

SUMMARY

Regionalisation of all Aboriginal programs appears to be part of the solution to culturally appropriate delivery of services, and a culturally appropriate service is one that recognises and respects the cultural characteristics of the community that it services.

Prior to 1770 there had been some 790 individual tribal boundary areas through out Australia some 2500 individual dialects, each one completely different from the other, all living in harmony and balance with nature, all different , spiritually, culturally, socially, economically, contrary to beliefs held by non indigenous people, at that time there was non recognisable forms of government with which to negotiate some form of treaty, Aboriginal people had a land and labour based economy, aboriginal people had achieved a state of peace and stability across a whole continent, that has never been achieved by any other race of people in the world and we had a functioning economy given that we lived in civil societies.

This was a pure democracy, there were no chiefs, kings, queens, elected politicians, every person was on the same level, there was no upper and lower or middle class aboriginal societies, these cultural values and practices have impact on aboriginal leadership today, with the creation of ATSIC it's a hierarchy that's non consistent with the way that aboriginal people do business.

This was a culture built on consensus, with the decision making process being made by all members of the clan groups within there tribal boundary areas, these are important cultural issues that need to be very carefully considered by government when making decisions that relate to service delivery.

Today with in our communities, we are even more diverse, because of a whole range of reasons, making it that more difficult to provide a service that is acceptable and appropriate to the needs of aboriginal people.

The following is a proposal to formulate a working document coming from a grass roots perspective which contains an initiative which we hope may change the way in which Governments deal with indigenous service delivery, and in doing so, we recognise the importance of a national role, and in saying this, bearing in mind the above information and its importance in a cultural perspective.

It's about the Government first recognising, past injustices, acknowledgement of the first peoples and respecting the cultural practices and values, and the now, diversity of these groups, they will become evident, we see this as a major factor. 60,000 years of culture cannot be changed in a short 234 years; it will be about recognising the causes rather than trying to band-aid the symptoms

This proposal will require a collective effort and the responsibility of our own situation in relation to the development of our regional authority and to put in the appropriate steps to realise our desires, this will require an analysis of our current situation, it will require a formulation of our goals and aspirations it will require genuine planning at the grassroots level.

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE ABOLISHMENT OF OUR NATIONAL PEAK BODY ATSIC.

A INTRODUCTION.

(1) The following submission was prepared by the Many Rivers Regional Forum, they comprise of 2 representatives from the 13 grantee CDEP organisations within the Many Rivers Region from Tweed Heads to Wyong in the south.

(2) The proposals within this paper will be based on our beliefs that we need a nationally elected indigenous body with the capacity to express our concerns for Aboriginal self determination and to advocate on our behalf, consult in-depth with communities to develop policy, be able to advise governments on service delivery after consultations with communities, and also monitor government performances on our behalf.

(3) In accordance with current census indicators, the population within this region is estimated to be some 33,000 Aboriginal people, our submission specifically relates to this region and of the structure that we would like to have, in relation to a more culturally appropriate and equitable mode of service delivery into our communities.

(4) Aboriginal self determination is a collective human right of our people, and it can mean many things, freedom from political and economic domination by others, self government and the freedom to make decisions about family community, and country and it can take many forms from regional agreements to community constitutions depending on our needs and aspirations and based on our cultural beliefs and practices.

(5) This proposal will also seek to identify within our region the increase of community participation and control as a central feature of improved government service delivery, it is based on moving control back to the grass roots people, If it means regionalisation of our programs it must ensure that the people involved within the regional authority model are capably of interfacing with governments, whilst being representative of and accountable back to our communities and people.

(6) If this proposed structure is to be successful, then the communities within this region must be 100% involved in the allocation of funds that relate to service delivery, a special group of community people must be entrusted to oversee the amount of funding per region, it's a bottoms up approach, ultimately this scenario will give real power back to the people to make and effect day to day program decisions which will reside directly with the individual communities within this region.

(7) The diversity with Aboriginal communities is an issue that hinders any proposed development and progress, and in most cases it's the dominant family structure that dictates terms to the smaller divisions within these communities, if decisions are to be made in relation to funding and service delivery, then decision makers from all factions of each community must be involved in this process. In saying this, local people know more and care more about the needs and aspirations of their own communities than anyone else, and want the shortest straight line between those needs and aspirations and the resources to meet them.

(8) From our perspective the current ATSIC structure is unsustainable unless major reforms are structured and implemented the old ATSIC structure is a consequence of Government creating a hierarchy which is not consistent with the way that Aboriginal people

and communities conduct their day to day business, and the power to make decisions must be given back to the grass roots level to address the real issue of poverty and disadvantage and to address these issues through appropriate service delivery.

A GUIDING PRINCIPLES.

The outcomes of the review into ATSIC reflected the governments own perceptions it was without vision there was no opportunity for intention or aim and it lacked content, no recommendations of the abolishment of ATSIC on the contrary, in fact , recommendations to strengthen rather than abolish, and it clearly lacked any adequate process of consulting with indigenous people.

