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

INQUIRY INTO INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT

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Contents	2
1. Introduction	3
2. Skills	4
2.1 Tertiary education	4
2.2 Trades	5
2.3 Non-tertiary and non-trade fields	5
3. Issues affecting Indigenous employment	5
3.1 Welfare dependency	5
3.2 Drugs	5
3.3 Literacy	6
4. Need for strategic assistance	6
4.1 Transition from CDEP to mainstream employment	6
4.2 Venture investment	6
5. Recommendations	7

1) Introduction:

In this submission I wish to offer general observations from an Indigenous perspective. These observations are drawn from my personal employment history over the last 21 years. My work experience ranges from the Mining Industry, Indigenous Community Organisations and the Commonwealth Public Sector.

The points I raise have wider application, and are not specific to Indigenous Australians. However, I emphasise that as an Indigenous Australian myself, I have a keen interest in Indigenous advancement. That is, to see Indigenous Australians retain their cultural identity and relationship with country and embrace economic opportunities that are presented before them.

In this submission I will raise issues that I believe are impediments to Indigenous employment, such as the dependency on welfare, lack of skills, drug issues and literacy.

Discussions on Indigenous employment should be within an education and training context that is divorce from political differences. Practical initiatives in Indigenous employment should be bipartisan, and supported by private sector businesses and each tier of government.

Governments, industry and Indigenous leaders and Indigenous organisations know that long term commitments are prerequisite. Issues affecting Indigenous employment need to be addressed over a significant period of time. However, with strategic assistance, some Indigenous employment initiatives can be accomplished in the short term eg industry employing skilled Indigenous employees, whilst other initiatives such as Commonwealth Development Employment Project (CDEP) Transitional Employment strategies may be accomplished over a medium to long period of time.

Therefore, it is my hope that all governments can work together, with industry and Indigenous businesses, Indigenous organisations and leaders for Indigenous advancement.

2) Skills:

A significant issue that affects Indigenous employees is regionally relevant skilling. Lack of skills provides a burden both to business and individual employees.

Dedicated staff from Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICC), with support from industry and local Indigenous community organisations within a whole-of-government approach, can help to identify where skills are needed in a specific region and how these skills can be attained in that local region.

Indigenous students need more educational support than most non-Indigenous Australians. This is due to a number of factors such as geographic circumstances, lack of role models and family support, health issues like sight and hearing problems, language, and lack of greater community support.

2.1 Tertiary education:

In light of the above factors, more Indigenous Australians, particularly those living near or in major Australian capital cities, are successfully completing tertiary education.

Initiatives such as the National Indigenous Cadetship Project (NICP) is progressive and shows in a practical way how more private sector businesses and government agencies around Australia are taking on Indigenous cadets.

However, how many of these graduates are retained by their employers? There are no statistics available to confirm Indigenous employment retention across the private sector or across *all* Australian Government agencies. I am aware that in respect to some Australian Government agencies, Indigenous employees may be put into the 'Equal Opportunity Categories' by recruiters instead of identifying those employees as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. This may necessarily not be the fault of the recruiter, as I believe that some Indigenous Australians do not wish to identify, for varying reasons, as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

In light of these 'hidden' aspects on Indigenous employment levels in government employment registers, I suggest that more emphasis be placed on retaining Indigenous employees through retention strategies.

I suggest one strategy could be put in place where Indigenous cadets, who undertake training with the employer's graduate programs as part of their cadetships. This would allow Indigenous graduates a greater appreciation of that organisation and its opportunities.

Another strategy could be the idea of Indigenous cadets in Indigenous organisations, undertaking a graduate program within their cadetship that includes rotations in key Indigenous government agencies. Thus providing Indigenous organisations and representative bodies with Indigenous employees, who understand government Indigenous policies, programs and processes.

2.2 Trades:

In light of the aforementioned factors, more Indigenous people have trade qualifications, particularly in the mining resources sector where hourly earning rates for qualified trades personnel are much more attractive than found in major centres. However, there still needs to be strategies where Indigenous trade apprentices can train for nationally recognised trades in their region. A National TAFE system would be advantageous but requires full whole-of-government support and key support from major industries.

I suggest that some Indigenous apprentices undergo trade training as part of a mobility program before they are formally indentured. This could be structured with input from industry, all governments and Indigenous Registered Training Organisations and high schools with high numbers of Indigenous students.

