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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

(**Subcommittee**)

Reference: Indigenous employment

WEDNESDAY, 27 JULY 2005

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

Wednesday, 27 July 2005

Members: Mr Wakelin *(Chair)*, Dr Lawrence *(Deputy Chair)*, Ms Annette Ellis, Mr Garrett, Mr Robb, Mr Slipper, Mr Snowdon, Dr Southcott, Mr Tuckey and Mrs Vale

Members in attendance: Ms Annette Ellis, Mr Slipper, Mr Snowdon and Mr Wakelin

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

Positive factors and examples amongst Indigenous communities and individuals, which have improved employment outcomes in both the public and private sectors; and

1. recommend to the government ways this can inform future policy development; and
2. assess what significant factors have contributed to those positive outcomes identified, including what contribution practical reconciliation* has made.

*The Committee has defined 'practical reconciliation' in this context to include all government services.

WITNESSES

Subcommittee met at 9.00 am

BRIMM, Mr Ernest Milton, Cultural Officer, Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park

FREEMAN, Mr Don, Managing Director, Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park

FREEMAN, Mrs Judy, Director of Marketing, Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park

CHAIR (Mr Wakelin)—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander References Committee inquiry into Indigenous employment and I thank you for having us at your place today. These hearings are proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. I invite you to make an opening statement, which will be followed by discussion.

Mrs Freeman—Thank you very much. We welcome you to our establishment, the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park. My partner, Don, and I are the co-founders of the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park. Some of you may know about us and some of you may not. If it is all right with you, we would like to do a Powerpoint presentation, which should take between 10 and 15 minutes. It is a case study, but is not directly geared to the topic at hand. Ernest and I presented this at the National Indigenous Tourism Conference which was held in Perth. It may give you a better idea of who you are talking to.

CHAIR—That is fine. Perhaps you could say a few words to pick up the thread as we go, or do you just want to go through—

Mrs Freeman—We will look at this first, because it will give you the background.

CHAIR—It will give us a picture.

A PowerPoint presentation was then given—

Mrs Freeman—There is 18 years behind this, so it is a very long story. We could sit here all day—and I am sure you would get lots of valuable information from us—but this will give you a snapshot. In 1987, it was a very different Australia and a very different era in Australian tourism. There was not a single place where an international tourist could learn anything about the Aboriginal culture—visit a cultural centre or watch a dance performance—and, frankly, most of domestic Australia was very uninterested. Born in the basement of a shopping centre, from a need to portray Aboriginal culture with dignity and pride, Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park is now one of Australia's largest and most successful tourist attractions. The largest private enterprise employer of Aboriginal people in tourism in the entire country, it is a stunning theatrical, symbolic interpretation of a 50,000-year-old society.

At the time, there was no role model, no-one to ask for advice and no mentors available; there was just a group of 10 individuals who wanted to make a difference. The original company was formed in 1987 by my partner, Don Freeman, and me, David and Cindy Hudson and six young men from the Tjapukai tribe. It was a true partnership between black and white, modern and ancient and community and business, and has had far-reaching implications for the Tjapukai community, the Cairns tourism industry and Australia's image both here and abroad.

Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park started in the basement of a shopping centre in Kuranda with 10 of us and a capital investment of $45,000. Today, it is a corporate entity, with 100 employees presenting some 40 shows and presentations every day from 9.00 am through to 10.00 pm on a 25-acre property with a capital investment of $10 million. Of the 100 employees here at Tjapukai, some 85 are Aboriginal—making us the largest private enterprise employer of Aboriginal people in tourism in Australia today. It is a place where performance art crosses cultural barriers and invokes a spirit of friendship and admiration for the Australian Aboriginal people. It has been an exciting journey which has seen us take dramatic chances, reinventing ourselves regularly to keep up with a dynamic and ever-changing industry.

After two years in our basement home, we built a special-purpose 300-seat theatre on the main street of Kuranda. Totally unfunded by any government agency, we risked everything we had earned so far in this dramatic million-dollar gamble and we survived—but barely; by the skin of our teeth. Exactly one month from the opening of our new theatre complex, the pilots went on strike, virtually closing down the entire tourism industry in the Far North.

After a few years, we decided once again to take a chance on our own vision. Our simple dance show, as successful as it was, created more questions than it answered. We wanted to answer those questions that our tourist guests were asking about Aboriginal culture and we also wanted to remain at the forefront of this vibrant and demanding industry, and so the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park was born—a $10 million facility that represents a new era in cultural tourism.

Mr Brimm—Tjapukai is not a government funded organisation. It is a private enterprise dedicated to creating wealth for investors—which include a majority Aboriginal shareholding. Tjapukai is owned by two Aboriginal communities, Tjapukai and the Yirrgandyji, Djabugay—the long-term employees—Indigenous Business Australia, Don and Judy Freeman and some 30 per cent is owned by non-Indigenous investors. The land and majority shareholding are forever in the hands of local Indigenous people. It is profit that brings benefit, both cultural and economic. When we started, the white community, the black community and the tourism industry had no doubt that we would fail, but 18 years have now gone by and we are still here—bigger, better and stronger than ever.

The experience within the park portrays the essence of life for the Tjapukai tribe, from the wondrous legends of the dreamtime through to the present reality of today's Tjapukai people. When we started, we decided that we were going to be professional in all we did. We told the industry that we were professionals and we try to act like professionals. Over time, we came to be accepted as professionals in this growing industry. This reinforced our own self-image and began an upward spiral that has continued to inspire not only us but also the new recruits of our company.

Tjapukai has become the most recognised Aboriginal language group in the world. The community has profited economically and spiritually and has gained experience in every aspect of business and industry. Since its beginning, the park has contributed almost $30 million to the Aboriginal community in profits, loyalties, wages and the purchase of arts and artefacts. The park has been instrumental in a cultural and language renewal, where knowledge of all aspects of the Tjapukai culture has increased the value of what is now a second generation of Tjapukai employees. Now, after 18 years, the children of the original founders of the company are

entering the Tjapukai work force—children who have grown up with an understanding that commitment to excellence and reliable performance lead the way to success in the modern world.

In the beginning, Tjapukai had seven Aboriginal employees and they were all performers. Today, Aboriginal employees work in all areas of the park, including technical and management, customer service, reservations, retail, food and beverage, administration and all levels of supervision and management. Tjapukai's dedication and the courage to constantly reach for new levels of achievement have not gone unrewarded. Many members of the community who have worked as performers at Tjapukai have travelled the world performing in 20 countries over 25 international tours. They have returned home with an expanded world view. A large body of world travellers from one small community has invaluably changed how this community sees itself and its place in the world. Let me show you some of the history. Many of the young people in this clip of Tjapukai, who were eight or nine years old at the time, are now working at Tjapukai alongside their mothers and fathers.

Mrs Freeman—Tjapukai has challenged the perceptions and the stereotypes of a nation. When we started 18 years ago, there were no Aboriginal tourism attractions in all of Australia. In fact, the perception was that the Aboriginal people would be unable to maintain the quality, the consistency, the reliability and the commercial focus necessary for success. The tourism industry is remarkably unforgiving. While they want to see an authentic, tribal and preferably primitive experience, they expect it to happen on time, exactly as it has been promised and regardless of any cultural imperatives. You can spend years working to secure a major tour client and do dozens of familiarisations, constantly adapting your presentation, your schedule and your content—doing whatever is necessary to meet the needs of the client—but if you screw up just once, if you get two complaints after hosting hundreds or thousands of their customers, you are gone. It is the end of your enterprise.

