

The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Parliament House
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REF: Aboriginal Urban Communities

The following is a synopsis of oral reports and informal interviews collected by Aboriginal members of our Council over the past few years.

- **Opportunities for improving the housing situation of urban dwelling Aboriginal people and their participation in decisions affecting local communities.**

***The Block*, in Redfern, Sydney was a small grant of urban land made by the Labor Government in 1971, It was the first of its kind and was made in recognition of the traditional cultural needs of Aboriginal people to live in close community groups.**

The Aboriginal Housing Company (the AHC) was set up, initially to support the existing community by providing low costs secure housing without the threat of evictions by investor landlords. Unfortunately the Directors and the Executive has become a landlord pursuing the same goals. Many houses in this historic precinct have been systematically demolished due to neglect and total lack of maintenance over many years. **The most recent demolition of twelve houses took place this month**, after the successful application to South Sydney Council, made during the general community distraction caused of the Olympic celebrations.

Over the years political and bureaucratic decisions within the AHC have resisted the democratic rights of residents to have **a say** in their community. Over the years too, many of the hard working residents have been continually refused membership and have given up and moved away.

The Federal Government health, medical, legal and child support services for Aboriginal people began in Redfern after 1971, **the first in the country.**

The Redfern housing project in its formative years was the model for a well-run, successful venture despite the cultural mix of Aboriginal 'nations'.

Over the past 28 years this sense of community has been gradually eroded. What went wrong? Was it ...

- market forces and the spread of the City proper to Redfern?
- the high sale & rental value of property (
- policies of the Aboriginal Housing Company, Redfern (funded at one time by ATSIC).
- successive former State and Local Government Land and Redevelopment policies. such as:

.1. The relocation of inner-city dwellers to Western and South Western Sydney.

.2. The suppression of the perceived **ghetto** mentality (community living)

3. **The redirection of the drug culture into the Block** and away from more public residential areas and the critical public eye ie King's Cross, Darlinghurst and other eastern suburbs. This has been accelerated in recent years due to the successful Olympic bid.

These decisions further reinforce the strong belief among Aboriginal people that dispersal and assimilation are 'alive and well'.

In 1998-9, the National Aboriginal History and Heritage Council undertook extensive investigation and historic research into the cultural importance and basic needs of residents living in and around this inner urban Aboriginal community in Redfern. A detailed submission was made to the Australian Heritage Commission and 'the Block' was **listed on the Register of the National Estate as an urban Aboriginal heritage area in October 2000.**

This submission was made with the hope of halting the present re-development and rehousing policies which have been continuously pursued by the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) in Redfern, one which has been consistently resisted by many residents with the support of many non Aboriginal individuals and groups.

Results of relocation policies:

Since the 1980's, many of the younger families resident on 'the Block', accept the lure of the **cream brick veneer** house on the city's edge. This caused many older residents to move as well in order to maintain family contact.

However, this has resulted in many social problems for the youth, elders and other members of the family. Particularly the isolation among the white and at times racist community.

Among problems reported is the lack of:

- family, extended family and community support
- job opportunities and /or youth programs
- access to community amenities: Aboriginal health, sporting facilities etc
- fast, efficient transport to and from work etc and the high cost of public and private travel.

Many older Aborigines, unable to adjust to the problems outlined above, have returned to Redfern and the Block, forced at times to reside in sub standard housing as the availability of rental properties diminish.

NB But most of all, the lack of the traditional extended family, grannies, aunties and uncles, so important in Aboriginal culture, is the primary cause of the high crime rate among Aboriginal youth in outer urban areas. The removal of Aborigines once more onto the fringe of cities and towns resonates in our history. We all have our roots among the earlier fringe dwellers of country towns.

Is this the old policy of *out of sight, out of mind*? It didn't work then and it doesn't work now

Removing the problem to the isolated fringes does not change the problem. In some areas where Aboriginal people live in State housing projects, the urban ghetto is thriving. The cycle of poverty, child abuse and wife bashing continues behind the suburban facades and beneath the scream of the ghetto blaster.

- **How to improve the housing situation for Aboriginal urban dwellers and provide opportunities for Aboriginal people to become economically independent.**

Historically, this movement for economic independence has taken place since the depression in the 1890's. Aboriginal men came down to the city seeking work in the Everleigh Railway Workshops and the new factories, which developed around Redfern station. The numbers grew even larger during the Depression of the 1930's.

Families, friends and relatives soon followed and 'the Block' became a safe haven for Aborigines away from the Reserves and other repressive government policies, until full citizenship rights were granted in 1967. This was also evident at La Perouse. This threat of forced removal and insecurity led to strong general community support. The divisions of nation, language, clan and family were accommodated and respected.

NB Aboriginal families were not dependent on Government hand-outs, but were economically and socially independent, even if poor.

Great Aboriginal leaders emerged from around the country and united to take up the fight for equal citizen and human rights. They even produced an Aboriginal newspaper, 'The Abo Call' and William Cooper petitioned the Federal Government to grant their Ten Point Plan, so ironically alluded to when the present Federal Government was legislating on Aboriginal Land Rights.

