

Submission

to

Senate Select Committee on the
Administration of Indigenous Affairs

Inquiry into the Administration of Indigenous Affairs

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Introduction

The Progressive Labour Party was established in 1996 and has been federally registered as a political party since 1997. The PLP has contested several elections at federal, state and local government levels. It was formed principally as a result of widespread disenchantment by its members - and many Australian citizens - with the economic rationalist policies pursued by both major parties. The Progressive Labour Party believes that Australia must genuinely recognise the right to self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Reinstate ATSIC and ask Indigenous Australians to decide the way forward

Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have criticisms of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission's structure and practice. It is not ideal, and in many ways reflects the consequences of attempting to graft European cultural norms about representative structures and processes onto Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities without adequate consultation or culturally appropriate models. There is no question but that ATSIC was in need of an overhaul.

Nevertheless, ATSIC was the only national representative voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The arbitrary abolition of ATSIC by the Howard Government was an appalling dismissal of the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to a say in their own future. Combined with the announced intention to "mainstream" the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, this marks the lowest point in the relations between black and white in this country for many years. The Government opportunistically used the cover of media controversy about some of ATSIC's leadership to sweep away one structure while having nothing but colonial paternalism to put in its place.

The proposed legislation merely attempts to create retrospective legitimacy for this outrageous act. It should be rejected for this reason.

The history of mainstreamed programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is a history of neglect and failure. Mainstreaming disempowers communities, and disguises the use of resources in a way that minimises public accountability.

The success stories invariably involve Indigenous Australians taking a central role in planning and implementation, government willingness to direct adequate resources, and allowing time to let programs work, and flexibility to let them evolve to meet changing circumstances. The best models empower Indigenous communities to take real steps to repair and rebuild themselves.

The proposal to move Indigenous programs to "mainstream" departments and authorities should be rejected by the Senate. The direction of policy should be towards more "best practice" empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to take genuine, meaningful control of programs which directly affect them, to build rather than undermine self-determination.

Conclusion – Reject the Bill

The Progressive Labour Party urges the Senate to reject the proposed legislation, to reinstate ATSIC, and to ask Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to decide the way forward.