



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

**Reference: Community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
communities**

TUESDAY, 31 MARCH 2009

BADU ISLAND

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

INTERNET

Hansard transcripts of public hearings are made available on the internet when authorised by the committee.

The internet address is:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>

To search the parliamentary database, go to:

<http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au>

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

Tuesday, 31 March 2009

Members: Mr Marles (*Chair*), Mr Laming (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Abbott, Ms Campbell, Mr Katter, Ms Rea, Mr Kelvin Thomson, Mr Trevor, Mr Turnour and Mrs Vale

Members in attendance: Mr Katter, Mr Marles, Mr Turnour and Mrs Vale

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The operation of local community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with a particular focus on:

- food supply, quality, cost and competition issues;
- the effectiveness of the Outback Stores model, and other private, public and community store models; and
- the impact of these factors on the health and economic outcomes of communities.

WITNESSES

AHMAT, Mrs Kay, Head of Badu Campus, Tagai State College, Badu Island	12
ALBERT, Mr Darrell, Accountant, Donga Town General Store, Badu Island.....	22, 39
COLEMAN, Mr Charles W., Private capacity.....	39
GUIVARRA, Mr Wayne Samuel, Councillor, Torres Strait Island Regional Council, Division 5, Badu Island	3, 39
KEBISU, Miss Rita Murile, Project Coordinator, Mina Aigud, Matha, Zizimika, (Eat Well, Be Active), Tagai State College, Badu Island.....	12, 39
MITCHELL, Mr Robert, Store Manager, Island and Cape.....	33
MORSEAU, Mr George, Private capacity.....	12
NAMOA, Mr Manuel, Island Manager, Torres Strait Island Regional Council, Division 5, Badu Island	3
NEWIE, Mr John, Private capacity	39
NEWIE, Mrs Maureen, Private capacity.....	39
NONA, Mr Laurie, Private capacity	39
NONA, Mr Titom, Private capacity	39
SAILOR, Mrs Susannah, Private capacity	39
STEPHEN, Mr Seriako (Seri), Chairman, Ugar Kem Le Ged, Zeuber Er Kep Le, (Torres Strait Islander Corporation), Stephen Island.....	26
TAYLOR, Mr Keith, Private capacity	39
WARIA, Dr Peter, Private capacity	3, 39

Committee met at 9.41 am

Mr Namoa—Good morning. We are going to get this inquiry underway but before we do I am going to call upon our elder, a traditional owner and uncle, to come forward and bless this event. Thank you.

Dr Waria—All stand please and we will say grace. Almighty heavenly Father, as you raised your Son from the dead and as it said in John 14, ‘I am the Light, the Truth and the Way’, for this meeting may we stand for the truth and the only truth and nothing but the truth. Amen.

I welcome you all to Badu Island and when I come to Australia I hope you will welcome me. Thank you.

Mr Namoa—Thank you very much, Uncle. On behalf of the Badu community I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the committee of inquiry into our community. Your visit to our community offers us hope. It is a sign of hope for us because we have been suffering for many years. It is a historic moment because we have got a committee that is looking at changing our lives and how we live our lives in the area. We are hoping that we are going to be able to give you some of our concerns and you guys will be able to take them back to the relevant people—and you guys are the relevant people also that can make changes that are going to impact positively on our lives and our existence here in the Torres Strait. So a big welcome again to Badu Island. I know that members of our audience and the people you will be talking to today will certainly bring up their queries. In some instances you may not understand—you will need to read between the lines—because we have got some very heavy issues and grave concerns about the prices and price structures here in the Torres Strait. Again, welcome to Badu Island.

[09.44 am]

CHAIR (Mr Marles)—I thank you, Counsellor, for the prayers at the opening of today's hearing. I welcome everyone here to this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs and to our inquiry into community stores in remote Indigenous communities. I start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land and I pay our respect to elders—past, present and future. The committee would also like to acknowledge the presence of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are here today and who reside in this area. We would also like to thank the Badu community for having us here and for receiving us with this public hearing.

I say at the outset that there is a formality to these proceedings. These are formal proceedings of the Commonwealth parliament. Everything that people say should be factual and honest. It can be considered a serious matter to attempt to mislead the committee. I invite all those who are giving evidence to make comments that will assist us in our inquiry, with the intention of making some improvements to the current government administration in relation to community stores.

This hearing is open to the public and a transcript of what is said will be placed on the committee's website. If you would like further details about the inquiry or the transcript, please ask any of the committee staff who are at the hearing today. At the conclusion of the formal part of the hearing, where we will be receiving a number of witnesses, we will be conducting an open forum for anyone who is here and would like to make a contribution to the discussion we are having about community stores. We would welcome hearing from any of you in the audience who have a particular perspective or have something to say about the operation of community stores. Before I call our first set of witnesses, I will get those members of parliament who are here today and who form part of this committee to introduce themselves.

Mr TURNOUR—Good morning, everyone. It is lovely to be back here on Badu Island as your local federal representative and to bring Canberra here to hear directly from you about your concerns about costs of living, health and local community stores. It is great to be here. Thank you so much for the welcome this morning. We pay our respects to the elders and the traditional owners as part of our visit here today, and we look forward to hearing from you. Thank you again for having us.

Mrs VALE—Good morning everyone. Thank you very much for your warm welcome. I pay my respects to your elders, to the residents and to the members of your community. My name is Danna Vale. I am the federal member for Hughes, which is an area of southern Sydney. It is a real privilege and a pleasure to be here with you this morning.

Mr KATTER—I would just like to thank our priest for welcoming God to our meeting to start off the proceedings today. In all my years as the minister up here, at every single meeting we ever held on the outer islands God was introduced first. I think that is one of the reasons why you are probably the most successful race of people on earth. Thank you.

CHAIR—And my name is Richard Marles. I am the federal member for Corio, which is an electorate based in Geelong in Victoria. I chair this committee.

[09.49 am]

GUIVARRA, Mr Wayne Samuel, Councillor, Torres Strait Island Regional Council, Division 5, Badu Island

NAMOA, Mr Manuel, Island Manager, Torres Strait Island Regional Council, Division 5, Badu Island

WARIA, Dr Peter, Private capacity

CHAIR—I welcome Mr Wayne Guivarra, Mr Manuel Namoa and Dr Peter Waria. Would you like to make an opening statement and then we might ask you some questions?

Mr Guivarra—What I want to say as an opening statement is that, basically, we have always been a humble set of people but we are happy people. But we have been suffering in silence for very many years. That is why we see you guys as a ray of hope coming here into our community. In the past we have tended to accept what is given to us, because I guess in some ways we were ignorant and misinformed about a lot of things. We did not know about the bigger, wider world out there.

But things are changing now. People travel more. Some of our families have had to leave our communities to go south for better employment opportunities, better education, better housing and those types of things. When our families go down and visit them—because we have a close network of families—we see these prices down south and we come back here and see far more exorbitant prices. Our people wonder how this can be. How come they have all these cheaper prices down south? We are humans too. We are citizens of this country too. We should be looked at and taken into account with the prices and with how we are suffering—but it does not seem to be. This is why we welcome you. We see you as a ray of hope and that hopefully we can be considered as people, just like people on the mainland, and we can get those prices and we can get some sort of assistance to give our communities a chance of carrying on our lives.

At the moment things are putting a lot of strain on our communities, and always have. We did not have to wait for an economic crisis throughout the world, as is happening now; we have been suffering for years and years—before my time. We have not been considered properly. It started from there and we are paying the price here today. We look to you, again, as that ray of hope—that maybe you can take away our stories and make a difference in our lives.

Mr Namoa—I pretty much agree with Wayne. The cost of living in the Torres Strait is phenomenal. I guess we are different from the rest of Australia in that we are on an island. With the current dilemmas with aircraft and fuel prices and stuff like that, it makes it really hard. And when you look at the economic state—CDEP is the main source of income, so it makes it really hard for us out here.

CHAIR—Can I just start by asking a couple of background questions. Does division 5, Badu Island just relate to Badu Island—it does not go beyond Badu Island?

Mr Guivarra—That is correct.

CHAIR—How many people are employed by the Torres Strait Island Regional Council here on Badu Island?

Mr Namoa—Including CDEP, because CDEP is part of the regional council, it is between about 240 and 300.

CHAIR—How many community stores are there on Badu Island? Is it just the one?

Mr Namoa—There are two.

CHAIR—Are they both IBIS stores?

Mr Namoa—No, they are independently owned by locals.

CHAIR—So neither of them are IBIS?

Mr Namoa—We have no IBIS here.

CHAIR—So, two independently owned stores.

Mr Guivarra—If I can interrupt, we are one of three communities in the outer regions of the Torres Strait that do not have IBIS stores.

CHAIR—Okay. Are those stores near each other or are they on different parts of the island?

Mr Namoa—Different parts.

CHAIR—So they are not really competing against each other?

Mr Namoa—Well, they are.

CHAIR—Fair enough. What comments would you make about the quality of the products that you can buy in the stores and the prices that they are being sold for?

Mr Namoa—When you look at vegetables and stuff like that, the quality is not always good because of the time it takes to transport them from Cairns to Badu. In cases like today and last week, where the barge did not come in on Monday but came in today, that is an extra day of having the vegetables sitting on the boat. So the quality is not as good as you get in Cairns, but that is the only available source.

CHAIR—Would you make that comment about the meat as well?

Mr Namoa—And the meat. The meat is very, very expensive compared to Cairns prices. It is almost double what you pay in Cairns.

CHAIR—The barge is meant to come in once a week. You said that the barge was late this week. Does that often happen?

Mr Namoa—From time to time, yes. We have only one company operating in the Torres Strait and I guess they have a monopoly on the market. If their boats break down then that is it.

CHAIR—Do you ever find that particular product lines sell out within the week? Are there some products that you can only get when the barge arrives?

Mr Guivarra—Very much so. There is a one-day difference but you are going to get an opportunity to go around and go through the stores and you will see that some of our shelves are empty or half empty. We do not really know how the shops display or put out their goods, but we certainly do recognise that there are regular items that are not on the shelf. Before you asked about some of the goods in the stores. We do not get a lot of variety of items. We are increasing that over time, but certainly we do not have the range of goods that we can go down and purchase that everyone else takes for granted on the mainland.

CHAIR—You said that you think that the prices would be double what they are in Cairns. Have you ever done any research on that? Have you ever undertaken an exercise to quantify how much more you are paying here?

Mr Namoa—It has not been done professionally but I have just come from Cairns and from just walking in the shops I can tell you that the price of a 1½ kilos of rump steak compared to up here is quite a bit lower.

CHAIR—Have you ever got an indication from the barge company or Sea Swift about what the freight costs are per kilo associated with getting product to Badu Island?

Mr Namoa—I think there is a standard freight charge of about \$40 per item, but usually the freights are fairly big. I will just give you the difference. We had Endeavour Shipping operating here and the company has been bought out by Sea Swift. There is a price difference of about \$25 in freight between the two. Fuel freight we worked out was about 40c difference. Sea Swift was much dearer than Endeavour, but they bought all of Endeavour's boats, so that was the end of the story for Endeavour.

CHAIR—Have you noticed that the prices of products in the stores have gone up since Endeavour went out of business?

Mr Namoa—There has been a fairly big increase that I have seen in the shops here.

Mr TURNOUR—Welcome. It is good to see you again. I just wanted to ask a question. Obviously the inquiry is looking at models of governance for stores. Here you have privately owned stores as compared to IBIS in the other parts of the Torres Strait. You guys would travel around a bit. How do you think the privately owned stores compare to the IBIS stores?

Mr Namoa—I will make a comment on that. IBIS fuel is actually dearer than what we are selling, and some of their prices are dearer than those in some of the private shops. I would have

thought that they would be much cheaper because of their bargaining power, having so many stores in the Torres Strait, but that is not the case.

Mr TURNOUR—What about the quality and the range of goods compared with the IBIS stores?

Mr Guivarra—It is pretty similar. Our private stores, I believe, have a better range of items available to the community, but in some instances the quality is good and in other instances the quality is not so good. It is a vicious circle in that we are getting a product to our people that does not have long-lasting value, so people have to go and get those types of materials again. So when you refer to quality, I see that issue as a problem in private stores here in the community. We have not got it here but—in my role moving around to the other communities—one wonders why IBIS, with the state government assistance they receive, have for the first time made a very limited profit. IBIS have been around for 30-odd years, and this is the first year they have made some profit. Apparently some of the money they are making in profit they are investing back into their community stores. Why can't we get better prices and better competition between the stores so that we can get products that are suitable and at less expensive prices than are offered now?

Mr TURNOUR—Are the privately owned stores in the community owned by members of the community?

Mr Guivarra—Yes.

Mr TURNOUR—That is good. It is interesting to hear the different comments about the privately owned stores compared with the IBIS stores.

CHAIR—I would like to get clear in my mind the governance of the stores. They are privately run for-profit businesses; is that right?

Mr Guivarra—Yes.

CHAIR—They are owned by individuals on the island. So they are not run by a community group but are a profit based body?

Mr Guivarra—The stores still get community assistance through CDEP for some of their employees. One wonders what will happen when CDEP is not be available to those stores. What will happen to the prices then?

Mr TURNOUR—I did not realise that. What percentage of their labour would come through CDEP?

Mr Guivarra—At a guess, it would be about 30 per cent.

Mr TURNOUR—I understood that one of the stores, although privately owned, has recently been managed out of the Island and Cape franchise. Is that correct?

Mr Guivarra—That is correct.

CHAIR—Where is that franchise based?

Mr TURNOUR—They are based in Cairns. They will be presenting to us at Bamaga.

Mr Namoa—I think they are presenting here today too, but I am not quite sure. The manager is, anyway.

Mr TURNOUR—Yes.

