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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

Reference: Indigenous employment

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

Monday, 28 November 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, Dr Lawrence, Mr Snowdon, Mrs Vale 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

Committee met at 11.36 am

PEARSON, Mr John Wayne (Jack), Private capacity

CHAIR (Mr Wakelin)—I declare open this public hearing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander committee inquiry into Indigenous employment and welcome all today. I particularly welcome Mr Jack Pearson. I advise that the hearings are a normal part of the parliament and should be accorded the normal regard.

Mr Pearson—Currently, I am based here in Canberra, in the suburbs of Chifley and Woden. I am the group Indigenous adviser to Sinclair Knight Merz. They are one of Australia's largest consulting engineering companies—about 5,000 people worldwide. My responsibility is advising on Indigenous affairs mainly in Australia.

CHAIR—Would you like to say a few opening words about where you think it is at and your particular focus on it? Take us through that then we will go to a few questions.

Mr Pearson—As you can see from my submission, I am passionate about Indigenous affairs, particularly employment and training. I have wide experience with respect to employment within the mining industry, the Commonwealth government and now back in the private sector. I spent close to eight years with the Commonwealth government, three of which I spent up here in the House. My aim is to raise some main issues that I think are affecting the way Indigenous employment is looked at today.

CHAIR—You have some recommendations in your submission. I will go through a couple of them and colleagues will come in. You state:

> Indigenous cadets are provided the opportunity to undertake graduate programs as part of their cadetship.
>
> Indigenous cadets from Indigenous organisations undergo graduate rotations in key government agencies that have Indigenous specific portfolio responsibilities.

It reminds me a little of a recent previous inquiry in many ways—this idea of engagement, mentoring, experience and that sort of thing. Can you develop that a little more in terms of how that would add value to the deal?

Mr Pearson—There is a disparity, I suppose, between Indigenous organisations which are predominantly run in the private sector and, in a lot of ways, are funded by the Commonwealth government. But I think there are not enough Indigenous people working in those organisations, particularly a younger generation coming through, who understand how a government works. You can get certain perspectives on government through the media, through the papers, but at the end of the day it is actually working in an office in a Commonwealth agency—for instance, there are a number of agencies now that have Indigenous affairs portfolios. I think it would be a good idea for agencies. There are those issues of security, clearances and so forth, but I think it would be good for a graduate program. You would get Indigenous undergraduates within specific disciplines relevant to the kinds of work that the agencies do. They would do some of their rotations in government agencies, but they would actually be owned by their original organisation. For instance, there are some statutory organisations such as the Northern Land

Council, the Central Land Council et cetera under the relevant legislation for the Northern Territory and the other native title representative bodies. I think there would be great value for those younger leaders coming up through to understand exactly how government works, even if it is only—

CHAIR—They need to be excellent candidates, though, don't they?

Mr Pearson—Yes, they would have to be excellent candidates. I think they would have to have a sound understanding, sound aspirations and so forth.

CHAIR—I will go to perhaps a trickier issue. Let us just talk about the mandatory requirement of these things and the pros and cons. Can you talk about that?

Mr Pearson—Definitely the advantages to it, the pros, are that people understand how government processes work, how funding applications are made and which agencies they would have to deal with. To some extent now with the Indigenous coordination centres and the OIPC I understand those procedures, but the fact is that a lot of Indigenous people do not—even with the ICCs. It is only early days at the moment—

CHAIR—That is right.

Mr Pearson—so I am not judging, but I am just saying that, for these Indigenous people to understand that, it is a shift away from the political pressures—having a political fight to get funds. I do not think that digging trenches is the way to go. They are definitely the pros.

I suppose some of the disadvantages would be that some Indigenous people would say these people are working for government: 'All you are doing is following the policies and the philosophies of that particular government.' My personal opinion is that you have to work with whichever is the government of the day, and you have to try and work within those systems.

CHAIR—We are slightly at cross purposes on 'mandatory'. I am thinking in terms of mandatory targets: the government setting certain requirements for—

Mr Pearson—As in percentages?

CHAIR—Yes, Indigenous numbers, targets, percentages.