The following is recommended by consulting with the people within this region and is guided by the following beliefs and principles.

The Indigenous people within this region recommend that we maintain regional and national representation, we recommend that the electoral process be refined and gives to the new board of commissioners the power to formulate but not to implement, the final allocation of funds distribution into service delivery must remain and be negotiated at the community level.

We agree that ATSIC with major reforms will be sustainable and should not be abolished, In light of the current senate inquiry.

ATSIC received 100% blame for 15% of funding distribution, although having serious funding cuts over the past 6 years, these cuts should be given back to community control, mainstream have failed us in service delivery, its only fair to say in respect of this that the primary function of ATSIC is not the delivery of services.

Regional authority is seen to be the way in which to provide services within our region, responsibility to negotiate for the service delivery arrangements with government and non government agencies and providers, the core function of this structure will be to provide to these agencies culturally appropriate information that takes in the characteristics of the communities that it proposes to provide services to.

The ethics of the communities on the far north coast will be our voice; we will be responsible for developing not only our own individual capacity but our organisations to make informed decisions to be more accountable. To develop policy, we currently experience a degree of autonomy within our organisations, what we want is to assert more autonomy and control our own destinies and lives.

The primary functions of this new structure will be to develop agreements with governments State and Territory for the provision of meaningful employment and appropriate services to our communities, the development of these agreements

will rely on local and regional involvement of communities and organisations, as well as government and non government agencies.

B THE STRUCTURE.

Understandably, there had been a clear lack of interest in indigenous voting in ATSIC elections and this has been used negatively by Government to drive home the policy of ATSIC abolishment.

If there is to be an alternate peak indigenous structure that will comprise a national body with an elected chair and board members and elected regional councils, we propose the following.

The regional council is elected through a democratically elected process.
The chairs of each region be elected through a democratically elected process
The board of commissioners is elected through a democratically elected process.

Further to this as in any election process people need to nominate for the respective positions, should go on the campaign trail and present to the people a profile of past experiences in educational qualifications work experiences as per any resume, through this process produce a governance structure that will facilitate a national voice of politically and academically strong aboriginal leadership.

- (1) A one stop funding shop, all funding that relates to the well being of aboriginal people within this region be co-ordinated from the one complex.
- (2) Representatives from each of the communities within this region will make up the authority.
- (3) That the government allocate funds to provide a proper needs analysis survey, a profile of each community "data base" then match or seek the appropriate funds against the communities needs.
- (4) On the mode of service delivery it must reflect and respect the cultural characteristics of each individual community and those working within a community context on development, advocacy must have the appropriate administrative skills and training to meet the proposed changes.
- (5) This is a very complex situation, considering the diversity of communities and their varying needs, there must be capacity both at the local and regional levels to develop policy and make decisions that reflect the realities of these areas, this will also require that governments and other organisations understand our commitments and obligations to work within this frame work.
- (6) This proposal will involve mapping out our existing infrastructure, it will involve accessing the human resources within our communities and planning their development within the context of those communities, in regionalising our services we will form real partnerships at all levels of government to address the real issues of service delivery.

- (7) Although we have some good people in place we would need training in, development in budget/resource management/ community relations/systems management/policy development.
- (8) A structure is currently in place we need the government to provide us with the opportunity to put the infrastructure and the appropriate cultural programs in place to effectively run these programs to full capacity, creating full time positions for people currently employed on the CDEP as service providers to there individual communities.

Community self management must drive service identification and provision, accountability must be built into this regional structure and aboriginal people must have confidence in the government, these communities and bodies need to develop and enter into partnerships with all relevant agencies and government organisations, this structure in its completion must be needs based and reflect equity principles, and there must be an effective complaints and grievance handling process.

We would seek real economic development within those communities, it wont be about and revolve around funding and of the governments capacity to pay, it will be about the involvement of aboriginal people who will drive these programs, the potential to create enterprises within these communities is there, the process for completion or reality is long winded and drawn out, and the transition from a welfare to some form of market economy will be a difficult proposition but hopefully it will give us access to a similar range of choices.

We think that the primary functions of a new commission, particularly our commissioner will act as an advocate for our region on issues that relate to our rights as indigenous people, and in consultations with the people of this region, develop policy proposals to present to the government on our behalf that relate to appropriate service delivery and to ensure that the principle of equity applies in seeking the appropriate funding for those purposes.

This whole structure should be round table discussions, members of the proposed regional authority model with commissioner, should be developing partnerships with other regions and with state/territory governments for the provision of infrastructures, which will be the platform to base indigenous services, under no circumstances should a hierarchy structure be formed the decision making process should always come from a grassroots perspective.

The commissioners within each of the regions, in consultations with community decision makers who would be key advisors on matters that specific relate to policy, service delivery, indigenous rights, and in partnerships with other regions have exclusive rights to represent his or her regions to state and territory governments and have appropriate speaking rights on matters that affect those regions.

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