Mrs VALE—One of the objectives of the inquiry is to look at the availability and accessibility of fresh fruit and vegetables for all the people of the islands and for people in remote communities in Australia. Is there any opportunity for you to grow any of your own produce on Badu Island?

Mr Namoa—We have a hydroponics nursery on the island, which is owned by the regional council. It does quite well, but because of the quarantine restrictions you cannot really make a business out of it unless individuals do it for themselves. That is the issue.

Mrs VALE—You could grow it for consumption on the island though, couldn't you?

Mr Namoa—We could.

Mrs VALE—Do the two independent stores that you have sell any locally grown produce, any locally grown fresh fruit or vegetables?

Mr Guivarra—They support us in that they allow the use of the front their premises. I think we are operating on one day a week, where product from our nursery is sold at the front of the store by our own staff.

Mrs VALE—What kinds of vegetables would be sold? Are there any fruits grown on Badu that are able to be sold?

Mr Guivarra—There are star fruits and bananas. One of the staff from the nursery is on the agenda to speak later, and that lady will be able to provide you with some more information about the products that are coming out now and how they are operating.

Mrs VALE—Would it be possible in the future, say, for the island to produce all its fresh fruit and vegetable needs or would it only ever be able to supplement its requirements and you would need to have them imported from the mainland?

Mr Guivarra—We would have to continue to have fruit and vegetables come from the mainland.

Mrs VALE—Were there ever any traditional gardens here?

Mr Guivarra—There were.

Mrs VALE—In the very old traditional culture did people grow their own vegetables or fruit—yams, potatoes?

Mr Guivarra—Yes. Our lifestyle was built on planting and growing our own vegetables and fruit.

Mrs VALE—So the soil here has enough nutrients to be able to sustain that?

Mr Guivarra—Yes. One of the problems right across the Torres Strait is that we do not have a great water supply, and that is going to affect it all the time. We rely on the seasonal rain. We are a bit more fortunate than some of the other communities because we have a fairly substantial water supply, but out of the 15 communities in the Torres Strait more than half will be under pressure every year if we do not get our annual rainfall.

Mrs VALE—Wayne, was the growing of traditional kinds of vegetables and fruit done on an individual basis or was it done on a community patch? Did people go to a community area to grow fruit and vegetables or was it done individually on your own little block of land?

Mr Namoa—Individually.

Mrs VALE—It is a trend that started back in mainland Australia. Individual people are trying to grow their own little vegie patch again.

Mr Namoa—Yes. The main products that were grown here were sweet potato and cassava. We have tried many others, such as lettuce, at the nursery, but the climatic conditions are not really good and there are bugs, so it is not ideal. It is very limited.

Mr TURNOUR—We heard in Canberra in relation to quarantine issues some earlier evidence that there was produce grown here that you wanted to send to Moa Island and it was not allowed to be transported to Moa Island. Is that correct? Can you shed some light on that or not?

Mr Namoa—Yes, that is true. One of the quarantine rules is that you cannot take live animals and plants between islands.

Mr TURNOUR—The evidence we have had from the quarantine authorities is that the legislation does not prevent movement of animals or plants within the protected zone; it is only for moving south. So it seems that there is a difference in the interpretation of the actual law. The advice we have had directly from quarantine is that you can move plants and animals within the Torres Strait Protected Zone but you cannot move them down into the special quarantine zone. I was interested to hear that.

Mr Guivarra—I would also like to mention one of the issues around fresh fruit and vegetables. We will find answers from you, hopefully. This is one of the major areas we want to look at because not only do we have people like me who are obese in this community but we have the highest rate of diabetes in Australia, if not in the world, in our region. We need to somehow find a way to encourage people in our community to buy fruit and vegetables, as well as for them to be fresh. There are a number of reasons why people do not buy them a lot.

Sometimes they do not arrive fresh, and it is too expensive. People cannot afford to buy products to feed their families, because they get a very limited CDEP wage.

They are the simple products—sugar, rice, flours and milk. The other products are the ones that continually do not help our health. But we have to survive. We see that as surviving, even though it is killing us. We cannot pay the prices that are in the shops. Sometimes, because the shops have leftover products, they do not order as much next time, and when you go in there it has gone twice as quickly. They are improving on the way they are bringing in their goods. We see that. But these are some of the things we experience in our community. From day to day, from week to week, things change like that; it is not consistent. There are reasons why it is not consistent. It does affect us.

If there is thing I plead on behalf of the people in the Torres Strait and our community, it is that you find an answer to making fruit and vegetables cheaper for us so we can increase the products coming into our community to make us healthier people. That is one area, definitely. I do not know how it is to be done. Without discriminating in other areas, how do we do that? I do not know. I do not know whether we do that somehow with fuel excise. How do you monitor that? Is there some way it can be monitored, like through the GST, the fuel excise or freight subsidies? There has to be some way, but it has to be something that is not only implemented but monitored to ensure that the desired outcome is happening.

Mr KATTER—How often does the barge come, Wayne?

Mr Guivarra—Generally every Monday to this community.

Mr KATTER—Is it practical to have the barge come twice a week?

Mr Namoa—When we had Endeavour operating, it was good because the one barge came in on Monday and the other came in on Friday. There were two separate companies, so you had vegetables coming in twice every week. But now Sea Swift runs the only barge. I do not know whether they can run two barges a week.

Mr KATTER—Wayne, if my memory serves me correctly, soon after I was minister—I think it was in 1990—there were two services coming into the Torres Strait. One of them went straight to, I thought, Badu. But it might have been Darnley, it might have been an eastern island. But one came straight up to the eastern islands, I imagine, and one came to Thursday Island. Have we ever had a direct service into Badu from Cairns?

Mr Namoa—No, I do not think so, but we did have two barges operating—Jardine Shipping and Sea Swift.

Mr Guivarra—Another thing I would like the committee to consider is that maybe one way we could get some sort of tax benefit back would be through zone allowances and those types of things. I was talking to an accountant this morning who indicated to me that a region like Cooktown gets the same zone allowance as us here. But the people there can jump into a car and go down and do some shopping; we cannot. Maybe something can be done where the zone allowance is increased to assist families living in our region and the more remote regions. Whilst they are in a remote region, they now have bitumen roads. They were determined remote

because they had old rough roads and bush roads to go through, too. Now they have bitumen roads taking them straight to the city. We do not deny that they are living away from the big cities, either, in a little bit of a remote region, but they do not have to go through what we are going through. We cannot jump in a vehicle and go down and do some shopping somewhere and get some good prices. We have just got to take what comes to us.

Mr Namoa—We could go to Tieri on a charter that will cost us about \$700 one way and get our stuff, or we could go in a dingy, which will be up near \$200 in fuel just to get there and back.

Mr Guivarra—That is right, and our lives are at risk every time we jump in it, according to the weather and those sorts of things. So they are the things we are dealing with day to day.

CHAIR—I have a couple of other questions about the stores. Does the council have a relationship with the stores? Do you talk to the owners of the stores regularly about how the stores are going, the produce that they have and the prices they are charging?

Mr Guivarra—No, I do not believe we do—definitely not enough. I do not believe we do, but it is definitely an aim under the new amalgamation that we talk with all the respective and relevant organisations in our community to develop regional plans or corporate plans that are going to assist the families living within our region.

CHAIR—Have the stores ever done any form of survey of the community about what products they would like to be stocked in the stores? Are you aware of that ever having occurred?

Mr Namoa—No, but I notice that whatever sells fast they will bring in more of, and whatever is not doing well they will tend to slow down on. I have seen that happen in the stores.

Mr KATTER—Both stores on the island are locally owned, are they? Badu people own both the stores?

Mr Namoa—Yes.

Mr KATTER—It would seem to me that legally the government quarantine service cannot stop you from having animals here, but it would be helpful if we could negotiate with the government. Pigs may be a problem because they are fed swill. There would be great resistance to having pigs. But as for cattle, it would be good to have a controlled heard here, for reasons that I do not want to bore you with. They have these fodder factories where you buy some seed, hydroponics if you like, and you can grow the cattle on it. They would actually be quite suitable for here, so long as not every island wanted to do it. Has anyone considered taking legal action, Wayne, against the government over the quarantine issues?

Mr Guivarra—As I mentioned in the opening statement, we have been too humble a people to take that line. We have always accepted what has been given to us. We see it as a little bit like the cavalry coming over the hill, that ray of hope. No, we have not taken that sort of action. It might be action like that that is going to change the way we are being serviced here in the Torres Strait, but we have been too humble a people. In answer to your question, no.

Mr KATTER—I do not want you to turn it into a Eureka Stockade or the Alamo! But really I think that the government has to be confronted on this issue, and the only way I can see that being done—you would be giving Jim a very hard task here—is to contest that in the courts, and then negotiation can take place. In the courts is where you are going to get your leverage, in my opinion, the same as you did with Mabo. At the end of the day, you could not get any justice out of the democratic system, but you did get it out of the legal system.

Mr Guivarra—That is correct, yes.

Mr KATTER—I think the same thing would apply here. My final question is about removing the GST completely in remote areas—and I would not call Cooktown remote. I would call Laura remote. If it is a day's travel from a city of 20,000 people, I think you have a situation which is remote. It would cost the government nothing to do that, but it would be of enormous assistance to you people. It is not on food but it is on all the other items that you buy, so you would have more money to spend on food if you were not paying the GST. Has that been considered—an approach of requesting the government to take GST off? You have to pay GST on freight here, which is terribly unfair.

Mr Namoa—Hopefully, from what you have heard and what you will hear, it is something you might need to consider when you go back—that is, ask the government if they can do that because the cost of living is just too high. Maybe with your inquiry that is one of the things you should take back, to say, 'Look, we need to look at GST in remote areas because it's not good, it's not helping the Indigenous communities in health and other issues.'

Mr Guivarra—It is not only through the stores that we are being impacted upon; there is an impact on the transport arrangements, the fuel, the gas, electricity. All of those things are really affecting us and we do not seem to be getting an increase on our wages out of this CDEP mould. It is going to take all of us to find a way forward, that is why we look forward to you being a part of that. We have some responsibilities in the way we develop, but it has to be a unified approach.

My final comment is that I am not too sure if our families behind know exactly how you are set up as a bipartisan group. You might just take some time out to explain it to them. We see you as the government, a lot of our people see you as the government, but obviously you are from all of the different parties out there. So could you explain that to the people when we are finished?

CHAIR—Sure, we will do that. Thank you Wayne and Manuel for the time you have given us. I am keen to keep going here because we have a reasonably tight time frame.

[10.22 am]

AHMAT, Mrs Kay, Head of Badu Campus, Tagai State College, Badu Island

KEBISU, Miss Rita Murile, Project Coordinator, Mina Aigud, Matha, Zizimika, (Eat Well, Be Active), Tagai State College, Badu Island

MORSEAU, Mr George, Private capacity

CHAIR—While we are waiting for the next witnesses, I will take up Wayne's offer and say that we are a committee of the House of Representatives. We are doing this inquiry around Australia. This trip is one of three that we are undertaking over the next few months. The next one will be to Central Australia, and after that we will be going to the top of Western Australia and the Northern Territory. We will be reporting to the House of Representatives in September-October this year, and then it is a matter for the government as to whether or not it wants to take up the recommendations that we make. As Wayne said, the committee is a bipartisan committee and includes representatives of the government and the opposition and also Bob, who is an Independent. Kay and Rita, would either of you or both of you like to make an opening statement, and then we will ask you some questions about what you do.

Mrs Ahmat—I am head of campus at the school up here. We have 181 students enrolled in our school. The school hosts the Eat Well, Be Active project for the community. It is a community project. Rita is the project officer, but she sits at the school. It is directed by all agencies. Just yesterday we had an interagency meeting so that we could pass on information and get some direction with that as well. But Rita does sit at the school.

Through the Eat Well, Be Active project we had some baseline screening done two years ago and we know for a fact that our kids at Badu are not eating enough vegetables. They are the hard facts that have come out of the Eat Well, Be Active screening that happened. The Eat Well, Be Active project is all about people living longer. We know about all of the chronic diseases up this way. This is particularly a project for Badu, but it is all about people living longer. We know that our kids are not eating enough vegetables, so we need to really work out how we can get our kids to eat more vegetables—and while vegetables are staying at the price they are, that is not going to happen.

I know that on Mondays, when the barge comes in, everyone races down, gets the fruit and vegetables while they are still fresh, and then that is it for the rest of the week. I also know that it is not uncommon for kids to come to school and not have lunch. We will take them home to try to get some lunch for them, and parents will say, 'Sorry, we have nothing in our house.' Of course we will always give lunch at school—we never let any kid go hungry—but we always see it as the parents' responsibility first. It is not uncommon for that to happen, that there is just no food in the house. That is probably all I want to say for my opening statement.

Miss Kebisu—The Eat Well, Be Active project is funded through Health Promotion Queensland. There are three sites in Queensland: an urban site in Logan, a regional site in Townsville, and we are the remote site at Badu. It is a three-year project and the funding runs out

this year. The project has four key action areas: mums and bubs; less junk and healthier food and drinks; budgeting, including label reading for parents; and more organised sport and physical activity. We have been promoting the 'Go for 2&5' government initiative—that is, go for two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables. Through the baseline survey, we see that our kids are eating less than 0.5 of a serve of vegetables. So we are trying to increase that because we know that here in the Torres Strait we have a high rate of chronic diseases. We have children whose parents or grandparents have diabetes, so we are trying to close the gap.

We have also attended seminars, including the National Nutrition Networks Conference in Alice Springs last year, where we presented the project. The information was collated and passed on to the commissioner for social justice, Tom Calma, to hand over to the parliament in the Close the Gap forum that I think they had in parliament last year. We were talking about the prices here on Badu, especially with fruit and vegetables. You need to shop around. Some things are cheaper at one shop and dearer at the other shop, and vice versa. For instance, broccoli is \$14 to \$17 a kilo; you would pay nothing like that down south. That is the thing we are facing up here: people say that they want to live a healthy lifestyle but they cannot afford to because of the price of the food.

