

Closing the Gap failure a political disaster for all, says Kevin Rudd



Former prime minister Kevin Rudd at the ANU in Canberra.

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Stephen Fitzpatrick

Indigenous Affairs Editor

Malcolm Turnbull will deliver a bleak ninth annual Closing the Gap report today, with an acknowledgment that efforts to reduce indigenous disadvantage remain starkly inadequate.

The report follows a succession of independent surveys critical of the government's - approach to indigenous affairs. And it comes as Kevin Rudd, who delivered the inaugural 2008 report, gave an address in Canberra last night in which he described the yearly review as "a political disaster for the government of the day, for governments of whichever political persuasion".

Attempting to limit the scale of that disaster, the Prime Minister refused to release any advance detail of the report other than a general admission of there being insufficient progress.

Last year's report found just two of seven targets on track: child mortality and Year 12 attainment. Another target, early education ("95 per cent of all indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025") was reported on for the first time last year.

Today's report will show improvements in the proportion of indigenous 20 to 24-year-olds achieving Year 12 or equivalent, improvements in health, and reading and numeracy advances.

However, Mr Turnbull is expected to emphasise in his speech to parliament the importance of better research and evaluation of Closing the Gap criteria, and may announce details of a "refresh" of the exercise already under discussion by the Council of Australian Governments.

He will also likely emphasise programs such as Empowered Communities, a detailed rethink of how indigenous policy is enacted which has yet to win full government support. It is designed to put Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the centre of regional decision-making.

Recent Productivity Commission and National Audit Office reports have been either gloomy about indigenous affairs or critical of government policy. The Audit Office's review this month of the Abbott government's 2014 landmark \$4.8 billion Indigenous Affairs Strategy found policy had been poorly conceived and hastily implemented.

Funding allocations under the system had also been unpredictable and opaque, leaving some of the very organisations contributing to Closing the Gap outcomes unable to function properly.

In November, the Productivity Commission reported alarming increases in imprisonment rates, mental health problems and self-harm. It found only 34 of 1000 indigenous programs, worth a total \$5.9bn, had been properly evaluated. While there were improvements in child mortality rates, educational outcomes and household income, rates of community violence were unchanged.

Speaking at the Australian National University last night on the ninth anniversary of the apology to the Stolen Generations, Mr Rudd said the indigenous child removal rates must be addressed through "immense co-operation across government departments (and) Aboriginal organisations being given responsibility for child welfare" in a policy shift that was "going to cost money".

Tony Abbott last night described as "regrettable" Mr Turnbull's decision not to follow his lead and spend time in an indigenous community every year.