The SPEAKER (Hon. Tony Smith) took the chair at 9:00, made an acknowledgement of country and read prayers.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Closing the Gap

Mr TURNBULL (Wentworth—Prime Minister) (12:01): Yanggu gulanyin ngalawiri, dhunayi, Ngunawal dhawra. Wanggarralijinyin mariny bulan bugarabang.

Today, we are meeting together on Ngunawal land and we acknowledge and pay our respects to their elders past and present. And we pay our deep respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people gathered here today—including our Aboriginal members of parliament—and all across Australia, who have been the custodians of these lands and whose elders hold the knowledge of their rich and diverse cultures. I also welcome the first ministers and their representatives from the states and territories who have gathered with us today to demonstrate that the responsibility—indeed, the opportunity—for closing the gap in partnership with our communities rests with all levels of government and with all Australians.

The lives, the occupations and the dreams of Aboriginal and Torres Islander Australians are as diverse as those of all other Australians and stretch across this vast land, from the most remote communities to the heart of our capitals, to our national parliament. Our First Australians are showing that they can do anything, as they inspire us with their resilience, their courage and their enterprise.

Last year, Chris Sarra proposed three principles that would help make a difference in Indigenous policy. He said: 'Do things with us, not to us, bring us policy approaches that nurture hope and optimism, and acknowledge, embrace and celebrate the humanity of Indigenous Australia.' I am pleased that Chris has agreed to join the new Indigenous Advisory Council, along with Andrea Mason, Susan Murphy, Ngiare Brown, Roy Ah-See and Djambawa Marawili. And I want to thank Warren Mundine and the retiring members for their work.

Humanity/Kenbi

Nothing brought a quiet moment of humanity to the 2016 election campaign more than the handing of the title deeds to Belyuen elder Raylene Singh, 37 years after the Larrakia people submitted a claim to what had always been theirs. For families like Raylene's, despite their old people passing on before the Kenbi land claim was settled, the past continues to live in the present.

Acknowledging past wrongs enables healing to begin. We saw that with the National Apology to the Stolen Generations—delivered by Prime Minister Rudd, who also joins us today—and the ninth anniversary of that moment in history was recognised yesterday here in the House. Acknowledgement requires the humility of acceptance of the truth. On that hot, dry day on the shores of the Cox Peninsula in Darwin, we acknowledged that the Larrakia people had cared for their country for tens of thousands of years, that their songs had been sung since time out of mind, and that those songs held and passed on the knowledge of Larrakia customs and traditions.

Acknowledgement is the seed from which hope and healing grow. It is that acknowledgement that 50 years ago saw the Australian people vote overwhelmingly to change our Constitution so that the Commonwealth could assume powers in relation to our First Australians. And while many issues divide us in this place, we are united in our determination to ensure that our Constitution is amended once again to recognise our First Australians. Changing the Constitution is neither easy nor a task for the faint hearted. The Referendum Council will conclude its consultations this year so that then parliament can complete the work of formulating and presenting the recognition amendments.

The success of the 1967 referendum also meant that First Australians were counted equally in our official population alongside all other others in the census. This provided our first understanding of the survival and the resilience of our Indigenous peoples, but also the depth of that gap between their situation and that of other Australians. The leaders of those times challenged us to think well past statistics: the Freedom Riders like Charles Perkins; Vincent Lingiari and his fellow workers at the Wave Hill 'walk-off'; and Eddie Mabo and his fight for native title. Theirs are the shoulders among many upon which a new generation of Indigenous leaders stand today.

And last night the Prime Minister's courtyard was abuzz with enthusiasm, with positivity and with the hope of leaders challenging us to again think past the statistics. Bright, determined women and men stood tall as successful people in their fields of work, proud of their heritage and anchored in their culture. While we must accelerate progress and close the gap, we must also tell the broader story of Indigenous Australia, not of despondency but of a relentless and determined optimism; that being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander means...
to succeed, to achieve, to have big dreams and high hopes, and to draw strength from your identity as an Indigenous person in this country.

As Prime Minister, I will continue to tell these stories, to talk about the strengths of our First Australians. We have among us five Indigenous members of parliament, who bring the same pride, the same strength, here to our democracy: Ken Wyatt, the first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives, and now the first Indigenous minister to be appointed in a Commonwealth government; as well as Linda Burney, Senator Pat Dodson, Senator Malanndirri McCarthy and Senator Jacqui Lambie.

Yet, even with the determination of our First Australians to create a better future, even with successive Commonwealth and state governments investing more resources and even with tens of thousands of dedicated Australians seeking to contribute and engage, we still are not making enough progress.

We have come a long way since the referendum, but we have not come far enough. I present today to the parliament and to the people of Australia the ninth Closing the Gap report. This report demonstrates that all Australian governments have much more work to do.

The proportion of Indigenous 20- to 24-year-olds who have achieved year 12 or equivalent is 61.5 per cent—up from 45.4 per cent in 2008. This target is on track to halve the gap. A new target for Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education is 95 per cent by 2025. The data shows that in 2015, 87 per cent of all Indigenous children were enrolled in early childhood education the year before full-time school.

We have seen improvements in reading and numeracy for Indigenous students but this target is not on track. Last year, 640 more children needed to read at the year 3 benchmark to halve the gap. This year, that figure is around 440. The literacy gap is narrowing and achievable, and through the individualised learning plans agreed at COAG, first ministers have committed to improve these results.

The national school attendance is also not on track. Around 20 per cent of the gap in school performance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can be explained by poor attendance. But there are examples of real progress with families and communities.

In the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands, the APY Lands, principal Matt Greene spoke to me of the fierce rivalry in community football. But he said he was more interested and focused on the fierce rivalry to attain school attendance targets. And with the help of our Remote School Attendance Strategy, championed by Minister Nigel Scullion, Matt is driving cultural change in Fregon. The strategy is working. RSAS schools showed a higher attendance rate in 2016 compared to 2013.

We have made great gains in improving the key factors that influence the health of Indigenous children. But we are also reminded of the fragility of life, and the heavy burden of responsibility of families, communities and governments. I am very saddened and disappointed that the target to halve the gap in Indigenous child mortality is not on track, with the 2015 data being just outside the target.

We must redouble our efforts to reduce smoking rates during pregnancy, continue to improve immunisation rates, lift rates of antenatal care, reduce fetal trauma, and keep our children safe. Rates of attending antenatal care in the important first trimester are highest in outer regional areas and lowest in major cities.

Ken Wyatt as the Minister for Indigenous Health, a field in which he has had many decades of experience, will work wisely and collaboratively with our state and territory counterparts, and the community health sector, to get this target back on track.

We have seen improvements in reducing mortality from chronic diseases; however, the mortality rates from cancer are rising. The overall mortality rate has declined by 15 per cent since 1998, and life expectancy is increasing. However, it is not accelerating at the pace it should and, therefore, as in previous years, this target is not on track.

The employment target is not on track either, but 57.5 per cent of those living in major cities are employed. Five thousand Indigenous job seekers have been placed in to real jobs through our Vocational Training and Employment Centres network. Almost 500 Indigenous businesses were awarded more than $284 million in Commonwealth contracts thanks to our Indigenous Procurement Policy. I want to thank state and territory governments for agreeing to explore similar procurement policies to help the Indigenous business sector thrive.

Mr Speaker, a telling point: the data tells us there is no employment gap between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians with a university degree—a reminder of the central importance of education.

If we look at the long-term intergenerational trends, we see that Indigenous life expectancy is increasing, babies are being born healthier, more people are studying and gaining post-school qualifications and those adults are participating in work. These are achievements that families, elders and communities can be proud of.
But incarceration rates and rates of child protection are too high. Sixty-three per cent of Indigenous people incarcerated last year were in prison for violent offences and offences that cause harm. Central to reducing incarceration is reducing the violence and, of course, protecting the victims of violence.

Our Third Action Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children includes measures to support Indigenous victims, and stop the cycle of reoffending.

Our *Prison to Work* report commissioned in last year’s Closing The Gap speech has since been delivered, and adopted by COAG. Working in partnership with Kuku Yalanji man, Jeremey Donovan, we have gained important insights into the cycle of incarceration. In response, COAG agreed to better coordination of government services especially in-prison training and rehabilitation, employment, health and social services.

Children should always be treated humanely and with love, especially when they are in custody. The confronting and appalling images of children shackled and in spit hoods shocked our nation, and as Prime Minister I acted swiftly.

While the work of the royal commission into juvenile justice and child protection continues, governments across Australia are taking steps to ensure children are always treated appropriately.

To provide independent oversight, this government will ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT).

I am pleased to inform the House that Bunuba woman, June Oscar AO, has been appointed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. The first woman to take on this role.

June brings tremendous knowledge, and has been a formidable campaigner against alcohol abuse, shining a light on the devastating consequences of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

The issues are complex, and, as we know, the solutions are not simple.

Indigenous Affairs is an intricate public policy area. It requires uncompromised collaboration with Indigenous people, and national leadership. And it needs buy-in from states, communities and most importantly families.

I am pleased that COAG has agreed to progress renewed targets in the year ahead, and I invite the opposition and the crossbench to participate, particularly the Indigenous members of parliament.

The national interest requires a re-commitment to the relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

But there can be no relationship without partnership.

And there can be no partnership without participation—we heard that very eloquently this morning at the Redfern Statement breakfast.

I firmly believe that people must be involved in the process in order to be engaged in the outcomes. It has to be a shared endeavour.

Greater empowerment of local communities will deliver the shared outcomes we all seek.

The government is reforming the way the Indigenous Affairs portfolio operates—moving from transactional government, to enablement, from paying for services to linking funding to outcomes, and from a one-size-fits-all mindset for program design, to local solutions.

Indigenous families and communities must be at the centre of this approach.

We have started the journey, but there is much more work to do.

I welcome Professor Ian Anderson into my department who will play an important role in leading this new way of working, along with people like Anne-Marie Roberts, who leads a team of passionate and committed staff working in communities across the nation.

The Indigenous-led Empowered Communities model is now in eight regions across the country. I met their leaders last month, and it is clear this approach is generating strong Indigenous governance, and empowering Indigenous people to partner with government and companies.

These models, and others such as Murdi Paaki in Western New South Wales, and Ceduna in South Australia, are being driven by local Indigenous leaders.

Where communities are ready, we will work with them to build capacity and ensure more responsibility for decision making rests as close to the community as possible.

My confidence comes from seeing firsthand how this approach is working at the community level.
I have met mothers, like Norma and Lena from Western Australia, who have lost children to suicide. These women have bravely shared their stories, working tirelessly with leaders like Pat Dudgeon, Gerry Georgatos and Adele Cox to find locally-driven solutions.

I met Corey McLennan, and the leaders of Ceduna and the Far West Coast as well as Ian Trust from the Kimberley, who have co-designed the trial of the new Cashless Debit Card with the government.

We hosted Charlie King and the No More campaign to end violence against women. In an historic display of support parliamentarians—all of us—linked arms and walked with Charlie to end this scourge of violence against women.

And I could tell dozens more stories of self-reliance from Fregon, Redfern, La Perouse, Scotdesco, Brisbane, Darwin, Perth—it is a very long list, as we know.

We can learn as much from these successes, as we can from the failures.

But, to do so we must have a rigorous evaluation of programs so we know what is working and what is not.

We will expand the Productivity Commission to include a new Indigenous Commissioner to lead the commission's work of policy evaluation.

And the government will invest $50 million for research into policy and its implementation; this will be designed in partnership and with the guidance of the Indigenous Advisory Council.

So much is published about Indigenous communities and, as many Indigenous Australians have said to me, not nearly enough is published for Indigenous communities.

So the data and research we have, and the evidence we need to build, will be made available to Indigenous communities to empower leadership and support community-led programs. It will assist government in its next phase of Closing The Gap, which must focus on regional action and outcomes.

I ask that we give credit to the quiet achievers—the Indigenous people who are working on the front line of family violence, who are enabling people with disability to gain the services they need, who are starting businesses, employing others, innovating—all people who have expressed their deep desire to work together as committed Australians.

And I ask that you seek out people like those I had the honour of addressing last night—everyday Indigenous Australians achieving extraordinary things.

Like the Kongs—a family of firsts. Marilyn and Marlene were the first Indigenous medical graduates at Sydney University. Marlene became a GP and public health expert; Marilyn became the first Indigenous obstetrician and their brother Kelvin, the first Indigenous surgeon in Australia.

I ask that we share these stories and those of the entrepreneurs, lawyers, the scientists, the teachers, the nurses, the servicemen and servicewomen, the social service workers, the writers, the accountants, the public servants, and the ministers, members and senators. Again, their callings and achievements are as diverse, as magnificent and as inspiring as those of other Australians. Let us tell the stories of Indigenous achievement and hard work, because those stories are true markers of progress. They inspire and encourage and they make a difference. This parliament has the opportunity, using the knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous people, to embark on a new approach to closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage.