CHAIR—I want to ask a couple of questions about the program to start with. Rita, you are based at the school. Have I got that right?

Miss Kebisu—Yes.

CHAIR—The program is not just aimed at school kids; it is aimed at the entire community. Is that correct?

Miss Kebisu—Yes.

CHAIR—But the entire program is run out of the school?

Miss Kebisu—Yes.

CHAIR—Why do you use the school as a base?

Mrs Ahmat—When the project first came on board, the interagency met and had lots of discussions. The focus of the project is on kids and the school seemed to be the best place for Rita to manage it from. It does not all happen at the school though: although the focus is on kids, it needs to be the whole community. There are activities down on the community oval; there are meetings that happen down here at the hall. So it is not like everything happens at the school, but Rita is based there.

Miss Kebisu—We also work with the childcare centres, going through their menus. We work closely with the health centre as one of the leading agencies for the interagency. We work closely with the zero to five age group and the five to 12 age group. We work with child health screenings and with maternal and child health programs with the promotion of breast feeding. We use the data on weight, height and waist circumference to get the anthropomorphic measurements to see if they are overweight, obese or underweight or normal weight.

CHAIR—I want to ask a couple more questions but before I do I would like to invite Mr George Morseau to sit up here and be a part of this. George, what role do you have?

Mr Morseau—I work for the Torres Strait district of Queensland Health as a cluster coordinator.

CHAIR—In our notes we have a number of objectives that you have set out for the program which will help achieve the goals that you have described. Could you take us through those objectives.

Miss Kebisu—The first objective is to decrease the consumption of high sugar drinks in children up to 12 years. In the baseline evaluation we found that our kids drank a lot of soft drinks and high-sugar drinks. Another objective is to decrease the consumption of high-fat foods, including fried foods, chocolates and things like that which have a high amount of fat, and to increase the consumption of fruit. In the baseline survey we found that our kids were eating enough fruit. At the school we have what we call a ‘fruit break’ from prep to year three. They have a longer morning session. This was an initiative taken up years and years ago by Mr Steve Foster, who was the principal. The parents pay a \$30 levy and the kids get a quarter of an orange and a quarter of an apple every day for the whole year. That is how they get their fruit serves. We also sell fruit in the tuckshop. You would find that kids would eat fruit more than vegetables.

Other objectives are increasing the consumption of vegetables, not including potato—trying to get other vegetables introduced—and increasing the consumption of water. We are trying to promote water more than cordial or high-sugar drinks. We only sell water and juice at our school. Juice is only sold at lunchtime, but we sell water at morning tea and at lunchtime and we are trying to increase water consumption that way. At all of our school sporting events we provide only water for the children.

Another objective is to increase knowledge about managing finances to purchase healthy food and drink choices. That would come into parents’ budgeting and label reading—which ones are healthier choices? Another objective is to increase the knowledge of nutrition and physical activities for mothers and babies and young children. We work closely with TPHU, the Tropical Public Health Unit, in Cairns. We get a lot of pamphlets from there that we use with parents or leave at the health centre to promote breastfeeding exclusively from zero to six months. We also use the Sport and Recreation Queensland Move Baby Move program booklets. We leave them at the health centre for the expectant mums and we also leave them at the childcare centre. We also use the Romp and Chomp program. I think that is an initiative from New South Wales or Victoria. We give resources from that to our childcare centre and to our preprep and prep teachers to use.

Another objective is to increase the level of physical activity. In our baseline survey we found that our kids are pretty active in the community. The Queensland government has introduced Smart Moves, which is 30 minutes of physical activity during school time every day, and we also have afterschool activities. The school also runs school holiday programs through Eat Well, Be Active. We work closely with our sport and rec officers here on the island and we also have the Australian Institute of Sport Active After-School program, which we started this year.

Another objective is to create supportive environments to increase the participation in physical activity. To cater for all the kids, from the younger ones to the older ones, we have ordered new equipment so that they have a variety of physical activities such as cricket, hockey and volleyball and we have jumping bags and hula hoops and those sorts of things for the younger ones.

CHAIR—Thank you for that, Rita. George, is there something you would like to say?

Mr Morseau—Yes. First of all I must apologise as I thought I was not going to be here, as I have been travelling around the Straits—but I am here now. I guess what I want to say is around the quality of food. In the district we look after all types of services. The most critical problem that we face is around chronic disease, around the burden of illness. The factor most contributing to that is the lifestyle stuff. In the district we look after about 3,000 clients with chronic disease. The numbers are continually increasing and the sad thing is that we are now seeing it in children. How we find this out is through our screening. We continue to screen people, in adolescence, aged from 15 to 50 and through child screening, so of kids. There are the higher rates of costs of food. Through the surveys that we do, through our screening, we know the quantity is not enough and, as for the quality, by the time consumers get to it about 30 to 40 per cent of it has gone off; the freshness has gone. The increasing price rate is well up, as everybody has said.

Moving into local government has put a lot of strain on families due to income matters. A lot of our families do not work full-time. Most of us are on the CDEP scheme. The rates of illness, as in the burden of illness, and of diseases are increasing as well, so it is quite frightening to see all this around. When we are talking about children, children are our future—and that depends on how long they live for. At the moment we are looking after 3,000 chronic disease clients—there are all types of illnesses—plus we have a population of around 10,000 in the region itself. The high cost of living is one of the contributing factors towards this.

CHAIR—Thank you, George, for those comments. Kay, I am going to ask you a question. Does the school itself do shopping to have products available at the school?

Mrs Ahmat—Yes, we have a tuckshop.

CHAIR—Where is the tuckshop sourced from? Do you buy from the stores?

Mrs Ahmat—No, we buy from Cairns.

CHAIR—Do you have it independently freighted up here?

Mrs Ahmat—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you keep fresh fruit and vegetables in the tuckshop?

Mrs Ahmat—We do. The barge comes in every Monday. At the time the barge comes in it is great in our tuckshop and Tuesday and Wednesday are great, then not so, because of storage. So for freshness it is always better at the beginning of the week. But we make sure we order every week. As Rita said, our tuckshop is very much only for healthy food. We have salad sandwiches and those sorts of things for the kids.

Miss Kebisu—Whenever we run out at the school, we get it from the shops, even for our fruit breaks. But when you compare the prices that you pay here at the shops with the prices for what we get from Cairns plus the freight, it still comes out cheaper to buy it from Cairns than to buy it from the local shops.

Mrs Ahmat—I can add to that—and this is probably more of a personal nature—that the teaching staff, because they have the financial capability to do so, do order their food from Cairns and independently freight it up. They use the shops for the fruit and vegies usually and to supplement their orders from Cairns. It is only because people have the financial capability to do that that they can do that. The discrepancy between a teacher's wage and what a lot of our community people get on CDEP is huge, as you can imagine. I know myself that I get orders from Coles and it is nothing for me, on a \$700 order, to then pay another \$250 at least on top with freight. I believe the latest on a car is about \$1,700. That is to get a car from Cairns to Badu.

CHAIR—Thanks for that.

Mr TURNOUR—Rita, I think you said that from the screening surveys you knew the children's activity was quite good, so the major issue is actually diet.

Miss Kebisu—It is diet, yes. At the school we have a junk food ban as well. They are not allowed to bring any sugary foods or chips or greasy food into the school. There is a big thing with the kids over a product called Cool C. It is a sachet of powder that you are supposed to mix with water. It is supposed to be a vitamin supplement that you drink. But it is actually full of sugar and salt. The kids do not mix it with the water. They dip a finger into it and they eat it and it makes their mouth really red. Some of them tend now to mix it with a soft drink, so they are getting more sugar. They mix it in with Powerade, so there is more sugar and salt in it, and then they drink it. Before the fad was with Red Bull. We are out there all the time pushing messages out to the kids but we still notice it. Through our newsletters going home we promote healthy food, but parents still bring in pies and other hot food into the school for the kids. We cannot take the food away because it is the kids' lunches, but we are trying to do that education all the time with the parents.

Mr TURNOUR—Following on from that, what percentage of your students eat from the tuckshop if it is only healthy food that is available from the tuckshop?

Mrs Ahmat—A big percentage—probably more than half every day.

Miss Kebisu—We introduced a healthier range before the Queensland government initiative of the Smart Choices program came in. We introduced that at the beginning. It was an initiative of Steve Foster, the former principal. We did notice that at the start the kids were not eating the vegetables; they were chucking them into the flowerbeds and the cleaners were cleaning them up. But now you see the kids eating the sandwiches. We have introduced salad shakers. You get your salad in a cup with chicken and a fork and you can add dressing on it if you want it. We have been trying to introduce different things such as corn on the cob, dried fruit, popcorn, muffins, pizzas with vegetable toppings and those sorts of things. So in that way we are trying to increase vegetable consumption at the school.

Mr TURNOUR—Is the tuckshop run by the community or run by the school or is it a combination?

Mrs Ahmat—By the P&C.

Mr TURNOUR—I have a couple more questions. The evaluation project finishes up in June this year. Where is the evaluation up to in relation to the overall project? Do you know?

Miss Kebisu—The evaluation is done externally by the University of Queensland, by Dr Lisa Hunter and Geoff Masters.

Mr TURNOUR—Can I suggest, Chair, that we have the secretariat follow up that information for the committee. Kay, in relation to children not having lunch, is that mainly due to the fact that people on CDEP, on low incomes, cannot afford to have food for the whole week?

Mrs Ahmat—Well, it is two weeks. On pay week it is very noticeable at school that the money flows into the tuckshop. What a lot of parents do is put \$50 on the tuckshop account, and as the kids eat their way through it they come in and put their next \$50 on. So there is a very distinct two weeks in the community now. Everyone eats well on pay week, and it gets more difficult in the dragging week.

Mr TURNOUR—I think there used to be a system of weekly payments and then it was moved to fortnightly. Would it be better to go back to a weekly pay system?

Mrs Ahmat—I believe so. Whilst people are in different CDEP groups, they may live in the same household. Weekly payments would mean that households would have money coming in on both weeks, and it would make it more even across the community. At the minute, it is very much like this.

Mr TURNOUR—George, is it correct that the screenings are done by Queensland Health?

Mr Morseau—That is correct.

Mr TURNOUR—I gather this is an externally funded project. Is the information shared with the broader health professionals in the Torres Strait, so that people who might be seeing a GP or a health worker will have their information shared?

Mr Morseau—That is right. The information distributes to the regional key stakeholders: the councils and the health services on individual islands. It depends on the screening. If it is child health, around school, we will provide reports to the school. If it is around adolescents it stays in the health centre, plus the council gets a copy and the executives of our department get a copy as well.

Mr TURNOUR—Thank you. I want to congratulate you. I think it is a fantastic program that we need to look at more to see what we can do with it in the future.

Miss Kebisu—Will the government be looking at something like a freight subsidy for the Torres Strait, such as that received by Tasmania? CDEP here for one participant is \$472 a fortnight. Out of that you have to pay your rent and do your shopping. The Queensland government is looking at pushing up the rent to 25 per cent of your total earnings, so people will suffer more. I want to make you aware of that.

CHAIR—Yes, thank you. We have had other submissions to that effect.

Mrs VALE—Rita, with the bubs and mums that you have in the healthy eating program, are there many mothers who do not nurse their babies?

Miss Kebisu—Because a lot of people work they tend to leave their child at the child-care centre, so they tend to use formula. But you can sometimes pay \$32 for a tin of formula which down south you might pay \$15 for. There are mums who do breastfeed exclusively, and sometimes because the formula is too expensive the parents tend to wean their kids earlier with UHT long-life milk or fresh milk, or even with Sunshine powdered milk.

Mrs VALE—When the children are weaned, is there any introduction of baby vegetables as part of the process? I mean mashed vegetables, or even canned vegetables such as Heinz baby foods. Is there any tradition of doing that with babies? I am asking about introducing children to the taste of vegetables at a very early age. That is generally how it is done in my part of the world. How do you introduce children to vegetables from the beginning?

Miss Kebisu—I am not quite sure. Up here they tend to introduce children to rice first, with what they call ‘zura’, which is just rice and soup, or noodles. If it is noodles, you are starting off with high-fat foods. Families up here are big, and buying food is really expensive. At the moment we have the frozen vegie packets that you put in the microwave for two minutes; they are snap frozen.

Mrs VALE—It is a very expensive way of buying vegetables.

Miss Kebisu—It is very expensive. I have a family of five children. To have a vegetable meal a night I need to buy three packets, which have three satchels in each. My kids ask, ‘Mum, can we have more vegetables?’ But to get three packets I am looking at \$21 to \$23 just on vegetables a day for a family of five.

Mrs VALE—Really? Okay. Does the school have a school garden to grow tomatoes, carrots or anything like that?

Mrs Ahmat—No, we do not, but we do buy from the local nursery when we can.

Mrs VALE—In my electorate of Hughes in southern Sydney there are lots of schools that have canteen gardens. The children have a little garden club—the children actually do the gardens—and they provide fresh produce for the school. If you are interested, I can tie you up with one of the schools. Loftus Public School also has a worm farm, which they use to fertilise the garden. They sell the worm juice to a local nursery. It all gets recycled around. This is just one of the initiatives. Again, it is encouraging children to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, because they are growing it.

Mrs Ahmat—Over the years there has been a garden on and off—it will go and then it will come back. We even had one class get into hydroponics one year and we were able to sell basil and some other herbs. Tagai State College has an initiative that it is a starting to push through now where it is a looking at a number of campuses getting campus gardens going.

Mrs VALE—Can you grow strawberries up in this part of the world very well?

