



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

## Official Committee Hansard

# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES  
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

**Reference: Indigenous employment**

MONDAY, 14 AUGUST 2006

CANBERRA

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**  
**Monday, 14 August 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:** Ms Annette Ellis, Mr Garrett and Mr Wakelin

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

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

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

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

**WITNESSES**

**DONALDSON, Mrs Marion Jennifer, Executive Officer, Capital Region Area Consultative  
Committee..... 1**

**WILLIAMS, Mr Terry, Committee Member, Capital Region Area Consultative Committee;  
Chair, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Subcommittee ..... 1**



**Committee met at 11.28 am****WILLIAMS, Mr Terry, Committee Member, Capital Region Area Consultative Committee; Chair, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Subcommittee****DONALDSON, Mrs Marion Jennifer, Executive Officer, Capital Region Area Consultative Committee**

**CHAIR**—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. I welcome members of the Capital Region Area Consultative Committee and its Indigenous subcommittee. Thank you for your submission and for your attendance here this morning. We are all under time constraints—we always are—so I apologise for what we are about to do, because we are going to be relatively brief. I invite you to make a brief opening statement. First, though, the committee will authorise your submission for publication.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Ellis**, seconded by **Mr Garrett**):

That the publication of submission No. 123 be authorised.

**Mr Williams**—I thank the committee for inviting us along to give a brief overview of what we have done. So many things in Aboriginal affairs today are not so positive. With a region like the ACT, it is sometimes difficult to deliver services, because it has its surrounding districts in another jurisdiction—across the border in New South Wales. The Region Area Consultative Committee introduced a couple of Indigenous programs. We thought that it might be an idea to respond to the committee in some sort of positive light rather than looking at the negatives. We have run a couple of programs which turned out to be fairly positive. We had a number of placements within employment. Even though we try to develop community projects within the consultative committee, there are some problems with that. Importantly, in a region like this we are able to get together with industry, plus the private sector industry, plus the Indigenous community to develop a whole range of new concepts, if you like. Skills enhancement is one area, along with getting people real jobs in which they can earn a real wage. What we are basically saying is, ‘Let’s do something positive.’

**CHAIR**—That is excellent. You understand that the terms of reference of our inquiry are about—

**Mr Williams**—In a sense I do.

**CHAIR**—They are essentially about positive examples to do with employment. We are sometimes preoccupied with some of the negative things out there, and we thought that it was important to put these things down for the record. We have been pleasantly surprised by all the positive things right across Australia.

**Mr Williams**—‘Invention’ is a word that can be used to describe the way we have moved to new ground. For example, we are dealing with the Master Builders Association in the ACT. The fires of some years ago meant that things needed to be done and skills needed to be developed fairly quickly. That was a new approach. I do not think that anything like this has been done

before, although there have been industry packages developed in rural and mining industries. Something positive came out of something that was really bad news for the community. The other approach was that dealing directly with business at the highest level also produces positive outcomes. We have seen that through our engagement with ACTION buses in the ACT.

**CHAIR**—I read in your submission about the MBA and ACTION buses. Can you take me through what you are doing with ACTION buses? I think that would be useful.

**Mr Williams**—Like most people on committees, you have your own job, plus you do your social thing by joining committees and lending your expertise to those committees. At the time, we had an additional body, or a consultant, that could go out and develop the things the types of things we had under our Indigenous strategy with the area consultative committee, and those things have occurred. So we had somebody on the ground who could develop it. One of the things that we did here was pick up on ACTION buses saying that they could not get drivers. We jumped on the wagon and said, 'Let's see what we can do with this.' That took a little while to do, but we mainly dealt directly with management, so it was a top down decision, and that worked extremely well.

**CHAIR**—I see that 10 per cent of total enrolments had undertaken pre-apprenticeship training and 43 per cent were classed as suitable to undertake apprenticeships. That was with ACTION, wasn't it?

**Mr Williams**—ACTION basically set the ground rules by saying that they needed to have this, this and this. So in that process we said, 'Okay, if they haven't got that skill we'll go and get them that skill somewhere else, and then when they start with you they'll have those skills rather than you having to train them in the position.' So we tried to develop the skills they needed before they went into ACTION. It might have been that someone who wanted to drive a bus didn't have a drivers licence, so we got them a drivers licence and then they moved into ACTION.

It was the same with the MBA. In order to build people's skills, we needed to start from some ground area somewhere. Initially we did things like getting the participants green cards to work on building sites and getting them licensed to operate lifting machinery—those types of things. We got them skills in using various tools—hammer drills, jacks or whatever. We were trying to give the skills to the people before they went in. But the MBA had a commitment to take them on, and it was a process of the employee coming through. Each participant would have a number of employers. So it was not as easy a matter as we thought it might have been in the beginning, but it certainly was a new approach to skilling-up people to enter the building industry. And that was across all trades—we are talking about plastering, rendering, bricklaying, plumbing, carpentry and the electrical trades.