In spite of the nature of the Aboriginal product, the tourism industry holds you to the same level of delivery as they would the Regent Hotel in Sydney. We have constantly met that challenge and, in doing so, we have proved to Cairns, to Australia and to the world that the Tjapukai people are the equal of anyone. Tjapukai has become Australia's most awarded attraction. Some of the awards we have won are shown on these slides.

Overheads were then shown—

Mrs Freeman—From our humble beginnings 18 years ago, we have always tried to be the industry leader—some say the leading light. The issue for us at Tjapukai continues to be that there are few products we can benchmark against, so we are constantly breaking new ground and looking for new ways to portray the culture to meet the different and changing demands of our visitors. How do you evolve the Indigenous experience? The answer to this question is that we constantly have to reinvent ourselves to make sure that we meet the expectations.

Every few years, every foreign and domestic visitor changes what he expects from his visit. Our latest innovation is our night-time show *Tjapukai by night*. This show is deliberately less cultural than what we present during the day. We created this show because, with the downturn in the European and American markets over the past few years to Cairns and the upturn of the Japanese market, Aboriginal culture as we were presenting it during the day was not so

interesting to our Japanese visitors and we had to come up with something quick smart to make a move into the Japanese market. What we came up with was a bit more light-hearted entertainment.

I guess because of Tjapukai's Aboriginality and, in a way despite its Aboriginality, it has become a recognised icon of Australian tourism. Consistently, when Australia has needed an ambassador for cultural tourism—be it here, Cairns or anywhere in the world—we have been called upon. Tjapukai is a perfect marriage between a lot of things, for example arts and tourism, and it has achieved a perfect balance. Let us look at it as an attraction unto itself. It really is a perfect marriage between a lot of things. It is authentic, it is owned by Aboriginal people and it is perceived nationwide and internationally to be doing the right thing. Its location is excellent. It is 15 minutes from an international airport and easily accessible. It is not two hours off the beaten track, down somewhere where people do not go. The price provides excellent dollar for dollar value. There is a $30 admission charge and you get a very professional, in-depth look at the Aboriginal culture.

In respect of reputation, the attraction is world famous. It is already brochured in programs all over the country—in every country, for that matter. It is written about in every guide book and it is the most awarded attraction in Australia yet, even though 80 per cent of all international visitors have expressed a desire to have an Indigenous tourism experience, we receive less than 10 per cent of the visitors to Cairns. I love watching people's faces when they hear that.

Mr SLIPPER—It is less than 10 per cent?

Mrs Freeman—That is right. It is a very sobering fact. The federal government uses this statistic a lot, and it is one that we all have to be very wary of. Less than 10 per cent of the two million people who come to Cairns every year actually slap down their cash as opposed to the 80 per cent of those who say they would like to. It is a really amazing fact. Tourism is highly competitive. We at Tjapukai have tried to provide appeal to a greater number of visitors to try to cut down the narrow group that want an Indigenous experience.

Mr SLIPPER—Why do you only get 10 per cent when what you have is world class and so obviously successful?

Mrs Freeman—It is highly competitive here. There are probably over 300 or 400 things to do in this region, which means that we are only one of 300 things. When you are faced with it, there are a lot of reasons. The tour desks, for example, work on commissions, so on a $30 ticket they pick up only a $3 commission. What would you rather sell—this or hot air ballooning, where you would get $35? So there are many reasons why we do not get that.

CHAIR—Press on.

Mrs Freeman—What we have tried to do is to create a new image of ourselves as a modern, fun-loving culture so as to involve a new generation. We did this for a North American roadshow, when all the various tourism providers from this region did a tour through America. Every operation had to create its own portion of the video. It was based on the Tom Hanks movie *Cast Away*. That is what we created.

CHAIR—We talked about the movie coming out here.

Mrs Freeman—We created that to take on the roadshow.

Mr Brimm—We at Tjapukai represent the new spirit of freedom that is hopefully growing in the Aboriginal community at large—freedom from dependence on government handouts; freedom from a century of oppression; freedom from the cycle of poverty. We are proud of what we have accomplished. We hope that those of you who have not had the opportunity to experience the Tjapukai magic will take the time to talk to us while you are here—or, even better, visit us when you are next in Cairns. Galin Nganda Mayin—go be joyful.

Mrs Freeman—Hopefully, that presentation has given you some idea of who we are and what we do and it might make the questions more relevant.

CHAIR—That was first-rate.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—Were you part of the Olympic opening ceremony?

Mrs Freeman—No.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—I saw the dove on your presentation and I thought it might have been part of the ceremony.

Mrs Freeman—The dove is actually from a show that we do every single day. We have a hologram show that recreates the legends of the dreamtime.

CHAIR—I will lead off with questions. Firstly, again, thank you very much. It was a wonderful presentation and it was quite inspiring. This is not the story Australia wide, as you would well know, though we are very determined with our inquiry to stay within the positive—and that is why we are so delighted that you have been able to be with us. I have a couple of general questions in the context of your words about professionalism, entrepreneurialship, the blend of cultures here and working with your core business on the Indigenous experience and adapting it. The adaptation is quite remarkable—from, as you said, the European-American target changing into more the Japanese. You said that 85 per cent of your staff are Aboriginal—and you are into the intergenerational aspect now, which is magnificent. Could you give us a couple of pointers about how you develop that professionalism with your staff? Could you tell us how you have developed that over the years and what is happening now?

Mrs Freeman—We are extremely demanding. I think if you set a benchmark for people to reach for, they will reach for it. We did two things simultaneously. As we have grown over the 18 years, we have developed a team. It is all very well for Don and me to run around with a rolling pin shouting at people, but it does not really do any good. So we have created a team and it works from within. I am sure Ernest will back this up. For example, if there are six dancers on the stage and two do not show up, I can shout all I want but it is up to the other four guys who have to carry the weight of the missing two on their backs to stand up and say, 'Hey, we can't keep carrying you.' I am sure the other two will probably have plenty to say as well.

Mr Freeman—There are a couple of key things. From day one, we have always attempted to create full-time jobs for people and to pay people enough money to change the way they live and, frankly, to get them addicted to a pay cheque on Friday—which I think all of us are. Ultimately, you create a lifestyle, but it takes a while. We started small and with a very small capital base. We have grown slowly. We have had three major expansions in the 18 years since we started but each time that we expanded we had a core of solid, dependable people.

We started with seven Aboriginal performers when we moved into our own theatre. There were 10 of us, counting Judy and me and the wife of one of the performers, and the number grew to 32 in that first jump. But we initially had 10 people we knew were solid. So the other 22 who came on board had role models—and, if all else failed, we knew we had 10 who were going to carry it.

Judy and I come from a theatre background, particularly a folk theatre background, and had worked with odd eclectic groups of people in different parts of the world. Theatre has its own discipline. The concept that the show must go on is a very powerful concept and everybody knows stories of actors going on with broken legs. It is a bit like sport. Once you have hung up the posters and you are committed to doing the show, the show must go on. That has certainly carried us quite a long way, especially in the early days.

