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Cry for respect as Indigenous affairs reach crisis point; Closing the Gap - Leaders appeal to PM

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Indigenous leaders are urging Malcolm Turnbull to tackle a crisis in Aboriginal affairs by signalling a willingness to engage when he releases a report showing only mixed progress towards closing the gap on Wednesday.

Veteran activist Jackie Huggins has endorsed Patrick Dodson and Noel Pearson's warning that the Closing the Gap project is doomed to fail without radical change.

"In my working life, I have never seen Aboriginal affairs at such a low point, Dr Huggins said. "There is no engagement, there is no respect and I agree with Patrick and Noel that we are in deep crisis.

"Sometimes I don't feel part of this society because it breaks my heart to see the conditions my people are continually left in without any leadership from the top."

The Prime Minister will deliver his first major speech on Indigenous affairs when the annual Closing the Gap report is tabled in Parliament on Wednesday. He is expected to affirm a commitment to improving the future of Indigenous Australia "not by delivering to Indigenous Australians, but by working with a diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and communities".

Mr Turnbull will tell Parliament "the opportunity to empower the imagination, enterprise, wisdom and full potential of our First Australians is surely an exciting one".

The report will show most progress in closing the gap on school attendance and halving the gap for Indigenous children in reading, writing and numeracy by 2018. Reflecting efforts by former prime minister Tony Abbott to boost school attendance, it will show that, on a given school day, the vast majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are attending school.

While last year's report showed no progress on reading, writing and numeracy, this year's report shows significant improvements in five of eight areas.

But the report is unlikely to show significant progress in other areas, including the key goal of closing the gap on life expectancy. Ten years after the campaign began to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the project steering committee says it will fail without concerted effort across governments and respectful engagement.

The pleas for action coincide with the release of a separate report commissioned by Reconciliation Australia showing only 26 per cent of the general population believe trust towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is high.

While almost 90 per cent of Australians believe the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians is important, one in three Indigenous people surveyed had experienced verbal racial abuse in the six months before the survey.

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten will commit a Labor government to a referendum recognising Indigenous Australians in the constitution in May next year and to expanding the targets to include reducing Indigenous incarceration rates.

Cape York leader Noel Pearson summed up the frustration of other leaders when he declared last week: "Make no mistake, Indigenous affairs is in deep crisis. We are seeing good things in isolated areas, but we are not seeing the tectonic shifts needed."

While Mr Dodson has suggested scrapping the Closing the Gap strategy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner and Close the Gap campaign co-chairman Mick Gooda says there are reasons for optimism but shared frustration with the "worst time of engagement" in this area.

"We've had progress over the last 10 years," he said, adding that some improvements won't be apparent in statistics for some years.

"We'd like to see the Prime Minister commit to treating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders like he promised he'd treat Australians more generally: as people with intelligence who can handle complex problems and issues," he said.