



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, 21 JULY 2009

BULMAN

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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

Tuesday, 21 July 2009

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

Members in attendance: Mr Laming, Ms Rea 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.

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Committee met at 5.31 pm

ACTING CHAIRMAN (Mr Laming)—I now declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry into community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, the Rembarrnga and Dalabon people, and to pay our respects to the elders, past, present and future. The committee also acknowledges the Aboriginal people who now reside in this area. The committee members are thankful to the Bulman community for receiving us to conduct this public hearing here today.

Please note that these meetings are formal proceedings of parliament. Everything you say should be factual and honest, and it can be considered a serious matter to attempt to mislead the committee. I invite you 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 remote community stores.

At the conclusion of the formal part of the hearing we will be conducting an open forum. We would welcome hearing from those of you in the audience who would like to speak on the operation of remote community stores. This hearing is open to the public and a transcript of what is said will be placed on the committee's website.

We are looking at three things. The first part is about how to get the best food, fruit and vegetables out to the stores, the cost of freight, the problems with power, and all the expenses of running the store. The second part, about the store itself, I will let Kerry describe.

Ms REA—Thank you. I too would like to pay my respects to the traditional owners and elders, past, present and future. I am the member for Bonner, which is in the south-eastern suburbs of Brisbane in Queensland, so it is a hell of a long way away from here. But it is really nice to be here with you this afternoon.

This inquiry is really important for us and we have had a lot of good discussions with people in different communities. We are really interested to know about the management of the store. I guess one thing we have learned is that a store that is owned by the community that has community involvement in the management—in how the store is run, who purchases and what you do—seems to be really important for the success of a community store. So we are really keen to hear how you, leaders in this community, work with the managers of your store to make it a success. Thank you.

Mrs VALE—Ladies and gentlemen, I am the federal member for Hughes, which is in southern Sydney. Hughes takes in the Sutherland and Liverpool local government areas. It is very close to Botany Bay. The local traditional people from my area are the Ngunawal and Gundungarra people. They are saltwater people. But what we are trying to have a look at, with the government's interest in your community stores, is to make sure that all the people of the community—most particularly the children—have access to fresh fruit and vegetables, so that they get the best nutrition they can have, wholesome food, and hopefully grow into more improved and healthier human beings.

So that is why we are here today: to have a look at how your store is providing for you, and to make sure that your fresh fruit and vegetables are accessible. But also we would like to hear from the mothers. It is one thing to have fresh fruit and vegetables and good food available in the store, but are you able to prepare your food for your families? So we would like to hear from some of the mothers about some of the challenges that they have. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR—We will now hear from witnesses in the open forum part of our hearing.

[5.34 pm]

AITKEN, Mr Peter, Manager, Outback Stores

AITKEN, Ms Gayleen, Manager, Outback Stores

CHIKKAPA, Mrs Maggie, Private capacity

MURRAY, Mr Lazarus, Community Councillor, Roper Gulf Shire Council

PASCOE, Ms Symone, Private capacity

PUCCETTI, Mr Mike, Principal, Bulman School

STEVENS, Mr Michael, Vice President, Store Committee

Mr Stevens—When Outback Stores first started here, we had nothing in this store—no food; no fruit and veg. The shop was run down. Everyone chipped in when they asked for Outback Stores to come and help, and now we have a store with fruit and veg and proper food. We would not want it any other way now, because we have constantly had fruit and veg since they started. There are plenty of food supplies coming in. Two years ago our store was run-down and broke; it had nothing. We live like kings out here now, compared to the way we used to live.

Mr Murray—I am the community leader here. I have got several other caps in the community, with the Northern Land Council and with the shire itself. One thing that the community is concerned about is the price range in the Outback Stores right across the region. I think it just went up a bit. Someone else might have a comment on that.

Ms REA—Do you know why those prices are so high? Do you know what the biggest factor is?

Mr Stevens—Freight.

Ms Aitken—You will probably find that next week when you come into the store to do your shopping that there will be a number of prices that have gone this way rather than that way. Outback Stores have just struck a deal with our carrier and, because of that, we are able to drop some of the prices on some of our goods. Some of them will be largely noticeable, some of them will be slightly noticeable, but it is happening.

Ms REA—Does somebody want to tell us a little bit about how the store committee works and how you work with the managers? Is there someone on the store committee who can tell us?

