

NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

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Member for Fong Lim

HANSARD EXTRACT

CLOSING THE GAP

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government. Labor promised it. The CLP ran off and said that it would match the $100m for the DV sector to try to get on top of the scourge of domestic, family and sexual violence in the Northern Territory, which unfortunately affects all of us in all our electorates. CLP members made that promise and broke it. They should hang their heads in shame.

In Aboriginal Affairs one would think that nothing is done. The Member for Barkly spoke about the NT Aboriginal Affairs Framework. That went through quietly. We looked for the framework last sittings, but it was not there. He said that the government had launched it. It was done quietly and without fanfare, almost as though the government does not want people to know that there is an Aboriginal Affairs Framework sitting somewhere with the CLP logo attached to it. It looks like a beautiful 12-page document with about 10 pages of writing. We will be looking at, because it is news to me that this framework was released. Every single second of any decision the CLP likes to put out a press release. CLP members do not like talking to the media, but they like to put out a piece of paper and expect everyone to find it on the NT Government website.

There is a long way to go, regardless of who is in power in the Northern Territory. One thing is for sure: Aboriginal Affairs and Closing the Gap targets will not advance for the better under the CLP because it is not committed and not genuine and it does not have respect for Aboriginal Territorians who have been here for thousands of years and making sure that Closing the Gap matters.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to acknowledge Close the Gap Day and the need to do something about Closing the Gap targets. I thank the Member for Arafura for bringing on this matter of public importance.

The statistics speak for themselves; there is nothing challenging about this. It is all going backwards and has been for some time. By and large, it has been going backwards because there has not been much of plan or a commitment to this. It has been nothing much more than motherhood statements for a period and histrionics, as we have just witnessed.

I want to be angry about this situation and the plight of Indigenous people in the north of Australia in particular, but mostly I am just sad. Member for Mulka, I share your frustrations because the fact is that governments have been negligent for a long time.

People are dying. Statistics indicate that things are getting worse. Not for nothing, but without the histrionics, I could not agree more with my colleague the Member for Barkly. The government for the last 20 years did little to progress much of this agenda. It is absurd to put on the kind of performances we have just witnessed without taking some ownership of the lack of commitment to improve the material conditions of existence for Indigenous people in the north of Australia. I am, frankly speaking, insulted by the performance that the Leader of the Opposition just put on. The idea that one out of 17 of us in this room cares about Indigenous people is insulting. It is insulting to me personally.

Six years before the Closing the Gap targets, initiative or program was even put out, I was doing research out bush in the north of Australia on welfare state restructuring and its impact on Indigenous people. All the things that I wrote about then, albeit 24 years ago, I stand by to this day. They are not getting any better; they have been largely getting worse incrementally over time. That is because of a lack of genuine commitment to create opportunity in the north of Australia.

Pontificating about communities in the bush without ever having done a goddamn thing to create opportunity for people in the bush when you had the opportunity to do so is just hypocritical. Simply, that is what it is: hypocrisy.

Often in this place I talk about the architecture of opportunity. Public health, housing, education and infrastructure are the things that create the bedrock for opportunity, and always have in the north of Australia. I hate descending to this, but the Labor government did nothing on those things for the most part, substantively, for people out bush in particular, over the last 20 years. It is astonishing that you would beat your chest about it.

Let us talk about the statistics that are going in the wrong direction or how we might improve it, but, surely, at a certain point you have to own the problem and start talking about your prescription. What is your solution? What is your commitment to a policy position? I assure you, Leader of the Opposition, that nobody is looking to mirror what Territory Labor did on Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory over the last eight years. No jurisdiction is saying, ‘We will have some of what they are having’; that is a ridiculous thing to say. Something has to be done, so what will you do?

Here is the baseline proposition I put to all of you over and again: good luck fixing anything in the Northern Territory without more money or more people. Closing the Gap has become tired nomenclature; people are sick and tired of hearing about it. Their eyes glaze over. It does not mean anything real, except suddenly when there is an anniversary and we all get to give a speech about it and suddenly care in earnest to focus our efforts. That is not good enough. If you really want to create opportunity to close the gap—Closing the Gap is about empowering people and giving them opportunity again—the Northern Territory needs more money and more people.

Do you know who is working on more money and people for the Northern Territory? The new government. In 18 months the new government has done more to try to improve the problems of no money and no people than Labor did in the last eight years. It is Labor's sheer economic negligence and hypocrisy that has resulted in me being on this side of the House, frustrated by the ineptitude of governments past.

There is no magic money tree. We are saddled with crippling amounts of debt. We talked about it ad nauseam last week. I restrained myself from talking about it because there will be so much time to talk about it still. The point is that we are trying to go constructively forward. My learned colleague the Treasurer is dealing with the mother of all hospital passes in that regard. It is a budget that is deeply in debt. There is little to work with, and within that limited paradigm we will do what we can to restore an architecture of opportunity.

There are no viable economies in a lot of the bush in the north of Australia. Member for Mulka, you know that. You know things are shutting down and closing up. Opportunities are drying up. The fact is that economic empowerment will emancipate people in the bush.

What it will take is more money and more people; instead, what we get from the opposition, if you can call it that—this economically illiterate rabble that masquerade as an opposition—is talk about the magic money tree, asking, 'Why don't you do more of this or that?' It is because we are broke from your idiotic policy manoeuvres. Repeated failures to engage with actual policy work happened over a long period. What we had from the former government—I seldom descend to saying these kinds of things—was nothing but platitudes and press releases. That is what you got for a long time, not a genuine commitment to economic, let alone social, policy reform.

