



National Congress Intervention at the United Nations

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24th April 2018

National Congress of Australia's First Peoples Co-Chair Jackie Huggins delivered an intervention at the United Nations in New York on Thursday 19th April 2018 during the 17th Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII). This key speech by National Congress comes only days after Co-Chair Rod Little emphasized the need for the Australian government to implement UNDRIP during his engagement with the Commonwealth People's Forum in London.

National Congress Intervention

[Full Transcript]

This year, Australia took up its seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council. The Foreign Minister, the Honourable Julie Bishop, has spoken about Australia's proud human rights record. In international forums, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is always strongly supportive of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In many regards, these statements are hypocritical in the extreme.

Particularly, Australia has been severely criticised for its human rights failures in its asylum seekers and refugee policy, and in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs.

Late last year, the final report by the United Nations Human Rights Committee on Australia's human rights record was released, which noted ongoing problems in protecting the rights of refugees and asylum seekers; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; women, especially in the context of gender-based violence; LGBTIQ people and all people to live free from racism and religious intolerance.

The Committees on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights also released damning reports in 2017 detailing Australia's human rights failures in these areas. First Peoples were emphasised in both.

Following a visit to Australia last year, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous People detailed a plethora of human rights failings in her End of Mission Statement. Ms. Tauli-Corpuz described the progress on the Closing the Gap targets as 'woefully inadequate.'

As you can see, Australia's human rights record may more accurately be described as woeful rather than exemplary.

Indeed, we have reached a crisis point in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. The recent Closing the Gap report reveals that only three of the seven targets are on track to be met. Despite making up 3% of the population, First Peoples comprise 27% of the nation's prison population, making Australia's Indigenous incarceration rates the worst in the world.

Imprisonment rates are even worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, who represent 50 per cent of the youth prison population.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women make up 33 percent of the female prison population in Australia. Of these, 90% of have been victims of violence or sexual assault, and 80% are mothers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 32 times more likely to be hospitalized due to family violence than their non-Indigenous counterparts.

The most recent statistics on life expectancy reveal the gap between First Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians is at 10.6 years for males and 9.5 years for females.

The national rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care is 9.8 times the national average. 50% of our people have a disability.

Despite widespread criticism, the paternalistic Northern Territory Intervention is continuing under the guise of the Stronger Futures policy. It has led to over-policing in our communities, quarantining of 50% of welfare, the forced participation in work for the dole schemes which pay individuals far less than an average reward rate, and the perpetuation of stigma against us.

Our rights to land were only established in 1992, and subsequently the government has engaged in a process of continually watering down our rights, such that land rights are inaccessible for the vast majority of First Peoples.

We have been pressing the government to work with us, rather than developing ineffective, short term policy options that are paternalistic and assimilationist in nature. To this end, we established a coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service organisations which have presented the government with our views of what needs to happen, encapsulated in the Redfern Statement. Our plead is 'We have the solutions.'

National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, as the peak representative body of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, leads this coalition.

While the government has shown interest, we are yet to see any meaningful change in policies and approach. Recently, after commissioning extensive consultations with First People's across the nation on constitutional reform, the government flatly rejected our recommendations in The Statement from The Heart, from Uluru.

Finally, I have personally fundraised for my trip to the UN, as the head of our nationally elected representative Indigenous body.

Unfortunately, this is indicative of how First Peoples in Australia are treated by the government.

While we can only hope for change, many of us are sceptical, disillusioned after many years of paternalism, hollow rhetoric, and empty promises.

ENDS

Please follow the activities of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples delegation at the United Nations in New York on social media using the hashtag **#CongressUN18**

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I pay my respects to the traditional custodians across the lands in which we work, and acknowledge our Elders past, present and future.



NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AUSTRALIA'S FIRST PEOPLES



Figure 1-United Nations Intervention: National Congress Co-Chair Jackie Huggins delivering an intervention at the United Nations in New York on Thursday 19th April 2018 at the 17th Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII). Image by Joel Sheakoski, USA.



Figure 2- Australian Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations HE Gillian Bird with National Congress of Australia's First Peoples Co-Chair Jackie Huggins during a breakfast meeting at the Australian Consulate-General in New York on Wednesday 18th April 2018.

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