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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

(Subcommittee)

Reference: Indigenous employment

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

Monday, 4 December 2006

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

Members in attendance: Dr Lawrence, Mr Slipper, Mrs Vale and Mr Wakelin

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

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

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

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

WITNESSES

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Subcommittee met at 11.21 am**ELU, Mr Joseph, Co-chair, Indigenous Community Volunteers****STEIGRAD, Mr Peter, Co-chair, Indigenous Community Volunteers****TYRRELL, Mr Paul, Chief Executive Officer, Indigenous Community Volunteers**

CHAIR (Mr Wakelin)—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, and I would like to welcome representatives from Indigenous Community Volunteers. Would you like to make a brief opening statement, and we will then have a discussion about the issues at hand.

Mr Elu—Thank you. The ICV was started in 2000 by Mr Peter Reith, who was the minister for employment back then. Our main objective is to transfer new skills to Indigenous people to better prepare them for work, whether or not they are already in work, and to increase their capacity and the capacity of their communities. The organisation initiates a partnership with ICV community organisations through their project applications, volunteers with appropriate skills are offered by ICV and a volunteer is picked by the communities. Our main office is here in Canberra but we also have offices in Brisbane, Alice Springs and Perth. We have subregional offices in Dubbo and Port Augusta. We currently have about 26 people on staff.

Since the first project in the field in September 2001 we have received over 1,150 project applications and we have completed about 450 projects. We have received about 2,000 volunteer applications, although only a third of these people are in the field at any given time or doing active work. All volunteers are screened very carefully. They take part in cultural awareness training before being placed on projects. A volunteer is covered for travel, insurance and a per diem is paid to cover expenses. The community provides accommodation and a cultural mentor, as we call them, to be the volunteer's contact in the community. A volunteer in the community has telephone access to an ICV officer 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to clarify any issues that may arise during the project.

The projects are generally run for between two weeks and three months, although we have received projects for up to six months. The volunteers are mostly people who are very experienced in their particular fields and have a strong interest in assisting Indigenous people to gain the skills the volunteers have to offer. An IC volunteer will attempt to meet any legal skills transfer requests from Indigenous communities, organisations and/or individuals.

The purpose of ICV activities is to enhance the Indigenous person's chances of gaining employment, becoming self-employed or making a measurable, sustainable and positive difference to the skills of Indigenous peoples, either collectively or as individuals. The first two goals are self-evident, but the latter may require further explanation. Many communities, particularly the governing structures and the administration, are often hard-pressed to meet the internal and external demands made upon them.

ICV frequently are asked to provide community leaders and staff with new governance and financial administration skills. This can vary from basic literacy and numeracy skills to fresh approaches to complex submission writing and reporting—things often required by state or

federal governments. With respect to self-employment projects, ICV are asked often for volunteers with a strong business background who can advise and assist with the skills to develop a viable business. For example, ICV have been asked to assist with new business skills in the areas of tourism, agriculture, aquaculture, retail and financial management, to name just a few.

Our primary funding comes from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, and we have smaller contracts in place with various state governments. ICV also have an active partnership with Rio Tinto, Shell Australia, the Myer Foundation and the Indigenous Land Corporation. We receive irregular but gratefully received small donations from the general public. An important national dividend of ICV work is that over 80 per cent of our volunteers continue to transfer their skills to Indigenous people long after their project with us has finished. This is an exciting but practical outcome and indicative of the level of mutual learning that is taking place out there.

ICV takes an in-depth approach to Indigenous skills transfer, with many initial projects leading to subsequent projects that target higher skill levels. It is important that ICV develops strong relationships with communities and individuals, because the initial project sometimes involves a community testing whether ICV can deliver.

ICV have been externally evaluated twice, most recently in 2004. The key findings were that 84 per cent of projects transferred skills successfully, 81 per cent of the trainees believed that they could manage the task without the volunteer being present and 94 per cent of the trainees felt, as a result of their training, that they could carry out the new levels and new tasks well to very well. Thank you.

Mr Steigrad—Why don't you give the committee our new, hot-off-the-press annual report?

Mr Tyrrell—I am happy to.

CHAIR—Thank you for that, Joseph, and thank you, Mr Steigrad and Mr Tyrrell. You say it was released very recently.

Mr Elu—This morning.

CHAIR—It cannot be any hotter than that! It is obviously very professional. When did you start? What year?

Mr Elu—We actually were started in 2000 by Peter Reith and DEWR, but our first project in the field was in September 2001.

CHAIR—Is this the same group that the minister announced last week that is connected to the Grey Nomads?

Mr Steigrad—No, we are not connected.

Mr Elu—That is FaCSIA.

CHAIR—Of course.

Mr Elu—We are with DEWR and Kevin Andrews.

