



**Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Affairs: Institutional Factors
Contributing to Racism, Hatred and Violence Directed at First
Nations People**

Inquiry into Racism, Hate and Violence Directed at First Nations Peoples
Institutional Factors Contributing to Racism, Hatred and Violence Directed at First Nations
Peoples

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Executive Summary

Racism, hatred and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples cannot be understood only as isolated acts of individual prejudice. They are also produced and reinforced through institutional systems, policy settings and administrative practices that continue to reflect historic inequities and unequal distributions of power.

This submission focuses on structural and institutional factors that can contribute to discriminatory outcomes, including the persistent disconnect between government systems and community-led decision making, the concentration of sector influence within a relatively narrow set of organisations, and funding and commissioning models that can unintentionally create competition within the Aboriginal community-controlled sector.

The submission supports reforms that strengthen self-determination, expand inclusive representation in policy development, improve transparency in government engagement, reform competitive funding settings, and embed cultural safety and anti-racism accountability across institutions. It also notes the relevance of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as an important human rights framework for guiding reform, particularly in relation to self-determination, participation in decision making, and the right of Indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their own institutions.

1. Government Reform, Institutional Disconnect and Structural Barriers

Addressing racism, hatred and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples requires attention to the policy and institutional environments in which these harms occur. Many of the challenges experienced by communities are embedded within systems, funding structures and decision-making processes that have historically excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices. Without reform to these underlying governance and policy settings, responses risk focusing only on individual incidents rather than addressing the structural conditions that allow these harms to persist.

A key issue contributing to these dynamics is the persistent disconnect between institutional government systems and the principles of Aboriginal self-determination and community governance. While many policy statements acknowledge the importance of community-led approaches, government systems frequently continue to operate through administrative and policy frameworks that are designed without meaningful participation by Indigenous communities.

As a result, many programs and policies are developed within government institutions and subsequently implemented within communities, rather than being designed and led by those communities themselves. This top-down approach can reinforce systemic inequities and contribute to ongoing experiences of discrimination within institutional systems.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, interactions with government institutions including health, justice, education and social service systems can involve experiences of cultural misunderstanding, unequal treatment, or exclusion from decision-making processes. These experiences are cumulative and contribute to a broader perception that institutional systems are not designed with Indigenous peoples in mind.

The commitments made by Australian governments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap recognise that structural reform is required to address entrenched inequities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In particular, the Agreement's structural reform priorities shared decision-making, strengthening the community-controlled sector, transforming government organisations and improving access to data acknowledge that systemic barriers within institutions contribute to ongoing disadvantages.

Addressing racism, hatred and violence therefore require governments to move beyond individual responses and implement these structural reforms in practice.

2. Human Rights and the Right of Indigenous Peoples to Self-Determination

In considering institutional drivers of racism and exclusion, it is also important to situate reform within a broader human rights framework. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, participation in decision making, the maintenance of their own institutions, and freedom from discrimination.

Although the Declaration is not domestic legislation, it remains an important normative framework for governments and public institutions. It provides a clear benchmark for assessing whether policy and administrative systems are enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to exercise meaningful authority over decisions that affect their communities.

Consistent with this framework, the Australian Government should continue to strengthen its commitment to reforms that support self-determination, genuine partnership, and accountability for systemic racism across public institutions.

3. Concentration of Sector Influence in Government Engagement

An emerging institutional issue within policy environments is the concentration of sector influence in consultation and decision-making processes.

While national peak bodies and larger Aboriginal organisations play an important role in representing the sector, there is growing concern that engagement between government and Aboriginal organisations can become concentrated among a relatively small number of organisations that have the capacity, scale, or established institutional relationships to participate in national policy processes.

This can result in greater access to consultation processes, advisory groups and policy forums for organisations operating within larger, nationally recognised systems, while other Aboriginal

community-controlled organisations may have limited opportunities to engage directly with government.

This is particularly relevant for organisations that are smaller, regionally based, locally governed, or operating in areas such as social and emotional wellbeing, justice, education, allied health, cultural programs, healing, community development, and family support.

Where consultation and policy engagement processes are concentrated among a limited group of organisations, there is a risk that the diversity of community perspectives is not adequately reflected in policy development. This can unintentionally reproduce institutional exclusion, even where consultation mechanisms appear formally available.

