

Australia: Bipartisan fraud on “closing the gap” of Aboriginal poverty

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The Labor government’s release of the annual Closing the Gap report on indigenous disadvantage has been the occasion for more lies and crocodile tears about poverty in Aboriginal communities.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard told parliament on February 6 that “closing the gap” was about “shared humanity” and “equal rights to services and support.” Liberal-National opposition leader Tony Abbott hailed Gillard’s “honesty” and declared there was “a new spirit in this land” that was “reaching out to embrace the indigenous people.”

Both leaders cynically claimed their parties were committed to eradicating the impoverishment inflicted on Australia’s indigenous communities. In reality, the shocking social conditions are the direct responsibility of federal and state governments, of every political stripe, over the past two centuries. The corporate media duly congratulated the two politicians for the “rare display of unity” and praised the “warmth” of their speeches.

This bipartisanship has one purpose: to cover up the reality that the Closing the Gap program will do nothing to end the desperate poverty facing indigenous communities, and was never designed to do so.

“Closing the Gap” was launched in 2008 by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd following his formal parliamentary apology to the “stolen generation”—the many thousands of Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970.

The apology and the “gap” program took place as Labor continued and expanded the previous Howard government’s Northern Territory “intervention,” which imposed a series of anti-democratic measures against indigenous communities, stripped welfare recipients of control over their own benefits, sought to break up remote communities and take control of potentially

lucrative Aboriginal land.

Under Rudd, and then Gillard, Labor extended “welfare quarantining”—the compulsory “income management” of welfare recipients—and other socially regressive measures beyond the Northern Territory, initially targeting five urban working class suburbs across Australia. In other words, Aborigines, one of the most vulnerable sections of the working class, became guinea pigs to test policies that are now being unleashed across the board. (See: “Labor government extends welfare quarantine powers across Australia”).

The Closing the Gap program selected six social indicators to set targets to overcome inequality between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. These were: life expectancy; mortality rates for children under five; early childhood education; reading, writing and numeracy; Year 12 attainment rates; and employment.

These indicators provide only a partial picture of the entrenched deprivation facing Aboriginal communities. Yet even by these carefully-chosen indices, this year’s report shows that inequality between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians has barely changed, or widened, since 2008.

The life expectancy gap has made little progress and will, according to various commentators, be impossible to bridge by 2031, the target date. Life expectancy for indigenous males is currently 67.2 years, compared to 78.7 years for non-indigenous males, and for indigenous females 72.9 years, compared to 82.6 years for non-indigenous females.

Average Australian life expectancy is the fifth highest in the world, but indigenous Australians rank about 100th on a list of 180 nations, according to the United Nations 2011 Human Development Index—on a par with Trinidad, Belarus, Azerbaijan and Vanuatu.

Two-thirds of indigenous deaths arise from chronic

and preventable diseases such as diabetes and heart problems. Recent HealthInfoNet statistics show that indigenous people are seven times more likely to die from diabetes than non-indigenous Australians. The deepening health and social spending cuts that the federal and state governments have begun to implement will only worsen these figures.

Gillard claimed that her government was on track to ensure that all four-year-old indigenous children had access to pre-school by the end of this year and “progress” was being made in halving the gap in infant mortality rates. She was forced to admit, however, that the gap in literacy and numeracy skills had worsened for Year 3 children and stalled in some other grade years. Only three of eight reading and numeracy indicators were tracking as expected, Gillard said, and the other five required “considerable work.”

Predictably Gillard, Abbott and the media failed to mention unemployment. Indigenous employment rates fell from 48 percent in 2006 to 46.2 percent in 2011. According to the official unemployment figures, which severely underestimate the real level of joblessness, indigenous unemployment increased from 15.6 percent to 17.1 percent last year. In regional and remote areas, the rate exceeds 19 percent, with indigenous unemployment more than five times higher than for non-indigenous workers.

Closing the Gap targets do not measure nutrition levels, causes of death, homelessness and housing, lack of access to potable water supplies, suicides and other basic indicators of the Third World conditions produced by decades of dispossession, oppression and government neglect.

No figures, for example, are given for indigenous incarceration rates, which continue to climb. More than 26 percent of Australia’s adult prisoners are Aboriginal, even though they represent just 2.5 percent of the country’s total population. Half of all juveniles in detention are indigenous. In 2008, the incarceration rate for young Aborigines was 27 times the non-indigenous rate. Last year, after nearly five years of Labor rule, that figure rose to 31 times.

This increase is no surprise. Life is bleak for thousands of young Aborigines, particularly in remote and regional areas, with seriously overcrowded housing, poor health, few educational opportunities, and little prospect of meaningful employment. The

most damning indicator is the Aboriginal suicide rate, which is about double that of the non-indigenous population. The highest rates are among 25 to 29 year-old indigenous males, at 105 deaths per 100,000 population, and 20 to 24 year-old females, at 21.8 deaths per 100,000.

Gillard offered the usual platitudes and claims that her government was doing everything possible to “overcome indigenous poverty.” Her underlying message, however, was that “closing the gap” was a “shared responsibility.” In plain English, any failure to achieve the program’s targets could be blamed on the victims of the social conditions confronting Aborigines.

Behind the bipartisan display of concern stand the demands of corporate Australia for the slashing of all social spending and an end to “welfare entitlement”—that is, social security payments. The Northern Territory “intervention”—rebadged by Labor as “Stronger Futures”—is actually “widening the gap” as part of an austerity offensive against the working class as a whole.



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