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Mr Barry Wakelin,
Chairman,
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

CAPACITY BUILDING INQUIRY
Submission No.50.....

Re: Inquiry into capacity building in indigenous communities

Barry,

In response to your request for a written summary of the points we discussed when you visited me in Port Augusta on 22 September, 2002, I now offer these comments with respect to your inquiry.

Please note that I speak from the viewpoint of a doctor with longstanding experience and endeavour working for Aboriginal health, and that my observations are made from the perspective of the health and community arenas.

I will begin by responding to words already written in the June 2002 summary, and make comments accordingly.

Re: Terms of Reference

“The Committee will inquire into and report on strategies to assist Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to better manage the delivery of services within their communities”.

Already, I detect that the inquiry is limited to management issues, and may not, thereby, adequately address the question of leadership. If ‘better management’ is the objective, the question needs to be asked ‘on whose behalf?’

Management and leadership are not the same. There are managers all over the place, but we seem to lack genuine leadership (and I don’t mean bosses!).

Proper governance, as stated, is another issue requiring serious consideration. Without proper governance, even the best managers will have to endure local restrictions and recurrent frustrations that will make their working lives extremely difficult.

The inquiry needs to consider the policies and practices of strategic development. What is the government's strategy here? Is it to address these complex issues seriously, or, is it only intent on reviewing the processes of management in line with predetermined objectives set by public servants?

If the latter is true, major difficulties will persist, as the indigenous sector will not feel properly included as a genuine partner with a desire to contribute from a position of knowledge and authority.

Over the past few years, I have been endeavouring to find out what the strategies (for Aboriginal health advancement) might be, and where the authority lies with respect to furthering these strategies. This has not been an easy task at all.

The particular considerations (a) and (b) for the Committee to consider, focus on community members and indigenous organisations. Fair enough, there are clear needs in these arenas.

In my opinion, community members would "better support families, community organisations and representative councils" if the organisations and councils were transparently democratic, and properly conducted. Unfortunately, democracy is a fragile and precious thing, and is not being honoured in circumstances where there is shoddy meeting procedure and/or inadequate secretarial capability.

"Indigenous organisations" might "better deliver and influence the delivery of services in the most effective, efficient and accountable way" if such services were conducted on the basis of community responses to community needs, rather than the present system of adherence to determinants from the outside, in pre-determined and specific packages that lead to a fragmented approach and an accounting nightmare, according to all reports.

An example of this is the tendency to specialise (e.g. with job descriptions that are narrow and specific) before ensuring that the basic and generalised

tasks are taken care of. This leads to State-wide networks around all sorts of specialised initiatives but leaves the more basic and comprehensive hack-work unattended, all too often.

I believe we need to apply a more generalist (yet multi-faceted) approach to offer a comprehensive range of services. Too many service-providers are locked into their specific job-roles and are, as a consequence, pretty useless unless an attending client presents with a need that lines up with the employee's own role and/or particular interests. This leads to frustration, delay, and an abandonment of duty-of-care in favour of referral to somebody else (who may or may not be available or willing to meet the client's actual needs).

In my opinion, indigenous organisations also need to develop better planning and review capabilities, and the plans that are developed on the ground need to be respected and supported by relationships of trust with key individuals within government systems who actually understand the importance of community capacity-building.

Unfortunately, it seems that such individuals (within government systems) are relatively rare. In the circumstances within which I currently work, the more familiar pattern is for some significant senior public servants to feel threatened by community initiative to the extent that they will do all in their power to by-pass genuine community-based decision-making by establishing all sorts of advisory groups to their (own) management systems, and manipulate those advisory and (so-called) management systems to maintain their own positions of apparent superiority and authority. Such are the power games of senior public servants.

These comments relate to part (c) of the Terms of Reference. In my opinion, we are in serious trouble at the present time with respect to a lack of trust between indigenous organisations and certain (State) government agencies, in the region within which I work.. This has come about because some individuals within the (S.A.) government agencies are manipulating the system for their own (perceived) benefit, I am sorry to say.

As mentioned in our conversation in Port Augusta, the tension that exists between some government personnel and indigenous groups has to do with different paradigms. In other words, the accumulated past experience, values, beliefs, assumptions and view points of different individuals who

perceive things differently. Until this factor can be acknowledged, we will continue to persevere down blind alleys with wasteful and unsuccessful programs that are doomed to fail.

