



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

**Reference: Community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
communities**

WEDNESDAY, 1 APRIL 2009

MER (MURRAY) ISLAND

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

Wednesday, 1 April 2009

Members: Mr Marles (*Chair*), Mr Laming (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Abbott, Ms Campbell, Mr Katter, Ms Rea, Mr Kelvin Thomson, Mr Trevor, Mr Turnour and Mrs Vale

Members in attendance: Mr Katter, Mr Marles, Mr Turnour and Mrs Vale

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The operation of local community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with a particular focus on:

- food supply, quality, cost and competition issues;
- the effectiveness of the Outback Stores model, and other private, public and community store models; and
- the impact of these factors on the health and economic outcomes of communities.

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Committee met at 10.22 am**DAY, Mr Ron, Councillor, Torres Island Regional Council, Division 15, Mer Island**

Mr Day—Welcome, everyone, here this morning. Thank you for your time for this meeting. I especially want to welcome our guests, the parliamentary committee. They are consulting with people over the cost of living. I welcome you all to Murray Island. Mer, as you might know, is the home of the Mabo case. It is a privilege to have you here today. I know that you are very busy in your work. We appreciate your time to make it out here to meet with Meriam people. Thank you very much.

CHAIR (Mr Marles)—Thank you, Councillor Day. I would like to welcome everyone here to this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs on our inquiry into remote community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities. I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and pay our respects to the elders past, present and future. The committee would also like to acknowledge present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who reside in this area today. The committee is very glad to be here and very thankful to the Mer Island community for receiving us here today and allowing us to conduct this public hearing in this place. At a personal level, I was studying law in 1992, I think, when the Mabo case happened, so it is a real thrill for me to be here at the home of Mabo and where these really great issues of our nation were determined.

There is a formal part to these proceedings. This is a formal proceeding of the Commonwealth parliament. Everything you say, those of you who are giving evidence today, needs to be factual and honest. It can be considered a serious matter to attempt to mislead this committee. I would invite all those who want to give evidence to this committee to make comments which will assist us in our inquiry and our intention to try and make improvements in the way that government administers community stores. This is a public hearing, and the transcript of what is said will be placed on the committee's website. If you would like any more information about the transcripts or, indeed, about the inquiry then you can approach the inquiry staff who are scattered around the room.

At the conclusion of the formal part of the hearing, we will have an open forum. We would like to invite any of you who have an interest or would like to make a contribution to this discussion to say something about your experiences of using the community store here on Mer Island.

I am going to get the members of the committee to introduce themselves in a moment. One of those members is of course your local member, Jim Turnour. A large part of why we are here is the advocacy that Jim has provided around this issue and his desire to see a parliamentary inquiry into the cost of living in the Torres Strait and the state of community stores here. I just wanted to place on record that we are here very much due to his great work around this issue. With that, I will ask the members of the committee to introduce themselves.

Mrs VALE—Good morning, everyone, and thank you for being able to be here with us this morning. I am the federal member for Hughes, which is in the southern part of Sydney in New South Wales. Part of my area is bounded by the Georges River, which flows into Botany Bay,

and the Royal National Park is not far to the south. That might help you place it geographically. It is a privilege to be here and I acknowledge the elders and the traditional owners of this place.

Mr KATTER—Some of you would remember me from days past. It is lovely to be here again.

Mr TURNOUR—It is great to be here. I would like to acknowledge the elders and traditional owners here. I thank you for having us again here on the island and look forward to hearing from you this morning. Over many years I have heard people's stories. This is a great opportunity to put your issues on the record with the federal parliament, so thank you for coming this morning.

CHAIR—I am the member for Corio. Corio is based on Geelong in Victoria.

[10.27 am]

PASSI, Mr Andrew, Assistant Manager, Islanders Board of Industries and Services

CHAIR—Andrew, is there anything you would like to say up-front, or would you like us to ask you questions? Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Passi—No.

CHAIR—You work at the IBIS store here on the island right now?

Mr Passi—Yes.

CHAIR—How long have you been working there?

Mr Passi—Probably 11 or 12 years.

CHAIR—Is that 12 years on Mer Island or 12 years with IBIS?

Mr Passi—I spent two months managing on Yam Island and nine months in Kubin village.

CHAIR—But you have been managing the store here on Mer Island for—

Mr Passi—I stood down for certain reasons—head office did not agree with me in certain ways on what I wanted to do for my people, and there was pressure from certain people that probably thought I did not do enough.

CHAIR—What is your current position at the store?

Mr Passi—I am second in charge now.

CHAIR—You were working as the store manager up until recently. When did you become the second in charge?

Mr Passi—About five years ago.

CHAIR—When did you stop being the manager and start being the second in charge? Was that a recent event?

Mr Passi—After I came back from Kubin, five or six years ago.

CHAIR—So you have been managing the store for five years.

Mr Passi—When the manager is away I take over the management. When she is away I take over, but I stepped down five or six years ago. I was asked to take over but I refused to because of certain—

CHAIR—Sorry, so you stepped down five or six weeks ago; is that what you said?

Mr Passi—Years ago.

CHAIR—So you have been the second in charge for five or six years—

Mr Passi—Yes.

CHAIR—and you step in as the manager when the current manager is away?

Mr Passi—That is right.

CHAIR—I see. Prior to that you were the manager?

Mr Passi—Sort of, yes. When my manager was away I would take over.

CHAIR—I have some basic questions but, firstly, but I am interested in the circumstances of why you stepped down. How many people does the store employ?

Mr Passi—I think there are three full-time and three part-time.

CHAIR—Are any of those people employed under CDEP?

Mr Passi—There are about one or two.

CHAIR—The store is supplied once a week?

Mr Passi—Once a week, yes.

CHAIR—What day is it supplied normally?

Mr Passi—Most of the time on a Monday, and sometimes on a Tuesday.

CHAIR—Which day was it supplied this week?

Mr Passi—Yesterday, Tuesday.

CHAIR—And that was a day late?

Mr Passi—A day late.

CHAIR—Is that unusual?

Mr Passi—No. It is most of the time like that.

CHAIR—Going back to the circumstances of your stepping down, can you explain again why you stepped down from being the manager of the store?

Mr Passi—I used to do the ordering. I would tell them what to send and to reduce certain products and increase certain products. After a while I would tell them about fruit and vegies. I said, 'Some of the stuff you send here we do not eat.' They said, 'No, we'll send it.' It was probably part of the policy or whatever on all the nutrition that was to be provided for people. But most of the things we would throw out and the money could have been spent on something to benefit our community.

CHAIR—Are we talking particularly about fresh fruit and vegetables?

Mr Passi—Most are fruit and vegies.

CHAIR—So were you ever able to tell the IBIS head office what fruit and vegetables people wanted to buy?

Mr Passi—Yes. I always did.

CHAIR—Did the IBIS head office listen to you when you told them that?

Mr Passi—Not really. They sent what they wanted us to eat.

CHAIR—Can you give an example of the kinds of vegetables which are sent up here and people do not like to eat?

Mr Passi—They send a lot of kiwifruit and we throw most of them out.

CHAIR—So you would say that most of the kiwifruit ends up being thrown out?

Mr Passi—Yes, thrown out; kiwifruit, honeydew, celery. They sell celery in a big bunch. People like a small amount to eat.

CHAIR—So people are not eating the celery?

Mr Passi—Not all of the people.

CHAIR—Are their fruit and vegetables that people are willing to eat?

Mr Passi—Yes, if we get extra apples, lettuces. I list my main ones and fax it down to them. I ask, 'Why do you send extra that we do not use?' They say, 'No.'

CHAIR—In terms of other product lines that were not fresh fruit and vegetables—dried goods—did you ever have similar problems in relation to them?

Mr Passi—Yes, with all of them.

CHAIR—So there were items that were not selling but you were continually being supplied with?

Mr Passi—That is right.

CHAIR—So you raised these concerns and they were not being listened to and that is the reason why you ultimately stepped down?

Mr Passi—That is right—because they would not listen to me.

CHAIR—Do you think they are listening to your successor? Have things changed since you stepped down, or is it still the same product that is coming up here?

Mr Passi—The same. There are no changes.

CHAIR—Of the fresh fruit and vegetables, taken as a whole, how much is sold by the end of the week?

Mr Passi—Half of them are sold and the other half thrown out.

CHAIR—You reckon half the fruit and vegies that you get supplied end up being thrown out at the end of the week?

Mr Passi—That is right.

CHAIR—All the meat comes in frozen—is that right?

Mr Passi—That is right.

CHAIR—Does that sell well?

