



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES  
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

**Reference: Indigenous employment**

THURSDAY, 17 MAY 2007

THURSDAY ISLAND

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**  
**Thursday, 17 May 2007**

**Members:** Mr Wakelin (*Chair*), Dr Lawrence (*Deputy Chair*), Ms Annette Ellis, Mr Garrett, Mr Laming, Mr Slipper, Mr Snowdon, Dr Southcott, Mr Tuckey and Mrs Vale

**Members in attendance:** Ms Annette Ellis, Mrs Vale and Mr Wakelin

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

Positive factors and examples amongst Indigenous communities and individuals, which have improved employment outcomes in both the public and private sectors; and

1. recommend to the government ways this can inform future policy development; and
2. assess what significant factors have contributed to those positive outcomes identified, including what contribution practical reconciliation\* has made.

\*The Committee has defined 'practical reconciliation' in this context to include all government services.

**WITNESSES**

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**Subcommittee met at 9.42 am**

**CHAIR (Mr Wakelin)**—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry into Indigenous employment. I thank everyone for being with us today. The idea is to try to seek examples of best practice around Australia to recommend to government practical steps to improve employment outcomes for everyone, particularly at a time when Australia needs every able-bodied person it can find to do the work available.

**AKEE, Mr Leo Brian, Private capacity****STEPHEN, Mr Napau Pedro, Mayor, Torres Shire Council**

**CHAIR**—This morning we welcome representatives of the Torres Shire Council, particularly Mayor Pedro Stephen and Leo B Akee. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

**Mr Akee**—I am the principal adviser, education services, with Queensland's Department of Education, Training and the Arts; this was previously the district manager position. I am here supporting Mayor Stephen with employment and training information.

**CHAIR**—The bureaucracy have got you up there as well, have they, with bits of paper?

**Mr Akee**—We are doing the elected members updates. The whole agenda has shifted since Beattie's announcement of amalgamation: size, shape and sustainability are out the door, and we are now talking about rebuilding for the future.

**CHAIR**—Constant review. There are about 4,000 or 5,000 people in your region?

**Mr Stephen**—Yes, about 5,000. The population is 'floating', because in our region a lot of transients come to the inner islands—that is from the outer islands as well.

**CHAIR**—You have the 'mainland' and what I think you call the 'inner islands'.

**Mr Stephen**—The term 'inner islands' refers to the area that Torres Shire delivers essential services to. That includes Thursday Island, Horn Island, Prince of Wales Island and the uninhabited islands here. But we do not deliver essential services to Hammond Island, which is only a kilometre away from TI. The total population of the Torres Strait is around 10,000, floating.

**CHAIR**—You mentioned that it is floating, that it is backwards and forwards a bit.

**Mr Stephen**—Thursday Island is the administrative hub of the Torres Strait. All the main government service deliverers are on Thursday Island—the Commonwealth and the state. The 'floating' issue also relates to construction under major infrastructure programs, which is happening on the outer islands as well as here in the inner islands: we have a lot of people moving into areas and out of areas.

**CHAIR**—How does the practical administrative relationship work between the people who occupy the building we are in—the Torres Strait Regional Authority—and the Torres Shire Council? What is the working relationship in terms of roles and that kind of thing?

**Mr Stephen**—Last year we signed a memorandum of understanding. Before that, there was ongoing liaison through different works programs. There was no official agreement, and that is why we went forward to have the MOU signed last year.

The other thing is the legislative structure in the Torres Strait. The TSRA is set up in such a way that there are representatives elected to represent the Indigenous population, under the Torres Shire jurisdiction: there is an elected representative from Port Kennedy and an elected representative from Horn Island and Prince of Wales Island. There is also the appointment of a representative from the TRAWQ Community Council Inc., from the back of the island. Those three are on the board of TSRA and represent the Indigenous population of the inner islands.

**CHAIR**—Our purpose this morning is to focus on employment opportunities. There is no better place to start than in your own operation. What is the situation with your council and your employees? What sort of numbers?

**Mr Stephen**—The Torres Shire Council employs a total of 80, including the indoor and the outdoor staff. We have 80 positions, and 95 per cent are filled by Indigenous people.

**CHAIR**—You anticipated my next question. It is a standard understanding: where the local, Indigenous people are fitting into it.

**Mr Stephen**—I think that the Torres Shire Council is one of the biggest employers of Indigenous people within our region. The department of health and the department of education are also big employers of Indigenous people. Organisations such as the TSRA and the Island Coordinating Council are also big employers of Indigenous people.

**CHAIR**—How often do you have your elections?

**Mr Stephen**—Every four years. The complex electoral structure in the Torres Strait is that Torres Shire Council has come under the mainstream local government legislation since 1991. The 17-island council comes under the community services act, but our council has always had its election under the mainstream local government legislation.

The new proposal for community governance is that our minister would be the Minister for Local Government, Planning and Sport and the minister for the outer island communities would be the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, from DATSIP, the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy. We have a four-year term, and our next election is next year.

