



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER
AFFAIRS**

Reference: Greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders

MACKAY

Tuesday, 6 May 1997

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

CANBERRA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER AFFAIRS

Members:

Mr Lieberman (Chair)

Mr Albanese	Mr Lloyd
Mr Campbell	Mr Marek
Mr Dondas	Mr Melham
Mr Entsch	Dr Nelson
Mr Holding	Mr Pyne
Mr Katter	Mr Quick
	Mr Tony Smith

Matter referred for inquiry into and report on:

Whether the people of the Torres Strait would benefit from a greater degree of autonomy;

If so, what forms should a greater degree of autonomy take; and

What implications would greater autonomy have for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Torres Strait region including whether the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission or the Torres Strait Regional Authority should represent the interests of such residents.

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Greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders

ROCKHAMPTON

Tuesday, 6 May 1997

Present

Mr Lieberman (Chair)

Mr Albanese

Mr Marek

Mr Holding

Mr Tony Smith

Mr Lloyd

The committee met at 9.25 a.m.

Mr Lieberman took the chair.

COLEMAN, Mr Charles, State Member, Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (TSIAB)

GELA, Mr Jack, President, Saima Torres Strait Islander Corporation

GELA, Mrs Annie, Saima Torres Strait Islander Corporation

BARSAH, Mr John, Wongai Corporation

HENDERSON, Mrs Lurl, Local Secretary, Wongai Corporation

KENNELL, Ms Nina, Wongai Corporation

CHAIR—Welcome. The committee is inquiring into whether Torres Strait Islanders would benefit from a greater degree of autonomy and how this could be best achieved, for Torres Strait Islanders living on the islands and of course on the mainland. As part of the inquiry, we have talked to a wide range of people and organisations in the region and on the mainland, and in the next few days we will be visiting several Torres Strait Islander communities in mainland Queensland. Tomorrow we are holding a seminar on Thursday Island and the next day we will be having a public meeting on Thursday Island. I only wish that you could be with us for that part of the proceedings. A written transcript of what is said at these meetings will become available to all of you, and we will make sure that you get a copy of it, hopefully over the next three weeks.

We have come to hear your comments today and learn from you and listen to what you believe is the best thing to do. We want your advice in respect of these issues. We very much appreciate the time and trouble you have taken to share with us today those issues. The thoughts of Torres Strait Islanders, wherever they live, on the mainland or on the islands, are very important and that is why your presence today, living on the mainland, representing a very large number of Torres Strait Islanders, will be of great interest to all of us.

We have some questions that we would like to put to you after your presentation so we would appreciate it if you would let us put those questions to you and you can answer them for us. We were hoping to be here before but, as you know, the cyclone intervened so it was not meant to be. But we are here now and it is good to be here with you. We want to report very accurately to the Australian parliament on what you think and for that reason our friends from Hansard are taking notes of your comments so that we will have your comments to study when we get back to our home to do our deliberations and to try to write a report which will be helpful to Torres Strait Islanders and to all Australians.

This is very informal so do not be nervous, just relax and enjoy yourselves. Charles, I invite you to kick off and tell us a bit about your thoughts on the inquiry and about what is going on.

Mr Coleman—Today I am speaking for my community in Rockhampton and I also represent some people in Gladstone. There are two organisations in Rockhampton, Saima Corporation and Wongai Corporation. They are concerned about the activities of the Torres Strait Islanders community on the mainland and back in Torres Strait.

CHAIR—While you are waiting for your notes, I have a couple of basic questions. How many Torres Strait Islanders live in this area?

Mr Coleman—In Gladstone there are close to a hundred, I suppose.

CHAIR—It goes up and down.

Mrs Henderson—There are about 50 families in Rockhampton.

CHAIR—So about 200 people. How long have you been on the mainland, Charles?

Mr Coleman—For about 30 years but I have always had close links with my people from up north. I left there as a 13-year-old.

CHAIR—What was it that brought you here?

Mr Coleman—Mum and Dad came down here for a job.

CHAIR—And have you been back to the islands to visit? You still have lots of family there.

Mr Coleman—Yes.

CHAIR—How long have you been here, Jack?

Mr Gela—I came to the mainland Australia in February 1968. I have been in Rockhampton for the last 21 years. When the Dreamtime Cultural Centre started, they came round and talked to us about input into that Dreamtime Cultural Centre to bring our community together with our Aboriginal brothers. That was in 1982. Then because there was not much representation of our people in the government departments, education and so on, we came up with the Walai organisation to speak for us. People could represent us mainly to the social department in speaking English where for our people it is a bit hard.

