

21 April 2010

Senator Russell Trood
Chair
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senator Trood

Re: Enquiry into Matters Relating to the Torres Strait Region

I am an anthropologist who has worked on both sides of the Torres Strait border: among the islands of Torres Strait, and in the Treaty Villages and other communities along and close to the coast of Papua New Guinea's Western Province. From 1999-2003 I was employed as an Anthropologist by the Torres Strait Regional Authority, and since that time I have continued to work in Torres Strait as a consultant. I have studied and worked in Western Province since 1995; my doctoral research was undertaken on the Bensbach River, which borders Indonesia and Torres Strait, and I have also undertaken a number of consultancy projects in coastal Western Province, most recently last year.

It is clear that a key issue for the region is Papua New Guinea's rapidly expanding population, which will have a profound impact on the future of Torres Strait, as more and more Western Province people use the waters for subsistence and cash-producing activities, and visit the Australian islands to access their infinitely better health and other services. When I commenced research at Bensbach in 1995, none of the locals had ever been to Torres Strait; more recently, it is quite common for sick and injured villagers to make the long journey to Boigu Island's clinic. Who can blame them? Medical services in their area, like most of Western Province, are poor or non-existent. This trend, of increasing access to and use of Torres Strait by Western Province people who do not have traditional links to the islands, will certainly continue.

A number of submissions note the need for better data collection and analysis. In addition to better collection of Treaty movement data, I would also like to suggest socioeconomic analysis of the current arrangements (e.g. trade and labour) that pertain between Torres Strait Islanders and Treaty Village inhabitants; modeling of population change and its likely social and environmental effects; regional consideration of the potential impacts of climate change; and better use of PNG census data. Most Australian (and PNG) agencies, including the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, use outdated maps of Western Province (I have known three past TLOs, none of whom had access to an accurate map of Western Province villages in their office on Thursday Island). This is something that would be very simple to produce with reference to the 2000 census (all villages were recording using GPS – Global Positioning System - devices).

General social and economic research on the Treaty and other villages near Torres Strait will also be required if we are to understand future pressures and potentialities. Do they have enough arable land on which to garden? Are the fisheries of Torres Strait, including turtle and dugong, sustainable in the face of PNG's population growth rate of 2.7 per cent per annum, with the population of Treaty Villages set to double every 26 years?

Given the above, I would also like to suggest that the governments of Australia and Papua New Guinea convene a major conference to discuss the future of Torres Strait, bringing together relevant regional experts in fields such as demography, Indigenous resource management, economics, fisheries, agriculture, health and so on, with the results to be published.

I have read the submission of my colleague, Mr Kevin Murphy, and agree with the majority of his observations and suggestions, derived from long-term engagement with the region. In addition to Mr Murphy and myself, Dr David Lawrence, a Research Fellow at the Australian National University, is another individual with extensive experience on both sides of the Torres Strait border. It is my view that our expertise has not been well utilized in the past, and I believe that we could provide pragmatic, technical assistance and advice to one or more of the Torres Strait Treaty consultative mechanisms – the Treaty Liaison Meeting and/or the Joint Advisory Council. This could be done by establishing a Social Scientist position, with observer status, on these bodies (subject to agreement by both states), and inviting one or more of us to provide expert input on relevant social, cultural, political, economic and historical matters, as circumstances require.

Yours sincerely

Dr Garrick Hitchcock