**CHAIR**—I would like us to understand the outer islands a little more. I understand the TSRA has a representative from each island and that they come together as a board. Does the outer islands group have the formation of a council, or are they all independent?



**Mr Stephen**—They have the formation of an individual council on the island. Depending on the population base, they usually have a maximum of three councillors and the chair. On Thursday Island, I am elected as the mayor and there are seven other councillors—a total of eight for the Torres shire.

The complexity of all this has now been before the minister. They are looking at the governance issues and may have three shires in the Torres Strait. One shire would represent the outer islands, and there would be the Torres shire, which would not be touched. The other shire that is proposed would probably cover the northern peninsula area, where there are three Aboriginal communities and two islands—

**CHAIR**—Which is under your jurisdiction—

**Mr Stephen**—It is under our jurisdiction as well. The outer islands council sits under the jurisdiction of the Torres Shire Council, under the Local Government Act 1993; but the running of community services, or the interpretation of essential services, and local government responsibility with regard to all these inhabited communities come under the community services act. It is like cutting up a scone. The uninhabited islands which sit around them are still the responsibility of the Torres Shire Council. So you have three layers of different legislation that apply. The local government authority—the Torres Shire Council—is still responsible to the state, but you also have the ICC—the Island Coordinating Council—which is answerable to the state as the voice of the Indigenous council. We have a similar setup, I think, to the Cook Shire. The Cook Shire has 16 Aboriginal councils under it. We sit here with a defined boundary and have 17 island councils.

**CHAIR**—That is gradually being reviewed and worked through, is it?

**Mr Stephen**—Yes. This morning, after the introduction of the representative from the Local Government Association, who is up here to do the elected member review, I think that they seem more confused than us!

**CHAIR**—We are confused enough in Canberra or wherever we come from! Mrs Vale will now introduce herself. Where we come from gives you a picture of where we come from.

**Mrs VALE**—I am the federal member for Hughes, which is an area in southern Sydney. You have probably heard of the Lucas Heights atomic reactor, which is a research reactor. It is in my electorate, which I am very proud of. It is my second largest corporate employer, and it provides medical isotopes more than anything else. It is the major industry in my electorate. That gives you an idea of where we are from. Thank you for seeing us today. It is lovely to be here on your island.

**CHAIR**—I come from South Australia. My largest Indigenous population are the Pitjantjatjara near Alice Springs, and I think Pitjantjatjara is known in the Central Desert as well.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—My electorate is the seat of Canberra, which is half the ACT. It has the parliament in it, and it is the country of the Ngunnawal.

**CHAIR**—I only have a couple of really key questions. You are the community leader in this part of the world: what do you see as the people's aspirations for work, and employment opportunities? We know that most Australians want to work and to have a certain standard of living. I am just looking to get your view about how you see 'the world at work' on Thursday Island, in the context of what the job market really is; and about what the government might do to support or assist.

**Mr Stephen**—Before I continue, there are two things that I want to say upfront. I would like to ask Mr Akee to give you some background information. Mr Akee's involvement has been in training for some time. In particular, he was the manager in charge of a five-year initiative that was funded by the state but was also a joint initiative with the Commonwealth, from '93 to '98. Some good recommendations came out of that.

I think that one of the main things we have here in our region is that we really want to break the welfare cycle. The welfare mentality reflects through different programs with the 'Indigenous' title on them. At the end of the day, all the initiatives that have come from the grassroots have not worked. The people who were engaged in different agencies are still being trained. The four years are still ongoing. Mr Akee will identify that, with those initiatives that came up in '93, you still have people going to university to get qualifications to get full-time employment.

**Mr Akee**—Prior to 1993 we identified that there were 805 public service positions in the Torres Strait. They found that 80 per cent of those were occupied by Torres Strait Islanders but in base grade positions. When I say 'base grade positions', I mean the first scale of administration positions in the public sector. And so the Torres Strait employment and career development strategy was introduced to help bring local people from base grade positions to AO4 or AO5 positions, to target higher positions.

When I came in to oversee the strategy, I negotiated with all of the state government and Commonwealth agencies about their aspirations for where they see Indigenous people in their progression with employment. We found that, because the local people had limited opportunities to undergo training, they were more or less kept in the lowest level of administration in the public sector. So the strategy had a varied degree of programs which enabled people to upskill themselves and also be given the opportunity to work under a mentor in the participating department. Then, at the end of that training, there would be the opportunity for the local people to act in those positions, should a position come up.

The overall target over the five-year strategy was 30 people a year in all the programs. At the conclusion of the strategy in 1998, we had put 484 local people into employment and training positions within government agencies. At that time there was a bit of upheaval in state politics, especially with the balance of power being held in Rocky, I think. We had a Labor government in power in the state government. With the balance of power issue, the individual shifted their vote and then the coalition came in. Things happened again and then Labor was in power. It was at that time that the strategy was concluding and we were wondering what was going to happen with the future of the strategy, whether another strategy was going to be implemented. It was because of that upheaval within politics that everything was put on the back shelf. It was an issue to have such a success rate—something like 450 per cent. There was no future. That is one of the reasons why I left Employment and Training to go to Education.