Mr Pearson—Within the Public Service?

CHAIR—Yes within that graduate type program.

Mr Pearson—As I wrote in this submission—and it is easy for me to speak from it, because it is very close to my heart—I was actually a former Indigenous cadet. Way back in early 1996—it is not that far back really, is it?—I got a cadetship in Defence. I felt that personally it was good for me as a graduate to come in and get this opportunity to work within the department. But what I found as a negative, I suppose, was that while the female director of the area where I worked was very positive, very supportive, and she understood why I was there and how I got to be in

the department in that particular division and section, unfortunately the other people in that section did not.

One person made the remark one day: 'Why should Indigenous people get the opportunity to work in this agency? Why should they have preference?' I said, 'Well, I did some political science subjects as well in my undergraduate degree.' And I said to him, 'If you have got issues with that, maybe you would like to write to the relevant minister and take it up with them.' I was not going to spend my time in a work environment arguing all these issues.

I believe the cadetship program is a really instrumental way of getting cadets into the Australian Public Service but I do believe that the people in the areas where the Indigenous cadets go to work should have done at least some cultural awareness training, of some shape or form, so that people do not have to go through my experience.

Another issue is that the cadetship is very limited, in that it is only at the end of the degree that you get a job and then you learn on the job. It is not like being a graduate. Even though I was a graduate, academically, I was not a graduate in the agency sense of things. Therefore, because I was not a graduate, the question was: how would people deal with me?

Graduates do three rotations within the agency. They get a broad understanding of the agency, the policies and the procedures and they come out being highly marketable. Within two years of coming out they usually get jobs at APS level 6; some get jobs at the EL1 level.

Mrs VALE—Jack, did you not do any rotations?

Mr Pearson—No, and at the end of my cadetship it was actually the divisional head who said, 'Jack, I'm going to try and get you into the graduate program.' From there I have never looked back. But it was through his initiative; there was no connection between the cadetship program and the graduate program. I propose that there should be.

On one level there is the Australian Public Service and its cadetship program. I think the cadets could be assessed throughout the time of their undergraduate three-monthly rotations within the agency. At the end of their degrees, depending on how well they have performed throughout—and they are only undergraduates, so you would not want to have too high a standard—you could give them the opportunity to do a graduate program. It would make them a bit more marketable and you would see more of these Indigenous people climb the Public Service managerial ladder.

I spent nearly eight years in the Public Service. When I was going for jobs, you had to have certain core competencies—you had to understand complex issues, have an analytical mind and so forth. But if I have not had the opportunity as a junior Indigenous person in the Public Service to get into those positions, and therefore to get into executive level training through the APSC, what chance is there for me to go up a level of training into executive positions in the Public Service?

I am talking about merit-based people; I am not talking about just opening the doors to all comers. I do believe in a merit-based system but I want Indigenous people to have access to that. The cadetship program is fantastic for getting Indigenous people into the Australian Public

Service, but it is limited; it could go further. I believe it is not about reinventing the wheel; it is just about rejigging the system a little bit to allow for that. I think it would be very positive.

Mrs VALE—It is just about putting in a linkage.

Mr Pearson—Yes, that is exactly right.

CHAIR—It is a really interesting point, because a couple of us were in Kalgoorlie three or four weeks ago talking to a fellow from the mining industry. We asked him, 'If you had one thing which you would ask for Indigenous people, what would it be?' and he said, 'Opportunity.' And, as you say, rejigging, just a tweak, to create that opportunity, could make a difference.

Mr Pearson—That is right.

CHAIR—I am a little unclear on the timing. How long do you stay as a graduate there?

Mr Pearson—In Defence it is about nine months. I think most agencies are like that. I think they do three-month rotations.

CHAIR—I think I got a bonus in your answer, because I previously did not understand. You have been there, done that. The authenticity of that you cannot put a value on. So thank you.

