

13 June 2006

Senate establishes Inquiry into Indigenous stolen wages.

The Senate tonight voted to hold an inquiry into the practice of state and territory governments with holding the wages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers.

The inquiry will be established following a motion tabled by Australian Democrats Indigenous Affairs spokesperson, Senator Andrew Bartlett.

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) had lobbied the Government, Opposition and minor parties to support Senator Bartlett's motion over recent weeks.

ANTaR National Director, Gary Highland congratulated Senator Bartlett and his colleagues for establishing the Inquiry.

"By their actions today, the Senators have shown that the major national task of overcoming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander injustice should be above party politics," Mr Highland said.

"ANTaR would like to thank Senator Bartlett, Senate Opposition Leader, Chris Evans, Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough and their parliamentary colleagues for taking this principled stand," Mr Highland said.

Mr Highland singled out Senator Bartlett and his office for their commitment to the stolen wages issue.

"Senator Bartlett has taken the time to sit down with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and listen to how they worked hard for years only to have their wages withheld," Mr Highland said.

"This practice occurred throughout Australia from 1900 right up to the 1980s. Payments withheld included child endowment, pensions and even soldiers' pay," Mr Highland said.

"As a result, Aboriginal people were condemned to lives of poverty while their money was used as public revenue or disappeared through fraud or negligence."

Mr Highland said he was confident that when other Senators get the chance to meet with stolen wages claimants they will come to share Senator Bartlett's commitment to rectifying this injustice.

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Mr Highland urged the parliament to adopt the bi-partisan approach shown in relation to stolen wages to other areas of Indigenous disadvantage including health.

“ANTaR would also like to see the Federal Parliament also commit to ending the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in a bi-partisan way,” Mr Highland said.

Despite Australia’s prosperity, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still live on average 17 years less than other Australians.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma recently issued a challenge to the Federal, State and Territory governments to close the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation.

“ANTaR will be urging the Federal parliament to adopt the same bi-partisan commitment to accepting the challenge and deadlines proposed by Commissioner Calma as it has to stolen wages,” Mr Highland said.

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