

Toowoomba Chronicle
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BRIDGES AND GAPS

Quite often I find myself driving over the Gateway Bridge in Brisbane, travelling to or from the airport, or from the southern suburbs to the northern parts of that city. I am always interested to see what progress is being made on the new bridge that is being built there. The process fascinates me.

As with most bridges, construction has begun on both sides of the wide expanse of the Brisbane River, and little by little the opposite ends of the bridge are stretching towards each other. Soon they will meet in the middle. I often wonder about how the project engineers spend those last few weeks as the opposite ends of the bridge come closer together. Is there some anxiety for them, as they wonder if their plans and measurements have been accurate, apprehensive about whether the levels will be correct? I imagine there is no easy way to correct things if mistakes appear at that stage! I'd love to be part of the excitement on the day when that final small gap is closed.

I don't pretend to understand the skills of an engineer, or the workings of an engineer's mind or creativity. But I suspect we might be able to learn something from the engineering process about how we could address the social conditions of some of the most vulnerable members of Australian society.

This week, Thursday, 2nd April, marks National Close The Gap Day. The Close The Gap Campaign highlights the 17 year gap in life-expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The campaign focuses clearly on discrepancies in the provision and effectiveness of health care available to Indigenous Australians, as compared with that available to other Australians, especially obvious in rural and remote areas.

In the past year, some significant steps have been taken. A Statement of Intent has been signed by the Prime Minister and several state Premiers indicating their commitment to work with Indigenous Australians to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' health and wellbeing. In addition, COAG has committed an extra \$1.6 billion over four years.

It is probably an understatement to say that the new bridge across the Brisbane River wouldn't have made the progress it has if there had been a plan, and committed funding, and nothing else! In response to the need and the opportunity, engineers had the dream and saw possibilities. Their vision was translated by many other people with diverse skills, and implemented by skilled labourers, all working as a team. This team believes that the bridge will meet in the middle, and they have a timeline to which they are working. And won't we all be delighted when the bridge is open, traffic flow improved, and we don't have to worry about whether traffic congestion will make us late for our flight!

For Indigenous Australians - and so for Australian social wellbeing - there is a lot more at stake than a missed plane if we can't manage to bridge this other gap, the one in life expectancy between Indigenous and other Australians. The problem is identified, some funding is allocated, the intention is signed, some people have a vision, and skilful practitioners are working extremely hard to achieve the aim. However, I'm not convinced that we have channelled the creativity of enough appropriate people to translate the vision into the most effective practical plan, and I'm sure we haven't mobilised enough committed and experienced professionals to work cohesively together to bridge this particular gap. There is still much progress to be made in raising awareness, improving attitudes and developing willingness within governments and the general community.

If I would like to be part of the excitement the day the gap is closed between the two sides of the new bridge across the Brisbane River, I will be overjoyed on that day when statistics show us that the life-expectancy of Indigenous Australians is equivalent to that of non-Indigenous Australians. I wonder if it will be within my lifetime?

For more information about the campaign and local events refer to the *Close The Gap* page on the Oxfam website, www.oxfam.org.au