



HUMANIST SOCIETY OF VICTORIA Inc.

Affiliated with the Council of Australian Humanist Societies (CAHS) and
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Mr Jonathan Curtis, Secretary
Senate Select Committee on the
Administration of Aboriginal Affairs,
Parliament House, Canberra, ACT 2600

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE
ADMINISTRATION OF INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

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REC'D: 22/2/05

FROM: Humanist Society of Vic

RECOMMENDED FOR PUBLICATION:

SECRETARY: [Signature]

Re: Supplementary comments on the provisions of ATSI Commission Amendmend Bill 2004.

SUBMISSION FROM THE HUMANIST SOCIETY OF VICTORIA. (HSV)

The HSV is a secular organisation fostering ethical, rational and responsible behaviour, human rights, the democratic processes and a just and inclusive governance.

It seeks to alleviate suffering, to promote wellbeing and the attainment of one's full potential. It engages in educational, community and charitable activities.

The views that follow have been formulated at specially convened group discussions to which all HSV members are invited. Further supportive information is obtained from print publications, the Internet, public lectures and from individuals with relevant expertise.

The Convenor of the HSV Submissions Committee is authorised to present these views.

In this supplement to our submission of 27.7.2004 we make the following comments:

1. Humanists believe that a nation's laws reflect the degree of civilisation it has reached and that positive discrimination towards the disadvantaged is one of the marks of a civilised society.

As the Indigenous Australians are, by all measures, greatly disadvantaged, we submit that the ATSI Commission Amendment Bill 2004 clearly state our commitment to:

1. special efforts designed to eliminate this disadvantage, and

2. the protection of human rights, cultural characteristics and social systems of the Indigenous Australians.

Such provisions would be of particular importance in the absence of an Australian Bill of Rights.

2. Humanists greatly value human rights and the ideal of liberal democracy.

In our view, the imposition of appointed representatives in place of elected ones, violates both principles.

As there is a great diversity of traditions, social structures, belief systems and languages in the Indigenous population, we appreciated the wisdom of the initial review of ATSI which stated the need for an enhanced role in decision making by elected regional leaders. We consider the rejection of this recommendation damaging, paternalistic and disrespectful to the Indigenous people.

3. The new National Representative Body should be required to develop well researched, long-term policies and supply a detailed rationale for their advice.

We note a statement made by the former Liberal minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Fred Chaney: "Since the 1970s, an elected voice provided a useful stimulant to debate, an indication of where Aboriginal people want to go. In my experience, nominated groups are quite different in nature. From them you get good short-term advice, but not good long-term agenda-setting advocacy." (The Age, 18/4/04. 'Federal Politics', by Michelle Grattan.)

4. We regard health and education - neither of which was ATSI's responsibility - as the crucial social areas. Mainstream services failed here due to lack of cultural sensitivity and knowledge required and vital in these areas.

Various reports (Commonwealth Grants Commission, the ABS, the Productivity Commission and Social Justice Commissioner Jonas) document that Indigenous disadvantage in these areas has not improved since 1996.

5. We submit that Indigenous-specific services should be under the control of the new National Representative Body. The knowledge of cultural values and sensitivities is crucial to successful service delivery to Indigenous people.

In this context it is gratifying to see a report (The Age 27/8/04) of a project for medical schools to teach the special aspects of Aboriginal health so that "doctors can take a medical history, understand the cultural differences and know what questions to ask."

6. The current assets of ATSIC should be transferred to the new body and the overall funding increased to deal with specific problems in health and in education.
7. We do not support the notion that we should all be treated equally.
To quote a noted jurist, Justice Elizabeth Evatt : "Treating unequal people equally is an injustice."

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Halina Strnad".

Halina Strnad,
convenor, submissions committee.
17.2.2005.