Mrs Chikkapa—I can talk about the shop. The shop is a little bit dear. We should have lower prices, a little bit, for everything. Sometimes I do not have my pension card or key card. I am an old lady and I cannot find more money. Prices should go right down now. We need a lot of prices to go down for old people. We need to save all the time until we get another payment for old

people. Also, all the young people and the workers—everybody. One time I made a mistake. I wanted to buy a knife. I thought it must be \$30 or \$40 but it cost \$80. I was going to get a butcher's knife to cook lunch or tea, but it cost \$80 and I did not buy it. I am still waiting for that price to go down and then maybe I can get one.

Brown sugar in a little packet cost \$3. White sugar in a little packet again might have cost somewhere around \$4 or \$5. Toilet rolls for one week, it might have been six rolls in there or now 12, costs \$7. All those prices, I know, are really high. Why can't they bring down those prices for us, because this is an Aboriginal community shop for us—it is not a European shop now; it is a community shop for us. We have got to save up any leftover money any time we go to Barunga so we can just go and buy them.

ACTING CHAIR—Does anybody want to tell us about the kind of food they want to see a bit cheaper in the store. Which kind of food do you find the most expensive for family? Is it the meat, the fruit or the vegetables.

Mrs Chikkapa—It is more dear all the meat. A big chicken costs \$12, \$14, \$15 or \$16. Chicken roll and everything is more dear. I have looked a lot of times. I asked the young fella working in the shop. I asked him about all those prices. It is more dear. Sometimes I keep my money back and save it for another time. When I really run out, then I go buy them. When I really run out of money and I have nothing to buy then I sit around hungry like that until my other payment comes, my pension.

Mrs VALE—Maggie, when you do get your food are you able to prepare it at home or do you cook outside? Do you cook in a big pot or do you cook in a frypan.

Mrs Chikkapa—It is a little one like a saucepan. I have my little grandkids too—two of my little grandkids. They eat lots. They can eat and eat those two little ones. But I cannot save it too long the meat. I have to make a big soup for those two little ones and for one big one, a big boy. I think he 16 or 17. So I make a big pot and all of the meat goes in there.

Mrs VALE—And do you do that very often? Are you able to make food in a big pot very often?

Mrs Chikkapa—Yes, and sometimes when I really run out of food—sugar or something, or tobacco too—I go around to my nephew, Dalywaters. Every time I go round there he gives me something for eating. My two granddaughters also always given me something. They have got a lot of love for me when I run out of everything they give it to me. They help me, my grandchildren, because they know it is clear here at this shop.

Ms REA—I would like to ask some of the younger mothers here, what happens at the school? Do you have cooking or fruit and veg at morning tea? Is there anything that the kids do through the school that encourages eating better food? Some schools we have spoken to do cooking and things.

Ms Pascoe—The women's centre provides for the kids. I think they get recess and lunch.

ACTING CHAIR—How many of the kids have breakfast before they come to school?

Ms Pascoe—All of them. They can get breakfast at the women's centre too.

Ms REA—So the women's centre does breakfast, recess and lunch.

Ms Pascoe—Yes, but some parents like to make their kids their own breakfast.

ACTING CHAIR—What is the common breakfast up here in Gulin Gulin for the kids?

Ms Pascoe—Cereals, like Weet-Bix and Coco Pops, oats, fruit, toast and eggs.

ACTING CHAIR—And they make that with milk. Do most houses have a fridge here?

Ms Pascoe—I think so, yes.

ACTING CHAIR—So they are okay for the milk?

Ms Pascoe—Yes.

Ms Aitken—There are also occasions where we have fruit left over that is still good fruit and we have a fresh lot coming in. I quite often will take that up to the school and donate it to the school. It does not happen all the time, but we quite often give fruit out after school if we know they have been to school. I just thought I would mention that.

Ms REA—How often you get a fruit and veg delivery?

Ms Aitken—At the moment it is coming in once a fortnight, but if we need fresh fruit or veg it is arranged to come in earlier for us.

Mrs VALE—Are there any community gardens here where people might grow their own vegetables—potatoes or cabbages perhaps? Is there any tradition in this community of having your own community gardens? As the community leader, are there any community gardens?

Mr Murray—We can talk about community gardens and stores. I have one other thing to say. Auntie was discussing prices earlier. The intervention and income management is the reason why some of the locals were concerned with the prices going higher. Income management had come into place. That is one of the reasons I think many people were finding it hard to shop in the local community store, because of the income management. That was one of the main issues. We all know about the intervention. It put a big scar right across the Territory—for all Indigenous people right across the country. Everyone knows all about it.

Going back to the question of having fresh fruit and veg, it all goes back to employment and economic development. That is where the breakdown is with the federal government and the community right across the Territory.

