



NATSILS

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL & TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER LEGAL SERVICES

MEDIA RELEASE

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Government back flips on justice commitment as incarceration rates soar

Just as this week's Productivity Commission *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report revealed a shocking increase of almost 60 percent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rates over the last decade, NATSILS are disappointed to hear that the Government has back flipped on its commitment to introduce justice targets as part of the Closing the Gap policy agenda, a move which NATSILS along with many other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and organisations have long called for.

NATSILS Chairperson, Shane Duffy, said that confirmation from the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Nigel Scullion, during question time in the Senate on Wednesday that the Government would not be progressing with introducing a justice target, despite publicly supporting such in the lead up to the 2013 election, was a troubling development.

"The over-imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this country is a crisis at tipping point and much more needs to be done by all Australian governments to address the disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children and men in Australian prisons," Mr Duffy said.

"One of the glaring omissions in the original Closing the Gap targets developed in 2008 was that of over-imprisonment, and the Commonwealth Government needs to accept that without tackling incarceration rates, the ability of all Australian government's to achieve the other existing targets is in serious jeopardy."

Mr Duffy said that given the complex and multiple issues at play which sit across multiple jurisdictions, including factors of socio-economic disadvantage, the impact of over-policing, stricter approaches to bail, mandatory sentencing and a lack of non-custodial sentencing options, particularly in regional and remote areas, it is critical that a bipartisan approach at both the Commonwealth and State and Territory level is achieved.

"Reducing incarceration rates is going to take commitment, action and coordination from all Australian governments, and the Commonwealth Government and the Minister for Indigenous Affairs in particular, need to stand up and show some leadership on this issue," Mr Duffy said.

"Prior to last year's election, when we saw commitment from both major parties to introduce justice targets we thought we were starting to see some real leadership on this issue but it is disappointing that this has now disappeared into the wind".

Mr Duffy said that the development of Closing the Gap justice targets was not just about throwing more money at the issue, as the Minister had described it, but was

rather about getting the policy settings right to affect real change and to make sure resources in the justice space are used most effectively.

“The high cost of incarceration combined with the fact that prisons actually offer little in terms of effective rehabilitation, means that addressing incarceration rates should be an economic priority for the Government and its budget bottom line,” Mr Duffy said.

“it is costing Australian tax-payers more than \$795 million per annum just to maintain the current level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander over-imprisonment, so to reiterate the sentiments of the Minister in recent days, we shouldn’t just keep throwing money down the drain.”

Media contact: Rachel O’Brien 0438 748 389 or rachel.obrien@atsils.org.au