

Thursday, 15 April 2021

Indigenous justice announcements welcome, but funding for multi-faceted response needed

Fresh announcements by the Government and the Opposition aimed at addressing the systemic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system have been welcomed by the Law Council of Australia on the thirtieth anniversary of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

The Government has announced it will spend \$2.4 million to set up a new custody notification service in South Australia, while the Opposition has today announced a proposed \$92.5 million package for justice reinvestment and legal services.

Law Council President, Dr Jacoba Brasch QC, said the government now had an opportunity to use the federal Budget process to lead the way in addressing the national tragedy of over-representation of Indigenous people in the justice system.

"While these fresh announcements are certainly welcome, what the nation urgently requires is a comprehensive national response to address the vastly disproportionate imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples," Dr Brasch said.

"We need a multi-faceted government response supported by adequate funding. The ALRC's Pathways to Justice Report provides such a framework. Until there is fulsome, considered, coordinated, and an appropriately resourced response to that report we cannot say we've seen the commitment required to change the current trajectory.

"It is a national shame that 30 years on from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody the problem of disproportionate imprisonment has grown far worse. The Law Council has long called for a focus on justice reinvestment, increased legal assistance funding, adoption of effective Closing the Gap targets, early intervention and prevention strategies and the adoption of community-led culturally appropriate services for Indigenous people. We need new investment in new programs to divert young people and children from custody.

"An effective crime preventative approach must be driven by policy frameworks that address the underlying reasons for why Indigenous people come into contact with the criminal justice system. This includes increasing access to services focused on mental health, housing, family support, youth engagement, and disability. Justice reinvestment approaches which bring these services together in key locations should be prioritised."

This week the Government announced that it would spend \$2.4 million to set up a new custody notification service in South Australia, which provides health and welfare checks and offers basic legal advice to Indigenous people.

The Australian Labor Party's proposed a \$92.5 million package, announced today, includes commitments of \$79m to provide funding for justice reinvestment initiatives and \$13.5 m for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services.

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