

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commission Amendment Bill 2004

Submission for inquiry into the Administration of Indigenous Affairs.

- a) the provision of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Amendment Bill 2004**
- b) the administration of Indigenous programs and services by mainstream departments and agencies; and**
- c) related matters.**

Preamble

The world view of the Aboriginal people of Australia is on the whole very different to non-Aboriginal people's view of the world. In addition the indigenous people of Australia are many and varied and cannot be lumped together – Australia is really a nation of nations. Though there are many similarities, there are also vast differences amongst those who call themselves indigenous. This makes it very difficult for policy makers who, at various points, have to “lump” people together in order to come up with a workable policy. Our plea with government would be that they, at least, recognise these difference and think of the various indigenous groups in Australia like they would think of the different nations in the European community. In this way solutions are much more likely to be worked out at a regional and local level.

Background

It is stated that the purpose of the Bill before the Senate is: *to make major changes to the Australian Government's institutional structures in indigenous affairs in order to improve the lives of indigenous Australians.*

To begin with it is important that the Government take notice of Aboriginal people's view point of where they are and have been in their relationship with government. Many Aboriginal people in Central Australia see themselves as being “looked after” by the Government. (This does not mean that they are not interested in being involved in looking after themselves.) Aboriginal people's initial contact with Western society tended to be under very paternalistic structures, quite different from the completely Government independent nomadic lifestyle that they came from. Despite the so called policy of “self-determination” the past few of decades of settlement lifestyle have only served to reinforce this notion of being “looked after” with welfare payments now widespread. However with the advent of the very Western styles of local and regional government Aboriginal people are now electing representatives for community councils and regional ATSIC councils and it is more and more being seen as something important and valued. Though the concept of being “looked after” is still very strong in their minds they are more and more wanting involvement and participation in the management structures of their communities.

Secondly, in the Aboriginal view of the world there are several important realities which the Government would do well to take note of in its administration of indigenous affairs:

- a) The cooperation within *extended families*.**
- b) The cooperation of the various extended families *within a community*.**
- c) The cooperation of various extended families and communities *within the language area*.**

a) The cooperation within *extended families*.

Family and kinship are very important for all human beings. However, the way Aboriginal people have traditionally organised their societies has been very much based on family and kinship – much more so than in the West. In the West we see family as only one part of the social and political structure. In traditional Aboriginal societies the social and political structures were based on family and kinship. In remote communities it is still very significant today such that community councils and other committees formed to meet the needs of Western funding bodies are heavily influenced by family and kinship. Our plea with government would again be to recognise the strong influence that family and kinship bring to bear on any imposed or non-indigenous organisation or structure. And it is not simply “education” that will make those structures work “properly” – indigenous people actually have a different way of thinking about the world and no matter what structure is put in place it will be used according to their view of the world and not ours. Their idea of “proper” is based on a different set of premises.

However as structures and organisations are discussed in the *light* of these differing world views the stakeholders will be able to work their way forward and come up with suitable structures that really will work. That will require compromise on both sides – but at least those compromises will be understood and in plain view. To date Western structures have been set up in communities, but too often both indigenous and non-indigenous people working with them have not understood well enough the compromises that are being made or need to be made – some how or other things just happen but no one is any the wiser and nothing ever gets better.

b) The cooperation of the various extended families *within a community*.

Although it is understood that getting cooperation between extended families on **communities** is not always straight forward, the community with its local council is the only larger administrative structure which has been working, at least to some extent. However the good functioning of these councils depends completely on good representation from each of the extended families in the community.

Whereas the democratic process is a fundamental part of wider Australian society it is only a recent development in indigenous societies. However, particularly in remote communities, it does not carry anywhere near the value that family and kinship does. Family and kinship will win out almost every time over a democratic process. Even though that process may be seen to be happening, underneath, when push comes to shove, family and kinship ties will override any “so called” democratic decision of a council or governing body.

Democracy also requires a good understanding of the notion of representation. A traditional indigenous person can only really represent his own family and so the notion of representing a wider group of people on an elected council or governing body is a relatively new concept and only partially understood at best.

c) The cooperation of various extended families and communities *within the language area*.

