

30 July 2004

**The Secretary
Senate Select Committee on the
Administration of Indigenous Affairs
Parliament House Canberra 2600**

Dear Sir/Madam

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the Committee's Inquiry on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Amendment Bill 2004 and proposed related changes to the administration of Commonwealth Indigenous Affairs policy.

Although I am a non-Indigenous Australian, I have had a long association with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across this land, stretching over 30 years. Over this time I have witnessed many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders overcome their sense of worthlessness, imbued in them often by the treatment they received at the hands of Mission Managers, as they have developed self-esteem through managing their own affairs. This really is the key to addressing the manifold problems experienced by many Indigenous peoples with respect to health, education and employment.

For example, my wife and I lived and worked in the community of Murrin Bridge for three years from 1978-81. This was a community living on welfare, except for two adults (2 out of 100) who were in paid employment. The sense of despair in the community was palpable. My wife worked with some women to begin a cottage industry based on their sewing skills and local artistic talent. The young men began woodworking classes and sometime later TAFE classes were brought to the community providing classes in things the community decided they wanted. The men learnt carpentry and other skills so they could build and maintain community houses. The result is that the community now has pride in itself. The latest enterprise, run by members of the community, is growing grapes which are turned into wine, marketed under their own label.

Australia has an obligation to respect and protect the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to self-determination.

More recently, in 2001, I, in association with Carol Vale, an Aboriginal woman, was contracted by the Bourke Shire Council to develop a whole-of-community Action Plan for Bourke. We were guided by and reported to a Steering Committee made up of representatives of various government agencies plus members of the Bourke Community Working Party, representing the various Aboriginal organisations and family groups in the town. During the two months I was in Bourke I got a good insight into the important role that the ATSIC Regional Council and ATSIC regional administration plays in representing the aspirations of the Aboriginal people across the Murdi Paaki region. They are involved constantly in negotiating appropriate and effective delivery of services by government agencies to Aboriginal families.

I am aware that the Murdi Paaki region is one of the regions participating in the COAG trial which is based on an agreement between Federal and State agencies and ATSIC for co-ordinated delivery of services. This partnership is clearly working in the Murdi Paaki region so why would the Federal Government try to dismantle ATSIC across the country, instead of replicating this model.

The dismantling of ATSIC also clearly contradicts the Government's own review of ATSIC which endorsed the need for national elected Indigenous representation, and greater control at a regional level.

The wholesale return to mainstream-focused service delivery will be a backward step to a failed paternalistic approach to Indigenous affairs. Indigenous people are often poorly served by mainstream services so there remains the need for Indigenous-specific services controlled by Indigenous peoples themselves.

Finally, any replacement for ATSIC must be determined in consultation and negotiation with Indigenous stakeholders, on the basis of their informed consent. The Committee's report should provide strong endorsement of this principle.

Yours sincerely

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