COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

SENATE

SELECT COMMITTEE ON REGIONAL AND REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Reference: Effectiveness of state, territory and Commonwealth government policies on regional and remote Indigenous communities

THURSDAY, 13 NOVEMBER 2008

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

INTERNET

Hansard transcripts of public hearings are made available on the internet when authorised by the committee.

The internet address is:

http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard

To search the parliamentary database, go to:
http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au

SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON

REGIONAL AND REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Thursday, 13 November 2008

Members: Senator Johnston *(Chair)*, Senator Crossin *(Deputy Chair)*, Senators Adams, Moore, Scullion and Siewert

Senators in attendance: Senators Adams, Crossin, Johnston, Moore and Scullion

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Arbib, Barnett, Bernardi, Bilyk, Birmingham, Mark Bishop, Boswell, Boyce, Brandis, Bob Brown, Carol Brown, Bushby, Cameron, Cash, Colbeck, Jacinta Collins, Coonan, Cormann, Eggleston, Ellison, Farrell, Feeney, Fielding, Fierravanti-Wells, Fifield, Fisher, Forshaw, Furner, Hanson-Young, Heffernan, Humphries, Hurley, Hutchins, Kroger, Ludlum, Lundy, Ian Macdonald, McEwen, McGauran, McLucas, Marshall, Mason, Milne, Minchin, Nash, O'Brien, Parry, Payne, Polley, Pratt, Ronaldson, Ryan, Stephens, Sterle, Troeth, Trood, Williams, Wortley and Xenophon

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

a) the effectiveness of Australian Government policies following the Northern Territory Emergency Response, specifically on the state of health, welfare, education and law and order in regional and remote Indigenous communities;

b) the impact of state and territory government policies on the wellbeing of regional and remote Indigenous communities;

c) the health, welfare, education and security of children in regional and remote Indigenous communities; and

d) the employment and enterprise opportunities in regional and remote Indigenous communities.

WITNESSES

Committee met at 3.30 pm

CHAIR—I call the committee to order and declare open this first public hearing of the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities. Before commencing, on behalf of this committee I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this country. On 19 March 2008, the Senate appointed this select committee to inquire into and report upon: (a) the effectiveness of Australian government policies following the Northern Territory emergency response; (b) the impact of state and territory government policies on the wellbeing of regional and remote Indigenous communities; (c) the health, welfare, education and security of children in regional and remote Indigenous communities; and (d) the employment and enterprise opportunities in regional and remote Indigenous communities. Today's hearing will not be inquiring into reference (a), the effectiveness of Australian government policies following the Northern Territory emergency response, which is to be considered in detail next year.

To date we have received 40 submissions to this inquiry. All of those submissions are available on the committee's website. The committee is next due to report on 30 March 2009. Before the committee starts taking evidence I advise that all witnesses appearing before the committee are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to their evidence. Any act that disadvantages a witness as a result of evidence given before the Senate or any of its committees is treated as a breach of that privilege. However, I also remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute a contempt of the Senate. The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public but, under the Senate's resolution, witnesses have the right to request to be heard in private session. It is important that witnesses give the committee notice if they intend to give evidence in camera. If a witness objects to answering a question the witness should state the ground upon which the objection is taken and the committee will determine whether it will insist upon an answer, having regard to the ground which is claimed.

[3.33 pm]

MUNDINE, Mr Graeme, Executive Secretary, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission of the National Council of Churches in Australia

RUSSELL-MUNDINE, Ms Gabrielle, Project Officer, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission of the National Council of Churches in Australia

CHAIR—I now welcome witnesses from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission. Welcome! I invite you to make a short opening statement, and at the conclusion of your remarks I will invite members of the committee to put questions to you.

Mr Mundine—I thank you for the opportunity to appear in front of this committee. You have our submission already in front of you but I will probably speak to four points, if I can, and then also bring to your attention a document that we want to table that the National Council of Churches put out last Thursday. I will speak, in turn, to each of the four areas. Probably the most important to us is the proper measurement of and setting of benchmarks for programs. It is very difficult to be able to see whether we are making headway in these areas if we do not have any benchmarks to measure from. The example that I have been giving to a few groups is that we may find that we have 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander jobs, but our starting point may be that we had 99 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander jobs. We need to have some sort of basic line that we can all measure from—not only governments, but the churches, who are great providers in these areas.

The second area that we want to bring up is the relationship-building area. We notice that in the report on the intervention, it mentions recalibrating our relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander people. We find it is a very important area where we do need to start thinking about how we relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The churches have been in the Northern Territory for over 100 years and have had, over that time, cause to rethink who they are and how they relate with Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander people. We would say that governments also need to do that: to stop, to reflect upon that relationship that they do have. Sometimes those relationships seem to come across as one-sided, and likewise the churches have been like that too, in the sense of the Western culture—if I can put it that way—being the superior culture and the other cultures having to bend to fall into line with it. There needs to be a balance between the two so that we are a bit more understanding of both sides to be able to move forward in that relationship. And it is about relationships, I think that is the important thing.

There is another area in that area of relationships. It has been expressed to us by Bishop Greg Thompson, the Anglican Torres Strait Islander bishop, that churches themselves are not being listened to or spoken to in consultation with the on the ground work in these communities. Especially these days, his ministers in these areas are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have not only a relationship with the church and that whole history of interaction with Indigenous peoples, but also they are cultural leaders within their own society and have that experience to be able to walk through some of the relationship building within those communities.

The last point is the adherence to human rights principles from the point of view of two areas. One is, of course, in the area of the Racial Discrimination Act. I am sure, as has been pointed out to us this week while we have been visiting members, that it was not taken lightly putting into place these measures and rolling back the Racial Discrimination Act, but it is a worry to the churches that we have to have legislation that does roll back the Racial Discrimination Act, and we are very concerned still that it will take another 12 months for this to be rectified. I am sure we will keep an eye on that.

The second one is the rights of Indigenous peoples. Although not directly pertinent to this committee, having trust between governments and Indigenous peoples is important. An international instrument has been agreed to by the vast majority of nation states in the world, and yet the Australian government—although it has signalled that it will support it—still has not supported it. We would encourage them to do so to give confidence to the great work and the great new directions that the whole of government—whether it be the government itself or the government and the opposition—has put in place to show their commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this new era of bringing about change.

I need to table the statement. The statement itself says exactly that: the churches do support and congratulate the government and the opposition about this new feeling of time and commitment to change for the better of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and also brings up those two areas of concern—the one about the Racial Discrimination Act and the one about the rights of Indigenous peoples. So with those opening statements, I will table that for you to have.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Mundine. Ms Russell-Mundine, is there anything you would like to add?

Ms Russell-Mundine—No.

CHAIR—I am very sorry; I have to be in Melbourne this evening and I am going to leave. I thank you for your submission. Senator Crossin is the Deputy Chair and she will continue with questions from senators. Thank you very much, Mr Mundine, for your submission.

ACTING CHAIRMAN (Senator Crossin)—Thank you both very much for your time and presentation. I am going to take the liberty of going first with my questions. You raised the pretty valid point about the lack of benchmarks and measurements in place, you say, for the intervention. I say to you that it is much broader than just 73 communities in the Northern Territory.

Mr Mundine—Yes. That is true.

ACTING CHAIR—Other than what you put in your submission have you done any further work about where there are deficiencies? For example, I know that every year in the federal parliament DEST, now DEEWR, table the national Indigenous education report—albeit that it is lagging behind by two years now. Nevertheless, there is an attempt to track and monitor what is happening right across Indigenous education and to put a report of that kind into federal parliament. So we do have some sort of benchmark and statistical reporting in education, but we do not have it in any other areas, although we have annual reports. So I am wondering whether you have had a look at what exists and where the gaps are.

Mr Mundine—My first reply is that it is good that we are beginning to benchmark, at least in education, but my understanding is that even in the area of education there are still areas that are between states that still need to be looked at in terms of the types of measurements. In some states we measure some things slightly differently from other states. That is only my understanding of that. I encourage you to say that we probably have not done enough work in at this—whether it is health or the other areas.

Ms Russell-Mundine—We are more users of statistics than creators of statistics. We do not have the capacity to create them. We work within the Millennium Development Goals so we see where the gaps are—from what we use and what we do not use. We are talking more and more with the providers of services, and they are advising us that they are finding it hard to get information across the board.

ACTING CHAIR—If you are users of statistics, where do you think the gaps are? Are there gaps right across the board, as far as you are concerned?

Ms Russell-Mundine—Yes, right across the board. And there is that thing of being able to compare apples with apples, particularly in health and education. We find it very hard to disaggregate the statistics across the board. We find the Productivity Commission report quite useful. I guess we are working two or three years behind as well, which is also a problem. When we are talking about whether there have been improvements there is a delay in getting those numbers to us.

ACTING CHAIR—I understand that there would be, because even with the census there is a delay in getting that information out—

Ms Russell-Mundine—Yes.

Mr Mundine—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—and that is a great compilation of statistics. And we are aware that COAG is starting to put together some sort of framework for the states and territories to report on Indigenous expenditure.

Ms Russell-Mundine—Yes, that is right.

ACTING CHAIR—From your point of view, do you think there is a need for the Australian government to start producing a yearly report card or a biannual report card across a range of areas?

Ms Russell-Mundine—That is right. That is why we like the model of the millennium goals, because it is sort of like having blood pressure measurements. You need some key indicators that indicate how everything is going. If you cannot achieve these certain things then nothing else is going to be achieved. We need the detailed stuff for providers of services and all that, but also at a higher level we need those key indicators to keep us accountable. You have to be accountable, and that is a way you can be accountable. They have to be non-fudgeable numbers so that everybody understands that these numbers are true and fair, and that they do indicate the reality.

Mr Mundine—The example was the report from the Northern Territory where the government was saying that all of this stuff is quite emotional and we are going to push that aside because we want to support the quarantining of welfare. We also hear the other side of the story of people who are also telling us that there are problems in that area of welfare quarantining which need to be dealt with. So all this wishy-washy hearsay needs to be tightened up a bit. As I have been saying all week, it is not just for governments; churches are big providers in these areas and they need to have their own benchmarks as well to be able to do their work properly.

ACTING CHAIR—What are you saying here? Are you saying that NGOs and churches, right across the board, and in fact anyone who is a recipient of a dollar amount that is targeted to an Indigenous program, needs to perhaps have benchmarks and indicators about where they are going?

Mr Mundine—That is right. And common ones so that we are all working together in the same direction—we know where we are starting from and we know where we are going to.

ACTING CHAIR—How difficult would that be to achieve? And there is probably a counterargument out there that says the amount of money and resources that you would put in to try and establish that would be better spent on the ground.