So we try to establish that organisation so our people, they can come to us to make that in between, that link. From then on, 87 men of our family come together with that organisation, and they started to talk our culture in schools and university. They asked us for help to put a program together. But also, with that link back home, we are not forgetting. My mum is still alive. She is 94. She lives up on Darnley Island. So our link from here to home is still there. For us now I bring all my kids, I taught them dancing and all that culture comes through.

For us here, for me, to come for this autonomy now, I think it is a very good thing for us because we do not get much support from ATSIC in this. Always I am misunderstanding because those of us in the central area have not had a representative Torres Strait Islander for the last 20 years or so. So we have more or less been left behind. We still have links through a national conference and seminar. We try to make an effort to attend.

CHAIR—You were in Brisbane when I was there.

Mr Gela—Yes, early this year. I don't talk too much?

CHAIR—No, that's good, Jack. As a matter of courtesy, I have to indicate that the local television is filming. I said I thought it would be okay. Are you happy with that? Fine. I just wanted to let you know that I agreed with that.

Mr Gela—In the last 20 years or so, before we elected our representative here, we have been missing out. We tried to make an effort when delegates of Torres Strait Islanders thought about us in Rockhampton and sent us a paper to attend national conferences and all that stuff. We still like to link with all the Torres Strait Islander community around that country and for us to come into that autonomy it is very good. To be recognised as Torres Strait Islander, for me, I am very proud. We got that identification without missing out with our Aboriginal brothers and sisters. It is great.

CHAIR—Jack, that is a great introduction. I am sure we will have some questions. Charles, I think your paper has now arrived. Would you like to present it to us and then we can go on from there?

Mr Coleman—We Torres Strait Islander people must make decisions that not only affect us now but 30 to 60 years in the future. We must have a vision of the future of where we want to be, and we must make a future for our children and grandchildren. There are forces that are occurring now that will have an effect on our future and on the future of the Torres Strait and our people. This is why it is important to have two separate commissions—that is what I have got here in my notes but I am not too sure on that yet.

We know what effect the mining in Papua New Guinea is having on the Torres Strait. The waters are being filled with chemicals from the mining, and poisonous base

metals will infect our food chain—chemicals like cadmium and mercury, et cetera. Our fish will be inedible. Even now these chemicals are found in our turtle and dugong. Then there are the Indonesian fishermen. These people have fished out and polluted their waters and they will come in increasing numbers. How will we stop them? We cannot declare war on them because they are too powerful. They have an army, et cetera. Australia will have to come to a political solution through talks with the Indonesians. Torres Strait people must be included in these talks. We must bring something to the table and that is what we must decide now or in the near future.

You may say this is rubbish, but Indonesia controls the deepwater sea lanes that Australia must use to get to the Northern Hemisphere, and it will protect those lanes at the expense of the Torres Strait Islands people. We must be aware of this and prepare some course of action now. We islanders must protect and preserve our way of life and our food supply from exploitation and overfishing, even to the extent of issuing very expensive fishing licences for the right to fish in Torres Strait waters for a period of three to four months—the period to be decided by referring to the survey by the department of natural resources, or whatever department it is, and the CSIRO. We will stay linked to Australia and the state government. We cannot become an independent nation. We do not have the resources to stand on our own. Who would fund us?

CHAIR—Just a question on that point. That is the message that we have been getting from all of your brothers and sisters on the mainland and also on the islands: that they are very proud to be Australians and they want to continue to be part of Australia. That has been a strong message that we have been getting.

Mr Coleman—We will get funds from sources other than Australia, but we will be worse off because we will forgo our island. We will lose our right to the land, the sea and our fish and we will become strangers in our own islands. Things like trawling must be regulated now. The case for land and sea rights is vital. I will now discuss autonomy in regard to economic development. With regard to an autonomous base for the Torres Strait people—TSRA is one of autonomy, and the local council shire for Thursday Island—we want to have eco-tourism, backpackers' hostels, the promotion of Torres Strait Islander culture, and a fishing industry with the development of a coast guard funded by the government.

With regards to fishing and sea rights, Torres Strait people must push for land and sea rights, for full control and ownership and the legal rights of our people—traditionally—and the way of living today. Our number one priority is land and sea rights, our number two priority is protection of these rights and our number three priority is protection of the natural resources—such as fish, crayfish, beche-de-mer, shells, turtle, dugong and shark. Measures must be introduced to protect breeding stock. Breeding areas must be protected no-go areas. The Department of Primary Industries and the CSIRO must be asked to do a survey on the natural resources of the Torres Strait and provide a protection program that can be implemented by the Torres Strait Island authority.

