

SUBMISSION

Senate Inquiry into the Administration of Indigenous Affairs *Life after ATSIC for remote living Aboriginals*

29th July 2004

SUMMARY

The main principles to be addressed in the review of the administration of Indigenous affairs can be encapsulated in the following:

- The power to change the social circumstances in remote Aboriginal communities has to rest with the local people.
- Governments must not be relied upon to solve the social problems that are causing the disruption widely acknowledged as the reason for poor health status.
- Communities must stop expecting "the government" to solve their problems.
- The extent of breakdown in the social infrastructure is not something that any government or institutions can fix.
- The action must come from the community with the assistance of social entrepreneurs¹ and community proconsuls².
- Funds to bring about social change and the development of programs to build social capital need to be sourced from the corporate or philanthropic sectors.
- Social development will build projects that will in turn create employment opportunity and through this give children goals to work towards in their education.
- Reconciliation will only be achieved when "white" Australia is able to see project partnerships they can become involved in that will build stronger ties.
- Aboriginal health will only improve when the "health" of the remote communities is improved so people can learn to understand what "good health" means again.

In order to provide a structure to enable the above to happen it will be necessary to:

- Restructure the administration of Indigenous affairs to enable maximum input and resolution at the local level
- Staff the structure with people who are sensitive to and committed to see an improvement in the lifestyle of remote living Indigenous Australians.
- Fund the establishment of cells for social planning at the local and regional level.

¹ Dr Bill Glasson, President, Australian Medical Association, Speech to Rotary Conference, March 2004.

² John Hirst, Historian, The Australian 5 May 2004.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The regional councils established under ATSIC be retained but renamed as "social development councils"
2. The Regional Social Development Councils (made up after the abolition of ATSIC) be composed of people who are representing the social needs of local communities
3. Legislate to have the Regional Social Development Councils recognised by Local Government and Land Council structures as a joint partner in social and economic development.
4. The people representing local communities have as their priority the following functions
 - 4.1. Sharing ideas
 - 4.2. Sharing resources to obtain "critical mass"
 - 4.3. Establishing priority of social need
 - 4.4. Presenting regional views to a National forum

BACKGROUND

The decision by the Commonwealth Government to abolish ATSIC is the time to admit that successive governments have failed to address the ill health of Aboriginal people and especially those living in Third World conditions in remote communities.

The best sides of ATSIC at the regional level can be maintained with the funding available going towards projects that will further strengthen communities by rebuilding the social capital that has broken down during 30 years of failed government attempts.

In place of ATSIC the government says it will return programs to "mainstream" departments and appoint an advisory panel. This proposal needs to be strengthened with a proposal that provides the opportunity for Aboriginal people living in remote locations to have access to money which will allow them to rebuild social capital.

Two critical areas of health and education have been "mainstreamed" to remote communities with no significant results being shown. In the case of health the situation is worsening every year with the early onset of diabetes and kidney disease becoming the norm in these places.

It is proposed that a social development/social planning agenda be adopted that will help the people of remote communities to develop an improved infrastructure in their communities, which would in turn help to overcome some of the social pressures that are bearing on them in 2004. Clear evidence around the world is establishing that the way people live has a bearing on how long they will live. The better the living conditions the longer a life for the individual. The factors that bear down on people and work against a healthy life (the social determinants of ill health) need to be addressed one at

a time and doing something to make them better that a healthy and longer life will be achieved for the individual.

"Community in crisis" is an adequate description of the plight of Aboriginal people living in remote communities across the Top End of Australia. In reality they are living in conditions comparable of the Third World countries of the world but because they are located in a developed and prosperous country they cannot attract the assistance available to more prominent problems on the world stage. Their health status is worse than some other developing nations and their life expectancy is decreasing every year due to the inability of the dominant culture to come to grips with the fact that these people are living in crisis.

The maternal age of women is so low that by the time a woman reached aged 30 years she could already be a grandmother. The results of this is the speeding up of generations and that by the time a man reaches his life expectancy of 59 years old he could have already have fathered three generations of people expected to uphold the customs and culture of his ancestors.

Alas this is not the case. The culture of the moment is beset with the problems of a welfare dependant race of people addicted to the pleasures of living that for short term pleasure the outcome is long term ill health – grog and gunja.

The \$1.2 billion dollars that the Government intends to hand back to "mainstream" departments should be allocated to the State/Territory governments for them to pass on to the regional structures that are closer in touch with the needs of the people.

