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The Secretary of the Committee

House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

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ENQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY STORES IN REMOTE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES.

Terms of Reference

The Committee shall inquire into and report on the operation of local community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with particular focus on:

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

I have been involved with two privately owned stores in the north-east Alice Springs region over the last fourteen years. These are Mt Swan Store and Red Gum Store, forty kilometres apart, both located on MacDonald Downs Station which is owned by Malcolm McLeod Chalmers.

The Chalmers family have operated 'station store/s' since the 1970's or earlier when the 'dole' was first introduced. During the late 80's the aboriginal people who were living at Mt Swan moved to a site 30km away where a good permanent water supply was found, and the people who were living at MacDonald homestead dispersed to various locations on Utopia. There is still considerable goodwill between members of the Chalmers family and the aboriginal people they grew up with.

I was initially employed as a station hand before beginning to assist in the family run store at Mt Swan. I managed this store for a short period during 2002/03 and have since overseen and assisted subsequent managers employed.

Both stores have evolved into business enterprises in their own right. We do not have access to Government grants, staff are not paid by outside schemes and if cashflow gets tight they are expected to trade through.

During my involvement the stores have always displayed a large variety of stock – fresh fruit & veg, frozen goods, dry goods, auto products, electrical items, kitchenware, manchester, clothing, etc; and have always provided additional services – assistance with Centrelink correspondence/requirements, vehicle breakdown assistance, large item deliveries, special vehicle parts or other orders sourced from Alice Springs or further afield.

In a 200km radius (road travel) there are another eight stores operating – Outback Stores, community owned and private. Our customers travel anywhere from 30-170km to shop with either Red Gum or Mt Swan. Feedback over the years has indicated that we had a better range of goods at reasonable prices in comparison to most other shops.

We used to operate a 'book-up' system where customers would negotiate for the amount of credit they could be allowed. Since the NT Intervention we have changed to zero credit for all customers on welfare benefits as was required by the licencing agreement for receiving Income Managed Funds. During this change some customers returned to their home community stores but have started to come back, despite having to travel, and despite no credit being allowed (although it is still a common request).

We have strived to maintain the good service and good variety in stock which we had a solid reputation for. Our markups have been reduced a little to try to compete with the introduction of Outback Stores. Our stock is mostly bought from wholesalers in Alice Springs but we look for specials that can be obtained through Coles, Woolworths and Kmart. Fresh fruit and vegetables are restocked weekly, other supplies are collected fortnightly or monthly depending on storage capacity.

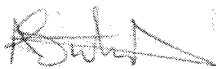
Over the time I've been here I've seen the sale of fresh fruit & vegetables increasing, we restock more variety than when I started. Maintaining a healthy diet is a personal choice and is developed through education where the greatest influence is from parents and guardians to children. Simply removing unhealthy foods from the shelf is not an answer as people will travel to get what they want. As a retail store we could develop marketing ploys to encourage the purchase of healthier food or perhaps copy the alcohol industry and overprice the unhealthy options.

I would like to see economic opportunities developed in communities. In many quarters, where entire communities are welfare dependent, there seems to also be an expectation for these communities to be serviced by non-profit organizations. People may well get more value for their welfare dollar but what is the long term cost to the community and its children. How can a community move beyond welfare dependency if it only encourages non-profit initiatives and a reliance on Government funding?

Why not operate on a for profit basis. Turn the profit into ventures that have long term positive effects for the whole community.

Start with a community's store – most have something in place and functioning. Use its profits to go towards developing another profit making enterprise, eg. a mechanics workshop/wrecking yard, tourism, agriculture, etc. This in turn generates further 'real' job opportunities that are lacking with the current status quo.

Yours sincerely,



ANGELA SIEBERT