We the Torres Strait Island people see that there are two precedents for the granting of autonomy to the Torres Strait—the territories of Norfolk Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. TSRA itself has stated that, whatever future form of autonomy is agreed, it will continue to perform essentially local government and policy advisory functions. In this regard, the Cocos Island model may be more appropriate to the Torres Strait. Economic development is an important element in achieving greater autonomy in the Torres Strait.

We believe that a very strong link between the TSI people is the main thing. More consultation and talking around the table should come through the link-up between the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs—the national secretariat of the TSI—and the TSRA, the Torres Strait Islanders' organisation on the mainland.

CHAIR—That is very good, Charles. You have given us a lot of food for thought. I would now like to ask a couple of questions on what you have said. What challenges me more than anything else is that you have got about 20,000-odd Torres Strait Island people living on the mainland and about 7,000 or 8,000 of your people living on the island. You all want to be linked together forever, and that is something we would like to see preserved. But how much say do you think people on mainland Australia should have in the day-to-day running of affairs on the island or do you think that should be left pretty well to the people living on the island? Would you like to comment on that Charles, or would anyone else like to come in on that?

Mr Coleman—As I said before, maybe one island will have some sort of structure set up like the ICC. That has the structure of a state government doesn't it? It has the structure of a state government there on the island, but it is under Community Services. You ask how they would run it and what they would do—it would be just like the city council here in Rockhampton. People like to know what is going on and keep in touch, especially on the island. We like to know what is going on up there. It is not that we are running it for them, but we would like to be included in policy making for the Torres Strait. It is not for one community but for the whole.

CHAIR—For the broad strategic basis, yes. For example, if one of the islands wanted to establish a brick making factory to make bricks so they could build houses on that island, would you be happy to let the people on the islands make the decision on that or do you feel mainland Torres Strait Islanders should also be involved?

Mr Coleman—You are talking about the brick thing. I have that got idea in my head. I know who is doing it.

CHAIR—That is right. It is happening.

Mr Coleman—I am from that island—St Pauls—and I believe that people—the council there—should contact St Paul people on that issue. We are all down here but we

are all landowners there. There is no harm in writing a letter and saying what is going on: 'We are going to start a brick factory. We are getting some stuff from your land there. We are asking your grandad. What we can do?' It is easy: we just negotiate and go ahead.

CHAIR—Let us just clarify that. I think Jim Lloyd, one of our members, was talking to me on the flight up about having a regular newsletter sent from the islands to all Torres Strait Island mainland people so that there was a register of names and addresses of all the mainland Torres Strait Islanders—that sort of information could come out.

But there is a difference between sending information out, keeping you informed—say about the brick factory on St Pauls—and going one step further and saying to the people on the mainland: 'Do you agree that we should put a brick factory on St Pauls or not?' What I am trying to get advice from you on is: do you think you should have the right to tell the people on St Pauls that they cannot have a brick factory or that they can? How far do you think you should be able to make decisions or help make decisions on the islands?

Mr Coleman—Everybody knows where we are and things like that. I have been keeping a close watch on Council Chairperson and them up there on St Pauls. We know what is going on. He is the local council there. He should be telling us too what is going on there because he knows. We know the government will go and build a house or whatever they want anyway, but Ronnie is there for the people, he is not there for the government and what he has to set up. He is definitely there for the people too. He should be negotiating with the people concerning that thing in the early stages. I think we should be involved in it.

But, like I say, every island people is different. It does not matter where you are from, every island has different ways. See, I cannot go over there and talk for Murray Island people. I cannot go and talk for Saibai people, even though I am from the Torres Strait. I would find that a very hard thing.

I think it is best to go to the island and talk to that people there, like Ronnie now. You are talking about: is it okay for him to go ahead? Like the local government—yes, it is all right for him to go ahead. But there are things that he will have to abide by too. People say, 'We are building a brick factory here.' Righto! Where is the dirt going to come from and this and that? Up there from grandad's place.

Mrs Henderson—Charlie, simply because of that fact that a lot of mainland people do still have their family homeland on the islands and want to know what is happening on their island homeland—you want to be involved in that context.

Mrs Gela—If they are going to use resources from land that is owned by people that are living on the mainland, I think they should contact those families and ask them permission. I think that is what Charles was trying to say.

CHAIR—That has clarified it for me. I think that is a clear issue.

Mr Coleman—That is a very good thing. If they can make bricks, good luck to them.

Mr Gela—I think if a lot of the Islander people live more at home, they should make most of the decisions affecting them day to day.