Mr Mundine—You have been around for a long while too and our experience of the issues that we are talking about are not new. They have been around for a long time. If we do not begin to start putting baselines and measuring where we are starting from, in 20 years time we are going to have to go through this all again. We want some improvements. There is some commitment from governments to bring about this change. There are commitments from churches to bring about change. We need to build on this now and move it forward.

ACTING CHAIR—Yes, I have been around a while. I have spent the last 10 years of my life in this parliament trying to find out how many Aboriginal kids have glaucoma—it is as basic as that. There are some deficiencies, I think. Can I ask you about economic development: do you think the churches keep any kind of statistical analysis or even any sort of broadbrush research on where we are tracking in terms of economic development out in communities? For example, I can never get a handle on what even the average monthly wage is in a community. I am wondering if you have any ideas about how many people you might have to assist, say, with food parcels, or respite for money or whether you keep any of those kinds of statistics?

Mr Mundine—Are we talking about welfare?

ACTING CHAIR—Yes, at the welfare level.

Mr Mundine—If you are talking about economic development I think you are moving into another area that the churches are not really into, but for welfare they probably do. But we are not aware of those precise statistics.

ACTING CHAIR—So, across the range of churches, you would not know how many welfare recipients were assisted last year, for example, or whether that is more or less than the year before?

Mr Mundine—No, but some of our agencies would. Organisations like Centrecare, Anglicare, and Uniting Care would.

ACTING CHAIR—Is that in their annual reports, do you think, for the different churches? It would be, wouldn't it?

Mr Mundine—I suppose it would.

ACTING CHAIR—If we wanted to find that out we could.

Mr Mundine—It is.

ACTING CHAIR—In relation to the relationship building, you were talking about the constructive and new relationships and you made the comment that you have doubts as to whether in practice this is yet happening.

Mr Mundine—The question we have been asking this week is that there is a new wave that is happening within governments, but we are still dealing with the same people on the ground, and what are we doing about changing attitudes of all people from the top right down to those who are actually delivering services on the ground? Or are we still maybe pushing forward at the top but down on the ground there are still the same attitudes that have been there for decades. Whole churches have done it. As I was saying, before we had white ministers in these places, it is now becoming more and more prominent that the Indigenous church ministers are now taking up these roles within the communities and also giving some insight back to the mainstream, if we can use that word, about directions for the future.

ACTING CHAIR—But we are getting a lot of feedback that they are being ignored by people coming in to run programs and things. They are not being talked to at all to see what is already in place and what the church agencies are doing. They are not seen as part of the community, even though they are integral to the community.

Mr Mundine—There is the whole question that sometimes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are anti-church. In some parts of Australia, just like in the mainstream, that is true, but in some of these remote communities they go hand in hand. The church is very much central to the life of some of these communities.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you very much for travelling and giving submissions to committees. Just in terms of statistics—and I would love it if somebody else could jump in and help me out—I can recall that there used to be a book of about this size, and I suspect it came out of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, that dealt specifically with the demographic of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders. There was a whole bunch of it.

Ms Russell-Mundine—The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey?

Senator SCULLION—The first one came out in 1997. I really do not know. Is that still around, or is there a frequency of its release or something like that?

Ms Russell-Mundine—Yes. I am no expert on it, but I believe they are about to undertake another survey. I cannot remember.

Senator SCULLION—What is the frequency of that?

Ms Russell-Mundine—Every two or three years—something like that. I am not entirely sure. I have used them and I think they start this month.

Senator SCULLION—The reason for my inquiry is that, if something has happened at a certain time, perhaps you could actually build on a framework of collecting information within that democratic. That might be a practical approach.

Ms Russell-Mundine—Yes, that is right.

Mr Mundine—The ABS has been collecting that information. It is about giving them the support and the backing to be able to do it and do it better.

Ms Russell-Mundine—When we first started the Make Indigenous Poverty History campaign, the first thing we did was go through all the statistics that were available and put them with the development goals. One thing that was quite obvious was that the ABS, the social survey and others did not actually agree on some key areas. I am sure that they are working together to correct that over time, but there were some discrepancies. Do not ask me what those discrepancies were, because I cannot recall. I think the differences in the data was an issue that they were trying to address. That is largely to do with the census collection methods, which are notoriously unreliable in terms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The social survey is probably more reliable because it specifically interacts with Indigenous peoples. But I am no expert on that.

Senator SCULLION—I would just like to touch on the issue of quarantining. As you both know, I am a supporter of the intervention and a supporter of the quarantining. We have had some of those discussions. I understand from your submission and from what you have said on the public record that you do not have a problem with quarantining but it has to have a voluntary component—that is, somebody says, 'I think I'm in trouble.' I know that through your lives and practice you often touch upon people who have a problem. That problem might be substance abuse or gambling, and particularly in Indigenous communities that is pretty prevalent. From my position, I would like to understand the rationale behind your position, because we do not share it. Somebody spoke to me just the other day complaining about it. I said: 'Look, every time I see you, you humbug me for money because you've spent everything you get in your cheque on gambling—every time. You might have had highs and lows in between that. You actually get half of it in food.' They said, 'Yeah, I know, but I want to make it my choice.' She will never make it her choice, because of the circumstances. It is not really a choice for her that she has to gamble, and for others it is not really a choice that they are in a cycle of substance abuse.

I know it is difficult, so perhaps you will want to take it on notice and have a longer chat to me later about this, but I am yet to understand and agree on how we can rely on those processes, given that anecdotally at least there seems to be a huge increase in the amount of money spent in communities on food and those sorts of things. It is not empiric science—I acknowledge that—but there does seem to be quite a large body of evidence that that is actually working. I do not

know who came up with 50 per cent, but one would expect to pay about that much on the sort of amenities that are provided for under quarantining. My challenge is: help me understand why somebody would volunteer that. If I had a problem, I would not normally first go and volunteer things. That is not normally the process that I strike. Could you help me with that aspect?

Mr Mundine—There are a couple of things there. There are areas about volunteering that are compulsory. As you were saying, if these people are not performing—getting their kids to school and those sorts of things—it can be used as a stick, I suppose, to correct their lives et cetera. But there are also people out there who are doing the right thing and they are also having this stick waved at them. They are trying to do the right thing by their children but also within their own lives. That is where a problem lies, I think, at the present time. It applies to every person but at the moment it does not apply to every person in New South Wales, for instance, whether Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander people or non-Indigenous people. That raises some questions too, going back to the Racial Discrimination Act, about the rights of these peoples. I can understand that in some cases—if there is an alcohol or a gambling problem—these people need help and we need to support them. But to have something that is a blanket that forces people into these areas when there is probably no need to does raise a few questions with us.

Senator SCULLION—I acknowledge, and I think everybody should acknowledge, that there are plenty of people living in the prescribed areas who have innocent passage and have been affected by this legislation where they may not have needed to be. I think we all acknowledge that. I do not really want to spend time talking about what my view is on that, but I thank you and I really do appreciate your position on this and your experience in these areas. Because we have a different view, I do like to have an opportunity to share that.

We talked about relationships. To me, one of the fundamentals has been changing faces and changes in relationships. One of the great challenges in communities that I visit often—and I am sure Senator Crossin also visits them often—is that we have changing faces. You just get used to one with one program and they are gone again. These things can only be based on a relationship when they are there. I note in terms of relationship building that all good relationships are based on trust and time; that is acknowledged. What advice would you to give to government about these relationships—for example, about relationships by contract and about the way we hire people or about how long people live in the community; they might have a wife back in Tasmania but they are now living in the Western Desert so they are obviously not making a full-time commitment to that community. What sort of advice could we prescriptively give to government? When you are employing people here, is it a function of time? Obviously, if you get a bonehead in a community for three years, he is still a bonehead whether he is there for a day or for three years; I acknowledge that. Is it the time, the cultural understanding and that interaction?

Mr Mundine—My response would be about two things. The area of employment is one, but the area of governments is another. Governments are in for three or four years, depending on where you are in the country. There are policy changes all the time. It is very difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people. They get to the stage where they fully understand a situation and then a new government comes in with a new idea or a new way of doing things and we have to go through and learn things all over again. We have just gone through CDEP. In some areas it worked and in some areas it did not work, but at least we had a system that people were

starting to understand as to how it worked. Now a new idea has come in and things have changed, so that is one side.

The second one is the area of people who come in. It takes a long while, as you would know, to get to know people within Indigenous communities. To be there for one or two years then move on and have to start again of course causes a lot of problems. So we do need to have things a bit more long term. We need to have people who are, in a sense, there for the long haul to help with understanding government policy and also for a policy that is pretty consistent within those places.

Ms Russell-Mundine—And a focus on skills transference so that, when they do leave, they are leaving something behind.

Senator SCULLION—Maybe that could be an end phase of the job.

Mr Mundine—That is right. Religious orders, I hope you do not mind me saying, have gone into communities and of course are slowly pulling out of those communities. The question you have to keep asking them is: what legacy, what positions are you leaving? Have you trained people to be able to fulfil those roles? Some have had good teacher education to be able to take over the roles of the good sisters and brothers within the communities. But we also have to have succession plans for when these people move on—are we training these people to take up good roles? If we take up the idea of education, for instance, we know that having a good principal and some good teachers within the school makes a difference. These people are there not just for a few months, one year or two years but for the long haul. That does make a difference within those communities. Does that answer the question?

Senator SCULLION—It does, but we will probably have to catch up on that in further discussions. Thank you, Mr Mundine. My last question probably cuts across two parts of your submission. One is the intervention and its exclusion from the Racial Discrimination Act. As I know you would understand, if the emergency response legislation were not subject to a cessation of the application of the Racial Discrimination Act it would in effect be in breach of the Racial Discrimination Act and would not be law, so the intervention would not happen. That is really what it is about.

Mr Mundine—But could it—and it is all history now in that sense—have been done better? Even the government now is looking at how to put it back into place and another way round so as still to be able to do the things that we are doing.

Senator SCULLION—That is a discussion for another time, but I do know that both sides of parliament looked very carefully at it. In fact, I think those opposite then agreed with us, though there was one aspect that they thought they could have taken out. It would not have made a substantive difference, but they are looking at it again. In effect, the entire intervention was at threat and that is the reason they took that approach. That is a smaller part of my question, but fair enough.

You have talked about some real and practical measures of support for Indigenous rights. Do you think that if we ratified the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that there would be some real, practical changes on the ground? I was not sure if you were referring to changes to

rights or changes that, as I understand it, are real and practical. What effect do you think it would have?

