

Australian Federal Politician Case Study:

Malarndirri McCarthy

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As one of only a few Indigenous people to ever hold a ministerial portfolio, Malarndirri McCarthy's position as the Minister for Indigenous Australians is notable on its own. However, what truly makes it interesting is not simply the fact that she holds the portfolio, but the sacrifices she made to achieve it, and the limitations she faces because of it. Malarndirri McCarthy's actions as Minister for Indigenous Australians highlights the constraint of party and cabinet solidarity on individual advocacy, and demonstrates the impact of federalism on addressing the problems impacting Indigenous communities.

McCarthy was born to an Indigenous mother and a White father in the Northern Territory. She was primarily raised by her father but stayed in touch with her Indigenous heritage through language classes in school. She had a private boarding school education in Sydney for grades 7-12, before applying to join the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). She began her career as a journalist and anchor with ABC news before running for Territorial government and eventually for Senate. She was nominated for Territorial government through preselection and was elected as a Labor member in 2005. She was a fierce advocate for Indigenous rights, culminating in her crossing the floor to oppose a government bill that would have increased mining on Indigenous lands in the NT (Garrick and Morgan 2024). She lost her seat in the 2012 election, after a landslide Country Liberal win, and was then recruited to run for Senate in 2016 after the leading NT Senate candidate dropped out. Upon her election to the Senate, McCarthy continued her advocacy until 2024, when she was nominated to become the Minister for Indigenous Australians.

McCarthy entered cabinet in a harsh environment for an Indigenous rights advocate. The failure of the voice referendum the year before had shown they were not a winning issue in

Australian politics. During the referendum, McCarthy had “played a prominent public role in the failed Yes campaign,” again underscoring her dedication towards advocacy (Garrick and Morgan 2024). In the aftermath of the referendum, voters were shown in exit polls to believe “that special rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are unfair, with a sizable number of Australians also thinking that the reason for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage is a lack of effort” (Biddle et al. 2023). This undermines the government’s ability to move policies to effect change, as the issue is simply unpopular. This comes even as studies show that there was no significant relationship between cultural determinants, like speaking an Indigenous language or participating in cultural activities, and a lack of labor force participation (Dinku and Hunt 2021).

Following the referendum, the Albanese government deprioritized Indigenous rights and “made a significant change in direction from Indigenous rights to economic initiatives for Indigenous communities” (Stanford 2025). This put McCarthy in a precarious position. She had gained the most powerful platform in Australia to advocate for Indigenous rights at a time when her party and the country at large were moving away from them. The bulk of her time in Parliament before this had been spent advocating for Indigenous rights, but she was now held back by the ties of cabinet and party solidarity. As demonstrated by the change in tone of her speeches to parliament, she clearly felt pressure to reduce the extent of her advocacy.

In 2020, in response to the threat of the contemporary Coalition government decreasing funding for Indigenous women facing violence in the Northern Territory, McCarthy spoke at length about the extent of violence in Indigenous Communities. She highlighted how much work still needed to be done to fix these problems and that these funding cuts said “to the women of the Northern Territory that, in this instance, their voices don't matter” (Australia 2020). Four

years later, after she became a minister, McCarthy faced calls from Greens Senator Dorinda Cox to prioritize a motion over a report on the frequency of violence against Indigenous women. In response, McCarthy acknowledged the findings and expressed her dismay at reading them, but advocated against prioritizing the motion because “we need the time.” (Australia 2024).

The contrast between McCarthy’s criticism of the Coalition government for deprioritizing Indigenous women, and her own actions to deprioritize them herself is explainable through her change in position. In 2020, as a backbencher in the opposition, her advocacy is her strength. It builds her reputation as a passionate Senator with a cause, and allows her to hold the government to account at the same time. However, in 2024, the roles are reversed, the causes she advocated for are now unpopular in the mainstream, and she is the one in the government being held to account. She still personally believes in the need for violence against Indigenous women to be a priority, but to use her position to advocate for that now would only drag her party down, by tying it to an issue that it has already fought for and been broadly unsuccessful in doing so. Thus she is forced to pivot, and toe the party line and deprioritize Indigenous rights to avoid drawing the criticism of others in her party. The contrast of this pivot with McCarthy’s reputation as an advocate is clear in Senator Cox’s response to the dismissal of the motion, “Really, Malarndirri? How embarrassing” (Australia 2024).

