

RECEIVED
28 MAR 2006

BY: ATSIA

Submission No.	121
Date Received	28-3-06

**Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Affairs**

Submitted by:

John Corboy, Chairman, *Ladders to Success*
Paul Briggs, President, Rumbalara Football and Netball Club
Jim Andreadis, Boardmember, *Ladders to Success*
Neville Atkinson, Chairman, Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative Ltd
Tony Cutcliffe, Director, The Eureka Project Pty Ltd

for the Committee hearing at Melbourne, 11 April 2006

BACKGROUND

We are very pleased by the opportunity to meet with this committee to discuss our experiences associated with Indigenous employment in the Goulburn Valley region based in Shepparton, Victoria. Our involvement with, and exposure to, Indigenous employment issues is varied and of particular relevance is our experience with the *Ladders to Success* Indigenous employment programme. John Corboy, Paul Briggs, Jim Andreadis have been directly involved in establishing and operating the *Ladders* programme: Neville Atkinson chairs the Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative and Tony Cutcliffe has extensive involvement in analysing issues of Indigenous policy in the region.

Our personal and professional backgrounds are diverse and so is our experience associated with Indigenous employment in the region. However, the views we have established on the topic of Indigenous employment are quite consistently and uniformly shared. Our appearance before this Committee is not aimed at simply criticising the policies of present or previous governments, but is intended to share our views on the way in which more effective results can be obtained out of the present investments in Indigenous affairs.

By way of background, the *Ladders to Success* Indigenous employment programme was established in Shepparton under a Federal Government STEP programme in 2003 with around 75% of the funding coming from the Australian Government, and the remaining 25% from the State Government of Victoria. *Ladders* found employment for 125 Aboriginal people and around 80 of those jobs were established for periods of, or in excess of, 26 weeks in duration. The Board of *Ladders* made a commercial decision to close the programme in November last year because the supply of work-ready Aboriginal people was approaching exhaustion. We no longer felt it would be reasonable to invest taxpayer funds, and to excite the expectations of clients and employers, using a programme whose supply line had become constricted by the lack of connectivity between interdependent Indigenous programmes. Around 80 positions were on offer to work-ready Aboriginal people at the time of the closure and remain unavailed.

The *Ladders* board has formulated an alternative plan for the Goulburn Valley region to fill the current void and has advocated adoption of this programme in communication with the Australian Government over the last twelve months. The alternative proposal has met with little support from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations hitherto. However we are confident that Minister for Employment, Kevin Andrews, now has a more accurate and complete understanding of the issues following our recent meeting with him.

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

EXPERIENCE

There are a number of observations which we would tender in regard to Indigenous employment and related initiatives in the Goulburn Valley. We do not purport to speak for any wider community within Victoria or Australia, although we would be surprised if some common learnings did not become evident. We offer our views as follows:

1. Existing Indigenous employment programmes direct insufficient regard to the needs or natures of employers. The success of the *Ladders* programme owed much to the quality of the informal network that exists between small to medium sized employers in the region. The participation of employers was not attracted by subsidies, but by acceptance of the view from local business leaders that affirmative action was an essential measure if the broader community was to heal the sore presented by Aboriginal marginalisation. Employers demonstrated confidence in undertakings provided by their peers who undertook to provide the necessary levels of support and continuing interest required to make the employment successful. This was a professional and community affinity that the same employers were not, and are not, prepared to extend to Jobs Network providers.
2. The purely commercial nature of the Jobs Network agencies introduces market competition, but this generally works against its ability to succeed in placing Aboriginal people in long term, sustainable careers. This occurs because the purely competitive nature of the arrangements overlooks the social and educational elements of disadvantage that need to be addressed in lock-step with employment services. This expresses itself in a fee and reward structure that encourages Jobs Network providers to churn their clients through an ongoing series of positions, where high level statistical success conceals a tendency to push Aboriginal clients into a parade of short term, unsuccessful stints which leave both employer and employee angry and frustrated. The current emphasis on simply putting people into jobs, rather than keeping them in long term jobs, encourages Job Network providers to just recycle Indigenous jobseekers through a seemingly endless array of unsuccessful assignments.
3. Consistent with the above point, the current Jobs Network training allowances and supplements allow providers to warehouse Indigenous people who are effectively unemployable, and invest their training allocations on more feasible clients whose eventual employment yields the provider a more substantial fee. This means that young people who commonly have a family history of violence, intergenerational unemployment and persistent illiteracy, find that not only are their needs not addressed, but their frustration and anger are fanned by continued, superficial and unsuccessful employment stints. Such cases illustrate the very short term strategies inherent in the nature of existing programmes, when sustainable, remedial support for such individuals must be prescribed and measured in years not months. The more difficult cases which offer the greatest long term social and economic benefit attract the lowest provider return for the provision of the intensive help required by the client.
4. In cases such as these the client loses confidence in the system and sees it working against them, and correspondingly, the confidence and trust of employers is eroded equally. The lack of effective differentiation between short term jobs and sustainable careers continues to feed on itself and effectively produces an almost unending supply of unemployed Aboriginals to be recycled through the system to the benefit of Jobs Network providers.