Mr Mundine—First of all, I would say we are talking about decades of mistrust between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Governments are always seen to be the ones who are coming in here to muck us around, if I can put it that way. We need to build trust within those communities. This international instrument has been worked on for at least a decade of writing and rewriting by Indigenous peoples throughout the world, with all their experiences in numerous nation-states, to bring this together. Of course, governments have also had input into this change and rewriting along the road.

It is interesting that, now that we are finally putting it forward after a decade, some groups or nation-states have said, 'We cannot support this.' Some have said, 'It has been really quickly written' and all that. It has been over a decade in the writing to get it to this stage. Aboriginal people then see a slight distrust. This is the stuff that they have been working on and that they have supported, but the previous government and this government have not signed on to it or supported it. It raises questions within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups about the government's commitment, not that it is overshadowing at the moment. As I keep saying to you, it is good; we are in a new time and there is a will there. But these things raise for us, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the question, 'Are they really committed?' We have been through eras of, 'Yes, change,' but are they going to go through with it?

If we can feel that you are committed then we will work with you. It would be good to see that there are governments—not just federal but also state and local governments—that work closely with communities. You would see the uplifting of those communities to be able to work and move forward together on this. It is a small symbol. I know that you may have questions that we probably cannot get into here, but that is a good, practical thing. One of the things I have often said about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is that we are dealing with decades of having been oppressed, where the people do not feel like they are worthy and do not feel significant in the bigger scheme of things. If we can work on building up their self-esteem, showing them that they are worthwhile and that they have something huge to offer Australia and the world as a whole then things will be a lot better for those people on the ground.

As I said, this has been worked on by groups. We have spoken about it in communities. It has been spoken about internationally for well over a decade. There are a lot of fears out there which I think are unfounded in the sense of having interpretations of some of the wording of the declaration that do not serve it properly in the amount of work that we have done.

ACTING CHAIR—Senator Moore, do you have any questions?

Senator MOORE—I do not think it would be appropriate, as I missed so much of the evidence. I am sorry, Mr Mundine and Ms Russell-Mundine.

Senator ADAMS—I will just continue on there. As far as the government bureaucracies and your government business managers in the prescribed communities, or a number of them now, are concerned, how do you see a better interaction? We have travelled around with this committee, and with our committee inquiring into petrol sniffing, to a number of communities now and have had quite a lot of dialogue with the community people about this. Can you see a

better way forward? Do you think that they are inhibiting progress, or are the Aboriginal people becoming a bit more comfortable with them living in their community and being there for a longer time? You were talking about the length of time that people are there.

Mr Mundine—It has only been 12 months, really, that they have been there.

Ms Russell-Mundine—And it varies.

Mr Mundine—And it varies from place to place. There are probably a few things. My understanding is that you have one person who is the business manager for a region. Is it a region?

Ms Russell-Mundine—A community—

Senator ADAMS—Some of them do have two or three communities.

Mr Mundine—Yes, that is right. I have actually been in some ways, in some sense, a supporter of the ICC, the Indigenous community centre, a one-stop shop where at least Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can go instead of trying to deal with each of the departments and so on, so that is quite good. So having someone like that may be a good thing, but there is also the other area. We are pushing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards business. Not all of them but some people are not business ready. Communities may not be business ready on simple things—for instance, working with communities that may not have good accounting skills. They need education, not just governance training but good education about other skills that they are able to put into practice. They need to have not just the theory of the skill—to go off to TAFE—but also the practical skill in the community and on the ground; then they can see what we are talking about when we talk about theory and how it works in practice on the ground. There will be entrepreneurs within any community who will go off and do things. Tourism is the big push in most Aboriginal communities, but if we have everyone doing tourism, we are only going to compete amongst ourselves, and I do not think that will be the answer for everyone. But there are other areas that may come up.

Ms Russell-Mundine—One thing we are hearing, from people like Bishop Greg Thompson, is that they are not consulting across the board—that they are picking certain people, not necessarily in business management but people delivering services all over—and they do not appreciate what he calls the leadership map of the community. They are going in and picking who they will talk to and not necessarily getting a whole community point of view or picture of their needs. His suggestion is that they need to start with a leadership map—to go in and work out where the power is and who is who in the community, not just the titles and the jobs, the roles, but where the leadership is within the community and engage with those people as well. What we are hearing is that some business managers are achieving that very well and some are not. As is always the case, you are going to get great people and not-so-great people.

Senator ADAMS—So you see that leadership group as the first approach in the way they should be working—and any other government agency that is moving in or going to visit the communities?

Ms Russell-Mundine—Yes. If there is a medical service already in existence, they need to work with that medical service. In some places they do; in some places they do not. We do not want to see duplication of resources either. Apart from the practical interaction point of view, there is a waste of money to duplicate what is already there.

Senator ADAMS—Speaking of duplication, are you aware of any services that are being duplicated?

Ms Russell-Mundine—Not specifically, no.

Mr Mundine—I will add to that. They have to be flexible too from the point of view that what happens in one community may not necessarily work in a Melbourne community. They have to be flexible enough to have movement within what they have to do.

Senator ADAMS—Another thing that has come up as we have moved around is the situation of the young men who do not finish their schooling and then, later on, a number of the girls do really well and get jobs and become computer literate. The girls move on and get a job and some of the young men feel rather lost because they have left school and then realise that they have to catch up. Have you come across any programs where they have mature age learning or where some of the communities have set up adult learning centres for these young men to be able to catch up and have extra tutoring?

Mr Mundine—The women's movement has been good in the sense that they have had people who have been able to support a lot of Indigenous women, but it is important to know that Indigenous women have been the backbone of a lot of communities but that a problem has arisen. You will probably notice that the statistics for Aboriginal women now going to jail are on the rise.

We also need support for men. You are correct in saying this. A number of men's groups have started, or at least groups have come together and talked about their experiences and so on. I know Caritas Australia, the aid arm of the Catholic Church, has done some income management schemes in western New South Wales to enable them to get back in control. I will give you an example. Some men have been caught not paying fines and are on their way to jail because of that. It has also inhibited their lives. But through this program of learning income management skills some have gone on to slowly pay off their bills while still being able to support their families and also have a little bit of money to muck up, if they want to. They have been able to get their lives in order instead of just spiralling, with huge debts. In fact, in one particular case the person who was not paying fines could not get their drivers licence, which is very important in western New South Wales because they have to travel long distances to get to work. But that person was then able to pay off the fines, keep their job, survive and do quite well. It is a very good system of working with the community and these particular men to give them self-esteem and enable them to put some control in their lives that they did not have before.

Senator ADAMS—Are you prepared to tell us which community? We will be moving around western New South Wales.

Mr Mundine—I would have to check that and get back to you.

Senator ADAMS—If you could, thank you, because these are the sorts of things we would like to know about. It is far better than reinventing the wheel if there is something that has worked and could be spread around.

Ms Russell-Mundine—There are also two Indigenous theology colleges that do community development programs, though not specifically for men. We are hearing some good things out of those programs at Nungalinya College in the Northern Territory and Wontulp-Bi-Buya in Cairns.

Senator CROSSIN—At Casuarina in Darwin.

Mr Mundine—That is right.

Ms Russell-Mundine—In northern New South Wales there are some very good men's programs on domestic violence. I would have to check the name for you; I cannot recall it at the moment. They are doing some very good things. They are also linking up with Southern Cross University and Judy Atkinson's work there. They are getting a lot of mature age students going through and working on healing programs. It is a great program, but I will have to get back to you with the name of it.

Senator ADAMS—We would appreciate that. It will certainly help us. As far as the more remote Indigenous communities are concerned, what would you consider to be the biggest challenge for them? I know that is a bit hard because of the number of them.

Mr Mundine—One area that has come up quite a number of times this week is language. Can I just put on record that the National Council of Churches never said that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should not learn English. I think it is important to say that, yes, they do need to learn English because they are living in the 21st century and they have to interact with mainstream society. But what we have been saying is that there also has to be a balance, that they do need to continue to learn their own language to enable them to learn and maintain their own culture. So that is definitely one area.

We know, from places like New South Wales where those things were not allowed to happen, about the amount of damage that has done to a lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In places like New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria we sometimes have Aboriginal people who, because of the events of history, are trying to live a 21st century lifestyle but who know that they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people and are missing something. They know that, and that causes strain in their life, if I can put it that way. So it is important that we maintain that, especially in the Territory where the languages and culture are still very much alive and active. But we know there has to be a balance. They have to live in the 21st century and English has to be written and spoken—and spoken well—for them to be able to survive and progress. But to be able to do that properly we also need to have our cultural roots and our language.

Senator SCULLION—We have a very multicultural community in Australia. I come from Darwin, which is extremely multicultural. Many ethnic communities and demographics take special care to ensure culture and, particularly, language are maintained. We have a Greek school in Darwin. I know many of my constituents well, and at home they are fluent in the language of their original home before Australia because that is just something that you have to do.

Sometimes that is a convention of a community, particularly with some of the older people who have decided not to learn English. It is in the community, but it is always something that is done at home. None of those communities expect the state in some way—this is getting onto a sensitive issue, so maybe you might want to take it on notice. What I am saying is that I do not think the state does things particularly well in those sorts of circumstances, so what alternative is there? You talked in vagaries before, but only because my question did not quite capture what I was trying to get at. We are talking about whether you are taught in a school of a specific language, and I know there is a particular discussion going on about the bilingual teaching mechanism. Generally speaking, do you think these communities can be assisted by us not actually providing it through education or any of those sorts of things? Is there some other mechanism where some support can be given but the state is not responsible for the maintenance of your culture?

Mr Mundine—I have a couple of things to say about that. First of all, it is important to know that we gain billions of dollars through having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people around the world who sing and dance culturally. However, we are not really prepared to help them maintain that. It brings a lot of money into the country, yet we do not support them in trying to maintain that. That is one area, and I am not saying that is the reason why we should maintain it, but it is an important one.

Senator SCULLION—I acknowledge that.

Mr Mundine—The other thing I have to say is something that I do not think Australia has really come to terms with yet. We are talking about the oldest living race in all the world. Recently I was in Guatemala and the Philippines. The indigenous peoples there were saying, 'We've been in this country for some 5,000 years,' or, 'We've been in this country for some 10,000 years.' I got up and said, 'Yes, but we've been in this country for some 40,000 to 100,000 years, continuously living until very recently, just over 200 years ago.' Surely that is something that we should try to keep and maintain. I think that that is something very special and unique about Australia when compared to anything else in the world.

Senator SCULLION—What do you think we should be doing? You can take that on notice, if you like.