We have a unique situation here. We are quite rural, so the Indigenous community is still quite tribal and quite in touch with its roots. At the same time they are also quite integrated into the larger community. They go to the same schools as the non-Indigenous community. They probably have a greater grasp than some of the more rural areas of non-Indigenous community, which certainly worked in our favour in getting the thing started.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—One of the fascinating aspects for the committee is to understand the difficulties in entrepreneurship within business and development and ideas from Indigenous communities when they want to start something. There are always stories about how they do or do not succeed. Are you in a position to take us back to the start and to let us know how difficult it was or was not in respect of financing and getting people outside of your group to understand what it is you were trying to do? How do you convince them to invest in it or to get the loans for it? One of the big things for our inquiry is to understand the difficulties in entrepreneurship. Here we have a story that you can say is working. However, it would not have been working on day one. Can you take us through what you faced to get this off the ground in the first place and how you moved to the next phase?

Mrs Freeman—It is a book unto itself.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—Can you give us a synopsis?

Mrs Freeman—A quick synopsis?

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—It is an important question, because you have been there and done it.

Mrs Freeman—And we did it when there was not anything else happening.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—Exactly, and there are still people out there trying to do it.

Mrs Freeman—One of the things we should probably say at this meeting is that Don and I have been appointed as part of a federal government mentoring program—the Indigenous Tourism Business Ready Program—which has been put up by the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources. They have selected five mentors from around Australia to figure out how to do it. We shall see; it has just started. A quick synopsis of the difficulties when we first started with the 10 of us was that no-one had ever done this before. Everybody thought it was an absurd, ridiculous idea and that the Aboriginal people could not possibly do anything like that. We faced difficulties from the police and from the community. The Aboriginal community had no idea what we were talking about. It was all quite foreign. I think the non-Indigenous community was definitely ready for Aboriginal tourism but nobody had the vaguest idea of how to proceed or what to do.

Mr Freeman—I think we have to say that neither did we.

Mrs Freeman—We had no idea. One of the things about us, though, was that we were absolutely dog-hearted. All we needed to hear was that there was not anything like that and that no-one had ever done that before. We thought: 'Why not? We cannot accept that. It has to be doable.' And we set out to do it.

Mr SLIPPER—Because you were from overseas, it meant that you looked at the situation with fresh eyes.

Mrs Freeman—The other thing about is that we have lived in India. We have Buddhist backgrounds. When we look at people, in all honesty we do not see colour. We wanted to put on a good show. We did not care.

Mr Freeman—We were not tarnished by stereotypes that we had inherited from generations.

CHAIR—That is very important. It is almost coincidental that we uncovered that little pearl in terms of how you conceived it and did it.

Mr SLIPPER—Presumably, you must have once owned the whole show—

Mrs Freeman—Yes.

Mr Freeman—Most of it.

Mr SLIPPER—and then you brought in partners?

Mrs Freeman—Yes.

Mr SLIPPER—And your own share has become diluted?

Mr Freeman—Our share is relatively minor, in actual fact. We came to the point when we were up in Kuranda where we had the anomaly of Judy and I owning the Tjapukai culture. It was an anomaly that we felt was morally wrong. To some extent, the creation of the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park was a means of addressing that anomaly. At that time, we actually went to Indigenous Business Australia and attempted to sell them half of that business.

Mr SLIPPER—And it was a no go?

Mrs Freeman—No.

Mr Freeman—Their arguments included: 'If we paid you for half the business, you would take the money and run and there wouldn't be any increase in Aboriginal employment because the business existed as it was. Also, we were trying to get them to buy the business in the names of the employees rather than the community, which was outside the guidelines at the time. I guess as an alternative to that we said: 'If you put up the money to buy the Indigenous share, rather than it coming to us, we will use it to expand the business.' Ultimately, IBA bought into that concept and that is one of the reasons that we chose to go in the direction that we did.

CHAIR—Roughly, when did IBA come in—what year; what time?

Mr Freeman—We started talking to them in 1994 and—

CHAIR—And you started in 1985. So it was a few years on?

Mr Freeman—Yes.

Mrs Freeman—We did not get government funding for the start-up.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—Did you ever walk through the door of a bank?

Mrs Freeman—Yes.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—What did they say back then?

Mr Freeman—When we built the theatre in Kuranda, we borrowed $700,000.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—From a bank?

Mr Freeman—Yes, from a bank. When we built this place we borrowed $4 million from the then Queensland Industrial Development Corporation, which became Suncorp.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—What did you do to convince the bank to give you $700,000 at the beginning?

Mr Freeman—We happened on the land that the theatre was built on, so we had that for security. We also had a couple of investors in the original project, one of whom was quite a well-respected businessman who originally put up $15,000 of that $45,000.

CHAIR—So that 30 per cent of outside shareholders you mentioned?

Mrs Freeman—And that is current.

Mr SLIPPER—So you have entirely gone from Kuranda?

Mr Brimm—Yes, we have entirely gone from Kuranda.

Mr SLIPPER—And you sold the theatre to someone else?

Mr Brimm—Yes, we sold the theatre.

CHAIR—Ernest, you mentioned that it was a private enterprise; that you just went and did it. How do you feel about the private enterprise ethic? What was important?

Mr Brimm—I was not with the company when Don and Judy started off in Kuranda. I spent years in the forestry department and then came on board down here. So I had no idea about anything to do with the business in the sense of funding, loans et cetera.

CHAIR—How long have you been on board?

Mr Brimm—Just going on nine years in April next year.

Mr SLIPPER—The Tjapukai people are obviously around Kuranda. Are they also around Cairns?

Mr Brimm—The boundaries go from the Cairns airport right up to Port Douglas, the tablelands and right around, with the five clans within.

Mr SLIPPER—Where are the other two groups of people from? I will not endeavour to pronounce the names.

Mr Brimm—The coast.

Mr SLIPPER—The Cairns coast?

Mr Brimm—Yes, from Cairns to Port Douglas.

Mr SLIPPER—You call it Tjapukai, but you have the three groups of people involved. Presumably some of the traditions would be different among the different groups of people. Do you present just Tjapukai culture?

Mr Brimm—Yes, it is solely based on Tjapukai. The other groups of people are within the Tjapukai tribe.

Mr Freeman—Yirrigandyji is a clan of Tjapukai that chose to maintain a separate identity, whereas the other five clans of Tjapukai formed together into the Tjapukai Tribal Council. The other group, Ngundjan, are the long-term employees.

Mr SLIPPER—Ngundjan?

Mr Freeman—There are three groups.

Mr SLIPPER—So that is Tjapukai, Yirrigandyji and—

Mr Freeman—'Tjapukai' is the spelling that is used by the tribe in their Aboriginal culture. It is an anomaly that developed because of a linguist who was studying Tjapukai language and has worked well because it has identified the business as separate from the tribal corporations. It is not through any plans; it is just the way it has happened.

Mr SLIPPER—I presume Warren Entsch has been in touch with you over the years?

Mr Freeman—We work closely with him.

Mr SNOWDON—I am interested in your comments about the tourism industry. If two million visitors come to Cairns each year, what proportion of them goes somewhere else as well?

Mrs Freeman—I could not say. All of them go somewhere else.

Mr SNOWDON—The reason I am asking is that we know that a proportion of the tourists who come to Cairns will also go to Ayers Rock.

Mrs Freeman—Certainly the European American proportion.

Mr SNOWDON—And quite a few Japanese. My point is that there are different opportunities that people may have during their visit to Australia, not just to North Queensland, so I wonder how much of it is a marketing exercise or how much of it is people electing before they come here to make a choice about what they do when they are here—in other words, their wholesaler says: 'You're going to Cairns. These are the things you can do in Cairns, including Tjapukai, or you can go to Ayers Rock. When you are at Ayers Rock, you will see Anangu Tours and all that sort of business, and you might go somewhere else.'

