



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Closing the Gap

QUESTION

Thursday, 20 March 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

QUESTION

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Questioner O'Sullivan, Sen Barry
Speaker

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder Scullion, Sen Nigel
Question No.

Closing the Gap

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Senator O'SULLIVAN (Queensland) (14:37): My question is to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Scullion. Can the minister outline to the Senate how this government is making a difference in closing the gap between Indigenous and other Australians?

Senator SCULLION (Northern Territory—Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Leader of The Nationals in the Senate) (14:37): Can I congratulate the senator—

Opposition senators interjecting—

The PRESIDENT: Order! On my left! Senator Scullion, you are entitled to be heard in silence.

Senator SCULLION: I thank the senator for the question and congratulate him on his first speech and on his first question. This is a very important question, on National Close the Gap Day. Today is a day of reflection. It involves around 165,000 people attending around 1,200 events around the country. I congratulate all of them and the National Close the Gap Committee. Despite billions of dollars being spent on a plethora of programs there have been few lasting outcomes.

The *Closing the gap* report, tabled in the House of Representatives, in February 2014, confirmed that there has been little to celebrate eight years after the Closing the Gap strategy commenced. National Close the Gap Day is part of a non-government Close the Gap campaign. A key focus is on health, an area my excellent colleague Senator Nash is working hard on. We all know that you cannot have a good health outcome for Aboriginal and Islander Australians without looking at the challenges that they face holistically. The government is making 'Children go to school' the government's No. 1 priority in Indigenous affairs.

The Prime Minister has announced a new COAG target. Under the Remote School Attendance Strategy the government is providing \$28.4 million for 400 Aboriginal school attendance officers, covering 40 communities. There are already over 600 more children attending school compared to last year. I acknowledge

that it is early days but, in one school term, we have started to narrow that gap.

Senator O'SULLIVAN (Queensland) (14:39): Mr President, I have a supplementary question for the minister. Can the minister inform the Senate of the starting point this government faces in terms of the previous government's performance on closing the gap for Indigenous Australians?

Senator SCULLION (Northern Territory—Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Leader of The Nationals in the Senate) (14:39): Under this government the story of failure is starting to turn around, because we are willing to roll up our sleeves, get into the communities, talk to the communities and ensure that we are reflecting their wishes. This is just a start. The record of the previous government speaks for itself. A read of the 14 Closing the Gap targets shows that only two out of the eight targets set in 2008 are on track to be met. There has been no progress on reading, writing and numeracy. And I can tell you that, in remote areas, it is even worse. I along with my colleagues will not stop until there is real momentum for change in these areas.

Senator O'SULLIVAN (Queensland) (14:40): Mr President, I have a further supplementary question for the minister. Can the minister apprise the Senate of any other Closing the Gap targets which were not met by the previous government and how the coalition government intends to address them?

Senator SCULLION (Northern Territory—Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Leader of The Nationals in the Senate) (14:40): Dismally, there has been no progress made under the employment gap target—a very, very important target. That is why the government commissioned a review of Indigenous training and employment programs, led by Andrew Forrest, one of the captains of industry. The review was commissioned in recognition by this government of the fact that you cannot have endless training for training's sake if there are no real jobs at the end. We provide an expectation for our first Australians that if they start training and work hard at the training, there will be a job at the end for them. The last six years in that regard have been an appalling disappointment. The answer is real jobs that provide real skills that give Aboriginal and Islander people real jobs in this economy.