Mr Steigrad—We are now independent. We started, if you like, as a division of DEWR, effectively, with all seconded staff. Some years ago, when Tony Abbott was the minister and Peter Boxall was the secretary, they thought we had got our spurs, if you like, and that we could separate from the government. We are actually a separate company, with the Commonwealth as a member represented by the minister—presently, the minister for employment. We are separate from the government. The control from the government comes with the funding contract with DEWR. We are required to report monthly and quarterly, and provide annual business plans for the work that we do.

CHAIR—In 2004-05, there were some very significant grants—\$21 million, and this one is \$1.8 million.

Mr Steigrad—What happened was that after the first evaluation of our performance in the field was done—or was it the second, Paul?

Mr Tyrrell—It was actually in the middle of it.

Mr Steigrad—We had one evaluation done and we were halfway through the other evaluation—and the results were looking outstanding—and the Prime Minister decided that ICV was something to be fostered and preserved for the future. He made a one-off grant of \$20 million in the budget to ensure the future standing and growth of ICV. So that is how that happened.

Mrs VALE—Which minister had the initiative for this marvellous program? It is absolutely fantastic.

Mr Elu—Peter Reith.

Mrs VALE—I have actually thought to myself previously that it was a shame we did not have something like this. Rotary have been doing this under their fame program in other nations for years, especially in Papua New Guinea. I am just so pleased you are doing it. I was not aware that you were doing this until we got this submission.

Mr Steigrad—It was an initiative by Peter Reith, along with Tony Abbott and Brendan Nelson. Peter Shergold was the secretary of the department then. Reith's comment was: 'Australians volunteer all over the world'—

Mrs VALE—They do.

Mr Steigrad—'If we were to set up an organisation to allow them to volunteer in their own backyard, how successful would it be?' Now you can see how successful it has been. We stopped recruiting volunteers in the beginning because we were swamped with applications and had difficulty processing them. We now run seminars every month. In fact, we are having one in Sydney next week—

Mrs VALE—Are you?

Mr Steigrad—with a volunteer organisation. We run them all over Australia. We get about 35 volunteers a month signing up. They are put through very rigorous tests.

Mrs VALE—If there is such a thing as life after parliament, I know what I will be doing. I know exactly what I am going to go and do. They have great commercial opportunities in Maningrida for some of those beautiful jackets—but that is another story. How long do volunteers usually commit and stay with you? Do you send them out into the field for a year, six months or six weeks?

Mr Steigrad—Presently, the maximum length of our projects is six months. We are going into a strategic review of our activities in February, and I think it is most likely we will examine ways that we can do longer postings. It might mean one volunteer for a longer period or it might mean a number of volunteers for the one project.

Mrs VALE—Like a package of volunteers.

Mr Steigrad—That is exactly right.

Mrs VALE—That is what Rotary do too. They have virtual shifts. Who looks after the volunteers when they are away? Do they provide their own accommodation? Do they camp on site if the site does not have facilities?

Mr Tyrrell—There is a project officer assigned to each of the projects, and of course that means they are assigned to the volunteer. One contribution we ask from the communities, if they can, is to provide accommodation. When I say accommodation, it is often a room in a building—somewhere safe. Our volunteers are hardy souls.

Mrs VALE—Yes, I know.

Mr Tyrrell—We prepare them for it. As Peter said, they are there for up to six months but we do projects that are as short as two weeks, though not many. That is the minimum time we do for projects.

Mrs VALE—Some people would love to commit some of their annual holidays to this sort of thing, and this would be a wonderful opportunity if there were things available that people could do in a two-week or a one-month time frame.

Mr Tyrrell—The main constraining factor is that the project is designed by the Indigenous people. They will ask for a period of time and we try and stick to that. They know the level of skill that they require and that may require less or more time.

Mrs VALE—The volunteer has a real teaching role.

Mr Tyrrell—Skill transfer is our core business. That is all they do.

Mrs VALE—Apart from having the particular skill that is required and identified by the community, do you have any roles for a volunteer who might say, ‘Except for general life skills, I do not have any special training or qualifications; but, if you need an extra pair of hands, I am happy to come up and volunteer for two or three weeks’?

Mr Tyrrell—That is an interesting question. We actually do not provide free labour and we do not displace labour. They have to have a particular skill to offer. Australians are generous people and hundreds of Australians put their hands up. Unfortunately, we cannot take all of them, but we do take some hundreds and we still need more. They tend to be at the top of their particular skill area.

Mrs VALE—That is great. Even accountants, I should imagine, would have an application in a remote community when it comes to running a business.

Mr Tyrrell—We have seen a lot of accountants in administration with financial skills.

Mr Steigrad—A lot of the work we do is training people in computerised accounting systems. There is a big demand for that and corporate governance.