But, the mixing of different 'nations' of Aboriginal people in housing projects began during the dispersal period of white settlement and expansion: on Missions and Reserves cultural dislocation was evident. These particular clan allegiances and loyalties, together with the history of unresolved family disputes is a recipe for disaster and causes great disruption and distrust today within mixed Aboriginal communities, especially in regional urban areas.

- **What caused these changes to Aboriginal urban culture?**

Since the development of ATSIC, Aboriginal Land Councils, and Aboriginal Bureaucracies (with their sub strata of departments) to administer **Government policy and money**, old disputes have resurfaced and powerful lobby groups have been generated. In many areas of the country, one Aboriginal *nation* (usually not the Traditional owners) have taken a stranglehold over the Housing Co-op, the Local Aboriginal Land Council etc

The phrases, **Government hand-outs** and '**looking after family**', have taken on new meanings. Many of those most in need, go without support. This system of fighting for the Government 'spoils' has also promoted dependency and lack of independent economic initiatives.

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In many of the urban communities this has resulted in a lack trust at the local level of Aboriginal services. The family loyalty system too, has led to the appointment of untrained and unsuitable people to positions of power and responsibility in both Government and Aboriginal departments.

Owning your own home is not historically an important step for Aboriginal families, however, Local Aboriginal Building Co-operatives could be the answer, providing long term employment options and as training ventures for Aboriginal youth. But putting the seeding funding into an Aboriginal Company with no accountability is not the answer. (as painfully evident in Redfern).

Also, within the urban communities, the basic mistrust of '**the state**' as represented by police, by institutions and the ruling bureaucracy, **extends unfortunately, to the Federal Government and its own departments.**

- **Why is this so?**

Successive Federal government policies have failed Aboriginal people in their basic right to life and liberty. They have failed to address the growing and continuing problems of *deaths in custody, mandatory sentencing and the huge proportion of young Aborigines in prison*, each of which affects Aboriginal people at every level and in every community.

No amount of money will change that!

- **Results of Community perceptions and mistrust.**

There is still an alarming number of Aboriginal people who do not vote in State and Federal elections. When recently questioned about the ATSIC elections the answer was... **'we don't have to vote... we're not on the census!** Many of the people questioned receive Government Benefits but still have the 'mission mentality' that they are not part of the general society.

Could the Federal electoral office change this?

There is also much to be said for the Federal Government resuming greater control over Aboriginal funding and social policy over the States.

Since the relinquishment of many federal powers Aboriginal affairs has fallen into petty quarrels and lack of accountability. The departments of ATSIC and Aboriginal Land Councils and other bodies must be more accountable.

- **The maintenance of Aboriginal culture in urban areas and issues affecting Aboriginal youth.**

1. The setting up of Heritage and *keeping houses* in country areas has done much to raise the level of pride in traditional Aboriginal cultures. The Aboriginal Art Industry, so called, has brought economic growth to the country, but doesn't appear to have affected the *grass roots* economy of particular urban communities.

Sadly much of the vital urban Aboriginal art is created in Government prisons. The Bathurst prison is even building a '*goanna totem*' wing designed by inmates to accommodate the Aboriginal community incarcerated inside. The irony of this is appalling!

2. Aboriginal youth should be placed with an Aboriginal mentor, preferably from his/her own language group. And or work on Aboriginal community projects as part of their sentence.

For too long, Aboriginal lore has been denigrated and refused recognition. In many cases white legal processes and the culture of imprisonment promote hopelessness and despair on the one hand and a dependency and a safety net on the other. Rarely does it force Aboriginal youths to face up to their crime or to be responsible for their actions; nor does it offer an alternative to crime!

Culture cannot flourish in an atmosphere of boredom and a lack of employment prospects, but crime does. **Our council aims to promote a pride and awareness of Aboriginal history within the urban community.**

3. Pride in Aboriginal culture flourishes also in schools, which have good numbers of Aboriginal students such as Cleveland Street and Matraville High Schools and the La Perouse and Darlington Primary schools; special Aboriginal programs are very successful.

There is also a great need to promote compulsory courses in Aboriginal history and culture within the mainstream schools both private and public. This would also develop community appreciation of Aboriginal people generally and dispel so many of the negative media myths such as that of a *hopeless drunken criminal class* as often portrayed in the electronic media.

Conclusion:

1. Aboriginal people generally, need the support of a shared community, of other Aboriginal families, of extended family and clan. Schools from these communities, which have high Aboriginal attendance, produce more stable culturally informed students.

2. The shortage of available and affordable housing in inner city areas is a growing concern. THIS has prompted the spread of urban Aborigines into the mainstream society at the outer areas of big cities, such as Sydney; many live in high rise and unit dwellings (State Housing) and complain of isolation and a sense of insecurity.

3. Aboriginal people need to be more self-reliant and be allowed to make their own decisions. Many are afraid to complain of the injustices and corruption, as they rely on the Aboriginal Bureaucracy to get Government support in Health, Housing etc. **Urban Aborigines often feel shut out by the massive wall of bureaucracy, especially the black wall of 'coconuts'**. (black on the outside, white on the inside).

4. The Land Councils have more power and authority, as they now manage their own financial affairs and make their own decisions. This gives even less opportunity for the community voice to be heard and has created power blocks. All Aboriginal authorities must be more accountable.

But accountable to whom ?

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