

Minister Scullion – Estimates Opening Statement

27 October 2017

I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of country and pay my respects to elders both past and present.

2017 is – of course – a very significant year for Indigenous Australians. It is 50 years since the 1967 referendum and 25 years since the landmark High Court Mabo decision.

It is also coming up to the 10th year of the Closing the Gap targets. In that time we have made some excellent progress but I think we have also learnt a lot, and in particular the folly of setting targets without any consideration of how they would be achieved.

That is why we need to make sure that as the targets expire we replace them with measures that will drive behavioural change.

So through COAG we are working with the States and Territories, and in consultation with Indigenous communities, to develop targets that are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time bound), are supported by a resourced strategy to achieve the targets, and informed by data and evaluation.

This is an exciting time to be working in Indigenous Affairs. I met with my state and territory counterparts and the Co-Chairs of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, Dr Jackie Huggins and Rod Little, in Canberra on Monday for the first meeting of the Council of Australian Governments Ministerial Council on Indigenous Affairs.

It was a highly productive meeting at which we discussed refreshing the Closing the Gap agenda to one based on Indigenous strengths, the priorities in Indigenous Affairs in coming years and our shared commitment to improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

We have also had a productive Ministerial Council on Native Title that I co-chaired with the Attorney-General.

The fight for native title has now shifted to the challenge of making native title deliver.

And native title holders must be where the focus is.

For the first time, we have a fund that can be accessed directly by native title holders to build the capacity of PBCs and support them to engage in commercial discussions.

This \$5 million fund was announced under the Northern Australia White Paper and through this fund, I am working with native title holders in the Kimberley, like the Gooniyandi - who are looking to engage in the cattle industry, native title holders in the Central Desert region of Western Australia - who are looking at environmental and land management opportunities, the Yidinji people - who are looking at eco-tourism around Yarrabah and the Kokatha people - who are building their capacity to start their own business.

The Indigenous Procurement Policy continues to be a game-changer for Indigenous businesses.

As the committee would be aware, I recently announced the two-year results for the IPP. They show the Commonwealth Government has awarded contracts worth more than \$590 million to more than 950 Indigenous businesses in the two years since the IPP was launched.

This is up from just \$6.2 million in 2012-13.

This growth is extraordinary – and a testament to the Indigenous businesses that have won the contracts.

I anticipate the committee will want to ask some questions about the Community Development Program. What I can say upfront is it is continuing to get more jobseekers off welfare and into work. Since the start of the CDP, there have been nearly 20,000 employment placements for more than 15,000 jobseekers.

And on more than 6000 occasions, jobseekers have remained in the job for at least six months. These are real, life-changing jobs for people living in remote parts of the country.

Despite this success, I have been listening closely to people's concerns and recognise there have been issues raised through the Senate inquiry that we need to address.

This includes the need to move to a simpler, wage-based model with greater local control that provides local jobs for local people and is delivered by more Indigenous organisations.

I have taken the Indigenous Advisory Council through the model and look forward to making some more announcements soon.

I have visited more than 200 communities and met with many organisations and community representatives to discuss the delivery of remote employment services.

These are all changes people living in remote communities have been telling me they want.

My Department has also been regularly consulting and will continue to do so before the introduction of any reforms.

This is an important point – we will continue to consult before the introduction of any reforms and have learnt the lessons of the introduction of the Remote Jobs and Communities Program and will not rush this process.

Finally, I know that the Committee will have questions about the Government's announcement on constitutional recognition.

First of all, I would like to be clear that constitutional recognition is supported by the Government but we are willing to be honest with the Australian people and show leadership on this issue.

What we don't support is the idea of a constitutional voice, a third chamber of parliament and a constitutionally enshrined national representative body.

This is a departure from all previous proposals including the reports of the Expert Panel and Joint Committee and is something that the Government does not believe would be supported by the Australian people at a referendum.

Given that only 8 out of 44 referendum in our history have ever passed, proceeding with a radical proposal will set the cause back by a generation.

But we are still committed to constitutional recognition and I look forward to continuing this important work.

I look forward to our discussion today.

Senate F&PA Committee

Tabled Document

Inquiry: Supplementary Estimate 2017-18

Date/Time: 27/10/17

Witness Name: Senator the Hon Nigel

Organisation: Scullion, Minister for
Indigenous Affairs