Mrs VALE—Do you acquire people with certain skills? If somebody who was, say, a very good sewer wanted to actually teach in Aboriginal communities—

Mr Steigrad—We have done a number of sewing projects because they are small businesses that women, particularly, in communities can—

Mr Tyrrell—In fact, our previous national volunteer manager was a fashion designer, and she still works for us as a regional manager. She was a volunteer and did many fashion projects.

Mrs VALE—I was interested in that. Are you looking for people with qualifications or are you just happy for them to have a skill that is identified by the community that they can contribute?

Mr Tyrrell—No—as long as they have a skill.

Mrs VALE—All I can say is congratulations. I think this is a fantastic initiative. Apart from the skills transfer, there is the fact that you would have Aboriginal communities realising that there is such a wealth of goodwill from the white Australian community that they have perhaps not recognised before. I think that exchange of goodwill has to be very positive.

Mr Elu—Like I said in my opening statement, some of the volunteers keep going back after our projects with them are finished, because they—

Mrs VALE—They make lifelong friendships.

Mr Elu—That is it, and they go back and tell their friends and their friends turn up.

Mrs VALE—Joseph, it is paying dividends that perhaps even the politicians could never have thought about, so that is wonderful. Congratulations. You have had a very good financial year too.

Mr Steigrad—Thank you.

CHAIR—Mrs Vale and Dr Lawrence, we are almost within regulations. We have formed a subcommittee and you are free to go to your school and then rejoin us.

Mrs VALE—I will return as soon as I can.

Dr LAWRENCE—I apologise, Chair. For obvious reasons I was somewhat delayed.

CHAIR—I will go to Dr Lawrence as soon as she is ready. I just have a couple of questions. Perhaps we could just cut to the chase. Obviously you have come from the beginning, you are well in progress and I presume you have significant reserves with the grant last year, or the previous financial year. That is in the report in your submission. How do we maximise the employment opportunity? You could give us a focus. What are clearly a couple of weaknesses? Do not maximise it. What would you like to see that is a bit stronger?

Mr Steigrad—I will start and then throw to Joseph. Chair, that was not a question I was expecting. An ideal project for us in terms of our constitution is one that, for example, we did with an orchard, where we sent some orchardists to a community and set up an orchard. That created work. The community then advertised for three orchardists and got an outside panel to select the orchardists. As it turned out, several of the people had been trained while the volunteers were there putting the orchard in place. The orchard grew fruit and vegetables and employed, for money, some Indigenous people. That does not often happen.

As we see it, there are three groups of barriers to Indigenous employment. The first is a lack of skills—that is a clear one. The other very clear one is that there is often isolation from employment opportunities. Both of those are simple. We can understand those; we can get our heads around them and do something about them—sort of. The isolation is difficult for people who move or will not move. The third area is very complex, and Joseph might speak to this: the cultural and social issues that confront both the Indigenous people and the employers in a community when they are trying to meet each other's demands and wishes.

CHAIR—I want to ask you about that.

Mr Steigrad—Joseph is very experienced in this area and so maybe he will take this up. What more can be done? We need more work in that area. It is sort of tangential to—a little bit to the side of—what ICV does but it is a core issue in furthering employment of Indigenous people. Joseph, I will give you the hard one!

CHAIR—We are particularly interested in this. Call it what you like; but, Joseph would you like to have a crack at the question of cultural experience. How do we harness it? How does it restrict us?

Mr Elu—I say this to everyone. My take on this is that Indigenous people place different values on different things, whereas you and I—and I put myself as a worker here—place a certain value on our work, on our job. They place value on that as well, and the money we earn from that and the money they earn from that. But if something else happens which they place a bigger value on, like if somebody's wedding is taking place somewhere else, while you might say, 'Oh, he's a second cousin third removed; I won't go,' Indigenous people will attend. They have a structure that people do not understand is interwoven through generations that people have to attend these things. If it is the firstborn of a certain generation, it is very crucial that people attend, especially uncles and aunties, even four or five times removed. They are expected to attend. Or, if somebody dies who has a big presence in that family clan grouping, these people will walk out of a job—just like that. It is not that they place a lesser value on their job and income; they place a higher value on attending certain cultural activities.

I was just telling Peter this. We have to educate them to plan, to structure their life so that they can do that. But of course if they are working on CDEP they find it very easy to walk out because their income is not that great. They can go. I was telling Peter before we started here that the amount of money that they need to survive where they live is not the same as people in cities need to survive. In Maningrida people can live on \$140 a week—easy.