My government will not shy away from our responsibility and we will uphold the priorities of education, employment, health and the right of all people to be safe from family violence. We will not waver in our quest to achieve these outcomes, but we will have the humility to admit that we must travel this road together, with open hearts and a determination to ensure that our First Australians and all Australians will be able here, more than anywhere, to be their best and realise their dreams.

**The SPEAKER:** I just ask the Prime Minister if he could present a copy of the report. I thank the Prime Minister. The Leader of the Opposition.

**Mr SHORTEN** (Maribyrnong—Leader of the Opposition) (12:23): I acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, traditional owners of the land upon which we meet. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

This tradition of recognition goes back millennia. This parliament and the nation we call home, was and always will be Aboriginal land. Where we are, so too are Aboriginal peoples: from the Noonga near Perth to the Eora of Sydney, the Nunga of Adelaide, the Kulin around Melbourne, the Palawah of Tasmania, the Murri of Brisbane and Torres Strait Islanders. We are one country, enriched by hundreds of nations, languages and traditions.
After the last election, I took on the shadow ministry for Indigenous affairs. My family and I went back to Garma to listen and learn. I have met with Northern Territory leaders, defending the young men being abused in juvenile detention. I travelled to Wave Hill to commemorate the courage of Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji. And I have looked to my Indigenous colleagues for their wisdom. They are as inspirational as they are modest: a Wiradjuri woman in the House, a shadow minister; a Yanuwa woman in the Senate, heading our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caucus committee; and a Yawuru man, the father of reconciliation, I look to him as my mentor and assistant shadow minister. I also recognise the member for Hasluck, Ken Wyatt, and congratulate him on his historic appointment, and I recognise too Senator Lambie.

I will never forget walking into Cairns West Primary on Djabugay Country on the first day of last year’s election campaign and I saw the wide-eyed smiles of so many young Aboriginal students as I introduced them to Senator Patrick Dodson. The value of role models, of the next generation seeing faces like theirs in places of power, cannot be underestimated. It should not be the exception. We should make it the rule.

In the Labor Party, we are doing better than we have, but what we did before was simply not good enough and I want us to improve, not just at the federal level but at every level of government.

There are so many First Australians in the galleries today. You are friends and your peers would elevate and enrich our parliament with your talent, whichever party you choose. I look forward to the day, and can imagine the day, when one of the First Australians is our Prime Minister or, indeed, our head of state.

As the Prime Minister mentioned, the Referendum Council are continuing their important community conversations. After the Uluru gathering, it will be time for the parliament to step up and draw upon these consultations and to finally agree a set of words to put to the Australian people.

I believe, and let me be clear, that this parliament, this year, should agree on a way forward—not a vague poetic statement meaning nothing and offending no-one by saying nothing; a meaningful proposition that every Australian can understand and, I remain confident, Australians will overwhelmingly support.

Recognition is not the end of the road, but it should be the beginning of a new, far more equal relationship between the first peoples of this nation and all of us who have followed. And that is where the listening and the learning must reach beyond the walls of this chamber.

I do not seek to present a balance sheet of the good and the bad—not a list of top-down programs imperfectly managed; not the same old story of reports written but not read. Instead, I believe in a new approach.

We must forget the insulting fiction that the First Australians are a problem to be solved and, instead, have a new approach to listen to people who stand on the other side of the gap; a new approach that, from now on, the First Australians must have first say in the decisions that shape their lives; a new approach that means a stronger voice for the National Congress of Australia’s First People and the resources to make it happen; a new approach to extend ourselves beyond handpicked sources of advice; a new approach to be in the places where our First Australians live and work and play, from Mount Druitt to Logan, in the APY Lands and East Arnhem. Not treating local consultation as a box to be ticked but applying the wisdom of people who know. Understanding and recognising there are many Aboriginal nations across this country: Waanyi and Warlpiri, Badi Badi and Gumatj, Tharawal and Kuarna, Yorta Yorta and Narrunga. And all of these nations have the right to have control of their future. The change required is deeper and more profound than where we visit and who we talk to, though.

I believe that First Australians want a way to be heard in a voice that they are in control of. I want Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to know that Labor hears you. We understand the need for a structure that is not at the mercy of the cuts or seen as a gift of largesse; a voice that cannot be kicked to the curb by change of government or policy; an entity that recognises culture, kinship, identity, language, country and responsibility; the pride that comes from knowing who you are, where you come from and the values you stand upon; and a system where culture is central and fundamental. And have no doubt; this can be done.

We see it when a Pitjantjatjara person seeks out a local healer, a ngangkari, in addition to a GP—when they see both the GP and the local healer; because spiritual wellbeing cannot be treated by a packet of Panadol alone. We see it in the Koori Court in Parramatta, using diversionary sentencing as an alternative to incarceration. The elders sit on the bench alongside the judges and ask the right questions of young people. They give the young people a sense of belonging and, if these young people muck up, the elders address them with that straight-talking freedom of family and culture, a frankness and reassurance, that even the judge can learn from. There at this court, the police, the prosecution and the defence show sensitivity to culture, yet still deal with the young person who has behaved in an antisocial way. This cross-cultural approach enhances the system, bringing Aboriginal cultures to the centre, allowing justice to be done without diminishing the individual or denying identity. It Australianises justice and makes it work better.
We also see it in the best of Australian theatre and art and in education and literature. And if we can accept the value and richness of Indigenous cultural genius and allow it to impact and transform our justice system and the arts, we can do this with the Australian parliament too. In this the people’s place, we can grow an enhanced respect for the first peoples for their unique societies, for their values and for their experiences.

At Redfern, Paul Keating threw down a gauntlet to us, the non-Aboriginal Australians. He posed a question that we had never asked: how would I feel if this were done to me? That question still stands before Australia, 25 years later. How would we feel if our children were more likely to go to jail than to university? How would we feel if the life expectancy of our families was 20 years shorter than our neighbour? How would we feel if, because of our skin, we experienced racism and discrimination? And how would we feel if every time we offered a solution, an idea or an alternative approach, we were patronisingly told ‘the government knows best’?

This is about our ability to walk in another’s shoes. So our test, as a people and as a parliament, is not just to craft a new response but also to rediscover an old emotion, to recapture the best of Australian compassion, to wake up our brotherhood and sisterhood and recapture our love for our fellow human being and our dedication to our neighbours, as we saw with Weary Dunlop’s devotion to his troops—the love of others over risk to self; with Fred Hollows’ life of service; and with Nancy Wake’s courage. It is actually a spirit we see in millions of ordinary Australians: carers, teachers, volunteers and emergency service personnel. It is the story that Pat told me about the matron at his school demanding that that young boy have sheets on his bed like every other young boy. It is about the lady in Casterton who said that no-one was going to treat Pat any different to any other boy.

Courage comes in all forms, and it is the spirit we need. There is a spirit of courage which lurks in the hearts of all Australians. There is that sense that we, at a certain point, will be pushed no further, that we will not stand for it any more. It is that spirit to reject discrimination, to reject inequality and to simply say, ‘This cannot continue and Aboriginal people should not put up with the rubbish anymore.’ So my message today is not just for the people in this chamber but for the first peoples of this nation. We seek your help. We seek your partnership. We seek your inspiration and your leadership, because things cannot continue as they are.

The audit of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy tells a worrying tale, a familiar tale. It is concern about consultation and cuts. But it speaks, though, of a problem—perhaps it is called paternalism—of a slide backwards. We see too often—and this is not a comment on the coalition or Labor; it is a comment about parliament—the legitimate cynicism of our First Australians towards the efforts of this place. There are problems written across the land, in suburbs and remote communities, in our schools and hospitals, in women’s refuges, in the courts of our country and in the targets that we fall short of today. We see it in the staggering 440 per cent increase in Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.

It has been 20 years since Bringing them home, that report which brought tears to this chamber. It is nine years since Kevin Rudd and Jenny Macklin’s apology to the stolen generations—and I wish to acknowledge former Prime Minister Rudd’s presence here today in the gallery, visiting his former workplace. I say this, Kevin: you can take well-deserved pride in your leadership on the 2008 apology. But now we have more Aboriginal children than ever growing up away from home and away from kin, culture and country. We know that many members of the stolen generation are still living with the pain of their removal and the harm done by years of having their stories rejected and denied.

That is why I applaud the state governments of New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania, who are already taking steps towards providing reparations to families torn apart by the discrimination of those times. Decency demands that we now have a conversation at the Commonwealth level about the need for the Commonwealth to follow the lead on reparations. This is the right thing to do. It is at the heart of reconciliation: telling the truth, saying sorry and making good.

The Closing the Gap targets were agreed by all levels of government—not just the Commonwealth; the states and the local government—in partnership with Aboriginal people. The targets were driven by the understanding: that your health influences your education, that your education affects your ability to get a job, and that good jobs make thing better for families, relationships and communities. The Closing the Gap framework is an intergenerational commitment to eroding centuries of inequality. It outlives governments and parliaments and prime ministers and opposition leaders—but it also requires renewal. This year, many of the current targets are due to be renegotiated. And there are also new areas that we must consider. Labor continues to demand a justice target, because incarceration and victimisation are breaking families and communities across this country.

Today we propose a new priority on stronger families—adding a target for reducing the number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. The Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care has shone a light on this shame: one in three children in statutory out-of-home care are Indigenous. And Indigenous children are nearly 10 times more likely to be removed by child protection authorities than their non-Indigenous peers. Labor will
listen to and will work with SNAICC—and, most importantly, the communities themselves—to look at new models and new approaches.

Breaking this vicious cycle of family violence, of women murdered and driven from their homes, of unsafe communities, of parents in jail and kids in care, requires more from us than doubling down on the current system. We need to learn from places like Bourke and Cowra and their focus on justice reinvestment—on prevention, not just punishment; from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities who are making men face up to their responsibilities, forcing a change in attitudes and supporting great initiatives such as the 'No More' campaign. And that should be our story across the board: in preventative health, in education, in employment and in housing. It is time for humility—to admit that we don't have the answers here; to go out and seek them.

It is time for truth-telling. Our ancestors drove the first peoples of this nation from their bora ring; we scattered the ashes of their campsfires. We fenced the hunting grounds; we poisoned the waterholes; we distributed blankets infected with diseases we knew would kill. And there has been plenty of damage done in different ways with better intentions—by the belief that forced assimilation was the only way to achieve equality.

So today, I come here not to tell but to ask, because where we have failed the first Australians have succeeded. On the road to reconciliation, it is our first Australians who have led the way: giving forgiveness as we seek forgiveness; standing up and walking off at Wave Hill Station, for their right to live on their land in their way; Charles Perkins and the Freedom Riders, who opened the eyes of a generation to racism and poverty; Jessie Street, Faith Bandler, Chicka Dixon, Joe McGinniss and countless others who rallied support for the 67 Referendum under the banner 'Count us Together'; and Eddie Mabo, who told his daughter Gail: 'One day, all Australia is going to know my name'.

The success of Aboriginal leadership can be found in every corner of the country. I have seen it with my own eyes: the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, providing essential primary care; marvellous Indigenous rangers, in Wadeye and Mamingrida, the Central Desert and the Kimberley, working on country and on the seas and waterways, doing meaningful jobs for good wages; the Families as First Teachers program, which has given culturally-appropriate support to over 2,000 young families, helping with health and hygiene and preparing for early childhood education; Money Mob, teaching budgeting and planning skills; Deadly Choices, through the Institute for Urban Indigenous Health in Brisbane, improving preventive health; the Michael Long Learning and Leadership Centre in Darwin; the Stars Foundation, inspiring Indigenous girls, modelling the success of the Clontarf Academy for Boys; and there is the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience, connecting Aboriginal university students with high achievers at school.

On every issue, at every age, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are demonstrating that solutions are within their grasp. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know what needs to be done. What they need from this parliament is recognition, respect and resources.

We cannot swap the tyranny of bureaucracy for funding cuts and neglect. The people on the frontline—the elders, the leaders, the teachers and health-care workers—know what to do. We need to take the time to listen. We need to respect the right of Aboriginal voices to make decisions and to control their own lives—to give them their own place and space. They just need us to back them up.

Fifty years ago, Oodgeroo wrote:

… the victory of the 1967 Referendum was not a change of white attitudes. The real victory was the spirit of hope and optimism … We had won something. … We were visible, hopeful and vocal.

All too rarely—before and since—has that been the story for Aboriginal people. Instead, it has been a tale of exclusion: exclusion from opportunity, from the pages of our history, and exclusion from the decisions that govern their lives.

It is time to write a new story. And it is a story of belonging, because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples belong to a proud tradition, of nations who fought the invaders; brave people who fought, and died, for their country, at Passchendaele, Kokoda and Long Tan, and now in the Middle East and Afghanistan; who have fought and continue to fight for justice, for land, for an apology, for recognition.

