

INDIGENOUS HEALTH — “CLOSE THE GAP” DOCUMENT

295. Mr P. ABETZ to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs:

Can the minister please advise whether Western Australia has signed the statement of intent document to close the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians?

Dr K.D. HAMES replied:

I thank the member for the question. It was brought to my attention last week that a letter had been sent from the Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia to the Premier, calling on the Premier to add his signature, in a bipartisan manner, to the statement of intent to close the gap between Aboriginal health and non-Aboriginal health in this state. I was very pleased to see some components of the letter, which perhaps relate to the comments that the Premier was just making about the way in which this government operates. I will quote two paragraphs of the letter, which is addressed to the Premier. The first paragraph states —

We acknowledge that since you took office that the Health Minister has had an open door to the Aboriginal Health Council of WA —

That is as opposed to the situation under the previous government, I might add, which did not meet the council once in eight years, whereas I met it in the first two weeks —

and your government has significantly increased an active engagement with Aboriginal community controlled health services.

That was the first plaudit that came our way. The second paragraph states —

We note that you personally have taken a leadership role within COAG that saw an unprecedented commitment of \$1.6 billion allocated to ‘Close the Gap’, we also note that you were a strong advocate for a special COAG meeting on ‘Close the Gap’ to be held this year. This action alone is the biggest ever injection of new funding for Indigenous health.

It was a great move by the Premier and great recognition by a committee made up of Aboriginal people from across this state.

Mr M. McGowan interjected.

Dr K.D. HAMES: This is not about the Rudd government; this is about us. It is not about the opposition. The council would not have said that about the previous government. What it said about the previous government is not worth repeating. This group had in its office a picture of the former Minister for Health with a set of horns, and a picture of someone else with a halo.

Mr C.J. Barnett: Who would that be?

Dr K.D. HAMES: I do not know who it was. I do not want to boast. The point is that this government is very strongly committed to closing the gap, and we have seen that recognised by the department, which is doing that. This group called on us, in a bipartisan manner, to sign that document “Close the Gap”. We have obtained a copy of the document, “Close the Gap”. It has a preamble from the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and it is signed by Mr Rudd. There is a signature that I cannot read, and it is then signed by Jenny Macklin, and a number of Aboriginal groups also signed it. It is signed by Brendan Nelson; Rosanna Capolingua, the Australian Medical Association president; and a number of other Aboriginal groups that support it. I am very pleased to say that the Premier has added his signature to that list, as have I. I know that the Leader of the Opposition has a copy of that letter, because a copy was sent to him by the Aboriginal Health Council, calling on him to give bipartisan support. If the Leader of the Opposition has not signed that document already, I ask that he join with us, in a bipartisan way, and add his signature —

Mr E.S. Ripper: I signed a similar document last year, as you will recall.

Dr K.D. HAMES: No, I am talking about this document, “Close the Gap”, which was prepared by the Prime Minister.

Mr E.S. Ripper: I am a strong supporter of closing the gap, and I signed the document last year.

Dr K.D. HAMES: The Leader of the Opposition’s deputy was at the front of Parliament House doing a media interview on this document, “Close the Gap”. I am sure that he will encourage the Leader of the Opposition to add his signature to that of the Premier and of me.