Mrs Ahmat—I do not think so.

Mrs VALE—You can not? Because that is a great source of potassium, and that is another product that our local schools grow.

Mrs Ahmat—You can garden, but it is very limited—as Manuel and Wayne were saying—as to what you can actually grow in the tropics.

Mrs VALE—Yes, you have got to look for something in the local area. I just wanted to know about that. Has the Eat Well, Be Active project only just started or has it been going for some time?

Miss Kebisu—This is the third year.

Mrs VALE—Can you see a difference, even though it probably has to be evaluated? As educators, can you actually see a difference in the children's reactions to fresh fruit and vegetables and thinking about what they are eating?

Mrs Ahmat—The kids are talking the talk, definitely. You hear them talking about healthy food and not healthy food all the time. I have to admit that I was at the shop the other day and was trying to sneak in a chocolate and one of the students there said, 'That's not healthy.' So they talk the talk, but when they go home and have dinner they eat what is put on the table in front of them.

Mrs VALE—Yes, that is understandable, but at least they are aware—

Mrs Ahmat—Yes, very much so.

Mrs VALE—and if the parents are restricted in their food choices because of cost, that is understandable, too.

Miss Kebisu—The year before last we put out vegetable sticks, celery and carrot sticks. Two weeks later they were still finding celery sticks and carrot sticks around the pre-prep here. But last year, when we had vegetable sticks, carrot sticks, low-fat cottage cheese dips and peanut butter, we were running out. I had enough vegetables for two days, but all the vegetables went in one day, because the kids were wanting more, so we were just chopping up more.

Mrs VALE—That tells me you are making a huge impact with this program. What we have to see is ways of getting the fresh fruit and vegetables up on a more reliable basis for the whole community.

Miss Kebisu—And at a cheaper rate.

Mrs VALE—And at a cheaper rate. Thank you.

Mr KATTER—Rita, I hope I am getting this message across at these meetings—as you realise, I was the minister for a long time: if you own the land then you own the fixtures upon the land. That is the law. So if you really do own these islands—and the Mabo case decided that you did—then you own those houses. I really do not see that the state government has any right to impose a rent upon you. At some stage there has to be a confrontation here. There is a very high cost of maintenance for those houses and understand that, if you take ownership, the state government does not have any responsibility for maintenance. But when I was minister you worked out a mile ahead if you took ownership of those houses. Actually we also got a mile ahead, because there was a program to train you to do basic house repairs yourself. Even a hopeless beggar like me can change a tap washer. Have you looked at this possibility of taking ownership of those houses so you pay no rent upon them at all?

Miss Kebisu—Previous councillors have put that to the government before. Maybe Manuel can speak about that, because he has been in the council for a while. He can bring it up again in the general discussion. But, yes, homeownership has been brought up before.

Mr KATTER—The second thing is rugby league. I am an official and I have played all my life. It is hard to stop young blokes from playing rugby league. If they are playing regularly over a long period of time, your exercise problem fades away for boys. Where I come from the girls played basketball and it was exactly the same with the basketball. Do we have competitions here? The *Melbidir* provided a movement of people from island to island to get competition. I think it was probably a mistake to let the *Melbidir* go. Is there inter-island competition on a regular weekly basis?

Miss Kebisu—Our boys participate. George is the president of the Mulga Tigers Football Club. Our boys participate on a weekly basis at the KRL, which is the Kaiwalagal Rugby League competition on Thursday Island, which has just started.

Mr KATTER—Is it on a weekly basis?

Miss Kebisu—Yes. It started last week. This year we have introduced the Torres Strait and Cape region to the Foley Shield, which will be played over the Easter holidays. So we have boys from here and some of the other islands in that team as well going down. We do have weekly basketball games, which will start up after Easter. We have had children's basketball games, which are from year 4 to year 7. Since the program has started we have noticed a lot more people are out and about walking, because we do a lot of health promotion. We are getting walking signs put up around the community in conjunction with the 10000 Steps program.

Mr KATTER—You do play every week, though?

Mr Morseau—Yes, we do.

Mr KATTER—How long does the season last?

Mr Morseau—Last year we had a short season from July to September. This year we started last week and we are finishing in September. As you can see, because of the high cost of living in fuel prices, travelling on a weekly basis—

Mr KATTER—That is what I was about to ask: how do you get from island to island?

Mr Morseau—Travelling on a weekly basis to Thursday Island in about four dinghies, tinnies—fibreglass boats—it takes 80 to 90 litres of fuel to take is backwards and forwards, so you are looking at about \$500 just on fuel, unless there is a substitute we can access.

CHAIR—We will have to wrap it up there. Can I thank the three of you for giving evidence today. We really appreciate your time.

[10.58 am]

ALBERT, Mr Darrell, Accountant, Donga Town General Store, Badu Island

CHAIR—The committee welcomes Mr Albert from the Donga Town General Store.

Mr Albert—I am a partner of Donga Town General Store. I am an accountant and financial adviser. I come up here regularly.

CHAIR—Are you appearing on your own today?

Mr Albert—Yes, the other two partners did not make it.

CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening statement about the operation of the store?

Mr Albert—Jack Hammond, the past chairman, and I opened the shop in November 2006. We decided to start the shop because prices here were far too high, and we thought we could set up a competition which would benefit the people by trying to keep the prices lower. In doing so, over the last three years we have actually made losses. By trying to keep the prices down we have actually made losses in the last three years. As Rita mentioned, there could be a subsidy on freight. That is where the biggest expense is. To give you an example, if you brought up 50 10-kilo bags of rice, the freight on that per cubic metre would be \$246 plus GST, which is \$270, from Cairns to here. That equates to something like \$5 or \$6 a bag, on top of the cost of buying the rice.

Mr KATTER—The GST is on the freight, not on the food.

Mr Albert—They charge us GST on the freight. There is no GST on rice, but the freight has GST.

Mr KATTER—And the freight is \$246 for 50 bags of rice?

Mr Albert—Per cubic metre, yes, which is about 50 bags of rice.

Mr KATTER—How many kilos in 50 bags?

Mr Albert—Five hundred kilos. There are 10 kilos per bag. That is close to \$6 per bag on freight. You have the cost of that and then you have your staffing costs, staff superannuation and staff workers compensation. When you put it all on top, to make a profit, the prices would be too high for the people. A lot of people here are on CDEP, which is basically, as Rita said, four hundred and something dollars per fortnight. They cannot afford to pay the prices that we would have to mark up in order for us to make a profit. It is very difficult for them.

CHAIR—You have been running the store for how long?

Mr Albert—In November 2006 we opened.

CHAIR—And you have not made a profit in any of those years?

Mr Albert—The only time we made a profit was last year, when the two partners joined. The two partners only take something like \$800 a week.

CHAIR—How many staff do you employ?

Mr Albert—At the moment we have two permanents and maybe two or three casuals on the freight day. When the cargo comes in we have to have extra staff sometimes, so we have everybody turn up. Now we have a couple of people working who are on CDEP. They are helping us down there. We had two this morning. They do their CDEP hours there. So they give us a hand with the cargo. Before, we were employing staff to do it. So that has put a bit of ease on us.

CHAIR—Is this the only store that you run?

Mr Albert—This is the only store we run here.

CHAIR—Is this the only store that these owners run?

Mr Albert—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you do any cross-subsidisation with the fruit and vegies? Do you do anything to try and make the fruit and vegies cheaper?

Mr Albert—The freight on fruit and vegies is not that expensive. At one time we were donating a carton of apples and a carton of oranges to the school every week. I am not sure when that stopped—the cost to us was getting a bit out of hand. The freight on frozen and chiller stuff like vegies and meat is not expensive. The freight on dry cargo is where it gets expensive. The freight on chiller and freezer goods is only 40c or 50c per kilo to bring it up from Cairns, but, for dry cargo like rice and noodles and all the general cargo, that is where the freight is very heavy.

CHAIR—How is the freight charged? Is it charged per cubic metre?

Mr Albert—Per cubic metre for dry goods and per kilo for frozen and chiller.

CHAIR—Which makes the fresh food cheaper to bring up?

Mr Albert—Cheaper to bring up, yes, freight wise.

CHAIR—Do you have any sense of what percentage of the cost that you ultimately sell the product for is freight?

Mr Albert—Our mark-up to cover our wages, electricity and overheads is about 50 per cent on fruit and vegies.

CHAIR—Does that include the freight?

Mr Albert—That includes the freight.

CHAIR—What percentage would the freight be?

Mr Albert—For instance, you buy a kilo of oranges for \$3.50 and you put 46c to 50c on top of that for freight, so it goes by the kilo.

Mr KATTER—How much would those 50 bags of rice cost? How much do you pay the supplier?

Mr Albert—At the moment, we pay about \$21.89 for a 10-kilo bag of rice. Call it \$22. That is the price for a 10-kilo bag of rice purchased in Cairns now. If you add \$5 or \$6 freight on that, that is \$27, and we charge \$34.

Mr KATTER—I very much appreciate your candour.

CHAIR—Do those of you who are involved in running this store have a background in retailing?

Mr Albert—I have.

CHAIR—You have had a background in retailing?

Mr Albert—I have had businesses before, yes.

CHAIR—Whereabouts have they been?

Mr Albert—I had a business in Sydney and I had two businesses in Cairns.

CHAIR—Were they simple businesses running retail stores?

Mr Albert—And I managed stores for clients. As I said, I am an accountant—a financial adviser—but I had restaurants and grocery stores. I managed businesses for clients of mine.

CHAIR—In terms of the objective of trying to make the cost of food cheaper—

Mr Albert—As I said, the only way the prices here can be reduced is if there is a freight subsidy. The freight is where the cost is taken up. It is not the cost of the goods so much; it is the freight on top of it. The freight is why the goods up here are so expensive. We have tried our best to keep prices as low as possible and we have gone backwards because of trying to keep prices low.

Mr TURNOUR—How much has the freight gone up since Sea Swift has come in? You may have this covered earlier.

Mr Albert—Since we started in 2006, I think the freight has gone up about four or five times in that 2½ years.

Mr TURNOUR—How much has it gone up by—on, say, a cubic metre?

Mr Albert—When we started, in November 2006, we were paying \$196 a cubic metre. It is now \$246 plus GST—\$270.

Mr TURNOUR—I am not sure whether you outlined this earlier. Did you mention your supply chain? Do you buy out of a wholesaler in Cairns?

Mr Albert—It is cheaper to buy the stuff from Brisbane and freight it up to Cairns and then freight it here than to buy it in Cairns. So we buy most of our general cargo and frozen cargo from Metcash in Brisbane. That is freighted up to Cairns and then freighted up here—so we have two lots of freight. The freight from Brisbane is over \$200 a pallet. It does not matter how big the pallet is; it is \$279 or \$289 a pallet. But from Cairns to here it is charged by the cubic metre, not by the pallet.

CHAIR—Was Endeavour still operating when you started your business?

Mr Albert—Endeavour freight?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Albert—I think they have been taken over by Sea Swift. I approached them before they were taken over. The prices they quoted me, I had arguments with them that their prices were more than Sea Swift at the time and that is why we stuck with Sea Swift. The quotes they gave me—I showed them invoices from Sea Swift and they came to me with a lot of stories about additional costs. I proved to them that Sea Swift was cheaper than them.

CHAIR—So since Endeavour was taken over, you have not noticed any increase in the cost of freight?

Mr Albert—I think it has gone up once since they have taken over Endeavour. Not by much, but it has gone up.

CHAIR—Darrell, thank you very much for the time you have given us today. We really appreciate your evidence. We may have further questions, which we will direct to you in writing through the secretariat.

[11.11 am]

STEPHEN, Mr Seriako (Seri), Chairman, Ugar Kem Le Ged, Zeuber Er Kep Le, (Torres Strait Islander Corporation), Stephen Island

CHAIR—Welcome. Is there anything you would like to add to the capacity in which you appear before us today?

Mr Stephen—My role is the chairman of a prescribed body corporate, the Ugar Kem Le Ged, Zeuber Er Kep Le—the TSI Corporation. I will be speaking on behalf of Ugarum Le and the issues of Stephen Island alone.

CHAIR—Seri, would you like to make an opening statement and then we might ask you some questions.

Mr Stephen—I want to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which I stand here before the inquiry, and also in attending the native title workshop on Badu, including the Mura Badulgul people. First of all I would like to make a statement on the record. I really want to get into the history of IBIS, IIB and how the island industry board have been established in the Torres Strait. We know the history. It was started on Stephen Island by a lad by the name of Charlie Walker. He has moved on from Stephen Island to Badu, and established the IIB on Badu. Stephen Island and Badu Island are the only islands that do not have IBIS stores. We are the first island to have these stores shut by the board.

From memory, the IBIS store on Ugar—I use the traditional name for Stephen Island, Ugar—was closed in May 2003 by the then board of IBIS. I believe it was led by Mr Joseph Elu. One of the things that still sticks in my mind, and I still strongly advocate it as the chief of the native title body, is the statement that was made by the chair at that time, that IBIS on Ugar—Stephen Island—will never be profitable. That statement was unfair because the community did not have input and feedback on that statement, and there was no thorough consultation done by the board into the community at that time. The community was deprived of its basic human rights, and under the UN declaration, which Australia is about to take a position on under the Rudd administration, it is only fair that this inquiry hear the story for Stephen Island—Ugar.