You belong to a tradition of sporting brilliance, in the face of racism from opponents, teammates, administrators and even spectators. You belong to humanity's oldest continuous culture—more famous around the world than ever before. You do not belong in a jail cell for an offence that carries an $80 fine. You do not belong strapped into a chair with a hood on your head. You do not belong in the back of a windowless van, away from your family and loved ones. You do not belong in a bureaucrat's office begging for money. You do not belong on the streets with nowhere to go.

You belong here, as members of parliament, as leaders of this nation. You belong in the Constitution, recognised at last. You belong in schools, teaching and learning. You belong on construction sites, building
homes, gaining skills. You belong on country, caring for land. You belong here, growing up healthy, raising your children in safety, growing old with security. You belong here, strong in your culture, kinship, language and country. You belong here, equal citizens in this great country, equal partners in our common endeavour. This is your place. This is our place. Our future is your future. As Senator Dodson has said to me, 'Let's go. The best advice: let's get on with it.' As he would say, in the language of his people, 'Wamba yimbulan.'

**DISTINGUISHED VISITORS**

**The SPEAKER** (12:46): I acknowledge all of our guests in the distinguished visitors’ gallery, on the floor of the House and in the speaker's gallery. I particularly acknowledge former Prime Minister Rudd, who joins us today.

**MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS**

**Closing the Gap**

**Mr KATTER** (Kennedy) (12:46): by leave—I will start my speech in the same way that I started *An Incredible Race of People: A Passionate History of Australia*, a book which I had published and which had moderate success in sales, if I may say so. I agonised on how to start it for nearly three years, and then it suddenly occurred to me how I should start it: I should start it with the history of my own homeland, where my family have lived for 130 years and probably more.

All of my life I have been called a blackfella. I take great pride in being identified that way and have identified that way on numerous occasions. We Cloncurry people call ourselves the 'Curry mob', and there is a bit of everything in the family tree. None of us look too black and none of us look too white! I started my history of Australia with a quote from Clarence Waldron, who was a long-time elected chairman of the shire council at Doomadgee. The state officials were up there telling us that we were going to have no more grog: 'You have different laws than the rest of Australia.' We blackfellas have different laws. We are not allowed to drink. Only whitefellas can be trusted to drink. Clarence said: 'You don't come here and say what's what and that's that. This is my land. You don't come here and say what's what and that's that. This is my land.'

Kalkadoon is probably a generic name. I think it referred to all the tribes in north-west Queensland. About 130 of us died defending our homeland against the settlers that were coming in. Ironically enough, we were not losers: we took out about 130 of them as well. It does not sound like a lot of people—260 dead people in this war—but that was half of the entire population of the Gulf Country. If you read my book, you will see each of the specific incidents quoted in the book. One of the biggest cattle-owning families in Australia have their main homestead in Davenport, and when I was a kid the gun ports were still there—where you pulled the shutters down, you had a hole to put the guns through. That was in the 1950s.

The alcohol issue is an interesting issue. Has there been any single action by government to deal with the causes of alcoholism—anything at all, even just a donation to the local rugby league team? I would settle for that. No, I am not aware of any single act by government. I do not wish to denigrate, because I think both the leader of the Liberal Party and the Leader of the Opposition are very sincere in what they said today, but, as a blackfella, I do not need any more platitudes, fellas. I want some action.

We pay great tribute to the Christian churches because most of the useful land that we have—we are supposed to own about 21 per cent of Australia; about seven per cent of it is either desert or national parks, but that still leaves us with 15 per cent. We fought and secured and maintained ownership of 15 per cent of the surface area of Australia, and almost all of that land gets more than 26 inches of rainfall. Most of it, I would argue, gets more than 40 inches of rainfall. So why, as the most land-rich people on earth, are we the poorest people on earth by way of income? I seek leave to table this document.

Leave granted.

**Mr KATTER:** This is a map of Australia. Cape York is in red and Victoria is in red. If you have a look at the map, they are both the same size. There are two differences between Cape York and Victoria. Victoria has less than 30 inches of rainfall, and Cape York, which is almost all owned by First Australians, has more than 60 inches of rainfall. So we have twice their rainfall. The other difference is that we have 147,000 head of cattle and they have 4½ million head of cattle. Now, remember, half of Victoria is sheep and wheat, so how come they have got 4½ million head of cattle and we have only got hundred and 47,000 head of cattle?

**Mr Robert:** It's a conspiracy, Bob!

**Mr KATTER:** There was an interjection from a gentleman over there. These are the official figures of the government. They are the ABS figures on cattle populations for Australia; they are not my figures. And as far as the rainfall goes, you can go and check the isohyets chart yourself, if you can figure it out, which you probably cannot, but I will help you out if you want me to.
Let me return to my own homeland and the homeland of Clarence Waldron, whom I quoted previously, at Doomadgee. Tony Chong came in to see me, and Chongie said, 'Hey, Bobby, I got one of those blocks.' I said, 'one of those 40,000-acre blocks, Chongie?' He said, 'Yeah.' Chongie is a very handy inside centre in the local football team. I said, 'Have you gone to the bank to get money to buy cattle?' and he said, 'Yeah, and the bank won't give me any money.' I said, 'Why?' and he said, 'They want security.' I said, 'Have you been to the lands department to try to get a title deed to the land?' and he said, 'There's no such thing as a title deed on blackfella land.' I said, 'Well, there's not, Chong,' and he said, 'Well, what about your legislation?' I said, 'My legislation, which was not my legislation—it was your legislation, Chongie; you black blokes drew it up—was overturned in 1992, and there is no mechanism on the books to issue a land title in Queensland.' You cannot get a title deed, so you cannot borrow money from the bank, so you cannot get cattle together.

Three days before Christmas I was up there, and I will not mention names in this case, but I said, 'We've got to get title deeds.' One councillor said, 'I don't need it. I've got a thousand head of cattle,' and I said, 'Well, because you're being so stupid as to shoot your mouth off here, I'd say by five o'clock this afternoon there will be action taken to take those cattle off you.' And he said, 'Gungalida man, this is my land. Those are my cattle.' Well, we went to lunch with two of the most prominent people in Doomadgee, and before I even sat down he said, 'We're going to fix that!'—and he used a fairly obscene remark which I will not repeat in the chamber—'so-and-so because he said they're his cattle. They're not his cattle; they're Gungalida cattle. They belong to the tribe.' So we will have the usual story of two or three years of in and out with the lawyers all fighting each other as to who owns the cattle, because there is no title deed. There are blokes who get off their backsides and go out there and put a few head together, but no sooner do they do that than they are assailed by, quite frankly, bludgers who want to sit in the town and then say, 'Oh, they're our cattle because they're on our land'—which, in fact, legally, they probably are.

For those who doubt what I am saying, I believe that Hernando de Soto Polar should have got the Nobel Prize. It was very controversial that Hernando de Soto Polar, an internationally renowned economist, did not get the Nobel Prize. He should have got that prize for a book called The Mystery of Capital. Piketty has written a very famous book called Capital in the Twenty-First Century, but Hernando de Soto Polar's book has not got anywhere near the publicity. Effectively, it was the study that he had done of Peru, his homeland, and of the Philippines and Egypt—three completely different countries on three different continents, tens of thousands of kilometres away from each other—and it asked: why are they the three poorest countries on earth? He said that the people who actually have a piece of land, which everyone considers to be theirs, cannot get a title deed to that land, so they cannot borrow any money on that land value. He said that in the three countries, unlike in Australia, it is possible to get a title deed, but the average time to get the title deed is seven years and you go through an average of 237 legal processes, for most of which you need a lawyer.

I do not want to claim any credit for myself for the Bjelke-Petersen government, because we just said, 'Fellas, we're setting up local government and shire councils. When they're set up, we're going to ask you what you want with this land. At the present moment, officially the Queensland government owns it. We're the trustees, the legal owners, and you're the beneficial owners—sort of like little children. You know, it is like you have a trust and when you turn 21, when you are old and responsible, we will give it to you.' That was the arrangement that existed then and, well, that is the arrangement that exists now, because when those laws were overturned we went back to the bad old days where the government was the legal owner and we poor blackfellas were not really capable of owning our own land. We might be irresponsible with it, so we are not allowed to own our own land like everybody else on the planet.

Whilst in Peru and the Philippines and Egypt it takes you nearly seven years and 237 processors to get a title deed issued, our program was developed by Eric Law, one of the most distinguished and greatest Australians still alive today, and Lester Rosendale, from probably the most famous first Australian family in Cape York. Eric Law was headmaster of a school, played Queensland country Rugby League and was effectively head of the department which I was responsible for. He was brought in as a young radical and took over as the head of the department. They probably were more responsible than others for our program, so I mention their names. You walked into the local council chambers in every community area in Queensland, of which there were about 30, asked for an application form, filled out the application form and submitted it to the council. They gave you a photocopy of it, and the council had two months to deal with it. If they did not deal with it, it went to the local 'tribal elders', for the sake of better words, and a normal magistrate as a sort of court of appeal, if you like. So long as they did not say no then the title deed was issued by the state government.

Now by the time we got boundaries sorted out and councils installed we had 3½ years. Mr Roozendaal produced nearly 800 title deeds. In the 26 years since, I would doubt that in Queensland there would have been a
dozen title deeds issued. I would doubt whether there were a dozen title deeds issued in the next 27 years! So, in 3½ years there were nearly 800 title deeds and in the next 27 years there were about a dozen.

My brother first Australians asked, 'Why?' I said, 'You must understand that every government—the same as the two leaders today—quite genuinely want to issue title deeds. They say, 'Oh, well, we'll develop legislation, not like the last mob that were in here,' like the ALP or the LNP, or the Bjelke-Petersen government, which is hated by both of them, 'we'll do it properly this time.' I do not know how you can do it properly. We issued a freehold title that was inalienable, and that was what they asked for: inalienable freehold title. It is yours forever, the same as every other person on earth enjoys freehold title—with one small difference: you cannot sell it to outsiders. So if a bloke owes money on his car and he tries to put up his market garden, or his station property or his house at Doomadgee, he is not allowed to do that. So it will not be alienated to outsiders. It will belong to the people of that area forever.

Having said those things, I pay tribute to the rich and powerful people of the big cities who have always gone out of their way to help us. Recently, Michael Crouch, Jamie Packer, Andrew Forrest and Dick Smith have tried to deliver. And they have been frustrated by the people in this place. And if you cared, you would be determined to get those title deeds out!

A person who was very improperly removed from this place, in my opinion, was Mal Brough. Broughie was only there for six or eight months, whatever it was, and he ran at 100 miles an hour, trying to get title deeds out in the Northern Territory. Whether he did it right or whether he did it wrong, he knew that whether we live or die, we First Australians, depends upon whether we can actually own our own land. And we actually own our own land—all we have, like little children, is that we are beneficiaries of a trust that is controlled by the government.

I conclude by saying that we appreciate the candour of the Prime Minister in saying that in most of these areas we are not meeting our targets of closing the gap. Dick Smith and Macca, from Macca on Sundays, went up because Dick had donated $50,000, I think, to put a market garden in on Mornington Island. We have diabetes in epidemic proportions—and diabetes is just another name for malnutrition. The hospital there advised me that two people had died of diabetes in the two weeks before we went up and that there was another person going to die in the next month from diabetes. So that was three deaths in a population of about 300 or 400 people in the space of about six or eight weeks. People like Dick Smith and Macca on Sundays are so concerned that they fly all the way up from Canberra at their own expense to give some money out to try to get market gardens going there.

When I was minister, every single community had market gardens which the government inherited from the Christian churches—almost all these centres were missionary stations. They were kept going by almost every community. But to the shame of the Australian people, there is another stain on our soul—like the stain on our soul from the Boer War and the 28,000 women and children murdered in the concentration camps; like us not taking any Jews to this country before the Second World War, when six million of them perished in Europe; or like what we did to the men from Vietnam or to the dairy farmers of Australia—we have closed down by law the market gardens in the Torres Strait. By law!

We have told them they cannot have market gardens because disease might come into Australia through the Torres Strait. I do not know what numbskulls run Australia; I fail totally to comprehend the mentality of the people who run, or who purported to run, this country. The boats have been coming down from New Guinea through the Torres Strait to the mainland of Australia for 10,000 years, since the land bridge vanished 10,000 years ago. In fact, on most Torres Strait islands, quite frankly, you can find a few New Guinean people. They call them the 'nonpeople'. They change their names and get social welfare payments et cetera.

When I was on a delegation—because I had seen paradise and I never wanted to go back again, but I did—and we went to Yam Island, a person who was not an admirer of mine, Joey Mosby, leapt up and said, 'Bobby, they are murdering us! They are murdering our people. They are murderers! The government of Australia are murderers!' The rest of the delegation asked, 'What's all that about?' I said, 'You've taken their fishing rights from them. They have to get commercial licences to fish properly—commercially—which they cannot get. And you have closed down the market gardens. In fact, you're paying 60 people to go all over the islands to make sure there are no market gardens there.'