CHAIR—It is a pity that airline announcement interrupted you. Jack, you were wrapping up for everybody. I think you were saying that with the decisions of day to day made by the island people for people on the island and the decisions that affect people on the mainland, such as the use of some of the land, you still believe that you have an interest in them and you should be asked about that and have the opportunity to influence the decisions. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Gela—Yes.

CHAIR—The third thing you are telling us is that, anyway of all the things that go on on all the islands, all the people on mainland Australia should be informed regularly about what is going on. You have already told us that you already get a lot of information through your families as well.

Mr Gela—Yes.

Mr HOLDING—Given that there are significant cultural differences between Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people, would some of your objectives be advanced if in fact, just as Aboriginal people have ATSIC, there was an organisation for Torres Strait Islanders which represented not just those on the islands themselves but Torres Strait Islanders in areas like this? That is to say, you would have a separate body for Torres Strait Islanders.

Mr Gela—To handle all the Torres Strait Islander issues.

Mr HOLDING—Yes, so that it would meet with representatives of the islands and representatives of significant communities to elect people, and its function is to coordinate Islander responses so that the minister can have a direct contact as to the hopes and aspirations of Islanders. How do you feel about that?

Mr Gela—Do you mean it would be like an organisation on the mainland here where we can bring all our representatives from the Torres Strait?

Mr HOLDING—It would be just as ATSIC has predominantly represented Islanders and Aboriginal people. What I am putting to you is whether you would be better served if you had for Torres Strait Islanders a commission that was elected from people on

the mainland and from Islanders themselves, and they would meet on a regular basis to discuss cultural and economic issues for Islander people, whether they are in Mackay, Townsville or on the islands. This would be for this problem that seems to be emerging where Islander people have to rely on what their families tell them or what they can pick up. It would provide a constant basis whereby Islander people come together and can make recommendations to the minister and the government as to the way they see policy being formulated for and on their behalf.

Mr Gela—Right, we would like to have that Torres Strait Islander separate commission and, like we would do for the last seven years with our national Torres Strait conferences with all the things that we elect delegates from the mainland and delegates from Torres Strait and they come to one body.

Small organisations, like ours, in the outer community could all feed into one with the others, get everything and come back to the national conference and to the minister. But the feeling is that we would like to have a separate commission for Torres Strait Islanders.

Mr HOLDING—Is everybody agreed on that? Does anyone disagree with that?

Mr Coleman—Separate commission, yes, like what we have now, like the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs in Canberra and setting up the new secretariat. All we need now is to link up with the councils up north once every three months or once every six weeks just to start things off.

All that the people have been doing there is just talking and talking. They have been talking for the last I do not know how many years. I was only a little fellow when I heard people talking like this here. They have been trying ever since Mr Holding was the minister and they are still talking. I think we have to get something together and give it a go. I think people get that much today, they are not silly enough to run into that wall, you know, like with the way things were going in the past.

But now, today, I think the island people have a better understanding of the government structure. We have to start working together, and working with the councils themselves up north and on the mainland. We have to get that together.

Ms Kennell—My concern is that I know there has been a lot of talk about it but it is just that it is a frightening step to take. When you look at it, it is a big step to take to go on your name. That is why there has been a lot of talk all this time, but it is just to take that first step.

I think it is it a good idea for Torres Strait Islander people to be responsible for their own actions, for their own funding. We should be responsible for getting our people into jobs and getting them into those places where they can get help, like taking people to

social security and getting them to the hospital. We should have our own people there to help them.

Mr MAREK—Where do you believe that this administration should be set up? Should it be set up in the Torres Strait, or should it be set up here? We have come across two arguments here. The Torres Strait people up there have said that there is new administration and it should be set up in the Torres Strait and have, say, office branches around the country. How do you feel about that? Should it be up in the Torres Strait, or should it be here in Queensland or in Canberra?

Mr Coleman—I do not think it would matter where it is set up really, as long as it has representatives from mainland and Torres Strait, fifty-fifty together.

Mr MAREK—I just want to clarify something you are saying. Are you proposing that OTSIA, Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs, link in with the island councils or the TSRA and create a link between the two rather than create a new commission? Is that what you are trying to lead towards or not?

Mr Coleman—How long will it take to set up this new commission like with a structure we have today?

Mr HOLDING—It would need an act of parliament to get it under way. The real question is the concept. ATSIC tends to be based in Canberra because of Aboriginal communities being far more diversely spread around Australia and there are certain regions of Australia in which there are many more Aborigines than others. If you took that as a model, the centre obviously could be on the island, but the important thing is that where you administer it from is a matter for discussion. It is not for us to indicate to you where it should go.

