



August 10, 2004

Submission to the Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs

Indigenous affairs...the next phase

Reconciliation Victoria is a not-for-profit community based organisation with an elected Council of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Victorians, who believe that national and regional representative Indigenous bodies are necessary to ensure Indigenous people and communities have a self-determining voice in their own affairs.

The recent announcement regarding the abolishment of ATSIC provides an opportunity for a fresh look at Indigenous affairs policy. While there is broad agreement that reform of ATSIC was necessary, this is not an excuse to walk away from the commitment to an effective representative Indigenous body that can provide advice to, and work with, government in the development of policies and provision of services. All other participants in the Indigenous affairs service delivery, government departments and local Indigenous cooperatives must also be scrutinised afresh.

We believe a national representative Indigenous body working alongside the Government enables people to have a say in the development of policies and the provision of services that affect them. Such a voice is imperative to the enjoyment of basic rights. The Government's commitment to mainstreaming the remaining services for which ATSIC has been responsible, must be matched with Indigenous involvement throughout the implementation and to the evaluation of service delivery.

Labor has said it will establish a new framework for Indigenous self-governance and program delivery with a focus on regional partnerships and a new directly elected national representative body, we urge the Government to:

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- create a new national advisory mechanism
- ensure that adequate time, resources and support are provided to allow for appropriate consultation of Indigenous people in the development of any new structure
- ensure that any legislative changes are in accordance with Australia's obligations under the ICCPR and ICESCR and the Racial Discrimination Act.

What is needed now are new commitments, adequate resources, sound advice that should be followed through in good program delivery that is monitored with the involvement of Indigenous people. We in the Reconciliation movement ask the Government to make the delivery of services to Indigenous communities more effective in meeting their needs.

Some commentators have noted that there has been a welcome change in the attitudes of many Australians. This has yet to be translated into successful outcomes for Indigenous people particularly in health and education. Sir William Deane, patron of Reconciliation Australia, believes that we have reached a blind alley in the pathway towards true national reconciliation. He also noted that this is a critical time for Australia as a nation and ponders whether the achievement of reconciliation will be a defining test of Australia's worth.

For many people involved in the Reconciliation movement it is indeed seen as a defining moment for developing an holistic Australian identity. We need a constructive approach fitting for the 21st century and building on some of the achievements of the last 25 years.

Specifically Reconciliation Victoria believes that focused efforts must be directed at:

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1.Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage:

This means governments engaging with Indigenous Australians and other knowledgeable people to develop programs with successful outcomes that have been funded from all areas of government to benefit Indigenous communities. Long-term regional and national goals must not be jeopardized or aborted because of governments' short terms. As with the reconciliation process overcoming disadvantage requires engagement and commitment from all involved including a responsible Indigenous leadership, to overcome illness, disadvantage and poverty and develop the next generation.

It means also that Indigenous expert advice must be available and combined with other expertise to ensure best use of resources. It requires monitoring and evaluation using the COAG performance indicators through all departmental programs with Indigenous input into the evaluation.

2.Recognising and appreciating Indigenous contributions to Australia:

Over the centuries many Indigenous Australians have made a unique contribution to Australian life but because of their marginalization, much of this history is not known. The reconciliation process has changed attitudes and many more Australians are now willing to learn. In addition to the peoples' contributions the history of the land through Indigenous place names and stories should be part of mainstream history.

3.Understanding Indigenous aspirations and history:

There must be a legitimate place within education and public history of Australia for Indigenous peoples stories. Too much has been said about the so-called black armband version of history and too many challenges have been spuriously made about the reality of contact history.

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4. Meaningful Reconciliation around the harder issues:

Much of the difficulties facing Indigenous Australians can be overcome by reconciliation and understanding. Meaningful partnerships by Indigenous communities with other groups from the public and private sectors would require people to work together to overcome some of the hard challenges in health and housing for example.

Indigenous and non Indigenous groups working together to develop such programs in the spirit of reconciliation to overcome disadvantage would require little direct government funding but would benefit from government support.

A well developed reconciliation process would include understanding and valuing cultural and historic differences and assist in cross cultural dialogue. Such a reconciliation process needs to include reparations for past dislocation and recognition of traditional owners throughout Australia. Moving reconciliation to the next level would develop a climate of opportunity for all Australians.

Eleanor A Bourke,
Co Chair

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