In conclusion: I just ask, on behalf of my people, just allow us to own our own land. We won the Mabo case. Let me also serve notice that we are going to issue our own title deeds, because the whitefellas are never going to do it. After 27 years with nothing happening, with the brief exception of Mal Brough, nothing has been given to us at all in the way of title deeds. We cannot get the mechanism that Hernando do Soto said we need to be able to progress. We can create $20,000 million worth of value tomorrow if you give us the title deeds. Mr Deputy Speaker Mitchell, thank you very much for the time to make a contribution today.

Mr LAUNDY (Reid—Assistant Minister for Industry, Innovation and Science) (13:07): I move:
That the House take note of the document.

Question agreed to.

Debate adjourned.

Ordered that the resumption of the debate be made an order of the day for a later hour this day.

Reference to Federation Chamber

Mr LAUNDY (Reid—Assistant Minister for Industry, Innovation and Science) (13:08): by leave—I move:

That the order of the day be referred to the Federation Chamber for debate.

Question agreed to.

BILLS

Building and Construction Industry (Improving Productivity) Amendment Bill 2017

Second Reading

Consideration resumed of the motion:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR (Gorton) (13:08): Labor opposes the Building and Construction Industry (Improving Productivity) Bill 2017. Legislation for the reintroduction of the Australian Building and Construction Commission passed the parliament in the final sitting week of last year, as you will remember, Mr Deputy Speaker. It passed after a protracted and bungled process which began all the way back on 14 December 2013. It passed in a late sitting in the last week of the year with the support of many on the crossbench, including Senators Hinch, Xenophon and Leyonhjelm and senators from Pauline Hanson's One Nation. In fact, the specific provision we will amend here today, if the government has its way, was proposed by Senator Hinch and supported not only by the crossbench but also by the government.

In our view, we have dealt with this matter, a matter that started, as I said, in December 2013 with the introduction of the ABCC bill into this place. Of course, that bill was rejected by the parliament at that time, and a compromise was reached and, indeed, supported by the senators I have just mentioned. So, having settled the law with respect to the building industry—according to the Prime Minister a vital economic reform—the government now wants to trash its own law.

Companies that have enterprise agreements which are legal but not code compliant are nonetheless able, until 29 November 2018, to submit expressions of interest and tenders and be awarded Commonwealth work. That is the law as it stands. The government is proposing to further amend the Building and Construction (Improving Productivity) Act 2016 less than three months after its passage to wind back the exemption period for non-code-compliant companies from two years to nine months, and limit the exemptions so that companies that are not code compliant may tender for but not be awarded any Commonwealth building work within the nine-month exemption period. The effect of this amendment on those companies that have signed agreements, approved by the Fair Work Commission pursuant to the Fair Work Act, which are legal but not code compliant is that they will have to make a commercial decision not to tender for Commonwealth building work or they will have to seek to renegotiate their agreements with parties to those agreements in a very limited time frame. According to news reports, it is estimated—and, indeed, it was confirmed in the very brief Senate inquiry yesterday—that there are over 3,000 enterprise agreements that were made pursuant to the act, which were made lawfully and in good faith by employers, their workforce and unions, and they will have to be renegotiated before August this year.

It is important to remember that all of those companies that negotiated with unions in good faith and entered into legal enterprise agreements over the last three years acted prudently and reasonably. What was not reasonable for them to have to do was to anticipate a law that may or may not be enacted by the parliament. In fact, on the basis of the rejection of the code throughout the course of the last parliamentary term, it was quite reasonable, and indeed entirely proper, for employers not to have regard to the code, which had no legal basis, no legal standing whatsoever, when they negotiated and settled those agreements. It is also important to remember that the code they are supposed to comply with not only was not law when those agreements were made, as I have just said, but had been rejected time and time again by the parliament.

While Labor does not support the existence and substance of the code, the only sensible thing for the government to do would be to exempt those companies from the operation of the code until their existing enterprise agreements nominally expired. In other words, if an employer under the law entered into an agreement with its workforce and relevant unions then it would be entirely unfair for them now to be punished for negotiating those agreements in that manner—yet that is exactly what the government seeks to do. It seeks to
Cancer Support Group, they do not purport to provide a medical service, nor do they seek to offer medical advice. What they do offer is a forum whereby men at all stages of prostate cancer from prognosis to diagnosis to remission, and their families, can share experiences with others and question the guest speakers as they participate in a 1800 group call line. For a group of people who are suffering and battling through the same disease, an outreach group such as the Australian Advanced Prostate Cancer Support Group is often a godsend.

There were many Jims in the room today. In fact, all the gentlemen who are fighting advanced prostate cancer were wearing a 'Jim' name badge because they are all in it together. At today's event, Jim Marshall was presented with a Max Gardner Award for Distinguished Service by another Jim, Jim Hughes AM, national Chairman of the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia.

The fact remains that prostate cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in Australian men. With more men dying of prostate cancer than women of breast cancer, now is the time to have an open and frank discussion about this life-changing condition. Mr Deputy Speaker, did you know that one in seven men risk getting prostate cancer by the age of 75, and by the age of 85 this increases to one in five? These are real statistics that affect real men across Australia: sons, fathers, brothers and friends.

I encourage men, not just those in the Ryan electorate, to talk to their doctor about testing for prostate cancer as part of their annual health check-up. Taking the lives of more than 3,000 men annually, prostate cancer is serious. But, through the Australian Advanced Prostate Cancer Support Group, sufferers are no longer isolated.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hastie): In accordance with standing order 193, the time for members' constituency statements has concluded.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Closing the Gap

Consideration resumed of the motion:

That the House take note of the document.

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (17:01): I speak today in relation to the Closing the gap report. It is a very disappointing and profoundly despairing document that we have seen handed down by the Prime Minister today. I am aggrieved about it, and so should many people be aggrieved about it. This is a government that came in, I think, with the best of intentions to reform Indigenous affairs but unfortunately, in its first budget, cut $534 million from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs across the country. It did not listen to the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and in the first budget it cut $15 million out of assistance that had already been budgeted for by the previous Labor government for the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, the peak Indigenous body. Thereafter it established an Indigenous advisory council that really represented no-one and continued to claim that there was an efficiency dividend in relation to these budget cuts only.

The truth is that the Closing the gap report today is really the consequence of so much mismanagement across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. I say that because the report is stark. It says that target after target is not being attained. We are seeing a failure to halve the gap in child mortality. We are seeing failures in terms of closing the gap in life expectancy. We are seeing failures to close the gap in school attendance. We are seeing failures to close the gap in terms of employment. The words 'not on track' are littered through the report.

This backs up the Auditor-General's report. When I was the shadow minister for Indigenous affairs, I wrote to the Auditor-General requesting that the Auditor-General turn his mind to the preparation of an audit report in relation to the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, the centrepiece of the Abbott and now Turnbull government's Indigenous affairs policy. Much fanfare heralded the Indigenous Advancement Strategy in May 2014. They committed $4.8 billion over four years from 2014-15, cutting $534.4 million over five years, much of it in Indigenous affairs and much of it in preventative health programs.

The consequences were that many organisations that had been working in community control across the country failed to get the funding program that they needed in terms of certainty and employment. The outcomes were therefore a consequence of the failure of the Abbott-Turnbull government. In 2014-15, the first year of the strategy, the department focused on transitioning 3,000 funding agreements across the country. The Auditor-General found:

... the department did not effectively implement the Strategy.

A failure of administration. Also:

The department's grants administration processes fell short of the standard required to effectively manage a billion dollars of Commonwealth resources. The basis by which projects were recommended to the Minister—
Senator Scullion—

was not clear and, as a result, limited assurance is available that the projects funded support the department's desired outcomes. Further, the department did not:

• assess applications in a manner that was consistent with the guidelines and the department's public statements;
• meet some of its obligations under the Commonwealth Grants Rules and Guidelines;

... ...

• establish performance targets for all funded projects.

The performance framework and measures established for the Strategy—the centrepiece of the Abbott and Turnbull government's Indigenous affairs policy—do not provide sufficient information to make assessments about program performance and progress towards achievement of the program outcomes.

This is a damning report by the Auditor-General of the government's whole strategy in Indigenous affairs.

The grants administration was appalling. There was a kit provided before the opening of the grant funding for these organisations which are at the front line of delivering services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and whose main work is about closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage. Approximately half of the applicants under the grants program of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy did not meet the application documentation requirements. There may be benefit in the department testing its application process with potential applicants in future rounds.

There was an inconsistency with the guidelines in the internal guidance. So this is the consequence of this government's Indigenous affairs policy. We are seeing it today. The best I can say about this report is that it actually looks like a report. In previous years we have had what looked like a brochure—a brochure that nearly had more pictures that words on it—that had been handed down as the Closing the gap report. It is a damning indictment of this government's Indigenous affairs policy.

I have been with the member for Lingiari when the minister talked about resetting, restarting and renewing in speech after speech. How many more times is this government going to do that? They have failed to acknowledge their failures this area, but at least the department has agreed with every one of the recommendations of the Auditor-General. So there is hope yet that the government may get this right in terms of Indigenous affairs.

In the time remaining, let me say a few things about what they could do in this space that might actually help. How about refunding the National Congress of Australia's First People the $15 million that Labor made a commitment to do? How about showing the respect towards the Redfern Statement that they fail to do in the last election campaign? I went to the National Congress of Australia's First People and announced Labor's policy in Indigenous affairs and showed respect for that, as I showed respect for the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people who are the custodians of this particular place. I pay my respects to them today. I showed respect in Redfern for that.

The recommendations of the peak bodies across the whole area, from Family Violence Prevention Legal Services through to the First Peoples Disability Network, the National Congress of Australia's First People, the Lowitja Institute, the Healing Foundation—they all stay the same thing. They all say: 'Across the forward estimates, how about you restore the funding cuts? How about you actually reform the Indigenous Advancement Strategy? It might be a good idea to listen to what Labor has been saying for about four years and listen to what the Auditor-General has been saying. How about you actually do what you said when you were in opposition and have failed to do now you are in government: how about you develop justice targets for closing the gap? How about you take funding Family Violence Prevention Legal Services seriously? How about you actually meet under COAG and put this on the table at COAG meetings?'

We know that, in some parts of the country, Indigenous men are more likely to go to jail than to go to university. We see that an Indigenous woman is 34 times more likely to be hospitalised by partner abuse than a non-Indigenous woman; an Indigenous adult is 15 times more likely to be imprisoned than a non-Indigenous adult; an Indigenous child is 24 times more likely to be in detention than a non-Indigenous child. This is a national shame, a disgrace and a tragedy, and the government is not taking it seriously.

The government should also be doing something about the number of Indigenous kids who are more likely to be living not with their parents but in out-of-home care. They are 10 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous kids. We have tens of thousands of Indigenous kids across the country who are vulnerable and at risk in this area, and we need to establish a national target in relation to this issue. The government should be listening to SNAICC, the peak body that has been talking about this time and time again, but the government is refusing to listen.
How about empowering Indigenous girls through education? How about doing a Clontarf-type program for girls, like the Stars Foundation, and roll it out across the country? Do you want good practice? Look at what they are doing in the Northern Territory. Do you want to talk about best practice? Look at what the Institute of Urban Indigenous Health is doing with the Deadly Choices program in preventive health, in empowering young people and making them proud, and in supporting culture and community-controlled health services. Look at what they are doing, do good practice and fund them. That is what the government should be doing.

The government should also be looking at doing something about glaucoma, which is a Third World problem that is still in Australia. They have to address that issue. Sure, Hugh Taylor and other people have been doing great work in that area, but we have to do so much more to address the fundamentals, the basics, of that. If you look at addressing those fundamentals, you will do better. How about funding Indigenous education under the Gonski needs-based funding, which will help 195,000 Indigenous kids get the education they need? If you look at the fundamentals and the social and economic determinants, then you may close the gap. Then the government will have something to be proud of, and so will we as a country.

Mr McCormack (Riverina—Minister for Small Business) (17:11): I acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, custodians of the land on which this parliament stands. I also acknowledge the Wiradjuri people, who represent the Riverina and Central West area that I proudly represent in this place.

Since the redistribution of the electorate boundaries a lot of people have asked me: what does the bottom of the electorate around Yerong Creek and Wagga Wagga have in common with the top of the electorate of Forbes and Parkes and right up to Peak Hill? It is true that the Central West relates more to Orange and Dubbo, while the southern part of the electorate around Wagga Wagga relates more to the natural geographical area Riverina, coordinating with the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, as well as the Snowy Mountains areas of Tumut and Tumbarumba. But the one thing these areas have in common is the fact that they are all Wiradjuri country.

I also acknowledge the member for Lingiari. Forty-two per cent of his constituents are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I know the great work that he has done not just in his electorate but on a national stage to help the plight of the Aboriginal people he represents, and I acknowledge that.

