

CAPACITY BUILDING  
INQUIRY  
Submission No. ....58.....

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

Inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities

## **SUBMISSION**

**Prepared by  
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## **Abandoning the collective model in Indigenous Affairs**

As a consultant who has worked in the Aboriginal affairs area for over twenty years, I am a little amazed to see members of the Australian Parliament carrying out yet another expensive inquiry in the capacity of Indigenous communities to better manage their communities.

A similar standing committee then chaired by Warren Snowdon, who I note is a member of your committee, compiled what I considered to be a good report, entitled "*A change for the future: training in skills for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community management and development*". Despite considerable spending by the Commonwealth Government over the subsequent years I predict that your committee will discover little improvement, if any, since the Snowdon report. In fact, the "Violence in Indigenous Communities" report would suggest that conditions have deteriorated.

I also note that in a Canberra Times report of 18 January 2003, the new Chief Executive Officer of ATSIC, which is the Commonwealth Government chief co-ordinating agency in the Indigenous area, admitted that "the National office of ATSIC when I arrived was close to dysfunctional". How can the members of the Australian Parliament expect Indigenous communities to better administrated if ATSIC can not be run efficiently.

The Courier Mail on 14 February 2003 reported the Chairman of the National Indigenous Development Alliance and Deputy Chairman of ATSIC is facing forgery charges and a business he heads (Bidjara Motors Corporation) has gone into voluntary administration. The outcomes of ATSIC's Business Development Program have been less than impressive. The Minister managed to get an agreement from the ATSIC Board for a yet another review of Indigenous business in February 2002. While Indigenous businesses are based on the collective model they are bound to continue to fail. The Collective model didn't work in Russia why would it work with Australian Aborigines?

The 2001 Census of Population and Housing showed that 27% of Indigenous community housing was in need of major repair or replacement. This was down from 29% in the previous census, hardly great progress given the funds injected.

The Australian of 18 February 2003 reported that the Building Additional Regional Networks (BARN) program of the Department of Communication can not spend its allocated funds. I wonder if the administrators of this program have any knowledge of the digital divide in most remote Indigenous communities. Perhaps this committee could bring it to their attention?

It is against this background that I will make some comments against your terms of reference but I think the performance of Commonwealth agencies involved with Indigenous communities over the past 14 years has been uncoordinated, wasteful and retrogressive.

### Comments against term of reference (a)

In March 2002, the Commonwealth Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs gave a "Changing Direction" speech, where he outlined five priority areas. They were:

- A greater emphasis on the individual , displacing the traditional focus on community organisations;
- Better education as a basis for better employment outcomes;
- An emphasis on the responsibilities of Indigenous people, including individual responsibility, in a partnership with government;
- A particularly focus on substance abuse as a basis for improvements in health; and
- Improving Indigenous access to mainstream programs.

Almost twelve months later, I have yet to see ATSIC's policies or programs reflect the Minister's new direction.

One of the simplest actions that the Board of ATSIC could have taken would have been to inject \$20 million into the ATSIC Home Ownership program. This program received \$25 million in 1990 when ATSIC was established and an additional \$10 in 1992. The remainder of its funds are self generating from interest and capital repayments. By any objective evaluation this program has been one of ATSIC's few success stories but it has attracted least funding support. Currently, there are approximately 700 applicants on the waiting list for ATSIC home loans. To my knowledge no study has been made of ways this program could be made more accessible or affordable to Aboriginal families. Clearly the interest rate could be reduced for lower income families if more funds were injected into this program.

With regard to discrete Indigenous communities I believe no further grant funding should be made to repair or construct houses unless community members who are to benefit from the grant funds contribute "sweat equity" into the repairs or construction either as CDEP participants or through a building-training scheme. People have little respect for houses which they get for free or make little or no contribution to their construction. TAFE has a much greater role to play in delivering vocational education in remote communities. Using outside contractors to undertake this work provides no capacity building or pride in achievement for the residents. I understand that the Department of Employment and Workplace relation's Indigenous Employment Policy has unfilled positions. However, the history of ATSIC and DEET (former agency) working in a coordinated manner does not hold out much hope of greater strategic planning and program coordination in the future.