Mrs Freeman—Yes, absolutely.

Mr SNOWDON—So they make the selections before they get here.

Mrs Freeman—We have a large market, and a small marketing team. We certainly do sales trips to all of our markets and we make sure that Tjapukai is included in all of the brochures globally so that we get maximum uptake. Even if they do not, I want them to at least read it in every brochure they pick up.

Mr SNOWDON—So they have it in front of them.

Mrs Freeman—That is right. So they see Tjapukai in Qantas, in Swain's in Globus and so on. Even if they do not buy that, when they get here they remember it.

Mr SNOWDON—So you go across to those tourism extravaganzas in Germany.

Mrs Freeman—We visit every month.

Mr Freeman—But we tend to stay away from roadshows and prefer, when we can afford it, to go directly to the wholesalers. Rather than going on a roadshow with 10 products under Tourism Australia or Tourism Queensland, you really try to do it individually so you get their personal attention.

Mr SLIPPER—Are you the only Indigenous park or Indigenous opportunity of substance in Cairns?

Mr Freeman—There are a number. One is Rainforest Station.

Mrs Freeman—It is in the Cairns vicinity. Rainforest Station is a nature park owned by one of the three major tour companies. They are probably our greatest competitors. There is no Indigenous ownership but they have a dance troupe. Gugu-Yalanji do a rainforest walk in Mossman Gorge, which they have done for many years with varying degrees of success. There are a number of walking tours with traditional owners in Mossman Gorge, Cooktown, Wdjul Wdjul and Hopevale. Some of them have come and gone. There are a couple around that seem to be doing quite well. There are other opportunities. There was a themed restaurant in Cairns for two or three years.

CHAIR—You mentioned that you aim for full-time employment. Do you have many people here on any form of employment that is subsidised by the Australian government? Do you have any people here on CDEP?

Mr Freeman—There is nobody here on CDEP. We do not get involved with CDEP. We have a contract with STEP, which is part of DEWR. Over the last two years they provided us with a subsidy of about $5,600 for an Aboriginal employee that we took on and who stayed for six months. You get $1,300 when you take them on, another $1,300 at the end of three months and another $2,600 at the end of six months. We contracted with them to take on 24 employees over a two-year period, which about covers our attrition rate. Of the 24 that we took on over the last two years, probably 15 are still working here.

CHAIR—Can we go back to Warren to develop his thoughts further?

Mr SNOWDON—I was trying to pursue it a bit with Indigenous Business Australia. What currently is their engagement with you?

Mr Freeman—IBA owns 20 per cent of us.

Mr SNOWDON—Are they involved in other Indigenous tourism businesses in the town?

Mrs Freeman—They are starting to.

Mr Freeman—At the moment, their position is a bit unclear. They used to be a merchant bank that took equity positions in Indigenous businesses and would have been prohibited from getting involved in any other Indigenous tourism venture in Cairns under a non-competition clause that is in our partnership agreement with them. They suddenly changed and became the business arm of what was ATSIC. So their role has changed and they are becoming increasingly

involved in other Indigenous businesses. It would be interesting to follow the ramifications of the government's change of policy in so much as we still have a non-competition clause.

Mr SNOWDON—So their original role as a merchant banker has effectively changed to that of a business operator or a business mentor?

Mr Freeman—They now do grant funding, business mentoring and feasibility studies. They have taken over ATSIC's role.

Mr SNOWDON—But they have merged the two roles of ATSIC.

Mr Freeman—Yes.

Mr SNOWDON—Not only the merchant banking provisions but also the business development provisions.

Mrs Freeman—Absolutely.

Mr SNOWDON—You are implying that there could be a potential conflict of interest between those two functions?

Mrs Freeman—Yes, certainly in our case.

Mr Freeman—It is a very real issue because they are now apparently investing with the Mau Mau people down south, in the rainforest walk, and they are certainly supporting a number of Indigenous enterprises in the area.

Mr SNOWDON—Have they developed in conjunction with you and their other clients an overall tourism strategy for Indigenous involvement in this area, or are they just doing it on an ad hoc basis?

Mrs Freeman—Ad hoc.

Mr Freeman—They are just doing it on an ad hoc basis. We are completely out of that loop.

Mr SNOWDON—You talk about the number of people coming into Cairns. We do not know the answer to this, and clearly you do not either, but we do not know whether or not they have developed a strategy which is designed to capture a greater share of that market for Indigenous people generally.

Mrs Freeman—As far as I know, we have not. I would safely say no.

Mr SLIPPER—It sounds as though you are approaching it as a work in progress.

CHAIR—We are meeting with them on 8 August.

Mr Freeman—They are shareholders in the business. They act as shareholders. At least at our board table they were very active.

Mr SNOWDON—Positive?

Mr Freeman—They are active. They are very hard-nosed, probably more hard-nosed than a private enterprise business.

Mr SNOWDON—Who do they have as a board member representative?

Mr Freeman—Chris Smith.

Mr SNOWDON—He is an employee of IBA?

Mr Freeman—He sits on our board.

CHAIR—He is an Indigenous person?

Mrs Freeman—No.

CHAIR—Do you know where he is based?

Mr Freeman—He is based in Canberra and he sits on the board of a number of—

Mrs Freeman—He is on the board of a number of Aboriginal groups.

Mr Freeman—For Kakadu, Kings Canyon—

CHAIR—I get the picture.

Mr SLIPPER—Generally speaking, in employment we are, quite appropriately, not allowed to discriminate on the basis of race. Given the fact that you have 100 employees, 85 per cent of whom are Indigenous—and I understand why you would want to promote Indigenous employment; that is a very laudable aim—are you given some sort of exemption from general rules which has seen you be able to achieve 85 per cent Indigenous employment? Or is it just something that has happened on merit and on the basis of their involvement with the Tjapukai people and their understanding of the culture and what you are trying to produce and present?

Mr Freeman—We are on a bit of thin ice here—and we are putting this on *Hansard*! Our goal is to increase Indigenous employment and we unquestionably give preference to the Tjapukai and Yirrgandyji people, Aboriginal people in general and Indigenous people in general. All other things being even close to equal, we will employ an Aboriginal person before we will employ a non-Aboriginal person. We have had situations where we have needed people to provide skills in specific areas and have been unable to find an Indigenous person. For example, our restaurant runs breakfast, lunch and dinner and we feed about 500 people a day plus we do functions and things like that. I do not know an Indigenous person who can manage that—but, if we could find one, we would.

Mr SLIPPER—Do you have Indigenous food—bush tucker?

Mr Freeman—No.

Mrs Freeman—We have side things—bush flavoured foods. It is very difficult because we have a very varied international market. We have Indians, Americans, Japanese et cetera and each nationality is so particular. The Indian market just about demands Indian food—though we cannot put out an Indian buffet. We try to be all things to all people. We had dhal and vegetable curry. We have miso soup. We have rice. We have vegetables for the vegetarians.

Mr Freeman—And we have a stir-fry dish pretty much every day of some sort.

Mrs Freeman—We have been talking about how we can get more Indigenous food onto the menu and we have talked about having guest chefs. We were talking recently about putting one Indigenous dish on the menu every day which would be based on a recipe from somebody within the company. We do not want to lose the fact that we are Indigenous. It would be nice to serve Indigenous food but I think we would lose half of our customers if we served only Indigenous food.