From the local perspective, as far as employment goes, we have managed to put through the strategy the majority of the people that you see currently employed here at the TSRA in health and education. We put three Indigenous doctors through the program. It was a good success rate in that the three doctors, who we supported with their studies, are now practising doctors in hospitals throughout Australia. There are three of them.

We also introduced five secondary teachers to the program. Many of the teachers were already up here in community teacher positions. We took five of them out of the primary school level and put them into the secondary level. Now the five are currently enjoying secondary teaching.

We also had success with individuals who entered into the Bachelor of Nursing; they currently have their qualifications. Twenty-five individual health workers were identified for a middle management program. Our success rate is that 100 per cent of them went on to become health centre managers in the communities.

As a local person, I was disillusioned that we had a strategy that was operating for a key purpose—to target local people in employment and training—and then it fell flat on its face. It has not gone further since then. At the moment it is going back to the old attitude that ‘people are not skilled and so they do not have the skills to act in high positions’. That is sad in a way and it defeated the purpose of why the strategy was implemented in the first place. So we are in a situation now that some people are probably resigned to their positions at the moment, but they do not see a career path in going any further with their studies.

From an education perspective, we targeted those five secondary teachers. We are in a situation now where more should be done to encourage more Indigenous people to go into secondary schooling. There is nothing wrong with people dreaming that they would like to be the manager of an organisation and somebody wanting to do finance and all this, but of course those things cannot happen unless government is genuine about its recruitment and selection policy.

We have people who come up here to work, and I will give you an example of what can happen. We came back from holidays after Christmas and the New Year and we went to put our vehicle on at Cairns. We found out that we could not get our vehicle on, mainly because the people who were on transfer from the outside, who had come from the mainland to be employed here, were all bringing boats with them. For us in the community, it paints the wrong picture, because either you are coming for work or you are coming for pleasure. That is why, I guess, people are a bit reluctant about where their future is as far as employment and training go. You can train so much, but you cannot train as an architect in the community if there is no base for an architectural position in the community.

**Mr Stephen**—That is why there is frustration from the community, because we have had a strategy that has worked. One of the main emphases from the community perspective was that the strategy, or the office, had the support of both the state and the Commonwealth. There was justification for funds being spent on the area, because we saw positive outcomes. Therefore, when that strategy stopped it was really sad, because then it was open. What we have now is really what you see in other mainstream towns. They say that you have to go into mainstream job opportunities. When we get absorbed into the mainstream, we still have not caught up. We are still trying to catch up in different areas. Now they are saying that ITEC will look after our

training needs, but they forget that these guys have already been around the mill two or three times. These people were trained before, and there is frustration here.

The council is trying to address the issue of land and housing opportunities. Here you still have the main push. The positive thing that came out of the strategy was that it addressed equity in terms of equity of access to job opportunities in our region. The strategy was never given an opportunity. Whilst it targeted the public sector, it did not have the opportunity to also look at the private sector. The private sector had a lot of good initiatives that came from the community, where we had talks about forming a construction consortium of local councils. Torres Shire cannot bid for a big position against Theiss Bros. When the hospital was going to be built, all the big companies from as far away as the west were applying for the contract job here.

The initiative that came from the community was that, if two or three councils joined as a consortium, we would then form a local construction arm. When that initiative came forward, the argument that we got back was that we had to be careful of how we advertise for big jobs. The big jobs are for hospitals, sewerage systems and other big projects. We have to make sure we do not discriminate against the mainstream contractors. But the unfortunate thing is that we have had so many failures that never really hit the mainstream paper, where outside people have been brought in to build infrastructure such as dams and they met the targets but there was a problem. For example, there was a project on Bardu. A company from the Gold Coast built the dam. They went away and got all the accolades, but in the first wet season the dam could not hold water. Then they spent a big lot of money to find and rectify the problem, really doing the major works again to do that.

The idea was to have an infrastructure arm. It was an initiative to follow up something that started here in the seventies. We had a local construction arm that moved around: you got boys on deck, and there were mechanics, there were plumbers, there were carpenters and a whole range of people. That program was initiated from the community and it was run until it was not supported anymore. It got to the stage where it bought a barge and the barge was equipped with skippers and the crew was all Indigenous. It was called MAW Corporation. That went by the wayside because there was no follow-up, there was no incentive such as this strategy: the incentive that if something works then followers-through do not stop and start something that might duplicate it.

The problem I was talking about with housing relates to state policy everywhere. People say, 'We know that you are Indigenous, but you are in the state, and it is a state policy that if you are employed locally you cannot get a house.' So it does not solve the problem of people still living with their families. It is like living in a debt society, forever in debt. You can get a good job but you cannot get a house, and you still have to live with mum and dad, with your brothers and sisters.

