

Australia's "Closing the Gap" fraud: Indigenous conditions worsen

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18 February 2016

Delivering the Australian government's annual "Closing the Gap" report on indigenous disadvantage to parliament last week, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull turned the world on its head. He extolled the report as an "exciting opportunity, to empower the imagination, enterprise, wisdom and full potential of our First Australians."

The previous Labor government established the phoney "Closing the Gap" process in 2008, on the pretence of rectifying the gulf between the health and wellbeing of indigenous and non-indigenous people. It was launched after Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's equally cynical "National Apology" to the "Stolen Generations," referring to Aboriginal children who were removed from their families up until 1970.

Turnbull, speaking for the wealthy elite he represents, and the privileged indigenous layer that the Australian political establishment has cultivated, declared: "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are studying at universities at home and abroad, at Oxford and Harvard, are completing medicine degrees and apprenticeships, are sending their children to school, buying homes, starting and running businesses, and have dreams for the future that are as optimistic and as different as the rest of us."

The reality could not be more different, even as measured by the seven limited indices set in 2008. This year's report card reveals that most of the targets are not being met, while seeking to cover up the failure on the two targets allegedly "on track."

Most of the statistics have not even been updated since last year's report. This itself illustrates the fraud of the "Closing the Gap" operation and demonstrates the official indifference toward the social conditions confronting indigenous people, who are among the poorest and most vulnerable layers of the working class.

· "Not on track" is the target of halving the gap in employment by 2018. According to the report's outdated figures, the indigenous employment rate, among people of workforce age (15–64), fell from 53.8 percent in 2008 to 47.5 percent in 2012–13.

The report attributes this to a "softening" of the labour market, marginally compounded by the closure of the work-for-the-dole Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program. In other words, indigenous workers are among the worst affected by the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs in mines and basic industries that accelerated in 2012–13.

This decline cannot be explained by the difficulty of finding work in remote areas. In the major cities, where the majority of Aboriginal people live, the rate was just 49.8 percent—well below the national rate for all working people of 72.1 percent.

· The target of eventually closing the gap in life expectancy by 2031 is also "not on track." In fact, again on outdated figures—from 2010 to 2012—no progress has been made. A gap of 10.6 years for men and 9.5 years for women remained. The report claims that the overall indigenous mortality rate declined by 16 percent from 1998 to 2014, but a footnote states: "However, no significant change was detected between the 2006 baseline and 2014."

· A target to "ensure access" to early childhood education to all Aboriginal four-year-olds in remote communities "expired unmet" in 2013, reaching only 85 percent. This year's report provides no data on the new target of having 95 percent of indigenous four-year-olds nationally

enrolled in such programs by 2025.

- Another “reset” goal, adopted in 2014 to close the gap in school attendance by 2018, also looks set to fail. In 2015, the attendance rate for indigenous students was 83.7 percent—“little change” from 2014—compared to 93.1 percent for non-indigenous students.

- One target supposedly “on track” is closing the mortality gap for children under five by 2018. According to the report, “there was a decline in indigenous child mortality rates of around 6 percent from the 2008 baseline.” But, in another example of dishonesty, a footnote states that the decline from 2008 to 2014 was “not statistically significant.”

- On closing the gap in Year 12 completion rates by 2020, the gap reportedly narrowed from 39.6 percentage points in 2008 to 28 percentage points in 2012–13. But no new data has been provided since the last report.

- On halving the literacy and numeracy gap by 2018, the report claims the numbers to be “within reach” on the basis of 2015 results in just four out of eight areas, based on NAPLAN standardised testing results for years 3, 5, 7, and 9. It admits that “caution is required as results vary from one year to the next.”

These indices are doubly misleading. First, they compare the indigenous “average” with the non-indigenous “average.” This covers over the ever-growing inequality in society as a whole, and also among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, from whom a well-to-do layer of business entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, politicians and academics has been created over the past four decades.

In other words, the results do not disclose anything of the class nature of indigenous disadvantage. For a clearer vision, the comparison would need to be between the indicators for indigenous and non-indigenous poor and working class people, and those for the non-indigenous and indigenous wealthy. Such figures would more clearly reveal the widening class divide in Australia.

Second, the seven targets exclude many critical social indicators. For example, the number of Aboriginal children taken from their families has increased by 440 percent since the Australian Human Rights Commission’s *Bringing them Home* report was released in 1997.

Indigenous people constitute about 3 percent of the total Australian population and yet they make up 27 percent of the national adult male prison population, and over 47 percent of the young people in the criminal justice system.

Failures on targets have been admitted in previous annual reports, but the outcomes are worsening. This is largely because of the deteriorating social conditions facing the entire working class, and government cuts to health, education and other social programs, driven by the collapse of the mining boom and the growing impact of the global financial breakdown that surfaced in 2008. This social reversal is particularly hitting the most vulnerable members of the working class, with indigenous people among the most disadvantaged of all.

One of the most offensive features of Turnbull’s speech was its patronising message. “[W]e have not always shown you, our First Australians, the respect you deserve,” he said. “But despite the injustices and the trauma, you and your families have shown the greatest tenacity and resilience.”

Far from showing any “respect,” Australia’s capitalist class drove Aboriginal people off their land, subjected them to massacres and disease epidemics, removed their children, and killed many young people in police custody and prisons. Most recently, the Northern Territory Intervention, begun by the Howard Liberal-National government in 2007 and then continued by Labor, involved welfare quarantining, forced removal of families from remote communities and funding cuts to health, welfare, employment and legal aid programs.

Behind the contemptuous references to “tenacity and resilience,” the shocking truth is that indigenous people are dying at alarming rates, being imprisoned at staggeringly high rates, and suffering from terrible levels of unemployment, ill health, disease, homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction and poverty.



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