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**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

Reference: Indigenous employment

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MANINGRIDA

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

Monday, 17 July 2006

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

Members in attendance: Mr Slipper, Mr Snowdon, Mrs Vale and Mr Wakelin

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

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

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

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

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Committee met at 12.45 pm

DANAJA, Mr Peter, Secretary, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation

DAVIES, Mr Christopher Scott, Senior Project Officer, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation

GEINBARABA, Mr Morris, Employment Officer, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation

MACHBIRRBIRR, Mr Gordon, Chairman, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation

MUNRO, Mr Ian Ross, Chief Executive Officer, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation

ROSTRON, Mr Victor, Ranger, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation

RYAN, Mr Matthew, Ranger, Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation

DJORDILA, Mr Charlie, Chairperson, Maningrida Jobs, Education and Training Centre

CHAIR (Mr Wakelin)—Welcome. I declare open today's public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs at Maningrida. We are inquiring into the positive examples of Indigenous employment around Australia, and we are drawing towards the close of our hearings. This will be our last field visit, so we are indeed honoured to be here at Maningrida. Thank you for your hospitality and your welcome here today. Do any of you, particularly the representatives of the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Ryan—I am an executive member of the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation.

Mr Djordila—I am Chairperson of the Maningrida Jobs, Education and Training Centre, MJET, as well as a council member and lecturer.

CHAIR—I invite you to make an opening statement.

Mr Munro—I welcome the committee to the community. This statement supplements the corporation's submission, which is before the committee. The principal intent of Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation today is to present the members of the committee with some insight into the way in which we employ Aboriginal people in the Maningrida community and in the 32 outstations in the region. The Community Development Employment Project is central to our employment model. We have been delivering CDEP for 17 years. We currently have some 600 participants. BAC operates 20 business enterprises in the community. The successful incubation of the local economy stems from conventional consumer demand, coupled with accessible employment.

BAC is based in a very remote location and the job market is small. Aboriginal people affiliate with their country to the degree that there is no possibility of significant mobilisation in search of jobs outside the region. The corporation understands that our client group are fiercely retentive of their culture and that this frequently precludes conventional engagement with the workforce.

Out-station residents qualify for CDEP by undertaking a range of standard activities, but their more creative undertakings are worthy of specific mention. Much has been written about the hybrid economy and the material value that can be imputed to traditional activity. Now there are visionary developments in carbon trading, coastal surveillance, fire management and a raft of ecoservices, all of which are underwritten by CDEP to some extent and which provide tangible national benefits.

Presence on country conserves language and culture, and the current government support for the preservation and documentation of Indigenous ecological knowledge respects this. Coupled with CDEP, out-station residency provides economic and social outcomes which are beyond contestability. European notions of work can sit comfortably with Indigenous livelihood aspirations in remote locations. A shift in thinking is needed to enable non-Aboriginal Australians to accept that Indigenous productivity need not be measured in the same way as their own. Properly delivered, CDEP is work, not welfare. It is commonly an alternative to unemployment.

A great strength of CDEP is the devolution of funding to regional organisations. This allows local knowledge, organisational stability and Aboriginal governance to have a strong guiding hand in policy, direction and operation. The acceptance of the need for flexibility is a cornerstone of our approach to realistic CDEP delivery. Prescriptive policies tend to result in resentment, conflict and poor outcomes. Communities differ, and no 'one size fits all' policy has any chance of success. Acceptance that the community development theme of CDEP is of equal importance as the employment theme is critical.

Current threats to CDEP are of great concern. The reality is that remote Aboriginal communities will be contingent on state support for some considerable time. There is little marginal cost to government in funding CDEP and it has been proven to operate successfully in many communities. It behoves governments to discover the elements that distinguish successful CDEPs and draw on their experience to inspire the less successful.

There is no question that CDEP plays a significant role in nation building in remote Aboriginal Australia. Housing and roads are two areas of obvious achievement in the construction of national infrastructure. The development of regional economies can be stimulated by entrepreneurial application of CDEP, as in our case, and this can result in considerable savings to government in the delivery of services. It is, or should be, an acceptable reality that CDEP underwrites a range of service delivery.

Certainly, there is much work to be done on the standards of education and health care, particularly for people in the bush. Total engagement by the workforce in unsubsidised employment is not a reality in the foreseeable future. Access to business development funding is virtually impossible. Job outcomes from training and adult education activities are elusive. BAC have been effective in creating employment, elevating self-esteem, relieving pressure on cultural erosion, creating community and family stability, delivering government and non-government services, providing sustainable futures for our client group and delivering tangible social and economic results.

The Aboriginal homelands inquiry, undertaken by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, presented its report in 1987. The

Blanchard report, as it is commonly known, made a number of key recommendations which have been a guiding hand for BAC for almost two decades. The report acknowledged the spiritual and economic significance of country, and accepted that value could be derived from occupation of country by the owners. The report accurately predicted that support for out-stations would not be greatly expensive, compared to the social benefits likely to accrue.

The report noted the full-time occupation of Aboriginal people in productive activity in what would now be described as the hybrid economy. The report quoted the 1983 review of CDEP, concluding that CDEP had brought considerable social benefits, had found wide Aboriginal acceptance and that it should be continued and expanded. Blanchard introduced the importance of flexibility in CDEP delivery. The committee also accurately predicted the important contribution of art production to Aboriginal livelihoods and to the national economy. Maningrida Arts and Culture is now one of Australia's leading art centres, representing 700 artists, with a turnover of \$2 million last year. CDEP and the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation have both come a long way since the release of the Blanchard report. Much remains to be done, but the BAC employment model should provide hope for Aboriginal people and the government alike.

CHAIR—Thank you. Does anyone else want to say anything at this stage?

Mr Djordila—I would like to talk about a couple of areas that Ian has talked about. Maningrida should have a globalisation arena. Maningrida needs to have an area where we can work together to bring all different language groups together, and it is a very hard thing to do. But if Maningrida is to manage its own affairs and if we are to make decisions for ourselves, we must come together as a group. As individual language groups, it does not work. But, in coming together and forming alliances with each other, we can create something. Then we can develop a level of understanding with government agencies, like the education departments, such as DEST or DEWR. We can try to work out ways of sharing what the Northern Territory is all about, what the Northern Territory can offer and what we as a community can offer to a larger area.

CHAIR—Is there anything further? Please feel free to make a statement. It is fairly informal and fairly relaxed.

Mr Danaja—Sorry, we are just talking about it.

CHAIR—No, that is fine. I am sorry I cannot respond in your language.

Mr Djordila—We will talk in our language first and then one of us can interpret for you.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mr Djordila—We were talking about what is happening within this community. It must come from us. As members of this community where we grew up, where we bear our children, we belong. We want to make this community beneficial to members of this community as well as contributing something that the Northern Territory can prosper from as well.

CHAIR—Is there anything else?

Mr Danaja—Maningrida has probably got—how many?—14 different language groups here?

Mr Munro—Sixteen.

Mr Danaja—That is right. About 16 different languages are spoken here. The local people here are known as Kunbidji people. They are the TOs. Therefore, with anything that we need to do we have to see them first before any progress can take place. They have to be happy with the things that we try to do and achieve. There is another group of people who live here. Going back to the history of how Maningrida was established, people heard about the building of a training place up in Maningrida, so people came from all tribal groups. So it is about cultural diversity here. There are all different kinds of language groups. Everybody has their own unique style of cultural rites through dancing and so forth. But, like Charlie said, we have become one voice. No offence, ladies and gentlemen, but we elected you to parliament; therefore, you have to listen to our voice. That is what you are there for. No offence, but it is a clear message. If you do not understand what we are trying to do, we will go to another party. Do you know what I mean?

CHAIR—Yes. That is democracy.

Mr Danaja—That is democracy. There is always that option.

CHAIR—Yes, that is exactly right.

Mr SNOWDON—You were going to talk about the expectation of what the government expects of Bawinanga. You talked about your visit in town to DEWR. Could you explain about that?