Mr Passi—It does, yes. Meat sells well. We have changed company now to get better quality product, but we do not get enough meat for what people need.

CHAIR—How often do the IBIS head office people come out to the island and talk to you about how the store is going?

Mr Passi—Probably once in five to six months, I think, they come from head office.

CHAIR—So they would come out two or three times a year to have a look at how the store is running?

Mr Passi—That is right.

CHAIR—Is there a standard order which they send up every week, or is there some kind of inventory management which happens through a computer?

Mr Passi—They have a whole system set up. Certain things are sent out to the island. Probably when they visit they just press the button and the same products come out. Most of them are already here, if they do not sell much. Extra comes in and takes up all the space where we pack all the other stuff.

CHAIR—Is there a computer recording what items have been sold?

Mr Passi—Only in head office, but we do not see all the results of what we sell and all that. They do not provide to us that information.

CHAIR—They do not provide that information.

Mr Passi—No.

CHAIR—But when somebody purchases something on this island here, that information is being recorded in Cairns?

Mr Passi—Yes.

CHAIR—I see, through the computer. Are there items of stock that you tend to run out of commonly—milk, for example? Are there certain things that run out normally before the barge comes in at the end of the week, or the beginning of the week?

Mr Passi—Yes, we do run out of milk because of the expiry date. It is probably three or four days by the time the milk arrives here and in a couple of days we write them off. Some of the milk we got only yesterday has a week before the expiry date.

CHAIR—You have worked on other islands in IBIS stores. How does the store here compare to stores on other islands?

Mr Passi—We do more sales here than anywhere in the Torres Strait. That is including the supermarket on TI. But we do not have the product to keep the sales well up to benefit the people here.

CHAIR—The final question, from me at least, is: is there some way in which you talk to your customers about what products they want? Do they just raise comments when they are in the store, or do you do some kind of survey? How does that work?

Mr Passi—Mostly customers approach me and complain about certain things and then I contact the head office and I talk to them about it.

CHAIR—How does head office deal with those complaints?

Mr Passi—A few of them get something done about it. I tried to tell the head office they used theory to deal with us out here and we do the practical, and they should listen to me all the time because I live here. I am an island fella and I know what we eat.

CHAIR—Pricing in the store is all set from Cairns—is that right?

Mr Passi—That is right, yes.

CHAIR—Do you have any control over pricing locally?

Mr Passi—No, we do not.

CHAIR—Do you have any sense, then, of whether or not this store is profitable, or is that all information which is kept in Cairns?

Mr Passi—It has certainly been told to us. Years ago we used to check ourselves through a computer. Now they keep everything to themselves.

CHAIR—So they do not give you a sense at the end of the year or at the end of each month of whether it has been a good month in this store in terms of sales? Do they do any of that localised reporting to you?

Mr Passi—They do send information out for us saying that in a certain area we did well and in a certain area we need to improve.

CHAIR—Are you given any targets that you have to meet in terms of selling particular products?

Mr Passi—Yes, they do give us a budget to match for the month. If you do well, if you match that budget or go over, then they supply you with a voucher or add to your wage.

CHAIR—Did you say there is a bonus for your wages if you do well in terms of sales?

Mr Passi—Correct.

CHAIR—Does it often happen that you get a bonus?

Mr Passi—It has only been up in the last two or three years, I think.

CHAIR—Do you often achieve the bonus or is it unusual to achieve the bonus?

Mr Passi—It has only been for the last two or three years.

CHAIR—Are freight costs all handled in Cairns?

Mr Passi—Everything is arranged in Cairns.

CHAIR—You are not personally purchasing the freight?

Mr Passi—No.

Mr TURNOUR—Thank you for meeting with us today and providing evidence on the inquiry. I have just a couple of questions. What are the main fruit and vegies that you would sell out of every week?

Mr Passi—Apples, oranges, lettuce, watermelon.

Mr TURNOUR—If the barge arrives today, would they be sold out every week? When would they be sold out by?

Mr Passi—We would probably lose some of the sale because of the late arrival.

Mr TURNOUR—As for the other products you mentioned, every week you throw out close to 100 per cent of things like kiwifruit and some of the honeydew melon—is that right?

Mr Passi—That is right.

Mr TURNOUR—What sort of training has IBIS provided to you over the 10-plus years you have worked for them?

Mr Passi—They provide management training every year. You complete that at the end of the year. Every three to four months you travel to Thursday Island for that training.

Mr TURNOUR—Do you get any clashes between, for example, what the sale price is in the newspaper and what comes up in the computer from Cairns? Do they match all the time or do you get some problems in terms of customers saying, “This is the price that was advertised, but the price in the computer is different?”

Mr Passi—I think that when they advertise in the newspaper it is for Thursday Island supermarket. I think there is extra freight added on to what we sell here.

Mr TURNOUR—So you are saying the prices that are advertised in the newspaper are not the same prices as the ones that you are charging on Mer Island.

Mr Passi—At the supermarket.

Mr TURNOUR—At IBIS, the specials are different here than on Thursday Island?

Mr Passi—Only slight differences.

Mr TURNOUR—The other thing is: how often do you get a visit from a manager from TI or Cairns?

Mr Passi—Every two or three months, I think, depending on the situation of the store.

Mr TURNOUR—When was the last time they visited?

Mr Passi—Yesterday.

Mr TURNOUR—How long ago was the time before that they visited?

Mr Passi—The regular visit was two weeks ago, I think.

Mr TURNOUR—Two weeks ago was a regular visit and then yesterday you had a special visit?

Mr Passi—Yes, just for the new ATM.

Mr TURNOUR—Are you getting an ATM put into the store?

Mr Passi—Yes.

Mr TURNOUR—Was that put in or has that not been put in yet?

Mr Passi—It has been put in but we are still having problems getting used to it.

Mr TURNOUR—In the visit from the manager, did they discuss this inquiry coming today?

Mr Passi—I do not know if she had been contacted about that.

Mr TURNOUR—When they arrived yesterday did they talk about our hearings today?

Mr Passi—They did mention it.

Mr TURNOUR—Thank you very much for your evidence today. It has been very helpful for the committee. We appreciate you coming in and giving evidence. I can understand how it can be difficult sometimes giving this evidence when you are employed by IBIS, but your evidence will be very helpful to the committee and it is a great service to your community. I want to thank you very much for that.

Mrs VALE—Thank you, Andrew. You have answered a lot of questions this morning, but I only have one or two. Regarding the kiwi fruit that is thrown out every week or fruit that you feel is unsuitable because people are not eating it, like celery, is this because people do not like those fruits or is it because the fruit and vegetables are not fresh or have gone bad?

Mr Passi—They just do not like the fruit or vegies.

Mrs VALE—Would you know—and you may not—if there has been any education about fruits and vegetables and their values and what is good for you? Kiwi fruit is very high in vitamin C. It is very good for children. They are easy to eat with a spoon if you cut them in half—did you know? They are really good, but some people have to be taught how to eat them.

Has there been any education regarding the benefits of certain fruits and vegetables that people might know about?

Mr Passi—I try to encourage most of my customers to eat what is good for them, but some of them—

Mrs VALE—Yes. Has there been no official healthy eating policy or anything like that that has come through to the school? It is not your role to educate people, Andrew, about what is good for them. I was just asking: is there any health department program or educational program that has been available to the people on this island?

Mr Passi—Some come up. I cannot remember now. Some people come up here and tell people what to eat and they cook outside the shop.

Mrs VALE—Do they?

Mr Passi—Yes.

Mrs VALE—When did that happen last? Do you remember?

Mr Passi—Last year, I think.

Mrs VALE—Did those people come up from the health department or was it a promotion?

Mr Passi—I think they came up from the health department.

Mrs VALE—Is the food that is thrown out thrown out because it has gone bad because nobody has been buying it?

Mr Passi—That is right.

Mrs VALE—This morning I saw some ginger which was really in pretty bad condition. It was deteriorating. Will that be thrown out or will it be left on offer for sale?

Mr Passi—It will be thrown out.

Mrs VALE—It was not the best and it did not smell very good. Ginger I would have thought would have been something that people would eat here. Is that not part of the diet in any way?

Mr Passi—Yes, ginger is part of our diet, but some products do not—

Mrs VALE—Was too much ginger brought in?

Mr Passi—Sometimes too much. There is garlic; sometimes less.

Mrs VALE—The ginger was actually brought in by IBIS. It is not locally grown here, is it?

Mr Passi—I know.

Mrs VALE—So it was brought in from IBIS. It takes a while for ginger to go off and I was wondering why. Maybe it was the heat. That is all I wanted to ask you, especially about educational opportunities for the kinds of fruit that is good.