**CHAIR**—Houses are available to outsiders?

**Mr Stephen**—Yes.

**Mr Akee**—But not for people who are employed locally.

**Mr Stephen**—And the policy does identify—

**CHAIR**—What rental?

**Mr Akee**—It is probably a sore point for me especially, because I have progressed in the public service from being a trainee, since we moved up here in 1987. Now, in a senior management position, you tend to think that things have become a failure: you are a public servant, you want to be treated as such, as a public servant, and yet your colleagues who are employed from the mainland, who are currently in government employee housing or departmental housing, are paying anything from \$6 per fortnight, on the outer islands, to \$48 per fortnight.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Rent component?

**Mr Akee**—Rent component. As for me, I am employed locally and am in another government housing program yet I pay \$560 a fortnight. That is a big difference in the rental program and that is probably why a lot of local people do not see themselves progressing, because there seems to be one policy for us and one policy for somebody else. With a lot of the husbands and wives who are working, one of them has to leave their employment, because if the two of them are employed they get charged the market rent, the market rent being anything up to \$560 a fortnight.

The other side of the coin is that when you get the likes of Customs or AQIS, who have to rent or lease accommodation, they are happy to pay something like \$1,200 to \$1,700 a week in rent. That is the difference; that is the reality, getting back to your point about employment.

**CHAIR**—We have been hearing a little of that. It is something that I cannot comment on, because I am not familiar with it, but I can understand the impact: where is the incentive? Going back to the employment issues and the positiveness of the 1993-98 period: perhaps we need to understand a little better the value that you saw in it. Obviously it had mentoring. It had—

**Mr Akee**—Sponsoring.

**CHAIR**—It had sustained financial support from federal and state. I am just trying to understand what—

**Mr Stephen**—It was a double-edged sword. It kept accountable the local people that were engaged in that program, as well as those agencies that were employing them. I believe that, where you had a one-strategy approach, it was focused and it could be assessed. Now you have five or 10 different organisations that are going in saying that they are doing the same thing that the Torres Strait employment strategy picked up in 1993. Therefore, you have all of the universities out here with their Indigenous unit to lobby for people. That is well and good; it is about choice, and the people can go away. But, for me, it is all a numbers game, rather than being a genuine effort. There needs to be a constant pathway where you are trained and then you are able to come and get employment. That strategy guaranteed that.

**CHAIR**—The issue—and you linked it to the opportunities—is that the big contracts are coming from outside, whereas you were hoping that your own local group would be able to tender for contracts and give continuity. I am not familiar enough to know exactly how that works. What I am hearing is that there was a time here in recent history where you felt that there

were genuine outcomes. You would have liked to have seen people aiming for the middle and higher end of job opportunity, which is something we are hearing more and more about within the mining industry, for example. You are all familiar with Weipa. We understand that Rio or Comalco, as they are more locally known, are looking to make sure that Indigenous people move into those more senior positions. There is a real drive and a real skill in how you encourage that to happen.

**Mr Akee**—For example, out of the 23-plus agencies on the island, there are only five of us who are in senior management. Actually, there are more than 23: I think there are about 28 to 30, as much as that. So there are only five of us who are in senior management at the moment.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Can I just clarify that? It is 30 or however many government agencies?

**Mr Akee**—State government, local government.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Between state —

**Mr Stephen**—State and Commonwealth

**Mr Akee**—And local government.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**— And local?

**Mr Akee**—Yes.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—So out of the three tiers of government.

**Mr Akee**—In senior management, yes.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Thanks.

**CHAIR**—We come here as people who are not familiar, and therefore it is always dangerous to make presumptions. We hear your aspiration. We hear what you believe would strengthen the employment opportunities, not only for the total population but in terms of moving forward into the senior positions. We heard the Torres Strait Regional Authority talk about moving from the CDEP program into ‘mainstream’ jobs. For example, there are 400 municipal jobs available in the region, which would move into what we would call mainstream jobs, not CDEP jobs, thereby attracting something as basic as superannuation. Clearly, that aspiration is there. We are hearing that, but we cannot make presumptions—well, I can’t, because I do not know it well enough.

Obviously our time is limited as always, but I need to ask you for a couple of suggestions as to what the government could do to move it forward, given that example of the past that you have cited. Then I will go to Mrs Vale and Annette Ellis.

**Mr Akee**—I came through the Torres Strait Islander employment and curriculum strategy—which is now no more—and then I spent a few years on the Indigenous Training Advisory Council, the national advisory council that advised the Australian National Training Authority.

One of the major issues for me has been that the communities here in the Torres Strait—and I do not speak for any of the Aboriginal communities on the mainland—tend to get overconsulted. When funding is put into an area, the majority of that money is swallowed up in overconsultations. So, when you have people like me who have experience, it is a matter of ‘if you want to implement a program, then rely on local expertise’. So that has probably been a failure in the sense that the communities are now overtrained—and I think that the mayor was alluding to this earlier—but they are not trained to build sustainable communities.