I was just drawing this thing for Peter here before. In my community at Seisia we run a shop. So I told the manager of the shop, 'Give me the number of the skeleton crew you can run this shop with,' and he said, 'Four.' I said, 'Okay, those are the non-Indigenous positions'—or not non-Indigenous but outsiders you can bring in. If something happens in our community and our people go and shut down, you can still run that shop. Another five can be local people. But you tell the local people: 'If you want to be Assistant Manager you have to stop going to funerals or weddings or whatever in Townsville or Brisbane, because that is then your job. If you're going to just walk out and go away then you cannot be the assistant manager.'

It will happen over a period of time. There are people like me. I am Indigenous. I lived and grew up in the Torres Strait, but I have put a differing value on my job and my income.

CHAIR—Do you see that different value emerging? That is the big challenge, isn't it? Is it emerging?

Mr Elu—I was just telling Peter that it took the Western world—France, Britain, Russia, wherever—700 years to be aware of that, and you want us to do that in 150 years or whatever it is. I told Peter they were running around naked in the forest 600 years ago; they did not want to do anything. We are probably the same today.

CHAIR—I am particularly interested in this. I think if we understand that then maybe we set our reality level to a level where we do not—

Mr Elu—I was just telling Peter before that, if you take Australia today, in the Torres Strait, Arnhem Land and these places, people can easily walk out on jobs because they place more value on cultural or social activities. In Melbourne, Sydney and other places like that, the Indigenous people might not do that. So it is changing.

CHAIR—That is right; and that is exactly where I was going to go to. There are significant percentages of people at Weipa, near Kununurra and in obvious places within the mining industry where change is occurring. An example is our entertainment group in Cairns Jabuki; I am sure they have their moments, but it is emerging. One of the great challenges is: where do CDEP and the welfare system intervene and maybe discourage? There is a view about that, and there have been some well stated points about that.

Mr Elu—With the DEWR changes to CDEP that are happening currently, in the outer, more remote areas, they are very afraid of what is happening. They feel that if CDEP is taken away, they could face problems, because CDEP is their biggest income in those areas. But I think that in the urban regional areas they accept that CDEP will go and they will have to move into those other—

CHAIR—Yes, change is happening.

Mr Elu—That is right. We were in Dubbo a couple of months ago, in that office, and I was talking to the Aboriginal people in Dubbo. They did accept back then that CDEP might be taken away from them, but things are happening around Dubbo that they hope will give them more employment.

CHAIR—You would know of Dr Dennis Foley. He did a lot of work on entrepreneurship and on enterprise and small business. I was particularly fascinated by the work that he has done, because that is obviously linking up with some of the work that you have been endeavouring to link into as well. Do you see a role there—additional to what you are doing and what he is suggesting?

Mr Elu—That is the big problem we find in the Indigenous areas: the lack of capital, and the trust between financial organisations and Indigenous people and communities is not there. People say it is not racism, but there is a very thin line when you look at Indigenous people going in to get a loan and getting knocked back. I keep making this comparison: when I was first appointed as ATSI Commission, I was on an \$87,000 a year job. When I went to get my first credit card, I was refused because I grew up where I grew up, and I did not have a credit rating. The bank said, ‘That is not racism.’ I said, ‘It is not racism per se, but because we grew up where we grew up, and the old Queensland government did not allow us to move, to get jobs or blah-blah-blah, we did not have bank accounts, so how could we get a credit rating? The first credit that I got was American Express. The Americans gave me what the Commonwealth Bank couldn’t or wouldn’t.

CHAIR—I am reminded of me as a farmer trying to get a loan in a drought. I am sure they discriminate against my ability; they wanted it to rain first.

Mr Steigrad—There is entrepreneurship in regional Indigenous centres. We see it in the project applications that come to us all the time. Some of them are not well thought through, but there is this spirit of entrepreneurship for sure.

CHAIR—Having a go at it, yes. I have a great regard for the capacity of Indigenous people. It is not just recent history. There are some lovely stories. You can do anything in that sense. There is the sense of what the priority is at a given time, I understand that, and there are distractions.

For example, some people within the ILC have got clear views about the distraction of CDEP and where people of great ability can be distracted by that. That is enough from me. I would like to give Dr Lawrence an opportunity to go through this with you.

Dr LAWRENCE—I apologise for not being here for your presentation; but I have read your report, so it gives me a bit of a feeling and, in any case, perhaps I can have a look at that later. Forgive me if some of the things I am going to ask you may have been covered, in which case say, 'Read the *Hansard*,' and I would be happy to do that. Firstly, how does your program relate to the announcement the minister made just a couple of weeks ago about volunteers from Grey Nomads?

Mr Steigrad—It is not related.

Dr LAWRENCE—I wondered about that.

Mr Steigrad—Having said that, there is a relationship in as much as many of our volunteers are of course senior citizens.

Dr LAWRENCE—Of that age, yes.

Mr Steigrad—I do not know what percentage, but it could be a third of them.

