

## Coalition reviews Indigenous jobs program that gave \$90m to companies including Crown

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*The minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, says the Coalition will take a 'new approach' to focus on long-term employment.*

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The Morrison government has moved closer to winding up a controversial Indigenous jobs scheme that handed more than \$90m of funds designed to alleviate Indigenous disadvantage to 10 major Australian companies, including Crown Resorts.

The minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, has invited public comment on a discussion paper on how the \$4.8bn Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) could be revamped and a new Indigenous skills, engagement and employment program developed.

“The new approach will focus on long-term employment, not the 26-week employment outcomes currently provided,” Wyatt said.

The release of the discussion paper follows a commitment from the government to scrap the multimillion-dollar employment party initiative, which is part of the IAS, after years of criticism about its operation.

Under the initiative, at least \$91.7m was allocated to 10 of Australia's biggest companies, including Crown, Wesfarmers, Woolworths, Fortescue Metals and Accor Hotels, who received a payment when an Indigenous employee achieved a minimum term of employment of 26 weeks.

Crown Resorts, the casino giant facing royal commissions in two states over allegations of facilitating money laundering and allowing junkets linked to organised crime to bring in high-rolling gamblers, was awarded a \$3.6m grant.

Greens senator Lidia Thorpe accused the Coalition of using the strategy for alleviating disadvantage as a "slush fund" for "their big donor mates".

"Billion-dollar companies don't need government funds, taxpayers' funds, to employ Aboriginal people," Thorpe told a Senate estimates hearing in April. "Our communities need this money. And if you want to close the gap, I would stop giving money to mining companies and these big corporations, who are raking it in."

In May, the Morrison government announced it would scrap the EPI by the end of June 2022.

Wyatt said phasing out the EPI was part of the government's commitment to "transforming the way it works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people".

Since 2014, Wyatt said, EPI partners have placed 6,990 Indigenous jobseekers in jobs that lasted six months or longer, at a cost of \$66.87m.

His agency, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, said it does not collect data on employment beyond 26 weeks, but an independent evaluation of its Indigenous-specific employment programs is currently underway.

That evaluation is expected to be finalised at the end of this month.

The shadow minister for Indigenous Australians, Linda Burney, said she supports the evaluation.

"I hope that it can be wound up in a timely manner, preferably before the next estimates," Burney said.

The Indigenous advancement strategy, of which the EPI is one small part, was created in 2014 by the Abbott government to “ensure funding actually achieves outcomes” and has had its administration called into question several times.

The Australian National Audit Office investigated in 2017 and found that the grants administration processes “fell short of the standard required to effectively manage a billion dollars of commonwealth resources”.

The ANAO reviewed it again after the 2019 election and found there had been “substantial delays” in establishing a reliable way of measuring the outcomes of IAS programs.