I have been in training since 1993. We are some 14 years down the track, but we are in a situation where we have communities that are not sustainable. They have gone through a training phase with numerous mainland training organisations that have come here and delivered training, but you do not see a sustainable community. There are no bakeries, there are no garages, there are no mechanical services—there are no shops, where people have said, ‘All right. I have done the training; now I can start up a business in the community.’ It is just not there. So that defeats the purpose of why people want to undergo training.

**CHAIR**—I think you have really put your finger on it. This is the job to go to: how do you link it up and then turn it into a circle that sustains itself?

**Mr Akee**—The sad point about it is that plumbing, block laying and carpentry are probably skills that people have come out of their training with. They have got the qualifications, but there is nothing there to support them as to how to start a business. The majority of the boys that I came through my program with since my days in TAFE in 1993 are still working for somebody else. Why aren’t they working for themselves? As the mayor was saying earlier about having a local construction arm, there is nothing stopping that from happening. But first of all you have to get support, finding organisations that have the money to help support local people with employment.

**Mr Stephen**—Since that strategy and in the lead-up to the strategy, we have been identifying issues locally, seeing that there was so much infrastructure that was being built but that they are still getting people from outside to come and maintain that infrastructure. And then the community gets the blame for something going wrong, with outsiders saying, ‘Why aren’t you guys putting your hands up?’ The initiatives that they have come forward with should have that ownership, but if it has not been done then people walk away.

The strategy that we have to help people get a job is like this: they go to Health, and Health says, ‘You should be thankful that you have a job, but you cannot get the remote area incentives.’ And yet they are working side-by-side with someone who has the opportunity to fly down to Cairns in their time off. You have the local guys doing the same thing, but it is harder for him or her to fly down. From Cairns to Thursday Island is the dearest leg in all of Australia. We have talked umpteen times with the department of transport. We have had local airfares which were good, but that initiative comes around when Qantas are bidding to get that leg secured with the department of transport. As soon as they secure that leg for the next five years, they go off and change the seat rates for the community. They said, ‘What we have done now is that there are cheap rates but you have to go to the internet.’ How many Indigenous homes have internet access?

There is one thing that the government can do for us. The government introduced the 20 per cent Indigenous employment strategy to every big job, but there is no policing or enforcing of that. It is left to the construction arm's interpretation of it, and they say, 'I have two guys on-site here from CDEP.' But just because they are on CDEP does not mean they are actually engaged in training and getting a job. At the end of the day, that housing project or the hospital finishes, the company moves on and the guys are still there on CDEP. It is very disheartening.

**CHAIR**—That is not the progress you would like.

**Mrs VALE**—Thank you very much, Mayor, for your information this morning. As you can imagine, as we go around Australia, we find that each community has its own unique problems. Yours are quite unique here. As I listened to you, Leo, talking about the programs and the employment strategy that you had that worked so well, I wanted to ask you if it was in the change of governance of the state that the strategy fell by the wayside. Has there been any application by your council and your other community bodies to have that program reinstated?

**Mr Akee**—I have always been a big supporter of the idea that if something works well it should be continued. As I said earlier, I got disillusioned by the fact that I contributed to something that worked well, but it did not continue.

**Mrs VALE**—Is that the reason that you are now in a senior position in the public service? Were you part of that program?

**Mr Akee**—No. I am confident enough that, if I see a position that I think I can fill, I will apply for the position. I was not a protégé of that program, nor a beneficiary of that program.

**Mrs VALE**—You were a promoter of that program?

**Mr Akee**—I was a promoter of that program. When I was saying earlier about our place being overconsulted, we had \$5 million there for a specific purpose, and not one cent of it was spent on consultants. We were local people who were managing the funds ourselves, so we knew where the money was needed the most. In that sense, I think that the reason that the strategy was successful was that when people wanted training for something, we were able to provide that program.

**Mrs VALE**—Your outcome speaks for itself. Has there been any formal move to ask the state government for the reintroduction of that program?

**Mr Akee**—Not formally, although there has been some talk amongst the leaders about another Torres Strait—

**Mrs VALE**—Using your local federal member and your local state member to lobby for you—

**Mr Akee**—The state has come back with other initiatives—

**Mrs VALE**—That is the one that you have found that worked—



**Mr Akee**—They have come and used the school to work program concept, but they have—

**Mrs VALE**—You want this other program.

**Mr Akee**—That is right.

**Mrs VALE**—I think you really should lobby very, very hard for that program to be reinstated. The other idea you had, Mayor, was the construction arm, which seemed to me to be a very good idea, where you could actually employ young people in trades. You said that you had organised a barge which was all equipped. What happened? Why did that idea just melt away? Did your construction arm have to compete for different tenders that came up from time to time?

**Mr Stephen**—They did. Yes.

**Mrs VALE**—But they were not taken up? The work went to a mainland contractor?

**Mr Stephen**—I think that what happened was that it was a non-government organisation that was running it at that time. I think there was a failure in the management structure. As Leo indicated before, there was no real training. There were people who could do hands-on work, but—

**Mrs VALE**—They did not have a business background. That is another skill. Perhaps if you had a training dollar again, you could look at that business management side.