Dr LAWRENCE—Thanks very much for that outline. It was very useful. Obviously, you made those specific recommendations with people who are interested in Public Service and with government capacity, in a sense, to directly make the decision to develop the cadetships and pull them in. But now that you are in the private sector I wonder whether you see any role for the private sector, perhaps with government incentives, to take on Indigenous people, initially as trainees or cadets with a view to employing them longer term, possibly at lower skill levels than you are talking about here, which would provide opportunities for them to learn on the job and do training. By way of example to show you what I am thinking, the former government provided incentives to employers to take on the long-term unemployed. Although in some senses it was quite an expensive program, it was very successful and, in the long term, cheaper than keeping them on benefits. I wonder whether you see any role for incentives of that kind or some other for the private sector to take on Indigenous people.

Mr Pearson—Right now I am not only the group adviser for Indigenous affairs at Sinclair Knight Merz but also the manager of Indigenous engagement. Under that hat, I am setting up the Indigenous cadetship program within the company. I have developed the policies, and now I am being asked to implement them. There is a lot of goodwill in the private sector and a lot of desire for corporates to get involved. One hurdle the corporates have to get over is themselves. They need to understand the Indigenous policies and framework—not that they have to be full bottle about it—particularly with respect to employing Indigenous people in their organisations. There could be some crosspollination of people.

There are some very good examples within the mining industry with what Rio Tinto, BHP Billiton and the other miners are doing. They are very proactive. They know that there are long-term future benefits for communities. Now they are being more strategic. There are the lower skill level areas, and I know that there are some initiatives being looked at, for instance, with

trades. Tradespeople who may have an interest in going into the professional fields in engineering would finish their apprenticeships and be fully qualified tradespeople, and then some of them with that kind of interest would possibly go on to mechanical or civil engineering, for instance. That takes them, of course, onto another level—it is then into the professional area. For corporates to concentrate on the lower skill levels when running those kinds of programs I think is very advantageous and beneficial to those communities, but it is a long-term thing.

CHAIR—We have come across a couple of folks in senior positions, and they are optimistic. In fact, I think they are getting some people through into the senior positions.

Mr Pearson—There are a lot of opportunities for not just the miners, who have lots of resources—financial and human resources committed to these kinds of programs—but for other corporates to get involved in a meaningful way.

Dr LAWRENCE—To what extent do you think that shift—and it is a shift, because it is fair to say that a decade ago corporates were often very reluctant participants in Indigenous employment and training—has been the result of the fact that they are having to strike agreements with Indigenous people around native title questions. I have certainly seen one or two emerge out of that. I do not know what you have seen.

Mr Pearson—In regard to ILUAs, it is going to be a challenge for companies that have historically had no interest or no stake in looking after Indigenous affairs. It has only been in the last 10 years. It all depends, I suppose. If you look at the mistakes made by some of the big miners in the 1960s, they have learnt from that that there has to be a sincere approach. They have an advantage. They have 25 or 30 years of learning because of what they have done—corporate knowledge—but there are a lot of other companies now that have only recently taken this desire, and they want to know how. As a consultant and a project manager for specific Indigenous policy development and implementation, I am teaching corporates how to do it. It is a win-win situation for government as well as for industry.

At the end of the day, we are asking what the long term benefit is to these remote communities where there are not many employment opportunities. In the Pilbara there are a lot of employment opportunities, but in a lot of other places there are not so many. You can get skills training—for example, the National Heritage Trust funds a lot of Aboriginal ranger programs in the Northern Territory and in other parts of the country. But an Indigenous person might say: 'OK, I am on CDEP and I am going to get certificate training and land management certificates 1, 2 and 3. When I go back to the community, what will I get? Well, I will be back on CDEP.' That is not a future and it is not a good example to tell younger Indigenous kids at school.

When I grew up I was told, as a young Aboriginal Australian, 'You have got to get an education; you have got to get those qualifications and start working and paying taxes, and then you can get yourself a bank account and so on.' But those values are not Aboriginal values. I have learned those values. They are values which are part of European heritage. But there are a lot of places I have been to, even in the last few days—I have been up to Arnhem Land, and I know Mr Snowdon has been up to those places as well; each of you will have had different kinds of exposure—where I have been told, 'Jack, we have difficulty in understanding English, let alone the new policies and procedures of government.' We look at literacy with regard to language and money, but that is a whole package of values that clashes with the communitarian

views of Aboriginal people in those communities. Here in the ACT, it is different because you have access to libraries, universities and TAFE colleges; there is a lot of access here. But in a lot of these remote places there is no access.

