

## 'They must listen': Indigenous congress optimistic about Closing the Gap changes

*Council of Australian Governments urged to consider targets to reduce suicide, child removal and incarceration rates*



*Rod Little with Malcolm Turnbull in February. 'If they want to engage with us then they must listen,' Little said of new Closing the Gap goals. Photograph: Mike Bowers for the Guardian*

Calla Wahlquist  
23 October 2017

The Council of Australian Governments has been urged to consider introducing targets to reduce suicide, child removal and incarceration rates as part of a 10-year review of the Closing the Gap goals, which expire next year.

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples addressed the meeting of the Coag ministerial council on Indigenous affairs in Canberra on Monday for the first stage of what the federal government is touting as a massive shift in the way the Closing the Gap goals are formulated and pursued.

In a draft consultation document, the commonwealth has said it will spend \$300bn towards meeting the new Closing the Gap goals, which it aims to have finalised before the current goals expire in July, in the 10 years to 2030.

The national congress co-chair Rod Little said he was optimistic about the process, which has already exceeded the “minimal involvement” of Indigenous Australians when the first set of Closing the Gap goals were developed in 2008.

“We have certainly made it very clear that whatever it is, whether it’s new targets or refreshing of the old targets, it must not forget that our imprisonment rates of our people are at unacceptable levels, as are our suicide rates and rates of children being put in out of home care,” Little told Guardian Australia.

“We are being quite emphatic: if they want to engage with us then they must listen.”

Little said both federal and state and territory governments at Monday’s meeting openly said that the current strategy was not working, which he said indicated a willingness to change.

He said a significant barrier to the success of the existing Closing the Gap goals were the political funding cycles, which reset every one to three years, and said he hoped the new targets would provide genuine funding and policy security.

The current Closing the Gap targets were set in 2008 after the parliamentary apology to members of the stolen generation.

As of February 2017, only one of the seven targets is on track. Australia is on track to halve the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students completing year 12 or an equivalent education and training certificate by 2020.

Targets to halve the gap in mortality rates; achieve parity on school attendance; halve the gap in reading, writing, and numeracy skills levels; and halve the employment gap, all by 2018, are not on track.

The target of closing the gap in life expectancy by 2031 is also not on track, and the target to get 95% of children enrolled in early childhood education has been pushed back to 2025.

In a statement issued before the Coag meeting, the federal Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, said the “refreshed” Closing the Gap program would involve a greater collaboration from states and territories, to ensure state and territory governments bought into achieving the targets.

“I’m looking forward to working together to strengthen relationships, collaborate and demonstrate accountability across and within jurisdictions,” Scullion said.

A draft PowerPoint presentation written for a community consultation meeting and seen by Guardian Australia said the new targets would be based around the idea of “working together in genuine partnership”.

The document is to be presented in Broome on 7 November, at what Guardian Australia understands will be the first community consultation session nationwide. The timeline for community consultations was not formally agreed upon until

Monday's ministerial meeting, some weeks after the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet issued invitations for Broome.

The draft presentation said the federal government had received criticism about government departments working in silos and the need to broaden the focus of the Closing the Gap goals, and had also been told that programs to implement the targets would not succeed if it ignored the central role of culture.

It grouped the four key priorities of economic development, environment, individual goals including health and education, and community development around a central theme of Indigenous cultures. It said there would be a focus on shared decision making, evidence-based policies and programs, and tailoring services and programs to particular communities.