

Closing the gap isn't just a dramatic policy failure, it's a moral failure too

Enough of Closing the Gap. It only shows how governments of all persuasion can get away with fatal incompetence when it comes to the First Australians



The newly crafted Aboriginal 'gargoyle' at the Australian War Memorial is sculpted with the identical condescending ethnographic curiosity as the gargoyle it replaced. Photograph: Mike Bowers for the Guardian

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Enough. This yearly political charade, Closing the Gap, is not saving Indigenous lives, getting more First Nations kids through school or keeping more young black people out of prison. Indeed, the very arbitrary determinants of “the gap” do not even include a measure on the number of incarcerated Indigenous Australians.

A big part of this largely whitefella process is, after all, managing expectations. And were you to start measuring Indigenous outcomes in terms of the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people behind bars or who continue to die in

the most hideous ways in custody, you might have to actually admit that you'd already ignored the best advice on how to change things.

On 15 April it will be 26 years since the royal commission report into Aboriginal deaths in custody. It made 339 recommendations on how to keep Indigenous Australians out of jail and, therefore, away from the possibility of dying behind bars.

In 1991, when the report was handed down, Indigenous people comprised 14% of prisoners (a shameful figure given Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders constitute about 3% of the population). Quarter of a century later, Indigenous people comprise about 27% of the prison population and 150-plus more have died behind bars.

No state or federal administration since then, conservative or Labor, has adequately explained why the royal commission's recommendations haven't been implemented.

Which goes to show that in the space of policymaking for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, governments of all persuasion can get away with the type of literally fatal incompetence/negligence/ignorance that would cause a clean sweep of the parliaments were non-Indigenous lives in such peril.

So enough already. Enough of Closing the Gap, its associated PR and pageantry and pre-release expectation management.

Every year it's the same. The appalling outcomes (this year six out of seven targets were not met) are always pretty much unchanged or, indeed, worse than the year before.

The federal parliament's leaders say they must, will, do better. The media, for the most part little interested in the nuts and bolts and delivery of policy for Indigenous Australians – because none of that involves the same make-or-break political tension as, say, debates on paid parental leave or expenses for the entitled or incessant leadership shadow play – go, "Yeah, they must do better, they've promised to do better. Let's wait and see next year."

It's an outward-facing political gesture – an assurance to the world that while our Indigenous continue to suffer as some of the most underprivileged people of the world even though they might live on the luckiest, richest continent – the mostly whitefella politicians are, at least, still watching the disaster space. Mind the gap.

This dramatic policy – and moral – failure is, like so much of what is important to Australia, is shrouded in bipartisanship.

At the core of the Redfern Statement (re-presented to the politicians after it was ignored during the last election campaign) is the ambition for self-determination – for another chance for Indigenous Australia to involve itself at the heart of policymaking and implementation. State, territory and federal parliaments have been marred by failure, scandal and corruption. Yet Australia persists, rightly, with those institutions.

But the dramatic failure of Atsic spelled the death knell of self-determination in this country. It is held up – “See what happens when *they* get to run things themselves!” – as the exemplar of how not to manage Indigenous affairs. That’s another whitefella convenience, a way of avoiding investing trust in Indigenous people to bring better outcomes for themselves in the cities and regions and remote communities.

Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars are pledged to the Recognise campaign, to write Indigenous Australians into the constitution. Someone, please, from Don Dale to the Darling Downs, explain how that will bring the really urgent changes to Indigenous outcomes? From Redfern to North East Arnhem Land, I’ve never heard an Aboriginal person say they want Recognise or that they’re waiting for Closing the Gap to improve things.

But I have heard them complain about having to travel five hours on a bumpy road for dialysis. And lament that their kids are stuck in jail for driving offences. And talk about the babies that never made it. And for the need for a toilet at the school. It goes on.

I’ll say again, out of frustration and anger, that it all comes back to history – to the attempt to crush the oldest civilisation on the planet, to their denial of land, to the murders and the ongoing racist oppression that reverberates generationally and directly causes such terrible human outcomes. Closing the Gap might seem like accountability to (mostly) non-Indigenous policymakers who oversee the failure of Aboriginal Australia, but it doesn’t, to my mind, constitute a beginning 50 years after the 1967 citizenship referendum.

How instructive, as parliament resumed last week, that our MPs gathered at the Australian War Memorial (which does not reflect Indigenous resistance to British invasion, post-1788) to pay tribute to those Australian war dead we do choose to recognise.

The stone gargoyles in the main courtyard, featuring Australian fauna, have been there since the memorial opened in 1941. Recent asbestos contamination necessitated their replacement.

One of the newly crafted Aboriginal faces sits on the wall in place of the old, sculpted with the identical condescending ethnographic curiosity as the gargoyle it replaced.

Which illustrates, of course, just how little official attitudes to Indigenous Australians have really altered. That’s the pace of improvement in the lives of First Australians.

Just look at Closing the Gap.

Enough.