It is good to hear the Western Australian and Northern Territory governments talking about funding ranger programs—for instance, Aboriginal sea rangers. I think that is really positive. I think that is great, but I am hoping that is long-term, mainstream employment. There are movements towards that for the coastal people, but what about remote middle Australia, where people are getting educated but they are not getting the recognition for it? That is the biggest test. We have got to look at some new initiatives. Over the weekend I saw in the *Australian*—I think it was there—that Santos had helped the local community with a camel farming project, and I know of some instances where there is emu farming.

Mr SNOWDON—I can tell you about that because I was there. They do not have a market for the camels. They have got a huge area of land which is fenced, and they have yards so they can herd camels and other animals. But it is not just about camels; it is about controlling other feral species. The interesting thing is that they want to pursue the next step, but the state of the camel industry is an obstacle. You need special vehicles and special vessels. With live camel exports you cannot put them on a normal export vessel because of the size of the animal, so you need specialised transport and that is an issue.

Then there is the market itself. There is now a small meatworks north of Alice Springs which is killing camels. Camel is good meat—very lean and very nice. So there is the potential for an industry. But you have got to get people to develop the taste for the meat. The real issue, though, is the camel industry as a land management tool. There are hundreds of thousands of these beasts wrecking the environment, and there is great value in them being culled, captured, sold and so on.

CHAIR—They gave an estimate of the numbers of the camels, didn't they?

Mr SNOWDON—The numbers are huge. To return to your point, though, my understanding is—and I might be wrong—that this is the first time Santos have ever really engaged in that way, even though they have been in the area for close to 25 years. That is good to see.

CHAIR—It would be good to see that.

Mr SNOWDON—It is good to see them involved. I will just go to the Ranger point. Last week—and this is just an observation; it just shows you how what you are saying has some validity—a foreign fishing vessel went one kilometre up a river. It was discovered by the Djelk Rangers from Maningrida who then flew out in their own plane and went on their own boats. They rang Customs and said, 'We've got boats and planes available—just tell us what you want us to do.' They never got back to them. Needless to say, that vessel scarpered.

Mr Pearson—In fact, as to the Djelk Rangers in Maningrida, I was up there only a couple of months ago and they showed me images of all of the aerial photography and the amount of boats that they had been finding. They were saying, 'If we have this capability and we can demonstrate it, why can't we get some moneys from Justice or Customs to assist in this?

Mr SNOWDON—That is right—to do the work.

Mr Pearson—Even if it means only three mainstream jobs, guys could go through Customs training and it would mean real employment and being off CDEP.

Mr SNOWDON—And those people are highly trained—we have to be very clear about it. These Djelk Rangers are trained in fire management and they understand the environment. But, as someone said to me the other day, you put them in their uniforms—the green Djelk Ranger ones with big badges—and they undergo training. If you put them next to their cousins who work in Kakadu, the blokes from Djelk are on under $200 a week and the guys at Kakadu are on 60 grand a year. That is the difference.

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Pearson—There really are some disparities.

Mrs VALE—How could we address that anomaly? I think it is a good idea if those people have the skills. They really can do a very worthwhile job for Australia.

Mr Pearson—It is in regard to the national interest. It would mean creating some mainstream jobs. It is in the national interest and that is the argument I think it should come from.

Mrs VALE—Absolutely.

Mr Pearson—A lot of these coastal ranger programs are at the front line of feral animals and plants coming into this country.

Mrs VALE—Absolutely.

Mr SNOWDON—But you should know that the Bawinanga association of Maningrida has written to Minister Macdonald asking him if they would like to avail themselves of the operation of the service of the Djelk Rangers to send people up to have a look at what they do and assess them. There has been no response.

Mrs VALE—Maybe we should write to the minister, Chair.

CHAIR—Yes. Can we continue. We have a very knowledgeable man here and I want to maximise on that. Can we go to the key issue.

