

Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment Bill 2004

Second Reading

Tuesday, 7 December 2004

Senator CROSSIN (Northern Territory) (12.47 p.m.) —I rise to contribute to the debate on the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment Bill 2004. No doubt people who know of my contributions in this chamber will know that this is a fairly passionate subject for me and has been now for the best part of nearly three decades.

The stated purpose of this bill is to amend the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000 in order to improve Indigenous education outcomes and to appropriate that money for Indigenous education that is over and above mainstream funding for the period 2005 to 2008. It does so through the provision of funding for both the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program, commonly known in the industry as IESIP—prior to that it was known as AEP, the Aboriginal Education Program—and the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance Program, the acronym of which is IEDA. These include elements of what was the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme, which will now be known as the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme, and what is known as ASSPA funds. ASSPA stands for Aboriginal Students Support and Parental Awareness, and it now seems to be located under what is termed the Whole of School Intervention Strategy, about which I will talk more later.

We all would be only too well aware of the need to improve Indigenous education outcomes in this country. The social justice report of earlier this year was fairly scathing in what it had to say about the Howard government's outcomes in the field of Indigenous affairs as a whole. While some things have improved, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people remains large and has not closed. This certainly applies across the various levels of education. In his second reading speech, the Minister for Education, Science and Training claimed:

Closing the education divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians remains one of this government's highest education priorities.

When I look closely at the implications of this bill, I fail to see how that will be the case. Associate Professor Boni Robertson, according to an article in the *Campus Review*, has said that funding for Indigenous education needs to be drastically increased considering the large percentage of young people in the Indigenous population and the discrepancy between the participation and graduation rates of Indigenous Australians across all levels of education and that of the non-Indigenous population. According to the article, she said of this bill that the slashing of affirmative action programs like ASSPA and other Indigenous education in schools this year needed to be urgently addressed. She also said that renewed funding by both sides of government to implement Indigenous language programs and address the extraordinary high levels of truancy, suspensions and inclusions of young Indigenous students from within the education system was of paramount importance to the ongoing development of Indigenous Australia. So there is no resounding support for the changes outlined in this bill, and Boni Robertson is one person who has spoken out about that.

However, notwithstanding the problems with the fine print of this bill, as is so often the case with this government, it thinks that outcomes will be improved by having more regulations, more accountability and more funding tied to performance indicators—in other words, more government intervention. We would not deny that accountability is important. We do need and want to know how funds are being used and we would like to know what is being achieved. However, as I will discuss later, the changes being introduced under this bill would appear to have been made with little consultation with the stakeholders, the Indigenous people of this nation, and one can therefore certainly question the educational value of the changes.

I have to say that uncovering the implications of the changes in this bill reveals one of the most incompetent exercises in consultation that I have known the officers of the Department of Education, Science and Training to undertake in the 6½ years that I have been fronting up to them at Senate estimates. We now know that there are 3,800 ASSPA committees in this country. We know that DEST randomly selected 400 of those, sent them a discussion paper and only got 10 responses. It is on the basis of that that these changes are being made. Why were 3,800 ASSPA committees not sent the documentation? Why were there not state or territory consultations and face-to-face consultations? Why were questions not asked about why only 10 responses were received? Did people not understand the changes? Were they not asked to respond to the changes? Were they sent a discussion paper for information only? To make the substantial changes that this bill implies after getting feedback from only 10 committees out of 3,800 shows a lack of scrutiny and accountability that I have not known from DEST officers in the 6½ years that I have been in this place.

I have had many representations from my Indigenous constituents in the Northern Territory, particularly from urban Darwin and Palmerston, who have expressed concern not only about the proposed changes to Indigenous education but also about the way in which those changes were made. They came away from DEST-provided information sessions with far more questions and concerns than they went in with. I still believe to this day, having met parents from those ASSPA committees two weeks ago, that DEST still really has no idea how these changes are going to operate. The government has no plan as to how these changes are going to operate, and we are less than three weeks away from the start of the new year.

Let me first refer to the figures in this bill. Based on the government's announcement on 5 April, this bill provides \$641.6 million over the four-year period from 2005 and 2008, so it is in fact the next quadrennium of IESIP funding. Of this, \$513 million is for maintenance of supplementary recurrent funding and \$128.1 million is for ongoing and new strategic projects. So this is really an increase of only 16 per cent over a four-year period—a four per cent increase for each year—which hardly provides for any real growth, especially when one considers that demographically, certainly in my electorate, the number of Indigenous people, and hence Indigenous students, is rising very rapidly. One would think that funding for this real growth is essential if outcomes are to be improved.

