

A submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh Process

Summary

This submission argues for a more radical and substantive focus on underlying policy rather than the maintenance of a flawed structure whereby the targets are not clearly funded or resourced and there is no independent monitoring of the effectiveness of programs in relation to the targets and overall progress. The absence of such an underlying policy structure has the potential to reinforce generalised complacency in the wider community about the nation's efforts, and thus increase the risk that Indigenous people will be blamed for the ongoing lack of success in closing the gap.

The Closing the Gap targets and the associated annual process of reporting the Parliament at the beginning of the Parliamentary year have considerable advantages both to the nation as a whole and particularly for Indigenous peoples.

In particular, it provides a highly symbolic opportunity to take stock of the nation's efforts to meet its social, economic and cultural obligations to its Indigenous citizens. It also provides a high level, but shallow, form of transparency and accountability primarily related to the efforts of government at all levels in addressing the challenges of Indigenous disadvantage.

Notwithstanding the advantages, the Closing the Gap process is problematic on a number of levels.

There is a widely shared critique of the Closing the Gap process that it reinforces a focus on 'deficits' and under-emphasises Indigenous strengths. There is a conceptually separate critique (Altman 2018) which argues that the Closing the Gap focus on gaps incorporates an assumption that Indigenous people should not be different or do not have a right to choose to be different, and implicitly pushes policy towards assimilationist objectives.

While I consider that policymakers need to be cognisant and actively address both critiques in both target and policy design, I don't see them as constituting a persuasive argument for dismembering the Closing the Gap process. In particular, a focus on strengths and prosperity is not inconsistent with simultaneously focussing on deep disadvantage where it exists. The mistake would be to see these approaches as alternatives when they are more properly seen as complementary elements in a more comprehensive policy framework.

A further and more salient issue in my view is that at the level of public opinion, the Closing the Gap process operates to engender a view in the community that our elected governments and the nation as a whole are seeking to 'do the right thing' by Indigenous citizens, even if the targets are not being met in full. In other words, the Closing the Gap process operates to engender a 'complacency effect' which counterintuitively operates to undermine the political impetus to substantively address Indigenous policy concerns.

The fact that the Government has been prepared to take a decision not to renew the National Partnership Agreement on remote Indigenous housing, which allocated

\$5.4bn over the ten years to 2018, while extraordinarily high levels of remote housing disadvantage continue to drive myriad adverse health, economic, and social outcomes, provides tangible proof that this 'complacency effect' is alive and well within the Government.

Moreover, there is in my view a risk that the underlying intention of the refresh process is primarily to remove or defer the potential for negative media coverage associated with the lack of progress against specific targets particularly around the annual Prime Minister's report to Parliament. To the extent that this was to be the result of the refresh, the 'complacency effect' would be strengthened, with the result that the exclusion of Indigenous interests within key institutions and sectors of Australian life would continue and may worsen.

Given that the Closing the Gap process involves both potential risks and opportunities, any process of policy adjustment (or 'refresh') should involve a rigorous policy design process. To date, we have seen extensive consultation, but it is clear from the Public Discussion Paper '*Closing the Gap: The Next Phase*' (PMC 2017) that it has been focussed around a preconceived intention by government to shift towards a 'strength based' policy framework focussed on 'prosperity'.

The Discussion Paper, in outlining the rationale for refreshing the Closing the Gap targets, shifts seamlessly from asserting that 'Improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a key priority for our nation' to noting that 'as we approach the tenth anniversary of Closing the Gap only one of the seven national targets is in track and four will expire in 2018'. This progresses to statements acknowledging the need of governments to work differently with Indigenous Australians, and to work in 'genuine partnership' to 'identify the priorities that will inform [not 'determine'] how governments can better design and deliver programs and services, to close the gap'. This then leads to the conclusion that governments want to hear from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 'to inform a new way forward'.

We might translate this into plain English as follows: the targets are not being met, but instead of making the funding and policy changes necessary to meet them, we will talk to Indigenous people and then change the targets presumably either with targets that can be met or which are not rigorously measurable and thus cannot be shown not to have been met.

A better and logically coherent policy design process would look rather different. It would begin by asking the fundamental and basic question: What are the structural underpinnings of Indigenous disadvantage? The answers, which need to be culturally, demographically and socially nuanced, would determine the high level targets which are chosen. A series of long term policy frameworks would then be devised, ideally in consultation with Indigenous interests, directed to addressing the structural impediments to removing Indigenous disadvantage. The chosen targets, their associated policy frameworks, and the funded programs linked to each policy framework might be constructed around either strength or deficit based approaches, (or an amalgam) and would be monitored annually and evaluated independently every five to ten years.

Key elements of a radically reimagined policy framework would be to select a small number of targets which are focussed on structural change, that is, change which levels the playing field rather than merely moves the ball around on the playing field. Second, a key piece of work which PMC should coordinate would be to disentangle the funding allocated by government for citizens entitlements and the funding which is aimed at driving structural change. Third, the framework would need to actively engage all levels of government, and the Commonwealth would need to take responsibility for national funding commitments and allocations.

The absence of such a policy development process, and the associated lack of any public and bipartisan commitment to address the funding and policy shortfalls in evidence today makes the current refresh exercise a second best process. Just because the government consults Indigenous interests, or manages to design technically robust targets, the overarching long term outcome may nevertheless be sub-optimal.

Conclusion

The refresh of the Closing the Gap process ought to primarily focus on improving the linkages and the funding available for the underlying policy frameworks which impact Indigenous disadvantage. The primary focus ought not to be on the targets themselves but on improving policy design and funding allocations, particularly at a structural level. Importantly, it needs to be underpinned by the establishment of a policy framework which reflects and builds a national consensus, rather than one which is riven by Commonwealth / state conflict.

Thus for example, changes to GST and local government funding distribution arrangements should be considered to both increase resources available and to simultaneously make addressing closing the gap targets by states and territories and local governments a condition of horizontal fiscal equalisation transfers.

A focus solely on targets hiding behind the fig leaf of a new 'prosperity' focus would be an exercise in shifting the goal posts and giving the appearance of new action but won't actually change conditions on the ground for the better in Indigenous Australia. Such an exercise runs the risk of raising Indigenous (and mainstream) expectations in unsustainable and ultimately counterproductive ways.

The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee (whose Close the Gap campaign in the Indigenous health sector was the progenitor of the Commonwealth Government's Closing the Gap strategy) has released '*A ten-year review: the closing the gap strategy and recommendations for reset*'. This is an excellent and extremely well researched and argued document and the Government should take careful note of each of their recommendations. It too focusses on the need for policy frameworks to be aligned with the targets.

Finally, whatever adjustments are made to the Closing the Gap model, there is a need to re-establish a robust, independent and transparent monitoring and assessment process. The absence of such an independent oversight body in any

revised framework will clearly signal a lack of real commitment to addressing the very real and tangible consequences of deep disadvantage for the majority of Indigenous Australians.

References

Altman JC (2018). 'How the gap widened, and how to "refresh" the policy approach for remote Indigenous Australia', *New Matilda* 26 March 2018.

Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee (2018). '*A ten-year review: the closing the gap strategy and recommendations for reset*', available at www.humanrights.gov.au

PMC (2017). '*Closing the Gap: The Next Phase*', Public Discussion Paper, available at <https://closingthegaprefresh.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resources/ctg-next-phase-discussion-paper.pdf>

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