Dr LAWRENCE—It obviously would make sense that you guys might be put in charge of that program, whatever it is.

Mr Elu—It might happen; it is \$300,000, though.

Mr Steigrad—There could well be a difference in the program, which I would point out now. Our program is successful for three reasons. First, we have fabulous volunteers. We are just blessed to have wonderful people in Australia who volunteer. The second reason is that the volunteer is actually chosen by the community: we provide to the community a selection of volunteers with the requisite skills, and they choose them.

Dr LAWRENCE—I was going to ask you about that.

Mr Steigrad—But maybe the critical reason it is successful—and Paul, I think, because he is working with them day to day, would say that is the real reason—is that the project itself is initiated by the community. So there is no outside group going to the community saying, 'You should do this; if you do this we will do that.' It is something that is already one of their priorities, something they want to do.

Dr LAWRENCE—Yes.

Mr Steigrad—We are not sure exactly what program the minister had in mind, about working with the National Seniors—because we will not move from that. If it is the case that the priority is established by the community then we would be able to work happily with them and maybe administer the whole thing for them.

Dr LAWRENCE—Sure.

Mr Steigrad—If it is something other than that, it might prove difficult for us. That is the only point I would make.

Dr LAWRENCE—Thank you. You say you have some wonderful volunteers and basically they are chosen by the community for projects that the communities have identified as important. I think that is absolutely vital. In addition, do you provide or oversee any training for them in terms of cultural awareness?

Mr Steigrad—Every volunteer goes to a cultural awareness training program which we run every month. We would have—how many people a month in these, Paul? Twenty maybe?

Mr Tyrrell—About 20 to 25.

Mr Steigrad—From 20 to 25 every month.

Dr LAWRENCE—So it is fairly intense?

Mr Steigrad—It is intense; it runs for two days. That is a general cultural awareness program and then, before being selected to go on a specific project, they have a specific briefing and teaching about that community and the issues involved.

Mr Elu—If they are selected.

Mr Steigrad—Yes, if they are selected.

Mr Elu—They get a briefing on that particular community. Another thing we do is we make the community appoint a cultural mentor so that when this volunteer goes in there he is his contact.

Dr LAWRENCE—So if they are behaving like a complete klutz then someone will tell them!

Mr Elu—We will all tell them! The cultural mentor is supposed to teach them more culture when the volunteer gets there!

Mr Steigrad—We have been so lucky—touch wood. I should not say this, but we have not had a disaster yet. But we will; we just have not had one yet.

Mr Tyrrell—Dr Lawrence, many of the volunteers have not actually worked in Indigenous communities before, so we do a lot of preparation. The cultural mentor is vital because he or she is the 'go to' person.

Dr LAWRENCE—And can interpret daily things.

Mr Tyrrell—You are going to stub your toe in the first few weeks, culturally; so, to try and lower the rate of that, the cultural mentor intervenes.

Dr LAWRENCE—Do you get feedback from the volunteers when they come back to you? Do you systematically get that?

Mr Steigrad—It is required.

Mr Tyrrell—Yes. In fact, we get a written report from the volunteer and from the community and we have a debriefing with the volunteer. So there are three forms of feedback.

Dr LAWRENCE—Presumably, you use some of that feedback in your training subsequently.

Mr Tyrrell—Definitely. In fact, it is quite good fun. The experienced volunteers often come to the volunteer training as guest speakers. That is regular.

Mr Steigrad—We run a seminar every month—sorry, probably more than one. Every month we hold seminars for people who are interested in volunteering, so they have that preparation as well. There is one in Sydney next week.

Dr LAWRENCE—In part, you have answered my next question, which is about monitoring outcomes. You get a report back from the volunteers, but do you do more assessment than that?

Mr Elu—We have been evaluated twice by an outside agency. The last time was 2004. We are doing one currently.

Mr Steigrad—The next one is 2007.

Mr Elu—Sorry. Next year we are getting another evaluation. The previous evaluations have both been very positive.

Dr LAWRENCE—What sort of indicators do they use?

Mr Steigrad—They measure the ‘stickability’, if you like. I do not know what the right word is.

Dr LAWRENCE—The persistence of the program after the volunteer has gone?

Mr Steigrad—Yes. They measure whether the skills are still present and being used in the community. In the last evaluation—and we covered this before—the key findings were that 84 per cent of the projects transferred skills successfully and 81 per cent of the people trained believed they could now manage the task without the volunteer being present. This was more than six months after the project had been completed. So we did these reports after six months and 12 months. It is an outside group that does that. The figures are very good, actually.