CHAIR—In relation to the ginger, was that brought in yesterday?

Mr Passi—Yesterday; that's right.

CHAIR—So that is the condition that it came off the ship?

Mrs VALE—That ginger was brought in yesterday?

Mr Passi—Yesterday.

Mrs VALE—Thank you very much.

Mr KATTER—Obviously, I was responsible for the IIB when it was IIB, which is a long time ago. A lot of the old hands, I noticed, turned up at the hearings. They were of the opinion that when they changed from the old IIB arrangements things went bad. We have had a lot of complaints; we are only here because of complaints. We have had an awful lot of complaints, and very serious complaints with respect to price and freshness of fruit and vegetables. If you had to pinpoint a time when things started to go bad what was that time and what happened? Why did they go suddenly bad? I hardly received any complaints about IIB.

Mr Passi—I would say about three years ago things started to change.

Mr KATTER—What happened then—new management, new arrangements or ownership?

Mr Passi—I think when get a new CEO coming in they have a different style of running the show.

Mr KATTER—The CEO is now based in Cairns. Was the CEO based in Cairns five years ago?

Mr Passi—No, we have a head office in Thursday Island years ago and we had very close contact with them. For our needs, whatever we wanted, we just contacted them on Thursday Island.

Mr KATTER—But five years ago was the CEO on Thursday Island or in Cairns?

Mr Passi—I cannot remember, now, when that change was made and all the staff was sent up to the Cairns office.

Mr TURNOUR—I just have a couple of questions that I should have asked before. They have a healthy choices star rating. Is that very popular? Does that make a difference to people's buying habits in the store?

Mr Passi—Now we display a lot of those stars on the shelf for people to identify for their health.

Mr TURNOUR—Do people shopping utilise the stars to help them shop?

Mr Passi—Yes, we try to explain to them what the stars are all about.

Mr TURNOUR—And are you selling more of those products with the stars on them?

Mr Passi—We have only put stars on for the last few days now. Probably next week we will start to notice the difference.

Mr TURNOUR—Okay, so the stars have only been introduced in the last few days. Is it the same situation on other islands—that the stars have been introduced recently?

Mr Passi—Yes, it is supposed to throughout the Torres Strait.

Mr KATTER—While they are thinking of the next question, I just want to tell you that I do not eat honeydews, kiwi fruit or celery. I cannot stand them.

Mrs VALE—And look what happened to him! One of the things I wanted to ask, apropos Jim's question, was: did the manager who came on the special visit from IBIS institute the stars yesterday?

Mr Passi—Yes. Most of the stars were put on the shelf yesterday, but some of them were put on earlier—late last week.

Mrs VALE—So it was only very recently.

Mr Passi—Yes, just a few days ago.

Mr TURNOUR—I was also going to ask about the computer system. I understand that, when something is bought, the system is supposed to say that it has gone from the shop, to help in the reordering process. Do you think that system works effectively?

Mr Passi—No, it does not. They introduced a system, I think four years ago, so that what you buy automatically goes into the computer. That is why they built small storerooms; we do not store lots of things—everything goes straight in. But it never worked. And I have told them that.

Mr TURNOUR—Your experience is not that what you sell is what they send in on the barge the next week?

Mr Passi—The system they introduced has never worked from the start.

Mr TURNOUR—Have you raised these concerns with your island manager and at training meetings?

Mr Passi—We do always.

Mr TURNOUR—Have other island managers raised similar concerns?

Mr Passi—Yes. Most of the managers do not get the chance to talk—they close the meeting before they have something to say.

Mr TURNOUR—So they do not have a feedback session—it is only a one-way conversation?

Mr Passi—Most of the time, yes.

Mr TURNOUR—So there is no real active involvement with the island managers in terms of trying to get feedback on how management at the Cairns end or the TI end can improve the system?

Mr Passi—They send our regional manager out. I do not know what they tell him. Then they pass it on to us. But we never say much at conference because of that limited time.

Mr TURNOUR—They do not encourage that?

Mr Passi—They do not encourage that.

Mr TURNOUR—That is very disappointing. I appreciate your frankness this morning.

Mr KATTER—I hope I am not out of order here, but I spoke to George Nai this morning. He has been a very dominant figure, as you are well aware. He said that he considered that the best model was the local ownership of the store, with it belonging to a buying group. There would still be an IBIS buying group but the store would be owned by the local community. Would you see that as a good model?

Mr Passi—I think that change would benefit the community a lot. All of the staff down at head office are trained to deal with a system that down-sells. Not here. They must adapt to this idea to make everything work. So the balance is not right. That is why we have problems.

Mr KATTER—So you would agree with that comment?

Mr Passi—Yes.**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Andrew, for giving your evidence today. It has been, as Jim said, very frank, and we very much appreciate it. It goes without saying that everyone who gives evidence to these committees needs to do so under oath, and with that comes the protections given to evidence under oath. Those protections apply to you as well. Thank you very much.

[10.58 am]

BON, Mr Matthew James, Private capacity

DAY, Mr Ron, Councillor, Torres Island Regional Council, Division 15, Mer Island

CHAIR—I welcome our next witnesses, Councillor Ron Day and Mr Matthew Bon. I might just start with some background questions. The Mer Island division just covers Mer Island—is that right? There are no other islands covered?

Mr Day—That is correct, yes.

CHAIR—Do you know roughly the population that your division covers?

Mr Day—The population goes to nearly 500 people.

CHAIR—How many people from the council work on the island, roughly?

Mr Day—There would be about 100, including the CDEP participants.

CHAIR—On the island there is one store—is that correct?

Mr Day—There is one government owned store, which is IBIS, and there are a couple of locally owned private businesses.

CHAIR—What do the private businesses sell?

Mr Day—They mostly sell stuff like soft drinks and cigarettes—these are only some of the items—but not groceries like foodstuffs.

CHAIR—So the only store which sells groceries and foodstuffs is the IBIS store?

Mr Day—I would imagine so, yes. Some of the other members of the community are making their own orders from Cairns.

CHAIR—Do you know how many people would do that?

Mr Day—There would probably be about 10 families.

CHAIR—And that then comes in on the barge with the other products?

Mr Day—With IBIS, yes. But still the IBIS has the priority.

CHAIR—I wonder whether you would like to make any comment about the quality of the products in the IBIS store and the cost of the products?

Mr Day—Yes. Because this community is the furthest, even to Thursday Island, the freight cost adds on to the items. That would be the killer compared to what you purchase from the Thursday Island stores, for the IBIS store and also the privately owned stores. So prices are high, and people working on CDEP wages cannot afford that.

CHAIR—What about the quality of the product that is in the stores?

Mr Day—I would say they do not last long. They come in pretty good at first and then after a few days or a week, as the manager was saying, it is all thrown out and written off.

CHAIR—Does most of the food that people consume come from that store, or is it supplemented with their own fishing or other activities?

Mr Day—We have fishing activities here, and what we are trying to do now through the council is to encourage people to go back to living off the land, a garden, because there would be more fresh products when you get produce from the garden. So we are encouraging people to do that. The health department has also been involved with that, but comparing this to what it was before? I don't know. I am not blaming anyone, but it could be that the modern changes of technology have changed the concept a lot. When I was little, I attended the garden places. I would go in the morning and come back at dusk, and this is what we did to help.

Mr KATTER—Sorry, what did you do wrong?

Mr Day—I had to go out to the garden places in the morning—that was on the weekend, Saturdays—and come back home at dusk. You had to plant to be able to survive. Here, you have a barge coming in once a week and the stuff that the barge is carrying is a week old or months old, and that is not good for our health. So we are trying to encourage people to go back to the land, till the soil and plant their own crops.

CHAIR—How is that going? Are many people taking your lead and growing more—

Mr Day—Some of the people are already involved in all that. I think those people who are actually planting their own crops are pretty happy and satisfied about the product they get. I know because I am one of the people who are doing that. We harvest bananas, sugarcane and tropical fruits.

CHAIR—What sort of things are grown on the island?

Mr Day—Any tropical fruit that you can think of you can plant here because the soil is volcanic and is very rich. It is a bit of a disturbance the concept of humans living in this part of the country. Something which makes it easier for us—I call them shortcuts—makes you feel, 'There is something I can achieve in a very short period of time.'

Mr KATTER—What do you call them, Ron?

Mr Day—Shortcuts. It is saying, 'Instead of planting I will wait for the barge to arrive with the products from Cairns'—that kind of thing. We need to redevelop that spirit to go back and utilise the soil. This is what we are doing.

CHAIR—Is there any ability to sell what you have grown to the store?