As the small business minister I also want to acknowledge the fantastic work that Senator Nigel Scullion, the Indigenous affairs minister, has done for procurement for Aboriginal small businesses, because we know that the best way out of welfare is a job. We know that the best way to get ahead in this world is to have income, to run a business and to be able to make a profit that way.

The original target set for contracts for Aboriginal procurement in 2015-16 was 0.5 per cent of Commonwealth domestic contracts. This acknowledged the very low base, given the Commonwealth procured only $6.2 million from Indigenous businesses in 2012-13. In just the coalition's first year we have so far surpassed the targets. Under the coalition's new procurement policy, the Commonwealth has awarded more than 1,500 direct and indirect contracts to almost 500 Indigenous businesses. These contracts are worth a total of more than $284 million—almost 46 times the value of Indigenous contracts awarded by the Commonwealth in 2012-13. That is a credit to Senator Scullion.

The coalition is immediately bringing forward to this financial year its 2020 target to award three per cent of contracts to Indigenous businesses, nearly three years ahead of schedule.

Although more than half—56 per cent—of the total value of Indigenous business contracts were awarded in the building, construction and maintenance sector, what makes the IPP so remarkable is the range of businesses which have successfully tendered for work under this policy. These include businesses which produce information and communications technology products, as well as service providers in the recruitment, legal and financial industries. Through the Council of Australian Governments we are continuing to work with the states and territories to get them to introduce their own Indigenous procurement policies, and I call on them to redouble these efforts.

I want to acknowledge some of the Aboriginal people who are making some really good initiatives and being really fine role models in the Wiradjuri areas that I represent—namely, Kath Withers, Isabel Reid and Gail Clark. Each of them do wonderful welcomes to country. Whether it is Australia Day or any other event that is going on in and around Wagga Wagga and Coolamon, these three wonderful Aboriginal elders are always there and always talking about inclusivity and the need for all of us to be united.

We heard from the previous speaker about Clontarf, which has a great program at Mount Austin High School—a fantastic rugby league program—which has been rolled out to get more Indigenous youth not just playing sport but interested in turning up to school and participating in that way that makes sure they get a great education. We heard from the Prime Minister today about how education is the great enabler for Indigenous youth.
Mr SNOWDON (Lingiari) (17:21): Can I firstly acknowledge the traditional owners of this great land that we are on, the Ngunawal and the Ngambri people, and acknowledge the traditional owners of all Aboriginal lands—
all Aboriginal nations—right around this country, most particularly in my own electorate of Lingiari, which traverses 1.34 million square kilometres, one-sixth of Australia's landmass, and has a sizeable proportion of the remote Aboriginal population.

I thank the member for Riverina for his contribution. I will come to a couple of points that he made shortly. I also acknowledge the member for Blair's contribution.

I will say at the outset that I watched both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition today and I thought they both spoke well. I was particularly impressed by the Leader of the Opposition's commitment to two new Closing the Gap targets. The first was the justice target, which I think was long overdue. The second was the issue to do with out-of-home care, which is a vexed issue but something that we must confront as a nation and something that is long overdue.

I do, however, want to concentrate most particularly on two elements of the Closing the gap report, which I commend the government on. It is, as the member for Blair said, actually a good report because it lays down, in a very bare way and a very straight way, the issues that are confronting us in our attainment of these targets that are before us. I want to talk in particular about the life expectancy target and the halving the gap in child mortality in 2018 target. I just make this observation about the child mortality target: this is the first year that we have gone backwards. In the nine years, this is the first year that we have gone backwards. The key point that the report points out is:

The target to halve the gap in child mortality by 2018 is not on track this year.

As I say, this is the first time. We know that they have declined. On the surface, we seem to be doing well, but, if we are actually going to meet these targets, we need to do a damn lot more. It is of particular interest that many people now have started to twig that, if we really want to have an outcome here, we have to do actually invest in what works.

The report itself talks about the need to focus on preconception and maternity-care services through to early childhood services for children up to eight years of age. I agree with that, and it is something I know is at the forefront of Labor policy. We have taken a decision to take this early childhood area very seriously and support the First 1000 Days proposals, which are now well and truly within the lexicon of the health debate and something we should be supporting.

If we are ever going to close the gap in this infant mortality space, and more importantly close the life expectancy gap in the longer term, then we must make sure all children get the best start in life. This means starting to communicate with parents-to-be prior to conception, working with them for the first thousand days and looking at opportunities that exist—as has been happening in the congress, the Aboriginal health service in Alice Springs—using the Abecedarian model of education opportunity for kids 18 months and older. We must actually channel kids so they get the health care they require and, at the same time, the education opportunities that will benefit them and make sure they grow up into healthy adolescents and then adults.

That is of primary importance, but what goes with it is a whole lot of other things. We need to make sure that housing is properly addressed and that there is food security. But all the wraparound things that go to making sure a young child is in a safe, caring environment, can live a productive life, learn well, be healthy at the end of their adolescence and enter adulthood with the opportunity for further education are fundamentally very important. If we do that properly then closing the gap will be something we can achieve.

Whether we hit it in 2031, however, is a very different question, because that is probably the most difficult target for us to achieve. This report outlines, in particular, that if we want to close the Indigenous life expectancy gap:

… Indigenous life expectancy would need to increase by 16 years and 21 years for females and males respectively, with average annual life expectancy gains for Indigenous Australians of between 0.6 and 0.8 years required.

That is a really difficult task, but it is not beyond us to address it. It requires us to take seriously the addressing of the continuing issues of chronic disease and further addressing the issue of tobacco consumption, which is highlighted in this report.

I will just add, as an aside—it is not my desire to politicise this debate—that the Labor government, and I as the minister, introduced anti-smoking measures which measures were pilloried by the then shadow Treasurer, now ambassador to Washington, who did not believe we should be funding these programs. How short-sighted he was, because what this report points out, very starkly, is that these programs and other preventative health measures are the things we should be investing in if we want to make sure that the diseases which are now so apparent amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are to be addressed.
I want to quote from Dr Fadwa Al-Yaman, an Indigenous health expert at the ANU and also with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. She said, referring to tobacco and, most importantly, to higher cancer mortality rates that they:

… were largely a result of more prevalent risk factors such as smoking, cancer not being detected until later stages, inadequate education about health risks and issues with access to healthcare.

Unfortunately, time is too short for this discussion because there are many components for us to get to the nub of this to address it properly. But what we must do is what the Leader of the Opposition said today, which is that we need to work with those things that actually are working themselves and that are getting the better outcomes.

He points to the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations around this country and the magnificent work they are doing to improve the health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people right around this country. They are the best examples of comprehensive primary health care in the nation. What we do not want is for them to be white-anted by some competitive-funding model, which has the potential to happen. So I say to the government: invest in what we know works. I am sure that if we do that, we can get better outcomes all round.

I note also—and the Leader of the Opposition spoke about this today—that there are programs that actually do work well.

The Deadly Choices program through the Institute of Urban Indigenous Health, which the member for Blair referred to—a highly progressive organisation—started with four health clinics in Brisbane and now has 18, delivering comprehensive primary health care across the urban population of Brisbane for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—some 50,000 to 60,000 people. The number of health checks is increasing. I note that one of the very positive signs that come out of this report today—something which I think we all should take note of—is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander one- to five-year-olds have the highest immunisation rate of any group nationally, and that has a lot to do with the work which is being done by these health organisations, and we need to commend them for it.

As I said, there is a lot more we could say about this, but one of the things we on this side of the chamber are determined to do is to try not to politicise this debate. We will be critical of the government for bad policy and, we will say, poor decisions, but it is my intention to work as closely as I possibly can as the shadow minister who is responsible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. We have had discussions about working together to try to get the best outcomes we possibly can across this parliament. That is not to say we will agree with everything and it is not to say we will not be critical, but we can attempt to work together in a constructive way for the benefit of the nation, and that is something this parliament should be doing in any event. Similarly, we have started discussions with the minister who is responsible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, Senator Scullion, about having a similar approach, trying to make sure that, where there are points of difference, we put them aside and try to do the things we can agree upon so the benefit goes to the whole community.

I say again that we have a lot to do in this country if we want to achieve the objectives that are set out in the Closing the Gap targets, I commend this report, but most importantly I commend the new targets, which have been stressed by the Leader of the Opposition—that is, new targets for justice, hearing and out-of-home care. We can do this, but we have to be listening and working with Aboriginal people, not telling them what is important. They know what is good for them. We need to work with them to get the best possible outcomes that we can.

Mr WALLACE (Fisher) (17:32): I, like my colleague the honourable member for Lingiari, support the previous speakers that have spoken so eloquently on this topic to date. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak today on this very important issue, which I believe goes to one of the most important societal issues that we face in Australia. In the first paragraph of my maiden speech, I said:

The lot of our Indigenous peoples has been racked with poverty, ill-health and lack of opportunity since European settlement. As we have learnt from today’s report, our work is far from done in achieving some semblance of equality. We can and we must do much better.

I have a very simple mantra when it comes to representing the people of my own constituency. In all of my work on behalf of the people of Fisher, I aim to help make the Sunshine Coast a great place to learn, a great place to work and a great place to retire to. In short, I want to help make Fisher the place of choice for education, employment and retirement. As parliamentarians, we collectively owe that same duty to all of our nation’s First Australians. When I was a young barrister, I was regularly briefed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service. I represented a number of our First Australians when it was necessary for them to interact with the courts. I saw firsthand the struggles that many of our Indigenous people face with imprisonment rates far, far in excess of the non-Indigenous population. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my friend and
colleague Tim Hishon, who is the leader of ATSILS on the Sunshine Coast, and his team and the great work that they do for Indigenous peoples on the Sunshine Coast.

I learnt through that contact that all Australians, whether Indigenous or not, thrive and prosper when they are given access to a quality education, when they have access to meaningful and productive employment or the chance to create their own, and when they are able to save for their own future.

A lack of proper education and training, a lack of purpose in our prime years and a lack of independence in our twilight years are the enemies of a good quality of life. Though sometimes we hear a great deal about what sets First Australians apart from their country men and women, we all share those fundamental truths. Though cultures and approaches to meeting these basic human needs have varied by place and time and continue to do so, all successful societies have sought to give their people the knowledge they need, a way to support their families and dignity in their old age.

When we assess the results of this annual report, we should review it against those three tests. Are we as a federal government helping Indigenous Australians to get the education they need to succeed? Are we helping to create the conditions where they can access good jobs and create new jobs themselves? Are we ensuring that Indigenous Australians have access to the good health care and the financial provision they need to enjoy a long and fulfilling retirement?

Like others, when I make this comparison, I find in the data from this report a great deal of work to do but also a lot of individual success to celebrate. Most importantly, I find hope for the future. The statistic that I believe should make us all cautiously optimistic is the fact that, for those Indigenous Australians who have a tertiary education, there is next to no employment gap. We should take a moment to consider the implications of this fact, remarkable in the scale of achievement it represents and a sad reminder that this should need to be an achievement at all. Where Indigenous Australians have been able to access fully the high-quality education that our country provides, they have also succeeded in finding work to the same extent as non-Indigenous people. We know well the benefits that flow from this.

Sadly, the statistics from the report demonstrate that, once you drill down below tertiary education into the vocational education sector, certificate IV and certificate III, the numbers drop off somewhat significantly. For instance, for certificate IV level education, there is a 12 per cent gap. For certificate III, there is a 12 per cent gap. Once you get down into year 11, there is a 24 per cent gap. So there is much work to be done at an educational level.

Repeated studies have shown that even short periods of unemployment can cause all types of individuals and their families to suffer poverty, housing stress, family breakdown and social isolation. People out of employment are statistically more likely to access healthcare services and are more likely to suffer from a range of chronic illnesses both mental and physical. Long-term unemployment makes individuals in all communities significantly more likely to be involved in crime, while, for children growing up in jobless households, rates of behavioural problems, alienation and future unemployment are materially higher.

Without work, of course, individuals are also unable to set aside the money they need to support themselves in retirement. For those First Australians who have a tertiary qualification, they are now able in our society to secure the life benefits of good-quality, meaningful employment just as non-Indigenous Australians can. Their hard work, skills and commitment are being recognised and utilised by employers. This has come about through the effort, ambition and determination to succeed among First Australians themselves. They also have been supported in their achievements by government through its targets for Indigenous procurement and employment and by the concerted efforts of corporate Australia.

This development is the model and the inspiration to show us what can be achieved together and how. At its heart is the individual educational success of hardworking First Australians. We should therefore welcome the fact that the government's Remote School Attendance Strategy has helped to reverse a long-term decline in school attendance in remote communities. We should welcome the increases in reading and numeracy among Indigenous children and the high percentages now enrolled in early childhood education.

Most of all, we should welcome one area—and it is an important one—where we are currently on track to meet our 2020 target: the increase from 45.4 per cent in 2008 to 61.5 per cent in 2015 in the percentage of Indigenous 20- to 24-year-olds who have achieved their year 12 or equivalent. These figures represent the gap of the future, though we should celebrate the achievements of our young Indigenous Australians and acknowledge the progress that is being made, at the moment—but, at the moment, the gap remains too large.

