Government must act now to meet its commitment on justice targets

On February 13, 2008 my colleagues and I left work mid-morning and walked the Prime Minister to The Block in Redfern. It may be a memory playing tricks on me but as we walked, the skies opened up and the rain began.

It was of course an historic day for our nation – a day which has been, and continues to be, talked about by many – the day our Prime Minister apologised on behalf of the Government and Parliament of Australia to the Stolen Generations.

As the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Gooda later said, it was the day “Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians sat together, held each other and cried together”.

Many others have commented on the importance of the healing that day – to members and family members of the Stolen Generations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but also the wider community.

Much has also been said of the disappointment of many at the absence of a compensation package or more substantive changes to accompany such a symbolic shift in the relationship between white and black in this country.

Understandably given the emotional and heartfelt words spoken by our Prime Minister in making the Apology, relatively less focus has been paid to the goal setting that was included in the speech.

The Prime Minister set four targets aimed at closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in health, education and employment - within a decade, halve the widening gap in literacy, numeracy and employment outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous Australians, within a decade to halve the appalling gap in infant mortality rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and, within a generation, to close the equally appalling 17 year life gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Two further closing the gap in education targets were added with an agreement forged at the Council of Australian Governments. The National Indigenous Reform Agreement set out the closing the gap framework with national partnership agreements accompanying seven building blocks and investing $4.6 billion to meet the targets.

In essence, the national partnership agreements were the instruments – agreed between federal and state and territory governments, to direct action on each of the building blocks – early childhood, schooling, health, economic development, healthy homes, safe communities and governance.

The targets gave some effect to the intent of the apology that was made then – that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda’s 2005 Social Justice Report which was the bedrock upon which the Close the Gap Campaign was established. He said then that a time dimension was needed to Close the Gap and provide a “long term vision to focus government activity, so important to the relationship between white and black in this country.

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement was so important to addressing complex, long-term issues such as traffic offences, or have simply sunk without trace. The shadow of the Stolen Generations is cast across the land with solutions to the unacceptable rates of incarceration. They are critical to the Federal Government meeting its commitment to reduce incarceration and create safer communities.

Last week, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders met in Canberra to discuss the detrimental impact of the 2014 Federal Budget on key organisations and frontline services. They called for emergency talks between the Prime Minister and national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders beyond the Indigenous Advisory Council and other individual advisers.

This call must be heeded if the Prime Minister is serious about wanting to be the “Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs”. The cuts to the vital services across many areas, including those that are needed to reduce the unacceptable rate of incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, must be reversed.

It’s now time government acted on its commitment to set a destination and chart the course to get us there in relation to incarceration and to do so with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Government should put this issue on the COAG agenda as a matter of urgency and work towards the development of justice targets. It must meet its commitment on setting targets to reduce incarceration.

As we a nation can’t let this incarceration crisis continue.

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