Mr Day—Another government order came in with AQIS, so we have to be careful how we trade with this stuff. If you purchase, say, a banana, the banana might not be of good enough quality to have a financial dollar gained from it. We have to be careful about all that. But before the diseases were around here we were able to share with other island communities, even Thursday Island. But now we cannot do it. We cannot even do it locally. If we do that then someone who is pretty bright would contact their house and say, 'I got sick because I bought a banana from such and such a person here.' That kind of thing we are taking into consideration very seriously before we sell. But some of us are really selling all the products. We even use the IBIS veranda to sell all our products.

CHAIR—What about fish? Are people able to sell the fish that they catch?

Mr Day—We are actually selling fish to Australian markets and even overseas. The council actually purchase marine products from fishermen and then we sell it on. Some people would like to sell all the fish they catch.

CHAIR—How much does fish contribute to the diet? Would most people eat locally caught fish every day?

Mr Day—Nobody who lives on Murray Island would deny eating fish. We eat fish every day and have for generations.

CHAIR—Mr Bon, is there anything you would like to say about the way the stores operate and their quality or the cost of living on Mer Island?

Mr Bon—Yes. I think the cost of living could be addressed to service our people in a better way because, as you know, the employment of our people under the CDEP rates are quite high. I think you find families that have more than five kids with the wages that they get under CDEP find it very hard to even budget to buy the goods that they need not only for their kids but for themselves. One thing leads to another on the health side of it. For example, if your kid has a dental problem and you need to get your kid to Thursday Island you have to pay the airfares. And that is a strain that eats into what you need to buy for your family on the island. It is quite a strain.

CHAIR—With the issue of quarantine that Ron raised, is there anything stopping the trading of fruit and vegetables between here and Badu, Masig Island or any of the islands within the protected zone?

Mr Bon—Because of the black sigatoka we have on Mer here that the other islands do not have, we don't allow that. The other islands do not have that kind of disease that affects their bananas. There is no movement of bananas or any part of the plant.

CHAIR—You do not allow it to be moved off the island at all?

Mr Bon—That is correct. There is scope for other stuff like cassava and yams. That could be moved around in the protected zone only and not to the special quarantine zone, which is the inner island—Thursday Island.

CHAIR—In relation to the bananas and the rule which prevents bananas being moved off this island, where does that rule come from? Who has established that rule? You have said that bananas or banana products cannot be moved off this island. Who set that rule?

Mr Bon—It was one of the rules that was given by our department, because the other islands do not have it. It is one of the things that we consider, too—not to actually move that particular banana disease to another island.

CHAIR—Did you get some directive from AQIS in Cairns?

Mr Bon—It used to be QDPI.

Mr TURNOUR—The Queensland department of agriculture.

CHAIR—So that ruling came from the Queensland government?

Mr Bon—I believe so.

Mr TURNOUR—Thank you, Councillor and James, for your evidence today. Just a couple of things about gardening, Councillor Day. Is most of that done as a community garden or they individual gardens?

Mr Day—They are individual gardens.

Mr TURNOUR—Have you seen a lot more gardening happening in the last year or two?

Mr Day—No, like I said before, there are just a few families involved. I would like to have that old spirit resurrected from what it was like before. After a certain time of the year there was a garden competition where all the gardeners came up with their products and felt proud of what they produced. They showed it on occasions like the Coming of the Light festival and other communal get-togethers. We would like to resurrect all that again.

Mr TURNOUR—I am happy to support the establishment of a garden competition on Murray Island/Mer Island, Ron. I will make a donation and we will get one going, if you like. I am very keen to do that. Were there more chickens and pigs around historically on Murray Island?

Mr Day—There are hardly any pigs or chickens around. If there are, it is beyond my knowledge.

Mr TURNOUR—But when you were small, were there a lot of chickens?

Mr Day—Yes.

Mr TURNOUR—What was the reason for them disappearing?

Mr Day—That is a very good question. I am not sure about. Most the time we harvested chickens and pigs for certain occasions. My grandmother used to have a big flock of different types and we used to get those for special celebrations. Whether we overharvested or whatever, at this time we do not have any. Thank goodness.

Mr TURNOUR—James, do you remember a lot of chickens or pigs around historically?

Mr Bon—Not here. I was actually brought up on Thursday Island. My family had a big chook pen at the back of the valley on Thursday Island. I only moved back here in 1993.

Mr TURNOUR—But you had a lot of chooks when you were growing up on Thursday Island?

Mr Bon—That is correct, yes.

Mr TURNOUR—And now there are not many chooks on Thursday Island either, are there?

Mr Bon—That is right.

Mr TURNOUR—Why do you think the chickens have disappeared from the Torres Strait in general? We get this evidence in other places as well.

Mr Bon—I cannot really say.

Mr Day—We probably let the farmers do that for us and we purchase them from the store.

Mr TURNOUR—The IBIS store came, and the eggs and the meat come through the IBIS store.

Mr Bon—It could be the new shire laws, too, you know, from when the new shire came in. Some people had pigs on Thursday Island. Some people had chooks. The new shire would have played a part.

Mr TURNOUR—Can we ask the secretary to check with the Torres Strait Island Regional Council and the Torres Shire Council about any local laws in relation to chickens and the keeping of those animals. That would be worth following up. Thank you very much.

Mrs VALE—Thank you very much for coming and talking to us this morning. By way of statement, you might be interested to know that the return to backyard gardens is also happening in suburban Sydney and in my electorate. People are trying to grow their own tomatoes, their own spinach and their own lettuce, sometimes for the sheer delight and pleasure of it but sometimes because it does actually save them money too—without the freight costs. So you are at the leadership of a real returning trend that is happening all across Australia, and it is gathering momentum.

Further to Jim's question about the chickens and the eggs and the pigs, there is no problem—if people on Murray Island wanted to keep chickens again they could. If they wanted to keep pigs again they could, as long as they did not trade them to other islands. Isn't that the problem, James?

Mr Bon—It is not a problem. It is great for our people to actually look down the track of having chooks or pigs on the island. It will be great for AQIS to monitor the different pests and diseases that we know are around. We do have all the pigs that are based in Badu and Bamaga monitored for JE, for example. So it would be great if we did have pigs here and if people did want to go into a piggery or something like that. It will be great for the community.

Mrs VALE—Yes. It just might supplement their food sources. Of course, if you have chickens you have fresh eggs, which are so good, especially for children. Every egg is a nutrient capsule, isn't it?

Mr Bon—That is right.

Mrs VALE—You are probably very much aware of this, but I do not know if everyone else here is. One of the big reasons we are here as a parliamentary committee is that there is a 17-year gap between the life expectancy of the people in remote Indigenous communities and the people on mainland Australia, who have access to fresh fruit and vegetables and good quality meat and eggs. That is what we are trying to have a look at—the access that the mothers and grandmothers have here to feed their children with fresh fruit and vegetables, the kinds of choices they have and the accessibility they have. If it is possible on a volcanic island like this, instead of depending on the ship coming in every week, maybe people can be encouraged to grow their own individual gardens or, if they do not want to do that, perhaps a common market garden would be helpful. Maybe that would work here. That is what we are looking at. It is about the kinds of food choices that are available to people in remote communities and how we can improve those for the benefit of your health. It is very important information, James, about how people can perhaps, if they wish to, have chickens and pigs and fresh eggs again back on their own island. Thank you.

Mr Day—Can I elaborate further on that. In making plans for the wellbeing of our community, we are also looking at the cornerstone effect. Most people, especially the government with their legislation and everything—for example, health—come and try to sort out the problems and the effect rather than the cause.

Mr Day—Can I elaborate further on that. In making plans for the wellbeing of our community, we are also looking at the cause of an effect. Most people, especially the government with their legislation and everything—for example, health—come and try to sort out the problems and the effect rather than the cause. That is why we are saying that, to be able to close the gap, that must be taken into serious consideration. What we would like to do is, for example, to privatise the store so that we have board members actually sitting here discussing issues like the health of the people and getting whatever would be appropriate for the people here, rather than having people from TI moved over to Cairns. We will become like a cry in the wilderness.

Mrs VALE—It might also take a bit of education from the Queensland department of health. It is a shame to hear that kiwifruit is being thrown out because nobody is eating it. Kiwifruit is so wonderful for little children. It has so much vitamin C in it. It is just a matter of being taught how to eat it.

Mr Day—Our children are our responsibility, like all other parents around the world. But we cannot do other things because someone else is making decisions on our behalf, and that is the killer. That is the very cause of all the effects. That is why we are planning our strategies.

