



Closing the Gap Report 2010

Main Committee

25 February 2010

Sharon Grierson MP

Sharon Grierson (Newcastle) (10:16 AM) —It is a pleasure to speak on the *Closing the gap* report and to follow the member for Lingiari, the Minister for Indigenous Health, Rural and Regional Health and Regional Service Delivery, Mr Snowdon. I again acknowledge and thank him for his work. He came to Newcastle for the national Indigenous health conference and his genuine concern, interest and knowledge were warmly appreciated by the participants. It is always interesting to have Minister Snowdon visit, because he knows people from all around this nation in the Indigenous community. I just know that the movement having come so far in terms of Indigenous men's participation in health care is in part a tribute to his work over many years.

On 11 February this year the Prime Minister tabled his second *Closing the gap* report in parliament. It was a highly significant occasion. It had been two years since the Australian parliament made a formal apology to the stolen generations. One of the highlights and privileges of my career here will forever remain sharing in that most generous welcome from the Indigenous people. It was the first smoking ceremony we ever had in parliament. I was taken aback by the generous spirit of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I thought it was we who were extending generosity, but it was not. It was the greatest and warmest welcome I have ever felt from fellow Australians and the First Australians.

It is time that we have an official welcome and acknowledgement of the First Australians in every session of parliament. There is always debate about the prayers and protocols but I think that whenever the parliamentary session is opened it would be very appropriate to formally acknowledge and recognise the First Australians and their ownership of this great land.

In the two years since the first apology, for the first time the parliament has reached a national agreement with all the states and territories on closing the gap. I do not think we should underestimate how difficult it is to get all the states and territories aligned in purpose, and aligned in financial commitment as well, to achieve the same outcomes. Since that time there has been a national investment of \$4.6 billion directed towards common goals, now shared around this nation, to transform the health, education and employment outcomes of Indigenous people. Two years ago we set six closing the gap targets. It was recognised that it will take a generation.

One generation is not a very long time in history, but we cannot afford to wait longer than that to close this gap.

Before going through those targets I would like to acknowledge a staff member of mine, Sharon Claydon, who has been very active in Indigenous affairs and who put these same targets at a state ALP conference in New South Wales. Sharon was instrumental in working with a committee to get these targets recognised. I do acknowledge her work. It is wonderful when individual members of a large political party can make a difference. The difference that she was committed to comes from her very long experience in working in the Fitzroy Crossing area in Indigenous communities. The target was to close the gap in infant mortality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Currently we are seeing a decline in the rate, particularly evident over recent years. It now stands at 5.3 per cent, but we do have to improve that data as much as we can. We have targeted mothers and baby services programs. In 2008 the gap in child mortality meant that 205 out of any 100,000 Indigenous children died before the age of five, compared to 100 non-Indigenous children. This difference was certainly unacceptable. We are seeing, very slowly, that gap being closed. We have, as I said, rolled out many new services.

The second target was to provide access to early childhood education. I know that the Prime Minister acknowledged that some of the improvements come from better data collection and from finally having statistics from around the nation, but to know that 60 per cent of Indigenous children are enrolled in early childhood education programs in the year before school is very pleasing. It is not the same as the 70 per cent of non-Indigenous children, but it does mean that some of those programs that we have tried to target in early intervention are certainly now becoming accepted and entrenched into our communities.

The third and fourth targets were to halve the gap in literacy and numeracy achievement. We have all been focusing very much on the results there. Literacy and numeracy scores have varied, but in 2009 there was an improvement in the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' reading in years 3, 5 and 7. For year 9 students, unfortunately, the gap slightly increased. Having been an educator all my life I do know that, if you do not get to children early, if they are failing in year 7, then by year 9 it is generally compounded rather than turned around—and the My School website bears that out. The other indicator, the number of Indigenous students achieving a year 12 or equivalent attainment, is improving, but a long term view is necessary. It will take a long time to achieve that target.