Since the closure in 2003, under the previous leadership of the chairman at that time, Mr Rocky Stephen, who is my nephew, who was the chair under the now defunct Community Services (Torres Strait) Act 1984, there has been limited progress through consultation with the board, through representation for traditional property owners on Stephen Island. The consultation between the board and management, through legal representation, which is the TSRA native title office, has been limited. I believe the Senate inquiry team met with IBIS and the CEO, Richard Bowler, yesterday. I would like to hear what he has to say from the inquiry team. Since the closure in 2003, the prescribed body corporate has tried to strongly advocate and energise its efforts to meet with the then Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partnership, the Hon. John Mickel. At that time we had a meeting in TI, at the DATSIP office there. There was a commitment made that a thorough consultation would be done. Ever since, there has not been any consultation. We have been endlessly trying to advise management to be

transparent and accountable in the sense that IBIS holds a statutory obligation to provide essential basic human services to people on Stephen Island.

In giving that brief background, I wanted to advise the inquiry team of some of the issues that impact on families that reside on Stephen Island—Ugar—and I think that it is only fair that this inquiry team hears from a traditional owner point of view. I first had contact with the council, and members in the committee. If I could have the opportunity later on, I could explain about some of the issues that families face and some of the issues that are risking people's lives, such as travelling to other communities to do shopping given the fact that there is no retail outlet that provides fresh fruit and vegetables and other basic services and goods. When we are talking about the Rudd administration and the coalition agreeing to a statement of intent on closing the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, it is important to remember that our levels of and access to basic human services is our human right. In saying this, later on I would like to highlight to the committee some of the issues that I want to address.

CHAIR—Thank you, Seri. What is the population of Ugar Island?

Mr Stephen—The last ABS census had about 70 to 75 people, from memory; the population is very transient.

CHAIR—Is there a sense of how big the permanent population of the island is? You say that there are 70 to 80 people who live on Ugar Island—

Mr Stephen—There are 70 to 75.

CHAIR—and that the population is transient. Is there a permanent population?

Mr Stephen—I think the permanent population may be approximately 60 people.

CHAIR—You said that the store went out of business in 2003. How are people doing their shopping? How are people getting their food now?

Mr Stephen—People are obtaining their food by two processes. One, if you have a credit card and a good credit rating you order your stuff through Coles in Cairns, and it gets shipped up by Sea Swift. The other is a very high-risk alternative, whereby families jump into their own tinnies, risking their lives, to travel to other communities.

CHAIR—Which communities do they travel to?

Mr Stephen—They travel to Darnley Island, especially, because it is closer. Depending on the weather, if there is a 10- to 15-knot wind or a 15- to 20-knot wind it might take about half an hour or three-quarters of an hour. If it is a 30- to 40-knot wind, it will take at least an hour to an hour and a half. They are travelling only in tinnies, so families are risking their lives getting essential food.

CHAIR—Do you get any of your food locally, through either fishing or growing vegetables?

Mr Stephen—Since the closure in 2003, families have been very independent. We have a strong track record in subsistence living from the land and the sea. The soil on Ugar Island is very volcanic, rich soil which does not pose any threat or problem to cultivate crops. Families live off the sea, catching fish, turtle, dugong and shellfish. Most importantly, they rely on gathering fish from traditional fish traps around the island rather than travelling to Darnley Island to buy a packet of rump steak, which is about \$12, and you have only two pieces of rump in a pack.

CHAIR—What vegetables are you growing?

Mr Stephen—The last time I was on Stephen Island was in October last year and, from memory, families had grown yams, cassava, taro and sweet corn, and there is a lot of popular vegetation in mangoes and native fruit trees. Other than that, there is a program through Queensland Health called Building Healthy Communities, which was initiated on Stephen Island, to grow fresh fruit and vegetables. I think families have strived to do that ever since the program was introduced by Queensland Health. In terms of fresh fruit and vegetables, the other alternative is relying on buying products through various outlets in Cairns and also on Thursday Island. Every now and then my sister rings up from Stephen Island, and I still do work for Queensland Health, and every time there is a doctor's charter going out, every three weeks, I have to put milk and bread on. Excuse me a moment.

CHAIR—Take your time. If I may ask another question, do you have a sense of what proportion of the food that is consumed on Ugar Island is through subsistence living? Is it, say, half the food? Is it most of it?

Mr Stephen—Can you repeat that?

CHAIR—Yes. You said that there is a strong tradition of subsistence living on the island. Is that supplying half the food or most of the food? Otherwise, is most of the food got through shopping or in other ways?

Mr Stephen—Honestly, you can only supply some of the food. It is a staple diet in terms of garden food and fish.

CHAIR—Does most of the food come through fishing and growing vegetables?

Mr Stephen—From memory, most of the food is derived from garden food and fish. It is like I explained before. If you have a credit card you can buy meat products from Coles in Cairns or from the Island & Cape outlet in Cairns. Other than that you live off fish and turtle.

CHAIR—Are there many people that have credit cards?

Mr Stephen—As you are aware, I can only speak of our people on Stephen Island and in the Torres Strait as well from my experience in health. We have a very poor health status and a very poor socioeconomic status. Eighty per cent of people are very dependent on CDEP on Stephen Island and throughout the region. If I may say, 100 per cent of people on Stephen Island depend on welfare. There are only three or four permanent government employees on the island, employed in health and through our local council. The rest are being employed by CDEP in a

welfare regime that has been championed in our community. To answer your question, Richard, if you have full-time employment and a good credit rating, you will have a credit card. When you are on CDEP, it is impossible.

Mrs VALE—Thank you very much for coming, Seri. Does your island have any opportunity to have chickens and eggs as a supplement to the meat diet that you might have and to your protein? Are there any chickens on your island?

Mr Stephen—On Stephen Island families do have chickens in their backyards. In terms of poultry products, I must highlight here that we are very conscious of our position in communities in that we are the buffer zone between two countries, as you know—Papua New Guinea and Australia. We are a sentinel host for any introduction of exotic pests and diseases, HIV and bird flu. So, whilst eradicating domestic pigs from all communities in the Torres Strait to deal with vector-borne and mosquito diseases, we might as well eradicate our chickens as well because we are the front line as a sentinel host to bird flu.

Mrs VALE—I understand that.

Mr Stephen—I do not think it is a good idea to keep a flock of hens to just produce eggs to make scrambled eggs in the morning. These issues need to be taken seriously by the committee.

Mrs VALE—Yes, but you can still have chickens and they can still be cleaned.

Mr Stephen—Absolutely.

Mrs VALE—And an egg is a great source of protein for a human being, especially a growing child. Do a lot of people have chickens on your island, or just one or two? Is it a very important part of the diet?

Mr Stephen—From memory, on my last visit, in October, there were only two or three families that had their own chickens in the backyard. It is not a large proportion of chickens that could produce X amount of eggs as a protein diet for everybody in the community; it is for a particular household. It is not to supplement the whole community; it is only about—

Mrs VALE—But why? We have people in the community which I come from in Sydney, in New South Wales, who still today have chickens in their backyards. People in country areas have chickens and they can actually sell any excess eggs at a significant discount to neighbours. It is a wonderful food resource, Seri, and it is a very easy thing to have and to grow.

Mr Stephen—I understand what you are saying. If you can subsidise chicken to people on Stephen Island, we will take that offer.

Mrs VALE—You would not need to subsidise them; you would only need to give them a flock or two dozen fertilised eggs and you have got the whole community looked after if you only have 70 people. It is just a very easy way of getting a very important food resource, for the children more than anything else—but for everybody. Once you have a couple of chickens and a big rooster, you will soon have lots of baby chickens.

Mr Stephen—We eat anything. We eat chicken too.

Mrs VALE—Chicken meat is something that we have not really talked about today. It is just an easy resource. It can be self-contained on the island. Your chickens can be checked for disease and you are only ever going to have to worry about disease if you get other chickens coming in. You would not import fresh chickens; you would just keep the chickens that you have. Once you have some clean chickens that have been cleared by AQIS to make sure they are disease free, you can keep that flock. It is just one suggestion. Sometimes, instead of having to pay all the freight and other things, self-resourcefulness is still the best. There has been a return to home gardens and having a couple of chickens in your own backyard. That is happening in suburban Sydney at the moment. I just wanted to let you know that.

Mr Stephen—Thank you. I hope that we do not introduce bird flu.

Mrs VALE—Of course you will not. It is just a matter of checking them. If they are self-contained on the island and you do not import any new birds, you cannot get bird flu.

CHAIR—Bob, do you have any questions?

Mr KATTER—No, I think Seri has handled it very well.

Mr TURNOUR—I just wanted to follow up on that. I hear what you are saying in relation to bird flu and other diseases. That is generally a view held around the Torres Strait. Is having chickens or pigs frowned upon in terms of quarantine?

Mr Stephen—As you know, Jim, and the committee knows, the Torres Strait is smothered by layers and layers of legislation. We have people enforcing the quarantine net and being the front line, the doorstep. They act as a buffer zone, a special quarantine zone to mainland Australia. This paints a very clear picture to the government that we present a threat of exotic pests and diseases. We are a threat of vector borne diseases—malaria, japanese encephalitis, dengue fever, ross river. We are a threat in terms of sexually transmitted infections like HIV from the coastal treaty villages of Papua New Guinea and also Daru, given the close vicinity of these communities to the Torres Strait and the islands within the Torres Strait protected zone.

Mr TURNOUR—Yes, I recognise that. One of the things that is becoming clear, though, is that there is a difference between the actual law and what the perception of the law is, from what I am hearing. The law is quite clear, as Danna Vale said. People can keep chickens. They can keep pigs within the Torres Strait protected zone, but they cannot transfer them south. I understand the difficulties with pigs, particularly with swill feeding, but maybe there is an opportunity to look particularly at the greatest threat to the life expectancy of Torres Strait Islanders, which is clear from the statistics. I understand the important work you are doing in protecting Australia, but I am particularly interested in protecting the health and wellbeing of Torres Strait Islanders, and the greatest threats are diabetes and heart disease. I think one of the things this inquiry is quite keen to look at is how we can tackle those real challenges without necessarily having you always having to take responsibility to protect the mainland, because we need to get back and focus on the health and wellbeing of these communities as well.

Thank you very much. I think it is great to have members of the committee here. I know Mr Katter has travelled up here extensively, but your testimony today will go onto the public record of the parliament and it gives a lot of people on the mainland a greater understanding of the difficulties and hardships of living on particularly small islands like Stephen and Ugar. So thank you very much.

CHAIR—I have a couple more questions. You are keen to get another IBIS store back onto Ugar Island. What contact have you had with IBIS to try and make that happen?

Mr Stephen—Through our legal representation and through the native title office, we have constantly been in contact with IBIS management, in particular the CEO. We have made several attempts to speak directly through our legal representation to the CEO, Richard Bowler. It seems that the problem that we have is with IBIS getting traditional property owners together. We have land allocated on Stephen Island. We have two or three lots of land, I think, now allocated by traditional property owners to negotiate with IBIS. IBIS has been very stagnated in their approach in terms of keeping a very strong communication with our legal representation, which is the TSRA, the native title office lawyers. It is 2009 now and we are still waiting for a roundtable discussion, to get our traditional property owners coming around the roundtable to speak with IBIS management about what they have to offer and sticking to their statutory obligation.

CHAIR—Have they ever suggested that it may not be commercially viable or profitable for them to open up a store? Do they ever say that to you?

Mr Stephen—There was a very clear and loud statement in 2003 that the store on Ugar will not be profitable and will be dependent on other stores to keep its operation and function going. Okay, that is fine. If it is the case, as I was strongly emphasising, we will look at other alternatives. Another alternative may be that we will look at other retailers that can come in and provide that service and also create opportunities through economic development, training and employment for locals of Stephen Island. It is all about economic independence. Whilst we are suppressed by this rhetoric, it will not be profitable. You can be held accountable for it.

CHAIR—Seri, thank you very for giving us your time today. We really appreciate the evidence that you have provided us.

Mr Stephen—Thank you. Before I close I want to express one more view here. In terms of access to the island, I think the last time they attempted to dredge the channel out from the shore to the edge of the reef was in 2001 or 2002 when that project came up to dredge the channel. All they did was put a big swimming pool in front of the church. That is where the kids go to swim when it is high and dry—low tide. The problem we have is that when people on Stephen Island order their fruit, vegies and meat and poultry product or have to go to Darnley to shop they have to wait until the tide comes in. If Sea Swift is delivering cargo from Cairns, they actually go past Stephen Island and service Darnley and Murray. Then, on the way back, if the tide is right—like the show *The Price is Right*—Sea Swift offload cargo and back log. But, if it is not, they take the stock back to Horn Island and leave it in the sheds. If it is meat, fresh fruit and vegetables, it will go out in another week or two. So there is an access problem to a barge and wharf facility. There is a problem with access to appropriate mode of transport. I think Bob remembers the airstrip. The consultation and the feasibility study was done in 1988, Bob. It is now 2009.

Mr KATTER—It was supposed to be completed, Seri, in 1988. The gear was on Darnley. The federal government ran out of money for the water development there, so the gear stayed on Darnley in 1988. In 1989 I ordered the gear to be moved, but we lost government that year and the gear was never moved over to complete the airstrip. But that airstrip was supposed to be completed in 1988. Davo had the gear there. He was in charge of it. It was all there ready to go. I hit the roof in 1988 over the fact that it had been delayed because of the lack of funding for the water supply there. It is just unbelievable to me that in 2009 there is still no airstrip there.

Mr Stephen—Twenty-one years and there is still no appropriate access to mode of transport. We are like millionaires, the Ugarum Le. A helicopter comes in every day but on other islands families travel by fixed wing. On Stephen Island they travel by rotor wing. We are like another Andrew Forrest and Clyde, that bloke who backs the LNP—millionaires. Thank you.

[11.45 am]

MITCHELL, Mr Robert, Store Manager, Island and Cape

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you want to make an opening statement?

Mr Mitchell—Not really.

CHAIR—You do not have to; that is all right. Can I ask you a few background questions. The Badu Supermarket is part of the Island and Cape franchise—have I got that right?

Mr Mitchell—Island and Cape wholesalers, that is correct.

CHAIR—Explain the difference there.