Ms REA—What has happened with CDEP here?

Mr Murray—I am pretty sure you know already. As of 1 July it came under the umbrella of income management. The current ones under CDEP are not going to be income managed. The ones that start off under the new CDEP program are going to be income managed, which makes it more difficult. In 2011, CDEP is going to cease right across the Territory.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you, Lazarus.

Mr Murray—One other very important question that I was going to raise—I do not know if anyone else knows about this. Where does this community Gulin Gulin store stand with Outback Stores? Is it still independent or is it still under the umbrella of Outback Stores? What is going to happen? As a community takes over in the next decade or so, are we still going to be under that umbrella? That is very important question.

Ms REA—That is why we are doing this inquiry—to work out the best way forward for the long-term management of community stores. How many people are employed in this community under CDEP? How many CDEP workers are there—at the school, for example?

Mr Murray—Roughly about 10 or 12. I think you will find half of the community are under contracts. Some are provided jobs by the local shire.

Mr Aitken—Just to clarify Lazarus's query about the Outback Stores umbrella and the management plan, to the best of our knowledge Outback Stores is here to manage the store for you, for the community. It is our intention to train local Indigenous staff up to a level where they have good retail practices sufficient to manage their own store. We have already made some really serious inroads in that direction with our local staff here at the moment. We are very happy with the progress they have made. They have made excellent progress so Gayleen and I can personally see that within the next period of time—I am talking about probably a year or so—the level of training will be high enough for them to be able to consider taking over a more senior management role in the store. Our personal plan is to be here for three years. After that we want to be confident enough to be able to leave the community knowing that they can manage their own store. That is the goal.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you, Peter. Part of the inquiry, Lazarus, is to find a plan for after three years—for what works best in the store. Would you like to say anything else or to make a final comment?

Mr Murray—Going back to that comment of the store manager, I have got no queries about that store. We are quite happy with some of the supplies that we are getting in the store. It is very good. Everyone is quite happy over that store, so far. It is pretty good. What else was I going to say?

ACTING CHAIR—The future plan for the store?

Mr Murray—Yes, about getting a supermarket here, maybe. Those sorts of bigger plans, you know. We might look at something different—maybe a new store.

Mrs VALE—Lazarus, there was something I wanted to explain to you. I asked questions about whether there were any community gardens. There have been some communities that we

have visited that have community gardens, and they have their own chickens too. I was just trying to understand what nutrition is available to the children of your community. That was an important question. Some communities have traditional gardens and some have started them up again. Sometimes it is good experience for young people to learn about gardening. They can actually start a little business where they can provide fresh fruit and vegies to the store. Thank you.

Mr Puccetti—I am the school principal here at Bulman. I just want to say that I have been here since January and as far as I can see the store is very well managed. I have been very appreciative of Peter's and Gayleen's assistance to the school in promoting nutrition with the students. They tried to organise Vegie Man to come out to the school. We did not actually get Vegie Man but we got about eight boxes of fresh fruit, which we distributed to the kids. That was fantastic in getting the message across to the kids.

Gayleen has had heaps and heaps of colouring in competitions and things like that to promote the kids eating good food. There have been barbecues as well. I like this store because it seems to be the community hub. Everyone meets there at the shop. The shop was instrumental, as well, in raising some money for the victims of the horrible bushfires in Victoria. They had a barbecue organised there and it was really good to see community support—people got together in the community and everyone worked together. I think the shop is doing very well.

There have been some ideas about trying to get the shop closer to the road. I think that would be a great idea, because I have been speaking to a lot of tourists along the road and they did not even know that a shop existed in Bulman because it is just not evident, where it is located. I know that all the community use the shop because they know where it is but I think they could probably get a lot more revenue for the community by having the shop along the road. It does not seem as if the Mainoru store is working anymore, so this would be a fantastic opportunity during the dry season when there are heaps of tourists.

Ms REA—What is the turnover for the shop?

Mr Aitken—At the moment the budgeted turnover for this store is around \$40,000 a week. We are meeting the budget nearly every week. Some weeks, when it is a pay week, we go quite a long way over budget. The store has been turned around from, as Michael Stevens said, an entity that was actually in liquidation. All we have done in the store is apply good retail practices.

ACTING CHAIR—As there are no other comments we will close the meeting. To all the senior ladies and all the senior men, thank you. I thank everyone from the store and the school as well. We will still have some comments afterwards, but we have to stop the recording here. I thank everyone for having us here this afternoon.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Rea**):

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

Committee adjourned at 5.56 pm