When it comes to the test of employment, the situation is similar. Progress has been made since '94, as we have seen among tertiary educated Australians. The employment gap has almost been overcome, and in the past 30 years there has been an overall increase in the Indigenous employment rate. However, the fact that since 2008 that
rate has been decreasing is one of the most concerning figures in this report. On all sides of the House we must
reform our minds on how to overcome this worrying trend.

Finally, on the test of retirement, again, we see hope for the future. As the employment outcomes for tertiary
educated First Australians improve, so too will their ability to save for their retirement. Beyond that, the total
Indigenous mortality rate has declined by 15 per cent over the last 17 years, and rates of smoking are also down.
These statistics represent a longer, healthier and more comfortable retirement for many Indigenous Australians
now and into the future. However, once again, a great deal more work is needed. We need to significantly
improve employment rates, in order to help more families contribute to super, and we need to close the gap further
on access to health care, to support longer and more active lives.

In summary, on our tests of education, employment and retirement we have come a long way in recent years
and the government should be commended for its focus on these issues. Sadly, however, the task ahead of us
remains as large as that behind. I am confident, however, that the Prime Minister and the Minister for Indigenous
Affairs are pursuing the right approach, strengthening ties with First Australian representative groups, committing
to programs like Empowered Communities and moving toward enablement rather than transactional government.

Ms CATHERINE KING (Ballarat) (17:42): I too rise, today, to join with many colleagues on the 2017
Closing the Gap statement. I will begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land, the Ngunnawal
and Ngambri peoples, and I pay respect to their elders both past and present. I also acknowledge the Wathaurong
people, who are the traditional custodians of the land surrounding my electorate in parts of Ballarat. I also want to
thank Congress this morning for their terrific presentation of the Redfern Statement. It was a very powerful
message, bringing that statement here into this place to tell us as community leaders what they expect and what
they demand of us if we are to close the gap.

This year's Closing the gap is released at a time of positive progress in Indigenous representation in our
parliament. In our shadow ministry in this place and in the other place, Labor is proud to have taken steps to
increase the voices of Indigenous people in this parliament, a platform which we look forward to building into the
future and it is already making a significant difference. The appointment of the member for Hasluck as the
Minister for Indigenous Health should also be recognised and commended.

While we celebrate progress within parliament, the stark reality is that closing the gap in Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander health and equality, unfortunately, remains a persistent challenge for us and is, sadly, still a distant
goal. The Closing the Gap report released today is a sobering reminder of the substantial work needed to address
the Closing the Gap health targets. The target to halve the gap in child mortality by 2018 is not on track this year.
The target to close the gap in life expectancy by 2031 is not on track this year. The Indigenous mortality rate from
cancer, which is the second-leading cause of death, is rising and the gap is widening. Cancer, in particular, and the
low survival rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is something that needs much more investigation and
much more understanding. When I have spoken to services providers, for example, in the Northern Territory—in
particular, in the cancer centre there—there is a huge amount of work that needs to be done to not only provide
access to services but also it is about the treatment methods that are being made available for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islanders.

We are doing very well, and I recognise the government's commitment in terms of eye health. I think there is
further work that needs to be done in terms of eye health, particularly otitis media.

There are some positives to note. There has been a nine percentage point decline in Indigenous smoking rates
for those aged 15 years and over between 2002 and 2014-15. Smoking cessation programs in Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander communities do make a difference, and funding for them matters. This will, of course,
contribute to improvements in health outcomes into the future. The total Indigenous mortality rate declined by 15
per cent between 1998 and 2015, with the largest decline being from circulatory diseases. Tracking progress, of
course, is critical to knowing what strategies to close the gap are actually working and where we need to do more,
but if we are not actually achieving progress, if we are simply tracking the contribution of underlying problems,
policymakers cannot expect meaningful change.

There is a road map on how to proceed, and that is the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health
Plan. The plan, developed in true partnership between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, articulates a
vision for closing the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health inequality. It outlines a life course
approach to developing health policy, and targets the social determinants of health. It addresses the important
issues of chronic diseases so prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across this country.
And, very importantly, it prioritises the fundamental importance of Aboriginal community controlled health
organisations in providing comprehensive primary health care and preventative health programs.
I note the government is pursuing patient-centred medical homes. We already have an example of that in this country, and they are called Aboriginal medical services. They have been doing comprehensive medical care for quite some time and they are the best in the country at it. I recognise in particular my own Aboriginal medical service, the Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative, who, again, do terrific work throughout my own community.

I think it is critically important that Primary Health Networks, as they are working through competitive tendering, have formal MOUs with Aboriginal community controlled health organisations and that they do not throw out programs that have been working or organisations that have been working in the health space purely because of the motive of competitive tendering. It is critical that Aboriginal community health organisations are central to the work of improving health and life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. If the PHNs do not go down that path, I think that would be a very serious mistake.

Unfortunately, whilst we do have a national plan, we have yet to see any funding attached to that plan. It is all very well to have a plan. It is all very well to have developed an implementation plan. But, without the funding to actually do the work, it remains a document that will be testament in the years to come to why we have failed to close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. In order to make substantial inroads to meet the Closing the Gap targets in health, the government needs to commit to properly funding ACCHOs as well as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan.

As noted during the election campaign, one program that I would commend to the government is Deadly Choices. If you want a preventative health program that is in fact working in terms of getting smoking rates down and making sure that there are comprehensive health checks undertaken and follow-up work, it is one of the few programs that has seen significant success across this field. I note that in the election campaign we committed to fund it further and roll it out across the country, and I hope very much that the government follows suit.

Future budgets must adequately resource the implementation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan if it is to have any success. Labor will always support a bipartisan approach to this issue, and the implementation plan in particular is essential for driving progress towards the provision of the best possible outcomes for investment in health and related services. As we heard today, the Redfern Statement grants us an opportunity to refocus and recommit to working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to improve participation in and delivery of health services.

While measures of inequality are a sharp reminder of how far there is to go, they should drive us to be more determined than ever to enact change. The Closing the gap report is a reminder that supporting treatment models driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that are culturally appropriate from their inception has to be at the core of health policy.

Today we have united as a parliament to reflect on our progress towards meeting the Closing the Gap targets, but this is only one part of the picture. We need to unite to enact change, not just share words, in this place. Rhetoric is just that. It needs to be matched by action. It does matter when you cut funding programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health programs, in particular in areas of prevention but in broader areas as well. It does matter when you make changes to tendering processes where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations do not have a seat at the table. Addressing the disparity in health outcomes for Australia's first people must be a priority of this parliament. I do not want to be here again next year and the year after and the year after, again despairing that we have been unable to meet or see improvement in those targets.

I was encouraged to hear the Prime Minister say that he has asked his Minister for Indigenous Health to look in particular at the area of cancer survival rates. There is more that can be done and more that should be done, but it will require the will of the government to invest more comprehensively in cancer services that are available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, understanding that treatment closer to where people live is critical. That is not always easy to deliver, nor is it cheap to deliver, but it is something that the government needs to do if it is going to have a serious impact on cancer survival rates.

Again I say that the area of ear health is really critical. We are seeing children who have already had substantial damage done to their ears who are finding it very difficult to learn in a challenging learning environment. It certainly sets back their education, their employment and their life opportunities substantially if we are not tackling that area. There is work being undertaken and, again, I commend that work to the government and suggest that, if we do want to continue to close the gap, those are two areas that we could do some easy and early work in.

Ms PRICE (Durack) (17:52): I rise today to speak on the Prime Minister's Closing the gap report 2017. Where are we today? It is 2017, and we are inching slowly towards closing the gap, but, as we have all heard today from the Prime Minister, there is no doubt that we need to do more today. Yes, we are making inroads into education—
as we heard from the Prime Minister today, there is now no gap between tertiary educated Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians in terms of employment outcomes. That was a good start, which is fantastic news, but there is still a massive gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians when it comes to both getting into tertiary education and completing tertiary education.

We have missed our targets on child mortality, education, life expectancy, employment, incarceration rates and literacy. Indigenous Australians are 2.8 times more likely to commit suicide than non-Indigenous Australians. As long as there remains a gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia, I commit to working to close it. I am very proud of the decision we have taken to have a suicide prevention trial site in the Kimberley and in the Mid West, and I look forward to working with both of those working groups.

We—not just as the government but everyone in this place—really do need to do more. We need to live and breathe this issue, just as our First Australians live and breathe their plight every day—morning, noon and night. As the Chair of the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, I strongly encourage every member of this House and the Senate to acquaint themselves with the issues that Indigenous Australians face every day and to consider how they themselves might foster the grassroots growth and support that is required to make a real dent in regard to the issues that we are discussing today.

The Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs released an interim report last May on the first steps for improving educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students—and we have continued with that inquiry this term—which included a number of recommendations on how we might help address some of the issues that we are seeing in this report that we are discussing today.

Education is the key to this. Education creates job opportunities, which flow into health outcomes, social outcomes, social welfare outcomes—all of it. The first recommendation in the report of the standing committee was around changes to ABSTUDY and a redesigned system, making the program more accessible and more workable. The government has gone some way to addressing this recommendation already, which I will touch on a little later.

My electorate of Durack has the third-highest Indigenous population of any federal electorate in Australia, and it includes some of the poorest and most disadvantaged Indigenous Australians in this country. Some of the worst health gaps, employment gaps and education gaps are found in parts of my electorate. It really is very heartbreaking and pitiful.

Another recommendation in the interim report was to redirect funding for furthering programs that directly relate to Indigenous girls' programs—we hear a lot about boys' programs—like the Girls Academy and the SHINE program, which I am a huge supporter of; the SHINE program is based in my electorate, in Geraldton. As our future mothers, it is critical that these young Indigenous women get the education they deserve—no less—so that they can be the future leaders in their communities, and so that they can fulfil their own dreams.

Just recently I put my money where my mouth is and hired a 17-year-old SHINE program graduate to work in my electorate office in Geraldton. Let me tell you: she is an absolute cracker and she is going to become an incredibly valuable member of our team. What an opportunity, and she has grasped it with both hands. We are all so proud of her. I encourage all members of this House and the Senate to think about the commitments they make in public and think about employing a local Indigenous lady or man in their office, because we can all be richer for this experience. I put the challenge to my colleagues that they too might be able to take that opportunity.

There is no lack of will to change the outcomes for Indigenous Australians. There is no lack of funds available to change the outcomes for Indigenous Australians. But there has been a lack of change in the day-to-day lives for Indigenous Australians; there is no denying that. This is not a partisan issue. This is not a coalition versus Labor argument. It is not even a state government versus federal government argument. This is an issue that every Australian feels very deeply, one way or another, and it is an issue that I feel very deeply. But as long as this gap exists, the poorer our country will be for it, because there is untapped potential. Even from a pure economic perspective, there is untapped potential, especially in northern Australia.

There are programs that this government is delivering that are producing real results. The Indigenous Rangers program has been a fantastic success in my electorate of Durack, and I know there are many successful ranger programs.

I recently spoke on the reforms that the government is implementing to make university more accessible to Indigenous Australians, and this is an issue that I am deeply passionate about. These changes, based around changing the ABSTUDY program to be more workable and accessible to more Indigenous Australians, are aimed at improving Indigenous tertiary education participation and completion rates. As I said earlier, we know that tertiary-educated Indigenous Australians and tertiary-educated non-Indigenous Australians sit on an equal footing when it comes to employment opportunities. It speaks for itself.
We know that the benefits from employment are boundless. Full-time employment allows a person to realise their aspirations. It allows them to start a family on firm foundations. It allows them to enter the housing market. It allows them to take responsibility and ownership of their life. This legislation aimed to move away from judging our performance as a government by the number of Indigenous students, and to focus instead on Indigenous graduates. By focusing on Indigenous graduates, we can create educated Indigenous leaders, who can hopefully one day replace all of us in this place and carry on this work.

The Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Nigel Scullion, also made a statement to the Senate today regarding the government’s work around this issue and has committed to identifying what programs work and what programs do not.

We need to support the programs that empower Indigenous people to make their own decisions, take ownership of their lives and their own communities instead of having well-meaning government and government departments telling them how to live their lives.

The challenges that Indigenous Australians face, they are significant and can be difficult to fix. We know that. This government needs to be robust in its leadership on this issue, and I sincerely hope that we are able to do that. It is not easy; I accept that. I do believe, however, that political correctness can get in the way of closing this gap. We must call the issues as we see them, be brave and work towards solutions without fear of offending our First Australians. We have been too soft—all of us have been too soft. We cannot continue to be soft, because lives are at stake.

