



First Peoples sacrificed in the name of Budget Surplus

Available for Immediate Release

9th May 2018

National Congress and its members are dismayed that the Federal Budget has once again failed to significantly address many of the key concerns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations, and peoples. First Peoples have come last.

The Government's priority for First Australians focuses primarily on economic prosperity. While many would welcome this outcome, the Government's roadmap to accomplishing this prosperity is fanciful, incoherent and sorely lacking in the detail necessary for success.

Although the Government has listened to a few of our concerns regarding the Community Development Program, major issues largely remain unresolved in this budget. The harsh and discriminatory penalty system is largely intact. In fact, penalties have worryingly been strengthened in cases involving participants who need the greatest amount of support. For this reason alone we renew our call for the CDP to be replaced with a wage-based program which provides meaningful employment and training for our peoples.

We are deeply concerned by the Government's proposal to withhold income support payments from individuals who default on fines. This is a recipe for ensuring that the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society will remain so, with unpaid fines likely leading to increased rates of incarceration rather than pathways to prosperity. Our peoples cannot achieve economic prosperity if we cannot meet our basic needs.

In claiming that it will provide \$550 million in new funding for remote housing in the Northern Territory, the Government has attempted to hide its abandonment of a national housing strategy. The National Partnership Agreements on Remote Indigenous Housing have expired. Prospects of renewal are slim, particularly if negotiations with state and territory governments are unsuccessful. If Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are forced to live in insecure, overcrowded and unsafe homes, or are homeless, the barriers to economic empowerment are overwhelming.

The Federal Budget fails to address the shameful over-incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We make up 3% of Australia's population, but 27% of its prisoners. If anything, the Government's callous disregard for our basic human rights to equality and quality health, education, housing and employment opportunities makes this problem worse. These factors are also responsible for child removal rates being ten times greater than for non-Indigenous Australians, which threatens to create a new Stolen Generation and perpetuates intergenerational trauma.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services have highlighted gross inadequacies in government funding for civil cases. As Centrelink breaches, inability to repay fines and housing tenancy disputes become more commonplace due to Budget measures, the demand for legal services will only increase and these inadequacies are likely to become more severe.

Attempts to Close the Gap appear to have stalled, with Minister Scullion making no reference to the program in his media release. No new funding has been allocated to the strategy, despite a dire need for further community consultation and national co-operation between governments and our organisations. The Government's failure to Close the Gap must not be used as an excuse to abandon the targets altogether, lower expectations and widen the life expectancy gaps or shift responsibilities to state and territory governments.

We note in this budget that \$50 million has been allocated for the memorialisation of the 250th Anniversary of Captain Cook's voyage to Australia. Whilst gaining pockets of local support, this appears a controversial investment in the Treasurer's own electorate. Our preference would be to redirect these funds into community based Closing the Gap initiatives to address the negative impacts of the European invasion of Australia.

National Congress welcomes the renewal of funding for our health organisations and programs. In particular, we appreciate the recognition of the crucial role which the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce plays in delivering positive health outcomes for our peoples. However, we note that the provision of culturally safe and appropriate healthcare must also be integrated into the mainstream health system. We also acknowledge the Government's commitment to provide new funding to aged care, but unless the large gap in life expectancy is resolved, many of our peoples may not enjoy the longevity to benefit from these services.

We reiterate our call for the Government to work collaboratively with us. The need for an independent and well funded national representative body to inform Governments is greater now than ever. Our organisations are in the best position to provide culturally safe and appropriate services to our peoples. However, we cannot achieve this without adequate resources and support.

On reflection this budget leaves so many of us uncertain of the true value of our extensive consultations with Government over the past year. So little of what we have said, like so little of what we have recommended, has been taken up by this Government in this underwhelming budget.

Our political leaders have seemingly exhibited an attention deficit; one proportional to the surplus evident in their own self-interest.

Media Contact: Craig Hodges – 0447873993 – craig.hodges@nationalcongress.com.au

We pay our respects to the traditional custodians across the lands in which we work, and acknowledge our Elders past, present and future.