Mr Munro—CDEP is central to employment in this community, as it is in many Aboriginal communities. CDEP was formerly a program under the management of ATSIC. The demise of ATSIC saw it handed to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. We feel that it was not through merit that they gained that program but rather by default.

For all the faults and failings of ATSIC, we always felt we were on the same side. From the very beginning, we were forced into an adversarial position with DEWR, and that has now become entrenched. We feel that DEWR are profoundly ignorant of Aboriginal people and communities. We feel that they have a very poor understanding of CDEP. We feel that they have an unrealistic expectation of Aboriginal communities' capacity to create unsubsidised employment. We feel that their support for successful CDEPs is lacking. We feel that their negotiation powers and processes are deficient. Our experience with them has been almost exclusively negative.

Mr SLIPPER—In other words, they are doing a great job!

CHAIR—Perhaps it would be useful to define the specifics.

Mr Machbirr—It is not really a great job we are doing, but the services we are providing to Indigenous people are the services that satisfy our people. Some of them are traditional owners; later on, I will talk about their homeland out-stations. People feel that our movement, our corporation, is there to support the Indigenous people, and it was established and incorporated for them; and some of them are traditional owners.

Our story is that the corporation is providing services and trying to develop culturally appropriate services where elders need to receive them. The bottom line is that when we come to a department and we request funding to support those people—to support an elder or a traditional owner—sometimes we have difficulties. One of the things that we often get from a department is a letter that says, ‘You have to wait X long’. And we can talk and argue with you through letters, but our traditional men expect us to provide that service for them. We want to provide that service to an elder sitting at an out-station. With that funding, we are going to try to get central services like water, a pump, solar power and anything that that man and his family need out there to survive.

CHAIR—And you are having to say no.

Mr Machbirrbirr—Sometimes they say yes; sometimes they say, ‘Wait till we talk to that other fellow’ or ‘You talk to that other man.’ The word goes around that you have to talk to this person, and I say: ‘Hold on—that bloke told us to talk to you. You have to talk to us.’ And then he might say, ‘No; you talk to that other bloke.’ This corporation is not here to play hide and seek; we are here to provide what the Indigenous people—human people, Australian people—need to have provided.

CHAIR—There is a frustration with that.

Mr Munro—There is a key issue involving DEWR, and it is their preoccupation with what they call ‘real jobs’. They not only define CDEP as a job, they also define it as welfare, which is profoundly insulting to people who are working and receiving CDEP payments. Since the inception of CDEP here in 1989, Aboriginal people have been involved in a mutual obligation program. They remain involved in CDEP. The fixation on ‘real jobs’ underpins a very poor understanding of larger scale employment on Aboriginal communities.

Currently, we have approximately 600 CDEP participants. Half of those people work more or less in full-time jobs and receive a component of their pay as what we refer to as ‘top-up’, a ubiquitous phrase throughout CDEP Aboriginal Australia. That top-up is derived from either the profits or the grant funding of the organisation or the department that they work for. Top-up basically pays a higher rate of pay and a greater number of hours per day of work than does standard CDEP.

We feel that a combination of CDEP and top-up provides the maximum benefit to the largest number of working people in the community. This runs counter to DEWR’s philosophy, which says that fewer people should be receiving top-up and more people should be given what they call ‘real jobs’. Real jobs can only be funded by taking top-up away from CDEP participants and turning it into full-time salary or wages for a select few. We feel that this discriminates against the aspirations of the members of the organisation who want the maximum number of people to have access to jobs at any given time.

The profits of our organisation pay for a number of things. They pay for the funding shortfall in the delivery of CDEP, which has been over \$100,000 a year over the past two years. They pay for the non-funded costs of the organisation—things like insurance overruns and unfunded salaries. They pay the top-up for hundreds of people who receive additional wages on top of their standard CDEP payments. The profits from our business enterprises also create the seed

money that the corporation needs to develop new enterprises. We have about 20 business enterprises at the moment. Not all of them are profitable, but fortunately most are. They provide us with this elusive capital that Aboriginal communities and organisations like ours need to start new businesses.

We have been frustrated by Indigenous Business Australia, whose job it is to provide business funding to this community and to all Aboriginal communities and organisations. I will illustrate that with an example. You saw this morning our largest profit-making business, the BAC Tucker Run, which is a supermarket. We applied to Indigenous Business Australia to build a new building to house that existing business. Indigenous Business Australia imposed five funding conditions on us. They were as follows.

The first condition was that we had secure land tenure on the land occupied by that business. We effectively have that through the lease arrangements that we have negotiated with the Northern Land Council and the traditional land owners. The second condition was a requirement to produce engineered architect's drawings in advance. That would have cost over \$200,000 for the scale of the project. That was unfunded at that stage. Thirdly, they required 100 per cent security over the loan funds in non ATSI grant funded assets. Fourthly, they required a complex business plan that we were expected to pay for to prove the viability of the business. Bear in mind that this is an existing business that we were merely seeking to rehouse in larger, airconditioned premises. It does not take a great mind to understand that minimal business planning is required for that. The fifth imposition was that they required the new business—the new Tucker Run—to be separately incorporated from the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, which effectively meant that we could have lost control not only of the business but also of the profit stream from it.

It took about 12 months of negotiation to get to that stage. We then went to our bank, which gave us the money overnight. I think that says a lot about what is unhealthy in business funding for Aboriginal organisations like ours. If we struggle—if a big, prosperous organisation like Bawinanga struggles—what is it like for small organisations in smaller remote communities?

CHAIR—I want to give maximum time on the DEWR issue and Indigenous Business Australia. I think that is important. But what I would like to do now is try to marry that up with your submission. Can we do that for about five or 10 minutes? I think that is important, because you have made some very good points in the submission. If we can deal with that first, I will then open it up to all members and have a free-for-all discussion. We will come to DEWR and the challenges of CDEP and real jobs. I am not enough of an expert to know what is happening, what they are doing and what they are trying to do. It might be useful and it might link in to what I am about to say. It may offer a model which may be more appropriate, because that is our role. Our role is to try to decipher all of this and come up with some recommendations which may suggest ways to the government of the day, to DEWR or to whoever else some alternatives to the way they are doing business. Clearly you are not happy with the way they are doing business at the moment.

I will address the last five points in your submission and then come back to the other stuff. You have laid it on the table, it is 14 months on and you have gone through this fairly tortuous negotiation with DEWR and Indigenous Business Australia et cetera. I go to the first point:

1. remove access to the unemployment benefit.

That has been around for a little while, and it has been quite contentious. I can understand why you would say this. Point No. 1 continues:

Simultaneous operation of CDEP and UB destabilises CDEP.

Can you address that?

Mr Munro—That submission is, as you said, 14 months old, and it is something of a work in progress. The point that we were making about CDEP has been reinforced by DEWR's policy of real jobs. If you are paying CDEP at a rate equivalent to unemployment benefits, there is very little incentive for people to participate in the work activities that CDEP affords. If you pay, as we do, CDEP at a higher rate for a greater number of hours, there clearly is an incentive. But what DEWR is proposing is the creation of real jobs. That robs the organisation of the ability to pay more hours at a higher rate of pay and reduces the pay of CDEP participants who are working now at the UB rate, which removes the appeal of CDEP.

CHAIR—This issue has been around for 15 years. I have heard the ebb and flow of suggestions about real jobs and a top-up not being part of that and how that does not allow for flexibility. Clearly, up until now, you have had that flexibility.

Mr Munro—Flexibility is the core component of the success of CDEP. In a remote community like this, each and every Aboriginal person has cultural obligations that they cannot ignore. When they will be taken out of the workforce is unpredictable, and sometimes it is for long periods of time. The prescriptions of an enterprise bargaining agreement are not always able to encompass that obligation.

CHAIR—You might remind me of the correct number, but I think it is 500-odd on CDEP and roughly 400 on UB.

Mr Munro—Currently, there are 600 in the community on each one.

CHAIR—Point 2 states:

... provide business funding linked by formula to CDEP, in the same way that oncosts are linked by formula.