The problems are not insurmountable. We have seen that. We are very slowly making progress, but it is not fast enough. Indigenous Australians are still more than 2.8 times more likely to commit suicide; they are overrepresented in our prisons; they have a shorter life expectancy than their non-Indigenous counterparts. But the reality is governments cannot do this alone. We do need a full court press to really close the gap and the disadvantage that Australian Indigenous people experience, and to achieve this, if we are doing it as a team, it requires local Indigenous leaders. They have got to step up to the plate. They have to step up, they have to speak out—and that includes those grassroots operators who often are the ones with the answers but who often do not get a voice. We as a government have got to make sure they have got a voice. In my electorate of Durack, I look forward to working with those people so that we can all make a difference and close that gap once and for all.

Ms CLAYDON (Newcastle) (18:01): I would certainly like to begin my remarks with an acknowledgement of the traditional owners of this place that we meet on, the Nambri and Ngunawal peoples. I pay my respects to their elders past and present, and, indeed, their future leaders. I would also like to take some time to acknowledge the traditional owners of my own home town of Newcastle and the wider electorate, which encompasses Awabakal, Worimi and Wonnarua people and their country.

It is a bittersweet experience to speak today on the ninth Closing the gap report, which provides some important feedback for us all in this House on the progress—or, as the case might be, lack of progress—towards redressing what is an enormous disparity in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on a whole range of issues, but with a particular focus on the health inequalities. I would like to acknowledge at the outset and say thank you to the Indigenous men and women who took time to come and address us as members of parliament this morning in a ceremony in the Great Hall. They presented the Redfern Statement, which was a document crafted during the last election, to all members of parliament. It is a document that should be beyond party politics and divisions; it is something that each of us, from whatever seats we might occupy in this House, whatever parties we might belong to, can sign up to and subscribe to. The message I took home this morning from the presentation of the Redfern Statement was really just how urgent a need we have in this country to reset the relationships that we have with Indigenous Australians.

I will come back to that issue, because it is a challenging one. Indeed, it is very much a reason why I stand here, in my fourth year, speaking on the Closing the gap report in this parliament, because it gives me no pleasure to again report that we are only on track on one of the metrics in that Closing the gap report.

But it is important that we stand and confront those issues, because the Closing the gap report really reflects an issue that goes to the very core of our identity, to the significance of our identity, to our understandings of our history and, indeed, the building of our nation. So it does cause a little existential angst when we are being asked to look honestly and squarely at some of the really complex but deep and lingering impacts of a colonial history which is the founding basis of this nation.

It is uncomfortable at times—and rightly so—but it is something that we non-Indigenous Australians certainly have to face very squarely. As I said this morning, the message from the elders and senior people who contributed to the forming of the Redfern Statement is that we really need to bring some honesty to our debates in this House and the community. We need to acknowledge our failings, to redouble our efforts, to commit to breaking that
cycle of failure, because it is an extraordinarily heavy burden that we ask Indigenous Australians to carry each and every year when we simply fail to live up to the targets that we have set ourselves.

There was much conversation today around the need not to be focused on the deficit side of people's experience or, indeed, the language that we use in our debates to acknowledge many of those achievements. I will come to some extraordinary achievements that are happening in communities and on the ground, but, again, I feel very strongly the need to emphasise the requirement for a really honest appraisal of the current situation and where we need to head from here.

Certainly, in terms of the targeted achievements, I think the Prime Minister this morning flagged a number of the areas where there was room for some optimism. The year-12 attainments are a target that we do appear to be on track for, and that is absolutely terrific news, but all of those other targets, many of which go towards areas around education, employment, infant mortality and life expectancy are still shocking and appalling, and none of us should rest easy whilst those inequities continue to exist in our community.

I am not going to go through each and every one of those targets—I think that there has been good coverage of those in the debates—but I would in my limited time like to take up the challenge that was presented this morning to talk about some of the successes in Indigenous communities. I really want to celebrate here in this national parliament the work of a number of programs that are happening in my community in Newcastle. I pay particular tribute to the work of Dr Kelvin Kong, a Worimi man whose life as Australia's first and, at this point, only Indigenous ear, nose and throat specialist has been dedicated to the eradication of ear diseases in Indigenous communities, which, as we heard from the member for Ballarat earlier on, is such a particular problem in so many Aboriginal communities.

I had the extraordinary pleasure of meeting him and getting to understand just a small window into the life of Kelvin Kong when he took time to talk to me about the issues confronting the Aboriginal community. He talked about the size of the problem around otitis media, in Newcastle, our region, and the work he undertook to shrink waiting lists of hundreds of Aboriginal kids who had been trying to see him for what is a very simple surgical procedure to restore hearing capacity for kids.

He has such a deep understanding of the lived experience of those kids and a profound knowledge of the world that is opened up to children once they are able to hear, and hear correctly, and opportunities that can unfold for them. He has done extraordinary work to reduce the incidence of otitis media around Newcastle, but he travels extensively across Australia to try to deliver and share his skills and expertise with as many Indigenous communities as possible. We should absolutely celebrate people like him and his work. Indeed, as a national government we should be providing whatever resources and support we can to ensure that ear health is right there amongst the priority areas for Indigenous kids in Australia.

Deadly Choices was also mentioned as a terrific program. It is—but, regretfully, due to funding cuts, that program was not kept on in my area of Newcastle, to the deep regret of many of us. There are many areas that do not get touched on in this report that are deeply serious issues for our Indigenous communities. They go to the continued forced removal of children from kin and country, the outrageous rates of incarceration for Indigenous people and the escalating levels of family violence. These are serious issues, serious challenges. They can be uncomfortable conversations that we have to have, but we have to have honest, open conversations and partnerships with our Indigenous men and women.

Mrs WICKS (Robertson) (18:12): As I rise to respond to the ninth Closing the gap report tabled by the Prime Minister today, I begin by acknowledging that we are meeting on Ngunnawal country and acknowledge and pay my respects to their elders, past, present and future.

Closing the gap remains a priority for the coalition government and I have been monitoring this report's progress closely in my time of representing the electorate of Robertson on the Central Coast and also as a member of the coalition's backbench committee on Indigenous affairs. There is a relentless determination that I see in this parliament to ensure that we do close the gap, which becomes more urgent with every passing year.

I know it is a priority not just for the Prime Minister and this side of the House but for all of us in this place, as has also been seen by the broad support for the Parliamentary Friends of the Close the Gap Campaign. The purpose of the group is to raise awareness of the national effort to close the gap as a forum for policy discussion, provide opportunities for local engagement with communities and ensure that we have the latest information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health initiatives and best practice outcomes. In fact, it is the areas of health, education and employment that so often provide the vital snapshot of where progress is being made to close the gap and where we need to further focus our efforts.

This year we have seen progress in the Closing the gap report in several key areas, which I wish to mention briefly. There have been significant improvements in the proportion of Indigenous 20- to 24-year-olds achieving
year 12 or equivalent. At higher levels of education there is almost no employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. There is a significant decline in mortality rates—including in chronic diseases and infant mortality—a greater access to antenatal care, reduced rates of smoking and a significant increase in Indigenous female employment over the longer term.

I welcome these improvements and commend them to the House but, sadly, there is so much more work to do. As always, the response will require courage, collaboration and an awareness of the complexity of each issue. For example, the target to halve the gap in child mortality for Indigenous children under five by 2018 is not on track nor is the target to close the gap on life expectancy by 2031.

I echo the Prime Minister's genuine sadness on this point and endorse the need to escalate our efforts to reduce smoking rates during pregnancy, continue to improve immunisation rates, lift rates of antenatal care, reduce foetal trauma and keep our children safe.

We have seen improvements in reading and numeracy for Indigenous students, but this target is not on track. The national school attendance target is also not on track, while incarceration rates and rates of child protection are too high. While meaningful improvements are being made in many areas, today's report states that we are only on track to meet one of these targets. I am confident of the leadership of the Prime Minister in this area, with the support of the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and the member for Hasluck, Ken Wyatt, the first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives and now the first Indigenous minister to be appointed to a Commonwealth government. Together, the task must be to stay the course, look at what has worked over the last decade and where greater efforts are needed.

One example is the Empowered Communities initiative, where we are supporting Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander people to be at the centre of decision-making in their regions. The Indigenous-led model is now in eight regions across the country, generating strong Indigenous governance to build capacity and improve community responsibility for decision-making.

On the New South Wales Central Coast, the CEO of the Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council, Sean Gordon, is leading this initiative with vigour. His response to the latest Closing the Gap report was also that we must stay the course as a government in our effort and commitment towards closing the disparity gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Sean told me that, while there have been great improvements in some of the target areas, we must also acknowledge that there is still a lot more work that needs to be done, especially in the areas of early education and employment. Darkinjung is reporting real success in addressing Indigenous disparity through a fantastic partnership with Barker College and the establishment of an alternative schooling model, as well as a partnership with Lendlease to deliver employment and procurement opportunities on the Central Coast.

Also on the Central Coast we have the Barang organisation, forging strong community networks, developing local Indigenous leadership and optimising investments in the Aboriginal community. The Barang organisation is a fantastic organisation in my electorate on the Central Coast. It includes the extraordinary NAISDA Dance College, based at Mt Penang, and the Bara Barang Corporation, which provides services, like support for young people, through community and arts programs.

This local response to a national issue is seen increasingly across the Central Coast, where three key health providers have formed a partnership to develop, promote and implement strategies that will make a difference in the lives of our Indigenous community. The Central Coast Local Health District, Yerin Aboriginal Health Services, and Central Coast Primary Care are working together to improve access to education, employment and health services in our community.

The Hunter New England and Central Coast Primary Health Network is also working to develop a pilot project aimed at supporting Aboriginal health practitioners. The project aims to not only increase the availability of primary healthcare services in Aboriginal communities but support Aboriginal students through study into employment.

These are local projects that involve boosting health, employment and education outcomes for local Aboriginal people. In light of the ninth anniversary of the apology to the stolen generation, this ought to be a reminder that, while we recognise the importance of words, we recognise that it will be actions that will set us on the path to closing the gap. We reaffirm and stand by that apology but use it as inspiration to press forward and ensure that closing the gap for our First Australians is, and will remain, a key priority.

**Mr THISTLETHWAITE** (Kingsford Smith) (18:19): At the outset, I acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, the traditional custodians of the land in Canberra, but also the traditional owners of the wonderful community I represent in Kingsford Smith, the Bidjigal and Gadigal people.
Closing the gap begins with respect—respect for Aboriginal people, respect for their culture, respect for their connection to their country and respect for their precolonisation contribution to the development of Australia. At the moment, in our nation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still face discrimination in our community. In respect of the Closing the gap report that we are debating here this evening and the targets, there is still a hell of a lot of work to do before Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are considered on a par with the health, welfare and educational standards of non-Indigenous Australians.

On average, Indigenous Australians die 10 years younger than non-Indigenous Australians, and this has not changed, fundamentally, since 1998; there has been no significant decline in child mortality rates since 2008; we are not on track to halve the gap in employment by 2018; and there is still a 10 per cent difference in school attendance. With reading, writing and numeracy it is only in year 9 that numeracy is on track to halve the gap by 2018. There is a long way to go and a lot of work to do if we are going to close the gap, and more work to do to respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This morning many of us attended a very humbling and important event in the Great Hall of Parliament House—the handing over of the Redfern Statement to the Prime Minister by leaders of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The Redfern Statement is a statement that was drafted in June 2016, in the lead-up to the last election, by the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples and signed by another 17 organisations that work in and around the Aboriginal welfare, health and education space. The policies of this document and its statements, basically, are encompassed in a few words: policies made with communities—rather than to communities.

The document calls for the restoration of the $500 million in cuts that were made by the Abbott government in their 2014 budget that have been maintained, and are supported, by this Turnbull government. These cuts are resulting in disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are some of the reasons we are not meeting the targets that were set by the Close the Gap initiative many, many years ago. These include cuts to Aboriginal legal services, cuts to health programs, cuts to domestic violence programs and diversionary programs for at-risk youth.

The document includes a new justice target for Aboriginal incarceration. It is shocking that, upon graduating from high school, a young Aboriginal man is more likely to go to jail than to attend university and get a degree. That is something that Australia needs to be ashamed of and that we need to rectify. I am very proud to be part of a Labor team, led by Bill Shorten, that has recognised this and has said that, if we are elected to government, we will include a new target in the Close the Gap initiative: a justice target to specifically work to reduce the rates of Indigenous incarceration in this country.

The document also includes a commitment to justice reinvestment and diversionary programs that are working in many communities, and a standalone department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. Currently, the work of government, in respect of delivering programs in this policy space, is part of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and we have seen what an absolute disaster that has been under the Abbott and Turnbull governments, with resignations, in-fighting and the Aboriginal community despairing of the way that this policy area is being managed by the Turnbull government.

The catchcry of the Redfern Statement this morning for those present was a very powerful one and a very insightful one, and something I certainly support—that is, we have the solutions. Aboriginal people and their communities have the solutions to many of the problems that have been identified in Closing the gap and that we all know about in terms of welfare, life expectancy, and educational and health outcomes. Aboriginal people have the solutions to many of these problems and they are sick and tired of being told what is good for them.