Mr SLIPPER—It may be a good idea if you had one dish, though.

Mrs Freeman—That has been our current thought.

Mr Freeman—We have done that from time to time.

CHAIR—You were talking about this 'thin ice' issue that we all struggle with at times wherever you come from. It seems to me that the blending, the mentoring and the success come from this cocktail of unique things that have happened here. You know better than us about the blending of those 100 people, the mentoring and the leadership. Could you talk a bit about that in terms of the chemistry that is happening? It happened in 1987 with the mentoring and leadership roles and things like that. This leads on from Peter's question a little bit, but maybe we could talk about it in a more general sense.

Mrs Freeman—I like how you used the word 'cocktail'. It is nice that you see and appreciate that, because we are in a unique situation. We are very organic. We have grown from a seed and all of us are very grass roots. We are not a major hotel chain trying to put something together to better the hotel visitation nights. Everyone wants to cash in on the Aboriginal tourism thing. Our development of that has been very organic. We work very closely as a team.

This afternoon, Ernest, the people in the Ops team and I will have an operations meeting. We go through all the reports. We write millions of reports—probably way too many. We go over everything and we are very careful to stay on top of our daily performance. Every department has to write down anything that goes wrong in their department, so that it does not come from left field and knock us over. We get together and we discuss how we can do better and what we can do better. But it is not just us; it is all of the group. No-one is scared to say what they think.

CHAIR—There is confidence within the organisation and you sift through things. You made the point earlier that you can have a thousand or a hundred-thousand positive experiences, but

you try to deal with the one or two negatives before they happen or as they happen. That is why you are getting on top of it. The one thing that I found quite exciting is the adaptation. For example, you adapt to the Japanese market or whatever and you just work it out as a business and blend this cultural experience. Ernest might wish to make a comment on this as well. You are giving the Indigenous experience but you are doing it in a way which relates to your market. A challenge like this for a private enterprise and to be commercial in these sorts of situations is tough going.

Mrs Freeman—There are some key points in what you are saying—for example, how does one recreate and capture this in other places? I wish I had the answer.

Mr Freeman—I wish that we had bottled it.

CHAIR—You are very generous.

Mrs Freeman—Is tourism the answer? Right now, many of the Aboriginal communities see tourism as their saving grace because they feel that they are good tour guides and they like to talk to people. So there are two things that could happen. We could have a plethora of Aboriginal guided walks throughout the country, and the same tourists that are come here and going to Ayers Rock and Sydney will pick only one. They are not going to pick 17 guided walks to do. So that might not work. In some of the communities, the cultural imperatives overtake the commercial reality and, unless that balance is correct, there is no point at all in moving forward.

Mr Brimm—Going back to the cocktail comment: what makes a cocktail taste good? The identities within the cocktail—Don, Judy and the past employees who have come together to make this place, or the cocktail, taste good. That is what Tjapukai is about. We will sit down this afternoon in our operations meeting and try to fine tune operations to take us to the world stage—which the guys have seen. There is a general understanding that, from a cultural point of view, as a cultural officer, we need to continue with our identity but, at the same time, on a marketing level with Don and Judy, we still have to work together.

Mr SLIPPER—It sounds like an intoxicating cocktail.

Mr Brimm—And it tastes very good.

Mrs Freeman—One of the other things is: how can you know about tourism if you have never been a tourist? Going back to 1987, we would stand up on the street and beg people to come to see what we did. We would say, 'Don't pay now; pay at the end.' There were seven guys on the stage and two people in the audience and it was heartbreaking for me. So we would say: 'Don't pay.'

CHAIR—That is incredible.

Mrs Freeman—We determined that Australians really accept things better when they are famous overseas. So we thought, 'We'll go overseas; we'll take the group overseas.' We approached various corporate entities to pay for the seven or so tickets. We finally succeeded, but I was threatening to put—

Mr Freeman—We got some kind of a discount out of Thai Airways—not even Qantas.

Mrs Freeman—No-one would help us, and I would say, 'That's all right; we are going to France.' Once we took the first group of people overseas, it was eye-opening. Some of these guys, who had never left Kuranda before, were suddenly in Paris. After that, it was like: 'Okay, now I know what it is to be a tourist.' That really helps what you do here.

CHAIR—Watching the presentation, there was never any doubt in my mind about the Aboriginality of it, yet I related because they were there with a ball—there was this activity that spoke a whole lot of languages and it was done in a fun way. You would say, 'This is fun,' but there was no doubt about the Aboriginality in the dances. You could see the authenticity of it.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—I would like to talk more about the employment aspects, which was what you were beginning to touch on. You are right, Judy: how many guided walks can we bear economically in the country? In other discussions we have heard—and we are all very aware of this—that the very culture of our Indigenous people offers challenges in terms of employment and, unless there is a very understanding and in-tune employer, it can be very difficult; for example, sorry times, funerals, off time and all those sorts of things. How have you dealt with that at the hard end within your work force? We cannot have 200 guided walks but what is your view about Indigenous people working not necessarily directly in the tourism industry but working, say, in the retail industry within tourist areas? It is very difficult to find Indigenous people working in the retail industry in Cairns, Darwin, Alice Springs or any of these other places where people go to see an Indigenous experience. So there is this second level of employment that would be a really good thing. Can you discuss that aspect for me—first of all, how you have done it there and then how we can then hope to try to translate that to extend that employment base further?

Mrs Freeman—I guess you could probably say this in any job, but we said, 'We stated that we are going to do two shows a day, and we are doing two shows a day—funerals, whatever. If you are going to the funeral, we have to find someone who is going to stand in for you, because the show is going on.' The minute that you allow the funerals and the community obligations to close down the business—even for a moment—that business is finished because it would be running along community policy and directives, not commercial policy.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—So whose responsibility has it been to find other people to step in—the person or persons who wish to absent themselves or management?

Mrs Freeman—Together.

Mr Freeman—Things are very different now than they were in the beginning.

Mrs Freeman—In the early days there were seven people. We needed six guys and one—

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—I understand that. There was no room for absenteeism, was there?

Mr Freeman—It was more of an issue then than it is now, because there were only seven people. They were all closely related to each other. It was a small group of closely related people. If your first cousin dies, you are expected to go to the funeral. I do not care who you

are—white or Aboriginal—if your first cousin dies and you are in town, you had better show up at the funeral because, if you do not, you are insulting the family.

Mrs Freeman—One thing we did—and the community was great about this—was to try to work with the community. In the early days we had shows at 11 am and 1.30 pm. Everyone was very committed to sticking to 11 am and 1.30 pm because, if people came and we were not there, that would have been the end and we would have been finished—you cannot do that. So the community worked with us to have the funeral at a time when the show was not on. Therefore, the performers could be there for those two show times and the funeral was at three o'clock.

Mr SNOWDON—But that circumstance will vary from place to place across Australia because of the cultural differences that exist within Aboriginal communities.

Mrs Freeman—That is right.

Mr SNOWDON—If you tried that on in the Central Desert, you would get nowhere.

Mrs Freeman—That is a real issue. You cannot say that you are operating a business from nine to five and then close down, because no-one will come.