Mrs VALE—Do you see the role of the new Indigenous centres—

Mr Pearson—The ICCs.

Mrs VALE—Yes. Do you see those particular policy coordination centres as having an effective role where that kind of information can actually get fed back up the line to government?

Mr Pearson—I think so. I have met some of the people in the ICCs. However, I suppose that one reservation I have is that what I and a lot of other Aboriginal leaders would like to see is really passionate people. There are a growing number of passionate white Australians who are working in black communities in Australia who want to make a difference. They are there not because of their superannuation or their salaries. Fair enough, that is an incentive, but they are very interested in an area of work. I think that can be very useful. There is an apolitical philosophical approach to the work they do.

Mrs VALE—Have you had any involvement yet with the new ICCs?

Mr Pearson—My company is, I suppose, a consulting company and I am limited as to how much I can do. The company has applied to be on a multiuser list for helping in a facilitator kind of role on certain projects. It is an issue with the agency as to whether the company gets on the list and whether I come in and work with the Australian government on particular contractual work. Nonetheless, I am passionate about this area. I work with agencies or Indigenous people whether we are getting money from the government or not. I suppose where I am coming from is looking at the corporate investment.

Mrs VALE—And corporate delivery.

Mr Pearson—Exactly.

Mrs VALE—One of the focuses of this committee, and no doubt you have seen the terms of reference, is to look at policies or situations that have worked in a very constructive way. You are a perfect example of a success story. What was it in your education that made you value that education and you saw that as a doorway to opportunity? What can we make sure that other Aboriginal children know?

Mr Pearson—Personally, I am coming from a history where both of my parents were under the protection act, the fauna and flora legislation. They were under protection legislation. They grew up in missions in Queensland. I was fostered out. I suppose growing up in regional Queensland I started to piece together the experiences of my family. For instance, why were my own family members paid in tobacco and flour and not given money? Why? So I had to ask these questions myself, but not many people could answer those questions because of whatever circumstances. My undergraduate degree is in anthropology and Indigenous studies. Basically, I wanted to know what the social scientists were saying about my people, why were policies used, what were the philosophies. I went from a mining industry trade and having a degree to just having enrolled in a legal workshop at the Australian National University; so I am in the final throes of becoming a lawyer. My personal drive initially was what helped me to answer questions from a non-embittered standpoint. My personal view is I am not after an apology and I am not after a treaty, but I would like to see more Indigenous people have opportunities and to engage with both government and with industry effectively.

Mrs VALE—Jack, were you fostered to an Indigenous family or to a non-Indigenous family?

Mr Pearson—No, to a lovely Swiss lady called Alice Marbach.

Mrs VALE—Were there any values that you applied to your progress?

Mr Pearson—Yes. When I started getting educated I was called a 'coconut'—you are brown on the outside but you are white inside. I said, 'You've got to understand the world around you, and if you don't learn how to speak both languages in this world you can't go very far.' My families have had very successful native title claims in Queensland. Some of my members are very highly educated, but they can go back and speak their first language; they still have the culture. But because you are Aboriginal and because you identify with country does not mean that you are a coconut or that you are incapable of understanding the complexities and the analytical necessities of government or procedures.

Mrs VALE—Absolutely, and that is what you intimate in your submission: the human mind can actually do everything; it can do them all. They are not mutually exclusive.

Mr Pearson—I suppose that has been challenge. For instance, trying to employ people in the public service, there are biases. Everybody has got biases, but if you cannot appreciate another person's world view—and then when you get Indigenous people working with you, of course you are going to ask questions if you are not Aboriginal, if your parents were not put into places where they were punished for speaking their first language or languages. Coming from that background I have realised, getting educated and understanding the system intimately, I have an advantage. It is an example; I want to be a role model for future generations. You do not have to lose sight of country when you go to the city.

Mrs VALE—That is a beautiful way of saying it. Thank you, Jack.

Mr Pearson—No worries. I am passionate about it. I suppose it is coming from a balanced view of my education and experience.