The **language area** is a larger area of reality built on traditional relationships between extended families living on different communities. For example, of all the Pintupi/Luritja people who came out of the Western Desert from the 1950s onward most of their offspring are living on five communities Papunya, Haasts Bluff, Mount Liebig, Kintore and Kiwirrkura. These communities are known as Pintupi/Luritja communities and cooperate with each other at a wider level. There are shared Ceremonies, Christian singing, football and other family based inter cooperation. A person from any of these communities can always find ‘family’ to stay

with on each of the other communities. Of course there are people living on each of these communities who have relationship ties to families in the Warlpiri communities. There are others who have relationship ties to families in the Martu Wangka & Ngaanyatjarra communities. There are others who have relationship ties to families in the Arrarnta communities etc. However there is a shared recognition by all living within the area of the reality of that language area.

The average non-aboriginal person working in mainstream government departments have great difficulty understanding the language and culture of traditional Aboriginal people. They can tend to have an attitude that there are a lot of problems with Aboriginal culture which have to be “fixed” by Aborigines totally adopting the “white way” of doing things. But Aboriginal culture is a legitimate culture, equal to and not inferior to white culture. Of course there are problems in Aboriginal culture but they are not alone – Western culture certainly has its fair share of problems. In fact Aboriginal culture has just as much to say to the Western culture.

Because of such differing world views communication between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people is often thwart with problems¹. Too often non-Aboriginal people think that, if you communicate through a traditional person who has good English, then there are no problems getting the wider community to understand and accept what needs to be done in any given situation. However, whilst that English speaker may understand much of what the non-Aboriginal person is saying they are not in a position to get broad cooperation with everyone else in that community, (even if they are the chairman of the council). If that English speaker is a senior person he/she may have some hope of getting cooperation from his own extended family, but not from other extended families. If that English speaker is a junior person, then most times they cannot get cooperation even from their own extended family. Hence we have come to view with suspicion the saying, “Well, that’s what the community says.” Such a statement is usually more indicative of the non-Aboriginals lack of liaison with all sections of the community.

Recommendations

For the effective administration of indigenous programs and services in remote areas of Australia we recommend that:

- 1) indigenous programs and services be delivered region by region each region defined primarily by language and the natural groupings of people. We recommend that there be a regional council for each area elected by the people of that region. It is most important that the decision on the regional boundaries be made in close consultation with the communities.**

Furthermore, there needs to be a closer working together of all the different strands of services to community. That is, instead of each major entity in a community (housing, education, health and the like) having its own council, and its own set of regular meetings, each community has one council which is responsible for all these areas. This improves facilitation of services, cross-sectorial communication, and reduces meetings.

- 2) there be a group of liaison officers for each region who will be key people in the organisation of Government programs and services in that region. These officers need to be well trained in community development and given substantial cross-cultural training before they go into a community for the first time. They will need to clearly understand both the Government system and the Aboriginal culture of the area in which they work. They would also need to have ability in the language of the area. (If**

¹ Viz “Crossed Purposes” by Ralph Folds

they do not have that ability a requirement for their employment would be that they commence learning the local language).

Their primary role will be to see that good clear communication and consultation occurs between government and regional and community councils. They will work primarily with the regional councils and the local community councils particularly as they interface with government departments. Government funds which were formally made available through ATSIC should be channelled through the regional councils, eg, The Pintupi/Luritja council, the Pitjantjatjara/AP Council, the Warlpiri Council, etc. and on to the individual community councils. The liaison officers as individuals and as a group would be responsible to see that Government funds were used responsibly in the communities. Part of that responsibility is to ensure that genuine employment and training opportunities are provided for Aboriginal people from the community through the delivery of services and programmes.

If there was irresponsible use of funding they would alert the councils to this and also recommend to the funding agency that some action needed to be taken. The funding department would then be responsible to go to the offending council and clearly, through the liaison person, enunciate the action that would be taken if the matter was not put right. Local Community leadership (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff) need such outside support in order to be able to run their communities well and responsibly.

The rules and guidelines of all government programs and services should be worked out with the regional councils and community councils, not forgetting the ramifications of breaking those rules or misusing the guidelines. Most importantly these rules and guidelines should be worked out in the language of the community rather than in government legalese.

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