

Hard-headed approach is needed to close the gap

Indigenous disadvantage remains our greatest challenge

There can be no more bracing reality, no statistic that conjures more pathos, than the brutal fact that indigenous children are dying before reaching the age of five, sometimes at double and even three times the rate of non-indigenous children in our nation. If anyone feels the need to question the focus or wonder about the imperative of the Closing the Gap initiative, then the cruelty of young lives lost before they have had the chance to blossom provides the bottom-line reference point for a country where equality of opportunity, let alone equality of outcome, simply does not yet exist. Putting aside all the worthy debates about policy, process, discrimination and personal responsibility, it must be out nation's greatest shame that in life expectancy, health, education and employment, indigenous Australians are left considerably behind their compatriots.

Across the nation the child mortality rate is less than 100 deaths per 100,000 children under five years old. But for indigenous children the rate is almost double that and in the Northern Territory it is three times as high. In cold hard numbers this amounts to as many as 100 extra deaths: 100 or more indigenous children dying each year because of the impact of their family's disadvantage. Over recent decades there has been improvement, especially by boosting access to care and education for expectant mothers, reducing the numbers of mothers smoking during pregnancy and improving immunisation rates. But there is much further to go in closing the gap; the aim set in this area in 2008 was to halve the difference in mortality rates between indigenous and non-indigenous children by 2018. We are failing that task.

Indeed, receiving the ninth Closing the Gap report yesterday, Malcolm Turnbull revealed we are falling behind in six of seven aims: child mortality, life expectancy, early childhood education, school attendance, reading and numeracy, and employment. Only in Year 12 attainment is the target to halve the gap by 2020 being met. Indigenous Year 12 completion has increased from 45.4 per cent in 2008 to 61.5 per cent in 2015 while the non-indigenous rate has remained stable at 84 per cent — so this target is within reach. Even then, of course, the gap needs to be closed altogether, which is why the Prime Minister declared yesterday that the state and federal governments will settle on a new range of targets over the coming year.

The disappointing progress so far

cannot go unaddressed. A Centre for Independent Studies report last year detailed a lack of accountability in the \$5.9 billion spent annually on specific programs for indigenous people. It found that only 8 per cent (or 88) of 1082 programs had been properly evaluated. In other words, there is insufficient focus on whether taxpayers are getting value for money and whether the dollars spent are achieving the outcomes they are designed to deliver. This is an appalling situation, especially considering that when combined with access to broader government services, the CIS estimates more than \$30bn is contributed each year trying to assist the 3 per cent of our population that is indigenous. We must close the gap and to do this we must ensure that this vast sum of money is used effectively. To this end Mr Turnbull has turned his focus to this challenge, vowing to empower communities so they can promote the most appropriate allocation of resources for their needs. The Prime Minister also announced a new effort through the Productivity Commission to help marry inputs with outcomes.

"We must have a rigorous evaluation of programs so we know what is working and what is not," Mr Turnbull told parliament. "So we will expand the Productivity Commission to include a new indigenous commissioner to lead the commission's work of policy evaluation." The move comes with \$50 million for research in conjunction with the indigenous Advisory Council — which has been re-formed after an untidy dissolution of Tony Abbott's appointees.

There is much to do in this national challenge. But Mr Turnbull was right, too, to draw attention to inspirational successes who light the way forward. "I ask that we give credit to the quiet achievers — the indigenous people who are working on the front line of family violence, who are enabling people with disabilities to gain the services they need, who are starting businesses, employing others, innovating." Many groups and individuals seek to make a difference but one outstanding scheme is the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, which sponsors students through school and university. It has delivered success rates of more than 90 per cent and now proposes drawing on government support only for successful graduates. There is no one-size-fits-all but the AIEF model is excellent. It is through achievement and example, in grand gestures and small, by groups and individuals, in public and private, that the disadvantage gap will be closed.