Dr LAWRENCE—In that successful outcomes are obviously being delivered for the programs, I guess there is a broader question about planning these things: does the community have an opportunity to, in a sense, integrate them with other things that are happening? The fact that it is community identified obviously means that it is more likely to be the case than someone else popping in and saying, ‘Have we got a great new scheme for you!’ Is that done systematically to try and work with the community and identify areas of high priority?

Mr Elu—Not systematically, but communities do that themselves anyway. We have found that we have gone into some communities for a third and fourth time. They have all developed from the first volunteer. We find that the first volunteer might be in there just to set up the office and the systems and then it flows on. As I said, we are now getting more complex applications.

Mr Steigrad—The second volunteer would help them do a business plan. They take their business plan and get capital from whomsoever they go to and then the business starts. It could be like that.

Mr Tyrrell—The integration point is very interesting. Joseph mentioned in his opening statement that over 80 per cent of our volunteers, when they have completed their project, continue to pass on their skills through email, visiting, fax or telephone conversations. We are not paying for this anymore; this is a dividend that the people are now delivering to the nation, as it were, and we did not expect that. There is a very high rate of that. They become friends, to be frank.

Dr LAWRENCE—That is great. That is very important. You talked a bit about this, and this is not strictly, I suppose, in your brief, but obviously your volunteers will observe it, as Joseph has done: the value given to turning up at work every day, being a wage slave, is not quite the same in Indigenous communities, globally. But, of course, we have people in our own communities who are like that—for example, women with children—people who might think that it is more important to go to the kids' assembly than turn up at work.

Mr Elu—I gave a speech somewhere and I said that, in certain parts of Australia, that is the case. You can go to Byron Bay and see how many people work. They are all out the back smoking ganja or something, but that is Byron Bay!

Dr LAWRENCE—Truly, I would not put it that way. I think that part of the problem that administrations and bureaucracies have is that they have a single way of thinking about the engagement of people in employment and the earning of incomes, whereas for many people the routine of work is actually very difficult for them in order to manage other responsibilities: cultural responsibilities, children, elderly relatives. A lot of people are stuck in a system that is not sympathetic to them. So I am just wondering whether you are able to give any feedback, in a sense, to the bureaucracies, like DEWR and others, that maybe there should be a more intelligent approach to what is actually happening in the lives of these people rather than making some attempt to impose a template that simply does not fit their lives.

Mr Elu—With my other work, there are two properties in Kakadu: Crocodile Lodge and Kooinda. Tourists asked for tour companies run by Indigenous people, so we have set up four small family owned companies to take people around on tours. But they do not all want to work, like you said, for seven days or five days, so we have told them that they can chop and change their time, as long as one of them is available. In the mining area at Port Hedland, there are about 80—

Dr LAWRENCE—They have a pool.

Mr Elu—people on their books, of which maybe only 30 or 35 are employed at any given time. They know that if somebody goes walkabout they can call somebody else in, but the truck is still running and the grader is still going.

Dr LAWRENCE—They all have the skills.

Mr Elu—That is right. That has taken off. The mining company loves this because it has taken the rostering of their workers off their hands. It is up to the Aboriginal company to roster their workers, as long as they know that 94 tonnes of iron or whatever will be moved next week.

Mr Steigrad—Dr Lawrence, I think the clash of aspirations that you speak about occurs less in isolated communities because, quite clearly, there is no work there. So let us forget about that. They will be given whatever they are given by the government at the time. Where you see the clash—where I think the issue is—is more in the regional centres where there is, effectively, a clash of cultures. It is very difficult. I was discussing this with Joseph earlier. In many respects, this is generational. I mean, many younger Indigenous people, because of their time in education, see both these sides and, I guess, they are torn between: do I go right or left? That is a big issue. More and more are going right, if you like, which is to follow our aspirations. An outcome of this is that, while we might end up with more being employed, it will also have an impact on the cultural background. It is quite difficult to balance. I do not have an answer to this and I think about it a lot. Perhaps the part that tugs at hearts most of all is when a young person in that environment is left behind. I know that this is happening. It is bad enough to see older Indigenous people in bad times, but to see young people who have no future is terrible. That is not really an employment issue, but the clash of aspirations—

CHAIR—It is pretty close to it, though, is it not?

Mr Steigrad—Yes. This clash of aspirations is a significant issue. When you treat it simplistically, you get no answer.

Dr LAWRENCE—I think that is right. We need a nuance response rather than a one-size-fits-all response.

Mr Steigrad—I do not think there can be one response. It is very difficult. It is very rewarding when it turns out right.

Dr LAWRENCE—But to have it in front of you—the fact that this is a likely problem you will confront, whether it is in a volunteer program or in an employment program—means you are more likely to deal with it successfully. If you simply try to bulldoze your way through it, the outcome is likely to be that there are more people stranded, on one side or the other, in the way you have described, either losing your family and cultural connections or not being engaged—that is, their skills and talents not being used in any way, and then you get all these problems.