Mr SLIPPER—But I suppose in the Central Desert there is a different ethos from, say, tourism here in Cairns where you are up against a lot of other operations that would operate religiously for certain hours of the day. In the Central Desert, people go there for a cultural experience and maybe the tourists would be more understanding if such a thing—

Mr SNOWDON—It is a different context.

Mrs Freeman—But they might be more understanding.

Mr SNOWDON—The service is provided; it is just—

Mrs Freeman—The minute that Qantas Vacations sends two people out to whatever experience in the Central Desert is happening and that does not happen because of whatever reason—I do not care what it is—you are out of Qantas, you are out of the program.

Mr SNOWDON—My point is that there are different strategies for dealing with the same issue.

Mr Freeman—If the Smithsonian Institute or National Geographic sell a $15,000 tour to Australia, of which the core of it is this Indigenous experience, and you get there and the experience does not happen—

Mr SNOWDON—You will not do it again.

Mr Freeman—That business would be in big trouble.

Mr SNOWDON—My point is that what applies here may not necessarily be what is used as a strategy somewhere else.

Mr Freeman—I have not had to deal with it so I do not know the reality of it. But, if the community wants to get involved in tourism, it is going to have to somehow include those people in whatever is happening, even if it is a funeral. The reality is that those people come for the cultural experience. If that is the cultural experience of the day—

Mr SNOWDON—That will not happen where I come from.

Mr Freeman—I understand that, but there has to be an alternative event of some sort.

Mr SNOWDON—Yes. This is why I think the question that Annette asked is quite interesting. I have seen groups in other parts of Australia who operate dance companies and go walking and do all that sort of business and they know that, if there is a funeral on 300 kilometres away, they are going to go. So you have to find another way of dealing with the issue. There is no question that you still have to provide the service. So you have to have a group of people who are perhaps more diverse or a different collection of people engaged in it. All I am pointing to is that the differences will be there but there have to be different strategies to address what you rightly point out is a commercial imperative. If you do not provide the service, they will not come again.

Mr SLIPPER—I think there is an organisation called Indigenous Tourism Australia.

Mrs Freeman—Is it part of Tourism Australia?

Mr SLIPPER—Yes.

Mrs Freeman—It is brand new. We have a bit of history on that.

Mr SLIPPER—Have you been involved?

Mrs Freeman—There is a long history to this—years of history. It started off with the deaths in custody inquiry many years ago. Out of that came the—

Mr Brimm—The Tourism Industry Advisory Committee.

Mrs Freeman—Yes. They wrote the tourism strategy.

Mr Freeman—I was a member of it for four years.

Mrs Freeman—Some interesting things came out of that. That strategy was written and then the government changed and all of that strategy went to some shelf somewhere out there in Canberra—where you all are. The next thing was the National Indigenous Tourism Leadership Group, which I was a part of. That was a very high-power group of nationally selected people. These people met on an ad hoc basis—not often enough—and tried to develop some strategy. I guess the main thing that came out of that was that we provided the input for Joe Hockey's tourism white paper, which is now being effected. The ITLG, that leadership group, was disbanded and the new group is Indigenous Tourism Australia, which sits as a part of Tourism Australia.

Mr Freeman—Aden Ridgeway is the chair.

Mrs Freeman—Yes, but they have not met yet and they have not announced the group.

Mr Freeman—They have not announced who else is on it, but they have announced that it will operate inside of Tourism Australia and Aden Ridgeway will be the chair.

Mr SLIPPER—I represented Philip Ruddock a couple of years ago at something in Melbourne—

Mr SNOWDON—At a football game?

Mr SLIPPER—No, it was a fairly high-powered Indigenous tourism launch. I am just not sure what body was overseeing it.

Mrs Freeman—I know what you are talking about—Aboriginal Tourism Australia, the ATA. I do not know exactly what is happening with them right now. It is a membership based group.

Mr Freeman—Except nobody knows who the members are.

Mrs Freeman—I think that all these things are great to look into how you proceed and how you develop, but a lot of it has already been done. It has been done by some really credible people and some wonderful things have been written. What happened to all of that? There were pilot projects that were put into effect and no-one knows what happened to them. The studies are sitting on shelves are getting dusty and then new studies happen and this all gets done over and over again. We keep going back to the beginning.

Mr Freeman—With the Tourism Industry Advisory Committee, we invested about $1½ million in private projects and nobody has ever been able to tell us—and we have asked a dozen times—what has happened.

Mrs Freeman—We said that we were going to support 10 pilot projects and we were going to mentor these 10 businesses through the next five years or whatever.

Mr SNOWDON—What happened?

Mrs Freeman—I have no idea. Maybe you could find out.

Mr SNOWDON—Did you nominate the businesses?

Mrs Freeman—Yes.

Mr SNOWDON—Can you provide us with a list?

Mrs Freeman—I do not where it is anymore.

Mr Freeman—I would have to go see if I could dig out the old—

Mrs Freeman—There is a list.

CHAIR—We should be able to track that and find out what happened. We will let you know what we eventually find out.

Mrs Freeman—I know they are active. They have gone back to it again. The Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources knows how I feel about that. I have said it a lot.

CHAIR—You have touched on a really good point. I will try to draw it together a little. This issue is about government dabbling, fiddling and coming up to people who have done it, such as you, and saying: 'You come up with the ideas. We'll trot along and suck those wonderful ideas out and transplant them, and the world will be a happier, stronger and better place,' and of course it does not work because it ignores the dynamic and the chemistry that you have created as well as the blood, sweat and tears that you have been through. That is my personal view. It just makes a very good comment about government, whichever government, and those who are fiddling, dabbling and trying to do it. That might be a little harsh, but I want to make that general point. Warren had a point.

Mr SNOWDON—I want to go back to an entirely different subject. You talk about the STEP program. Is this the first occasion you have had any labour market assistance?

Mr Freeman—No. In the first year that we started we were given 100 per cent funding for six of the seven performers that we had for six months, I think 75 per cent for an additional three months and 50 per cent for an additional three months, which gave us a year to get this thing up and running. Six of our seven performers were paid for and, without that, it would never have succeeded. That was the single most critical thing that made this work because, as Judy said, there were plenty of days where we had seven people on stage performing for two people. It took a year to turn that around. We will get $75,000 from the STEP program this year We are about to sign a new contract, so I hope I am not going to have any trouble! It will be a great help because, in spite of the big buildings and the fancy televisions and although this thing makes money every year—it has made money in 16 of its 18 years—nobody is getting rich.

Mr SNOWDON—It is a thin margin.

Mr Freeman—So that $75,000 is a big help although, frankly, it does not make or break this business. If we did not have the STEP program, we would get $5,200 for each employee that we take on over the next two years, and we would get $700 from Jobstart, or $4,200. There is always some money around to hire.

Mr SNOWDON—That was in the first couple of years.

Mr Freeman—That was in the first year.

Mr SNOWDON—In 1987 or 1988 or whenever.

Mr Freeman—When we started this project, we got a bunch of funding to take on trainees, which was $321 a week, as I remember, and was hardly enough money to make anybody go to work, especially somebody who is not really that keen to go in the first place. But we would top

that up a little anyway, which probably got us in more trouble than it was worth because we ended up hiring more people than we needed. We eventually got rid of most of them. The 30 trainees that we took on that were paid for were in addition to what we needed to run the place.

Mr SNOWDON—In the current environment, leaving aside the STEP program, where do you recruit your employees from? Are they all in the labour market already, or are they are at school and coming into the labour market, or are they people who are unemployed and coming into the labour market? What is the profile of the people who come into your operations?