GOVERNMENT SPONSORED AGENCIES

Local Government and the Land Councils are seen as an agent for change but this is not always evident on the ground. The functions of local government (community councils) and the Land Councils have their roles defined in the respective Acts of Parliament at either State/Territory or Commonwealth legislation.

In 2003, Bob Collins, speaking on ABC Radio Perspective (23 February 2003) said:

Half of the Northern Territory's land, in broad terms, is aboriginal land; 85% of our coast is aboriginal land; there is a real opportunity for economic independence for aboriginal people with an asset like that.

... that enormous asset is administered on behalf of those stakeholders, those shareholders, by a very small number of people who do, in the main, the best they can, and work out of the Northern Land Council office in Darwin, the Central Land Council office in Alice Springs, the Tiwi Land Council office at Bathurst Island, but a great many

of the people who are actually owners of that asset have got no real understanding of what actually goes on in respect of that.

There needs to be a more open accounting back to the community in terms of the use of money obtained through payment for the royalties that accrue from economic development on their own land. In the case of the Tiwi Land Council its Annual Report of 2002/2003 states that *"the Tiwi Islands Community Trust controlling assets of \$25 million"* – the people in the community would like to know where that is and where it is accounted for in the public statements required by the organisation. The previous year's Annual Report stated that the same Trust had assets of \$15 million – a difference of \$10 million in one year.

Further to this the *ABC Darwin Radio News* ran an item on 21 July 2004 relating to the successful forest industry on the Tiwi Islands as follows:

Newsreader *The Tiwi forestry project is one of three Territory business partnerships to win the Prime Minister's award for excellence. The joint project between Sylvatech Ltd and the Tiwi Land Council has received the Northern Territory medium business award. John Hicks from the Tiwi Land Council says the congratulations belong to the Tiwi people who built a solid economic foundation for the future. He says the project worth an estimated \$120million a year will eventually be managed by the Tiwi community.*

John Hicks *They really have established the opportunity to entrench their own Tiwi economy and the leaders believe that is the basis of real change, real pride, real capacity amongst their people.*

Yet those same people who own the land and should have access to the benefits are unable to obtain support for the simplest of social needs. At Nguuiu on Bathurst Island the Strong Women's Group wants a "family centre" but has been unable to obtain support from either the Tiwi Land Council or the Tiwi Islands Local Government.

The deficiency in the current system is thus not solely the fault of government and its agencies. Government programs should have the flexibility to assist local communities and have guidelines available that meet the needs of the communities. At a recent briefing in Darwin by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services the audience was told that "communities should organise themselves to meet the guidelines" of the program titled "Local answers". It is suggested strongly that in the case of the Third World remote Aboriginal communities the guidelines should be organised to meet the needs of communities.

These people need an advocacy channel and this could be provided through the local representatives on a Social Development Council and its support "secretariat". The power for change should not rest with government employed bureaucrats or the few

people who represent their clans on the councils of Land Councils. The land belongs to the people – all the people.

ASSUMPTIONS TO BE TESTED

1. That remote living Aboriginal people are able to articulate a vision for the future; identifying needs and prioritizing those needs.
2. That it is possible to build the capacity in a community to develop resources that will help the people cope with change.
3. That financial management of community funds can be delegated to a local level and responsibly dispersed in the interests of a better community.
4. That the human resources needed to carry out essential tasks in the provision of welfare and other services are available at the local level.
5. That there is a role for a coordinating body to draw together the interests of government and non-government agencies in developing a social plan for the regional population based on the input from the individual community level.
6. That there is a “social responsibility” evident in the private sector wishing to see an improvement in the way of life, and hence health outcomes, for remote living Aboriginal people.

CONCLUSION

It is time to trust Aboriginal people and acknowledge the skills they have to intelligently decide on what is best for their own people. Reconciliation may then be rejuvenated through partnerships developed between local communities and the mainstream sector, especially business houses and the corporate sector.

There is a need to develop a culture of people working together towards the betterment of the lives of Aboriginal Australians living in remote communities. At present, and with the outsourcing of more government programs, the administration is being handed over to a culture of people who are public servants and may not necessarily have taken on their jobs with the idea of improving Aboriginal health and wellbeing. The proposal in this paper suggests a process to be developed through people who have as their mission the desire to improve the lives of people in remote communities.

I commend the inquiry to this process.

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