Mr Mundine—Sure. Two-way education has been tried and in some areas it is working, but we need to investigate that more with our educational people. Within the church institutions we are at least trying to maintain cultural ties and also allow these people to become modern Aboriginals. You are looking at one now, who went through a church organisation. We are only talking before about the number of leaders that you as governments turn to who actually came through good church institutions to be here in suits and ties talking to you.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR—We need to finish there as we have other witnesses waiting. On behalf of the committee, thank you very, very much for your time this afternoon. We appreciate it.

[4.25 pm]

FULLER, Ms Sarah, Assistant Director, Social Policy, Minerals Council of Australia

STUTSEL, Ms Melanie, Director, Environment and Social Policy, Minerals Council of Australia

ACTING CHAIR—I welcome you to the committee. You have sent a submission in to this Senate select committee's inquiry. It is numbered 21 for our purposes. Just before I ask you to make a short opening statement, do you want to amend or change that submission at all?

Ms Stutsel—No.

ACTING CHAIR—I invite you to provide us your opening statement and then at the conclusion of that we will put questions to you.

Ms Stutsel—Thank you for inviting us here today. We really welcome the opportunity to provide input to your inquiry into regional and remote Indigenous communities. As you would be aware, the MCA is the peak industry association representing the mining industry wherever it operates across Australia and also Australian companies internationally. In that role, our engagement with Indigenous people across our industry as a whole is founded on mutual respect and recognition of Indigenous rights and interests in land and waters. We are very committed to building stronger, more sustainable Indigenous communities co-located with our operations.

We do this for two reasons: not only because it is the right thing to do, but because there is a very strong business case for a sector like ours. Sixty per cent of our operations are co-located with Indigenous communities. Obviously, we have substantial demands around workforce participation and there are real benefits that have flowed into our business through the positioning work we have done to be now the largest private sector employer of Indigenous Australians, with a participation rate of around five per cent across the industry as a whole.

As I mentioned, exploration occurs on Aboriginal land and, when we mine, we are tenants on Aboriginal land. We see that mining can provide real benefits to Indigenous people through compensation for impacts on native title rights but, more importantly, through benefit-sharing arrangements through things like education and training, and employment and enterprise development. Because of where our operations are located, we recognise that we are in quite a unique position to support the development of strengthened regional economies for Indigenous communities through direct employment, our contractor and supply chain relationships and of course the multiplier effect of wages in local communities. In doing that, however, we have realised that, despite the economic opportunities that mining can provide, those opportunities on the ground are limited to some extent. They have really been limited by the poor delivery of essential services in some communities around things like education, health and medical services, water and housing.

We clearly differentiate between what our responsibilities are as the private sector from those of government in delivering basic social services to remote communities, which we consider part

of the foundation towards building social and economic wellbeing. However, in the absence of government and the failure to provide remote and regional Australia with the same kind of core citizenship entitlements that those in capital cities and on the eastern seaboard share, we have often been forced to take a proxy role of government in providing community level services like childcare facilities, housing, schools, health care, training and work readiness, and financial management skills.

While there has been a business driver for that and it has been an important short-term measure in remedying the systemic failure of that service delivery, there is a growing recognition by our shareholders and importantly those in the communities in which we operate that this approach is neither appropriate nor sustainable. That is largely given the limited life of mining in communities of up to 40 years. So we recognise that addressing the challenges for sustainable Indigenous communities cannot be achieved solely by industry, by government or by Indigenous communities themselves. We strongly advocate a partnership approach between the public and private sector and the communities. Such support, we consider, should focus on a range of issues which include the enhanced provision of soft and hard infrastructure in remote and regional Indigenous communities, things like housing, education and training services, communications, transport, child care, and drug and alcohol rehab. It should focus on resourced long-term initiatives to improve Indigenous employment in regional and remote communities, which is really centred on developing a continuum from education through to employment so that people have logical pathways to value education and to be sure that training outcomes are actually going to deliver economic outcomes.

We also think that there is an important role for Indigenous enterprise development. We strongly support both government and industry involvement in the provision of mentoring and business development assistance to grow Indigenous businesses along the supply chain—in mining in our instance but also more broadly in areas where Indigenous communities have a natural advantage, like cultural tourism, art, traditional environmental knowledge, carbon sequestration and the like. We would also support government providing a special exemption or recognition for Indigenous businesses in the government's procurement guidelines, to provide a catalyst for enhanced investment in Indigenous supply.

In conclusion, we recognise that stable governments, communities and families are created through socioeconomic outcomes. Employment has a normalisation effect on communities, and we consider that the resources sector can provide an effective catalyst for economic development for Indigenous people and deliver real benefits through education and training, employment and enterprise development. However, our ability to recognise that shared goal of Indigenous economic empowerment and effectively functioning regional communities is, as I mentioned, limited by a number of social determinants and outcomes around health, housing and education. Those outcomes are the result of a historical underinvestment in Indigenous communities, and we consider that addressing them will require significant ongoing government, private sector and Indigenous community participation. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you very much for that. Can I start by asking you a question about the announced Australian Employment Covenant. Has the Minerals Council had a role to play in that, and what is your view about that planned program?

Ms Stutsel—The Minerals Council of Australia strongly supports the intent of the Australian Employment Covenant. We absolutely concur with the role that the private sector can play in providing employment opportunities for Indigenous people. In terms of the direct involvement of the Minerals Council, the covenant is more struck at looking at employment opportunities outside of the minerals sector, given that the minerals sector has already been such an active participant and that, as we know, over two-thirds of Indigenous people live in urban and peri-urban Australia, where the mining industry does not operate, so our involvement has largely been around the extension of leading practice.

We ran a forum last month in Melbourne, where we invited the CEOs of the top 100 Australian companies and showcased what we think are the core tenants of a strong Indigenous employment program; the processes we run in supporting people from education right through to career development; and the role of culturally appropriate employment practices, mentoring and the like. We will continue to provide that sort of assistance going forward to any companies that are interested in seeing what the minerals industry has done and the opportunities we have found and successes we have had to date.

ACTING CHAIR—Among your membership base, your member companies, where there is that strong support, cultural understanding and mentoring, do you have any statistical analysis of whether their outcomes are more long term and sustained than perhaps those of other companies? Do you have model companies, for example?

Ms Stutsel—Some of our companies have a long history of engagement with Indigenous people, where the engagement is founded on respect; an agreement in place, which has usually been struck outside of the native title system—so, rather than contesting native title rights, they have gone down the path of mutually beneficial agreement negotiation—and understand the cultural context in which they are operating. We have found that those companies achieve not only high employment outcomes—and at some sites we have seen up to 28 per cent Indigenous employment and objectives for the level of Indigenous participation in the workforce to mirror that of the surrounding community—but retention rates for Indigenous employees that are at times higher than those for non-Indigenous employees.

The reasons for that are multiple, but the core reasons that we have put that down to are: the employees are living on country and maintaining their cultural connections whilst also participating in the mainstream economy; the support structures provided by the companies are provided at the individual level but also at the family level, so there is a broader context within which their work is taking place; the economic benefits that that can provide to families and the community as a whole; and the impact that that has on culture and practice. Also, importantly, the industry has built personal relationships with those employees to the point that there is incredible flexibility around recognising that they have a dual role. They have their role as an employee of the industry but, importantly, they have their cultural role with their community, and that flexibility enables them to move between those worlds as they need to.

ACTING CHAIR—Thanks.

Senator ADAMS—Thank you very much. Having been to several of the Minerals Council conferences and listened to some really good success stories, I am very pleased to see and hear that all the different projects that you have are moving on, especially that one where you are

involving family and work and everything else that goes with it in the area where the Indigenous employees live. Could you give us examples of several of your real success stories? I know that at Roebourne there was one that involved a scholarship scheme with schoolchildren and then taking them on to apprenticeships, going on further—just with the fact that year 7s and 8s would be employed at the end and had a goal to work for. Do you have some examples like that that we could have?

Ms Stutsel—Certainly. I will not name the specific companies, but I am happy to provide material later to the committee if you would like. In terms of the kinds of opportunities that we have seen, some companies have arrangements in place where if students get to a year 10 qualification then they guarantee employment in the industry. They provide training opportunities right through to higher education opportunities to people to match their skill and experience levels with what jobs there might be in the sector.

We have seen programs that have been established around maternal and child health which have meant that women have stayed in school. We know that for every year that an Indigenous woman stays in school we see a three- to five-year health benefit in terms of lifespan for her children. We have seen an integrated range of activities around maternal and child health, including providing opportunities for women to work in supply businesses related to the mining industry but not directly associated with it—for example, running local roadhouses and having childcare facilities co-located with those roadhouses.

The Minerals Council of Australia supports the Indigenous Engineering Summer School. It is a program that is run jointly by the University of Newcastle and the University of New South Wales. That program is really about identifying Indigenous students around the country with an aptitude in science and mathematics, bringing them to the university, identifying the range of engineering opportunities that are open to them, giving them an exposure to what university life is like and the kinds of employment opportunities that might be available to them were they to gain an engineering qualification, and then mentoring when they go back to their community. We have seen a number of engineering graduates come out of that but, importantly, we have also seen several doctors, teachers and nurses, and the majority of those people, once they have got a qualification, have gone back to their communities to work. So there are quite a broad range of examples, some directly mining industry related and others more broadly in terms of our corporate social responsibility approach.

Senator ADAMS—Is the percentage of Indigenous employees throughout the mining area going up?

Ms Stutsel—It is. It is currently over five per cent across the industry as a whole. Obviously, that is quite patchy, depending on where the sites are located. It is significantly higher in remote and regional operations as opposed to those that might be located in periurban areas like the Illawarra or the Hunter Valley. We are seeing continued growth in that area. As I mentioned, that is built not only on employment strategies but importantly on retaining those people who have already come into the operations as a whole. Not only is it providing a stable workforce, which is great for our business and has important long-term benefits in a time of skill shortage, but also it is building more stable regional economies around our operations and making sure that there is a broader sharing of the benefits of resource development.

Senator ADAMS—As far as bridging courses go, you have probably heard me ask the question about some of the younger males who drop out of school and then later on realise that there are job opportunities, but how are they going to get there when they can really only make a mark for their name? They are desperate to learn, but there are no education facilities available for them once they leave school. Do you have any companies doing bridging courses to help these people get up to the stage where they can be employed?

