

Wednesday 10th April 2017

Budget fails Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights organisation ANTaR today expressed dismay at the lack of urgency and substance in the Federal Budget to address the ongoing disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

National Director ANTaR Andrew Meehan said that the Budget is all about priorities, and the government had failed to prioritise the health and wellbeing of the nation's First Peoples.

"In February of this year the Prime Minister reported that only one of the six targets that have been set for closing the gap is on track, and those targets don't go near representing all of the social and economic issues that need addressing."

"The government is failing to adequately address the disadvantage experienced by the nation's First Peoples, failing to inject any sense of urgency in turning around these issues, and failing to listen to, and work with First Peoples," he said.

Mr Meehan noted that the Prime Minister had recognised the need to lift their game in saying that "...at a national level, progress needs to accelerate", but he questioned that there's any real commitment to do that in a significant way.

"That government needs listen to, and work with, First Peoples to accelerate progress is unquestionable, but nowhere is the urgency to do that evident in this Budget."

"If the government can afford to build a dozen multi-billion dollar submarines, or give tax cuts to corporations, it can afford to address the wellbeing of just 3% of the population, and the First Peoples of the land," he said.

Mr Meehan offered the following suggestions of what could be funded immediately to start to signal that government is taking the health and wellbeing of First Peoples seriously.

1. Restoring previous funding levels to the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples as the national representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
2. Funding the establishment of peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing and education organisations to provide a national voice for those issues
3. Provide sufficient funding for the Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023
4. Fund the development of a long-term National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Cultural Determinants of Health Strategy
5. Fund a national Inquiry into institutional racism in the health system
6. Prioritise disability services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including through making disability a priority in the Indigenous Advancement Strategy and quarantine an equitable share entitlement of the NDIS according to need
7. Ensure adequate funding for Aboriginal Family Violence Protection Legal Services, including through allocating funding to ensure there is national coverage (regardless of geographic location) of FVPLS services.
8. Ensure funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) that is able to meet the level of need, including through implementing the Productivity Commission's Recommendation from its Access to Justice Arrangements Inquiry Report to provide an additional \$120 million of Commonwealth funding to the Legal Assistance sector.

9. Fund reforms to address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system

Further substantive reforms are encompassed in the historic Redfern Statement which government must work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to implement.

"It's time to inject some urgency into meeting the government's own commitments to closing the gap, and address ongoing social and economic inequality experienced by First Peoples. If government doesn't do this, we'll be seeing yet another report on failure from the Prime Minister in February, at the expense of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people," Mr Meehan said.

ANTaR is the only non-Indigenous organisation dedicated solely to supporting the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and working to educate the wider community, shape public opinion, and speak up for justice, rights and respect for Australia's First Peoples.