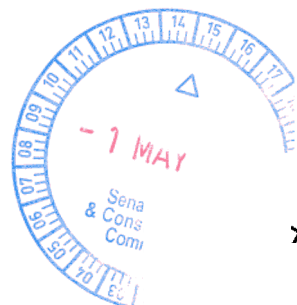


Reconciliation Queensland Incorporated

28th April 2003-04-28

Peter Hallahan
Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee
Room S1.61, Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600



Dear Mr. Hallahan,

Thank you for according Reconciliation Queensland Incorporated(RQI) an extension of time to make a submission to the Inquiry into the provision of the Australian Human Rights Commission Legislation Bill 2003.

RQI have some serious concerns in regard to some proposed changes to the operation and effectiveness of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission(HEREOC). RQI believe that

- the loss of specialist Commissioners is a retrograde step. Australia's human rights record was enhanced by establishing the specialist commissioners with specific portfolio responsibilities. By proposing to convert these positions into generalists, the Commission may lose its expertise, commitment and effectiveness in its relations with specific community sectors, e.g. the Indigenous population;

- putting the workload of five specialist Commissioners into the positions of three generalists will inevitably mean that some important aspects of such work may not be able to be handled efficiently and some may even "fall between the cracks" e.g. particular aspects of the equal opportunity areas;

- the change of position from Commissioners to Deputy Presidents means a loss of statutory powers, authority in the community and therefore trust. This could again result in further deterioration of HEREOC's capacity to be more effective;

- the requirement for HEREOC to seek the Attorney General's permission before investigating an issue reduces the powers of the Commission and politicises it to a level not commensurate with democratic principles. We believe that this deprives our Nation of an important and objective watchdog function. As a result we would assume that issues of concern to the community, but of a sensitive political nature may not be dealt with by the Commission because the Attorney may not agree for them to proceed, e.g. asylum seekers in detention.

Reconciliation Queensland Incorporated

We therefore strongly object to the proposed changes as not being in Australia's national interest and contrary to the further development of its democratic, pluralistic, multicultural society.



Uri Themal, OAM
Secretary