

THE AUSTRALIAN

THE HEART OF THE NATION

Closing the gap requires embracing success stories

Indigenous progress must be driven by the private sector too

Aptly, Malcolm Turnbull opened in parliament yesterday with a few lines in the language of the local Ngunnawal indigenous people. But each year the Closing the Gap statement brings the indigenous affairs debate back to a language everyone can understand — hard statistics on results. While symbolism, legislation, cultural change and even partisanship can all be important in their own ways, what matters most is whether practical achievements are being made to redress inequalities in education, health, employment and opportunity. Only when gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in these areas no longer exist will the nation derive the ultimate benefit from its people and indigenous citizens best decide their chosen role in it.

The eighth report since targets were set in 2008 contained what officials call mixed outcomes. A crucial target to halve the gap in infant mortality rates by 2018 is on track, with indigenous child death rates falling by a third since 1998. Immunisation rates for five-year-olds are better for indigenous children than for the rest of the population. Even still, the nation is not on track to deliver the most fundamental — and most confronting — target of ensuring indigenous Australians have the same life expectancy as the rest of the country by 2031. Mortality rates are declining but not by enough to close that gap inside the next two decades. Indigenous Australians, on average, die 10 years before their non-indigenous compatriots. That statistic alone should be bracing for all of us and guarantee ongoing commitment to improvement. Measures include programs delivering better healthcare and directly targeting chronic illnesses, smoking and drug use, but we know better health results also will flow from improvements in education and employment.

Virtually no progress has been made on the target to halve the gap in jobless rates. Yet for indigenous Australians who attain a high level of education (and more are going to university) there is no real employment gap, so education is pivotal. In this field the results vary, with some improvement in basic standards but not in attendance rates. The encouraging news is that with almost 60 per cent of indigenous children completing Year 12 (up from 47 per cent in 2008) the target to halve the school completion gap by the end of the decade is on track (85 per cent of non-indigenous students complete Year 12). The modesty of these targets speaks to the stark inequality that prevails. And given 80 per cent of the

indigenous population lives in metropolitan areas or regional towns, the difficulties of remote locations is not the overriding challenge. The social problems at play are reflected sharply by noting that indigenous Australians make up only 3 per cent of the overall population but more than a quarter (27 per cent) of our prison count.

"We must be honest about the catastrophe and violence created by drug and alcohol misuse and confront, and respond, to the cries of help, particularly from women and children," the Prime Minister told parliament. But overwhelmingly his message was one of tackling these issues with a sense of optimism. "If our greatest assets are our people," Mr Turnbull said, "if our richest capital is our human capital, then the opportunity to empower the imagination, the enterprise, the wisdom and the full potential of our First Australians is an exciting one." He recounted how he had asked indigenous educationalist Chris Sarra to detail three priorities that would make a difference and summarised Dr Sarra's considered response: "Firstly, acknowledge, embrace and celebrate the humanity of indigenous Australians. Secondly, bring us policy approaches that nurture hope and optimism rather than entrench despair. And lastly, do things with us, not to us."

The Prime Minister revealed little detail but outlined a commitment to empowering communities and individuals. He also supported indigenous constitutional recognition as an important step towards reconciliation. But in keeping with his broader economic themes about excitement and innovation Mr Turnbull spoke of optimism and opportunity. In doing so he recognised that government cannot hold all the answers; private sector efforts to create jobs, education and training — and break down barriers — are central.

This is why the Coalition should continue to support the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, run by former banker Andrew Penfold, which has created almost 3000 places at some of the nation's best schools and universities. The scheme is not for all indigenous students but, with private donations and government support, along with mentoring, it is helping to build a cohort of professionals and leaders in a variety of fields. It is driven by success and even proposes a funding model that calls on government subsidies only once a student completes their study. Success is what is needed to close the gap, and success should be shamelessly embraced and pursued.