The other area which the committee needs to examine is ways of breaking up collective title of discrete communities so that individual title is transferred from community organisations to individuals provided that they are prepared to accept the

responsibility for the payment of rates and to insurance and maintain the improvements. At present there is no incentive for residents to move to this form of ownership. Incentives need to be developed for this change to occur. Section 40 of the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act would allow for 99 year leases to be given to individual residents.

Likewise land held under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 or land purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation needs to be transferred from collective ownership to individual ownership. The individuals should like all Australians have the right to mortgage their title or to sell them on the open property market. Of course, the Northern and Central Land Councils with their parliamentary friends would resist such a change but this approach would be far more preferable to what was proposed in the Reeves Report.

#### Comments on Term of Reference (b)

Integrated Local Area Planning done at the community level offers the best approach to coordination of all government services and improved delivery. The problem is the lack of planning and community development skills at the local level. When any community planning has been attempted in the past an outside consultant is usually hired and after minimal consultation a community development plan is produced of which the community has little ownership because they have not been involved in its development process. There is nothing new in this suggestion. I would refer you to page 26 of Snowden's report. The question for your Committee to ask government agencies is why it has not happened 14 years later.

For the past three years or so, ATSIC has been bogged down trying to put legalistic Community Participation Agreements in place. I believe this is the completely wrong approach. An Integrated Local Area Plan, which the local residents have genuine input into and a sense of ownership is a better method. This bottom up planning should allow Indigenous community leaders to say to fly-by-night Government agencies this is the direction which our community wishes to go what can your agency do to assist us? Rather than the government agencies all with different agendas saying that these are the hops you must jump over to receive our program dollars. This would require a sizeable shift in the thinking of Government agencies and community development training of a number of Indigenous people from remote communities with little formal education.

The other area which requires your Committee's attention is local Government reform in the Northern Territory and Queensland. I believe until discrete Aboriginal Communities are integrated into mainstream Local Government in Queensland, the residents will remain an isolated second-class citizens. Surely it's time to review a system of local governance established when Joh Bjelke Petersen was Premier of Queensland. Obviously, this needs to be a Joint Commonwealth/Queensland Government exercise with the involvement of the Queensland Local Government Association. The Northern Territory system of Local Government is also long overdue for an independent review. My believe is that about 16 Shire Councils need to be established and pastoral properties made to contribute to a general rate. However without a change from collective Aboriginal land title to individual title it is doubtful if this local government reform could be achieved.

### Comments on Term of Reference (c)

Despite the *National Commitment to Improved outcomes in the Delivery of Programs and Services for Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders*, which was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments way back on 7 December 1992, little has improved at the local community level for Indigenous people.

Little real Vocational Education and Training has occurred in management, community development and financial management. Most Indigenous Community Government Council has non-Indigenous Chief Executive Officers and office administration staff. Where has the career paths and vocational educational effort been in this area?

With regard to the CDEP scheme, I believe one of its many failing has been its inability to delivery national accredited vocation training to its participants. There has been very little capacity building under this national program and little cooperation from the Commonwealth agency responsible for the creation of Indigenous employment in remote areas of Australia.

Finally, I wish to make mention of what I consider to be one of the worst examples of public administration in the Commonwealth Public Service in recent years. I refer to the implementation of ATSIIC 2000 by the former CEO of ATSIIC. The decentralisation of national program administration to state capitals and the division of program administration from policy formulation was a costly disaster which certainly did not improve ATSIIC's already poor capacity to deliver quality programs or policy advice. I would like to see your Committee investigate this \$5 million waste of taxpayer's funds. One can not expect Indigenous communities to improve their capacity and performance if highly-paid public administrators who perform poorly are never called to account. In fact, the officer concerned has been promoted to manage a bigger Commonwealth Department. What a joke on the Australian taxpayer! The 5 million dollars waste of administrative expenses in relocation and recruitment of new staff could have been spent on providing individual home loans to Indigenous families. This is to say nothing of the corporate knowledge and experience, which ATSIIC lost in this futile process.

I believe it is time to abandon the collective model in Indigenous affairs because it has failed over the past thirty years and to focus on integrating remote Indigenous people into the mainstream economy. This will require more productive effort in the areas of local food production, and housing and infrastructure. However unless we encourage a move to family land title and owner-operated businesses it is difficult to see little hope of success.

While not expecting much constructive change to come out of your report, I look forward to reading its recommendations.