Our fifth target was to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and it is a target about which we have seen some very concerted effort. It is still well below the non-Indigenous employment rate in 2008, but the most recent available data indicates there was a 21 per cent gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment. It is an improvement, but it is certainly going to take time. The life expectancy gap is the accumulative target and the beneficiary of all of these measures if we are successful. An Indigenous male born today is likely to die at just 67 years of age and an Indigenous female at 73 years of age. This is less than the 17-year gap that we thought existed a year ago. It is good news but, again, statistics have now been available to us that have

never been available to us before. I think it is very wise that the Prime Minister has said that this is a long journey that we need to take. We cannot just use statistics; we do have to depend on those partnerships across the states and territories and across Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

I would like to take a little time to emphasise the benefit of some of the major expenditure in my own electorate of Newcastle. The Rudd government has provided millions of dollars in funding to support local Indigenous groups. More Aboriginal people live in New South Wales than in any other state, and 20 per cent of the New South Wales Indigenous population lives in the Hunter region. I think sometimes people do not realise the significance of our Indigenous populations in our urban communities, and I think it is sensible to keep reminding people that major regional centres like Newcastle and the Hunter region are home to many, many Australian Aboriginal people and their descendants.

The Worimi and Awabakal peoples have been very active in our area for a long time. It has been easier to support them because they have developed considerable social infrastructure over many years. But I want to call particular attention to the almost half a million dollars in funding over the next three years for local Indigenous service provider Wandiyali ATSI Inc. To be a service deliverer of such depth and to receive so much funding shows that their work is extensive. Wandiyali will receive that funding under the Australian government's new \$37 million Indigenous Community Support Service.

We have given over \$100,000 to the Newcastle Family Support Services Inc. for its Koti Bulla Umullan Project. Then there is funding for the Loft Youth Venue. Of course, the most significant demographic groups for Aboriginal populations are young people, so we cannot ever do quite enough for them. We have given \$33,398 to the Loft Youth Venue for its ongoing Indigenous cultural support program. If you go to the Loft Youth Venue in our area you will see a recording studio, events training, management training—you will see young people actually developing their skills and strengths around the cultural programs and activities they enjoy.

Almost \$400,000 was given to the Indigenous languages, arts and culture program. It was wonderful when the Prime Minister visited my electorate for the seventh community cabinet and was presented with a book on Indigenous languages. This work is ongoing but long overdue. We have also given almost \$345,000 to the Arwarbukarl Cultural Resource Association for IT and training resources; another \$33,000 to the Loft Youth Venue for arts and cultural training for Indigenous youth; \$10,000 to the Muloobinba Aboriginal Corporation for cultural programs for Indigenous men; and last year the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Hon. Jenny Macklin, and I announced \$500,000 for a mobile playgroup for Indigenous children in Newcastle. That mobile playgroup bus is now decorated and filled up with wonderful resources, and goes on its outreach to assist young indigenous children all over the Hunter. That announcement was part of a \$5 million Australian government package of specialised playgroups to be established in 20 regional and remote Indigenous communities across Australia, and delivers a range of activities to around 2½ thousand children.

At the other end of the education system, I note that this year the Wollotuka School of Aboriginal Studies at the University of Newcastle has reached a new height with more than 500 Indigenous students enrolled to study at the university. They are now studying across a wide range of disciplines—and I have said many times in this House that most Indigenous GPs were trained at Newcastle university. It is a long-established endeavour and Wollotuka, having its own school of Aboriginal studies, has provided the necessary pastoral support to young Aboriginal students coming from all over the state—and I think that this achievement is a tribute to them and their success. Just yesterday the university launched two Indigenous health programs designed to improve outcomes for pregnant Aboriginal women. This involves not only the Newcastle university but also the Hunter Medical Research Institute, which has an outstanding mothers and babies program, and Hunter New England Health.

Finally, I would like to mention Newcastle Knights player Cory Paterson for his amazing effort playing for the Indigenous All Stars in the recent NRL match. It was a delight to see so many people enjoying themselves, and it was wonderful to see the Indigenous team victorious. Cory can take great comfort from the fact that he gave a very solid performance—one that Kurt Gidley will not forget for a long time. Newcastle also had an off-field representative, as Country Rugby League vice-president John 'Choc' Anderson, the formal Newcastle rugby league chairman, was one of the team's co-managers.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge that closing the gap is a high ideal, an ambitious ideal but a long-overdue ideal. As Minister Snowdon said before, it has bipartisan support in this House, and something that we would all like to have against our record as members of parliament is that we made a difference. I think this is happening now. I know in my own community the partnerships are strong, the history is strong, and the faith and hope remain particularly strong. There is hope as we, the Australian government, Indigenous leaders, the Indigenous community and the Australian people, continue to address inequalities and work to eliminate them. That is how progress will be made, progress that needs to come from the ground up, but by providing support in the frameworks underpinning success. Our job as government is to support and facilitate this progress. By doing so, we will lessen child mortality rates, improve literacy and numeracy levels, create job opportunities, increase access to health services and, we hope, continue to close the gap for life expectancy rates.