

Government senators' additional comments

1.1 The government is committed to improving outcomes for First Australians. The Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) is focussed on delivering outcomes and is empowering organisations. Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion, Minister for Indigenous Affairs has noted:

Through the IAS funding round, 46 per cent of organisations funded were Indigenous (up from 30 per cent) and they received 55 per cent of total funding. These figures are heading in the right direction and we are confident we can do even better in the future.¹

1.2 The government has acknowledged that there are lessons to be learned from the first IAS funding round and to this end PM&C established internal and external reviews in June 2015. The executive summary, key findings, recommendations and conclusions of the internal review were provided to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee through the 2015-16 Supplementary Estimates round. This review made recommendations to improve planning processes, resources, governance and assessment, IT and infrastructure and communication.²

1.3 In addition the external review of the application guidelines has been completed with the revised guidelines to be released shortly.³

1.4 Government senators acknowledge that this process has been disruptive for organisations and some organisations have missed out on funding. However the government is determined to ensure that money is serving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities best, therefore it should be provided to organisations which are achieving positive outcomes. Mr Tongue, PM&C, summarised what the process has achieved:

Yes, it has been disruptive in the sector, but for the first time you—because we have provided everything that we have funded to the committee through Senate estimates—the sector and we are able to see this sweep of funding in Indigenous affairs across \$1.2 billion worth of funding. That throws up a series of policy questions about 'Why this and not that?' or, in some communities, 'Why six of those rather than one?' It also begs a series of policy questions about 'So how much of this money is allocated against evidence and how much is it, what I call, the geological layers of governments and ministers and bureaucracies over time?' The significance

1 Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion, Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Community-driven approach key to Closing the Gap, Media release, 10 February 2016.

2 See Answer to question on notice 61 for Supplementary Budget Estimates.

3 Mr Andrew Tongue, Associate Secretary, Indigenous Affairs, PM&C, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 1 March 2016, p. 3.

of that is quite powerful in shaping the Indigenous affairs agenda, going forward.⁴

1.5 Mr Tongue emphasised the increased transparency:

I think it is a very big change agenda and, typically, in government, those big change agendas—one thinks back to the employment services market—take a little while to work through. I think we are probably at a stage in this funding process where we are being more transparent than ever. I am hoping that that elicits some response from not just the sector but universities and others to ask us harder questions about funding directions and processes going forward. The Prime Minister has made clear a commitment to move to working in a more consultative way with communities, and the program allows us to do that. As we transition, there have been some ups and downs and some bumps, but I think there is quite a lot of power in having the money together.⁵

Timeline of inquiry

1.6 The length of time it has taken for this inquiry to report is disappointing and government senators question the value of the reporting extensions.

1.7 The inquiry was initiated in March 2015 with a hearing held in June 2015 but the final hearings were not held until February and March 2016. One of the aims of a Senate inquiry is to improve systems and processes and to this end reporting as soon as possible closer to the original reporting date of 18 June 2015 would have been of more assistance to PM&C with any follow-up issues monitored through the estimates process.

1.8 The lengthy timeline of the inquiry facilitated conflation of funding processes in previous years.⁶ Further, some witnesses at the Darwin hearing had not provided a submission to the inquiry and many witnesses had not applied for funding under IAS.⁷

1.9 The lengthy timeline of the inquiry also facilitated witnesses using the process as an opportunity to discuss concerns with other government programmes.

1.10 It also should be noted that it is important for Committee inquiries to consider the views from communities that actually receive the services that are the subject of the inquiry, not just those of service providers whose views on the IAS are likely to be dependent on their success in the funding round.

4 Mr Andrew Tongue, Associate Secretary, Indigenous Affairs, PM&C, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 1 March 2016, p. 11.

5 Mr Andrew Tongue, Associate Secretary, Indigenous Affairs, PM&C, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 1 March 2016, p. 11.

6 Mr Owen Cole, Member, Combined Aboriginal Organisations of Central Australia, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 16 February 2016, pp 39-40.

7 Ms Christina Davidson, Chief Executive Officer, Association of Northern Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 16 February 2016, p. 48.

1.11 Government senators acknowledge the heavy workload on committees but believe better outcomes could have been achieved by a much shorter inquiry timeline.

Senator Cory Bernardi
Deputy Chair

Senator Joanna Lindgren