I think that is a really novel and interesting concept.

Mr Munro—It is all borne of our frustrations. This organisation has been in existence since 1979. It has been an incorporated body since 1979. Up until a month ago, we had succeeded in that 25-year passage of time with only one application for Indigenous business funding. That was a \$20,000 grant for a feasibility study for a project that did not proceed because it proved not to be feasible. That is one successful application in 25 years. As I said, borne out of frustration, we are suggesting that there is an ocean of money out there for Indigenous business. Indigenous business funding is there; it is accessing it that is difficult. It should be possible for the government to develop a scheme that makes that money available to each and every community that has an idea and to be prepared to take some risks.

A very simple way of establishing that scheme in the first instance would be to do it by formula. You could do it by numbers of CDEP participants or overall populations. In places where businesses are likely to succeed, it makes good economic sense to target the ideas that people come up with for businesses. There are many ideas for things that will undoubtedly work; they just require capital.

CHAIR—You will recall our little discussion earlier about business failures and someone mentioning Enron et cetera. In other words, your submission talks about accepting failure as par for the course—that is, the important thing is to accept risk as part of the deal.

Mr Munro—Absolutely. And that is what the current Indigenous business funding body is not doing.

CHAIR—No. 3—and I will be as quick as I can—is:

Vast sums are currently wasted by the training matrix.

Can we get a glimpse of that?

Mr Munro—Charlie probably knows more about this than I do. He is a lecturer in the Maningrida JET organisation. But what I can say, to prefix Charlie's undoubtedly insightful remarks, is that there have been various attacks on adult education in Aboriginal communities over the years, to the point where at one stage the organisation that Charlie works for and helped to set up had to be established or there would have been no adult education in the community of Maningrida. JET is a separately incorporated Aboriginal organisation in its own right that has been successfully delivering adult education to this community since 1991, when it was established. However, I feel that, given the suboptimal outcomes that are produced routinely by schools in remote Aboriginal communities, the hope for people who are already graduates lies in training and adult education, and that requires much greater financial support than it is currently receiving.

Mr Djordila—Maningrida JET Centre is involved in creating what is now commonly being called capacity building. To me, this capacity building goes back to the time when our leaders, who are long gone now, spoke readily about Maningrida and continuing to maintain our culture and language. But now what Maningrida JET Centre is all about is keeping and maintaining that culture in two-way education. We are talking about having a real understanding of what education is all about in that two-world concept.

For example, very soon—probably in September or October—we will be setting up adult governance training as well as youth wellbeing governance training, where adults will be participating in learning about how we can come together, learning about making decisions together as a group, developing something for our young people. Then members from the adult governance training can go and talk to the youth governance training participants as well. In this way the young people will be the ones carrying on when we go. What JET is trying to do is head up that foundation so that it will continue into the next millennium for our young people.

Mr Danaja—The beauty of this JET centre is that, if I want to become a welder, it is no use me flying all the way to Darwin to learn something up there. If I have a certain amount of

business then, like Ian said, I have a responsibility to my own people. Therefore, when we have a JET centre here, it is really good for us. That way we are home, safe and secure. We know that we can go in and train, and not only that but in a workplace like this now we can learn about how to run the business, how to provide service to our people. It is through this training that we can actually do this. Of course, the JET centre has done a very good job over the last couple of years. Most of them have certificates through the centre, but, as Ian will point out—and I want to point this out—then again, there are no real jobs out here. It is a small community. Once you have a certificate in your hand, that is it. I do not know where you are going to get a job. The only way you are going to get work is to go out to another community or in town. Some might get a job that way. But in a work scenario like this, you cannot get a job here. It is so hard here.

Mr Ryan—I will give you an example. As rangers, we have done all this training in land management science. We have all these certificates, but we are not being recognised for what we have done. We have completed all these courses. We graduate in town and come back with a certificate and big smiles on our faces, but then we go back to square one again. Where do we start? What is the use of having this training when there are no jobs in front of you? There should be something set up. I suppose, like Charlie said, everyone should work together and try to develop something. I suppose we need an aim for our kids so that they know where they are going to be headed.

CHAIR—Connected to it.

Mr Ryan—Yes.

Mr SNOWDON—I will just ask one question to provide a point of comparison. If you were working for the Conservation Commission or national parks, how would the conditions be different?

Mr Ryan—I think it is just about incentives. There should be something there for the kids.

Mr SNOWDON—If you were working for NT parks, how much money would you earn? Would you earn a wage?

Mr Ryan—It depends on where the kids want to go. There should be something there for what they want to do. If there is a \$40,000 job, they will take it. At the moment most of the blokes here are on CDEP and, I suppose, back to square one.

Mr SNOWDON—That is my point, though; I am trying to get—

Mr Danaja—If I go and work in another community, that knowledge flows over to that community. So it is much better if I learn something from the JET Centre and stay within my own community and teach the young ones what I have learnt. It is a waste of learning otherwise.

Mr Ryan—When they go into town a lot of really young people tend to get distracted by other things. But if you have it here in the community and they are here doing their training, they do not get distracted and they concentrate much better.

CHAIR—Better value.

Mr Danaja—It is like we are role models. We want to be role models for our community.

CHAIR—That is excellent; that is fine. Can we come back to that in a little while? I have two more things I want to go through and then we can all come in. The three-tier pay scale is a discretionary option. We have talked about it. Maybe we can put a little bit more on the record. I think the way you have adapted CDEP since 1989 and the way it has developed has shown its flexibility and the adaptability. I do not say that in 1989 it was like it is now, but it has developed since then. Can we talk about the three-tier pay scale and how you built the incentives in—how you started to give the appropriate incentives and the direction? Is that fair?

Mr Munro—Yes. it is well outlined in the submission that we put in 14 months ago. Basically, people who choose to reside on out-stations will receive basic CDEP payments for the work that they do there and for residing. I think they do 36 hours of work a fortnight at \$12.90. People who live in Maningrida and who for a short time are not working will forgo approximately 20 hours a week of pay, and that saving we use to pay a higher rate of pay to the third category of people, who are the people who do work here in Maningrida. We add \$2 an hour to their hourly pay rate. That is then supplemented further by the so-called top-up that we spoke about earlier, which is generated either from grant funds or from the operational profits of individual enterprises.

Mr SNOWDON—No work, no pay.

Mr Munro—The no work, no pay rule is applied and after two weeks people lose their CDEP benefits if they are not working.

CHAIR—Does anyone want to add any more to that? Is that about it? That is about how it is going. Are there any real concerns or new developments?

Mr Munro—The essence of that is that it does instantly provide an incentive over and above unemployment benefits, which makes UB less appealing, which must be a good thing.

Mr Danaja—I used to work as the CDEP manager. That rule still applies. If, for example, a person had not come for a period of time we would get him off the CDEP. The rule is that the CDEP position—

Mr Davies—We keep the position. We replace him with—

Mr Danaja—Someone else. If we do not have anyone up there, we lose that position.

Mr Davies—I have had a lot to do with CDEP in the last two years since I have been back in Maningrida. I was the CDEP payroll officer and had a fair bit to do with the CDEP managers program. Ian was talking earlier about the three-tier pay structure. The people who are not participating in any work for that first fortnight of pay get 20 hours out of the CDEP at the lower rate of pay, at the standard rate of CDEP. If, after that, they are still not working then their pay will be completely stopped and they will be given another two weeks to front up to work. If they do not then their CDEP payment will be terminated.

Mr SNOWDON—What is the standard rate?

Mr Davies—I do not know the latest rate because I have not looked at it this year, but it is about \$12.90 per hour. With normal CDEP, you get 36 hours per fortnight at \$12.90 an hour.

Mr SNOWDON—If you are not on the normal CDEP, you get 20 hours a fortnight at \$12.90?

Mr Davies—Yes.

CHAIR—Is there anything else you would like to add?

Mr Davies—No.

CHAIR—No doubt we may be drawing on you in a little while. Peter, I am sorry to have interrupted you.