Mr Steigrad—You have expressed it better than I have.

Dr LAWRENCE—Not at all. You are experienced. I have seen it; I have been up close sometimes but more often from a distance.

CHAIR—The corporate sector are key partners. You refer in your report to your new partners, Rio Tinto, Shell, Myer, and you mentioned them earlier. Another corporate is, I think, Westpac. Many of the corporates have been trying to engage here for some years in partnerships et cetera. Can you give us a glimpse of how that is going and how you do it? With respect to Rio Tinto—I touched on Weipa and Argyle—what is the relationship?

Mr Tyrrell—It varies, Chair. Rio take a slightly more targeted approach. When I say ‘targeted’ I mean they are not dragging people from communities and saying, ‘ICV should work with those communities and bring them into their labour force,’ but what they are saying is that they are keen for Indigenous people within their sphere to avail themselves of employment opportunities. ICV’s engagement, because it is by invitation, is a different style of engagement. Rio have joined with us, if you like, to offer skills that may be of interest to the Indigenous communities and to the company in that region, and that is what we are engaged in in the various Rio activity centres around Australia. That is what we are doing. We received project applications from the communities. For example, these could be in the area of catering, maintenance or heavy machinery.

CHAIR—Through TAFE at Weipa—Rio are a particular company there—they are engaged directly in employment. They are now looking at target percentages and they are engaged in the education system. I am trying to understand where ICV links in. Is it based on the application driven project but suggested by someone within Rio at the mine site who says—

Mr Steigrad—No, it is suggested by the communities surrounding Rio Tinto mine sites. I think your question was a little different concerning the engagement with corporations. When Peter Reith had the idea for this foundation, he saw there being three partnerships—with the Indigenous communities, the wider Australian population and the corporations. When it was first set up we were funded directly by DEWR. Effectively, we were a division of DEWR, but we have now moved away from that. In fact, Tony Abbott thought we would do better if we were not an arm of government.

CHAIR—He would.

Mr Steigrad—He said, ‘Why don’t you go off on your own, and we’ll have a contract over the money.’ That is how that happened. But, in the beginning, the idea was that the corporations would come on board and provide funding. We must have spoken to a hundred of them. Almost in every instance they said: ‘What a terrific idea. We are so pleased somebody is doing this, but we’re not going to give you any money, but we might make available’—I am being fairly superficial in my response here—‘some of our staff for one day a year to do some work. That would be a wonderful thing for our staff to do.’ Of course, that was just no help to us whatsoever.

There were some organisations that were more involved; Accor were more involved and corporations did help us out in kind. There was an amazing turnaround when we became very well funded with the first grant, the \$20 million from the Prime Minister. The corporations suddenly realised, ‘Here is an organisation doing good work; it isn’t going to ask for money.’ When we went to the corporations and said, ‘We would like to form a partnership with you to serve the needs of Indigenous communities and we will go fifty-fifty on things we do,’ almost invariably they said: ‘What a terrific idea. Let’s do that. How do we do that?’ There are two

things: (1) we were well funded, so they knew we were not necessarily coming with our hand out, and (2) we changed our approach to them, which was, 'We have common problems here and we will work on these.'

CHAIR—Rather than the begging bowl kind of thing.

Mr Steigrad—Exactly right. Since then we have been doing more and more work with corporations.

CHAIR—You have hit the mark; you come with a strong sense of credibility.

Mr Steigrad—That is an interesting psychological vision, isn't it? Where we were having difficulty even getting to meet the right people, now it is an open door.

CHAIR—Straight in the door.

Mr Steigrad—We are doing an interesting project with the Indigenous Land Corporation. Paul, you can explain that one.

Mr Tyrrell—I want to add to that point: as soon as we started using the word 'partnership' rather than 'money', the dialog changed. Going back to the ILC now, it completely changed. The ILC, as you know, manage a whole lot of holdings. Some of those holdings are under review, in terms of assisting people to use the holdings beneficially and economically, and they have identified 17 to 25. The Indigenous people who are the title-holding bodies have also agreed that they need some assistance with respect to that land management and the business that they want to run, and we are now actively engaging with those communities. We are gathering together specialist volunteers, agribusiness volunteers—farmers, if you like.

Mr Elu—You might come on that.

CHAIR—I see that you have built up some expertise in networking, but, through the scrutiny, you also bring credibility and you try very hard to bring the credible people in there. I can talk all day about it, but I need to move to two or three others issues. I notice in the report—and I am very grateful for the annual report, hot off the press—that there are 448 new project applications. What percentage gets up? Do you get 50 per cent up, roughly? You would have to knock a few back. Basically, you go through a scrutiny process—

Mr Steigrad—Paul, of the 448, how many go ahead?