**Mr Stephen**—We would like to upskill those local people who have trade skills, to enable them to run their own businesses.

**Mr Stephen**—That is why the incentive now is to focus more to have councils consortiums because the councils themselves are equipped with the administration and under the legislation you could actually have a business arm operating. So I think that individual councils have added that initiative whether they are running a motel, a tourist venture that is happening at the moment. We are really blessed at this time that we are looking at the tourism opportunity that we are focusing on; we are looking to implement a Torres Strait tourism plan that should get a lot of things happening, including getting the school engaged to cater in the curriculum for kids to enter the tourism industry.

**Mrs VALE**—To learn hospitality and things like that.

**Mr Stephen**—That is right.

**Mrs VALE**—And we have spoken about two other groups that have represented different aspects in different agencies, about the prospect of tourism there, because this place is paradise. It is absolutely beautiful! And you have so many wonderful natural attributes. In fact, even political stability which is not there in other havens of the world is here in the Torres Strait. Even though you have that potential, you need to get some good tourist infrastructure here: it will actually generate a lot of jobs and there will be a lot of spin-offs. And the shops that you talk about, being a shopaholic, I thought, 'My goodness, I didn't see any shops here,' which is

unusual even for an island; there are usually some local stalls or something. I believe you do have markets once a month—

**Mr Akee**—Once a month.

**Mrs VALE**—Once a month, and I suppose that is a beginning. But the concern about the perception from the community that even getting a job and working hard, it is actually going to cost them. I mean, that is a big obstacle to overcome. It is one thing to have aspirations to have meaningful work, and for what that can buy you or bring your family, but it is another thing when it actually costs you. I don't think there are too many communities or even ordinary, mainstream Australians that are in that position, that if they actually get work it is going to cost them. That is a huge obstacle.

**Mr Akee**—You are right there. A lot of people who aspire to run their own businesses cannot do so because of the high cost of living.

**Mrs VALE**—The high cost of success, too.

**Mr Akee**—Yes. The cost of living is so high that someone who aspires to run their own business cannot because the government has gone and purchased a vacant block here for \$280,000. Now, in reality, you are talking about almost twice the value of what the initial value of that land is. That is why the high cost of living is such that people cannot buy their own homes, they cannot own their own homes, purely for the fact that the government purchase the property and put the cost out of reach of local people. And so when the time comes to get a property to build your business, the cost is so high that you have to get almost a million dollars to actually get your property off the ground. Because you have to buy the land for a certain amount, and then you have to build on it as well, which is going to cost you almost twice as much also.

**Mr Stephen**—We sort of identified that by trying to encourage cottage industry in our new Integrated Planning Act that has been adopted now, to focus more on people actually working from home and trying to cater for that area.

**Mrs VALE**—I would love to ask you a hundred other questions but time is our greatest enemy and I want to give my colleague an opportunity—

**CHAIR**—We have another group to speak to. We only have about 20 minutes to go.

**Mrs VALE**—But thank you very much for coming, and I am sure you have some answers. I would like to talk to you perhaps afterwards.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—I just have one really quick question, because we are running out of time. How many teachers on the island are locals, if you know the answer to this?

**Mr Akee**—Locals?

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—All of them? Some of them? Just give us a punt.

**Mr Akee**—Probably not even, say, 60 per cent. Probably maybe 40 to 45 per cent.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—There are two schools, aren't there? There is a state school and a Catholic school.

**Mr Akee**—Here on the island?

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Here on the island.

**Mr Akee**—On Thursday Island? No, the majority would be non-Indigenous.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Okay. So no locals.

**Mr Stephen**—About 10 per cent, probably.

**Mr Akee**—It is quite a low number.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—I just wanted to check. Do you have any idea of the health workforce, the nursing staff, in the hospital? What degree of locals there are there? Just roughly.

**Mr Akee**—Not in nursing. Maybe one or two here.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—But again it is very low?

**Mr Akee**—It is all very low, yes.

**Mr Stephen**—In the management, in the administration you have a lot of Indigenous people.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Locals?

**Mr Stephen**—Yes.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Okay, but the practising staff? The actual caring staff?

**Mr Stephen**—The actual professional staff? Very few.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Okay, I just wanted to ask that, Barry. Thank you.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Annette. Gentlemen, we could go on at some length but we are out of time. Thank you very much. I think we have a snapshot. We hear the frustration, we hear of things that have worked, we hear of components of that that could offer opportunities for the future. You have some big challenges. Do you know of many that would be involved in the mining game, Weipa way?

**Mr Stephen**—With Weipa, we have a career market every year and Weipa plays a big role. Not only our students but also the community can go to the markets and look for what is

available. I know there are some incentives, that they may be looking at another mining thing at Lockhart or Aurukun or somewhere and we support them 100 per cent.

Going back to what Danna said about every community being unique in a sense: up here we are special. I think it has always been the case that, in this region, government can do a lot. We liken ourselves to a mini-Canberra because we have as many government departments here as you have in Canberra, because of the international border issue and all that stuff. You have the state shadow-boxing with the Commonwealth all the time. You have Commonwealth Education, you have state Education, you have Commonwealth Health, you have state Health.