Mr SLIPPER—That is all right. You mentioned that you have about 50 per cent of people on CDEP and 50 per cent on unemployment benefit. Within the community, is there a sense of treating those people who decline to be on CDEP as somehow not pulling their weight in the community? Is there a sense of looking down on someone who is basically just taking sit-down money, whereas looking upon CDEP participants as making a positive contribution to the benefit of the community?

Mr Danaja—Those guys who are on UB are not making any contribution to the community, but those guys who are on CDEP are making a very big difference with their contribution to the community. I see CDEP as a tool. When I say ‘tool’, I am talking about a lot of things such as infrastructure set up through the CDEP program. Ian was talking about new ideas that have come forward. We use CDEP as a base to establish trials to see whether or not the effort will work. CDEP is very important to us.

Mr SLIPPER—Do all the CDEP participants here who turn up and actually work receive the top-up money that you mentioned?

Mr Munro—In town, yes.

Mr Danaja—Yes.

Mr SLIPPER—So you are saying that your dispute with DEWR would mean that the top-up money you pay, between the base rate of CDEP and what they actually get, would be given to a fewer number of people who would be receiving a full-time wage without any employment subsidy?

Mr Munro—Yes.

Mr SLIPPER—Therefore, were DEWR’s wish list to become a reality, how many people would be able to be employed by the corporation on full unsubsidised wages compared with the number of people on CDEP with top-up?

Mr Munro—They have imposed on us an employment key performance indicator of 60 exits from CDEP in the 2006-07 financial year. At \$50,000 per position, that is \$3 million, which means it is absolutely unobtainable.

Mr SLIPPER—What amount of money are you paying by way of top-up now?

Mr Munro—Presently, between \$1 million and \$2 million, I would imagine.

Mr Davies—Yes, I would believe so.

Mr SLIPPER—For 600 recipients?

Mr Munro—Yes, in total. You would be looking at a maximum of 40 exits from CDEP, even if you reduced all of the top-up back to basic CDEP.

Mr SLIPPER—So what you are saying is that \$1 million to \$2 million would only pay for 40 people?

Mr Munro—Yes—maximum.

Mr Davies—And then the other 260 would be out of a job.

Mr Munro—But it is more complicated than that, because removing the right of those people to work reduces the productivity of the workplace, which reduces the profits, which reduces the capacity to pay for real jobs.

Mr SLIPPER—I see real full-time jobs as being an objective.

Mr Munro—It is our objective too. It is the means of achieving that that DEWR is confused about.

Mr SNOWDON—But what is a real job?

Mr SLIPPER—It is a job that is unsubsidised by the general community.

Mr SNOWDON—Are you in a real job? Are schoolteachers in real jobs?

Mr SLIPPER—I think you would have to say yes in that case.

Mr SNOWDON—Then why isn't a CDEP worker in a real job?

Mr SLIPPER—Because the CDEP is partly an employment subsidy from the—

Mr SNOWDON—No, it is not.

Mr SLIPPER—I see it as such.

Mr SNOWDON—It never has been.

Mr SLIPPER—Essentially, it is the equivalent of unemployment benefit that is paid to subsidise work. If someone were in the Public Service, I would see them as obviously having a real full-time job. Like you, I see unsubsidised employment as an end goal. I suppose we are talking about how to get there as quickly as possible.

Mr Munro—That is right.

CHAIR—But the difference between UB and CDEP is that some people are in activity and others are not.

Mr SNOWDON—I think we need a bit of a historical perspective to understand what we are talking about here in terms of Peter. The CDEP was set up when Aboriginal people said that they did not want sit-down money; they wanted to work. It is not a substitute; it is a work program.

Mr Machbirrbirr—Warren, one of the things you said was that other people classify the CDEP's work. I mentioned homeland earlier and I will talk about it now. Out-station people have moved back to their land in order to live there. What is also important is this corporation's support for that movement to the homeland; we had a little bit of funding that helped them move to their land. ATSIIC established a CDEP program, which has meant that people do not have sit-down; they work. People have ended up acknowledging that the CDEP package is not about sit-down money; it is about work. As ASIC chairman, I have visited our out-stations and I have seen people working, cleaning their yards, living natural lives with native plants and other stuff, looking after their culture and country and protecting their heritage and their land. With CDEP, those things are classified more as work than as sit-down activities, but they are not classified as full-time positions.

Mr Munro—Perhaps I can make an important point. DEWR seems to regard CDEP as an alternative to employment; in fact, it is an alternative to unemployment.

Mr Machbirrbirr—I would like this committee to note this also. Previously, when Cyclone Monica hit here, everything was damaged. We were given emergency aid, but we had expected more. However, our CDEP guys were trained up with a chainsaw and an elevated work platform. In the end, a couple of emergency guys flew up and helped a little bit. Then, straight after that, we were told to stop. Some of those who helped out were volunteer schoolteachers. Most of the disaster stuff was cleaned up by our CDEP guys.

CHAIR—It was chaos.

Mr Machbirrbirr—Yes, it was chaos. After the cyclone, we expected hundreds to come around here to clean up.

Mr SNOWDON—Like they did in North Queensland.

Mr Machbirrbirr—But there was nothing. It was us on CDEP.

CHAIR—We appreciate that, Gordon.

Mr Machbirrbirr—And recognition has now come and CDEP is always there for our community needs.

CHAIR—Good comment; thank you. I want to make a couple of points and I want to finish on the flexibility, which is dot point 5. We are here today—let's face it—because you put in a very considered submission, in our view. That is why we are here, because you took the trouble to advise us of your views. Let us look briefly at CDEP from a national perspective. I have seen in certain areas that the mining industry has been crying out—not at Maningrida—for people and there is a CDEP program and the CDEP program cannot find one person transferring from that program to the mining industry. It is very frustrating. This is going back three or four years.

The phrase that emerged—this is the national picture, and Maningrida does not fit in much of this, as you make the point in your submission very well—is that CDEP is not the destination but part of the journey. Some people will take—perhaps we should be pointing it out as a committee—longer on that journey than many others. In incorporating—as you put it here—the logic of flexibility in the operation and administration, I will not just leave it at CDEP; I will leave it at just about everything we do in government. Can we talk a little bit about that? I think it is very important.

Mr Munro—When you look outside the community you see is not a mainstream Australian community. There is no agriculture, there is no mining, there is no fishing, there is no manufacturing. This is an Aboriginal community. There are high levels of unemployment. There is a low skills base. This is a place that is remote from markets and the job market is very small. However, through vision and creativity, it is possible to establish enterprises that become employers in their own right. This, as I indicated earlier, is contingent on state support and will be for some considerable time to come. Blanchard, your predecessor, with great prescience, pointed out the importance of flexibility in the delivery CDEP.

If we were being scored on KPIs other than exits from CDEP—for instance, delivering on the recommendations of the Blanchard report—we would score 110 per cent because we have been outstanding as an organisation in achieving what Blanchard suggested we should set out to achieve. If we were scored on the creation of taxpayers, we would have achieved 300 out of our 600 CDEP participants. But because we are scored on exits from CDEP, we do not score well. Flexibility is the essence of CDEP. It enables people to have a foot in both camps to maintain their connection with land, language and culture but, if they choose, to make connections with consumer demand and with the mainstream economy.

Flexibility is critical to the successful delivery of CDEP in a remote Aboriginal community like Maningrida. Today, whereas real jobs might be a good outcome, it is difficult to achieve them if inflexibility is imposed on you. In this community at this point in time real jobs are not the best employment outcome for Aboriginal people.

CHAIR—I am reminded of the great discussion we had this morning about the cadet program and what was happening. At some point—without discussing Customs—I am sure Mr Snowdon will help me out.

Mrs VALE—Chair, I do have a note about that, because I think it is a very important aspect. You talk about the flexibility, Ian, and how that is a vital part of any policy the government

comes up with, not just for your community but probably for every other community we will see in Australia. Has any member or representative of DEWR ever been out here to visit Maningrida to see what you do?