Mrs VALE—Also, in a way, it seems from an observer's point of view that it is taking away your self-reliance—the fact that you can depend on a boat that comes in but the quality is not as good. Even if everyone here grew one thing on the island that they could share with someone else—and you do not trade it; you keep it on the island so there is no disease being spread around—it would be a great support for your independence and your sense of making a contribution to your own lifestyle and your community. That is very interesting, and I am pleased to know that you will grow things, Mayor. What do you grow besides bananas?

Mr Day—Like I said, we grow any tropical fruit.

Mrs VALE—Any tropical fruit?

Mr Day—Yes. The soil takes that.

Mrs VALE—I understand that it is too hot to grow leafy green vegetables on the islands. Is that right—leafy green vegetables like spinach, cabbage or lettuce?

Mr Day—No, I think we plant cabbages here, and lettuce. Very seldom you see someone plant that. Mostly it is what we claim as traditional—what we always planted for generations.

Mrs VALE—Good. Thanks very much.

Mr Bon—There are a few things I would like to say, taking my AQIS hat off and as a community member, just for the record. The Hon. Bob Katter raised the issue about ownership. I think it is great to see our people taking over the stores here. Whether it is our people or whether it is the state, we need more people to be accountable and responsible, to be transparent in every way. Other issues that I have as a community member are about a bigger store. That needs to be addressed in our community, because this store at the moment—from the old store that we had to this present new one—still does not do the job. We still have the line of people waiting outside when the container of goods arrives on the island. It is all gone. The subsidy on freight is probably why the prices of goods are so high.

Another issue is training for staff and managers, which was raised by a previous witness who was sitting here, the assistant manager. Such things as public relations advertisements about the nutrition of goods can be better displayed to our people. Another issue is wages for our people. Instead of CDEP, we need proper award wages for the staff that are working there. There is a system which they have for the ATM—whether we need an ATM because the fees on it are so high. If you want to send \$50 from here to Thursday Island, it costs you \$30. So these fees need to be looked at.

CHAIR—Who charges the \$30?

Mr Bon—The IBIS store. So these are some of the things that we need to look at. We need to lower the service fees.

Mr KATTER—What is the \$30 for?

Mr Bon—I would not have a clue. It is probably the administration fee.

Mr KATTER—Is it to use an ATM card?

Mr Bon—As for the ATM card, you have got the St George Bank and most people deal with the National in the Torres Strait. I think it would be fair to say that an NAB system should be put in our stores here so there are lower fees—or there should be no fees at all.

Mr KATTER—But when are you charged the \$30? I do not understand. If I go over there and spend some money, do they charge me \$30?

Mr Bon—If you need to send any money from here to Thursday Island or from here to Cairns.

Mr KATTER—I see; it is to transfer money.

Mr Bon—Yes, to transfer.

Mr TURNOUR—Just quickly, and through the chair, so they are putting in a St George ATM but most people bank with the NAB, which historically has been the bank here?

Mr Bon—That is correct.

Mr TURNOUR—And IBIS are doing that?

Mr Bon—That is correct.

CHAIR—So that is an IBIS decision to put in St George?

Mr Bon—I believe so.

Mrs VALE—And yet if people use St George they have to pay a fee to St George? If they have access there is an extra fee?

Mr Bon—That is correct.

Mrs VALE—So it might be \$1 or \$2?

Mr Bon—That is right.

Mrs VALE—So every time they use the money they have got to pay a high fee? If it were NAB they would not have to pay that?

Mr Bon—That is right.

CHAIR—Do you have other things that you want to say?

Mr Bon—There is the high cost of living that we experience. IBIS used to be the one that actually had all the fuel here. They used to sell it in drums. I believe they have the capacity, given the land space that they have got there, to actually put in a proper bowser for our community. These sorts of things need to be addressed in our community because they are affecting us.

CHAIR—As a community do you have any formal dialogue with IBIS? Does the council ever raise issues with IBIS? Do they ever come and meet with you? I am not talking about the store here. I am talking about the head office management.

Mr Day—They do. They do come out to meet with us. But after you discuss it with them and give them it all they go back and everything is back to normal. It is left to sit far away from here. When I said ‘a cry in the wilderness’ this is what I meant.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, both of you, for giving evidence to us today. We really appreciate it.

[11.28 am]

KAIGEY, Miss Sainty, Senior Health Worker, Mer Island Primary Health Care Centre, and Coordinator, Eastern Island Cluster

CHAIR—Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement about your community's cost of living and health issues?

Miss Kaigey—Yes. I am a senior health worker who has been working on Murray Island—Mer Island—for over 10 years. There has been a high increase in chronic diseases in the Torres Strait. Because of the cost of living, we can only educate our clients one to one or in a group, and it is their choice. Because of the cost of living on the island, it is up to them as to whatever they can afford to get at IBIS.

CHAIR—I have a couple of questions. So your responsibilities are at Mer Island and you do not have responsibilities beyond Mer Island?

Miss Kaigey—I have responsibilities for the two neighbouring islands, Stephen Island and Darnley Island.

CHAIR—Do you get out to those islands much?

Miss Kaigey—Not at the moment; not really like that. I just visit them on some occasions, not every time. I am based for most of my time on Mer, because of the movement of staff.

CHAIR—We understand there is no store on Stephen Island. Is there a store on Darnley Island?

Miss Kaigey—Yes, there is an IBIS store on Darnley Island.

CHAIR—Would you like to make any comments about the quality of the produce you can obtain from the IBIS store here on Mer Island?

Miss Kaigey—We are looking at the fruit and vegies that comes on a weekly basis, either Monday or Tuesday. By the time it arrives on Murray Island the lettuce is very soggy and capsicum and cucumbers are mucky and some are soft. They are not fresh.

CHAIR—That is when they arrive?

Miss Kaigey—When they arrive.

CHAIR—In your experience, do people eat the fresh fruit and vegetables from the IBIS store? Do people buy those products?

Miss Kaigey—Yes. Whoever is first served gets all the fruit and vegies and whoever comes late goes without.

CHAIR—In your work, do you encourage people to purchase the fresh fruit and vegetables?

Miss Kaigey—Yes, we do. We tell them the right foods to eat, like fruit and vegies—to have two serves of fruit and five serves of vegies. It depends on the customer what they buy from the shop.

CHAIR—What about the quality of the meat that you can purchase from the IBIS store here on this island?

Miss Kaigey—The same meat comes on every barge. Sometimes you look at the meat and sometimes it is not red; it is very dark, where the blood goes over the meat. I do not know whether it is no good to eat, because you have blood everywhere and it is getting blacker than it is supposed to be, especially the rump steak and the T-bone and barbecue.

CHAIR—Do people supplement what they buy from IBIS with fishing or growing produce themselves?

Miss Kaigey—It depends what they get, what they can afford.

CHAIR—But do people do a lot of fishing?

Miss Kaigey—There is a lot of fishing and they eat a lot of sardines. That is the easy fish we can get. We can get them just off the beach by casting a net.

CHAIR—So people are not completely reliant on their food coming from the IBIS store?

Miss Kaigey—We are trying to educate them. We have an organisation, Inside Out Challenge, which is about backyard gardening. We have a young bloke that just commenced in February; he is new in the position. He is working with the community members. He has a list of clients that are high risk—they have chronic diseases that we need to look at. He is working with those people to try to start their backyard gardens and also working with the school, the children.

CHAIR—Is he employed by Queensland Health?

Miss Kaigey—Yes, he is employed by Queensland Health.

CHAIR—How is that program going? Are more people gardening?

Miss Kaigey—He just started. We had a lady before, but she left because we had no funding. We had funding come in, so we started this new bloke. He is doing really well.

CHAIR—Is diabetes, a chronic disease, getting better or worse here?

Miss Kaigey—It is increasing.

CHAIR—Why do you think that is?

Miss Kaigey—It goes back to the cost of living—how much people can afford on vegies but also vegies coming to the shop that get rotten and get thrown away. It is also the price of it. For example, two or three years ago I bought nashi fruit. One nashi two or three years ago cost \$16.

CHAIR—I wonder whether that pear was sold! Did anyone buy it?

Miss Kaigey—That was the only fruit left on the shelf.

Mrs VALE—Was it this big?

Miss Kaigey—Yes, it was that big.

Mrs VALE—It is a lot of money.

CHAIR—How does the store here compare to the store on Darnley Island?

Miss Kaigey—We need to upgrade. Fruit and vegies are left in the boxes on the floor. They need to have more shelving. There is no proper shelving to put all of fruit and vegies on.

CHAIR—Here on Mer Island?

Miss Kaigey—Yes, here. On Darnley they have all the fruit and vegies in the cooler. Here there is only so much they can fit on the shelves. Most of the boxes are on the floor.