Obviously there are significant groupings of islanders, mainly in Queensland, and they would form part of that body, just as Aboriginal communities from Victoria, which are a fairly small bunch in the national picture, are represented on ATSIC. So if you have 7,000 people in Mackay, depending upon population and involvement, you have a commissioner. With that person, you meet in the same way that ATSIC meets—to formulate policy. The issues you are discussing with us can be on the table. Basically, it is that sort of a concept.

Mr TONY SMITH—You have spoken of the Cocos Islands model. I take it that you mean in the nature of a territory situation. Is that what you mean, some form of state or territory?

Mr Coleman—Yes.

Mr TONY SMITH—If that were to be the case, if ultimately you were to have a territory of the Torres Strait—

Mr Barsah—With some degree of autonomy.

Mr TONY SMITH—Like the Cocos Islands or other territories of Australia. Is that basically what you are saying?

Mr Coleman—Yes.

Mr TONY SMITH—The thing that we have encountered, along the lines as put by Mr Marek, is that there is obviously going to be some suggestion that the people who are actually living in the islands would not particularly like people on the mainland telling them how to run their islands.

Mr Barsah—That is true.

Mr TONY SMITH—What do you think about that?

Mr Coleman—I talk with the people from down there. All they got is a little island and themselves, their little community. They are not looking at the bigger picture outside. They can achieve a lot of things coming out of there.

Mr TONY SMITH—Would you go back to the islands if there was work and if there was some sort of economic infrastructure?

Mr Coleman—Yes, I would go back there tomorrow; of course, I would.

Ms Kennell—There are a lot of resources there which are just not being used in the right places—a lot of resources and a fishing industry.

Mr Coleman—There is a lot of things.

CHAIR—Could I just get you to elaborate on that? Tell me first which resources you think should be used or could be used more; which ones?

Ms Kennell—The fishing. Instead of people going there themselves, they could pay people with the licences; and tourists, getting people to travel by boat and things like that with the tourist industry. They have a unique culture up there too. They can share their culture with the wider community.

CHAIR—Do you have any thoughts as to why they are not doing it now? Can you help me with that one?

Ms Kennell—No. Perhaps someone else can.

CHAIR—You think it needs some leadership?

Ms Kennell—Maybe they are not really thinking that way.

CHAIR—Do you think it needs some leadership to promote that?

Ms Kennell—Yes.

Mr Coleman—They need the same sorts of things now, leadership and all those sorts of things. What I mean when I say that they are lighting a little fire, I do not know what it is, but I went up there last year and people were talking to me about different sorts of things. I see the opportunity and everything that is there. But they will not get out and do something. You say leadership.

CHAIR—I met a very fine young Torres Strait Islander. I asked him how often he went fishing. He said that he does not go fishing unless he is broke. That really worried me.

Mr Coleman—Yes, that is right. I can tell you of my own program. When I left there, I was 13-years-old and I could look after myself, whereas kids today cannot look after themselves at that age. We were more or less living up there in a sort of life of survival. We survived. You have to get up in the morning and go and fish. If you do not fish, you starve. My grandad or auntie or them, they will not say ‘Get up.’ You got to get up yourself and go and fish, otherwise you do not eat. That is how we did it. I go back today and what do I see? All our gardens have gone. We used to have gardens all over, but they are all gone, finished.

Mr TONY SMITH—Why have they gone, do you know?

Mr Coleman—The shops. They have shops up there. They just go and get chips or a coke, that is all.

CHAIR—Processed meat?

Mr Coleman—They do a little but I do not know. It is a hard thing. It is the change, I suppose. There is the government and what they get. They get the dole. We never used to have the dole. They get the dole and they just lay on the beach there or in the house. You know, \$250 will last you a month up there.

Mr LLOYD—When talking about why they do not garden and fish, one young man told me, ‘I do not need to do that any more. Ibis is my garden.’ I think that is a very telling line—that the Ibis supermarket is his garden.

Mrs Gela—I think we should leave it for the people up on the islands to make their own decisions. We cannot tell them whether or not to go fishing. They have to start to think for themselves because we are trying hard down here on the mainland to do the same thing. We cannot say that they should wake up up there. What about us down here on the mainland?

You spoke of a separate commission. I think it would be a good idea to have a separate commission—something like ATSIC but for Torres Strait Islanders—because there are a lot of different organisations on the mainland. We find it hard to link up, as it is, to tell you the truth. Maybe this autonomy thing would be the best thing for us so that we could find ourselves. Our kids will have an identity. Today they go to school and they become more westernised and lose their cultural protocol, like the kids up on the islands now.

