I reported that measurement of progress towards these targets, including by the States and Territories, also needs to improve.

However we can already track progress in reducing under-five-year-old mortality each year.

We have effective measures of access to early childhood education and our measurement of achievements in reading, writing and numeracy is sound.

Direct measurement of life expectancy and year 12 attainment relies on the Australian Census data, which is only available every five years.

So we track overall mortality on an annual basis – and this forms a reliable proxy from which we can track improvement in life expectancy.

And we track trends in apparent school retention each year, which acts as a guide to year 12 attainment.

Our employment target is measured using the respected National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey, direct measures of progress which are available every three years – supplemented by the five-yearly census.

But when we began the work of closing the gap, we knew that we needed better information about Indigenous health, education and employment.

This is why the 2009-2010 Budget invested almost \$50 million extra over four years, funding new work by national data agencies and the States and Territories, to give us data which is more detailed and reliable, more comprehensive and easier to compare – particularly between Census years.

This year I can report that measurement has improved.

Central to the effort to measure progress is the Census – and last year's was better than any before.

\$20 million of that extra funding was allocated to improve Census data collection methods.

Local Engagement Managers and mobile teams built early rapport with Indigenous communities.

They organised the delivery and collection of census books differently and they developed new ways for people who aren't literate in English to answer census questions.

They worked especially hard in the most remote areas and among the most disadvantaged.

Indigenous communities themselves already tell us the 2011 Census was an important improvement on the past.

We have improved other measurement besides the Census.

To improve data on access to early childhood education, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has led the development of the new National Early Childhood Education and Care Data Collection. Importantly, this collection includes data on early childhood education in early childhood centres.

We now have nationally consistent data on smoking during pregnancy and we have agreed data to track the timing of the first antenatal visit – so we will be able to say how many Indigenous women get advice from a health professional at the right times during their pregnancy.

New key performance indicators will help us better understand the contribution of Indigenous specific primary health care services.

All this is thankless, detailed, time-consuming work – performed by dedicated professionals in statistical collection and analysis.

But because of it, Mr Speaker, I am confident we can say that we are better placed than ever before to measure effectively our progress to Close the Gap.

Today's Closing the Gap Report shows that the foundations for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage are in place.

The Report shows that we are seeing progress – we are making gradual gains.

The Australian Government remains the most confident of meeting two of the six targets.

The target of halving the infant mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018 is on track.

We are also confident we can ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities by 2013.

For the third, we are also now generally on track to meet the target to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement for Indigenous children by 2018.

This assessment is based on results from the annual National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, NAPLAN.

We can see measurable improvement in the 2011 NAPLAN results.

Significant gains occurred between 2010 and 2011 in the percentage of Indigenous students at or above the national minimum standards.

For example, for Year 3 Numeracy, up by 7.0 percentage points – and Year 9 Reading, up by 7.7 percentage points.

In fact in seven of the eight areas in which we can assess progress in reading and numeracy since 2008, the gap has narrowed.

And in six of these eight, the improvement over four years is fast enough that if it continues we will meet the target by 2018.

In year seven and year nine numeracy progress still needs to accelerate.

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

The Report shows that apparent retention rates to Year 12 are improving for Indigenous students – up from barely thirty per cent in 1995 to just over 47 per cent in 2010.

Faster improvement will be required to halve the gap in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020.

We will need to keep expanding places for post-school training and education.

We will need to keep working with Indigenous young people to ensure they find the opportunities which exist in the education and training system.

Faster improvement will also be required to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by 2018.

Indigenous employment has increased sharply in Australia in recent decades, reflecting a long period of almost uninterrupted economic growth – and an active and engaged approach from corporate Australia.

Never in our nation's history has business been more prepared to play its part.

Just under 90,000 additional jobs were won by Indigenous Australians from 1994 to 2008.

The Indigenous unemployment rate fell from 31 per cent in 1994 to 23 per cent in 2002 and to 16.6 per cent in 2008.

In urban areas, the majority of Indigenous Australians of working age are employed – this was not the case 20 years ago.

Closing the Gap on life expectancy by 2031 remains the most challenging target of all.

Progress towards the other health, education and employment targets all provide strong foundations to help us lift life expectancy.

And the life expectancy target is the longest term of the six – it is a twenty-five-year target.

While the challenge is very large we do know that some progress is being made.

In Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory the Indigenous mortality rate declined by 36 per cent from 1991 to 2010 – and there was a significant narrowing of the gap in mortality rates with non-Indigenous Australians.

And we know what the main causes of Indigenous mortality are – chronic disease and accident and injury.

So we are working to limit their incidence and reduce the harm they do.