Mrs Freeman—All of what you said.

Mr Freeman—This is intergenerational. Ernie's kids have grown up with Tjapukai as a job opportunity and watched their parents being gainfully employed for 15 or 18 years. The problem we have there, if there is a problem, is that we are so good now that it is hard for these kids to come in. Five years ago we had a 15 per cent absentee rate—if you wanted eight people you rostered 10 or 11 and you got eight. If you got all 11, you had to pay them and that was bad luck. Now our absentee rate is well under five per cent. It is probably better than most mainstream businesses.

Mrs Freeman—Under five per cent is extraordinary. It is as good as any operation, white or black.

Mr SNOWDON—Moving onto the next step, what in-house training or external training do you provide for people so they can upskill in the organisation?

Mr Freeman—Most of our training is on the job. Some of our food and beverage people are retail people doing certificates through TAFE, or with one of the training people, to improve their skills. For three or four years we had the WELL program, which we became ineligible for. I think three years is the absolute maximum. We got four years out of it, and then they said, 'Sorry, you're no longer eligible,' which was a problem because it was a great program. We had a good teacher. I do not understand why a business that was creating the sorts of employment and outcomes that we have would become ineligible for a program that worked. It was a good program. We had a dedicated teacher who was here 15 hours a week. It cost us a lot of money because we paid the people to sit here in this room. They taught literacy and numeracy. It was adaptable. We were able to teach lecturing. Ernie sat through it for two years, learning how to lecture and how to speak in public.

Mrs Freeman—It was a great program for us because sending our people away to train somewhere else is not so successful. Here is where we need it. The lecturing thing is really good, because people want to know more about Aboriginal culture, and we want people to have the ability to deliver a more in-depth talk to them. Ernie is our chief lecturer now. He lectures to people from all over the world.

Mr Freeman—It also helped with practical things such as filling out the reports that they have to fill out every day and cashing up. Every department has to report to us every day on any incident or event, positive or negative, in their department. It was really good value because they learned to write those reports and feel comfortable with them. I was sorry to lose that. It helped with things we need in Aboriginal employment. We are desperate to take people. The WELL

program and the STEP program are the lowest entry level. We are now at the point where we want to take people to the next step. I spent two years chasing some money to try to create a management cadet and a marketing cadet. We were asking for 50 per cent funding—

Mr SNOWDON—For cadetships?

Mr Freeman—Yes. We wanted to take an Aboriginal employee, or one from outside, and make them a management cadet. It would not mean that they would go to school; they would come here and virtually shadow me or spend four months shadowing the food and beverage management, the retail management or the reservations managers so they really learn. We are in competition with the Public Service, and we could not afford to pay what the Public Service would pay. A person could get $60,000 to go to work for some government department and probably be required to produce half of what I would expect.

Mr Brimm—Just to go back to the WELL based training environment, natural skills and talents and such, if I wanted to be a cadet manager, in finance for example, and I wanted to work for this company, I would not go outside and be a banker. If I wanted to be the manager, who should I shadow? A lot is to do with the environment and feeling comfortable with the Indigenous staff here. They come up here to the boardroom and do the WELL based program and, when then they go back to the ground level, they feel more comfortable and at ease with things. Sometimes programs have been done out amongst the trees with these teachers. Whether it is one-on-one teaching or you are sitting with a group, you need to feel comfortable.

CHAIR—It is really important to develop confidence, to be a part of it and go on.

Mr Brimm—Going through the WELL based programs or any training, it is important for us to sit down with these guys and say, 'As a team, we all have our different skills or talents and we need to work together,' where some would feel that they need to be more important than others or better than others. I started here back in 1997 and today there is a better understanding that each department has to work together.

Mr Freeman—The way the cadetship worked out is that I would write to whatever department it was and explain exactly what I wanted. I would go to Warren Entsch and Warren would write a very nice letter to whoever the appropriate minister of the day was, saying: 'This is great. This is a wonderful organisation. This is what they want—help them.' I would wait for months for a response to that. The response would be, 'That sounds really nice and we will pass it down to our state manager.' The state manager would wait three months and then he would write a letter and pass it down to the regional manager. The regional manager would call me and we would have a meeting and then we would determine that there was no program that would do what I wanted to do and then we would be back to step one. That went on for two years before I gave up.

CHAIR—After that fellow died you could try it again.

Mr Freeman—Exactly. When a minister changes we start again.

Mrs Freeman—That is the nature of the dilemma.

Mrs Freeman—Five years later, we still have not been able to—

CHAIR—That is very valuable—thank you.

Mr SNOWDON—Have you had any discussions under the new arrangements with the ICC? Have you had any discussions with Joey Carter—the Indigenous coordination centre boss here in town—about your needs for training?

Mrs Freeman—No.

Mr SNOWDON—Has there been any approach from the ICC?

Mr Freeman—I gave up.

Mr SNOWDON—So they have made no contact with you?

Mrs Freeman—No.

Mr Freeman—Not that I know of.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—I have two quick questions about the staff turnover, particularly the turnover of Indigenous staff. What sort of turnover is there—for example, people who come and leave, for whatever reason?

Mr Freeman—We have 20 staff here now who have been with us for more than five years. Ernie has been here for seven or eight.

Mr Brimm—Nine.

Mrs Freeman—If you get through the first year, you are probably here for a good run.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—Don, you talked about the on-the-job training, which is very apparent. Is there a possibility that people, particularly Indigenous people, get employed and trained and leave to work elsewhere?

Mrs Freeman—Yes. Mostly they go to government organisations—not so much to tourism operations or private enterprise.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—Regardless of what it is, some move out to other things, do they?

Mr Freeman—One of our long-term employees has just started his own tour guide service. Ernie probably knows more about it.

Mr Brimm—Darian, for example, is over next door and then there is Maria in Centrelink.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—So, in a perverse sort of way, it can also be said that you are providing training for employment in other places. I am just following on from what you were saying.

CHAIR—I think that is an excellent point.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—You have difficulty getting any assistance for what you want to do here and yet, without that, you are already achieving to some small degree training for the on movement of employees.

Mrs Freeman—We have trained hundreds of people.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—That accentuates even more the need for you to have that sort of recognition and assistance in doing so.

CHAIR—I think you have tapped into something that is very important.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—Absolutely.

CHAIR—That response indicates the work experience, the ethic and the cultural challenge.

Mrs Freeman—We actually have someone here doing that.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—I do not wish to turn you into a training organisation per se, but—

Mrs Freeman—But that is not so far wrong.

Mr Brimm—Just from personal experience, with the training that I went through with public speaking and such, I have looked to the long term and said, 'If the market, the economy or this place goes bust'—though I hate to say that—'there is life after Tjapukai.' A year and a half ago I started university. I have deferred because of personal things, but I would like to continue with that and be able to know that there is life after Tjapukai—that I will be able to go out to work, just as past employees have done.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—That reinforces very strongly what Don was saying about management level training and the wish that you have, and the need you can see to encourage that, if only you had the resources to do it.

Mr SNOWDON—But the simple truth is that, like other parts of Australia where there are large Indigenous organisations, whether or not they are commercial, it will be the preferred place of employment for Indigenous people because they know it, they feel culturally appropriate and their cousins, their uncles, their aunts and their mums and dads may be working there.