Ms Stutsel—The majority of the work that we would do tends to be not with immediate school leavers but rather with people who have been either out of the workforce for some time or working in an industry other than mining. Part of that is that there are age restrictions around working in a mining context. We usually look at people who are over 18 years of age. And, given the early school leaving ages that we see in Indigenous communities, they tend to have been disconnected from the education system for a period. Certainly, we invest heavily in work readiness programs at all of our operations but also in formal training and accreditation schemes, and that is for everything from the certificate I-II entry level positions in our industry right through to tertiary qualifications where people demonstrate an interest and an aptitude to do so.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you very much for your comprehensive submission. Obviously, there are huge opportunities. Sixty per cent of your holdings lie on Indigenous land and of your employees five per cent are Indigenous. I know there is no correlation between the numbers. What are some of the challenges in retention of apprentices? I understand there is a geographic issue: some mines or sites of work are close to communities and some are a lot further away. Perhaps on notice you can provide me with some of your statistics on retention through apprenticeships. Again on notice, if you do not have it here, what sorts of levels of literacy and numeracy and schooling outcomes do you have for apprentices? The reason I ask the question is that, in mainstream, a person who wanted to access an apprenticeship would be expected to have just below a high school level of literacy and numeracy to be able to get through an apprenticeship, let alone get access to it. You might like to make some comments now on that or take it on notice. Perhaps you could also indicate to us what other challenges you have with the retention of apprentices or with getting them through to the stage where they are in fact a tradesman.

Ms Stutsel—Certainly in terms of the statistics around some of the retention outcomes, I would like to provide those to you at a later stage, if I can. But I will take your question now about the challenges in retention and how we deal with numeracy and literacy issues and apprenticeships. In terms of the challenges in retention, it is really around people valuing participation in the program and seeing it as relevant to their lifestyles, their livelihoods and their futures. There are challenges in bridging the differences between the Indigenous culture that they are engaged in in their communities and the commercial culture of our business. We are taking people to work in a pretty tough industry. So people are going to work 12-hour shifts, five and six days a week. Not all people who have a long experience of working in other sectors would find working in the mining industry an attractive place to work or be able to put up with the kinds of demands that are put on people who work in remote locations. So you have those natural pressures on people as well.

In terms of the retention outcomes, we have seen that where people are participating in training and know that that is being done within the employment context—so they have a job before they are given the training—they can see a contextual role for that training and they value

it, and they are earning an income while they are doing it. Yes, you are right that Indigenous people in communities often do not have the literacy and numeracy requirements required to participate in those apprenticeship programs. So we have had to invest quite heavily in getting those numeracy and literacy standards to a point where they can actively participate.

Senator SCULLION—There is obviously a lot of hands-on stuff that people can get their head around but not necessarily some of the academic stuff. Do you take them on as an apprentice with a lower level of entry than mainstream would normally take and then supply them with those sorts of processes at work? Or do you look at education generally so that you can have access to people with a higher level? Which of those?

Ms Stutsel—We probably use both of those processes, depending on the situation. Quite commonly, it is bringing people on and skilling them up within a work context to then be able to take on an apprenticeship. In terms of the processes for identifying potential participants in those kinds of programs, we have found that the standard psychometric testing that you use for employees is not appropriate in an Indigenous context. For example, you might do a standard numeracy test on an Indigenous person and they might fail that numeracy test, but if you put the same questions to them in an applied context—for example, you have $20 and you want to go to the football; a football ticket costs $4 and a meat pie costs $3; how many friends can you take and what are you going to get?—you will find that people will test as numerate in that sort of circumstance.

Some of the skills for working in the mining industry are around things like ability to work in a team environment. So our testing really looks at the individual and the aptitude and capabilities that that individual has, whether or not that is recognised in a formal educational sense, and then working to bring that up to a level that is appropriate.

I should say that English literacy proficiency is very important in a mining context because of the safety and health risks associated with our operations. It is obviously something that we would invest in substantially before bringing someone onto a site if they did not have a high enough level of literacy to be able to operate in a safe context.

Senator SCULLION—You want to be satisfied in terms of specific recognition issues and those sorts of things. So you would focus on practical literacy in the context of safety in a mine area, for example.

Ms Stutsel—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—As an extension of that issue, you talk about your engineering summer school. Do you have difficulty finding recruits for that summer school?

Ms Stutsel—The process for identifying people for the summer school is run through an organisation we work with called Engineering Aid. They are inundated with suggestions of potential candidates that come out of communities. A teacher might identify someone who has a particular interest in science or maths. A family member may identify someone, or people may self-identify. We then go through a process of assessing whether that student is at the right time and place to participate in the program and to gain the kinds of positive outcomes that might be derived from it, as well as whether their educational standards are of a high enough level relative

to other students nationally, because it is a national program. Once we have brought them on, it is then about making sure that we provide support structures going forward to continue excellence in those disciplines when they return to community.

Senator SCULLION—I will just go back to the support structures in the context of the apprentices that you would like to recruit close to where you have the operations. What sort of support structures and resources do you put on—and you have alluded to some of them—to ensure that you have that retention? There are things like transport. We have talked about the vagaries of cultural differences, and I understand what you are saying there. To collect people, for example, after a break or a holiday is sometimes difficult because of the circumstances in the community. Do you have a proactive role about collection and about reinforcing their position? What sorts of resources do you put to that? Do you have specific human resources that you put to that and funding arrangements? Could you perhaps share some of those with me and, if not, again put it on notice?

Ms Stutsel—Certainly. Again, those would vary depending on which site we are talking about. But, to give you an indicative sense, we do provide transport services to get people from communities to the mine site. While our preference is for local Indigenous employees, we certainly have fly-in, fly out for Indigenous employees from all over the country going to various mine sites. We provide mentoring, and that is usually done by Indigenous people who may be local Indigenous people or Indigenous people from outside the area but who are full-time employees of the mine.

We have quite extensive HR and personnel sections within the business units, with dedicated resources to provide training, mentoring and support to Indigenous apprentices and employees. Where people do go away from the operations for cultural business, we try to maintain a connection with them while they are away on cultural business so that they understand that their job is waiting for them when they have finished their cultural business and that we respect the fact that they are going away for purposes of culture. If there is any support that we can provide to them in maintaining a linkage with the business while they are away, then we do; otherwise, when their cultural business is complete, we would either bring them back in because they have maintained that contact or go out and talk to them in communities and encourage them to come back to the workforce.

Senator SCULLION—I know it is different around the country but it may be useful for the committee to have an understanding of just what would be the period of time and the frequency of people needing time to provide for their own cultural needs? I am sure you will not have it here, but would you be able to provide that, obviously aggregated, with the number of times a year, the frequency and the period of time?

Ms Stutsel—Thank you, Senator, I am happy to provide that.

Senator MOORE—You mentioned in your evidence the meeting that you had recently with your members talking about best practice in Indigenous employment. Is that a regularly planned event or was this the first one? In terms of what came out of it—it would seem that there would be a lot of knowledge in that room on the very issues we are talking about—are there documents that have come out of that that we would be able to share in?

Ms Stutsel—In terms of the relationship within our member companies we have meetings quarterly of the senior Indigenous relations professionals from across the corporate structures of our companies. We also have a formal Indigenous leaders' dialogue, which is comprised of about 10 senior Indigenous leaders from around the country, with whom we have joint meetings to assess what the Indigenous perspectives are about our performance and where the opportunities are for improvement. The meeting that we held recently around the Australian employment covenant was for CEOs outside of the mineral sector largely, so the top 100, to really try and share minerals industry practice with other businesses. The nature of the conversation that we had is broadly reflected in two documents that I will table to the committee, with your leave. One is a joint report we did with the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources, now DRET on working with Indigenous communities and the other is a report into Indigenous employment in the Australian minerals industry and specifically identifies issues from attraction, retention, mentoring, support and development.

Senator ADAMS—I have a question on CDEP and as far as that goes in increased capacity and work readiness skills. Do you support that? There have been some changes of course to CDEP, so how do you see that if it is phased out or are you more supportive of it staying?

Ms Stutsel—The minerals industry has supported CDEP as providing great opportunity for people to build skills and experience and work readiness capabilities that enable them to move into other roles. We have always seen that as a transitional role and not one where people would get into a CDEP position and stay in it permanently. We have had some examples that have been quite public where people have taken CDEP positions and not necessarily been able to apply their skills to the capabilities that that individual has. We certainly would encourage a proactive identification process so, where people are involved in CDEP programs and have a suite of skills that are immediately transferable to businesses outside of the CDEP program, then those opportunities are realised wherever possible. The overall aim should be to enable Indigenous people to participate in mainstream employment outcomes wherever they choose to do so.

Senator ADAMS—In relation to the people that are actually supervising the CDEP programs, do you have a lot of dialogue with them? With a community that you are interested in, what is the process that you use to, firstly, obtain the correct people with skills and, secondly, how do you communicate with the people who are actually running the course?

Ms Stutsel—That would be a multifaceted approach. CDEP would certainly be one spoke of that model but we would also be engaging with the local land council or native title representative body. We have structures for engaging with the traditional owners partly through the agreement-making process. Where prescribed bodies corporate exist we would be engaging with them directly. What we have with CDEP is a real difficulty because of the lack of effectively resourced and representative Indigenous organisations in Australia to bring together broader Indigenous interests in a region so not only the traditional owners but also other Indigenous people who are living in that area. That does tend to be a gap. It has been more about having people in the industry who are very proactive and able to draw together quite disparate groups of people to have a broader conversation rather than any formal structure or network to achieve that.

Senator ADAMS—Ms Fuller, do you have anything to add?

Ms Fuller—I do not think so, thank you.

ACTING CHAIR—There are no further questions so I thank you both certainly for your submission and for making yourselves available for the committee's hearing this afternoon.

[4.56 pm]

GREGORY, Mr Gordon, Executive Director, National Rural Health Alliance

PHILLIPS, Mr Andrew Robert, Policy Advisor, National Rural Health Alliance

ACTING CHAIR—I now formally welcome witnesses from the National Rural Health Alliance. We have received your submission, which we have numbered 8, for our purposes. Before I invite you to make a short opening statement, do you need to change it or amend it in any way?

Mr Gregory—We do not, thank you.

ACTING CHAIR—I invite you to start. Make a short opening statement if you care to do that and then we will go to questioning.

Mr Gregory—I wish I could respond to your invitation to make a short opening statement. Forgive me if I provide a relatively long one.

ACTING CHAIR—Just remember we have your submission, so we can go to questions pretty soon.

Mr Gregory—I recognise that, thank you. Two of the 28 national organisations in the NRHA are Indigenous health bodies. They are the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, NACCHO, and the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, AIDA. NACCHO was a founding member of the alliance and has helped lead the alliance's work on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders since the alliance's establishment. However, it is important to emphasise that the alliance's submission to the select committee and this evidence reflect the overall views of the 28 member bodies but not necessarily the full or particular views of individual member bodies. This is particularly the case when the alliance's work deals specifically with the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people. The alliance respects the rights of NACCHO and AIDA to speak for themselves, while at the same time not wanting to inhibit the alliance from maintaining a consistent position of advocacy for improved health and wellbeing for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders who live outside the capital cities.