Hundreds of extra Indigenous health workers are working to attack scourges of cancer, diabetes, heart disease and mental illness, as well as targeting risk factors for chronic disease such as smoking, poor nutrition and lack of exercise.

Mr Speaker, four years into a twenty-five-year project, this much is true: health outcomes, employment outcomes, education outcomes are improving, they need to keep improving and to improve more quickly.

This much is also true: foundations are in place, work is underway, we can measure encouraging improvement now.

This is our progress towards Closing the Gap.

Mr Speaker, one of the great myths of Indigenous disadvantage is that it persists despite decades of expensive public responses.

The reality is quite the reverse.

Report after report has shown that decades of under-investment in services and infrastructure are unquestionably a major cause of disadvantage, especially for the very young.

No Australian family, however hard-working, self-respecting or self-reliant, is expected to fix broken sewerage pipes at the end of their street or repair street lighting outside their house.

These are things Governments are responsible for – the basic, universal services all Australians are right to expect.

So the Australian Government has heard the call to change.

We have delivered billions of dollars of additional investment in the "building blocks" of better lives.

In early childhood and in schools – in health and healthy homes – in economic participation, in safe communities, in leadership and governance.

I have seen the difference this is making even in places where problems seem as intractable as they have been in the town camps of Alice Springs.

And so many Indigenous people have heard the call to change too.

They have taken on new responsibilities, not only to improve their own circumstances but to share the example with their young.

I have met the people who are making these changes in their own lives.

They know that no Australian Government, however active or ambitious, can get any child out of bed for school in the morning – or make any parent ask visitors to leave at a reasonable hour so the children in a small house can sleep.

These things are the responsibilities of every Australian family.

Another great myth of Indigenous disadvantage is that the nation must choose between "two reconciliations" – symbolic and practical.

That we must choose between a reconciliation which respects the rights and responsibilities of culture and land – and a reconciliation which respects the rights and responsibilities to education, health and jobs.

This is also quite false.

It runs against what we all know to be true in our own lives – that things of the spirit are inextricably linked with the things of day to day life.

A life of plenty without respect and acceptance is still a life half-lived – as is a life of poverty with respect and acceptance.

Human beings need to nourish and sustain body and soul.

The reconciliation we seek between us is not something which can be sorted or classified like a list of policy priorities.

We seek precisely the kind of harmony and concord – a national unity – which can never be whole or complete under conditions of poverty and unfairness.

And we seek precisely the kind of practical benefits in people's lives – better education, employment and health – which can never ultimately work without sharing responsibility and self-respect.

I think of my visit to the Northern Territory during the dry season last year.

There, in the spectacularly beautiful Alice Springs Desert Park, I handed back to traditional owners the title to their land under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act.

I saw people overwhelmed and emotional about the handover and what it represented – I remember Alice Ngalkin signing the deeds while her friends and family took photos to mark the event.

A moment of great symbolic power which I shared with deep respect and which on that day brought me so much closer to the Indigenous people there.

And in the atmosphere of respect which we had built between us – the local Aboriginal elders and I then sat down to talk.

And they told me as frankly as anyone could, with both sentiment and deep conviction, what they believed I need to know about the practical problems they face.

They spoke about the need to listen and to trust.

And they said that the education system has failed Aboriginal people and it is critical to addressing disadvantage.

They said that the way the emergency response started in 2007 caused shame and hurt and they wanted to stay with us on the new journey.

And they spoke about alcohol and its harms – the need to be tougher.

They didn't pick sides in some dialectic or debate – but because of the trust we had shared that day, we could speak together in respect about what they knew was wrong and what they knew would work.

And that week, on the Gove Peninsula, I saw the traditional owners of the land and the representatives of a mining giant sign an agreement.

Signed before a gathering of thousands of people from all over Arnhem Land and from all around Australia.

We all met there for a striking ceremony performed on what was long contested country – where those most potent of all symbols of the struggle for land, the Yirrkala bark petitions, were inscribed in 1963.

And we met to celebrate an agreement which secures the future operations of the bauxite mine, alumina refinery and Nhulunbuy township.

Which delivers Indigenous people real economic benefits from the mining investment boom, with economic development, jobs, better housing and community facilities.

Mr Speaker, in the Desert Park and on the Peninsula – among Australians who treasure progress and respect – I have seen and felt the presence of the reconciled nation we can become.

Where secure title to the big tracts of traditional land gives traditional owners a long-term economic future and a share in the jobs and opportunities the land can create.

And where secure title to a home in a town or community gives parents the security to raise and educate their children in a safe environment.

Where by saying sorry for the wrongs of the past and by recognising Indigenous people in our constitution, we build respect between all Australians.

