



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

DOCUMENTS

Closing the Gap

SPEECH

Wednesday, 11 February 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 11 February 2015	Source Senate
Page 82	Proof Yes
Questioner	Responder
Speaker Lambie, Sen Jacqui	Question No.

Senator LAMBIE (Tasmania) (17:46): I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, past and present. Why are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies dying at a rate greater than non-Indigenous Australians? Why are not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living for as long as non-Indigenous Australians?

On 13 February 2008, seven years ago, then Prime Minister Rudd said:

This new partnership on closing the gap will set concrete targets for the future: within a decade to halve the widening gap in literacy, numeracy and employment outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous children, within a decade to halve the appalling gap in infant mortality rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and, within a generation, to close the equally appalling 17-year life gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous when it comes to overall life expectancy.

In another seven years, will a future Australian Prime Minister deliver a speech which contains words that hold the same meaning? I would like to say, 'No', but the sad reality is that if a drastically different approach is not taken by Australian politicians to solving the problem of the disadvantage gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians then it is likely that a Prime Minister of Australia in 2021 will be talking about closing the gap with the same sense of helplessness, frustration and anger that many caring Australians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, feel today.

I offer to this chamber a different approach to closing the gap between the first people of Australia and those who have joined them from all over the world. This parliament that we serve in can be overwhelming if you let it, because of its size and grandeur. This Senate can intimidate and frighten, with its complicated rules and procedures. However, stripped away to its bare essentials, this is a place where we make decisions on how to share Australia's national wealth and prosperity with its people, through argument and debate.

Put simply, we sit at our nation's table, have a conversation and carve up a pie. That is putting it quite simply. We decide how much of the pie each Australian receives and how it is going to be eaten. How can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians ever have a chance of receiving a fair share of the pie and determining how it is eaten if they do not have a permanent voice at our nation's table?

My message today is simple: if you want Australia's first people to have a fair share of our national wealth and a proper say in how it is spent, every piece of legislation that passes through this parliament must be scrutinised and spoken to from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander point of view. It is as simple as that. This democratic objective can be achieved in a number of ways. We could establish parliamentary committees that review all legislation and ask these questions: (1) Will this be good or bad for First Australians?; (2) How can we improve this legislation to help indigenous people?

The other way to guarantee that every piece of Australia's national wealth wrapped up in documents we consider in this Senate is spoken to by an Indigenous voice is to establish dedicated Indigenous seats in this parliament. This is not a new concept. A number of progressive countries have established dedicated Indigenous seats in parliament. Our brothers and sisters across the ditch, in New Zealand, established dedicated Maori seats in 1867. Importantly, the gap in the mortality rate between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in countries that have dedicated Indigenous seats is lower than Australia's gap. It is much lower.

An International Health and Human Rights research article in 2007—which examined the Human Development Index of Indigenous people in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States—showed that Australia was the worst performing country. We should be ashamed of ourselves for that. We were the only country that did not have dedicated Indigenous seats. The study confirmed that the gap between Maori disadvantage/mortality of 8.5 years, and closing, is not as large as Australia's first people of 23.2 years, and widening.

If two or three per cent of Australia's population is Indigenous, then I cannot see any good reason—and there is not one—why two or three per cent of our seats in parliament cannot be dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander seats. This one change—dedicated Indigenous seats—while not a silver bullet, if international experience is to be valued and respected, will do more to close the gap than any other symbolic or practical measure that has been previously put before the Australian people. I will never understand in this nation why we see other nations doing so much better. It is such a simple procedure, but we refuse to follow it. We refuse to even debate on it, and we refuse to talk about it. And that is half the problem in this Senate chamber. We keep going over old ground, and we keep using old material. It is time to look forward to the future, and it is time to do things very differently in this chamber. Until we start doing so nothing will change. The Indigenous issues will never get better and the gaps will continue to widen. I ask the people in this chamber, for once in their lives, to have a good look around the world and see how others are doing it and how their performance is standing up against ours, because ours is bloody dismal. Our performance with Indigenous people and how we treat them is dismal. That is all I am asking for. Have a look at it; bring it in. I want it debated. I want it looked at.

Question agreed to.