
PM puts right people in place to shake up the system

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- Stephen Fitzpatrick

Buried deep in his Closing the Gap address to parliament yesterday was the clearest indication yet that Malcolm Turnbull intends to shake up how indigenous affairs is handled.

Without fanfare, he announced that Melbourne University pro-vice chancellor and foundation chair in indigenous health Ian Anderson would lead a root-and-branch examination of what's working and what's not.

As deputy secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, responsible for indigenous affairs, Anderson will help move the Turnbull government "from paying for services, to linking funding to outcomes; and from a one-size-fits-all mindset for program design, to local solutions".

"Indigenous families and communities must be at the centre of this approach," Turnbull said. "We have started the journey; there's much more work to do."

It was an understated indication that Turnbull will get on with what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have been crying out for: to be given an equal seat at the table in matters of policy. To have, as the Prime Minister's new indigenous advisory councillor Chris Sarra says, "things done with us, not to us".

Yesterday's announcement that there would be an indigenous productivity commissioner, tasked with assessing the effectiveness of \$5.9 billion in spending to a level of detail never previously attempted, is part of the same deep shift. Clearly things are not working, but Turnbull has avoided a megaphone-style paternalistic approach.

Instead, he has acquired one of the country's most respected indigenous academics (with special expertise in health) to reform the department, appointed a six-member council of advisers widely regarded as being more than up to the job (ably complemented by new Human Justice Commissioner June Oscar), created a statutory position to hold everyone to account, and told them all to get on with the job. Now he must keep his promise to listen to what they tell him.