Mr Mitchell—Island and Cape are a wholesaler in Cairns. They have several stores through the Torres Strait and one store down in Aurukun.

CHAIR—Do they own the store or is it a franchise arrangement?

Mr Mitchell—They own the store.

CHAIR—So the store is owned by a company based in Cairns?

Mr Mitchell—Yes, that is correct.

CHAIR—How long have you been involved in managing the store?

Mr Mitchell—I started working for Island and Cape at the end of August last year but have been in the Torres Strait now for probably about 19 months. I was working for IBIS beforehand.

CHAIR—Your background is in retailing?

Mr Mitchell—It certainly is.

CHAIR—Can you tell us where you have done retailing before?

Mr Mitchell—I started off with Woolworths, doing a traineeship, forwarding on to becoming a store manager and becoming a group manager for southern New South Wales for their petrol division. I moved on from there to FoodWorks, being a retail business adviser. I moved from there to Arnhem Land, working for ALPA, or Arnhemland Progress Association, for three or four years. I moved from there into the Torres Strait, working for IBIS for six or seven months, and then moved here.

CHAIR—How many people are employed in the store?

Mr Mitchell—A total of 11, including me and my partner.

CHAIR—Do you do anything to try and make fruit and vegetables cheaper? Do you have any cross-subsidising arrangements going on within the product lines that you sell?

Mr Mitchell—We try and make all of our products as cheap as possible. We subsidise with non-nutritional products—for example, confectionery and all that sort of stuff—to try and bring the price down to a reasonable price. Obviously this is affected by drought, flooding, fires and so on. So the price does fluctuate dramatically week in, week out.

CHAIR—And that is dependent upon the freight circumstances?

Mr Mitchell—Yes, that is correct.

CHAIR—What percentage of the ultimate cost do you think can be attributed to freight?

Mr Mitchell—Freight can fluctuate anywhere between 8½ per cent to 10 per cent on sell price goods.

CHAIR—How is freight charged? How do you pay for freight? How does the pricing from the freight company work?

Mr Mitchell—I do not really know that. I just work on percentage of sell price goods at store level.

CHAIR—Do you order the freight in or is that all handled in Cairns?

Mr Mitchell—That is handled in Cairns.

CHAIR—But you reckon that you can add about 10 per cent to the ultimate price by virtue of the freight costs from Cairns.

Mr Mitchell—That is correct.

CHAIR—Do you do any work to try and survey the community or do any research to work out what product lines you should be stocking?

Mr Mitchell—At the end of the day we do a fair bit of work with RIST. On top of that we get a lot of customer feedback on new lines or products. We try and keep it as nutritional as possible, as well.

CHAIR—Are there difficulties in keeping levels of stock in particular lines through the week?

Mr Mitchell—At the end of the day, when you are talking about fruit and veg it is highly perishable, especially leaf lines—you have basically only got a couple of days life. If it comes

from Cairns it has been on the water for almost a week. Obviously it deteriorates in a very short time.

CHAIR—What sort of state does it come in?

Mr Mitchell—I would say quite reasonable, considering the distance it has travelled. I have definitely come across a lot worse cases in Arnhem Land.

CHAIR—What comparisons do you make between here and Arnhem Land in terms of the freight logistics?

Mr Mitchell—In Arnhem Land you are talking about being on the water for an extra two days, which really does deteriorate the product.

CHAIR—Nine days to Arnhem Land compared to seven here?

Mr Mitchell—Our highly perishable lines are on the barge by Wednesday; we receive it on the Monday. What is that—a five-day turnaround? That is on average. But this week it is six days. We have had cases where it has been anywhere up to eight days.

CHAIR—So that five days was a description of the freight time here in Badu and not Arnhem Land?

Mr Mitchell—That is correct. But it can actually go up to eight days. We have had one or two barges that have been quite late.

CHAIR—Are there issues that are particular to the Torres Strait which makes the running of community stores here more difficult than in other places in your experience?

Mr Mitchell—Obviously at the end of the day freight costs are a huge factor. On top of that there is maintenance of equipment. That is a massive expense as well.

CHAIR—Is that particular to the Torres Strait?

Mr Mitchell—Yes, I would say it is to any remote area.

CHAIR—Any remote area or the Torres Strait. Are you describing something to do with being in a maritime environment or just in a remote environment?

Mr Mitchell—Maritime.

Mr TURNOUR—Picking up on what Richard was talking about, I know you have worked in a range of different stores, how do you compare the model of a privately owned franchise compared to, say, and IBIS type franchise in terms of the quality and price of food?

Mr Mitchell—Here is where I actually do struggle a little bit. I am working for private enterprise right now. In the majority of cases—I will not say all cases—we can sell our product cheaper than a non-profit organisation like IBIS.

Mr TURNOUR—What do you put that down to?

Mr Mitchell—Good buying by the warehouse in Cairns.

Mr TURNOUR—So you can deliver food cheaper and had a better quality in general than a not-for-profit IBIS group?

Mr Mitchell—Yes, definitely.

Mr TURNOUR—Do you do any surveys to compare your pricing with, for example, IBIS?

Mr Mitchell—There are several people who go, for example, to Thursday Island. The pricing structure for IBIS varies from Thursday Island to the outer islands. We get customers who go and purchase stuff at IBIS on Thursday Island and in some cases they bring back the receipts. We are quite comparable, that is for sure.

Mr TURNOUR—We heard evidence earlier on. When the barge comes in, do you pretty much sell out of a lot of your fruit and vegetables in the first part of the week?

Mr Mitchell—We try not to. We try to keep at least a minimum range up until Thursday or Friday. Obviously we are going to run out of the highly perishable lines like lettuce, which are leaf lines, because they do deteriorate so quickly.

Mr TURNOUR—With perishables there is always a quantity that you do have to dispose of. Do you have a percentage that you work on in relation to that?

Mr Mitchell—Roughly five per cent. It all depends on when the goods arrive. For example, today our barge is a day late. Therefore, we have lost a day of life of selling the product.

Mr TURNOUR—Do you wear that cost or does the barge company?

Mr Mitchell—We wear that.

Mr TURNOUR—How does that compare with your experience in mainland stores?

Mr Mitchell—As in mainstream?

Mr TURNOUR—Yes, as in mainstream. What is the percentage loss here compared to, say, Woollies?

Mr Mitchell—The percentage of loss in mainstream is very minimal. You would be talking about three to four times at least up here.

Mr TURNOUR—There is a lot of discussion about freight increasing the cost of produce. The other issue that comes up regularly is maintenance, and you touched on it as well in terms of the higher cost of maintaining refrigeration, and other elements, I would imagine, in your store. What increase in the cost of produce would you think that that higher cost of maintenance has compare to mainstream or mainland stores?

Mr Mitchell—If you are talking about a technician coming out, we pay roughly about the same price per labour hour. But then on top of that you are talking about travel time, air expenses, accommodation and so on. On top of that, if there are certain parts or tools which are needed to fix equipment, that has to be freighted up as well.

Mr TURNOUR—If you are looking at it, though, over a 12-month period, there is obviously the additional costs in terms of freight. The other additional cost seems to be maintenance costs. That is all got to be recouped through the price of your goods. What sort of increase, compared to, say, Cairns, you would have because of the increased cost of maintenance as a percentage of your goods?

Mr Mitchell—If we are talking about percentage of the sell price of goods for maintenance, I do not know that figure off the top of my head, to be quite honest.

Mr TURNOUR—Would the company have an idea of that?

Mr Mitchell—They certainly would.

Mr TURNOUR—Okay. We might pick that up when we hear evidence from them in, I think, Bamaga.

Mr Mitchell—Yes, John is down there.

Mr TURNOUR—Thank you very much.

Mrs VALE—Thank you, Rob, for coming. I am interested in access to fresh eggs and chicken meat as a protein source. Do you import fresh eggs from Cairns?

Mr TURNOUR—Yes, we certainly do.

Mrs VALE—Is there much consumption of fresh eggs on the island?

Mr Mitchell—Yes, there certainly is. We go through on average probably about 10 cartons of eggs. Eggs are quite a good line. They are quite a stable line and you have quite a reasonable life as well.

Mrs VALE—What about chickens? Do you do frozen chickens or frozen chicken meat?

Mr Mitchell—All of our meat comes up frozen—obviously due to the length of time on water. Yes, we do a full range whether it be whole chicken, chicken cuts or fillets.

Mrs VALE—Are they accessed by people on the island?

Mr Mitchell—Yes, they certainly are.

Mrs VALE—Perhaps you are not the right person to ask, but is there any tradition of having chickens and having eggs on this island? I did ask Seri from Stephen Island. Would you know that? Do people keep their own chickens here?

Interjector (Dr Waria)—No, we don't.

Mrs VALE—When it comes to leafy vegetables and how important leafy vegetables in the diet, you were saying how they are so perishable. Is there any tradition here of growing spinach, cabbage and lettuce on this island?

Mr Mitchell—I do not know. I do know that the nursery grow their own up there. If you are going to grow vegetables in the ground, the climate is very difficult.

Mrs VALE—What, too much rain, Rob?

Mr Mitchell—Too much rain, too much heat.

Mrs VALE—Thank you very much.

CHAIR—Do you have a sense of whether the store here is profitable? Are your financial figures broken down store by store?

Mr Mitchell—Yes, they are. At the end of the day we are a private organisation and we do have to be profitable. It is a minimal profit. Our GP, as such, shows that. At the end of the day, as long as we cover the costs of expenses that is the most important thing.

CHAIR—Are you able to say what the profit margin would be across the entire store here?

Mr Mitchell—Talking about gross profit as in sell price of goods, we are basing ourselves roughly on about 40 per cent. You take your 8½ per cent or up to 10 per cent freight off that component. This is going to be a figure a lot of places will quote as a landed cost. We are talking about 30 to 32 per cent GP landed cost.

CHAIR—But, presumably, at the end of the day, when you take maintenance and all the rest of it out of it, the ultimate profitability of the store is much less than that?

Mr Mitchell—It is very minimal.

CHAIR—All right. Thank you very much, Rob, for giving us your time. We really appreciate it.

Mr Mitchell—You are welcome.

[12.00 pm]

ALBERT, Mr Darrell, Accountant, Donga Town General Store, Badu Island

COLEMAN, Mr Charles W., Private capacity

GUIVARRA, Mr Wayne Samuel, Councillor, Torres Strait Island Regional Council, Division 5, Badu Island

KEBISU, Miss Rita Murile, Project Coordinator, Mina Aigud, Matha, Zizimika, (Eat Well, Be Active), Tagai State College

NEWIE, Mr John, Private capacity

NEWIE, Mrs Maureen, Private capacity

NONA, Mr Laurie, Private capacity

NONA, Mr Titom, Private capacity

SAILOR, Mrs Susannah, Private capacity

TAYLOR, Mr Keith, Private capacity

WARIA, Dr Peter, Private capacity

CHAIR—A number of people from the St Pauls community have indicated that they would like to speak. Is there somebody who would like to speak first?

Mr Newie—Good morning. Thank you for having us here. My name is Pastor John Newie. My wife and I have travelled from Moa Island. We have recently moved into the community and we learnt that the panel was here. I would like to thank you for the opportunity.

CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Newie—Yes. Firstly, I would like to thank God for this inquiry. I want to acknowledge our family, Danna, Bob, Chair, Susan, and our member, Jim. Thank you. I have not seen your emails for a while.

It cost us at least \$60 just to travel here by boat, by dinghy. We have presented papers to the committee. There are two petitions, one on fuel and the other on rat infestation at the IBIS store. These issues have been taken up with various government departments but nothing has been done. This is a very serious matter concerning health. I have recently learnt about a submission that they have made to the inquiry. They have said lovely things about the health and quality of the food and about the Australian and New Zealand food health standards that they apply. Recently, my brother-in-law had eight bags that had been eaten. The whole place is infested.

They sent a guy round who set baits, but it is not working. If it was happening in the major centres, there would be a shutdown. Because we have only that one store—the other store is in another community on Moa Island, and it costs a lot to travel over there—the prices are unbelievable. We have recently moved from Cairns. We have been here seven weeks and we see the difference in cost. They were talking before about the program at the school. My children go to the school and it costs \$50 a week for one child at the tuckshop. With three children, it would cost us 150 bucks, but we do our sandwiches at home. We get frozen bread and my wife makes bread. We try to utilise what we have.

But I will go back to what Danna mentioned regarding plantation market gardening. These issues are real. It can be done. As I see it, the problem is the availability of land to dam. It is a huge project, but once you have a dam it will bring economic prospects for the community to do market gardening. There is scope for it. These issues are compounding. Wages are the key to bridging the gap to a healthy lifestyle that everyone else enjoys—the CDEP top-up et cetera. My wife and I, as citizens of this region, have submitted our views on all these things to the committee, highlighting various issues that you have highlighted in your inquiry about quality and whether there is profit—because we do not have any competition. There is no incentive for us. There is a lot of nepotism in the government process and there are a lot of obstacles even before we get to what you are inquiring about. We have a domestic situation ourselves. That is all I have to say. We have submitted everything.

CHAIR—Before you leave, we will make sure that we have a copy of all your material.

Mr Newie—I have handed in my copies.

CHAIR—We will put that into evidence.

Mr Newie—I made sure because we wanted to give it to you.

CHAIR—I want to ask one thing. Did you say it was a rat infestation? Is that right?

Mr Newie—It is a rat infestation. We have some photos. We have everything there in our submission. As someone mentioned before, as a statutory body they are obligated under law—and they put out this pretty list of all the compliance that they do!

CHAIR—Does the barge come to the store once a week?

Mr Newie—Once a week.

CHAIR—What is the population of Moa Island?

Mrs Sailor—There are about 536 people on Moa in the two communities.

CHAIR—And the one store is servicing the two communities?