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

5. The paucity of meaningful data regarding Indigenous employment, and the secrecy with which it is held by government, continue to hamper local efforts to rectify the problem of Indigenous unemployment. It is well known that “you can’t manage what you can’t measure” and it has proved impossible to obtain data which projects the quality and duration of Indigenous jobs being found by Jobs Network providers. For example, academic research commissioned by the Indigenous community in Shepparton suggests that Indigenous unemployment sits at around 80% and this is supported by experimental data gathered by the Australian Bureau of statistics. On the other hand, DEWR insists that Aboriginal unemployment in the Goulburn Valley region is 20%, but will not share the figures which it uses to arrive at this determination. It becomes exceedingly difficult to achieve consensus between DEWR and the local community, when their view of the problem is separated by 60 percentage points. The rudimentary information which is available often depicts success which is prone to exaggeration because of double dipping, which arises from multiple claims from different agencies for the one client. The exaggeration is also fed by the artificially low benchmark 15 hours employment per week constituting a ‘job’. It occurs to us that sometimes this information is so misleading that it may be worse than having no information at all.
6. There is a clear lack of connectivity between employment services, and those services which affect the causal activity which propagates unemployment. For example, there is a profound disconnect between primary, secondary and tertiary education, and between education and the employment market. This means that employment services will remain consistently focused on dealing with dysfunctional clients because no-one is turning the tap off. There needs to be clear and practical relationships established between the education and employment sectors and much greater levels of shared goals and activities and accountability. Equally, there needs to be greater recognition of necessary sectorial approaches, such as initiatives to assist young mothers back into the workforce when their children reach school age. It follows that insufficient links are established between the employment market and the physical and mental wellbeing services and initiatives; financial literacy and general visibility.
7. The local community experiences great difficulty in establishing engagement with DEWR relating to new and potentially successful initiatives regarding Indigenous employment. It seems to us that initiatives which are not conceived within the department are viewed with, at least, suspicion and more generally opposition or negativity. The relationship expresses itself in paternalism and condescension, which means that the Department and the community endeavour to satisfy their respective aspirations and responsibilities in a persistently adversarial environment.

CONCLUSION

It occurs to us that there is no ‘middle ground’ in the present approach to Indigenous employment. Clients are provided with only one direction in which to head, and that ultimately means that they either succeed or fail. Missing from the equation is an incremental approach which would see Indigenous clients gradually build up their bank of skills, experience, confidence and trust so that the likelihood of succeeding dominates the risk of failure. Sustainable employment for Indigenous

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

people in the Goulburn Valley can only be achieved, in our view, by taking a long term approach to cultivating and supporting job readiness. We are disturbed by the Department's 'one size fits all' approach which belies the difficulty of working with numerous, complex individuals who have experienced a diverse range of hardship and disadvantage.

The other element of particular concern to us is the level to which the issue of 'control' appears to dominate any existing or potential relationship between the Department and organisations such as *Ladders*. For example, we found that the alternative programme put forward by *Ladders* had languished for more than a year over previously unspoken concerns by the department about who would control the programme elements. It appears to us that 'control' becomes the fundamental criteria in negotiations with government, whereas, in our view, successful partnerships are more successfully propagated on the basis of mutual trust, equitable investment and shared reward. We believe that this approach by government is particularly counter-productive in the Indigenous community where matters are more effectively settled through local dialogue. As arrangements presently stand, Indigenous people in the Goulburn Valley are presented with a fait accompli, and they either accept this or go without. This is the exact antithesis to the successful formula which *Ladders* has demonstrated. It seems to us that the arrogance displayed by DEWR in the jobs arena and the broader COAG pilot in Shepparton, is characteristic of the Department's prevailing culture.

THE FUTURE

At our recent meeting with Minister Andrews we were encouraged to prepare a new proposal for consideration by the government which addresses those concerns which we have identified above. We intend to prepare that submission and we will be encouraging continued close and personal interest by the Minister.