Mrs VALE—You are not just a role model for other Aborigines; you are a role model for me too, Jack, I can tell you. Good on you.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—I have a couple of fairly small questions, but I think they are fairly important. Forgive me if you have already gone over them. They are a little bit generic, and you just talked about two of them. I have a fascination myself for the relationship of role models within Indigenous communities. I see them as pretty essential. I wonder what your comments are on just how important it is for us to utilise role models and where you see them coming from—it is a very general question—particularly for younger people in some of those remote places.

Mr Pearson—Through engagement, through more Indigenous people getting into the corporate sector. I think it is advantageous for the government to have more Indigenous people who are passionate about their work and how they would like to apply their experiences. But I think it is up to Indigenous people like me and others to put themselves forward as role models in communities. When I go out as a consultant and work on a particular project, I have the opportunity to talk with people and to say, 'I can see and understand where you are coming from. Is there any way I can assist?'

There is one particular organisation in the Northern Territory that has asked me to put together a proposal for a mentoring and skills transfer kind of project. They have a number of Indigenous businesses that are running quite successfully, but they need people from another organisation who do not live there to come up and work alongside their people. I think, by growing those

younger generation people from these communities, that is where those future leaders will come from. There are not enough of them. In the last 14 years, Indigenous affairs in the country has been bumpy. Now there is an opportunity. I am not saying that it has not been there before. Although there is a lot of good work going on, you do not hear good news in the papers. I think the ABC and probably SBS are to be credited for getting Indigenous programs and films on the television. I suppose it is through sportspeople, the AIS and so on—but it is not just the sport. We have the Deadlies in Sydney. I think that is fantastic, but I have not yet seen any Indigenous people coming through as Indigenous corporate leaders. We need to encourage that and those kinds of role models.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—My vision, my view, is that within the Indigenous communities themselves we have people who have succeeded in becoming good health workers. We go right through the whole spectrum. We have people who have become good sportspeople. We have some who probably have become teachers. We have some who have become corporate people. I think we need to encourage somehow some of those folk to go out and spend a little bit of time within those communities to explain to the kids at a school who are having a bit of difficulty in maintaining their education at that young level. It is that connection at that level. I am getting down to that sort of basic level. Do you agree that that is probably worth while, just to connect them somehow to where they are?

Mr Pearson—I think that would be very good. There are the Indigenous community volunteers. Where there are a lot of retirees, the predominant numbers of volunteers are retirees, I think it is fantastic. What I would like to see, and I am having initial talks with the ICV, are some Indigenous retirees—people who have made it. They are around the country, but we have not heard about them.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—We need to go and unearth them, don't we?

Mr Pearson—That is right.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—There is another question tied up in this, and you touched on it a moment ago. You said that some people in Arnhem Land and other areas have trouble understanding English. There has been a sad history, and correct me if I am wrong, of government at all levels in those sorts of areas actively discouraging the continuation of the language native to the area to the point where now those languages are hardly spoken or taught. What are your views on this from the point of view of mental health and wellbeing? If we are out there teaching English and at the same time actively promoting the teaching of their own local language, then psychologically that would seem to be a comfort area to go forward from. What is your view on that?

Mr Pearson—I am very keen to see young Indigenous people come through and say about themselves, 'I should be respected for who I am. I am a Commonwealth citizen and I should be respected for who I am. I should not be attacked for where I come from.' It is a mental health issue. There are some really progressive things going on. I heard recently that in the Pilbara there is an Indigenous clinical psychologist working closely with the miners on behalf of Indigenous employees monitoring their mental health. People ask: what are the mental health issues? There are some very serious mental health issues with Indigenous employees. I did not feel very comfortable myself when a person in my immediate work area said, 'Why should you get the

opportunity to work in this Commonwealth agency?' That is an attack not just on the agency but on my person.

Then you look at these kids in remote areas learning all the certificate levels they can learn. Some people in the community say there have been some suicides in relation to this. They have been told since the missionaries came that you have to get educated. So you get educated, get the certificate levels and so forth, and then you do not get mainstream employment. Then you have agencies that close their doors where there could be work.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—Is it fair to say that at the same time that process you have just outlined is in place there has also been discouragement of the continuation of their own culture, so this confusion of identity then occurs?

