



## The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council

---

### **NATSICC response to 2021 Closing the Gap Statement and new national agreement framework**

For many years we have called for the Catholic Social Teaching of Subsidiarity to be employed, not only Closing the Gap Policy, but in all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy. In Prime Minister Scott Morrison's recent announcement of the new \$1bn Government's Implementation Plan and Priority reforms we are finally starting to see glimpses of a new approach that acknowledges and utilises the knowledge and expertise of Australia's First Peoples – Australia's first scientists and diplomats and custodians of the world's oldest continuing culture.

The Prime Minister used the terms 'empower' and 'genuine partnerships' when outlining the road ahead for Closing the Gap and, on the Closing the Gap website it states the new National Agreement "acknowledges that to close the gap, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must determine, drive and own the desired outcomes, alongside all governments." These statements leave our Council cautiously optimistic that our voices will now not only be heard, but listened to and acted upon.

In 2016, NATSICC wrote 'self-determination, pride and self-respect are the banks of the river through which the waters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life flows.' It was true then and it is true now. Subsidiarity compels us to realise that the people closest to, and most affected by, the issues are the ones best placed to address them, with the help of the Government. From the experience of the Council, Programs that genuinely embrace the principles of Subsidiarity when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the most effective.

The \$378.6 million Redress Scheme for Stolen Generations survivors in the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory, as well as in the Jervis Bay territory in NSW is a welcome initiative, however, we lament the time it has taken and feel for the many that have passed away before this announcement. They will not have received the funds in their lifetime, nor will they have an opportunity to receive an apology.

We now echo calls for WA and QLD to initiate their own Redress Schemes for members of the Stolen Generation. This issue is time sensitive and needs to be viewed with urgency.

NATSICC would also like to see the Government to provide recipients of the \$75,000 payments with resources and clear mechanisms that will enable them to seek appropriate financial advice from accredited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander providers should they wish. Building the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to manage their own financial wellbeing is imperative to mitigating the predatory behaviour of some companies.

Additionally, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face significant hurdles in dealing with financial institutions, due to lack of cultural sensitivity and, significant to the those receiving these redress funds, difficulty in providing proof of identity.

Overall, NATSICC is of the opinion that the targets included in the new revised Agreement are appropriate, however, the targets themselves have never been the core issue. The commitment to reaching those targets have left many in the community feel like it is all an effort in 'ticking boxes'. While acknowledging there have been some successes, the design and delivery of the Programs attached to each target have often been created without appropriate consultation and lacking clarity of mission.

We have identified the following as important issues to be considered to ensure a more effective, appropriate and holistic approach to meeting the targets:

### **Support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations**

Many of the core 'deliverables' of the Agreement's 16 targets fall into the scope of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Organisations – where a \$50m funding boost was also announced. We are in agreeance with the Coalition of Peaks that these Organisations have been underfunded for many years and it will take a significant commitment to the long-term stability of funding to ensure that these Organisations can operate effectively.

NATSICC also hopes that longer term funding arrangements (10 years plus) will accompany the new Agreement. For too long, short term funding agreements have hampered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations in delivering Projects. Combined with 'clunky' and inflexible application and acquittal processes, an inordinate amount of time is spent on administration rather than on the actual delivery of the Programs.

The Government needs to show our Organisations that they have faith, by providing long term funding, and that they have trust by designing clear, flexible and transparent application and acquittal processes.

### **Raise the age of criminal responsibility**

This needs to be addressed with urgency. Australia needs to fall in line with International Convention and raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 – 14 years of age.

Raisetheage.org.au states:

"In just one year across Australia close to 600 children aged 10 to 13 years were locked up and thousands more were hauled through the criminal legal system. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately impacted by these laws and pushed into prison cells at even higher rates, accounting for 65 per cent of these younger children in prisons."

Adding to the above statistics, at most times 100% of youth in detention in the Northern Territory are Aboriginal.

No child should be in prison. Parents should be made accountable in some way but then we still need to work on the generational trauma. A combination of Diversionary Programs run by Community Organisations and reconnection to land and culture need to be implemented in the place of incarceration.