It goes back to the issue I mentioned in the opening of this speech. It is about respect. It is about having respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their ability to identify problems and issues within their communities and their ability to work together and to work with government at all levels to put in place solutions to deal with these issues and to get better outcomes. If we cannot trust Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to do this, if we cannot show them the necessary respect to give them this autonomy to find solutions to these problems, then we are not going to be able to work to close the gap on the issues and on the indicators that we are shockingly missing targets on at the moment.

I am very glad that this was a theme that was touched upon by Bill Shorten in his reply speech to the Closing the gap report this morning. He spoke about empowering communities, empowering Aboriginal people and, most importantly, listening and showing respect. This was demonstrated this morning when Senator Pat Dodson spoke to the Labor caucus about the campaign for Indigenous recognition and for closing the gap in this country. It has been proven that respect for Aboriginal people, listening to them and providing them with autonomy to come up
with solutions does work. I point to two programs that I am very proud are located in the community of Kingsford Smith.

Peter Cooley and Sarah Martin are two Indigenous entrepreneurs who run a company called First Hand Solutions. They are the instigators of the Blak Markets at Bare Island, which have been very popular, and the Catch N Cook program. Peter came to see me to tell me some months ago about a program that was very important for young Aboriginal men who were falling out of the education system. It is again about Aboriginal people providing the solutions to these problems. Peter's focus is on getting those kids to connect again with their country and getting them to connect again with their culture. That culture and that connection with country—that inspiration about the Dreamtime, bush tucker and understanding of the land and country—can set people back on a path to education, bettering themselves and having pride in and being proud of their Aboriginal heritage and culture. I was very pleased that late last year Labor's education spokesperson, Tanya Plibersek, visited La Perouse Public School with me and spoke to Peter and some of the kids who have gone through that program and saw its success. It is something I am very proud of and am very proud is happening in our electorate.

The second program is the Aboriginal Health College, which is located at Little Bay in Kingsford Smith. Every year I go along to the wonderful graduation and see the many Aboriginal people who graduate from these programs with diplomas. There are training programs at all levels providing health education. They provide health programs throughout the country. Their catchcry is: Aboriginal health education in Aboriginal hands. There is no better way to put it. Each year I see the pride of the graduates, who have gone through and worked hard to get their certificates. The work they are doing in the community is inspirational. Once again it proves that Aboriginal people have the solutions. It is about respect, and that is what we should be focusing on in closing the gap.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Goodenough): It being 6.30 pm the debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 192B. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Consideration resumed of the motion:

That grievances be noted.

Centrelink

Mr ROB MITCHELL (McEwen) (18:30): Tonight I rise to discuss the pain that is being felt in my community over this government's Centrelink robo-debt-recovery-system failure. Sadly, this government has failed us yet again by the way it has abused the system, once again attacking the most vulnerable in our community.

Labor have time and time again made clear our commitment to a transparent and efficient Centrelink system. We support Centrelink cracking down on people who are trying to rort our welfare system. But it is obvious that the Turnbull government cannot even get a crackdown right. They came out last year with all the bells and whistles claiming they were going to claw back $4 billion believed to have been incorrectly paid to welfare recipients. They were out there spruiking the new automated system that would match a welfare recipient's details with information from the Australian Taxation Office and generate 20,000 debt notices a week—up from 20,000 a year—in their so-called crackdown when it came in in July.

They had the cheerleaders out in support. Victorian Senator Derryn Hinch said it was 'bizarre' that billions of dollars were being wrongfully paid to welfare recipients. He congratulated the government for going after the greedy. Queensland Senator and Liberal buddy Pauline Hanson called the welfare system 'wrong' and pushed her agenda to issue identity cards to supposedly reduce the rates of fraud. But the icing on the cake was when the Minister for Human Services himself promised to jail anyone who owed money to Centrelink. To quote Minister Tudge:

We'll find you, we'll track you down and you will have to repay those debts and you may end up in prison.

Doesn't the minister know that studies like the HILDA report in 2016, from the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, show that Australian welfare dependency is at historical lows? He is clearly not alone because this came after a mass email campaign by the police and Centrelink that also threatened welfare recipients with jail if they did not provide accurate information.

This country should pride itself on helping out the most vulnerable in our society. It should be able to say to people, 'In times of trouble, we are there to help you.' But instead this government is out there chasing them down, chasing down people for debts they never owed, and it is just plain wrong. I have lost count of the number of constituents who have come to me worried and upset about the system's calculations of their debts. I have heard so many stories of the stress it puts on people with disabilities, on families with children to support, on honest people
trying to just keep their heads above water. These people work hard just to make ends meet, and Labor have made a commitment to them to make sure we provide an accessible Centrelink system when they need it. This government, however, is slapping down debt after debt without properly assessing each case, which means that hundreds of Australians are left feeling helpless and abandoned. It is not the Australian way.

Take for example a woman from my electorate of McEwen who worked for Centrelink for 15 years, and yet even she has fallen victim to this welfare sham. After falling ill for a period of time, she was forced to take leave and benefited from Centrelink’s sickness allowance during that time. When she received a message from the automatic debt recovery system saying that she owed $1,200, she immediately realised that they had calculated her debts incorrectly.

I wrote to the Minister for Human Services to raise her concerns, but this should not have happened in the first place. I wrote this letter back in December, and I have only just received an interim response from the department, so I imagine there are probably a few thousand letters on the minister's desk awaiting his signature on matters like this. Luckily for this constituent, she knew the system well, and she was able to correct the calculations. But what about all of those people who do not know the system? What about how this debt recovery system deeply affects them?

Another one of my constituents came to me about Centrelink's wrongful assessment of her debt. Throughout her law degree at Monash University she received Centrelink payments. After graduating, she was contacted and informed that she owed almost $7,000.

Why? Because Centrelink assessed that she was not a full-time student between February and October 2016. She was then forced to pay this money, to pay this so-called debt, besides the fact that it is an ongoing appeals process. It is plain outrageous. For a 25-year-old recent graduate seeking employment and living at home, these debts caused emotional distress and strained relationships with family. Centrelink later on admitted that she did not have to repay the debt, but it was far too late. She felt that it was unconscionable and unfair because the error led to the disaster of her family relationship breakdown.

The Centrelink automated debt-recovery system targets so many residents in McEwen I continue to receive these countless messages asking for help and guidance to navigate the system. Recently, I was approached by a couple from Doreen, telling me that Centrelink assessed they owed $4,000 for a period in which the husband was briefly unemployed—working on a casual and part-time basis between 2011 and 2012. This couple were shocked because not only were they struggling to support their family but also they were sure they had diligently reported all their earnings to Centrelink's requirements. These people, despite the minister's assertion, were neither ignorant nor careless. Like many others, they felt lost because they knew it would not be easy to prove their earnings from a casual job over five years ago. And of course, Centrelink did not stop there. No, they added a recovery fee to their debts, which was another layer of insult and financial injury. The couple contacted Centrelink a few times, and got conflicting answers about where their debt stood.

It is concerning that this mismanagement of documentation under this government and Centrelink is so negatively impacting the constituents in my electorate and many others around Australia. The couple was considered guilty until they proved their innocence. It is demoralising and it is inexcusable. Centrelink forced them into a repayment plan and the couple told me that Centrelink's actions had caused a lot of unnecessary strain—on a family just trying to survive.

There are many people in McEwen who are being forced to pay unnecessary debts like this all the time. And it is not just the financial stress it is the emotional stress and the pain that they feel when they are being treated like criminals for something they have not done. It is an exact failure of this government and this government's ability to manage an economy and to manage a welfare system.

Some say that 20 per cent of these debts identified in the Centrelink data-matching system are wrong. That is 20 per cent. But who knows what the figure actually is. Even The Age's economics editor, Peter Martin, suggests the rate of mistakes in the initial letters could be as high as 90 per cent. Where is the government's apology on this? The system is flawed, yet the government has done nothing as usual.

Prime Minister Turnbull's former digital transformation chief, Paul Shelter, said that if Centrelink were a commercial company with a 20 percent failure rate it would be out of business. So why, exactly, are we expected to sit around and accept this abject failure? This is dealing with peoples' finances. It is dealing with people's budgets. It is jeopardising their mental health, their family relationships and their ability to stay afloat. It is unacceptable. These are law-abiding citizens paying debts that they do not owe, because they trust the government—which, as we have learnt, is a bad thing to do—because Centrelink's bureaucracy is too much to deal with and because, sometimes, the necessary records get lost in the system.
We have seen whistleblowers reveal the truth that the government is constantly trying to hide. We have been told that Centrelink staff are being ordered not to use records in Centrelink's possession to change the debt notices. We are told that Centrelink staff reviewed hundreds of debt notices and only found a few dozen were correct. We are also told that Centrelink staff were advised to only lightly assess the debt conclusions, letting most of them get through. What kind of system is this?

This government is trying to make money by scaring and harassing the people who can least afford it, and forcing the people of Australia to pay ridiculous debts that do not exist. Tell me, did the government also contact IBM to set up the robo-debt system? The whole mess seems pretty similar to the government's last debacle, which, of course, was the census. These kinds of avoidable mistakes have made constituents lose confidence in Centrelink to properly record and store the documentation they submit. They have no confidence in getting timely service and attention, either in person or on the phone.

The Centrelink automated debt recovery system is, to put it simply, a catastrophe. The government is dragging innocent Australians into their absurd system, labelling them as fraudsters and expecting them to fork out thousands of dollars that they never owed. We are not going to stand by and let this havoc continue across my electorate. It is time the minister came out and apologised for his failings.

**Bangka Day 75th Memorial Service 2017**

Ms FLINT (Boothby) (18:39): In the introduction to her book, *Well may we say ... the speeches that made Australia*, author Sally Warhaft observes:

Even when we know that words are not enough, sometimes, offered humbly and humanely, they are all we have.

I cannot think of a more appropriate sentiment with which to begin this speech about 65 brave Australian nurses who endured the unthinkable 75 years ago today. There are no words that can truly do justice to these remarkable women who experienced atrocities and tragedies so awful they are difficult to recount.

The story of these 65 Australian nurses begins with their evacuation from Singapore as it fell on 12 February 1942. It was on the 12th that they boarded the small ship the *Vyner Brooke* along with many civilians and children. On board the *Vyner Brooke* and under the direction of matrons Olive Paschke and Irene Drummond, the 65 nurses gave up their quarters to civilians and took charge of serving food from the limited rations. The matrons determined early on that, in the event of an evacuation, the nurses would be the last to leave the ship. The ship was loaded far beyond its capacity and being small and alone on the sea, it was a target for the Japanese, despite the best efforts of the ship's captain to hug the coastline of the islands of Indonesia as they fled.

And so, 75 years ago today on Valentine's Day, the little *Vyner Brooke* was attacked by nine Japanese aircraft who bombed it no less than 30 times in five minutes, before damaging it so badly it began to sink. Many were killed during the attack. Even though the ship was quickly sinking, as per the orders of the matrons, the nurses ensured all other passengers left the *Vyner Brooke* before they jumped into the sea to cling to debris. Many of the nurses could not swim. All were at the mercy of the current. Injured and drifting, 53 nurses somehow made it to Bangka Island; 12 did not.

I acknowledge the wonderful work of the Australian Mint for releasing a coin today, which I have here with me, to commemorate the anniversary of this terrible tragedy. Of those who did make it to shore, some were captured by Japanese troops and taken to Muntok on Bangka Island, where they were held with civilian women and children. Eight of these nurses would tragically die in 1945 just before the end of the war. Nearby, 22 nurses, including several who were badly injured, along with civilians and servicemen from other ships, were washed up on Radji beach, Bangka Island. Matron Irene Drummond coordinated the 100 or so survivors. It was Matron Drummond who held her nurses together, when upon their surrender the Japanese troops proceeded to first kill the servicemen, who were surrendering with them, and then the civilians. It was Matron Drummond who said to her nurses as they marched into the sea to be machine-gunned, then bayoneted to death by the Japanese, 'Chins up girls. I'm proud of you and I love you all.'

Miraculously, Sister Vivian Bullwinkel survived this atrocity. Wounded and in shock, she not only dragged herself out of the sea but after coming across a badly wounded soldier cared for him for days until he was well enough to walk with her to the village of Muntok. Sister Bullwinkel survived the conditions in the internment camp that claimed the lives of eight of her fellow nurses and later gave evidence to war crimes tribunals in Australia and Japan. I cannot summarise the courage and dedication of these nurses better than Dr Brendan Nelson, the Director of the Australian War Memorial, in his address to the Bangka Day Memorial Service at the Women's Memorial Playing Fields in my electorate on Sunday, 12 February 2017. Describing the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Dr Nelson said:

The most prominent image chosen in the centre facing Anzac Parade across the lake to the parliament is neither the light horseman nor a Naval Officer.