CHAIR—Out the back?

Miss Kaigey—In the shop.

CHAIR—So they are not in a chilled environment?

Miss Kaigey—No.

CHAIR—Darnley Island has better storage and shelving equipment than here?

Miss Kaigey—Yes.

CHAIR—Are there other differences between the store on Darnley Island and here?

Miss Kaigey—There is not that much difference. It is just the shelving and the use of the chiller. The pricing and the products are the same.

Mr TURNOUR—What was the name of the person running the gardening project you mentioned before that Queensland Health funds?

Miss Kaigey—We have this young bloke named Bando Neliman.

Mr TURNOUR—Thank you. Is that program being run on other islands in the Torres Strait?

Miss Kaigey—Yes, there is one on Darnley Island. The person running that program is Michael Gela. That is a Community Development Employment Program project promoting backyard gardening to people.

Mr TURNOUR—Do you know if there are any links between that program and the federal government funded horticulture program that the TSRA is running out through the Land and Sea Centre?

Miss Kaigey—I am not quite sure. It is probably through Commonwealth funding.

Mr TURNOUR—Is that Commonwealth funding as well through the health department?

Miss Kaigey—Yes.

Mr TURNOUR—It just seems that there are now a few different streams of funding promoting gardens. It is probably worth while us making sure that the different streams of government are actually talking to each other and that we are getting a well-integrated service in relation to support for gardening in local communities. It is a very good program.

Miss Kaigey—That one probably has the Commonwealth government involved in it.

Mr TURNOUR—The Commonwealth government might be putting some money in through TSRA but there might be money coming through the health department as well. We need to check whether they are matching up. Like Councillor Day said, it is good to see people working on prevention rather than when people have already got sick. Thank you very much.

Mrs VALE—Thank you, Sainty, for coming in. Have you noticed a difference in the IBIS store in the last couple of days—because you have had a visit from a parliamentary committee? Is it in any way different—better stocked, fresher food?

Miss Kaigey—Personally, yes. It is better but, the quality of vegies it gets is no good—they have to throw it away. I spoke to a couple of IBIS managers a couple of years ago. I recommended those green bags that you get at Woollies or Coles.

Mrs VALE—The environment bags?

Miss Kaigey—They hold vegies for more than two weeks. They even keep lettuce fresh. Here you get lettuce on Monday or Tuesday barge but, if you want to eat it on Friday, it is no good. You are taking away the good nutrition that is in the outer leaves and you are left with the white area in the middle that does not have much nutrition. I would recommend that IBIS gets green bags and sell them.

Mrs VALE—This is about transporting lettuce in green bags. We must be thinking of two different bags.

Miss Kaigey—I have a bag but I couldn't find it at home. I bought it from Woolworths while I was in Cairns. They are washable and they hold any fruit or vegies for more than two weeks.

Mrs VALE—Do they, really?

Miss Kaigey—Yes.

Mrs VALE—I had not heard of that. I thought you meant the environment bags that you carry away. We were at the store this morning to have a look and I was surprised to learn that the ginger I saw was only delivered yesterday. It was pretty smelly and mouldy. I am amazed that the store manager put it out. It should perhaps not even have been offered. It was pretty awful. So you have seen a difference in how the store is managed on the basis that we were coming this week?

Miss Kaigey—Yes.

Mrs VALE—Thank you very much.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Sainty, for giving us your time today. We really appreciate the time you have given.

[11.42 am]

MALONE, Mr Kevin, Private capacity

TAPAU, Ms Bai, Private capacity

ZARO, Mr Kevin, Private capacity

CHAIR—At this point we are going to move into an open forum. So I open it to the floor and ask whether there is anybody who would like to make a contribution or say something to the committee.

Mr Malone—I have lived here on Mer for the last 10 years. I just want to go into the amount of money people have to spend versus what things cost. It seems to me that everybody is taking bits out here and bits out there, and a good demonstration is the IBIS transfer fund fee. I think when we first came here it was \$10 to transfer and then the IBIS manager came from Cairns. He was shocked at that and he said, 'I'll fix that up.' He fixed it the other way: it went up to \$30. People only have so much to spend and if you are paying fees like that the \$30 has to come out of your groceries or something like that. That is a pretty disgusting situation. The only way to pay bills on the island, if you have not got access to a computer and internet transfers, is to go to IBIS and transfer the money through there. So if you are paying a \$100 phone bill you have to add \$30 on top for the transfer fee. And that money has to come out of stuff that you would buy at the store. So people are just running, chasing themselves around in circles all the time.

The price of stuff at the store is really over the top. For the quality you get some of it is just ridiculous, especially on the meat side of things. I think that the whole system just needs a clean out. I do not know whether we could have subsidised freight, or something in that direction, to bring the price down. People only have a limited amount of money to spend and that is it. Most people here get paid on Wednesday and by Friday the money is finished. So if you have not brought anything then you just have to make do until the next pay day. Thank you.

CHAIR—In your view has the situation got worse in recent years?

Mr Malone—I think so; yes. I think it is has. The old IBIS store was ere—someone brought this up—and when we got the new store we were all pretty happy about that because we were going to get fresh food and vegies, but if you look at the chiller department there where you buy your fruit, it is only two metres long. As Sainty said, everything else is sitting on the floor. People are walking around it and stepping over it, and you have to help yourself out of the box. The store should be two or three times the size that it is now so that they can control the goods properly.

Mr TURNOUR—Through the chair, can I ask you whether you have noticed any differences between the docket price and the marked price in the store?

Mr Malone—No, I am one of those who buy my fruit and vegies down south. We go to the store and just buy bits and pieces here and there. We do not really take much notice of what is advertised in the paper or anything like that.

CHAIR—How do you buy your fruit and vegies from down south?

Mr Malone—We fax an order down to Coles, I think it is, for what we want and they send it up. As long as they get the order before Tuesday or Wednesday they put it on a barge that same week and it arrives on Monday.

CHAIR—What state is it in by the time it gets here?

Mr Malone—Good. The vegies that we get from there would last twice as long as the stuff you buy in the store—maybe three times as long. Some of the stuff you buy in the store only lasts two or three days before it has had it.

Mr TURNOUR—How much does it cost you to freight that up?

Mr Malone—Usually about \$100.

Mr TURNOUR—For what sort of volume or amount or package?

Mr Malone—We usually get a full box of bread, probably two or three boxes of vegies, a carton of meat and we have a separate carton for chilled stuff. Sea Swift have a minimum charge of, I think, \$53, so if you buy a small box it is going to cost you \$50. Once you get over the \$50 mark it comes down in price.

Mr TURNOUR—How often do you do that?

Mr Malone—Maybe once a fortnight or once every three weeks.

Mrs VALE—Your fruit and vegies come up on the same barge as the IBIS supply?

Mr Malone—Yes, that is right.

Mrs VALE—Can you explain, then, why the quality of your fruit and vegetables is better quality than what is given to the IBIS store?

Mr Malone—I believe that the fruit and vegies that come from IBIS come first from wherever they market it down there and go to Thursday Island. I do not how long they keep them—maybe for another week; they must—and then they send them out here. So where my vegies take four or five days to come, the IBIS vegies might be taking a week or two weeks to get here.

Mrs VALE—But didn't you say they come up on the same barge or the same boat?

Mr Malone—They arrive here on the same barge. I am not sure of the IBIS system but I believe that it goes first to TI and then comes out here. You will have to ask the IBIS people.

Mrs VALE—But if your fruit and vegies are being purchased in Cairns and IBIS goods are being purchased in Cairns too and they arrive here on the same barge—I am assuming they do not change barges—

Mr Malone—Yes, they do.

Mrs VALE—Your fruit and vegies change barges?

Mr Malone—Everybody's groceries, or whatever comes up to the Torres Strait, comes on a ship from Cairns to Horn Island. Then it is unloaded and it is put on other barges to go to the different islands.

Mrs VALE—I see.

Mr Malone—I am not sure, but I believe IBIS sort their stuff out and then they send it out here—so that might be another week added to it.

Mrs VALE—So the ordering done in Cairns does not isolate particular islands, such as one for Mer and one for Masig?

Mr Malone—I am not sure. I think most of it goes to Thursday Island and then gets sent out here.

Mrs VALE—Because it is a curiosity to me on the committee that you can actually order from Cairns and yet your fruit and vegetables arrive in good condition. After what I have seen down there this morning with the ginger—it is just appalling.

Mr Malone—I think that is the reason. It all goes via Thursday Island and then comes here. So it might take an extra week to get out here, whereas mine only takes two or three days.