Mrs Sailor—No, we have two IBIS stores.

Mr Newie—There is a member from the other community here also. We can only speak on what is happening in the St Pauls community.

CHAIR—Could you talk about the quality of the fresh food that is available in the store.

Mrs Newie—My name is Maureen Newie. I am actually a traditional property owner of Badu Island but, because I am married to him—John Newie—I live over on St Pauls. The St Pauls store does not have the capacity to keep the fresh food that comes into the store once a week. It actually keeps the goods in the cooler in the back at night, but during the day for the presentation of the food it is not all kept in the cooler; it is in the aisles. You actually walk over the fruit and vegies. Because of the size of the store they do not have the room to present it to people from the cooler. So you have all these fruits and vegies that are in the aisles. In this heat it does not last very long. Since we have come from Cairns I have not bought fresh fruit and vegies from the store for the simple reason that by the time you go and have a look it has wilted. If it is not that it is that the store smells of rat urine. The fruit and vegie section smells of rat urine. They are unacceptable standards, so when we have the money we actually drive over to Kubin's store. That is where I pick up fresh fruit and vegies from, not from the St Pauls store, because of the rat infestation.

CHAIR—Is the other store also an IBIS store?

Mrs Newie—That is an IBIS store also. To buy anything at the store the cost is exorbitant. For example, a one-kilo bag of cooked chicken meat that we buy for sandwiches costs me \$28 at the St Pauls store. If I were to order that from Cairns it would cost me \$12.88.

Mr KATTER—Can you say that again?

Mrs Newie—It is \$28 for a one-kilo bag of diced cooked Steggles chicken meat. To order exactly the same bag from Cairns would cost \$12.88.

CHAIR—Are you aware of anybody who is buying their groceries from Cairns and having it freighted up independently?

Mrs Newie—Not at St Pauls. We are in the process of getting goods up ourselves from Cairns. We have been there for seven weeks. We have tried to save money and put in one order because of the freight costs. We have had our stuff freighted up in a five-by-five-metre container, and that cost us \$1,500. That was just to freight our clothes and so on up from Cairns. Like the previous guy was saying, it costs you by cubic metre to freight stuff up. We have just recently placed an order to Cairns to have stuff up. I have not worked out the cost of that yet.

CHAIR—Have you raised your concerns with IBIS?

Mrs Newie—Different members of the community have raised our concerns with IBIS. Every time they say, 'There is an island manager; take it up with the island manager.' We have raised concerns with Queensland Health. We have raised concerns with the tropical public health unit. Other people have also gone to the quarantine office. That serves both Kubin and St Pauls. We have gone to whoever we can go to. Now we are coming to you to get something done. On top

of the prices that we pay, goods are written off daily. The number of goods that are written off is not funny.

Mr TURNOUR—This committee—and this is through the chair—will not report on this inquiry until September but I give you a commitment that I will get on the phone after this hearing and have my office pursue it. Could you put on the record where you have followed this up with Queensland Health?

Mrs Sailor—I actually rang Health on Thursday Island and they were going to get on to the tropical public health unit about it.

Mr TURNOUR—I will follow it up from my office. I will pursue this for you.

Mrs Sailor—I actually spoke to Richard Bowler. Richard Bowler said that there is nothing that he can do about the rat problem. The island managers do not have a voice.

Mr TURNOUR—I can assure you there were rats in Bi-Low in Cairns and, as you would remember, it was shut down immediately. If there are rats in IBIS in St Pauls then it needs consideration. It is not only an IBIS issue; it is a public health issue. I will pursue that.

Mr Taylor—My name is Keith Taylor. I live at St Pauls. There was a question asked about chickens. I am actually trying to get having chickens off the ground now but at \$40 a bag for chicken food, layer mash, it is a bit pricey. It is very hard. As for growing things, I have tried growing things at different times but this place has a very wet season and a very dry season when everything dries and there is no water in the dry season. In the dry season I will go down to have a wash in the sea. I have done that before at St Pauls. You cannot have water to put on your crops. It sounds easy: grow it and feed the chickens. But there are always those things, regardless of the snakes and other things we have. As for fuel costs, on St Pauls we have been paying \$2.85 a litre for gasoline. The fuel pump had been broken down—and I have spoken to an office about this—since before Christmas. It was only got going again this week. But we are still paying \$2.85 a litre for fuel. The price went up when everybody else's price went down. Our price on St Pauls is still up there. So I would like to add those comments.

Mr Coleman—My name is Charles Coleman. I am the chair of the elders group. Yes, there is a big problem with plants and gardens and things like that. It is very easy to talk about those things, but you have to look at the things that come into it, like water, for instance. St Pauls have got no water. They have got two little 'turkey nests', as we and those on the mainland call them, at the back of the village. They want bigger dams. A lot of water just runs off the island. There is a lot of good water for catchment there. I think I have talked to Jason and others about that before. There are a lot of good things that can happen with water. Water is the future of everything. I would like to see a big dam put there. I remember one time when I sat in on a Torres Strait Islands planning meeting. They were talking about dams. There was an aerial photograph of a couple of hills at St Pauls, and it showed you only had to fill in one side of a hill and you would have water for all the Torres Strait. That is what I would like to see.

Going to petrol, petrol is very dear; there is no doubt about it. I have been up here getting on to 60 years. Nothing has changed. I have been in these sorts of government things before. We are meeting a lot of times about things. Seeing Torres Strait in this sort of situation in the year 2009,

it is unreal. I think action has got to be taken for all of my people up here. Nothing has been done. I know there might be a little bit of change, like hot food and all that sort of thing coming in from TI, but it is still down to the basics. It is very hard. There are changes everywhere. People change. Times change. We get into a different way of life. It is hard. I think only the people here know what is best for them—and that is it. You have got to listen to them. I know you cannot give them the lot, but you can try and make some sort of changes. That is all I can say. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you. We appreciate that.

Mr KATTER—Charlie, John also made reference to a dam. Do you have a dam site with a reasonable catchment area behind it?

Mr Coleman—Yes, that there is a catchment area there.

Mr Newie—I believe there was some planning some time ago by the former families from Kubin and from St Paul's to enclose two hills, on one side, so the potential was there. It is long-term employment in market gardening and it would at least lessen the burden on other things that are brought over from the mainland, particularly with all these changes and the amalgamation that is happening. I believe that a lot of people, with the changes and the amalgamation in different communities down south, are on award wages. But our people up here are not even on award wages, so the problem is compounded because of all these other costs. With the changes in the housing costs now, with the department coming in and setting the ceiling prices—the basic income for a household is, I believe, something like \$420 a fortnight. We talk about 'below the poverty line'; this is below below the poverty line. It is unacceptable. We are Australians and we have the same rights as every Australian, whether we are living here or living in the region of the honourable Mr Katter. Nothing has changed. We desire the same basic human rights as everyone else.

These are real issues that are affecting our people in the Torres Strait. The stores issue is compounding it. It goes back to the actual income, because everything is based on income. By the time we pay for electricity which, at \$50 a week, is \$600 over three months—whereas when we were living in Cairns we were paying \$300 for our electricity bill for three months. Here, because we buy a \$50 card, it costs up to \$600 for three months. This is ridiculous. How can someone live on these wages; how can someone be expected to pay these high prices for food and for all these other things? You are left with nothing. This issue of wages is what it all boils down to: how much people are earning.

You have a person who is working for the state government and the state government pays him for only a few hours, and the rest is topped up from the CDEP. This is ridiculous. He is not even getting the full amount of money from the state government which employs him, to claim his property. Take the schools for example. These are issues that are just unacceptable, and that is all I can say.

CHAIR—Susannah, would you like to say something?

Mrs Sailor—I would just like to comment on what Bobby is saying in respect of the housing and the rents. It might not seem relevant but a new policy will come in on 1 July. How are we

supposed to justify \$300 a week on a \$400 income? That is what the welfare reform agreement will be when it comes into effect in July. My partner and I make only \$420 each, so that is \$840. Out of that will come \$600, which will leave us with \$240. At IBIS, \$100 will get us only one bag of food. How are we supposed to survive? We have been thrown in the deep end for years, and it is like nobody is out there helping us. We need someone to help pull us out and get us up to shallow land. That is what we need. We hope that you are here sitting in front of us to help us, not just to take our voice back and shove it under the carpet. We genuinely need help.

CHAIR—The \$600 you are referring to is for—

Mrs Sailor—The welfare reform agreement policy that is coming in on 1 July. With housing in the Torres Strait, people with two-bedroom houses are going to have to pay \$190 a week. Our elders cannot even afford it. For five-bedroom homes, they are going to have to pay \$300 a week.

CHAIR—So that \$600 is going to housing.

Mrs Sailor—The department of housing. We only get \$420 a fortnight.

Mrs VALE—How much is the rent now?

Mrs Sailor—We are paying \$20 to \$30 a room now because of the high cost of living, because of the food, the freight and everything else that adds up. That is under the old council system. But, when the amalgamation comes in, it will blow everything out of proportion.

Mrs VALE—So under the old system you only paid \$20 for a room. Is that bedroom based or—

Mrs Sailor—For the bedrooms alone.

Mrs VALE—So if you had five bedrooms it would be \$100 a week.

Mrs Sailor—It is \$100 for five bedrooms. It is per house.

CHAIR—Per month or per week?

Mrs Sailor—Per week.

Mrs VALE—And now it is going to go up to?

Mrs Sailor—Now it is going to go up to \$300 per week. It is not only affecting St Paul's; it is affecting all the Torres Strait Islands.

Mrs VALE—So the rental is going to be three times as much.

Mrs Sailor—Three times as much. The reason I brought this up is that it is relevant because we will not be able to buy our food at IBIS. Like Seriako said—

Mrs VALE—So—

Mrs Sailor—Can you just let me talk, please? Like Seriako said, the Torres Strait is full of legislation. We have turtle and dugong management on St Pauls and they are collecting data—for what? To ban our food sources? That seems to be what it is leading up to.

Mr KATTER—That is what it is for.

Mrs Sailor—To ban our food sources—that is what I think it is leading up to. We have so many restrictions, in every direction we look. Who is helping us out? That is what I want to know.

Mrs VALE—The question I wanted to ask you, and I am interested—I am not trying to stop you talking; when you speak we get to think of lots of questions, which is important—is about the impost of this new rent. Who is it coming from? It is not coming from the federal government, is it?

Mrs Sailor—It is coming from the state government.

Mrs VALE—The housing minister, is it? Thank you.

CHAIR—I have one final question, going back to the IBIS store, in relation to the rat infestation. Have any of you directly spoken with Richard Bowler about this?

Mrs Sailor—I have.

CHAIR—What was his response?

Mrs Sailor—His response was: ‘We can’t do anything about it. It is out of our hands until the island manager comes to some solution to fix the rat problems in the community.’ I said to Richard, ‘The island manager doesn’t have a say in decision making. He doesn’t have that authority.’

CHAIR—How long ago was that conversation?

Mrs Sailor—Yesterday, actually.

CHAIR—You had that conversation with Richard yesterday?

Mrs Sailor—I did, yes.

Mr TURNOUR—You have an IBIS store. You obviously also come to Kubin on occasion or to Badu to shop. How do you compare IBIS to, say, the privately owned shops?

Mrs Sailor—The mark-up seems to be out of proportion. Things are cheaper at Kubin IBIS than they are at St Pauls IBIS.

Mrs Newie—There is a difference in process in IBIS itself when you go to TI, Kubin or St Pauls. I find the private shops here on Badu cheaper than the IBIS stores. Even in the shops on TI I find some of the prices cheaper than in IBIS, and the quality of the fruit and vegies on TI at IBIS is up to the creek. Everyone says See Hops is really expensive, but that is where you find the good quality fruit and vegies. That is where I get my fruit and vegies from, even if it is expensive, because the quality is just no good at IBIS.

Mrs Newie—Yes. Our vegies will come in one day and, when we go the next day to get what we need, it will not be there—it will be gone.

Mr KATTER—I just need to get a handle on this rental. Could I ask you, Susannah, what are you paying now per week for rent?

Mrs Sailor—We are paying \$100 a week on rent now for a five-bedroom house.

Mr KATTER—And you think that will go up to \$300?

Mrs Sailor—It is going up to \$300. The Torres Strait Island Regional Council have held meetings in numerous communities to let us know of this new policy. We are all worried.

Mr KATTER—Am I getting this message across to you? You fought a long legal battle over 10 years, which is known as the Mabo case. It decided not that a tribe owns this island—I am sorry if I am offending people, but I am just telling you what the law is. It did not decide that a tribe owns this island; it decided that, if you had a piece of land there that you had held continuously for a period of time, then that piece of land belonged to your family. If someone built a house on that, you owned that house. I am absolutely familiar with this law.

Mrs Sailor—Yes, but what our councillors bring back and tell us is that, once we sign a lease for the house to be put on that land, that land automatically belongs to the government. That is what we have been told. See, we are getting mixed messages.

Mr KATTER—I know a hell of a lot more—

Mrs Sailor—I know you do.

Mr KATTER—than anyone that you will ever speak to on this subject. I know it intimately, backwards. I can give you the quotations of the pages on the Mabo decision. I am very good friends with Frank Brennan. I probably see him once a month. I want to say to you that what you are being told is a great big lie. The decision was that that land belonged to you individually, not collectively. The most strongly held principle of British justice is that the fixture upon the land belongs to the person who owns the land. I had advice from the highest level when I was the minister that it did not. I tore it up and threw it in the garbage can, and we actually sued the lawyer who had given us that advice—that he could be so incredibly stupid that he could give that advice. He went out of business soon afterwards. But I am saying to you: this is absolute. Do not back off on this. This is absolute.

Mrs Sailor—I have not.