Mr Tyrrell—Say there are 500, just for a rough figure: we would put 250 to 300 into the field.

CHAIR—That is pretty encouraging.

Mr Tyrrell—Yes, 250 to 300 would go in. The others are still being worked on because they flow into the next year.

CHAIR—So you do not knock them off too quickly.

Mr Tyrrell—No.

Mr Elu—Some of them go on hold, which is interesting. When ATSIC was disbanded and when the CDEP changes come up, you will see people pull their projects back. They do not go away; they just put them on hold, and two or three or four months later they are back on again.

CHAIR—They are pretty credible and they come forward. The really interesting part here is that there are a couple of states here that are way ahead in the application of this program. I note that in your comments you mentioned the engagement with state governments, and the two state governments you mention are Western Australia and Queensland. I presume that is an important part of getting people engaged.

Mr Elu—With Queensland, most of the work was done by the Indigenous Enterprise Partnership. With some of that Westpac work and the Queensland government work, they came to us for volunteers because we had the money for volunteering. One of the bigger projects in Queensland was with the Queensland State Library. They came to us to put libraries into those regional—

Mr Tyrrell—In Cape York. Indigenous Knowledge Centres are what they call them.

Mr Elu—They were funded initially by the Department of Transport and Regional Services. What are the centres called, Paul?

Mr Tyrrell—Indigenous Knowledge Centres?

Mr Elu—No, that is not it. I will have a think about it.

Mr Steigrad—New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia have formed partnerships with us at various times. Victoria and South Australia have not. It does not prevent us from working in those areas—

Mr Elu—The Northern Territory was making good noises until we got the \$20 million. Then Clare Martin said, ‘You’ve got more money than us!’ But we still work with them.

Mr Steigrad—We still work there. We think that it is appropriate for a state government to share some of the burden of providing the volunteers in those states. We do not say to a state government, ‘You have to go fifty-fifty with us,’ because we are there already. We are already doing the work and they know that. I must say that Queensland and Western Australia, through various ministers—they change a lot—are very engaged and very willing, and they seem to have a real grasp of the issues and what is needed. I do not know why that is the case but it is the case.

Mr Elu—The Regional Transaction Centres are what I was thinking of before. The Queensland state government put libraries into there, mostly computerised things, and they are very well frequented by kids, so it is good.

CHAIR—The vision to be recognised by Indigenous people, governments and the private sector is that the leading providers of volunteer services transfer skills to Indigenous

communities, organisations and individuals. You could not say there was not a need; you could not say that the need is not going to be there for a fair while.

Dr LAWRENCE—I hope you will write a letter to the minister reminding him of the fact that there is already a program.

Mr Steigrad—That has been running through my mind!

Mr Tyrrell—The minister knows our program well, and so do his advisers. I would not be concerned about that; it is not an issue.

CHAIR—No doubt the growth is there and the interest is there. Are there any other comments you would like to make? It seems you have a great relationship with government and you know what you are on about. There is nothing else to add?

Mr Elu—Not really. All I want to say is that we have stayed apolitical. State governments work well with us and we work well with them. We met with Chris Evans last night—hopefully, he stays a shadow minister!

Mr Steigrad—And we met with Peter Garrett.

Mr Elu—If there is a new one appointed next week, we will go and talk with him.

Mr Steigrad—The best line was Daryl Melham's.

CHAIR—I can imagine.

Mr Steigrad—It was wonderful, actually. When it was launched, John Howard was Prime Minister and he did the launch here in Parliament House. Afterwards Daryl Melham came up to Joseph and me and said: 'You know, this is a fantastic idea. If the Libs are giving you 100 per cent, we'll give you 110 per cent.' I said, 'Thanks, Mr Melham'. He said: 'It's a fantastic idea. Pity it's the only good idea Peter Reith's ever had.' He had this wonderful smirk on his face, and Peter Reith was there and he burst out laughing. Fortunately, that has been the case, and we do everything in our power to stay like that. We are pleased to be to one side.

Dr LAWRENCE—It gives you credibility.

CHAIR—You made all the points about positive examples of employment, what are the barriers, what is the future in a time of skills shortages. Even though you have some pretty general criteria, it is all part of the deal of picking up the ball a bit more and giving them opportunities in indirect and direct ways on the employment front.

Mr Steigrad—That is true.

Mr Elu—I want to thank you once again for seeing us in person. Hopefully, our information is useful to you.

CHAIR—Thank you, and we appreciate your time.

Mr Steigrad—We wish you every success in what you are doing. We have the same goals.

CHAIR—Gentlemen, thank you very much.

Resolved (on motion by **Dr Lawrence**):

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

Subcommittee adjourned at 12.14 pm