**CHAIR**—Was it 26 apprentices? I think that was the number that I saw there.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Trainees.

**CHAIR**—Trainees. And then 10 per cent of total enrolments undertook pre-apprenticeship training, and 43 per cent were suitable to undertake apprenticeships. That was as of the last 12 months?



**Mr Williams**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Of the projects starting in 2003, what lift did you see? Where had it come from and where is it at now?

**Mr Williams**—I am going to use what is probably a bad word here, but out of the ashes we developed this program. We had to at least approach the building industry training committee and get them organised, or get them to think about the program, plus develop a partnership with the Master Builders Association. So in a sense we had to marry two organisations together before we could get this thing started. There were a number of other players, including government agencies, so we had to get all those people in line.

There was a whole range of other problems that occurred with those processes because we did not have the same person at the table to give us direction on each of the programs. So, while we had good responses from the training industry council and the MBA, where we had people who were there all the time, in the public sector there were some changes in staff and all those other things that apply with that sector—someone might have a job today and then apply for another job and move off to somewhere else. So you could find that somebody you had been dealing with had gone to another state or something. Those things occurred. So there started to be some little inconsistencies in the approach where we were dealing with the public sector. But we decided the way we would do it would be to work out this agreement locally and if it fell through the cracks then it fell through the cracks but we would try to plug up those cracks before that occurred.

So there were a number of problems; it was not as if it just went off and started straightaway. For instance, when we started the preskills development, the skill training was in a location which was hard to get to, even for the people who ran the program, let alone kids from Queanbeyan and Tuggeranong and all the other places. So there were all sorts of problems with transport. The other problems were: who do we get to look after and manage the program, how do we do that and what sorts of special skills do they require? We engaged an Aboriginal man from Narrabri who is a master builder and who has also taught the building trade in the TAFE system. So we bring him down, plonk him here for a couple of years and we get through the process.

**CHAIR**—He was from Narrabri?

**Mr Williams**—Yes. It is not a bad little town.

**CHAIR**—No, it is all right.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—It is good to see you here this morning. I want to go back to the basic structure for a second to get it clear on the record. In regard to the way you operate—let us use the MBA as an example—what is the connection between an Indigenous person out there in the community looking for work and then finding you? What is the structure of how it all comes together?

**Mr Williams**—Our organisation is not an employment agency—

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—I know.

**Mr Williams**—We are this project development organisation, which is fine, but we do have a working relationship with Indigenous employment consultants in the ACT and, of course, like any good chair, I invite expertise onto the committee. We have invited one of the principals of the Indigenous Employment Group to be part and parcel of our subcommittee on the area consultative committee. We have that alignment now and we have that relationship.

In the beginning it was utilising organisations like the Salvation Army and all the other employment agencies to make referrals to us. While there are enough people on the Indigenous committee to be able to say, 'Right, I know five people, bring them along,' we did not want it said that this was a thing structured by the family or those sorts of things. We felt that if we could get those referrals from the other employment agencies then we would be right. There was a fair amount of publicity. The publicity that was created out of our approach was fairly good. We actually got some of the participants on-site when they first completed some of the homes out on the ridge. All the media were there, so it was fairly positive.

The **Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—So the ACTION and the MBA instances continue?

**Mr Williams**—The MBA has slowed down somewhat. There are a number of issues with that. There has been a problem trying to get people into the process, because of the things that occurred in the past. Mainly it was transport and a few of the other ancillary things that people needed to get to and from work. ACTION buses is happily going on down the road without any problems at all—dear oh dear!

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—What?

**Mr Williams**—I keep saying things like 'ACTION buses going along down the road'.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—I was going to let that go through to the keeper, Terry. You now have a program which has a continuous intake?

**Mr Williams**—Yes. It maintains itself.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—I do not want to be negative, because you are telling us good stories, but I want to touch on the Public Service, if I may. In the submission you bring attention to the Commonwealth Public Service in particular and talk about some difficulties and the need for recognition of Indigenous people being employed and coming into a work friendly environment and so on. You make mention of that a bit. Can you talk to us about where you see that currently and what you believe needs to be done from your perspective to make that more useful for the client base?

**Mr Williams**—I think one of the things about dealing with the public sector—and I mentioned this earlier—is that there is no consistent representative.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—No central point.

**Mr Williams**—No central point. First of all we were dealing, say, with people in Canberra and then we would be dealing with people from Sydney. You have that regional management versus central management thing, and that was one of the problems. Another problem is inconsistencies with Centrelink and with the other agencies in relation to training subsidies. People might have been able to get something out of Centrelink, but that would be taken away through, say, a DEWR program. They would go on the program under DEWR, but they would lose some of their health benefits, travel to and from work or discounted travel entitlements—those types of things. There were inconsistencies where it was difficult for people to actually work within the process. The other thing was that, when people moved from, say, a Centrelink payment across to this in-service training, there was little or no support. If they moved from Centrelink across to a training salary, the support was not going to be as great.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Is that still the case?