This sensitivity is a very important issue. It is essential that appropriate cultural respect for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to exercise independent advocacy should not inhibit non-Indigenous people in commitment, work and advocacy, to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We should be aware that the first recommendation of the *Little Children are Scared* report was that governments must commit to genuine consultation with Aboriginal people in designing initiatives for Aboriginal communities. But this must not be used as a reason for a hands-off approach by non-Indigenous Australia, nor as a rationale for lack of interest, lack of action or disengagement of others in society from caring about and working for better health and wellbeing for the original Australians.

In the Alliance's recent public symposium, Pat Anderson said:

All the evidence from social science and development studies puts genuine community engagement at the centre of any process for addressing such social issues as violence, ill-health and chronic abuse. In my opinion our report presented an opportunity for government to act with the Aboriginal community and on the basis of the evidence to deal not just with child sexual abuse and neglect but the whole range of social, educational and health issues faced by many Aboriginal communities. Instead we had the intervention. It ignored the needs and wishes of the Aboriginal community as expressed to us (the authors of the report) and documented in the report. It showed apparent complete ignorance about what had been tried already, what had worked, and principles on which those successes can be extended. Instead, it adopted a get tough, a quick fix rhetoric which portrayed Aboriginal communities as violent and dysfunctional, and our people as passive victims unable to help themselves.

Pat Anderson's fear is that 'mainstream Australia does not recognise or even see Aboriginal expertise and success.' Pat Anderson said:

There are a large number of well-established and effective organisations such as some of the community controlled health services whose work mixes expertise and evidence with the priorities and capacities of the Aboriginal communities to produce quality services. But these organisations, with their vision and capacities and long history of engagement with the issues of poor health and social disruption, were not made genuine partners in the process of the intervention. What seems to be missing in this whole scenario is a respected place for these organisations and the people who work in them because at the moment it still feels like we, the Aboriginal people, are still in the demountable out the back of the main building; we are consulted, sometimes endlessly, but it seems that what we say doesn't really get heard, or doesn't get translated into action. We are often—mostly at this point—intellectually excluded from all debate and dialogue.

An organisation like the National Rural Health Alliance, in which there are two Indigenous organisations, has to be conscious of these issues but must not use them as a reason to be less of an advocate for improved Indigenous health than it is for improved rural health generally for all people living outside major cities. There are 26 other member bodies in the alliance who care and who want to be engaged in doing what they can, with due cultural respect, to support, advocate, lobby and act to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

The alliance was a signatory to the Close the Gap campaign, was represented at the national Indigenous health equality summit and is a member of the coalition for Indigenous health equality. The coalition's campaign, as Senators know, is being led by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses, the Indigenous Dentists' Association of Australia, Oxfam Australia, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, and Commissioner Tom Calma. The alliance is a large network with a small staff capacity so it focuses on national policy settings, not having the resources to be a direct service deliverer or to be engaged in detailed analysis of case-by-case local situations. The alliance welcomes the establishment of the National Indigenous Health Equality Council and we particularly welcome its focus on increasing the number of Indigenous health professionals which, as Mick Gooda, has commented, will require the investment of additional resources.

The alliance also notes the extensive set of targets set by the Rudd government relating to Indigenous health and wellbeing, including: halving the gap in infant mortality rates over the next decade; halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy for children over the next decade; closing the 17-year gap in life expectancy over the next generation; halving the gap in Indigenous employment outcomes within a decade; providing at least 48,000 dental services to

Indigenous people over four years; the bipartisan commitment to improved Indigenous housing; additional support for drug and alcohol services; additional resources to strengthen primary care in the Northern Territory, improve workforce supply and boost Indigenous health infrastructure; allocating $15 million to tackle high rates of smoking in Indigenous communities; providing additional resources for members of the stolen generations to be reunited with their families; providing better access to antenatal care, teenage reproductive and sexual health services, child and maternal health services, and integrated child and family services; and a $19 million plan to strengthen the Indigenous health workforce. This is a very ambitious set of targets and meeting them will benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote communities as well as in other parts of the nation.

Commissioner Tom Calma has described the development of the Indigenous Health Equality Targets as:

> … a watershed in the history of Indigenous health: the moment when we dared to take our dreams of a future in which Indigenous and non- Indigenous Australians stand as equals in terms of health and life expectation and began to turn them into reality; the moment when we said 'enough is enough' and began to set in place an ambitious, yet realistic, plan to bring Indigenous health inequality to an end within our lifetimes.

These are inspiring and, hopefully, prophetic words.

From the alliance's point of view, the Indigenous health challenge is only the most urgent and important of several parts of a health reform puzzle for the nation, the solution to which will require four things. Firstly, success in moving from rhetoric to operation on a whole-of-government approach to improved health outcomes and service provision, which must include attention to the social and economic determinants of health and wellbeing. Secondly, improvements in the number, distribution and skills mix of the rural and remote health workforce, including an increase in the proportion who are Aboriginal and Tones Strait Islander people. Thirdly, a long-term national commitment involving the whole community, not just those intimately affected, and the investment of additional resources. And, fourthly, political will from all levels of government and all political parties.

Although the matter may seem esoteric, because this Senate select committee is looking specifically at regional and remote Indigenous communities, it is useful to clarify the areas in which Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders live. If one uses the Australian Standard Geographical Classification, ASGC, system, it is the case that 30 per cent of Australia's Indigenous people live in capital cities, 43 per cent in regional areas and 26 per cent in remote areas. Categories 2 and 3 of the ASGC system—called 'inner regional' and 'outer regional'—are summed as regional and are regarded by some as urban locations. However, for the purposes of the alliance's work, much of inner regional Australia is considered rural—places like Wagga, Dubbo, Tamworth, Toowoomba, Whyalla, Shepparton, Bendigo, Bunbury, Collie, Murray Bridge, Cootamundra and Goulburn. So while it is true that 70 per cent of Australia's Indigenous people live in urban areas, it is also true to say that 70 per cent of them live outside Australia's major cities.

In its work, the alliance recognises that many people in what can loosely be called 'urban areas' do not have the advantages common to metropolitan cities and these towns are characterised by the same overriding shortages of services and health professionals, long

distances and infrastructure deficits as areas classified by ASGC as remote. It is important to recognise that the bulk of the challenge of improving health and wellbeing for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders is a rural issue.

The alliance's November 2006 position paper, *The health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians,* was part of its submission to the committee. On pages 10 to 12 of that paper are 16 specific actions that governments and others could take to improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Northern Territory emergency response has demonstrated the urgency of improved access to health professionals, with child health checks having identified issues such as poor sight, hearing and oral health, with specialised staff not available for the necessary follow-up.

On pages 31 to 32 of that same paper are 11 actions to which the alliance itself is committed. This list illustrates the need for all of us—individuals and agencies—to work at two levels to contribute to ending the discrimination in health outcomes: externally or functionally, through what we do that is part of our allocated duties or core work and, internally, through the approach we take to the culture and attitudes of our own organisations and our own selves. Thank you for your patience.

ACTING CHAIR—Mr Gregory, thank you. Mr Phillips, do you want to add anything to that at all.

Mr Phillips—No.

Senator MOORE—Thank you for your submission and your evidence. I will only ask one question because we get to talk with you a lot in community affairs, so we have heard your evidence in this area. You made a point in your submission about mental health, and that is an issue that the community affairs committee has been dealing with over many years. Because it is one of the elements of Aboriginal and Islander health which is often not mentioned upfront, it may be useful if you could give us some information from the perspective of the alliance about what should be identified and addressed in the areas of mental health for Aboriginal Australians.

Mr Gregory—As you well know, it is an even more complex issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than it is for non-Indigenous people. Indeed, they do not use the term mental health but rather social and emotional wellbeing, as you well know. The best I can do in response is to say that continually, and still, mental health deficiencies in rural and remote areas remain a significant concern to the alliance. As with all of the other population health areas where we believe there to be deficits, mental health of Aboriginal people poses greater difficulties than for others. It is a parallel to all of those other areas, whether you take child and maternal health, oral health or mental health. The situation is compounded for Indigenous people by the fact that they have particular mores, expectations and cultural approaches. It is clear to us in the alliance that mental health services generally are deficient. We are concerned at this very moment—meaning this week—by decisions yet to be made, as we understand it, by COAG about what is going to happen to mental health services in the future.

It is fair to say that, for Indigenous people, mental health is a great challenge. The alliance does not have prescriptions which will help, except that we need staff, we need staff who are culturally safe and culturally appropriate, we need local governance and local involvement in the

services themselves rather than a top-down approach and we need to treat it as an emergency. The burden of disease in mental health generally, as you well know, is very high and growing. Therefore, I would have thought that, of all the areas where urgent action is required, mental health for Indigenous people is one of those. I am sure you did not expect prescriptive answers, and we have none. We have a great interest in the macroapproaches to mental health services and how they are delivered but no specific answers.

Senator MOORE—If it is okay I have one more question, which I am sure will touch on other people's questions as well. One of the ongoing issues we have discussed many times is the issue of resources. You identified in your submission the number of organisations that are involved in the alliance. You have been talking for many years about the lack of professional services available in rural Australia, and that is augmented in the case of Aboriginal communities. Do you have any opinion about the kind of health modelling that would affect the kind of support that Aboriginal communities need when there is a shortage of individual professionals? I am talking about the kind of multifunctional health services model that can be used in the mobile way that may be useful in these areas. I am particularly looking at things like ear health, eye health and bronchial conditions. In the large cities, we can go to specialists for each of those areas. Your evidence indicated that the specialist service is not often available in these areas. Could you put a little bit on record about how you can actually service the specialised needs without necessarily having the specialised professionals?

Mr Gregory—It is a complex issue. The first thing to observe is that the Northern Territory emergency response has shown the seriousness of this. I think everybody accepts that the intervention by GPs to do the childhood checks was a good thing, but what was disappointing was the lack of capacity in the system to follow up on what was discovered—poor eyes, poor teeth, poor hearing—with the specialist advice and services to rectify the situation. What that illustrates perhaps is that in Australia we have done much better, not just in Indigenous health but in rural and remote health generally, on the medical front than on the total health service front—and I guess that is the thrust of your question.

The alliance has been convinced for a long time now, as you well know, that it is teamwork in rural and remote areas that will work best, which is what we need. There are opportunities for much more creative service models based on the multidisciplinary team in rural and remote areas because, surprisingly perhaps, there are fewer turf wars and less turf to defend by individual professionals—so there is an upside to it. But, of course, we are desperately short of specialists, and I do not just mean medical specialists; I am talking about podiatrists, optometrists and dentists as well. The distribution of dentists in Australia in remote areas is absolutely appalling, probably the worst of any health discipline, I would guess.