Mr Munro—I think since DEWR took over stewardship of CDEP, we have had seven field officers. I think we are on our seventh now. So there is not much scope—

Mrs VALE—Seventh visit or one person who was supposed to—

Mr Munro—No, seven different field officers.

Mrs VALE—So a field officer is supposed to be a full-time job for DEWR, is it?

Mr Munro—Yes, I think they call them contract managers. So we have had a procession of different contract managers visiting the community.

Mrs VALE—That has been dysfunctional for you anyway, if there have been seven.

Mr Munro—This calendar year we have had only one visit from DEWR representatives, and that was a visit to introduce a new staff member to the field. So, in terms of negotiating the renewal of the CDEP contract, there was no face-to-face contact whatsoever. In fact, up until the time we were defunded from the delivery of CDEP, before the end of the financial year, we had not seen a CDEP contract manager out here in the community this year.

Mrs VALE—You said that you were defunded from CDEP?

Mr Munro—We were defunded from the delivery of CDEP in May this year. We had verbal advice from DEWR that CDEP would not be delivered by Bawinanga but would be delivered to the community by another provider.

Mrs VALE—Has that happened?

Mr Munro—No, we have had that decision reversed; sanity has prevailed.

Mrs VALE—When did your funding get reinstated?

Mr Munro—A couple of days before the end of the financial year, although the performance funding agreement did not arrive until 2 July.

Mrs VALE—I think it is probably another story to ask how you have coped with that in the meantime.

Mr Munro—That has caused this community extreme stress—to be told that about a program you have been successfully delivering for 17 years and which has attracted very favourable comment from everyone who has witnessed it firsthand. People who have experiences with CDEPs in other Aboriginal communities have always praised our CDEP, and we have drawn some pride from that and will continue—

Mrs VALE—You will get a model.

Mr Munro—We have been a model. You can only speculate about the reasons why DEWR chose to take that course of action. Presumably they think there are people of a different political persuasion, perhaps, who are better suited to the prosecution of their particular employment policies. Frankly, we believe that DEWR's policies are bad policies and that they should be opposed. However, we are contracted through the performance funding agreement to certain contract conditions, and we do our utmost to comply with those conditions. To suggest otherwise is profoundly insulting.

Mrs VALE—I will leave that aside, but I would like to talk to you about that. The issue of seven field officers sounds very dysfunctional for you as a community—to have your thoughts and your needs met by DEWR—and this, I understand, is what you are telling us about the inflexibility of DEWR. I just want to make sure that it is very clear on the record that you are not having your needs responded to or met or even having your voice heard by the field officers who do come.

Mr Munro—I will go a step further to say that we are having our needs and our voices dismissed by DEWR.

Mrs VALE—Thank you very much. Gordon made a very important comment. We were talking about the resources within this community and that you were able to respond to the cyclone that hit your community, which, I am told, did significant damage. It was the training that you had under the CDEP program that gave you resources. It is a skill resource base you would not have had otherwise.

Mr Munro—And a capital base; it was machinery as well.

Mrs VALE—Yes, because it came with it. So the investment from the government into your community here through the CDEP is a lot more than just the dollar value. It has a far greater value. It is a greater asset value to your community than just the dollar value that is implemented here.

Mr Munro—It is the capacity.

Mr Machbirr—It is capacity.

Mrs VALE—Well done, Gordon, on having that response for your community in such an emergency.

Mr Machbirr—Matthew Ryan said that we would like to be trained by a JET centre and have those skills, but also we would like to keep our skill base within the community for the future.

Mrs VALE—But that skill base is highly relevant to your community.

Mr Machbirr—Such as—

Mrs VALE—Yes—in that situation. It would not come very often but when it comes you and your menfolk were ready to respond.

Mr Machbirrbirr—Yes.

Mrs VALE—I wanted to ask the other question of Matthew, which is about the failure of Customs to respond to the excellent surveillance work you were doing here in discovering foreign fishing vessels and the fact that they are not responding to—how much would you say?—two out of every 10 calls? You would be lucky to have—

Mr Ryan—Yes.

Mrs VALE—So you find them and you find them under unique circumstances, and you probably get, say, only two out of your 10 calls responded to by Coastwatch. Could we make a note of that at some stage when everybody else has their question.

CHAIR—Could we clarify that a bit.

Mr Munro—I can clarify that. The Australian government has announced that it is going to double apprehensions. What that means here is a doubling from one out of 10 to two out of 10. It is not Coastwatch that responds to our sightings. Customs and the Navy are charged with the obligation to make the apprehension once a boat has been detected and reported. Also, it is not the job of the rangers to make those apprehensions. There are serious concerns about work health and safety issues and duty of care responsibilities in respect of armed boarding parties.

Mrs VALE—So the responsibility of Matthew and the sea rangers is to identify that there are aliens within the area, to do that kind of surveillance, and to report back to the appropriate authorities—which are?

Mr Munro—In the first instance that is the Customs 1800 hotline number and then it is handled by them from that point on. However, we liaise with other agencies, like AQIS. That is for follow-up quarantine inspections of incursion sites. The rangers are also involved in retrieving illegal fishing gear that might remain behind after a boat has been apprehended—

Mrs VALE—And they would clean up any sites?

Mr Munro—Yes. If a boat crew absconds because it feels it has been detected, it will leave its fishing gear in the water, which goes on killing fish long afterwards.

Mrs VALE—Ian, you articulated some really serious environmental aspects of these foreign fishing vessels actually coming and tying up here, either under mangroves or near land: rat infestations that can come from the boats onto our land and even maybe flora—

Mr Munro—Yes. We refer to them as biosecurity threats. The principal biosecurity threats that are likely to come here from foreign fishing vessels are foot-and-mouth disease, which could become established in the feral pig population on the north coast, and rabies, which could become established in the dingo population in Arnhem Land. Both would be very serious events for Australia.

Mrs VALE—Yes, for the broader economy. What is your current rate of response to the surveillance that Matthew and his people do? Do you have a record of how many responses you actually get from the appropriate authorities, whichever they are?

Mr Munro—They do their best to respond. They are seriously underresourced. There are simply not enough boats and armed boarding parties in existence to deal with the scale of the influx of these foreign fishing vessels. It is important to note that the scale of the problem does seem to have been concealed from the people of Australia, particularly those in the south.

Mrs VALE—Is it true to say that Matthew and his sea rangers can actually locate foreign fishing vessels that are tied up under mangroves and up creeks or rivers, which is not normally done by aircraft flying over the top, which actually miss them because of the obvious problems? Can you and your people actually locate them under mangroves, Matthew?

Mr Ryan—Yes.

Mr Munro—This photograph shows one of our examples.

Mrs VALE—That could be a submission to the committee. It is a photograph of a fishing boat taken through the trees. It is hiding in the mangroves.

Mr Munro—The important point to make is that the Coastwatch people who are charged with the official responsibility of detecting these vessels are becoming—and will be from 1 July next year—totally reliant upon radar surveillance and airborne electronic surveillance. If these boats come down and evade surveillance or evade apprehension, the mode of operation that they adopt is to set their fishing gear and then take up a hiding place in the mangroves, as evidenced by those photographs.

Mrs VALE—On the Australian mainland overnight?

Mr Munro—Yes, on the Australian mainland. During the day they will tie up to the mainland where they cannot be detected by radar. They will then fish at night and they will hide during the day. When they have a sufficient catch, overnight they will steam north until they attain the 200-mile exclusive economic zone boundary and then they are safe from apprehension.

Mrs VALE—And a lot of these boats are wooden and that is the reason why they escape surveillance?

Mr Munro—Yes, they are timber boats. The important point is that electronic surveillance cannot detect them hiding in the mangroves and the visual surveillance that is currently undertaken by Coastwatch is confined to flying along the coastline. They do not look inland where the boats hide. The only people who can find these boats are sea rangers.

Mrs VALE—And the sea rangers have a unique ability and they have an excellent rate.

Mr Munro—They also have local knowledge and a vested interest in protecting their front doorstep.

Mrs VALE—And it is a unique ability. Congratulations, Matthew, on what you do.

Mr Ryan—Thank you.