Again in his speech the minister claimed that the government's approach was to provide greater weighting of resources towards those with greatest disadvantage: those in remote areas. There is little real evidence of that in this bill. Although remote areas do get funded more than urban areas, this has been so for some time, to take account of the greater costs of service delivery in remote areas. Strategic funding will be continued at existing levels of \$128.1 million—in other words frozen, in nominal terms. So this is hardly a generous funding bill. It is very hard to see how this funding approach will improve Indigenous outcomes or how it redirects resources to the most disadvantaged. Successful projects such as the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, NIELNS, and the scaffolding program are continued, but one would have hoped that successful programs might have been expanded and funded for growth, not frozen at present levels.

The structured scaffolding approach to literacy has proved to be very successful. I have seen it in operation and I know the work of Brian Gray, the instigator of this approach, very well. It is especially successful for teaching Indigenous students in remote areas. It has demonstrated some excellent outcomes in improved student performance. But again, this bill gives little sign that there will be any growth in this program to improve outcomes for a larger number of students.

What most concerns both me and my Indigenous constituents, however, is the proposed changes under IEDA to programs such as ASSPA and ITAS, where funding arrangements are changed in a most significant way. Many of these changes that I alluded to earlier we

discovered through the process of estimates. The changes are being proposed with minimal consultation. From a government that has abolished the ATSI organisation, which gave Indigenous people their major voice, I guess it should not come as too big a surprise that there was minimal consultation on these changes.

Let me move to what some of these changes are going to be. In a media release on 5 April the Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson, said:

... we've funded a range of things over the last four years which we've had evaluated that have been found not to deliver the outcomes that they should, for example, the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Committees. There are 3,800 of these committees throughout Australia and the review which we conducted—

remember, DEST randomly sampled 400 of those committees and got a response from 10 of them—

found that they have delivered quite poor outcomes educationally for Aboriginal students.

There is a group of people connected with ASSPA committees working in Darwin and Palmerston and the greater rural area, and I know that Warren Snowdon has been working with a similar group of people in Alice Springs. The work that they have done over the last four or five months is to be absolutely commended. They have formed a group of combined ASSPA committees to fight at every chance they possibly can the changes to this legislation. In a newspaper that they put out in June they say:

What Dr Nelson doesn't say is that ASSPA has never been allocated the level of funding necessary to achieve the educational outcomes he is talking about. The facts are that in urban-based schools, ASSPA gets \$110 per ... student a year. That's \$2.75 per student per week (\$4 for secondary students).

Given those figures and the restrictive funding guidelines, it is completely unrealistic for the Howard government to expect ASSPA to achieve beyond that which it is currently funded to do.

In an age when this government talks about mutual obligation and quid pro quo for access to services by Indigenous people in response to funding from this government, this is an area that absolutely reeks of hypocrisy. It talks about welfare reform for Indigenous people. It talks about mutual obligation. It talks about increased rights and responsibilities Indigenous people need to undertake, yet it attacks the very committees that currently only get \$2.75 per Indigenous student per week through the ASSPA committees. One has to seriously question the motivation of this government and, as I said, its absolutely hypocritical stance and the jargon it uses when it talks about welfare reform and mutual obligation. Mutual obligation, according to this government, is a one-way street. Indigenous people will be forced to walk it, and there will be no reciprocal obligation on behalf of this government, and this bill is the very first example of that.

If this government were genuine in its comments about welfare reform and mutual obligation, ASSPA committees would not be abolished or changed, they would be strengthened and their funding increased. But these people are going to have crawl up hill and down dale, put in grant submissions and compete for this funding. That means that some schools will miss out under these changed arrangements. The people that have been working flat out to try and bring about some equity and justice and to get their concerns highlighted are fantastic people like Delsie Tamiano from Palmerston High School. She has been a power of strength in the last couple of months in bringing Indigenous people together in urban centres to get them to understand the implications of these changes. I refer also to Robbie Robinson from Alice Springs, Cherie Holtze from Taminmin high, Mark Munnich, Sharna Raye from Palmerston High School, Sharna Taut from Malak Primary School, Gloria Craigie, Patty Raymond and Eddie

McKenzie. There are a whole lot of terrific urban Indigenous people who are fighting for some extra money out of this government to maintain ASSPA committees and keep the system as it currently is, because they believe that they are achieving significant outcomes—outcomes that this government, through a flawed consultation process, has not bothered to look at or consider.

