**Aisha Novakovich: Why does the government exempt the Big Four banks from Closing the Gap with First Nations Australians?**

Australian Citizens Party (ACP) Senate candidate for Western Australia Aisha Novakovich today attacked the government for allowing the Big Four banks to undermine the nation’s commitment to “closing the gap” with First Nations Australians.

In February Federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers announced the Big Four banks had all committed to a moratorium on regional bank branch closures until mid-2027, emphasising the necessity of face-to-face banking services, especially in regional Australia.

“We are standing up for regional Australia, for the communities and people and small businesses of our regions, *helping to secure them the banking services that they need and deserve*”, Chalmers said on 11 February.

However, the Treasurer’s announcement was made only after the Albanese government and the previous Liberal governments had allowed the banks to close a third of regional branches in eight years.

Many regional and remote towns have been left without any bank branches at all, forcing the residents to travel hundreds of kilometres to access face-to-face banking services and cash.

When a town loses all of its banks, the impact is hardest on small businesses and vulnerable customers, including the elderly, disabled, and First Nations people.

At the ACP’s Western Australia campaign launch for the federal election, held in Perth on 9 March, the discussion with Senate candidates Aisha Novakovich and Rex Ryles included the damaging impact of bank branch closures on regional WA.

Aisha Novakovich is a Perth-based lawyer and community advocate, and has extensive experience with many different communities, including First Nations Australians; Rex Ryles lives in remote Laverton, where he served as a Councillor for 20 years.

“All Australians deserve proper services”, Aisha said.

“Jim Chalmers’ announcement last month rang hollow, because for so long the government allowed the banks to deny whole communities the banking services he now acknowledges they need.

“Bank closures have been equally hard on all vulnerable customers, but in terms of the impact on First Nations Australians, the banks have actively undermined the national commitment to closing the inequality gap with First Nations Australians, and the government has let them do it.”

The government’s National Agreement on Closing the Gap states that its objective “is to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments to work together to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and *achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians*.” (Emphasis added.)

The recent Senate inquiry into bank closures in regional Australia heard consistent testimony in hearings all across Australia that First Nations people were especially reliant on bank branch services, and were being abandoned.

In Tom Price the committee heard Aboriginals in remote areas of Australia already travelled large distances to a bank branch, for cash but also for things like getting an ID to use to access other services.

Being forced to travel hundreds of kilometres further to a bank makes getting an ID even harder; they need ID to activate a mobile phone service, and, ironically, even online banking.

Local bank branches were often able to do banking for Aboriginals without cards, because the staff knew the customer.

Now Aboriginal customers are expected to bank online, even though many can’t read English, and thus can’t even begin to navigate online banking.

They are forced to rely on relatives for help, and share their login details, which can be a serious vulnerability, and diminishes their personal agency.

“The government has allowed the banks to widen the gap”, Aisha charged. “The ACP’s public postal bank solution will close the gap by restoring face-to-face banking services for all communities through post offices, which still exist in most regional communities.”