CHAIR—I will add an overall comment on this topic. It appears that there is significant evidence that the people we are dealing with are very skilled at what they do. They know this part of the world extremely well. Some would say they play us off a break. I will leave it at that. I want to put on the record that there is significant evidence they are playing us off a break. Apart from your great submission, Warren Snowdon made it very clear that we should come to Maningrida. So over to you, Warren.

Mr SNOWDON—Thank you, Chair. I am more than happy to allow the other committee members to ask as many questions as they like, because I visit Maningrida a bit. More importantly, I have been advocating this position with our rangers for a long time now. I do not need to comment on that, because I am on the public record anyway. But I do want to get some discussion going about business training. If an individual came to you and said, 'I'd like to start a hairdressing business,' or open a newsagent or whatever it might be, what would happen?

Mr Davies—We had that situation last year with Peter's son-in-law. He was working with the fencing crew up in the CDEP yard. He approached the then CDEP coordinator in October 2005 because he wanted to start up a wooden furniture making business. The coordinator spoke to me about it and I approached our DEWR delegate to ask for some business funding to go through with that. In, I think, May this year, we received \$18,000 to purchase some second-hand tools to go ahead with this project. Peter's son-in-law has since moved on, because the process has taken so long.

Mr Danaja—He is back.

Mr Davies—He is back now, but it took us nine months to get to the point where we could get some money to buy these items, and he has lost interest.

Mr SNOWDON—There is an issue here about how you provide CDEPs with the capacity to develop new businesses with the appropriate mentor training with some external expertise. If you do not have any expertise internally, you have to bring it in anyway. I am concerned that there does not appear to be a transparent and easy way to get people those options. If they did want to start a business rolling out of the CDEP training they have, they would find it extremely difficult in any event.

Mr Munro—Gordon, you have a story about applying for business funding in your right to run the Jimarda store.

Mr Machbirrbirr—Yes. There was an old store that was provided by BAC sitting there. It was running and functioning, but due to financial problems the store went into debit and closed down, so I was trying to get that business up and running. I did a lot of dealing with DEWR about the business. It is really good, but every time they would point at one thing or another about it. The business was got up by my tribe and by me. I am still seeking that business funding. I know they will assist me with that, but I am waiting too long. The business is to get the store back up and running, to actually start the business and generate our own family income,

tribal income and such and such, and for the benefit of what the store can also provide, such as education to our people in the bush—

Mr Danaja—And full-time employment.

Mr Machbirr—and create more full-time positions by developing that.

Mr SNOWDON—Can I make another couple of points, firstly about other external influences which prevent people from doing things. Correct me if I am wrong here, but the community was after a trepang licence.

Mr Danaja—Yes.

Mr SNOWDON—They applied to the Northern Territory government for a trepang licence, because it was the issuing authority. The Northern Territory government ultimately gave the fishing licence to fish trepang here to a Tasmanian company. Is that correct? Do you want to explain what happened?

Mr Munro—That is not entirely right. At the time we were doing research into trepang and there was a licence available. There are six trepang licences for the entire Northern Territory coast. At that time five of those licences were held by a company called Tasmanian Seafoods. We could not afford to buy the sixth. It was consequently bought by Tasmanian Seafoods and is still held by them. Tasmanian Seafoods now owns all six trepang licences. That rules out our engagement in the normal way. The NT government undertook to give us a conditional licence. The conditions were that that licence would not be transferable and that it be regional. They renege on that offer.

Mr SNOWDON—They made you an offer for a locality-specific licence that was not transferable, which they ultimately withdrew?

Mr Munro—Yes.

Mr SNOWDON—Why did they withdraw it?

Mr Munro—Because of opposition from the holder of the other trepang licences.

Mr SNOWDON—How many people does the Tasmanian company employ who are local?

Mr Munro—They employ no local Aboriginal people here.

Mr SNOWDON—Where do they fish?

Mr Munro—They fish the traditional trepang grounds along the Northern Territory coastline.

Mr SNOWDON—When you were proposing to go down this course, what was your ultimate objective—where were you leading to?

Mr Munro—The ultimate idea was to reinstate a business that was running long before non-Aboriginal people came to Australia.

Mr SNOWDON—Beche-de-mer—trepang, sea slugs.

Mr Munro—They are a very valuable product.

Mr SNOWDON—The Macassans have been visiting this country since the Middle Ages.

CHAIR—For 500 years we heard this morning.

Mr Danaja—They used to use that entrance as a port. There was another place up at Marunga. They used to use that as a port. They would go out in small boats. The good thing about the Macassans was that they knew about trading. In exchange they would give you goods. In exchange they were allowed use of the water to get trepang.

Mr SNOWDON—My point in raising that issue was to demonstrate that there are restrictions placed upon the capacity of people to have businesses here by external agencies. There is licensing. Fishing is a good example because of what we have out the front here. Correct me if I am wrong, but the only fishing venture which the community is currently involved with, apart from getting their own tucker, is the commercial fly-in, fly-out recreational fishing activity?

Mr Munro—We have also purchased with our own money—without business funding—a Northern Territory crab licence.

CHAIR—It is a very good point. It is the capacity to generate jobs.

Mr SNOWDON—Could you talk to us about Djelk rangers and bushfire control?

CHAIR—We were just saying we wanted Victor to say something.

Mr SNOWDON—One of you might be able to tell us how it works.

Mr Munro—Vast sums of money are expended in places like Kakadu in controlled burning—mostly aerial controlled burning. There are large areas of Arnhem Land that now have reduced populations, as Aboriginal people have moved to centres like Gunbalunya. There are large areas of country out there that do not have the levels of occupation that they formerly enjoyed. In order to maintain that landscape in good condition controlled burning is required. That comes at a cost. However, the attractive thing for the Aboriginal people who own that landscape now is that there is quite considerable potential for carbon trading by modifying the way in which that country is burned to reduce emissions. Energy companies are prepared to pay Aboriginal people to burn their country in a way that produces that outcome. This is an extremely valuable business opportunity for Aboriginal people who own grass anywhere in Northern Australia.

Mr SNOWDON—And do you have a proposal?

Mr Munro—We have an active proposal, but it has not yet been announced.

Mr SNOWDON—Peter, you went to the meeting with DEWR in Darwin. Could you explain your interpretation of and frustration, if there was any, with that meeting?

Mr Danaja—For the five of us over here, we found it very frustrating because we wanted to offer a service. It is like Ian said: we only had seven visits from DEWR. I will tell you about DEWR. One day I was in town and the others were out somewhere, and DEWR came here without us guys knowing, and they were talking with the other community members. We did not know about it. They came without us guys knowing—no written letter, no anything. They just turned up on the doorstep, and they talked to the other community members. My concern about DEWR, or with any government, is that, in order for you to come, you have to write us a letter—a proper protocol way—two weeks in advance. Let us know you are coming; we will know where you are.

Mrs VALE—It is called manners.

Mr Danaja—That is right—manners. But coming back to your question: we found it very, very frustrating, especially for us guys, because we were the ones who were in the firing line. Once again, we were nominated by the community members to be their voice, so we wanted to take our voice on their behalf to the DEWR people and say, ‘This is what we want.’ But DEWR said, ‘No, you can’t do this; you can’t do that.’ We find it very, very frustrating. We tried our best to explain to them about our circumstances in community life—about cultural issues, cultural values, enterprises that we wanted to run and operate, and how the top-up system works—but they did not want to take that on board. So we find it very, very frustrating because they did not get the picture and the idea and the philosophy behind our community life, how our community life can be very successful using CDEP as a foundation.

Mr SNOWDON—You are given funding now for 12 months or three years?

Mr Danaja—Just to go back: DEWR says that in 2006-07 we need to have over 60 people in full-time employment. How are we going to do that? How are we going to raise the money to do this? Are we going to turn around and say, ‘Okay, let’s do it’? Are we going to take half the CDEP positions off and employ them full time or use some of the generated income from other enterprises that we have going? But I turned around and said to them: ‘No. 1, in order for the business to function properly, they’ve got to pay their bills. In each area, the further you come down, the higher the tax exemption goes up. Up here, you are paying a lot of money to run the services and businesses for your community. No. 2, they have to pay the employees, and, of course, by then there will be a little bit of money there, but that is where the CDEP comes in. Whatever the surplus we make, it goes back to the employee.’ Is that how it works?

