

Bill Shorten vows action on Indigenous imprisonment rates

Date: November 18, 2015



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A commitment to close the huge widening gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous incarceration rates will be pursued at the first meeting of federal and state leaders under a Shorten government.

The Opposition Leader has also promised to devote more resources to tackling imprisonment rates of Aboriginal women, which have increased by 74 per cent in the past 15 years.



Opposition Leader Bill Shorten has committed a future Labor government to closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous incarceration rates. *Photo: Alex Ellinghausen*

In a speech to University of Melbourne Law School, Bill Shorten vowed to work with state and local governments, law enforcement agencies, and corrections, community services and Indigenous bodies to set the targets.

"The re-imprisonment rate for Aboriginal young people is higher than the school retention rate. The numbers are heartbreaking – and getting worse," he said in the speech on Wednesday.

Mr Shorten also expressed frustration at the Turnbull government's failure to agree with Labor on who would make up a Referendum Council to drive the campaign for Indigenous constitutional recognition.

"Every day of delay, every day of talk without progress creates the risk of apathy and cynicism undercutting our goal. We can't prevaricate any longer," he said.

The Coalition government has so far resisted calls from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders for justice targets, with Indigenous Affairs Minister, Nigel Scullion, saying they would send "the wrong signal" that somehow Indigenous offenders were different from others.

Mr Shorten said the first meeting of the Council of Australian Governments would work on justice targets.

He also declared the justice gap could not be closed unless the gender gap for Aboriginal women and girls was a focus.

"Better education for girls and young women is our best hope of promoting better health and nutrition, reducing infant and maternal mortality rates – and boosting productivity and employment," Mr Shorten said.

"But right now, less than six in 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female students complete secondary school (as opposed to over eight in 10 for non-Indigenous students).

"And over 50 per cent of Aboriginal mothers have their first child while they are still teenagers."

Mr Shorten cited the work of the Clontarf academy in improving the school retention rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boys, but lamented that, while there were 28 academies designed specifically for boys, there are only 13 for girls.

"We can't build gender equality on this shifting, uneven foundation," he said, promising \$8.4 million would be spent to create 7155 places in a program to engage Indigenous girls.

Mr Shorten said Labor would partner with Stars Foundation in a program that adopts an approach similar to the Clontarf model, but designed specifically for female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The program provides full-time mentors and uses extra-curricular activities, including sport, to improve school attendance and Year 12 attainment, as well as addressing health issues and social and emotional wellbeing.

Read more: <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/bill-shorten-vows-action-on-indigenous-imprisonment-rates-20151118-gl22ff.html#ixzz3xHpb41MM>

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