Mr Pearson—There are some good initiatives in mental health issues, and there are some work practices in companies in the Pilbara. You may have heard of Barry Taylor from the Ngarda foundation in Port Hedland. He is one of the lawmen from that country and he told me about some really positive things with some of the contractors working in the area. By working closely with the contractors—they could be machinery operating companies, engineers, surveyors or whatever—and saying, 'These are the Indigenous employment targets for you, but just note that with regard to the Indigenous people that you will be employing they have cultural practices. So just factor that into your work force planning.' It is not really too difficult, when you think about it, when you understand those issues.

Mrs VALE—It is not rocket science.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—No, it isn't.

Mr Pearson—The employer and the immediate people working with those Indigenous employees need to understand those things. It is just going to make things so much easier, because you can say, 'Out of 30 positions I have got five positions held by Indigenous people and because of my relationship with the local law men and key representatives they tell me when there is this business.' There are different kinds of ceremonies—there are a lot of deaths that happen in a lot of communities, in some more than in others unfortunately, but there are also just normal cultural practices. Of course, they are all normal cultural practices. Some businesses are doing it very well but there is not enough of it.

CHAIR—I have a few issues I want to ask about. They are not easy issues, and you have covered them, but I want to try and restate them a bit. The cultural area is one of the toughest areas for me. I try to define it and I try to understand it. I try to find out how we can get the meeting of the minds, which I think is what you were alluding to in that discussion with Annette. If there was one key issue in this cultural discussion what would it be—what would be the critical thing to try and understand?

Mr Pearson—I think the most advantageous position for people who want to understand it is for them to understand, for a start, some of the most basic principles of the Aboriginal experience in the country. We did not have a treaty in this country. People here are more multinational than the Europeans; we are not a unified body. When I was at school I was taught about the tall ships, but no-one told me about the killings and the massacres—that was cloaked

from my understanding. I had to do a degree before I really understood that history, apart from what I knew from the oral history of my own people. That would be the most important thing for people to understand, that Aboriginal people were under an 'Animals Act' right up until not long ago. That is the most crucial thing to understand about Aboriginal people—even though Mabo II said in effect that we were Commonwealth citizens, that the Crown came here and came to all the lands. There were some really important principles that came out in that judgment. That would be the most advantageous thing, to understand that we were not considered citizens even though legally we were citizens under the Crown and that it was because of these reasons, and there are not too many. I do not think it is right to come from a 'guilty' kind of argument; it is a matter of laying out the facts. I am doing a law degree and I have done evidence law and I know that what you have to do is apply the facts, to say, 'Here are the facts.'

CHAIR—Thank you. It seems to me that if we fail to understand that then the talk of literacy, the talk of employment and the talk of, for want of a better phrase, whitefella learning, as you described it earlier, or the different learning that is needed about getting a bank account, 9 to 5 and a lot of this other stuff becomes a bit academic. We have to get the meeting of the minds. My definition of where I would like Australia to end up is where we do not even think about Indigenous people being in positions, where they are there because of their own ability, capacity and, as you said, based on merit. I understand the need for experience but they would take their place equally and have the opportunities so that in the future we do not even think about it—we would understand they are Indigenous, that people like you are Indigenous, but they would sit there as total equals in a society and we would say that is great. Do you see what I am saying?

Mr Pearson—Yes.

CHAIR—If we understand that then we can go forward. If we do not understand that I do not think we are ever going to be able to meet that, which I think is what you are saying. Is that fair?

Mr Pearson—Yes.

CHAIR—You have touched on role models. The key issue and the differences—which are part of the same issue—are not making a lot of sense. I am wrestling with this concept, because it is terribly difficult for all of us. Our inquiry is about the definition of 'work' and what to do if people have not engaged with the concept of the value of work. Have you a thought on how to describe 'work', 'employment' and 'value of employment' for Indigenous people? Do you have a thought about how we define the value of it?