Mr ALBANESE—One of the problems that we as a committee have is that we are hearing two different messages. On the mainland we hear very much the message which you are giving us. When we previously went to the islands, we were told that they were concerned about being outvoted on such a body. Given that there are 20,000 Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland and about only 7,000 still living in the Torres Strait, how would you get around that? With such a body, would you be comfortable with giving extra voting rights to people who are still on the islands in the Torres Strait?

Mr Gela—I think so, because that is where the roots lie. It has been identified; it is the council and the lot. It is on the Torres Strait. I think the main body, the government thing, whatever, would have to be in the Torres Strait. I suppose there probably would be an office in Canberra too. But the focus mainly to affect us on the mainland and Torres Strait would have to be from Torres Strait because that is where we have all our main roots and everything connected with our identity. It is there, Torres Strait. For us on the mainland, we just have to have that body which is formed here and link up together.

Mr LLOYD—What difficulties do you have as a mainland group of Torres Strait Islanders with ATSIC; what are your concerns and your problems here?

Mr Barsah—Lack of funding.

Mr LLOYD—Lack of funding?

Mr Barsah—And being left in the dark.

Mrs Gela—We cannot get our projects started—projects that we applied for funding for from ATSIC.

Mr Barsah—They are left on the backburner.

Mr LLOYD—Is this because you do not have the numbers on ATSIC; you do not have representation?

Mr Barsah—Yes.

Mr LLOYD—Can you give us specific examples of projects that you have put forward that have just not got up?

Mr Coleman—ATSIC has been going for, what, seven years now. Seven years ago we were incorporated. The past three years has been hard here—to me, it seems like that anyway. To find out all this, we had a workshop working on how to get one of us on the ATSIC regional council. What happened was that I got on the board of the regional council.

Mr LLOYD—Are you still on the board?

Mr Coleman—No, I did not make it this year.

Mrs Gela—We have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations here. You have an organisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. We used to feel great because there is the Torres Strait Islander name there, at the back of that.

Mr LLOYD—That is right, that is what ATSIC is. It is the two.

Mrs Gela—But I am not talking about ATSIC; I am just talking about the other organisations. You feel like you could get a job there or your kids could get a job there. But there is nothing there for our kids or for ourselves.

Mr MAREK—Do you think it would be better if you had just one focus rather than all these different bodies—one focus that might be called the Torres Strait regional authority, for instance? Say it was all called that and it all operated under that. Would you not be better off than having all these little minority subgroups that all try to push their little faction groups to get all this money? Would you not be better off with one group of people—getting rid of ATSIC and having your own group of people and running your own show?

Mr Gela—Yes, just the one chief and not too many chiefs.

Mr MAREK—At the moment you have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. There is the ability to have more Aboriginal people on the commission in ATSIC; the Torres Strait Islander people do not get enough votes, so you miss out. You would be better off with your own administration and not all these different subgroups within the Torres Strait Islander people. Just simply, the main body possibly should be set up in the Torres Strait islands because that is where the guardians of your land are. You might have some office branches throughout the country where you can go in and find out what is going on. Finished, that is it.

Mr Gela—You've hit the nail on the head, brother. That is it.

Mr Coleman—I was in the Torres Strait. I reckon it is only fair that we have an input into it or have a separate policy—a Torres Strait Islander policy—up there. We should have a big workshop and the representatives from here go up there to sit down and talk about what is good for the people of Torres Strait. We cannot say that is no good for you because it does not suit us down here.

CHAIR—On that point, say I was living on Torres Strait Island, but I am not a Torres Strait Islander, do you think that I should have a say also in the affairs of the Torres Strait Islander people if I live permanently on Torres Strait Island?

Mr Coleman—Yes. If I see that you are doing things wrong, I will tell you.

Mr LLOYD—One of the problems that I see is the difficulty in identifying the number of Torres Strait Islander people and where they live. That is why I was talking to the chairman earlier about some sort of—

Mr Barsah—Census or something.

Mr LLOYD—Yes, or register or some way of identifying people. In every community I go to, I ask, or other members ask: how many Torres Strait Islander people are there in your community? People say, 'About 50 or 100.' If you had a register or list of those people, it would help communication. Would you feel that that would be better? Would you have any problem with that?

Mr Gela—I ask our organisation in Rockhampton. I have the same problem. How many Torres Strait Islanders are living in central Queensland—that is up to Mackay and down to Winton and Hervey Bay? Mackay does not know either. Everyone lives in houses but to identify that number it is very hard to know unless we have a register.