Mr KATTER—Mr Chairman, if I could just say something here. I am very worried about what I have heard in the last two days. People will start suffering seriously from malnutrition. Some of those people will actually die if this goes ahead.

CHAIR—Could I thank all of you for giving us your time.

Mrs Sailor—Thank you for giving us the consideration of being able to speak.

CHAIR—It is an absolute pleasure. The contribution you have made is very important. If there is any material that you would like to give to us in writing, then please feel free to do that. You can get details about how to do that from the staff who are here now. We do not have long left, but I am aware that there are some others in the audience who would like to make a contribution.

Dr Waria—I was born on this island in 1938 and I just recently came back again, 2004. What I am about to say is what Bob said are true words. We will be minced meat from the beginning of time to the end of time. We are still in the cement mixer going around and around and around. The problems are still the same problems. The issues are still the same issues—the housing issue, the education issue, the doctors issue.

It is still the same. Education is getting a little bit better now that these new pollies happened here. We have a new doctor up here. He is only here for 18 months then he is gone again. You heard what the other people said here and all these people here, they can back me up. The one that was last in that chair, Jason O'Brien, I roused on him last time he was here for the very same thing, and he knows that. We have been experimented on from day 1 to this day. You heard the complaint by the people from the next village.

Bob was talking about the rent. The rent they want to come in, it is a means test from the housing commission in Brisbane, and I am telling you now that it is immediate. There are four people in one house and you are all working—you make \$300, you make \$300, you make \$300—so therefore you are going to pay more; with another \$300, you are going to pay \$1,200 a week. How are you going to subsidise with all of this CDEP work here? CDEP is not a state program; the CDEP belongs to the federal government, its department. The only thing that was pretty standard was demalgamation because it brought the railway union into it. There used to be a union rep for the railway when I was working for him in Brisbane. The things that you want to hear, the people have been telling you, and what Bob said is very true. He used to play football with the Thursday Island boys in Mount Isa that could not go home straight away. I have seen Bob Katter over there.

What we want is a government that can say a true word and take a step forward with what they say, not go back or sidestep it. No! We do not want that government. Next time a government like that comes to Badu Island, I will stop them at the ocean or at the airport if one is still alive. We are getting tired. We argue for the same things over and over and over and over. The central store is affected by rats. Who is feeding those rats? We are not. We are not feeding them rats. We cannot grow chooks here for one reason: the carpet snakes and pythons come along at night time and rob your chooks so you have no eggs. That is why I called out and said, 'No, we don't grow chooks.' For the same reason, then you have to go under the cover of night

time. You lay an egg; he is eating the egg behind you. Those are the predators that we are looking for in this place. Not only this place, but around all of Torres Strait. We are frightened.

We cannot grow vegetables. Why not? Nobody wants to build a dam. We have hills and valleys here that can be dammed, but the government says, 'No, our pockets are empty.' They always send the same signal. We do not get our bloody wires crossed—no. It is your kind that gets the wires crossed not our kind. Our kind is open. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you. Is there anybody who has not yet given evidence who would like to make a contribution?

Mr T Nona—My name is Titom Nona and I live on Badu. Listening to this, I think our main concern is that our housing and food is so expensive. As people were saying before, you have \$400 to pay your rent and buy your food. That leaves you with nothing for another week. I just heard somebody say they are paying \$20 for a room, and we are paying more than \$200 a week. CDEP wages are about \$400 a week, plus there is the mothers' benefit where they get money for their kids. Also, we will be paying 25 per cent on top of what we are paying now from 1 June or 1 July.

To go back to the CDEP, where is it going to leave us? When Mr Katter said, 'Those houses are ours', does that mean we can keep on fighting to claim those houses? That is a question for Jim, probably.

The cost of living up here is very, very expensive, plus there are the costs for fuel and the supermarket. I heard what they were saying about the supermarket and freight. Still and all, if you pay for what you can buy from the supermarket and pay the rent we are paying now, that leaves you with nothing for another week. But up here in our culture we have a way of asking for things from our relatives: 'Can you spare me a cup of rice?' That is our way of living up here. What I suggest is: are we an Eden generation living up here in the Strait where nobody knows us? If they are paying \$20 a room and I am paying \$200, plus the food costs, you might be spending \$300 or \$400 a week. What does that leave you for the other week?

I listened to the two people from our shop. They were talking about freight. For everything they bring to Badu they put a percentage on top to cover their costs. But we are suffering here on our side. That leaves us no way to survive the other week through to the next payday. The cost of living up here is very high. I would certainly like to change places with somebody who can live up here for six months—then see how they feel about the way we live up here.

We were talking about planting vegies here. A couple of people died of melioidosis. It is risky. If we got money, like somebody said here before, we could buy something to work on the soil and have safety for the people. We talked about chicken. Recently we had bird flu going around. That is another threat to our community because we are at the front of the disease. We have been monitoring JE for 10 years and we still have JE on Badu. Going back to the cost of living up here, our lives are very expensive. Somebody said it before: we are humans living up here, but still we are struggling.

The other thing I want to mention is housing. Money is given to Torres Strait and Aboriginal people but it seems that somebody just keeps taking it away from us. We are not millionaires up

here; we are just working people up here. What I am about to say may offend some people. Other government bodies come up here and talk about the same thing over and over and when they go back they just forget about us. That is why I said before: are we the 'forgotten generation' up here? We need somebody to tell us that we own the houses up here on Badu or elsewhere in the strait, because people come and sit in front of us and tell us all sort of stories that go and on and on.

We will fight for our rights but the thing is that, when the government makes the decision, at the end of the day, that is it and it puts us in no place. The cost of living up here, like I said, is such that you can eat for one week and starve the other week until pay day again. Plus there is rent. \$20 a room makes a lot of difference for us. Plus there is food. What else? There is fuel. We need somebody who can tell us, 'You can pay what you can afford.' We are not earning that much and we pay so much for our lives here in the strait. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you. I saw two other hands. We are way over time at the moment and unfortunately we have a plane to catch. Darrel, did you want to say something? Can we just be as quick as possible.

Mr Albert—I was going to mention some of the things that Titom just mentioned, but I do not need to anymore. I have two questions and one comment. To add to the comments I made earlier, I think we are the only store in the Torres Strait where one of the reasons for our losses was that, whenever we had stock—milk, cheese, bread or whatever—that was approaching its use-by date, we would give it to the people rather than destroy it. They can all vouch for that, I am sure.

The people in the Torres Strait cannot survive on the CDEP income they are getting now. Is there any way the government could look at increasing the CDEP for the people up here? That is one point. Secondly, in Cooktown, Charters Towers or Georgetown, the zone allowance is the same as the zone allowance for people in the Torres Strait—and you have to fly here; you cannot drive here. Is there any way the government can look at the zone allowance for the people in the Torres Strait?

CHAIR—Neither of those are questions we can answer now, but it is good that you have raised them. In fact, the zone allowance was an issue that was raised earlier in the day.

Mr Albert—Sorry, I did not hear.

CHAIR—You were going to make a comment as well.

Mr Albert—They were the comments I made earlier about our stock. We would give the stock to the people rather than wait for the use-by date and destroy it.

CHAIR—Thank you for that. I think Rita wanted to say something.

Miss Kebisu—With regard to growing your own gardens, we have a horse problem on the island so that when you grow a garden the horses come and eat the leaves off them and trample them. That is another problem that we have here. Mr Katter said something before about having cattle on the island. How are you looking at getting the cattle here—would you barge them up?

The freight is going to be really expensive. Is that something that the government is looking at? Will the government set up an abattoir here?

Mr KATTER—Through you, Mr Chairman, it was very attractive to look at the coconuts. You have places like Nepean, which is just an island completely covered in coconut trees. It is simply a matter of harvesting them and bringing them back somewhere they could be processed. It is very cheap to process them mechanically. So it could be done without plantations—and we could actually get something in from New Guinea as well. They produce two things. Firstly, they produce diesel fuel very cheaply. Secondly, they produce coconut meal, which can comprise 30 to 40 per cent of your cattle fodder. Probably 100 head of cattle would provide a large part of the basic nutritional requirement for almost all of the Torres Strait. Cattle are absolutely fantastic from that point of view. Also, there is then work in processing out the cattle and terrific savings on bringing alternative sources of food up here. It has been pointed out to me that there are some problems with Japanese encephalitis because of the cattle pads. I know a lot about it and I do not regard that as a valid argument. When they throw it at you, I will argue that one for you if you want me to. In answer to your question, 100 head of cattle would be useful, but you would have to look at coconuts as well, which I think would be a terrific idea because of the huge cost of fuel at present up here.

CHAIR—We will have to make the next comment the last, I am afraid.

Mr L Nona—I am from Badu. You have all heard about the rent business and all the costs associated with freight and so on. There is also the matter of charter flights and the costs associated with just getting a plane up here. Some people can go to Bali for \$800 and you pay that one way just to get home. Even from Badu to Horn Island is about \$700 to \$900 a charter and that is just one way. That is just another cost that nobody has mentioned.

I would also like to speak about border protection. We have got free movement with the treaty but we need some proactive measures now to deal with all the deadly diseases, as was mentioned before, that we have got in all the villages that are included in the treaty. There needs to be some sort of management of the border protection agencies. It only takes a few diseases to come here. We are the gateway. If we are going to get those diseases here, we are going to take them over there. You protect us in keeping those diseases over the border and we will not take them over to the mainland. There are serious diseases like AIDS, typhoid, malaria and other diseases like that. There are more of them over there.

There is a report written by some doctor that outlines every single disease. It states in the report that when, as he expects, some of those diseases come over here some day they are going to wipe out Torres Strait. That concerns me because I have got kids. I just stand here talking, but this place will be the place for my kids and the younger generation. They are a going to live here. Besides food and rent and all the other basic necessities for just living and preserving our lifestyle, there is the invisible thing that goes from a mosquito into our veins or from person to person that will wipe out communities. That is a serious threat.

There is AIDS. We have already got HIV that has come across the border. It is all a matter of when it is going to become an epidemic. Health is one of the biggest concerns we have and one of our elders touched on it. We do not want those health-related problems coming across the border. As Brother Titom just said, we want somebody to go there and deal with them.

I am only a young fellow but I remember your name from a long time ago, Bob, and you seem to be a fellow who sticks your neck out there and says whatever is on your mind. You are my sort of person. You do not hold anything back. You can swear if you want to as long as you get the message across. I have worked in big departments as well and there are internal cultures there. Some people say things like, 'I am only a minister; I cannot say this in this area or that area. I will be sensitive about what I say here because I might not be popular over there'—that sort of thing. People who are popular out in our communities are people who are out there getting slogged by the media, but what they are saying is right. They say, 'We don't worry about what the media say. We are worried about what this fellow is fighting for and what he is saying.' One of the biggest things is health. We do not want those diseases in our community affecting our future. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. That is going to bring the hearing to an end. I really appreciate the contribution, as does the committee. I thank the Hansard reporters and the secretariat for all the work they have done in making sure that today happened. I will now hand over to Jim Turnour, your local member, to close the morning's proceedings for us.

Mr TURNOUR—I thank everybody for coming along today and take on board the comments I have heard. I am happy to come along here and hear from you, and get yelled at on occasion as well. I have been elected for a bit over a year and cost of living issues are something that I campaigned around and something that I have taken back to Canberra and it is great to see that Richard, Bob and Danna are here to listen directly to you. Part of my challenge is to get more people in the parliament aware of the issues up here. I think that today has been very, very useful in doing that. So thank you very much for coming along.

Briefly on the health issues, one of the things that I am trying to do and am working on is getting health facilities across the border so that we can deal with those health issues in Papua New Guinea rather than having them come to our island clinics here in the Torres Strait. I think that you will see progress on that over the next year or two. That is something I am working on as well.

Thank you very much. The information you have provided me is very useful. I do appreciate the opportunities to come around and be a regular visitor to your communities. Thank you, Wayne and your office, the island and the traditional owners, for having us again. We do appreciate the experience and knowledge that the elders have provided today as well. Thank you very much.

Mr Namoa—First of all, I just want to thank our families and members of the public for coming today. I also want to thank families across from Moa Island for coming over here and for providing input. I know that this committee will walk away from here after listening to our grave concerns here. It is very important that we bring this to their attention and it is very important that they take away our concerns and comments with them and do something about the situation.

One of the things that we brought up was that not only do we have a lot of social issues but also some of the issues we talked about mean a lot of dollars—millions and millions of dollars. Some speakers have spoken about how you keep coming here and giving us the same rhetoric all the time. I understand that you are an independent body, a parliamentary committee, but we have government people coming here all the time making us promises and we never get anything out.

What is happening is that we are losing our lives. Our lifespan already is 17 to 20 years shorter than other people's and it is not going to improve until the government recognises us as citizens of Australia, not, as somebody mentioned, people living out in the back blocks not cared about. We might be small in numbers in the Torres Strait, but look at people in Tasmania. They have got bigger numbers and maybe they have got electorates that can change the governments. We are only one electorate here in the Torres Strait but we are people too and we need you to consider that. Many times people come up and offer us all these things, but they only look at the baseline. All they look at is the dollar value and how much it is going to cost the government to put in. Understandably, the government has got to raise the funds too from somewhere, whether through taxes or other schemes, but the dollar is shaping our life. They say things like, 'Oh, that's too much. It's nice to hear about those problems that the people have there but we haven't got the money to do anything about them.'

That is what we were saying before: we see you as a ray of hope coming here to our community and listening to our concerns. We would like you to take that back, as I said earlier, and take it to the relevant people and make changes that are going to change our lives. On behalf of the community, I thank all of you for coming to our community on this occasion. Thank you very much, members, for your input and I hope that someday we can see you back here giving us some really good news. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Turnour**):

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Dr Waria closed the meeting with a prayer in English and the local language.

Committee adjourned at 1.02 pm