4. Institutional Funding Systems and Competition Within the Community-Controlled Sector

A further structural issue relates to the way government funding and commissioning systems are designed and implemented.

The Aboriginal community-controlled sector was established on principles of community governance, collective responsibility and self-determination. These organisations were created to ensure that services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are designed, delivered and governed by communities themselves. However, contemporary government funding frameworks increasingly rely on competitive grant processes and procurement models that do not always align with these foundational principles.

From a justice and equity perspective, these arrangements can create structural conditions that unintentionally undermine collaboration and community-led development. Competitive funding processes may require Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to compete with one another for limited resources, rather than supporting coordinated, collective responses to community priorities.

These systems can privilege organisations with greater infrastructure, established government relationships, or stronger administrative capacity, while smaller, emerging, or locally based organisations can face barriers to accessing funding. They can also disadvantage organisations delivering services outside dominant policy priorities or established funding streams.

In some cases, these dynamics contribute to the concentration of resources and institutional influence among a smaller number of organisations, which may inadvertently marginalise other community-controlled organisations that play vital roles within their communities.

These institutionalised systems can produce conditions in which Aboriginal community-controlled organisations are required to compete against one another within frameworks not designed around cooperation, collective governance, or place-based community priorities. This is a structural policy problem rather than a reflection of weakness within the sector itself.

While competitive procurement systems are a common feature of government administration, their application within the Aboriginal community-controlled sector requires careful reconsideration. Equitable funding arrangements should support a diverse ecosystem of community-controlled organisations and strengthen the principles of self-determination, collective governance and community accountability that underpin the sector.

5. Institutional Reform and Structural Change

Addressing racism, hatred and violence directed at Indigenous peoples requires governments to consider how institutional systems distribute influence, resources and decision-making authority.

Structural reform should aim to ensure that government systems operate in ways that are inclusive, culturally safe and responsive to the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities.

This includes recognising the importance of a diverse community-controlled sector, where organisations operating across different service areas and regions can contribute to policy development, service design and implementation.

Ensuring that policy processes reflect the voices of a wide range of Aboriginal organisations is essential to maintaining the integrity of community control and self-determination.

6. Recommendations

1. Strengthen shared decision-making mechanisms with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations so that policy development occurs in genuine partnership with communities.
2. Ensure consultation and advisory structures include a diverse range of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, including those outside primary health care systems or dominant national alliances.
3. Increase transparency regarding how organisations are selected to participate in policy consultations, advisory bodies and sector partnerships.
4. Review funding and commissioning models so they do not unintentionally create competitive pressures between community-controlled organisations, and expand collaborative, place-based and long-term funding approaches.
5. Embed cultural safety and anti-racism frameworks across government institutions, supported by leadership accountability, independent monitoring and regular public reporting.
6. Invest in the sustainability of the community-controlled sector, including targeted support for smaller and emerging organisations to participate in policy development and service delivery.
7. Consider establishing a National Taskforce on Addressing Racism, Hatred and Violence Directed at Indigenous Peoples to oversee systematic review and reform of Australian Government policies, procedures and institutional practices that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Proposed National Taskforce

The establishment of a National Taskforce should be progressed through an open and transparent Expression of Interest (EOI) process rather than through appointments made solely by government or individual organisations. An EOI process would enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, community-controlled organisations, subject matter experts and practitioners with lived and professional experience to put themselves forward for consideration. This approach supports fairness, transparency and independence, while ensuring the Taskforce draws on a diverse range of expertise across community, service delivery, policy, research and governance. Importantly, it would help avoid perceptions that membership reflects institutional representation alone and instead prioritise the skills,

knowledge and experience required to address systemic racism, hatred and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

7. Conclusion

Racism, hatred and violence directed at Indigenous peoples are deeply connected to the ways institutional systems distribute power, influence and resources.

Addressing these issues requires governments to move beyond consultation toward structural reforms that strengthen self-determination, support the diversity of the community-controlled sector, and ensure institutional systems are accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

By reforming governance structures, consultation processes and funding frameworks, governments can contribute to building systems that are more equitable, culturally safe and responsive to the needs and leadership of First Nations peoples.