I think several of the recommendations in our submission were related to Aboriginal health workers. I am sure we still have much capacity to make up ground in Australia through further encouragement of that profession, because we all know how valuable they are when they are in place. The nurse is there; the doctor comes in on Wednesday afternoon or whenever it is; but the Aboriginal health worker has the capacity to make the service culturally appropriate and to make sure that people return and therefore get better health outcomes. So we could certainly boost the Aboriginal health worker profession.

To try to end on a positive note, one of the things we said in our submission was that young Aboriginal people represent a great untapped resource. We are working off such a low base that it is kind of optimistic to put it in the context that there is a major opportunity, because of the extraordinarily small number of Aboriginal people going into health professions, to build on that. We are working off a very low base but I think we should regard that as an untapped resource and do all we can—for instance, perhaps through scholarships. There are scholarships for Indigenous people, as you well know, in small number for nursing and pharmacy. One thing that we clearly could do if we were serious about increasing the number and proportion of Indigenous health workers would be to radically increase the number of scholarships. We know that there are difficulties in getting retention through training for a health profession, or indeed any other profession, but we could work on that and probably put in place significantly greater numbers.

Andrew has reminded me of something I could have added when you asked about mental health. One of the general concerns we have about the mental health service system as it currently exists is that so much of the money being made available is provided through Medicare. Again, you have a situation where people who do not have access to a doctor simply are not in the hunt when it comes to mental health services. The distribution of MBS services under Better Outcomes and ATAPS has been shown to be radically in favour of large regional centres and capital cities at the expense of country areas. It has even been suggested that there are perverse results from some of those enhanced primary care and mental health item numbers: they actually get psychologists to relocate to regional centres or capital cities where there is a better market. So there is some evidence about a perverse possibility. On mental health, of course, there is clear evidence that the very worst outcome where mental health is concerned—that is, suicide and self-harm—is a very serious issue with Indigenous populations, including in more remote areas.

Senator ADAMS—It is good to see you again. I really wondered why in your submission you did not go to page 29 first. We are talking about access to medical specialists. Do you have any solution for Indigenous people, as far as the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme goes?

Mr Gregory—As you know better than anyone else in the whole world, Senator, we are pursuing with all our might improvements in the PATS, if we can call it the PATS given that it has different names in different jurisdictions. With your support, we have made the point that, like everything else, PATS is a problem and the PATS problem as it relates to Indigenous people is even more challenging. You are in a better place to know what the latest news is than I am, but we understand that it has been referred to a committee that is being led by the Northern Territory and we expect to hear soon, hopefully, some good news. We will continue to push on PATS and we will continue to argue that Indigenous people deserve particular treatment to suit the culture and their circumstances under PATS. But, as you know, good news on PATS seems to be slow coming, doesn't it?

Senator ADAMS—I think the West Australians may have a better solution with the new policies that the government has got there, so we are hoping that that comes to fruition sooner rather than later.

Mr Gregory—Do you mean the resources for regions?

Senator ADAMS—Yes. It is very good policy. It is on their websites and I suggest you have a look. In your submission you have spoken about programs and initiatives directed at caring for elders and Indigenous people with a disability, the fact that they need to be simple and streamlined. Have you got any examples of some of those programs?

Mr Gregory—No, I have not. But our friends at ACSA, Aged and Community Services Australia, probably have. We have worked collaboratively in the past but not in the very recent past with Aged and Community Services Australia, and I think they would be the ones that we might ask for some evidence of case studies on that for you, if you like.

Senator ADAMS—That would be good. Just on the Northern Territory intervention, or the emergency response as it is now, have you had any feedback from your member bodies? I would imagine that a number of them would have been involved in some way or another. Have you done a report or anything like that in the organisation?

Mr Gregory—All we have done is to produce a media release very early in the piece which portrayed the alliance's position as it was then. I have to say that not much has changed. As you very well know, given the wide range of views on the detail of the emergency response and given that we have 28 member bodies, it is unlikely that we would get consensus across all issues across all bodies. So our position remains this: we think the emergency response has demonstrated some good results in terms of policing and pornography and perhaps alcohol. We do not have a position on the permit system. We are clear that the work done led by general practice has emphasised, as I already said in answer to your colleague, that we have a severe problem not only in the Northern Territory but elsewhere about following up on ill-health discovered in children or any other patients.

It is the alliance's view that, if nothing else, the Northern Territory intervention has had some very positive spin-offs. It has given greater public attention to the issue of Indigenous health and wellbeing than anything else in our lifetime probably. It has elicited bipartisan political support. It has suggested that there might be ongoing, meaning through time, commitment of significant resources. These are some of the things—the public support, the media attention, the money, the political will—which we clearly need right across the board to solve the situation for Indigenous health and wellbeing. What we are saying is that at the macro level it has been good because it has put in place those things, and there is no reason why they should just be in the Northern Territory. We need that long-term commitment, that long-term investment, that bipartisan support and that public attention to this issue right across Australia, which is why I went to some length to argue the alliance's position on advocating for this issue as an organisation which is partly comprised of Indigenous organisations. That is our position as it stands at the moment on the intervention.

Senator ADAMS—As you are aware, this committee of course covers all those areas that you are talking about. We are not just confined to the Northern Territory, which makes the committee's work even more valuable in that respect. I am sorry that I did not perhaps phrase the question quite the right way. I was just wondering if perhaps each of your organisations could provide us with details of the actual practical work that they did towards the intervention, because I am fully aware of the orientation that the rural and remote nurses did for the medical teams. It was just to show that the National Rural Health Alliance, really, with that number of rural bodies, is certainly an organisation that we can come back to for information. Seeing that

we are looking at rural and regional and remote communities, some of that information about the practical issues that your members dealt with could be very valuable. That was really what I was asking.

Mr Gregory—We can certainly respond to that. We can ask our individual member bodies what their professional experiences have been in relation to the Northern Territory and provide you with that.

Senator ADAMS—Yes, their practical experiences. It was not their opinions at all; it was actually how they worked practically within that team.

Mr Gregory—On the ground, yes. We can do that for you. We would be pleased to provide that to you later.

Senator ADAMS—Thank you very much.

Senator SCULLION—Mr Gregory, again, thank you very much for your submission. I have a number of areas that you might have to take on notice. I do not want to draw conclusions that are not in here, and I think there are some issues that I would like to check with you about. On the underspend that you have indicated and the impact of the state and territory government policies on the wellbeing of regional and remote Indigenous communities: just in the premise of that you have relied on some figures. I think there are figures of $350 million to $500 million, and somebody said that $460 million seems to be it. I am not looking for why you picked that one; that is fairly obviously in the middle. Who advised you that that was probably the underspend? Where did you get those figures from?

Mr Gregory—I would have to check. I think it came from HREOC and/or Reconciliation Australia and/or NACCHO—in other words, the people leading the Close the Gap campaign—but I would have to check on the history.

Senator SCULLION—No worries. It is just that my colleague from the Northern Territory and I have been involved in another committee that looks at the—

ACTING CHAIR—Can I just clarify. Isn't this even from the Australian Medical Association's report card on Indigenous health? Doesn't this $400 million or so underspend go back about two, three or even four years? I thought it was a figure that the AMA or some such body was calling on the previous federal government to put into their budgets, even when Mr Abbott was Minister for Health and Ageing, I think.

Mr Gregory—It is certainly not a new figure.

ACTING CHAIR—It is not a new figure; it has been around for about three or four years, as I understand it.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you for that, Senator.

Mr Gregory—But the Close the Gap campaign is—

Senator SCULLION—It is an important point. That sort of figure—it does not matter what it is—obviously is an important figure for our deliberations about where we go from here. I think it is an important figure. I am not sure if it is possible—but we have had some briefs from the Grants Commission about how they calculate a whole bunch of stuff. I am not even sure if they do this. I am assuming that they do, because they talk about underspends and overspends and how they go about that business of doing it. Perhaps they may be able to give us a more recent appraisal of something quite specific, and perhaps the committee might be able to discuss that with them. Obviously it is a very difficult area, in that, while health is maintained by the states and territories, that is not entirely true in the Indigenous context. There is a lot of stuff that is deliberately from the Commonwealth. It is a bit of everywhere.

You were talking about the benefits of a lot of the local health services, which are health services that are not only a health service; many of them have a certain type of independence that goes to financial independence and status and accountability, some perhaps not so much. There is clearly a possibility of providing funding directly for direct outcomes, of providing a budget directly to them in the context of their community or region. As you said, they have all the fundamentals of a cultural understanding, particularly a long-term relationship, and often people who have made long-term investments in their time in those places. Do you think there is any benefit in having a look at how we fund these things instead of the convention of the Commonwealth providing it through the states and territories? I know some funding is provided directly. Could you make some comments on how that money is provided? If you do not have an answer now I would appreciate a more considered response on notice.

Mr Gregory—It is tempting to come back to you later. The alliance is a very strong supporter of the community controlled health sector organisation, which is what NACCHO represents, of course. Taking the Northern Territory as an example, as you well know there are a relatively small number of Commonwealth funded community controlled health organisations there and a larger number of smaller ones funded by the Territory. So you are right, we have got a mixture. I am not sure the alliance has a position which would say categorically that the mixture is wrong. What we can say categorically is that we support the community controlled health sector. We think it is a good way to proceed. One of the specific bids in our submission, as you would have seen, is that there should be more of them and they should be better funded.

Having said that, we do not have any evidence that the smaller ones, which are funded by the Territory and in other jurisdictions by the state governments, are in any ways deficient. In my view, as long as there is local governance, local involvement and enough resources, infrastructure and staff to do the job, then that is pretty good. But we know that in many, many places that is not the case and we do not have all of those things. We are not in a position to say that it should be all the Commonwealth, through nothing but community controlled health organisations. We are in a position to say we strongly support that model. We can come back to you with some further information.

Senator SCULLION—I would appreciate that. There is no mischief in my question. It is just that you have dealt with some advice on a range of issues, and I think advice on that particular aspect might be useful. If you can put your mind to the process under which that might take place I would appreciate that.

I note your comments around the effectiveness or otherwise of the intervention, particularly about the difficulties in making a scientific or clear-minded evaluation. I think we would all acknowledge that. We have had other people make contributions this afternoon about some of the difficulties in having benchmarks and statistics so that we can get a perspective over some time. There has just been a review conducted by the government on the intervention. I am not sure when you made this submission but perhaps you could provide me with some advice on how you see that review affecting your statement about the difficulties. Does it add anything to it? When you read the review are you then able to make some effective evaluation of the intervention post the review or do you still think there is some work to do?