**Mr Williams**—As far as I understand, it is still the case.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—In your submission, you said:

Many of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who remain in the sector are experiencing a lack of empathy for, or awareness of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture from those in the mainstream workforce.

You mention Lynelle Briggs, the Public Service Commissioner, as recently saying similar stuff. Because we now have a public sector that is made up of all these different departments that work totally independently of each other in a bureaucratic sense, it seems, that must be part of the problem as well—that you have to reinvent the wheel every time you go into a different department or agency. Is that part of the problem?

**Mr Williams**—That is part of the problem. I think there is still a bit of a problem with the approach of the ICCs, the Indigenous coordination centres. We had a meeting a couple of weeks ago looking at a project that we might want to develop, and we asked, ‘How can the ICC or the members of the ICC work with us to structure this?’ I walked out of there and I was not satisfied. To be honest, we do not know how we might be able to get all of those agencies together to develop those sorts of things. I was a little disappointed, but when we think about it each of the agencies has their own policies and programs and those guidelines need to be adhered to one way or the other. But there is not a general thing that says, ‘Let’s pool our money together and get this thing going.’ There is still that process. While it may be a negative, I think if we can work on developing a set of protocols for projects when dealing with the Capital Region Area Consultative Committee, or something like that, then it might be different. At this stage, it is a little bit too hard for us to go out and wheel and deal with a dozen organisations and have everybody say yes and then, the next minute, have one of them fall over. Then we are not able to progress through the process or project.

**Mr GARRETT**—Can I go back to the area consultative committee set-up and hear your views about how they are working. Can you give me a little bit more detail on how you find them to be?

**Mr Williams**—As a member of the area consultative committee, it does some really good work. It fills a lot of gaps and, especially in this region, the things I have seen have been of

benefit to the community in one way or the other, and they have been fairly positive. There are basically two issues with the Indigenous communities. Most organisations are dependent on Commonwealth funds to maintain their service delivery, and there is not that much money to put to other areas. While, say, a scouting organisation is able to do all of these things and be responsive to a whole range of other things, if you get a little group in west Belconnen that wants to establish a childcare centre, for example, it is going to be hard for them to start to develop, because the economic base they are dealing with is very small and the numbers that they can pull in to develop and work with this thing are going to be small as well.

In a sense, the ACC is able to do all of this, but if there is a contribution it becomes restrictive when we have to look at what sort of contributions we can make. However, it does not have to be in monetary terms. It could be in kind. A person like me or a few others might say, 'We'll develop a business plan or something like that, but we'll charge you \$1,000 an hour to write it and it's going to cost you \$20,000.' So it is those sorts of things. We may be able to do that. They are the in-kind things that we can do. But if it comes down having to meet on dollar-for-dollar purposes then there are some restrictions on that.

If the ACC starts to deal with Indigenous communities and organisations, we need to keep in mind a couple of other things, I think. One thing is the MOUs that the community might be engaged in. They might be engaged in shared responsibility agreements and those sorts of things. I know that a lot of communities around New South Wales and Australia have entered into those. Of course, there was a trial in the ACT, which I was part of.

The consultative committee is doing its best. We are doing our best with what we have, saying, 'Okay, how can we get the community involved?' We are doing that. It is a slow process. We have a project in mind, but that has had to be put on the backburner for a little bit. It is not because of money. It is because of what the organisation wants us to do with them.

**Mr GARRETT**—I have a couple of other quick questions. When you are looking at the factors that impact on whether or not it is going to be successful to actually get people employed, you identified quite a few—mentoring, transport costs, dealing with Centrelink and so on. Is any one those more critical or more in need of our attention than any other?

**Mr Williams**—One of the things is that, with most of these training programs, we are bringing married men with children into the programs. With the Master Builders Association you need people with some previous skills in the industry and what we were going to do is train them up. We had a number of those guys there that, within a couple of years, would have completed it and got a certificate in whatever it might have been. The difficulty is moving them from whatever they were getting out of Centrelink and into some sort of training program. We have to keep in mind that these people participating in the program would have been moved from employer to employer. The idea of the skill-up program was to develop skills and give them a job later after they had them. So in a sense you have that transition between salaried and non-salaried. That is where the problem lies. Most of these guys were married. The movement away from one to the other with a loss of benefits was a real problem. While everybody was genuine, it was just one of those things. They cannot afford to do it simply because the family is going to miss out. I do not know how that works.

**Mrs Donaldson**—You wanted to know more about the Sunraysia ACC work with the Indigenous community. They would be quite happy to talk to you directly. I spoke to them again last week. I believe they have signed another contract with DEWR to extend the work they are doing out in that area. They would be more than happy to speak to you at an appropriate time.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—What is the central point of Sunraysia?

**Mrs Donaldson**—Mildura.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Mildura would be where you would go if you—

**Mrs Donaldson**—Possibly. You would have to ring them and speak to them.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Annette Ellis**):

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

**Committee adjourned at 11.54 am**