Mr Freeman—That has its own issues in management because you have two hierarchies—you have the family hierarchy and the business hierarchy—and they may not match. There may be a nephew who is a supervisor of an uncle and he may be able to tell him what to do at work but that night in the pub there may be a very different attitude. That is a real employment issue.

Mr Brimm—Prior to working here I was in forestry for 15 years and grew to understand commercial business, but have come here and grown to understand culture as well. So it is not sitting on the fence, but the show has to go on. It is very hard for me to say to my own people—nieces or nephews—'No, this has to happen,' or 'No, you cannot do that,' and still show face in the community where I feel ostracised. And it does hurt you. But I can see long term—be it mostly the immediate families—they will say, 'Yes, this is what we want you to do. We want you to continue on and not be suppressed here. We want you to evolve and continue.'

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—What avenues have been opened to you so far for sharing with other organisations or communities your knowledge of where you have been, what you have done and what has been achieved here?

Mrs Freeman—It is all pretty ad hoc. Very often, if a community wants to start something like this, they will send a delegation over to have a look at this and then they will go off and generally that is the end of it.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—Has government at the federal level set up any structures in which you can participate?

Mr Freeman—We have just taken on a contract with DEETYA to provide mentoring services to other—

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—But before that?

Mrs Freeman—No, not really.

Mr Freeman—Only through TEAC and then the ITLG.. We certainly had the opportunity to be involved, but those were pretty—

Mrs Freeman—That was a government level overview of the whole industry from the top. It was not really specific to Tjapukai.

Mr Freeman—Frankly, we have been pretty inward looking. Building this business on a shoestring, frankly, was pretty all involving. It has only been in the last couple of years that we have begun to feel a little sense that there is the freedom to say, 'Systems are in place, procedures are in place and people are in place; we can pick our heads up and look around a little.'

Mrs Freeman—We can do other things now.

CHAIR—Because you feel confident in your sustainability.

Mr Freeman—Yes.

CHAIR—We need to start drawing this hearing to a close, so I will allow everyone an opportunity to have a quick summing up.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—I am being a bit provocative here, but the reason for my previous question was that you have been going to government for a number of years saying, 'Could we have this because we've got this opportunity?' and, while you have been knocked back, it seems that nobody in the system—and I am not talking about politically—has gone, 'There is something interesting happening up here. They've got all these ideas; why don't we go and talk to them and hear what they've got to say about what they need and why?' That has not happened, has it?

Mr Freeman—No.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—So there has been the action on one side but not the recognition of why on the other, when there could have been very good understanding and gains made by someone having the initiative to come up and say, 'Why is it that you are doing all of this? What is it that you are actually up to?' and learning from that. I guess that was a rhetorical critique of the situation rather than a question.

Mrs Freeman—Thanks for that. It is nice to hear that. You are probably right—there is 18 years of history here. When we go—whenever that is; we are not going to live forever unfortunately—we will take that with us. It is a shame because we—us and the organisation—do have a lot to share that I think would be of benefit to so many other groups in this nation as a role model. I have a great deal to share. It would be up to you, I guess, as to how to use that or how to bring that forward.

I want to make one comment about what Warren said. At one point, I had talks with the mining companies that employ a lot of Aboriginal people in private enterprise. I was gobsmacked. The fact of the matter is that what they have that we do not have is huge resources. They employ five human resources people just to take care of the Aboriginal staff—to make sure they got through their first week, their second week and all of these other things. We have one part-time human resources person who has to take care of absolutely everything in this place. It is impossible for us to have the resources to do that. A lot of the training we have done has been, in a way, less than what we could have done if we had had more resources. We have one part-time human resources person to do everything, including payroll, who is not paid very well at all to look after all these employees.

CHAIR—If there was one piece of advice you could give us for the future, what would come to mind?

Mrs Freeman—Be consistent. Do not just pick up things and run with them and drop the ball and leave it for somebody else to come along and pick up the ball.

CHAIR—Ernest?

Mr Brimm—Be professional. Be proud.

CHAIR—Don?

Mr Freeman—Be flexible and accept the fact that you are probably going to get ripped off occasionally. You have to have somebody on the ground who is able to look at an organisation

and say, 'Yes, we can help them in the way they want to be helped,' and not have programs that are so tight that they do not fit what is happening on the ground.

CHAIR—Yes, adapt to it.

Mr SNOWDON—I would like to make the observation that, from the discussion we had this morning, a real element of this is coordination. You have to have coherent policy directions that are going to be long-lasting, not ones which are going to change on an ad hoc basis. It seems to me that in the relationship between IBA in its various modes and other agencies in government, which are designed to maximise employment opportunities, and how they coordinate their activities with you as a business, there ought to be a process where you as a business can go to someone who says: 'We can sit with you and work out how to develop further your business strategy. We can provide you with the personal development issues that you need to address and perhaps fund one of your positions.' It is bizarre that there seems to be so much of a disjointed relationship between the various agencies that you deal with and no coherent approach.

Mr SLIPPER—It seems to me that your prior life experiences probably gave you the vision, foresight and confidence to kick this off. Would you mind telling the committee where you both came from and how long you had been in Australia when you brought this vision into a reality in 1987?

Mrs Freeman—That is another book, but we will do it really quickly. I am from French Canada. Don is from New York City. We met in Guatemala. We then lived in Sri Lanka for two years. We did theatre projects in all these places. We then moved to India and stayed there for eight years. It was our primary home. The reason we came to Australia was that we had two children—one each, six weeks apart in age and not related at all—and they had to go to school. We were from different countries to begin with, and both of us were very 'tropicalised' by that point. We had no desire to go back to the land of the snow. We sat down and wrote a list of requirements in a place. North Queensland, where neither of us had ever been before, met all of our requirements of a place to live.

Mr SNOWDON—And Kuranda was it.

Mrs Freeman—We came here. We did not have resident visas, and we were pretty much asked to leave.

Mr Freeman—We were invited to leave.

Mrs Freeman—Not really, we had not overstayed our visa or anything, but we tried desperately to get resident visas and they said, 'No, sorry you can't,' even though by that time we had an Australian child.

Mr SLIPPER—Together?

Mrs Freeman—Yes, together.

Mr SLIPPER—His, hers and ours.

Mrs Freeman—Exactly. We travelled around the world trying to find a sympathetic consulate who might like us and give us resident visas without the $300,000 or whatever you needed at that time. We met the consul in New York City. We told him our background—that we were theatre artists and wanted to live in North Queensland, where people did not even go to the theatre at that point, and we wanted to work in the theatre in a regional area. He said: 'I like you. I am going to help you to get into the country.' And he did.

Mr Freeman—We do not remember his name.

Mrs Freeman—I do not even remember his name, but I often think about him. He went for it. We did exactly what we said we were going to do, and we created something unique to this country.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—What year did you come here?

Mr Freeman—We came in 1984.

Mrs Freeman—We came in 1983, but we left and came back.

CHAIR—We will endeavour to try to find that name!

Mr Freeman—We put all the paperwork in the box that we shipped from the United States. The ultimate submission we made was about 60 pages in a leather binder and it disappeared in Customs.

CHAIR—Australian Customs?

Mr SNOWDON—They are efficient!

Mr SLIPPER—Are you now Australian citizens?

Mr Freeman—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We do appreciate it. It has been a magnificent experience for me and, I am sure, for the committee.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Ellis**, seconded by **Mr Slipper**):

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

Subcommittee adjourned at 10.32 am