The whole dilemma is complicated by the fact of human self-interest, even greed. For, whilst the money flows, and people (no matter what race) see some personal advantage, it seems that many would prefer to maintain their silence (and position of privilege) rather than challenge the system. This is especially so where indigenous employees with permanent public servant status go into an alliance with the senior staff of government agencies. This is a major obstruction to the development of genuine community-based governance and of proper fully-functional community capacity.

SOME SPECIFIC COMMENTS

REGARDING LOCAL AND REGIONAL MANAGEMENT

It is important to decide between local and regional management as the two are not synonomous. I am suspicious of regional management as the boundaries are artificial and imposed, and bear no proper relationship to local realities and systems of organisation except for the fact that it suits the State bureaucracies to organise around Regions (at the present time).

Efficient local management will bring benefits to a Region by making sure that business at a specific location is taken care of. THERE CAN BE NO SUCCESS ON A REGIONAL LEVEL UNLESS IT IS MADE UP OF LOCAL SUCCESSES THAT HAVE BECOME ROUTINELY WELL-ORGANISED. EFFECTIVE LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND PROPER GOVERNANCE SHOULD BE THE NAME OF THE GAME, SO THAT SPECIFIC OPERATIONS ARE PROPERLY CONDUCTED.

If regional managers and coordinators want to assist, they could do so, but their efforts to assist will not work out well if they are revealed to be attempting to control the decision-making processes. Unfortunately, this seems to be a particularly common practice.

REGARDING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND INDIGENOUS GROUPS

I note that the “Committee also wants to discover whether governments and their agencies are building genuine partnerships with indigenous groups”.

I have found the various partnership arrangements (in health) a real frustration as I have tried to uncover the strategic thinking behind such partnership arrangements. It’s been a real frustration because, with so many different players in partnership arrangements, it becomes almost impossible to find anyone with some actual authority to make a real decision or even provide some clear direction.

PERHAPS THE STRATEGIC THINKING BEHIND THE PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS IS TO CREATE A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACH. This might make some sense for those in the system. The problem is, GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS CANNOT SOLVE THE PROBLEMS BY THEMSELVES, no matter how much ‘the government’ might want them to.

Processes of decision-making seem to be always pending, rarely decided, and this goes on month after month, year after year. An additional frustration relates to the fact that THE DECISION-MAKERS ARE VIRTUALLY NEVER THE ACTUAL SERVICE-PROVIDERS. They don’t know what it is like to work at the coalface. They don’t have to! Rather, they tend to uphold a system of constant delay and an artificial process of ‘overseeing’ what is supposed to be happening.

That’s where the partnerships fall down, in my opinion. But then, I am not really in ‘the system’. For those who really are in the system, the strong motivating factor (for them) is the fact that they have ‘a job’, and, thereby, a stake in maintaining the status quo. Unfortunately, in my opinion, this is not getting the job done properly (in view of the enormous task out there!).

PARTNERSHIPS ARE PARTICULARLY UNHELPFUL WHEN THEY ARE USED TO UNDERMINE EFFORTS BY LEGALLY-CONSTITUTED INDIGENOUS ORGANISATIONS TO BUILD UP THEIR OWN CAPACITY FOR EFFECTIVE LOCAL GOVERNANCE.

As stated previously, employees of many of the government agencies seem to feel threatened by the thought of stronger indigenous groups.

In my opinion, partnership arrangements are being used by some State-based departmental senior executives to maintain (secretive) systems of leverage and control over indigenous organisations for the purpose of controlling the flow of funding, thereby furthering their own agendas, which are couched in terms such as ‘the avoidance of duplication’, ‘to service the whole of the community’, and so forth.

They do this by engaging ‘strategic Aboriginal representatives’ onto partnership committees and advisory groups, and working out future arrangements whereby indigenous groups become entangled in partnership and service agreements that effectively undermine attempts by the indigenous groups to stand alone.

If this is what it means to be in partnership, I am concerned for the future. For such systems are not built upon trust and mutual respect, but on manipulation and control.

Such partnership arrangements also serve to undermine effective local governance of indigenous organisations by diverting needed resources and by establishing public-service-based governance instead.

Recommendations regarding good practice

I note that the Committee is looking for success stories. I am sure there are plenty out there, and that successes are being achieved every day despite the serious challenges involved.

I am sorry if my paper has appeared excessively pessimistic. As a doctor, it is my role to identify ailments in the system so that remedies can be determined.