I was told in estimates hearings that consultations were also held with ATSIC and Indigenous education consultative bodies. Unfortunately, there is no Indigenous education consultative body in the Northern Territory, so I am not sure who this government talked to in the Northern Territory. So we missed out on the consultations despite having the largest percentage of the national Indigenous population. I have to say again that the consultations were not good enough; they were cursory, badly handled and managed only minimally before DEST decided on some fairly major changes which are now of serious concern to Indigenous people in the Northern Territory. These changes have been publicised through information sessions, and I am told the minister wrote to all school principals and ASSPA committees. However, this is telling people of changes already made, over which they have not been consulted and for which they can see little reason.

From next year ASSPA committees as such will be abolished on the ground, according to the government, that they were not working efficiently to achieve outcomes. However, in many cases in the Northern Territory they were the only contact Indigenous parents had with the school. Let us never forget the reason why ASSPA committees were established—a history and a background which I am closely associated with. Of the 21 Aboriginal education goals, goal No. 1 was to encourage more participation by Aboriginal parents in their child's schooling. Goal No. 1 was established in 1989. The outcome of that and the way in which it was implemented—in other words, the performance indicator—was the establishment of ASSPA committees that worked alongside school councils, where they could, and alongside school principals, and were given a discrete bucket of funding in order to set some educational outcomes. In some areas we know that involves breakfast programs so that kids can be fed before they start the school day. It was about homework centres, after-school-hours programs, additional excursions and extending that child's educational program over and above what the school provided. Let us never forget the key reason why ASSPA programs were invented in the first place: it was predominantly to get Indigenous parents involved, committed and participating in their child's education.

There are cases in the Northern Territory where ASSPA committees are the only contact, as I said, between Indigenous parents and the school. In urban areas where Indigenous students are usually in the minority in schools, they were the only school communities that Indigenous parents felt comfortable attending or speaking at. The *DEST Review of the Indigenous education direct assistance program* at page 40 states:

Improving the participation of Indigenous parents in school education is a national priority—oh yeah—

to improve student outcomes ...

So this government seeks to abolish the very committees that encouraged that participation, and it talks about mutual obligation! That same review on page 41 said:

There was support for the concept of the ASSPA program among those consulted. Many ... were of the view that ... it [is] one of the most important Indigenous education programs.

So what happens? This government is deciding to abolish them. Are we perhaps back to some hidden agenda of assimilation? I do not think that agenda is hidden anymore; it is well and truly out in the open. So from next year ASSPA funding is to be abolished. No longer will

schools with Indigenous students automatically receive the funding amount according to the number of Indigenous students.

What we now know is that those committees, if they seek to exist, No. 1 have to become part of or associated with a school council, and No. 2 will have to put in a grant application to access those funds. In the case where you might have 10 or 20 Indigenous kids in a school and are looking at \$110 per student per year, it is probably not a lot of money. But in cases like Yirrkala in the Northern Territory that is \$60,000—that is a hell of a decent sized grant application, I would have thought. Who is going to write it—the principal, staff at the school or Indigenous parents?

I put it to the Senate that Indigenous parents will not have the time. I put it to the Senate that staff are already overloaded with an administrative burden. So I do not understand, in this day and age, when Indigenous education participation and outcomes are at their lowest levels, why we seek to create more hurdles for people to access Indigenous education funding when the system was working fine and needed only to be strengthened and encouraged, not abolished or changed.

In conclusion, there are many aspects of this bill, particularly in relation to the ITAS funding, that I know my colleague Warren Snowdon has addressed in the other place. I am glad that the Senate has referred the implications of the proposed changes to funding arrangements contained in this bill to the Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee for inquiry. The funding changes proposed in this bill need very close scrutiny. I hope the Senate committee will provide Indigenous parents with the chance to be consulted and to voice their views about the changes proposed in the bill. This government has never provided those parents with the chance to have a say about this matter. The Senate will take up those reins, step into the shoes of DEST and the government, and give those parents a voice.