Mr Gregory—The submission that we made was before review of which you speak. I would like to take your question on notice.

Senator SCULLION—Yes, if you could. It has all been a bit close.

Mr Gregory—The alliance needs to digest the recent review you refer to and get back to you on that.

Senator SCULLION—Yes, if you could take it on notice I would appreciate something on that area.

Mr Gregory—Yes.

Senator SCULLION—In your submission and your response this afternoon you have said that it is all very well for the intervention proposing that there would be no child in poverty without a health check, and all that sort of stuff, but it is pointless if there is no follow-up remedial action. We all acknowledge that. I can only glean what is happening from the media and from my being in communities, knowing the odd doctor and dropping in to ask what is happening, but I am finding some difficulty in getting a response. You might be able to assist me. I can imagine that in the intervention there would be, say, 1,200 people, or whatever the number is, who had the health check and there would be a file on each one and we would know where everybody was up to. In some cases people have said they found somebody who had now gone to Katherine and had surgery, so there has been an intervention well beyond a health check, yet in other cases clearly that is not the case. You are asserting, and I agree with you, that the follow-ups have not been as comprehensive as the health checks. What would be the normal process? What do you understand about the process of the intervention? There has been a health check done by doctors—and I imagine they are not completely excised for the medical centres and all those sorts of things around them—and everybody has a report card. What do you understand about the next action? Are there some assumptions that the local medical people will be dealing with diagnoses that have been exposed that were previously unknown? I am very much a lay person about the process of how you triage something in those circumstances and then respond.

Mr Gregory—I am pretty much a lay person, as well, in this regard. I am not across the detail of individual cases in the Northern Territory. It is just that we have heard from our constituents who are doctors, dentists and physiotherapists, that they know that there has not been as many staff injected into this special intervention for the follow-up as there were for the checks. The possibility that it raises is that there is, in fact, a huge amount of undiagnosed health problems in

many part of Australia. Of course the interests of the Rural Health Alliance would be in asserting that there are huge amounts of undiagnosed problems in rural and remote areas—that is, because people cannot or do not get to doctors regularly, there are a lot of people with conditions like poor teeth, poor sight and diabetes, which are undiagnosed.

What happened in the Northern Territory was that we had an arguably successful one-off injection of huge numbers of people who were doing the diagnoses. But we did not have the injection of large numbers of people to do the follow-up. This, I think, fits the terms of reference of your select committee, as I understand them. This illustrates the point that the Northern Territory intervention is no more than a case study in something which is out there—and much more largely writ than just in the Territory.

Senator SCULLION—Indeed.

Mr Gregory—The alliance is not in a position, Senator, to provide you with specific numbers about child health checks and all that. It has not been our business.

Senator SCULLION—Perhaps the secretariat will remind me at some other stage to ensure that I direct those questions to someone who is able to answer that.

ACTING CHAIR (Senator Adams)—Every month those figures come in.

Senator SCULLION—Well, we will be able to check that. There are a couple of other areas I want to get into. There is a great opportunity in every community I live in or visit. There is a huge dearth of jobs. Whose opportunity is it? There are unemployed but no-one to do the work. But in the health field Aboriginal health workers—tragically in some ways—often work for between 10 and 30 years, so they are long-term, but in that demographic they are fewer in number. There were some changes around the time of the intervention. I guess, as part of the intervention—forget about the part of it where we said that the Community Development Employment Program, CDEP, was to be changed—we said that the states and territories had an obligation to pay their health workers full time. They were no longer in a CDEP pretend thing—perhaps 'pretend' is not the right word to use and I mean no disrespect—so we moved to saying that people should have superannuation and full wages and should be treated as somebody doing proper work, not as part of some other scheme. Have you done any work or had any feedback about the impact of that particular aspect—not the CDEP aspect but the aspect of moving to full-time wages and the support the Commonwealth gives them? Has that had much of an impact?

Mr Gregory—Not specifically, but I can say that one of the mysteries in the last 10 or 15 years in the rural health area has been why it has been that the Aboriginal health worker profession has not developed more quickly and come together as a national body. We do not have Aboriginal health workers, for instance, represented in the Rural Health Alliance. We would very much like that not to be the case. We would like them to be represented. I am aware that there has been a lot of work in terms of curriculum development for Aboriginal health workers but, as with so many other professions, it has varied from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, as you know. I say again, it remains a mystery why we do not have a strong national, uniform Aboriginal health worker profession. I suspect and hope that we are nearer that now than we were 10 years ago, but it has been extremely slow. I am afraid that that is as precise as I can be.

Senator SCULLION—Okay. You use the term 'micro-nutrients' somewhere in there, I recall, describing this as an important aspect of food and health. They are obviously very closely connected. Whilst there is no empirical evidence, the anecdotal information from many of the stores is that, as a result of the quarantining of welfare in the intervention and its impact on access to food, they have a much higher turnover of foodstuffs. How do we actually evaluate the effectiveness of this? That has happened, but how do we know? Is there any suggestion? We talk about general wellbeing. Is all this fresh food making any difference? Apart from anecdotal information, is there any way that the reporting processes we have had from health departments and medical centres can shed light on this? We know that people are most likely eating more food; they are certainly buying more. They are probably not throwing it away. What sort of a lag time would there be? I have not seen anyone, although I have talked to a few people about how we actually evaluate that sort of impact. I am seriously looking for an answer. It may be that you do not have an answer but some of your colleagues in the alliance may have it. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of such a potentially significant nutritional change?

Mr Gregory—There is a thing called NATSINSAP, which, as you are probably aware, is the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan, which has just been re-funded. This is a wonderful opportunity for me to ask whether I might table the document from the conference that we, the alliance, helped run in March of this year in Alice Springs. It was a conference on community stores and all those related matters. I would like to table this if I may. The good news, as we understand it, is that NATSINSAP has now been re-funded. There was a risk three months ago that it was not going to be re-funded. That is an organisation and a body of people from the jurisdictions—certainly from Western Australia, the Northern Territory, Queensland, New South Wales and the Commonwealth—looking at fresh food and stores. If anybody has the sort of evidence that you are after, it would be them.

Senator SCULLION—Thank you for that. One of the difficulties is that the anecdotal stuff I get does not quite conflict but is not clear. 'Yes, we are selling a lot more stuff.' 'That is good,' I say, 'How do the lines change when it comes to the nuance?' They say, 'No, we still sell mostly flour. The amount of flour—carbohydrate—we sell remains the same.' It is the same for canned beef—bully beef—and stuff, though not necessarily because there is an attraction, I am sure. I have eaten enough of it myself, and it is not that attractive. Certainly, the convenience for people out on stations is part of it. They are telling me that, while there is more access to food generally and more of it is being sold, it is the more traditional lines that are being sold. Tragically, I was having a conversation with someone, about a month ago, about a capsicum. They had never seen one before and they were saying what a wonderful thing it looked like. The concept of what they would possibly do with it was an interesting discussion in itself.

We need to know about those nuances and about statistics and effect. Anecdotally, we learn that they are selling more. But also, anecdotally, it appears that some of those conditions that have been put on the stores in terms of accessing the Basics Card are not necessarily having an effect because the traditional conventions about the types of food being purchased and the general purchases are not changing. It would be very useful to evaluate that so that we can make some sort of decisions about further education. We could inquire into why that may be happening to try to change some of those behaviour patterns.

Mr Gregory—I cannot comment on the specific effect of the intervention on food availability through the stores, but I can respond with a rhetorical question which I have used in this place

before. That is, given the fundamental importance that we know attaches to fresh food at affordable prices for the health of everybody everywhere, how is it that we can conspire, and I use the word conspire in the best sense of the word—that is, how can private industry, governments and whoever else is involved conspire—to make Coca-Cola available on Groote at the same price as in Darwin? Perhaps you can answer that question, and then make it less than rhetorical. For years, as I understand it, Coca-Cola has been available on Groote at the same price as in Darwin, but fresh fruit and vegetables are not. It seems to me that this is something which we as a community, as a society and as a nation need to get to grips with. If it is still the situation—and you would know and I would not—that capsicums are not available then that is something which I frankly do not understand. It seems to me to represent a lack of will on behalf of all sorts of individuals or organisations not to do what clearly is practicable.

Senator SCULLION—My only contribution is that, whilst there is always an economic stream in decision-making, businesses are fundamentally there to make money, and I think that will always be the case. I note, though, that Coca-Cola as a company—and they probably will not like me for saying this—seem to move very quickly. They have said that they will provide Coke Zero, which is of benefit particularly in those areas that have a negative genetic predilection to foods of that nature, in certain areas at a particular price but it will be to the exclusion of other similar sorts of products. That seems almost philanthropic and is very beneficial, but it still has a business ethos behind it. Perhaps we need to directly speak to all those people. Massive companies certainly have philanthropic aspects. Perhaps their activities in those areas and that behaviour can be changed, but you can only buy what is there. Until we change those opportunities, health outcomes are going to be limited.

Mr Gregory—My response to the last comment is that the availability of fresh food to people everywhere is such an important issue that it should not be subject just to business decisions and commerce. If the free market is not making it available then I and the alliance would argue there should be some sort of intervention.

Senator SCULLION—Those who support the intervention would argue that the Outback Stores are making a pretty fair dinkum attempt to do just that. While they have a stand-alone business culture, there are some other resources from government behind them to ensure that that behaviour is changed.

ACTING CHAIR—It was very opportunistic that the Outback Stores were in Alice Springs when we were there doing another inquiry. I had an opportunity to speak to the General Manager of Outback Stores right across Australia. They are doing some very, very good work. Their managers are employed, so it is not just one person in a store whose profits go into their own pocket. Those managers are on a salary and have a menu of what they have to provide in their stores. Coke, chips and all those sorts of things are now not being pushed to the front but are right at the back of the stores. The amount of fresh food that is going out is quite amazing, as are some of the innovative ways that community stores are providing lunches and teas. We had takeaway from the community store in Balgo, which was very, very nice and very nutritious—and it actually had capsicum in it, Senator Scullion! As we move around, these are the things that we are doing. We are going into the stores, having a look and talking to the managers. It just so happened that the Outback Stores had all the managers from their Central and Western Australian stores in Alice Springs for a two-day conference to talk about exactly that—what they were doing, how they were going and where they were going in the future. There is a huge

increase in the fresh food. Cooked chooks are going out as salads for lunch, and there are packs of fresh stir-fry vegies that are done up so they can be cooked—and with instructions on how to do it.

I thank you both for appearing before us today. It would be very good if we could have those few things that we have requested of you.

Committee adjourned at 5.50 pm