Mr HOLDING—Do you imagine that problem could be solved by the very structure of ATSIC? Aboriginal communities have a much better future in Australia but that has not stopped them from having a structure. I would have thought that if you were to have a Torres Strait Islander conference where delegates are elected, you register as a

Torres Strait Islander in order to be able to vote. If you do not want to vote and if you do not want to participate, you do not have to participate. That would sort itself out in time. That is the least of the problems.

CHAIR—I refer to the group we met in Brisbane when you and I first met. Is there any division in Australia amongst Torres Strait Islander people living on the mainland about who should represent the mainland Torres Strait Islanders? Before you answer that, there has been a suggestion made informally to me that there is. That is why I wanted to find out. Can you give me some guidance on that? Is it a serious division, if there is one?

Mr HOLDING—I bet there are fewer divisions amongst Torres Strait Islanders than there are amongst members of the Labor Party or members of the Liberal Party.

Mr Gela—There is division. Everybody wants to have control both here on the mainland and in the Torres Strait. As Mr Marek said, whatever that vote or division, we should just have the one body and forget about fighting between the mainland and the Torres Strait. There are too many chiefs. We should have the one body and elect people from here and there to come together.

Mrs Gela—I think most of the organisations have people who have different Torres Strait Islander cultural backgrounds and customs. Some families have different customs from others. That is what is causing the division. Somebody else might have a different custom that the other person does not agree with. Then you get intermarriages, where an eastern Torres Strait Islander might marry a western Torres Strait Islander. Then neither he nor she is part of that section. People get upset and say, 'You don't fit into this area; you're supposed to be over there.' That is what is causing the division. I think you should just have the one body represented.

CHAIR—Getting back to your second home, how are your children getting on? Are they all at school?

Mr Gela—Our organisation is called Saimai. We are for our kids. We sponsor an indigenous little athletics group. All the kids have been going for 12 months now and they have been winning medals. There will be another Cathy Freeman at the Olympics in three years time. My kids are coping well at school but when they play sports their attitudes change. They mix with the wider community and the other kids and their attitude changes. They are all good. My kids dance at school and participate in storytelling and talk about things in the community. They are doing extremely well.

CHAIR—That is nice to hear.

Mr HOLDING—What is the unemployment level amongst Torres Strait Islanders living in Mackay? Is it small or large?

Mr Gela—The railway paid us off. There has been unemployment.

Mr HOLDING—Do you have any idea of the figures, just roughly?

CHAIR—It is high though. Paul, you would know.

Mr MAREK—I am not sure; it is not good.

Mr Gela—You are talking about our age group?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Gela—Where we come from there is not much education.

Mr HOLDING—I am not making a social judgment. I am simply interested to know where unemployment is high. It often tends to be high amongst indigenous people.

Mr Gela—At our national conference no-one mentioned it. None of us know much. It is hard to get a job in the community.

Mr Coleman—I think people here have problems with housing, employment, health and education too. They are trying to put the Torres Strait Islander thing into education. I tell them that they have to get the Torres Strait Islander people in here to tell them; they cannot learn on TV or video. Even the legal system is affected. They have no help in legal aid on Torres Strait Island. I have seen it. I know. Their representative in legal aid is no good. I think it is all around. There is a big legal aid office here but I do not know who they represent. I have been in Gladstone for the last 30 years and have heard nothing about it. They might be all right but how can we get them to come here and represent people? I talk to them every day, trying to arrange this. I do not know what to do now.

CHAIR—It is a big task.

Mr Gela—Aboriginal people mainly have the first chance in particular areas such as health and education. For us Torres Strait Islanders, they say, ‘We have one person to represent you’, but they cannot talk in our broken English or pidgin English or Kulkalag. It is a bit hard. Mr Marek will find that out over the next three years. When he goes to the office he will see that there are no Torres Strait Islander people in most of the offices. That is why we need a separate commission.

CHAIR—Do you have any other matters that you would like to raise with us before we finish this part of the morning’s program? It has been very informative to hear you talk. I think the points you have made have been very clear. You have clarified very clearly your vision for the future. I would like to thank you all sincerely for coming along.

Mr Coleman—I have one last thing to say. When you talk to people in Torres Strait just tell them that we want to work with them very closely and sensibly. That is all.

CHAIR—It is not a takeover.

Mr Coleman—No, it is not a takeover. I see some land owners down here. We are the land owners down here. We have land up there.

CHAIR—In all the evidence we have had and the submissions, there have been very few islanders who have given an indication that they do not want the mainland Torres Strait Islanders involved. There have been a couple. One was very strong in his remarks. I will tell you privately in a minute what he said. Most Torres Strait Islanders living on the island have a very strong bond. I still hear George Mye's words in my ears. George said, 'Lou, please make sure the bridge is there.' We all accept that as a big challenge—to build a good bridge that will last.