Mr Pearson—It is complex, but I think there are some basic principles. The idea of work that we know today is a capitalistic thing, but the world view of Aboriginal people, predominantly in rural areas, is communitarian. It is about all sharing the land. When you get work, there are certain expectations that come with the baggage of work—paying your taxes, getting a salary at the end of the fortnight or month and then with that money you pay for the kids' schooling or give them food; the necessities of life—

Mrs VALE—And you get a mortgage.

Mr Pearson—Yes, and you get a mortgage. What is the use of talking to somebody about a mortgage when their title to land is not the same as it is with every other Commonwealth citizen? Do you know what I am saying?

CHAIR—Absolutely. Do you understand that there is a real debate about that at the moment?

Mr Pearson—Yes.

CHAIR—How we word those things is fundamentally important.

Mr Pearson—It is fundamental, and people need to understand that. I think there are some very passionate policy people—do not get me wrong—but there are some other people in middle policy areas in key agencies who do not have a clue about these issues. It is not easy. How do you tell somebody in—

CHAIR—You are aware of the COAG trials and the responsibilities of the secretaries of each department in this whole-of-government approach. If you were to line them all up in this room and say, 'Peter Shergold'—or whoever—'that's the essential thing that we have to understand here,' would you define it in the terms you have just used? Can you give me a couple of phrases which you would use to explain it to these people? It is vital. What are a couple of the key factors?

Mr Pearson—In regard to property or work?

CHAIR—Work. In the bureaucracy of the Commonwealth Public Service, the basic definition of land is a debate that is occurring and is very much alive at the moment. How would you try to say to a senior public servant of the Commonwealth of Australia, 'It is vital that we bring Indigenous people in'? There are three things that we need to understand. How do we get—

Mr Pearson—One of them is understanding Aboriginal values and then knowing how to address them.

CHAIR—How would you address them?

Mr Pearson—I would pick each one out, because there are a number of key ones. One is, for instance, the value of work. What is work to an Aboriginal person? What is the value to an Aboriginal person in Yarrabah in Queensland, where they cannot buy their own land, of having a mainstream job?

CHAIR—It is back to that ownership issue.

Mr Pearson—Land and employment to me have a very close nexus. There is that issue, and then there is the issue in regard to learning. How do we bridge the values of the benefits of learning? What is the long-term purpose of learning those skills? We need to ask people, in regard to employment, 'How in your area'—because it will change; it is different in every area—'are work and employment going to benefit your community, your family and you as an individual?'

CHAIR—You made the point earlier that CDEP had to adapt and change and that there was no point in getting the skills and then going back to CDEP.

Mr Pearson—That is right.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—I also have a really good observation. This may be a bit unfair, but it seems to me to be quite ironic that when we go to citizenship ceremonies—when I go to them and when I hear of other people going to them—we make a great statement about how much we welcome culture from other parts of the world into our culture. We say that all those cultures are welcome, that we do not want people to lose them and that we just want them to bring them to us and enrich our own society at the same time as they become Australians. Yet we have this thing about the culture we have on our own doorstep that is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, cultures in the world. I find it quite ironic that, in one sense, we as a society can look at the immersion of cultures into our society but, in another sense, with this wonderful value we still rail against it at all sorts of levels.

Mr Pearson—That is right.

Mrs VALE—I think that is changing, Annette.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—I do too, but I still think it is fundamental.

Mrs VALE—Yes, I cannot argue with that.

CHAIR—The key point, if I can conclude on this point, is that it seems to me that if we do understand it better there are great rewards waiting for us.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS—Yes, without any doubt.

CHAIR—They are huge rewards in terms of opportunities for Indigenous people and opportunities for the country. That is why I am really wrestling with this. That is why I rather clumsily tried to get from you that further knowledge that I need to understand how we bridge the gap and how we get this country to inculcate in a way that you have been able to and show that example. That is what I see as the challenge for us.

Mr Pearson—Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you all. Anytime you wish to talk to me, remember you have got my number.

CHAIR—You have been very patient with us, Jack. Thanks very much for your evidence.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Annette Ellis**, seconded by **Mrs Vale**):

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

Committee adjourned at 12.32 pm