Mrs VALE—Something is happening. It is either that the supply of the fruit and vegetables is poor quality and done very cheaply to start with from the source or it is being delayed inordinately in transit.

Mr Malone—I think so.

Mrs VALE—I have one more question, Kevin. Thank you for standing up and giving your testimony; it is very helpful. I had heard about the money that is charged for fee transfers and I made the assumption that people were transferring money perhaps to friends or relatives on the mainland or wherever. What you said this morning is that this actually occurs when people pay for their utilities.

Mr Malone—That is right.

Mrs VALE—So you are paying for utilities and then you have to pay another \$30. If you go to IBIS to pay your phone bill, what else would you pay for? Your electricity?

Mr Malone—No, you buy electricity here. They use a card system. That is on the island. For any bills where you are making payments, such as for school fees or anything that has to be paid down south, if you have not got a MasterCard or internet transfer because you are not able to access a computer then you have to go through IBIS. There is no other way.

Mrs VALE—And it is very hard to access those other avenues of transferring finance if you are on the CDEP, isn't it?

Mr Malone—That is it.

Mrs VALE—It is impossible.

Mr Malone—Yes.

Mrs VALE—That must cost quite a bit of money. Thank you very much, Kevin.

Mr KATTER—Kevin, the thing that strikes me—and I wish that Mr Passi was still here—is that when I was a minister and I had a responsibility for IBIS we never got any complaints then. It seems to me that it is only after the last three, four or five years that the thing went bad. The complaints of most people have been over the last few years. If you go back five or six years, it was all right. Why is the situation deteriorating both in terms of their income versus the cost of food and the quality of the food? Why has it deteriorated so badly? Have you got any idea? Someone else might like to answer that question.

Mr Malone—I am not really sure. I think that even in the old IBIS store the food was not real flash here as far as the quality. It might have improved a little bit since the old store. I think it is maybe just the money thing. Everything costs a lot more these days and people are just not getting the extra money to spend.

Mr KATTER—That does not explain why the fruit is poor quality and old now when it was not then. When you came here it was not like this. The fruit and vegetables were reasonable when you first came here.

Mr Malone—I do not think so, no. It has been pretty much the same.

Mr KATTER—Right through? On the second question of income versus the cost of food—what is your take on that?

Mr Malone—Like I said, everybody's money has usually run out in a week. If they get paid fortnightly then there is just nothing left to spend. The instance you have of the transfer fee from IBIS going from \$10 to \$30 is a big lump out of people's meagre pay. Most people are on CDEP. Other things have risen, like the cost of electricity. Everything has gone up with inflation. There is just not enough money to spend and not enough stuff to buy really. I do not know if you are stopping overnight but over the next two days there will be not much left in the store in the way of vegies. It will all be gone because it is payday today. People will go and do all their shopping today, tomorrow and Friday, and then everything will have run out. The vegies will have run out and the money will be getting low.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that contribution. Is there anybody else who would like to say something to the committee?

Ms Tapau—I am a resident of Murray. I live in Townsville now but each time I come to Murray nothing has changed at the shop. We have a problem with the fruit and vegies but also the ATMs, because the ATM we are using here is St George and nearly all of the communities have an account with the National Australia Bank. We have been having this type of problem for years and years. People have been complaining. If you talk to the community they are going to be saying the same things over and over. Even if you get a ‘ricey’ bag, as soon as you open it there is a lot of mildew.

Mr KATTER—You get a lot of what?

Ms Tapau—‘Ricey’ bags that you get from the shop. That is also happening even with dry products. A similar thing is happening with the fruit and vegies and even the meat. Even if you get a packet of T-bone steak with only two T-bone steaks in the packet, it is probably nearly \$25 for one little packet. If you get four, it is over \$80. And it is not even fresh. Even if you get a carton of eggs, as soon as you bring the carton of eggs home, the eggs are rotten. There are kids—innocent kids—living off the things that their parents get from the shops.

CHAIR—Can you explain what a ‘ricey’ bag is?

Mrs Tapau—A ‘ricey’ bag is what nearly all the community lives off—a bag of rice. When people get those, as soon as they open it there is black mildew inside the rice bag. Complaints have gone to the shop, but nothing has been done about it.

Mr Zaro—I have been a community member for over 10 years. Since the upgrade to the new shop, I have asked this question a lot of times. When the shop was built, it was built the same way as all the other shops around the straits. When you look at the community size, we have the greatest number of community members besides Darnley and Badu Island. As you can see, we as workers do not go in until the morning when the bus gets in and all the bread and all that stuff is gone. We understand that there are children and all the families come in and buy it. By the time the workers go in, there is practically nothing for us. And that is especially the case with vegies, as you have heard, and all the main stuff—the meat and all that. By the time we get to the potatoes, they are all soft. We get practically the worst ones there. With the size of the shop, there are families all lined up in the aisles and families walking around with trolleys. There is not enough space for the families doing their shopping. Once you are all lined up, half the aisle is sitting outside waiting for the next load. When they all come in, most of the fruits and the other stuff are gone. You have a counter that is sitting right next to the aisle where all the shelves are. With everybody trying to get through, it is just not big enough for us.

The other situation there is that there are not enough staff. There will be one staff member working with a big line up the aisle. I do not know what timetables they have, but it slows the community. People working need to get that moving. Everybody has to wait. We have to work, but when we go in there we have to spend nearly an hour in the shop just to get an item. If one staff member is working, there are two registers that are not active. That is a big problem for us.

There are also telecommunications problems here. If Telstra goes down, the whole line goes down and the whole shop shuts off. Then you have power problems. With there being only one shop on the island, it is a bit of a problem. If you look at Thursday Island, they have four shops. They have the major shops and three other shops out in the suburbs around the island. Big islands like Darnley and Murray should have bigger shops that can help the whole community. Another issue is that when they do stock taking, it is a day off for the shop and that shuts out the community for the day. We have kids that want to have something for school. We want to be able to buy milk and break. When they do stock taking, the whole shop shuts off. When stock taking happens in other communities down south, they stay open. Why do they have to shut off when it means the community has to suffer?

So these are the things that have been major problems, as I see it, in that area. There has been a bit of a problem. You can see the size of the community, and when they all go to the shop, especially on payday—today is payday—you have half the island sitting there and others sitting outside. There is not enough covered area for them. When it rains, they all have to bolt under one area. I am looking at the health and safety issues there as well.

CHAIR—How often are there stocktakes?

Mr Zaro—Stocktakes are probably once every month. But they are open Monday to Saturday and during that time we have to have the shop open. We have a lot of feasting happening on the island. You have cultural stuff on the island. Also we have the school, the dongas. When they do not have food, everybody walks into the shop. When you have the cultural events, everybody comes into that shop. So the community fellas, the people at home, have that much respect for each other. They respect the cultural events. They have a big stock of food sitting on one side and that shuts off the other people who come in to get whatever they want. So these are the major factors involved when it comes to cultural issues, as well as all the enterprises on the island. If they do not have their stuff, everybody comes to that shop and they take many of the boxes of bread, boxes of milk, all the meat. We have nearly 400 or 500 people on the island and others are living at the back there, so we are a bit unfortunate in that area.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that contribution. Is there anybody else who would like to speak?

Mr KATTER—Could I just ask a question of that gentleman? Once again, I ask this question. What is occupying my mind is why we have suddenly gone bad up here. What changes have occurred so that suddenly now the prices are very high and the quality is very poor? Kevin said the quality has been poor for 10 years. Have you got any take on that, as to why suddenly the prices are very high relative to your income?

Mr Zaro—I want to work that out too. We just do not know. All we are doing is just walking in and buying the stuff and we find that everything has gone up and nobody can afford it. Why? When you shop down south you can walk out with a trolley full and you still have change in your pocket. That is \$200. If you walk out of this shop you will get \$400 worth of trolley out. I cannot explain why. We would probably think it is the freight on the barge. The freight weight is probably the only thing we can think of. Whatever the department has, we just cannot work it out here. We just get the community the stuff out here.

CHAIR—Thank you. Kay, could you please state the capacity in which you appear here today.

Mrs Marou—I live here on Murray Island.

CHAIR—And what do you do?

Mrs Marou—I work at the enterprise, the Mer Island guesthouse.

CHAIR—Is there any statement that you would like to make about the quality of the food and the service that is provided by the IBIS store here on Mer Island?