We believe there is so much control that can be done through legislation and policies that can enhance the community's aspiration and can make things happen for us. That is why the aspiration of the region as a whole is always to move towards an autonomy, or towards a federal government control body, because the state just duplicates and does not hold up their end of the bargain. From our perspective, the state duplicates and sucks up all the funds that are supposed to come to the community and reprioritises based on their perspective of what the community does. The days my fathers and my grandfathers came from, the days of the Department of Native Affairs, are still demonstrated by the state's control mechanisms for Indigenous people here.

The aspiration, the enthusiasm, from the community about ownership has always been there, and will continue. We have never been backwards in coming forwards in coming up with incentives to make things work for us. I know that there is a big opportunity for the Commonwealth to lobby for the AusAID funds that go to New Guinea, because we carry the implication of all the people of the Western Province, 50,000 people there—

**CHAIR**—We have undertaken, Mr Mayor, to represent that view to our people in Canberra.

**Mr Stephen**—Thank you very much.

**CHAIR**—We have undertaken to do that. We have picked it up in the report from TSRA yesterday. We have to close because we will miss our plane. I do apologise for cutting off a little quickly. Thank you very much.

**Mr Stephen**—If we want to submit anything in writing, can we forward it to you?

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Absolutely.

**CHAIR**—Please.

[10.41 am]

**WYMARRA, Ms Hazel, Employment Consultant, ITEC Employment**

**CHAIR**—I welcome you here this morning. We are, as you probably understand, very pressed for time. We have to be gone in the next 15 minutes, so it is going to be very brief, but thank you for being with us. The first thing I need to do is advise you that these are proceedings of the parliament and we welcome you here today. You might, if you would, tell us something about your work.

**Ms Wymarra**—I am an ITEC employment consultant. I have been on board with ITEC for the last eight months. Prior to that, I conducted the Torres Strait census for the bureau last year as a field officer. That was in 2006, prior to being an ITEC Employment consultant.

**CHAIR**—You might like to do just a quick overlay of how you see the employment situation here and then we will have time for a couple of questions.

**Ms Wymarra**—Prior to my job as an employment consultant, as I said previously, I conducted the Australian Bureau of Statistics census 2006. As a part of my role as a census field officer, I had to travel to all the communities. I looked after 15 communities in the Torres Strait. Employment was one of the areas that I covered; questions such as whether people were on CDEP and looking at what industries they have within their communities. I am now with ITEC, delivering training and employment. Right now we are looking at training and getting our people skilled up who are coming through from Centrelink.

The biggest unemployment cycle we have here is through CDEP, no local industries. We are just in the process of mapping out local industries within the communities themselves and trying to create employment. It could be seen as a far off thing but I think that you need to strike while the iron is hot. The employment situation, especially in our region, is given a lot more opportunities now, especially with the funding that is coming through for training. It has to be recognised and streamlined so that you do not just get a job here but can travel elsewhere, as well as be able to acquire long-term employment with skills and qualifications through what we provide as a training Job Network member.

**CHAIR**—I just need to try to understand ITEC a little better. You mentioned CDEP: do you have a close working relationship with CDEP?

**Ms Wymarra**—With Centrelink?

**CHAIR**—Community Development Employment Program.

**Ms Wymarra**—The councils look after CDEP. We look after our jobseekers that come through from Centrelink.

**CHAIR**—That is Job Network business. Are you able to indicate the sort of numbers you are dealing with on an annual basis?

**Ms Wymarra**—The caseload that I have—I look after the NPA, which has five communities—is about 270 clients.

**CHAIR**—Do you have a picture of the total number of people available? It is perhaps not your focus as a Job Network provider.

**Ms Wymarra**—I am trying to think of the bigger communities. Perhaps it is at least 1,500 people. That is including the 15 ICC communities.

**CHAIR**—I will shortly ask the other committee members if they have any questions to ask. If there is one thing, or two things that you would like the government to do, that might support you a little more, what would that be?

**Ms Wymarra**—I have a long list. I am a community person. I have never had a job with the government. I have always worked with social issues and such. I am very fortunate to be with employment and training now, and I am in a position where we have funding from DEWR to deliver training and employment. We need to look at industries. I am banging my head against the wall, because I did the census last year and there is so much potential out there. We have listed all the industries that can take off. The potential is there. It is just that the money does not reach there. It depends how the money comes, whether it is through grants or small business loans. It has not reached the ground. It was always a pilot about something, and a pilot about another thing, and that all gets squashed, and then something else happens. We really need to start looking at things that we have resources within our—

**CHAIR**—I am told that with all of these pilots, there are almost enough pilots to pilot the Qantas fleet!

**Ms Wymarra**—Yes. There are plenty of pilots, but not enough crew.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Are you the only Job Network provider in the Torres Strait?