Mr Davies—Yes.

Mr Danaja—So that is how it works. But how are we going to accommodate finding jobs for those 60 people?

Mr SNOWDON—Can you explain to me if you have any CDEP people working in the school or the health centre?

Mr Danaja—Yes, we do. That is what we said: we have CDEP workers at the hospital, the school, the shops. All the things that you see here are generated by CDEP. That is why Bawinanga has become very, very successful.

Mr SNOWDON—We will not be able to talk to the school because they are closed, but are those workers important to the way the school works?

Mr Danaja—Yes.

Mr Machbirrbirr—Just to answer about the school business: Bawinanga have supported the school under that development. With CDEP there are attendance officers from each tribal language. That is running successfully. They are wearing a uniform but also they are getting attendance going up. I am the chairman of the school council as well. Last year we had four students graduate from year 12, and now we have about eight students who will graduate from year 12 this year in Maningrida.

Mr SNOWDON—You might explain that this is the first time ever.

Mr Machbirrbirr—That was the first time ever this year 12 project was done or the model was finished. It was the first time we saw our young students graduating in year 12 in this community, in their own community where they grew up and where they started school, from the preschool to the end. And it is successful—why? Because the BAC are running successful CDEP and providing CDEP workers to develop, and the school attendance officers.

Mr SLIPPER—I was interested, and somewhat surprised, at something that Ian said, referring to your dealings with DEWR and referring to the possible moving of responsibility for CDEP from your organisation to another organisation. You said—and I hope I am not putting words into your mouth—something to the effect of: ‘Perhaps, given the political stance of this organisation, they thought that they could get someone who was more amenable to run CDEP in this area.’ I think you said something to that effect. My question is, what did you mean by ‘political stance’? I would have thought that an organisation like yours would have been apolitical and not party political in any way.

Mr Munro—We are not a political organisation. However, the policies that are currently being dictated from Canberra appear to us—and to many, many other commentators—to be the product of an ideology, and that ideology is entrenched in the right-wing persuasion of the current government. They are entitled to determine policy; they are the government. However, we believe that that policy does not take account of many cultural and regional factors on which we are the actual experts and about which we are not consulted when it came to the determination and development of policy. This frustrates us because we realise very clearly that bad policies will be developed and bad policies will not work. Bad policies will ultimately be abandoned, not because of opposition from groups or individuals like us, but because they will not work.

This has happened before. Assimilation is a very good example of a policy that was abandoned because it did not work, but it was prosecuted vigorously for some time. ‘Real jobs’ is another example of bad policy that will be rigorously prosecuted by the current government and which will ultimately be abandoned because it will not work. It is not the best form of

employment outcome in this community at this point in time. I was alluding there to the sympathy that the opposition has for Aboriginal affairs—at least the perception in Aboriginal communities is that the party that best looks after their interests is the opposition.

Mr SLIPPER—I respect your right to differ with me on this issue. But I do think you are being quite unfair to the current government insofar as the government has, since its inception, sought to bring about practical reconciliation. When I was chairman of the family and community affairs committee I initiated an inquiry into Indigenous health because I thought it was appalling that, for instance, Indigenous men live 20 years less than non-Indigenous men.

While I am not particularly close to the current Indigenous affairs minister, I think he has sought to have a new look at certain problems in the Indigenous community. I really think our record on Indigenous affairs shapes up pretty well with our predecessors. It is easy enough to mouth platitudes—and I do not want to be party political here—but I do know that from the Prime Minister down there has been a very real commitment to redressing Indigenous disadvantage.

While I respect your right to differ with some of the policies, I believe that it is wrong to simply say that this government has a right-wing approach; therefore, it wants to get stuck into Aboriginal people—which is what you implied. I think the government has endeavoured to re-look at a problem that has been with us for 200 years—that is, Indigenous disadvantage—and the government is seeking to do the best that it can. Any advice that you can give this committee will certainly be well considered. I know that the government will consider any report of this committee. I just could not let it go unchallenged on the record that somehow the side of politics that I represent is unsympathetic to Indigenous people. There are a lot of people who are incredibly passionate about this, and I think the government's record stands for itself.

Mr Machbirr—I want to make a statement. This place is our out-station, or homeland. I would like this committee to acknowledge that and to take it on board. A couple of months or so ago, I heard a lot of news about the government not funding the out-station, or homeland, movement. That makes me a bit worried, because there are families and relatives at some of these out-stations. I have also felt really worried about my out-station. Bawinanga supported our people to move to their homeland because we need to protect the culture and language of our land. Also the living nature within their language—the land comes with language—needs to be protected and acknowledged.

Besides that, I and some of our members who are sitting here have also learnt that knowledge from the land. The land needs more support from us, from this corporation. I think the government needs to support us, not de-fund us. Maybe it could support our homelands with ongoing funding because of the cultural things. At the schools here, children are learning both languages: they are bilingual. They have a language in the Western knowledge culture and in the traditional knowledge culture. Because we are teaching the knowledge of both curriculums, running the homelands should be more supported.

Mr SLIPPER—I said that I was not going to ask another question.

CHAIR—Gordon, are you finished?

Mr Machbirrbirr—I am finished now.

Mr SLIPPER—I was interested in something that Ian said about the 16 language groups. Are any of those language groups or languages, I suppose more appropriately, at risk of being lost?

Mr Munro—Yes. There are currently six language preservation projects that are being undertaken by the corporation. They are funded through government grant funds and are for the production of language dictionaries and learners' guides for endangered languages.

Mr Danaja—Bawinanga has become very successful. Whether you are a bureaucrat or a community member, you should learn something from our community, because it has been very successful. You can learn from us, or we can learn from each other, to make things work—not for the sake of a party or something else but for the sake of community members. We are there to provide services. Let us do that rather than step on one another's toes; that is not fair. Like Ian said, policy is good. You guys are policy makers. We appreciate you guys coming down here, but that policy has to work on both sides of the party in order for us to be very successful.

Policy is what makes things work. If you make a bad policy, it will not work. Some people will be disappointed by that; some people it will help to make things work. So, when you are making a policy, please think really hard about how you are going to best achieve and what is the best way to work policy. Each area has its own different environment. City life is a bit different than out in the bush, where there is a totally different environment. Each community has their own agenda as to how they want to run their business. When you make a policy it is not just one thing you have to think about; you have to think about how you are going to fit all those people or communities in. Thanks very much for coming.

Mr SNOWDON—Given the coordination of the ICCs, the Indigenous coordination centres, which are supposed to be the overarching coordinating bodies, what discussions, if any, did or have you had with the ICC about DEWR's approach to the community?

Mr Munro—We have met with the ICC and the OIPC, and there is certainly some concern in the ranks of ICC staff about the heavy-handed approach that DEWR is taking in respect of CDEP.

Mr SNOWDON—What would have been the impact on this community and on Bawinanga had the CDEP been moved to somewhere else?

Mr Munro—I think it is easy to assume that it would have been devastating.

Mr Danaja—We have established the foundation here; it is already working very well.

Mr SNOWDON—I appreciate that.

Mr Danaja—But if it moves to another service provider, it will not work. In the end, everything will have to be picked up again and service providers will have to start from scratch. It might take them about 10 years to actually get it up and running.

Mr SNOWDON—One key aspect of that is the governance issues—how you people operate as a committee and how you run these businesses. Was there any discussion with you and DEWR about those issues and about what might happen if DEWR de-funded your CDEP?

Mr Munro—There was no discussion about that.

Mr SLIPPER—Do other communities feel the same as you about DEWR's approach to CDEP?

Mr Munro—Yes. It is almost universal. There was a meeting of disaffected CDEP organisations in June in Adelaide; I think there were about 60 CDEP organisations represented there. The discomfort with DEWR's approach was universal.