What, by contrast, is this government doing? As my colleague the Member for Barkly said at the outset of this matter of public importance, we are doing a lot of things which in totality are producing a quantifiable set of effects. One of the areas where we are having a genuinely positive effect—one of the things that really matters in the equation—is stabilising our rapidly declining population. I just said, 'Good luck fixing anything without more money or more people'.

Let us talk about numbers. Do you want to talk about data that then gets ignored? Let us look at the last two years' worth of quarterly data on population. There is a six-month lag time on population data. In the data from 13 June, which reflects the December 2023 quarter, population growth was under 1%—unbelievable. Year on year the estimated resident population growth was under 1%; it was 0.9% at that point. Three months later it was even worse, at 0.8%. Another three months later it was 0.8%. Three months later than that, in the last quarter of data under the last Labor government, it was 0.7%. We were not growing; we were demographically haemorrhaging, and with it nurses, doctors, teachers—whatever you might care to add. Without people and a viable workforce to support industry across any sector, let alone the public sector, good luck fixing anything in this place.

What happened in the first quarter of data when we took over? In the first quarter of data in December 2024, which is in the first six months reporting from when we came in—the September 2024 to December 2024 quarter—there was a 0.5% increase. Straightaway it was up to 1.2% population growth, year on year. That is what we achieved. Was that a blip or because of issuing too many student visas in one quarter? No. The next quarter it was 1.3% year-on-year population growth and the quarter after that had 1.3% population growth again. The ABS has released today's data, and it is 1.4%.

I am not saying that we are the fastest-growing anything in the country; I am saying that we are stabilising the ship that you were tanking. This government is committed to more money, people and opportunity because that will meaningfully do something about closing the gap.

They have all left. I cannot identify who is and who is not here. I withdraw that, Madam Speaker.

To the former Territory Labor government ministers who still reside in this House: take ownership for why you failed to meaningfully make any progress on Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory. I have sympathy for backbenchers and those new to the zoo on the opposition side. It is fair enough; you were just taking

orders and had to do what you had to do. However, you are now in charge and have an opportunity to do better.

The fact of the matter is that nobody on your side of politics thinks that you are credible because you demonstrate ignorance of economic matters. That is what matters to everybody, including—newsflash—Indigenous Territorians. They also want opportunity, continuity and a plan; they do not want just handouts. I stand by the work that I did 24 years ago saying exactly that. Read it at your leisure.

You wasted your time in government on boundless purple propaganda and other associated nonsense rather than doing the real policy work. That is what you did in the time that you had in government. What does real policy work look like? It can look like a range of things.

I have spoken already in this House about the work that I did in conjunction with the Minister for Health and the Minister for International Education, Migration and Population on trying to resuscitate the skilled refugee labour agreement, which the last government summarily buried because it was inconvenient for it to point out how bad population growth was. Although we could not resuscitate the program in its totality, in the time that I have been in government, under the auspices of my ministers, I have delivered new specialist nurses, new pharmacists working in our Corrections system and new population—real people who are physically here doing work, building the Territory and trying to close the gap. That is what it takes, doing the real policy work. Everything was done to try to bury that program. I do not know whether it will be resuscitated in the current feverish climate about mass immigration, but we need to have sensible conversations about our terms of engagement with the Commonwealth on migration, population and fiscal matters.

We are doing other things in that space as well. One of the most important factors that correlates with all the Closing the Gap metrics is healthcare workforce. The Minister for Health already pointed out what we are doing in that space. In addition, we have more ambitious plans in the background that we are focused on getting on with, trying to create more Commonwealth-supported places, train more local doctors and expand our healthcare workforce so that we have not just more doctors but also more allied healthcare workers, nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists and midwives.

Part of that equation involves doing the stuff we have done—being tough on crime and trying to stabilise social dysfunction. That has resulted in some people choosing to stay. We clearly had social dysfunction and a significant crime problem. Has it all gone away? Nobody is saying that it has all gone away. No-one on our side is saying that it has all gone away. We know that there are problems all over the Territory in that regard still. It is the beginning of a journey.

The sheer hypocrisy of riding on a high horse, after all the time you have been in government, and blaming us for everything in the last 18 months we have been in government—has everything we have done worked out perfectly? No, it has not. Do we have time to do other things? Yes, we have plenty of time.

It is time that the opposition starts behaving like a real opposition and, frankly speaking, stops wasting our time in government with stunts and politicking. Genuinely focus on problem-solving, not on protesting, but on actual policy. That is what we will do on this side of the House.

A member interjecting.

Dr RAHMAN: Learned colleague, that is what I am telling you I do on my side of the House. I spend my time prosecuting the argument behind the scenes to do whatever I can to problem-solve for the sake of the constituency I represent and the Northern Territory writ large. That is what we should all be doing rather than just throwing tantrums.

We will spend our time on this side of the House focusing on problem-solving and policy because that is in the best interests of Territorians. Do you know who that includes? It includes Indigenous Territorians, Member for Mulka, who—I agree with you—deserve better than anyone has offered them in years of negligent governance.

On this sad anniversary I also note the Closing the Gap targets and that we can do better and we should do better. It is my earnest hope that this government will do better.

J DAVIS (Johnston): Madam Speaker, we live in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, yet in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people are dying earlier, locked up at unprecedented rates, living in overcrowded homes and being denied the education and health opportunities that non-Aboriginal Territorians take for granted. That is why we have Close the Gap Day—not as a report or a target list, but as a commitment to justice, equality and human dignity.