**Ms Wymarra**—Yes.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—And do you cover, from here on TI—where I notice your office is—the whole of the Torres Strait?

**Ms Wymarra**—Yes. We cover Torres Strait and NPA.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Is there a Centrelink office here?

**Ms Wymarra**—Yes, there is.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Okay. How many people work there, approximately? Is there one or are there 10?

**Ms Wymarra**—They have about six staff there and about three over at NPA. I believe they are looking for a permanent office on NPA and some accommodation over there.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Did you say there are six Centrelink staff?

**Ms Wymarra**—Approximately six.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—They are not from here? They are sent up on posting from elsewhere?

**Ms Wymarra**—No. They are local people.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—They are locally engaged local people. Do you work to them, and do they work to you for referrals for placement?

**Ms Wymarra**—Yes.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—You said earlier that there are approximately 1,500 possible clients in your catchment. What about the 250 people you mentioned earlier? Was that in the NPA, or is that the caseload that you have?

**Ms Wymarra**—Yes. Two hundred and ninety people.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—How many people are employed by ITEC?

**Ms Wymarra**—We have ten staff on board now. The majority of us are ECs and we do the remote work. We travel once a month for five days. We are finding we are a bit strapped for time. There is not enough time in the day to provide customised assistance, which is a one-on-one service. We seem to be like government, flying in and flying out, whereas we are meant to provide one-to-one assistance. When we are booking appointments, we are not going to book in 30 people to see us in a day. There is just not enough time in the day. Just coming from that perspective, I have to deal with clients on a one-to-one basis and put them through the pathways to employment with a lot of personal support, and social dysfunction stops growth.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Are you in a position to give us an approximate success rate of ITEC in terms of job placement? That is not a criticism; I just want to understand what your approximate success rate is.

**Ms Wymarra**—I have only been there eight months. Can we get something to you in writing?

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—I would love you to. My last question is a little bit provocative, but it follows on from the answer to an earlier question—and I am not suggesting that Centrelink or you should not be here, quite the reverse. Is it frustrating to be in the position of being a Job Network provider in an area where there is such little employment possibility?

**Ms Wymarra**—Very frustrating.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—It just seems so hard to me because the economy in terms of employment here, let alone in the more remote communities, is as it is, but you have a job to try and place these people. I am just trying to get an understanding of the connection between the federal level and Centrelink demanding that you do this work and your ability to do it, given the

economic climate in which most of these communities sit. It just seems to be a round peg in a square hole to some degree.

**Ms Wymarra**—There is not a real labour market. I am talking to all the employers in my area, trying to offer them a range of incentives so that we can get people back into the workforce. We need to create industries. I really feel sorry for the people out on the islands because they do not have anything. It is just about CDEP and crayfishing. I look at the resumes of these people, and especially kids coming out of school; they went to grade 12 and they are so skilled. I just really think something should be done now; what has happened in the past should never happen again. The future generation should have a vision of where they are going.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Do any of the state or federal government agencies who have positions of any kind up here come to an organisation like you first to see whether there is somebody you know of who could take a position they wish to fill before they transport someone up here?

**Ms Wymarra**—No.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Would it be a good idea if they did in some cases?

**Ms Wymarra**—I am hoping. I am glad that you brought that up because I have not actually thought about until now. Commonwealth or state jobs are not advertised through us for when we get job referrals or employees placed with us. So we are still completing the same cycle of refilling, backfilling from outside and getting people from wherever.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—It seems crazy to me that if Centrelink and you are here—and they may not match—but should there be a match possible between an agency wanting someone to come up here and do a job as against the people you are dealing with and it is not done, it seems crazy. But I will finish my comments. That is a statement rather than a question.

**Mrs VALE**—My colleague's statement is a very valid one, quite frankly. I hear your dedication and also your frustration at the same time. But I understand our previous witnesses said there are about 805 government jobs here—is that right? My colleague's statement about some sort of connection, that is just amazing. You should be able to link in with that. And maybe the most subtle way you can go ahead with that is to kick a few shins somewhere—or maybe we could kick them for you, if you tell us who—because that does not seem right. Because of time, I have only one question for you. What kind of industries do you think would be suitable? You said that you had sat down and nussed out some industries that you thought could be here. Of course, that is going to take private money, not government money, and that could be a problem. Tourism just jumps out at me, but what other industries do you think?

**Ms Wymarra**—We have tried the fishing industry. Industry can be created just through community projects. We are running a few community projects now and we are getting our people skilled up.

**Mrs VALE**—It looks like I am being called to a halt. Perhaps I could see you afterwards.



**CHAIR**—Mrs Vale is able to stay a little longer, but we will miss our flight if we do not leave you. We apologise for that. Time has beaten us. We started a little late this morning. That has been very valuable, even though it was short. Already, Annette Ellis has made a suggestion that I hope we can turn into a recommendation. It may not happen overnight, but we may be able to make some suggestions which, over time, may help you. Hazel, thank you very much.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Vale**, seconded by **Ms Annette Ellis**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Subcommittee adjourned at 10.57 am**