The Kimberley area of Western Australia has the highest youth suicide rate in the world. Tragically, many of these deaths are Aboriginal people. Raising the age of criminal responsibility is only one part of the solution, but an important move towards addressing such a shameful situation occurring in an prosperous first world Country like Australia.

### **Endorsement of the Uluru Statement from the Heart**

Our Communities are yet to spiritually recover from the out of hand dismissal of the Statement from the Heart by the then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in 2017.

It is the belief of NATSICC that the core recommendations outlined in the Statement from the Heart need to be implemented to allow for the Closing the Gap Targets to be met. Touchstone recommendations like Truth Telling, Constitutional Reform and a Voice to Parliament are imperative to ensuring that the Partnerships outlined in the new Agreement are genuine and result in effective outcomes.

Truth Telling is non negotiable. It does not need to be painful. It might be shocking and might evoke shame, but that is part of the healing and moving forward to find solutions together.

### **Education of Mainstream Australia**

The more we get to know each other, the more we realise that we are all the same in the eyes of God. Culturally, there may be differences, but these differences add to the diversity and beauty of creation. The rhythms of our interactions, languages, relationships and rituals all create the symphony of life. All Australians must be awoken to the unique harmony that Australia can produce.

None of the targets in the Closing the Gap Agreement are possible, unless the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-indigenous Australia is reframed. The constant conversations around the money spent on First Australian Programs becomes divisive without a clear message as to why the funds are needed, and how they are helping to build a more just Nation. We are advocating the use of 'asset based' language that highlights the gifts and knowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples bring to the table, rather than being defined by the situation in which they find themselves.

An example is labelling a Community "poverty stricken". An alternative is "the Community is still rich in language and a culture that stretched back millennia but is now experiencing poverty". This terminology provides a more holistic picture of the Community and provides the reader with the context in which the problem is occurring.

Sharing this information through the stories of those that need help has proven effective to humanise the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and also helps to move us away from the deficit focused language that has previously been employed.

All Australians are incredibly frustrated with the slow progress of Closing the Gap. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are paying for it with their lives. Statistics mean very little in the lives of our people- we want an education, we want our families to stay together, we want proper housing, and we want our kids to have dreams, goals and the right to be part of this society- not in jail where they are made out to be outcasts and no good; and where they have no self respect or self esteem.

As a society, we do not have time for the current pace of progress to continue and we hope that through the empowerment of First Nations Organisations and individuals, we may begin to see parity on all the targets in our lifetime.

### Summary of Statement

- The Government's renewed focus on developing partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations in reaching the new targets is appropriate
- We welcome the Stolen Generations Redress Scheme for the ACT, NT and Jervis Bay territory in NSW, but call for QLD and WA to introduce similar Schemes as a matter of urgency
- Longer term funding arrangements would empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led Organisations to create long term plans and develop Programs with greater lifespans
- The age of criminal responsibility must be raised to 14 years of age
- Government should move away from 'deficit' language when describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities
- NATSICC calls on the Government to adopt the key pillars of the Uluru Statement – Truth Telling, a Voice to Parliament and Constitutional Reform
- The education of mainstream Australia to the cultural gifts and genuine need of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is imperative to Closing the Gap

### Quotes for media (Referenced: "the NATSICC Council.....")

- "We want an education, we want our families to stay together, we want proper housing, and we want our kids to have dreams, goals and the right to be part of this society"
- "Self-determination, pride and self-respect are the banks of the river through which the waters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life flows."
- "None of the targets in the Closing the Gap Agreement are possible, unless the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-indigenous Australia is reframed."
- "We are advocating the use of 'asset based' language that highlights the gifts and knowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples bring to the table, rather than being defined by the situation in which they find themselves."
- "It is the belief of NATSICC that the core recommendations outlined in the Statement from the Heart need to be implemented to allow for the Closing the Gap Targets to be met."
- "As a society, we do not have time for the current pace of progress to continue and we hope that through the empowerment of First Nations Organisations and individuals, we may begin to see parity on all the targets in our lifetime."
- "Truth Telling is a non negotiable. It does not need to be painful, it might be shocking and might evoke shame but that is part of the healing and moving forward to find solutions together."