While the Albanese government has overall focused their Indigenous rights agenda squarely at improving economic metrics, they only make up only four of the 19 targets measuring progress towards bettering Indigenous outcomes in Australia. Beginning in 2008, the Australian federal, state, and territory governments adopted a framework to track progress towards closing the gap between outcomes in Indigenous communities and the Australian average. The “Closing the Gap” framework had seven target outcomes and tracked them over a

period of 10 years. At the end of that time only two targets were on track to be met, so the agreement was amended in 2019 with addition of 12 new targets (Campbell 2023). In 2024, when McCarthy became the Minister for Indigenous Australians, five of the 19 targets were on track (Remeikis 2024). In 2025, one year into her tenure, that number had slid to four, with four of the remaining 15 actually regressing overall (Torre 2025). In response to the continued decline of outcomes in Indigenous communities, McCarthy pointed the blame squarely at federalism.

One of the primary difficulties with Closing the Gap is that it is simply a framework for its signatories, the Australian federal, state, and territorial governments, to track their progress towards achieving their stated goals. It has no way to enforce action from its members nor monetary penalties for failing to meet the targets (Australia 2025a). This becomes problematic when states and territories implement policies that go directly against the stated goals of closing the gap. The framework only works if all members move in lockstep with each other, so the regression of just one signatory can have a significant effect on the overall progress towards the targets.

In this case, that signatory is the Northern Territory. The NT has the largest number of Indigenous Australians proportional to its total population while also being one of only two states or territories with a Coalition majority government. The Coalition had been the largest “no” vote in the voice referendum and overall less committed to furthering Indigenous rights (Baum 2025). The large, rural Indigenous population is one of the communities with the widest gap in outcomes across the Closing the Gap targets. Of the 15 targets that data was available for in 2025, the NT was regressing in eight, the most of any state or territory (Torre 2025). One of these regressing targets, decreasing the amount of Indigenous youth in detention, faced the most controversy. The NT government implemented several “tough on crime” measures that advocates

worried would increase the number of Indigenous youths in detention. McCarthy used the conflict of the new policies with the goals of Closing the gap to emphasize that “state and territory governments have a responsibility to make decisions that align with their commitments” (Henderson 2025). When questioned during Senate estimates, McCarthy reiterated that “every parliament who [has] signed up to the Closing the Gap agreement...and every minister that sits around those cabinet tables is responsible” (Australia 2025b). She also added that the “two jurisdictions that are the worst in terms of incarceration rates in the country are the Northern Territory and Queensland” which are also the only two jurisdictions with Coalition majority governments (Australia 2025b).

Improving Indigenous outcomes in the criminal justice system is only one of the Closing the Gap targets that is hindered by federalism. Criminal justice accounts for four of the closing the gap targets (Partnership on Closing the Gap 2025). Healthcare and education, also mainly controlled at the state level, make up an additional seven (Parliamentary Education Office 2025; Partnership on Closing the Gap 2025). Thus the majority of the Closing the Gap targets require a large amount of cooperation from the state and territorial governments, with nothing forcing them to follow them. This drives negative outcomes, especially in states with Coalition majority governments.

The inability of McCarthy to make progress on the non-economic Closing the Gap targets comes down to the lack of control the federal government exercises over the areas of the majority of the targets. Compounded by the lack of political will in the Labor government right now to continue fighting for Indigenous rights, and the convention of cabinet solidarity, McCarthy is stymied from being a vocal advocate and creating positive change for Indigenous people even in her powerful ministerial role.

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