2.3 Non-tertiary and non-trade fields

I suggest that some Indigenous employees undergo skills training in areas relevant to the skills requirement in their region. Training could be conducted as part of a mobility program. This could be structured with input from industry, all governments and Indigenous Registered Training Organisations and high schools with high numbers of Indigenous students.

3) Issues affecting Indigenous employment:

Indigenous businesses and industry that employ a significant number of Indigenous employees are generally required to tackle a number of other issues, outside the issues of running a commercial business. Some of these major issues are:

3.1 Welfare dependency

Welfare dependency is an enemy to Indigenous advancement.

A significant amount of energy is needed to encourage Indigenous people to seek an education and undergo further training so to enjoy wider economic benefits. They can do this without losing their language, culture or connection to country. Indeed, walking in two worlds is neither individualism or communitarianism but a walk which encapsulates both a commitment to family culture and country, and a commitment to individual career pathways.

3.2 Drugs

Indigenous people with drug issues are excluded from many forms of employment. This is particularly noticeable in the minerals resources sector.

ICC staff could, within a whole-of-government approach, with assistance from local Indigenous community organisations, help to identify and facilitate services that could be provided to assist with these kinds of issues.

I suggest one strategy may be drug education in schools that have large numbers of Indigenous students. The education should include how drug habits will impede one's career.

3.3 Literacy

Indigenous employees with English language constraints may also be excluded from employment opportunities. Literacy in financial matters can also be an impediment especially when one cannot manage their own financial affairs.

I suggest a whole-of-government approach to language and financial literacy training in:

- schools with large numbers of Indigenous students;
- Indigenous Regional Training Organisations; and
- existing places of employment.

4) Need for strategic assistance:

4.1 Transition from CDEP to mainstream employment

I suggest that there needs to be strategies put in place to facilitate the transition of Indigenous employees from CDEP to real mainstream employment. This needs to be addressed within a whole-of-government approach with key support of industry and Indigenous organisations.

I suggest that a proper approach should be regionally specific and case-by-case. For example, if prospective Indigenous employees under the age of 18, cannot be trained on a mining site because of statutory regulations which prevent underage access to the mining site by all accept apprentices (who are generally aged from 15 years), then there is the need for training centres in region which are located off-site. Such centres should be situated within an appropriate nationally accredited training centre which provides, for example, industry specific skills such as heavy machinery operator certified training - which may span a period of one to two years. Such centres could be funded with CDEP funding, grants, and industry investment (investment either monetarily or provision of trainers etc).

This strategy could provide a trained and skilled machinery operator workforce ready to work in the minerals resources sector in or outside their region. Such employment would evidence the transition from CDEP to mainstream employment.

This concept could apply to all necessary areas of training relevant to immediate and post mining era skills and training such as how to establish tourism and cultural art centres etc.

4.2 Venture investment:

I suggest that Indigenous employees and businesses cannot expand business operations alone. If opportunity arises for venture investment into Indigenous

business then such opportunities could be facilitated within a whole-of-government approach with support from industry and venture capitalists.

The aim is to have Indigenous businesses commercially competitive and sustainable for the long-term.

I suggest Indigenous businesses should be provided with appropriate information on what opportunities exist for joint ventures, and be open to assistance such as business training etc for the benefit of the venture.

I also suggest that joint ventures could be established for business projects ranging from \$50,000 to \$200,000. As there are Indigenous business initiatives such as small businesses that do not require as much in start-up costs.

This could be facilitated within a whole-of-government approach with industry support, Indigenous leaders support and Indigenous business support.

5) Recommendations:

The Committee may wish to consider the following recommendations:

- Indigenous cadets are provided the opportunity to undertake graduate programs as part of their cadetship.
- Indigenous cadets from Indigenous organisations undergo graduate rotations in key government agencies that have Indigenous specific portfolio responsibilities.
- Drug education in schools that have large numbers of Indigenous students. The education should include how drug habits will impede career choices.
- Literacy and financial literacy initiatives in schools that have large numbers of Indigenous students, and in existing workplaces where there are a significant number of Indigenous employees.
- CDEP Transitional Employment Training strategies in regions where there are a high number of prospective Indigenous employees who could enter mainstream employment opportunities in their region.
- Joint venture capital investment for small and medium sized Indigenous businesses ie joint investments ranging between \$50,000 to \$200,000.
- Indigenous Employment and Training Mobility initiatives and strategies for urban, rural and remote areas of Australia.