Mrs Marou—Yes, I would. I find difficulties—I am sure you have heard from past speakers as well—with the services of the IBIS store. Being so very small and having only two tills within the island, it is very difficult—with only one staff there as well. As you know, I am the manager of the guesthouse. I have to have food prepared for my guests up there. Sometimes my food does not come on the barge on time for the guests that I have up there, so I have to get food from the IBIS store. Then there is a great big line-up, especially on paydays. We have to wait. Money runs out from the ATM. We only have one that is provided for us at this very moment. As you know, today we have had difficulties with it too.

On the quality of the food, I noticed that when we have got vegies from the IBIS store they have not lasted us for a week. I am speaking just for the enterprise buyers from up where I work at the Mer Island guesthouse, because it does not last us for a week.

Mr KATTER—It runs out or it goes bad?

Mrs Marou—It goes bad. We do not get to use all of the food that we get. Sometimes the vegies that we buy today go off tomorrow, or it is off when it is sent to us so we do not get to use it at all, and that is a waste of the community money that we provide for the food up there at the guest house. Not only that, we also find difficulties with bread. I have a boy that goes to the school here, and we do not have enough bread that comes into the community for us. There are other issues. There are some products on the shelves that have used-by dates that are past. And we are still buying them from the store.

Mr TURNOUR—Like what?

Miss Kaigey—Like tinned stuff. I have bought several tins from the store which had a used-by date on it. I have also bought a bottle of milk from there. If it is due today we still use it the next day. Even though we have bought it we have to finish it before tomorrow—but we still buy it from the store.

Mrs VALE—Through you, Chair, did you say that the bread runs out?

Mrs Marou—Yes, they do not have enough bread provided for the whole community.

Mrs VALE—And does the bread come in once a week?

Mrs Marou—The bread comes in every Monday on the boat. It might finish on the day and all the people who come later to buy bread find that it is not there.

Mrs VALE—There is not enough bread. Okay, so they go without.

Mrs Marou—So some of our families miss out.

Mrs VALE—What kind of bread is on offer? Is it just white bread or do they have wholemeal?

Mrs Marou—We get sliced bread and we get white and wholemeal. We get fruit loaf.

Mrs VALE—Yes.

Mrs Marou—We do get those, and we sometimes get buns on the island.

Mrs VALE—But they are all sold out usually by the first day.

Mrs Marou—They are sold out before anybody else.

Mrs VALE—Is there no storage for frozen bread on the island?

Mrs Marou—There is a fridge for it but the bread does not last that long for anybody else throughout the week.

CHAIR—Have you raised that with the store?

Mrs Marou—We have. I think we had an issue with it about two weeks ago. There was a guy that was here—Tony Flint, who is one of the regional managers—within the community. I spoke to him about the issues that we were having here on the island, because he stays at the guest house. I spoke to him about the bread issue. It is first in first served. And you do not worry about whoever comes later on. There is just not enough for us.

CHAIR—What did he say?

Mrs Marou—He said that he was going to get some more in. I have never seen that happen. He spoke to me a week before but a week later I did not see it until it just came in recently. Normally on the pay week we do not get enough products sent in for us. On the off week, yes, sometimes we do and sometimes we do not.

Mrs VALE—But on the off week when it does come in people do not have any money.

Mrs Marou—That is correct. They do not have enough money to budget to buy food.

Mrs VALE—So there is bread that comes in on the second week?

Mrs Marou—Bread comes in on the second week. Bread comes in every week on the barge. Every Monday, whenever we have the barge, it comes in.

Mrs VALE—Just so that I can understand it for the committee, on the first week it is all gone by Tuesday or Wednesday, if it comes in on Monday.

Mrs Marou—That is right.

Mrs VALE—And the second week's bread lasts a bit longer because there is not enough money in the community to—

Mrs Marou—Sometimes it does not. Whichever family has money will take all the bread. You do not see the bread for other families who come in. We had bread issues, recently, all the time.

Mr TURNOUR—How many years, going back, have you had bread issues or is it just recently?

Mrs Marou—Just recently. Half way through last year and for the beginning of this year we have had issues. I cannot recall all the other years, though.

Mr TURNOUR—It is sold out every week?

Mrs Marou—It is sold out every week, yes. Whoever is at the shop will buy bread, and then it is gone for anybody else who comes in to get some.

Mrs VALE—Are they ordering less bread now, Kay? Is there less bread?

Mrs Marou—I do not know how there ordering system is with the IBIS store. I cannot say, but as a community member I know that we have not had enough bread on the island to feed our family.

Mrs VALE—Might I ask, then: in the absence of bread what do families usually eat?

Mrs Marou—They go back to the island food. They used to make damper or scone or whatever they have.

Mrs VALE—So damper, scone and flour food.

Mrs Marou—Yes.

Mrs VALE—And the mothers will make this?

Mrs Marou—They will. We are finding it very hard now because children now eat a lot more bread than they eat rice or flour. It is not like when we were young.

Mrs VALE—We have had some evidence to say that when the bags of rice are opened they are often mouldy. Have you had any problems with the bags of rice? Rice is an important—

Mrs Marou—I haven't with the bags of rice but I have with spaghetti. It has had weevils in it. I have bought spaghetti that has been on the shelves with black weevils. I bought a couple of those for the guesthouse as well and I had to throw them away. I did not ever take them back to the IBIS store to get reimbursement.

Mrs VALE—Will they reimburse for articles that are found to be faulty in any way? Is that a policy they have if you have to take goods back?

Mrs Marou—Before, they used to, but now you have to show a receipt to get reimbursement for your product.

Mrs VALE—Why would you have to show a receipt?

Mrs Marou—To state that you have bought the food at that shop.

Mrs VALE—Where else would you buy it?

Mrs Marou—That is the only store that we have. That is right.

Mrs VALE—Exactly. I would have thought it was the people who were on CDEP and do not order themselves who would be—

Mrs Marou—We do not have any other IBIS store bar the one that is here with us now.

Mrs VALE—And it is probably not a habit of most people on the island to keep receipts anyway.

Mrs Marou—That is right. I don't. Sometimes I forget where I have left them. I have gotten into the habit of throwing them in the bin straightaway, then if I want to take a product back I have to look for the receipt, and it is not there—it is in the bin.

Mr KATTER—I think Kay has put her case very well.

CHAIR—So you freight up some of your own stuff for the guesthouse?

Mrs Marou—Yes, through the Tourist Straight Island Regional Council. They run the enterprise up there where I work. I work for the council.

CHAIR—You have food brought up here independently?

Mrs Marou—I have food brought up here, but if it does not come on time I get products from the shop.

CHAIR—Are you using Sea Swift?

Mrs Marou—Yes, that is correct.

CHAIR—What is the cost of freight with Sea Swift?

Mrs Marou—I do not know. You will have to ask the island manager.

CHAIR—So that is done by someone else?

Mrs Marou—Yes. I do not hold the account.

CHAIR—How long has there been an ATM on the island?

Mrs Marou—The ATM has been here for a couple of years now.

CHAIR—Right. Has it always been a St George ATM?

Mrs Marou—The first one was. I do not know about this one. This one was only replaced last week.

CHAIR—I see. So the ATM has been replaced in the last week?

Mrs Marou—Yes, and we are still having problems with it today.

Mrs VALE—I want to talk about the quality of your food, Kay. Your food is delivered on the same barge as the IBIS food?

Mrs Marou—That is correct, but mine comes from Cairns.

Mrs VALE—But doesn't the IBIS food also come from Cairns? I am just trying to get a tracking—

Mrs Marou—I am not quite sure. I do not know where their products come from. I cannot really say. I know mine come from Cairns. I cannot say where IBIS's come from.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Kay, for the evidence you have given today. We really appreciate what you have done. I will ask your local member to make some final remarks to you on behalf of us, then I will call on Councillor Day to close the meeting for us.

Mr TURNOUR—I want to again thank everybody for coming today. I pay my respects to the traditional owners and elders for having us here on the island. We do appreciate the evidence that you have given. Thank you, Councillor Day and Vera, for assisting in the organisation of this hearing. We look forward to coming back. The inquiry will go to the Northern Territory in the middle of the year, to Central Australia and to Western Australia, and we plan to report in September this year. I look forward to providing you with the report when it is finalised. Thank you very much for having us.

Mr Day—On behalf of the elders, the youth, the women folk and all of the community members, I express our appreciation for the visit by you parliamentary members. I am sure you are very busy people but you have made time to come here. Thank you very much for this opportunity to make our concerns known to you. We hope you have a pleasant trip home. I believe you are off to Bamaga next, and after that we wish you a pleasant flight back. We have food and refreshments. I will ask Pastor Cec to bless the food and to then close the meeting with a prayer.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Vale**):

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

The meeting was closed with a prayer in English.

Committee adjourned at 12.16 pm