It is like the story of the glass that is half full. Is the glass seen as half full, or half empty? That has to do with attitude and perception.

My concerns relate to my perception (based on years of on-the-ground experience) that there is far too much money spent on wasteful exercises and that significant revision of practices is desirable and necessary if Australia is to address the significant challenges involved in advancing the well-being of our indigenous populations.

Unfortunately, I am not very confident that enough people in authority are even willing to seek for the 'paradigm shift' that would be required.

So... short of a complete cure, I would like to make five recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACCEPT THAT INCORPORATED BODIES HAVE A RIGHT TO EXIST

First, please educate public servants about the nature of incorporated bodies and their right to exist as autonomous and independent groups, with the right to make their own decisions based upon their superior knowledge of local circumstances.

It would be helpful if a genuine attempt was made to counter the assumptions by many in government that non-government people are incapable of making wise decisions.

This might allow the possibility for serious consideration to be given to bottom-up strategies based on local realities, rather than the more simplified top-down strategies that government agencies seem to prefer.

PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR INCORPORATED BODIES

Second, it would be helpful if genuine supports were provided to incorporated bodies so that they may advance and mature.

This means taking notice of what the incorporated bodies are saying, and respecting the development of such bodies and the links to their communities through general meetings and so forth.

It means resourcing them adequately so that they can function properly.

It means listening to the combined wisdom of the group, not just the opinions of better-known individuals of higher profile who tend to be singled-out as the more easily-identified spokespersons.

It also means becoming serious about breaches of standards of proper conduct and governance, and providing assistance towards the development

of higher standards of conduct and governance based on legal and functional requirements.

ADDRESS THE NEED FOR GOOD SECRETARIAL CAPABILITY

My third recommendation is to seriously address the shortfall or absence of proper secretarial capability in many organisations and committees. A good secretary (as well as a good 'chair') can play a critically important role in furthering the work of effective organisations.

Remember that indigenous groups are often not 'literate' as far as writing things down is concerned. Even educated (in the Australian sense) indigenous people often have trouble getting words down on paper. This can lead to a shortfall in due committee process as, when items are not properly recorded, it becomes difficult for agendas to be prepared, fruitful discussions to be conducted, motions to be prepared and voted on (an important procedure, I hope you will agree), minutes to be recorded, and decisions to be made.

Further emphasis on the vital role of the Secretary (in all necessary circumstances) might go some way to counter the tendency to abuse the role of Chairman/person, which, for some reason, seems to hold a higher status, to the detriment of many groups.

INSIST ON PROPER PROCEDURE FOR PARTNERSHIP COMMITTEES.

I feel the need to state that, in my opinion, the indigenous group with whom I work (Umoona Tjutagku Health Service) has a far-superior secretarial capacity and a much more democratic process of decision-making than the various partnership committees and advisory groups I have attended as part of my duties.

So, if secretarial assistance is a necessary requirement for the advancement of indigenous groups, it is also essential for the various partnership committees and groups who, in my opinion, are flouting democratic procedure and abusing proper committee process.

The cult of secrecy and behind-the-scenes decision-making that is going on in the health arena is alarming.

A lot of money is tied up in these dealings, and it's about time that some honesty prevailed. Without honesty, and integrity, there can be no mutual respect between various parties and individuals. Honesty and integrity can prevail only in circumstances where there is honesty and integrity in the manner in which a committee is conducted.

An honest and open committee is one in which the membership is clear, members have the right to contribute agenda items, there is proper discussion before decisions are made, and decisions are voted on after motions are clearly worded. These basic rules are a foundational requirement.

ENSURE ADEQUATE FINANCIAL RESOURCING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In my recent experience, all sorts of discussions have occurred at the level of management (within partnership committees) to decide the manner in which incoming Commonwealth monies might be expended but, unfortunately, the financial details of such proposed expenditures have not been properly addressed. Those with financial expertise are left out of the discussion. Consequently, when monies have been allocated, significant shortfalls have occurred.

As financial accountability is a clear necessity, there is a need for financial expertise to be incorporated into decision-making mechanisms.

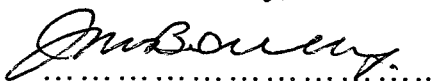
Conclusion

Now that I have had my say I will surrender this paper for comment.

I hope this provides an adequate statement of my concerns with respect to the important matters being addressed by your Committee, Barry.

Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.

Yours Sincerely,



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Dr John Bouly.