Mrs VALE—Ian, how long has DEWR had responsibility for CDEP?

Mr Munro—Since the demise of ATSIC.

Mrs VALE—I think that perhaps your problem has more to do with the culture of that particular government department than with things at a political level. You might see that three Liberals out of the four of us here are really interested in trying to advance the Aboriginal nation. DEWR itself has had no experience in this particular area or with dealing with something that is across Australia and has a different cultural group than the cultural group that they are used to dealing with. There is probably a mindset in DEWR that we all have to help change.

Mr Davies—I have had a long association with Maningrida because I grew up here and various other things. What you are saying is right: it is probably in the wrong portfolio, to be quite honest. The CDEP is purely an employment program, and that is all DEWR are really worried about. The CDEP encompasses community development, and community development does not always mean full-time employment with real jobs.

Mrs VALE—Absolutely.

Mr Davies—It also means ceremonies. It also means funerals, which my members here, my friends, are quite capable of telling you more about than I can. If you go out to a funeral or a ceremony, you are there for 15 hours a day; that 15 hours a day is classed as your job. I asked someone once, 'Would you ever fund that?' and they said no. I said: 'Why? That is a job; that is part of their job. They are there for 15 hours a day. Would you ever work 15 hours a day?' They said no. Those types of things are overlooked by DEWR. There needs to be more consultation with individual areas about the community development side.

Mrs VALE—And further, the current minister is probably totally unaware of that because there are no connections from his department or from DEWR to get that feedback. My solution would be—and it will be interesting to see what you think amongst yourselves—that there should be designated senior officers from the department of Aboriginal affairs seconded to DEWR who do understand the cultural implications and can advise DEWR, because DEWR is going to need some education from you. It is going to need some serious mind changing.

Mr SNOWDON—I am happy to make this observation in front of the committee, and I have done it before: there are very few public servants in either the Australian government or any state or territory government who have sufficient background or training to understand the communities in which they work. They are not required to undertake cross-cultural training or language training. They could come from Narrabundah, which is where I live in Canberra, to here as a DEWR appointee because they applied for a job in DEWR and not because they have achieved a certain level of understanding of the cultures or community backgrounds which they might be working with. They are not the criteria; the criteria are your capacities to undertake these functions in terms of the Public Service.

Mrs VALE—It is a great gaping hole in the administration. If this is going to be a new area of portfolio responsibilities for DEWR, we have to address it.

CHAIR—We can discuss that in committee.

Mrs VALE—The minister would not know.

Mr Munro—There are three cornerstones of our operations that are currently under threat: CDEP, the out-station workmen and the Aboriginal land rights act. Only one of those is administered by DEWR. We have problems with other government departments.

Mr SLIPPER—What is the birth rate here? Are there a lot of children being born? Are the employment challenges going to go on into the future?

Mr Munro—The population pyramid tells the story quite dramatically. There is a population explosion. This is common to Aboriginal communities throughout remote Australia.

Mr SNOWDON—I read a study while I was at Utopia, which is in Central Australia, last week. It is a great place; you Libs will never get there—in a metaphorical sense.

Mr SLIPPER—I think we are there.

Mr SNOWDON—Give us a break! The health outcomes for out-station communities are a lot better than the health outcomes for people living in townships.

Mr SLIPPER—Why?

Mr SNOWDON—They are eating bush tucker, they do not have alcohol.

Mrs VALE—They are not eating deep fried foods.

Mr SNOWDON—There are a lot of health benefits.

Mr Munro—There is also the social health that comes from living with the family and the cultural support that is maintained in that way. These things are not contestable. Out-station people are healthier than people in Aboriginal communities.

Mrs VALE—Do they live longer?

Mr Munro—I do not have that statistic.

Mr Davies—The major difference between the two philosophies—ours and DEWR's—is time. That is the major factor. DEWR would like to see people go into real-time jobs within 12 months, which is just physically not possible for people who cannot read and write.

Mrs VALE—If they really want that they cannot understand the community economy of places like Maningrida.

Mr Davies—That is correct. We have put in a STEP application for 10 participants over five years to try to fill two full-time jobs. DEWR has rejected that because (a) they said the time factor is too long and (b) there were only two outcomes at the end of it. Unfortunately, with STEP programs people do drop off. They might go out to a ceremony for nine months and they cannot just pick it up again. STEP program is pretty inflexible as well, with various things like that. That type of inflexibility is what DEWR needs to revisit and get a bit more understanding of. For some people it will take five years to learn how to do CDEP payroll.

CHAIR—How do you share your information and test your best practice? We mentioned the CDEP. In terms of a territory-wide program, do you meet and test each other's principles and concepts?

Mr Munro—There is no CDEP peak body. The common voice that Aboriginal communities had—

CHAIR—It is perhaps a bit broader than that, Ian, in terms of that type of operation.

Mr Munro—The voice that we did have was ATSIC, for its faults and failings, and that was taken away. We do not have ATSIC anymore. Nothing has taken its place in terms of a representative body. Previously Bawinanga has had no vested interest in publicising its model for its success. We do now have an interest in doing that. It is partly a matter of survival and it is partly a matter of assisting and inspiring Aboriginal organisations who are less successful than us.

CHAIR—I would have thought so. I want to conclude by talking about there being a number of full-time, predominantly white positions in Maningrida. I would ask you to comment, if you would, on the vision that might be out there. We talk about the rigidity of DEWR but what do you think is in Maningrida's mind about the movement to replace many of the white positions—teachers, health workers and administrators—that are here now? Is there a concept there or is there a discussion occurring?

Mr Munro—Our organisation practises positive discrimination. We will always favour Aboriginal applicants for jobs. However, you have an obligation to your client group to employ people who have the skills to do the job.

CHAIR—Yes, I agree with that.

Mr Munro—That is a reality.

CHAIR—Thank you for that. I need to do three things. One is to invite anyone else to make any comments. Is there anyone else who would like to say something?

Mr Geinbaraba—Yes, Chair. I was employed as a CDEP employment officer. One way that we are looking at being connected to this is by the government looking at cross-culture training, where employees would get involved with learning our ways and knowing each other. We would start off with that. The Bawinanga community had come up with that cross-culture idea. Each white employee would be involved. There would be volunteers from the employers and senior elders doing that part. That could go towards establishing how we want our systems to go—whether it be sport for young people or work. We would be creating more enterprises but this time in our way, which we have not yet tried. We have been looking at the Balanda way. Do you understand?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Geinbaraba—It is about building up our way. It could be with measurements. We have Balanda teaching, but we do not yet have teaching of our way to our people. Right now we are looking at our young people who wear their hats backwards, like Americans do.

CHAIR—Or how Hewitt does.

Mr Geinbaraba—We never come up with our plan. We have never had a chance to teach in our way. I think you know what I am trying to say.

CHAIR—I think so.

Mr Geinbaraba—In our workshops we have not come up with a plan whereby we can—and even I have not learnt enough from the elders—learn from the elders. I have been on this Balanda thing—a politician. Do you understand?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Geinbaraba—'I am a high man. Now I am a politician. I'm a white man.' Old people lay down to sleep but they are not dead yet. They are alive to teach us more about our culture thing. There has never been a chance—like I said—to do that. We would like to continue with that. The last thing is that I would just like to remind you that you are always invited, My Friend.

CHAIR—Sorry?

Mr Geinbaraba—You are always invited into our community.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Mr Geinbaraba—People have been asking you to come along.

CHAIR—I think I am on my fourth visit. I am almost a local. Thank you for that. Can a committee member move a motion concerning the publication of the evidence given at the hearing this day at Maningrida?

Mr SLIPPER—So moved.

CHAIR—Thank you. It has been a very pleasant, enjoyable and constructive day.

Mr Machbirrbirr—On behalf of Bawinanga and my staff and as chairman of this corporation I would like to thank you and the committee who came along to hear our issues on Indigenous support. Thank you very much. I hope you will take these stories back to government and consider them.

CHAIR—We will do our best with it. Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned at 2.31 pm