

Submission to Inquiry on Regional Australia

My submission to this inquiry relates to the scope therein, that is what is taken to be regional Australia. The terms of reference explicitly state other components of the scope, e.g. economy, service delivery, infrastructure.

According to the Regional Australia Institute, regional Australia is comprised of “all of the towns, small cities and areas that lie beyond the major capital cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Canberra).” I would like to emphasise the importance of including and specifically considering remote areas and communities in your committee deliberations. These are no less regional areas than Tamworth in the hopefully intended purpose of the inquiry.

Remote communities are central to Australian culture by definition. Descendants of first Australians live in these communities as proximity to their own lands is a central component of their culture. Given that destruction of culture is understood to be an act of genocide (e.g. forcibly removing children from their culture), preserving and enhancing remote communities, and the ability for people to live on their traditional lands, is an act against genocide. Further, different communities symbolise different and diverse cultures, so each community is important for preserving different cultures. I will not discuss homelands specifically here, but many of the considerations are the same if not emphasised.

Disadvantage in regional areas is often spoken about. However consider the services in a remote community, which are often a general store, petrol pump and airstrip for delivery of supplies and mail. Economies, service delivery and the like function completely differently to mainstream Australia (more so than what mainstream Australia would stereotypically associate with regional matters). I sincerely hope your committee makes an effort to understand some of these differences and the opportunities they bring, while looking to make improvements which are culturally appropriate, when making recommendations.

Like regional areas generally, remote areas/communities are incredibly diverse. A solution which works on one place will not necessarily work in another. Likewise the local issues in one place maybe quite different to another place even relatively close by. I hope your deliberations and recommendations take into account this diversity, and in fact this diversity taken to be a key strength of each community.

Given this diversity, regional Australia policy, and recommendations from this process, need to be flexible while taking into specific consideration the unique circumstances and opportunities of remote communities and homelands. This would necessarily involve working closely with local Indigenous councils and other relevant organisations. For example, in central Australia it would be important to work with organisations such as the NPY Women's Council. Having arbitrary government anointed broader regional bodies would be no substitute for this genuine consultation. On this basis, I hope that the National Indigenous Australians Agency and the Australian Human Rights Commission prepare submissions to, and/or meaningfully input to the government's response to this inquiry.

A further consideration with respect to remote communities, as opposed to regional Australia more broadly, is deficit discourse. It is important to take a balanced or strengths based approach to remote communities. Politicians always promote “mainstream” regional Australia for example the contribution of regions to GDP or whatever, but many people speak down about remote communities. We even have

a former prime minister describing communities, and thus first peoples' cultures, as a lifestyle choice. Despite the issues caused by remoteness in communities, people living there is a triumph of culture, identity and hope over the tyranny of distance, centuries of cultural dispossession, and the cultural dissonance of governments/their officials. These strengths should be actively considered by any development of regional Australia policy, with a view to facilitating communities to enhance these strengths. Just as importantly, people in powerful places such as politicians and media organisations need to get past their uninformed deficit only thinking and commentary. I would love to see this committee prepare recommendations aimed at ensuring a balanced perspective on remote Australia.

Please see below a link to a summary prepared by the Lowitja Institute on the concept of deficit discourse, and the large reinforcing effect it can have on outcomes.

https://ncis.anu.edu.au/lib/doc/ddih/Deficit_Discourse_summary_report_WEB.pdf

I urge the committee to start Australia on a path where positive outcomes are reinforced for all on the regions.