And where that respect allows us to speak honestly with each other as we decide, together, what works where.

Not to the detriment of basic local service delivery – never accepting the "soft bigotry of low expectations" or attempting to "explain away" violence against women.

But yes, bound together as individuals and as a nation by shared symbols of respect and practical action – listening to each other properly, about what the best evidence tells us about what will make the greatest difference.

Whether the conversation is between a minister of my Cabinet and the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, or between a departmental official and a parent who works part-time as a local teacher's aide, we listen to each other – and then we get on with the job.

This is the relationship between our people which I seek.

Mr Speaker, perhaps the ultimate manifestation of respect is constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians.

The proposal before the country now has been years in the making.

Over decades, many ways to recognise Indigenous Australians as our first peoples, to affirm their full and equal citizenship and to remove remaining traces of racial discrimination from our law have been proposed.

In August 1937, William Cooper sent a petition with 1,814 signatures to Prime Minister Joseph Lyons requesting that he forward it to King George VI, seeking direct representation in Parliament.

In June 1988, the chairs of the Northern and Central Land Councils presented the Barunga Statement to Prime Minister Bob Hawke.

It called upon the Australian Government and people to recognise key Indigenous rights and "to negotiate a Treaty recognising our prior ownership, continued occupation and sovereignty and affirming our human rights and freedoms".

And my party's national Platform has been pledged to support constitutional recognition since 1998.

Then in October 2007, then-Prime Minister John Howard raised the hopes of a nation, pledging that:

If re-elected, I will put to the Australian people within 18 months a referendum to formally recognise Indigenous Australians in our Constitution – their history as the first inhabitants of our country, their unique heritage of culture and languages, and their special (though not separate) place within a reconciled, indivisible nation.

It was a gracious and deliberate statement which effectively began the contemporary process that leads to today.

And four years on, the movement for constitutional recognition is strong and growing.

It grew through 2008, when the Cabinet met in east Arnhem Land and was solemnly petitioned to continue with this process.

And in 2010 I announced the appointment of an Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians to do the hands on work of developing options for constitutional change.

I didn't send the Panel on an easy journey – and they performed mightily.

Last month, the co-chairs Patrick Dodson and Mark Leibler delivered the Panel's Report on Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Constitution to the Government.

I have thanked them publicly already and I do so again here today.

Mr Speaker, for constitutional change, Australians have to understand and be persuaded of the case for change.

This does require all-embracing political bipartisanship.

But it requires more.

Political bipartisanship, while necessary, is not sufficient.

We need more than the consent of the governed to an agreement between parliamentarians – we need a genuine community desire for change.

Our Constitution is our nation's founding contract – our people rightly guard it with care.

Support for constitutional recognition must genuinely have the people's support.

That is what happened in 1967. Yes, bipartisanship – but more.

A deep feeling in the Australian community leading to millions of Australian people deciding to say yes to change.

Earlier today, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and I announced funding for a community conversation, to be sponsored by Reconciliation Australia.

To build support for what is already the subject of bipartisan agreement: the principle of constitutional recognition.

And to build understanding of the ways in which constitutional recognition might be achieved.

The Expert Panel's report provides a firm foundation for this discussion.

This is an opportunity for the Australian people to get involved.

To get on the *You Me Unity* website, to learn about what's in the Panel's report, and what happens next.

To find practical information and solid ideas and to discuss them – in their homes and with their neighbours, in their community meetings and in their workplaces, in their trade unions and in their churches.

The Government is committed to this change – we are committed to building public support for this change – and in the many conversations which follow in the Australian community, we will take a leading part.

It is through the sum of that myriad of conversations, of people listening and speaking with respect, that we will truly know that our people are ready to say yes to this change.

Mr Speaker, the day we said Sorry was a great day in this nation's history ... the day of constitutional recognition will be another.

Closing the Gap is an accumulation of all the small victories on all the many days that lie between.

The young man, first in his family to learn a trade, with skilled work on his traditional lands.

The young woman, first in her family to earn a degree, holding a job in the city.

The basic public services that surround them, delivered at the standard every Australian expects.

The keys to a couple's first home – and the life of dignity and pride they live within it, raising children who are ready to take their place in a reconciled nation.

The respect shown to them by people in the community where they live.

The detailed measurements which tell us this is so.

When more Indigenous children are ready to learn on their first day of school – we will know we are closing the gap.

When brilliant Indigenous school leavers are as sought after by the big firms as brilliant Indigenous footballers are sought after by the big clubs – we will know we are closing the gap.

When fewer Indigenous men between 35 and 45 die of disease – we will know we are closing the gap.

Today, we know we have a long way to go.

But we also know we are Closing the Gap.