Mr Gela—I have one last question. Rockhampton is a main area in central Queensland. Would it be possible—I am talking about a long time now—to have a Torres Strait Islander office? Our organisation and another organisation tried to link up only in the last three or four years. We have been getting feedback. But we have been missing out in the last 20 years. We need something for the long term. I have to talk to Mr Marek later when everything settles down. We put in a submission three years ago, asking for an office, but no go. I think we can handle our affairs from now.

CHAIR—Paul, would you like to respond to that.

Mr MAREK—This is what I have been talking about. I have spoken about it a few times here today. This is my opinion; it may not be the opinion of the rest of the committee. Until you can tidy up the operations of ATSIC and get better representation for the Torres Strait people, I can see that you are out on a limb and that is where you are going to stay until the whole thing is fixed up. The best thing you can do is have your own body—maybe a head office up there in the Torres Strait and branches throughout the place. There is a majority of people in the Mackay and Rocky area. I think you need to have a branch office here somewhere where you can directly liaise with the people up there in the islands. It is as simple as that. That is where I am coming on board for you—100 per cent.

CHAIR—We will take note of what Paul said. I think the time has come for me to thank you again for your attendance today and for your obvious friendship and interest in our work. It is very encouraging. As we go on to Torres Strait Island, you have charged the batteries for us. I appreciate that very much.

Charles, thank you very much for the submission that you have prepared, which is now part of the transcript. That is very good.

Before I close this part of the meeting, I would also like to record the committee's appreciation to the manager of the airport facility here for their hospitality and enabling us to use these very nice facilities. Thank you once again. We look forward to meeting up again.

Committee adjourned at 10.38 a.m.

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER
AFFAIRS

Reference: Greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders

MACKAY

Tuesday, 6 May 1997

PROOF HANSARD REPORT

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CANBERRA

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

Members:

Mr Lieberman (Chair)

Mr Albanese	Mr Lloyd
Mr Campbell	Mr Marek
Mr Dondas	Mr Melham
Mr Entsch	Dr Nelson
Mr Holding	Mr Pyne
Mr Katter	Mr Quick
	Mr Tony Smith

Matter referred for inquiry into and report on:

Whether the people of the Torres Strait would benefit from a greater degree of autonomy;

If so, what forms should a greater degree of autonomy take; and

What implications would greater autonomy have for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Torres Strait region including whether the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Commission or the Torres Strait Regional Authority should represent the interests of such residents.

CONDITION OF DISTRIBUTION

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WITNESSES

MABO, Mr Mario, 2 Gray Court, Beaconsfield, North Mackay, Queensland
4740 371

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER AFFAIRS

Greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders

MACKAY

Tuesday, 6 May 1997

Present

Mr Lieberman (Chair)

Mr Albanese

Mr Marek

Mr Holding

Mr Tony Smith

Mr Lloyd

The committee met at 1.10 p.m.

Mr Lieberman took the chair.

CHAIR—The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs is particularly pleased to finally get to this city after our encounter with the cyclone at our last attempt. There are many Torres Strait Islander people who live in this city and we hope to hear some of their views today. The comments of mainland Torres Strait Islanders will be very important to the inquiry. This is the sixth public hearing of the inquiry. We have had many informal discussions with Torres Strait Islanders in the Strait region and on the mainland. We have also received 34 written submissions.

I would like to take this opportunity to say just a few words about the inquiry. Terms like ‘self-determination’ and ‘a greater degree of autonomy’ mean different things to different people. The object of this inquiry is to find a meaning for a greater degree of autonomy which can satisfy the aspirations of the communities, representative bodies, governments and all others involved—taking into consideration the views of people who live in the Torres Strait and those Torres Strait Islanders who live on the mainland.

The outcome of the inquiry may not satisfy everyone. Some may find the process too slow and frustrating but it is not all bad news. What I can promise you is that members of this committee will bring to the inquiry immense goodwill towards Torres Strait Islanders wherever they may live, will listen carefully to what you have to say and will be searching for solutions which will bring benefits to all Torres Strait Islanders—and we will do this to the best of our ability.

MABO, Mr Mario, 2 Gray Court, Beaconsfield, North Mackay, Queensland 4740

CHAIR—Welcome. I now invite you to make an opening statement before members of the committee proceed with questions.

Mr Mabo—I have two suggestions. First, When ATSIC funding comes in, Torres Strait Island people only get a crust. That is one reason for the Torres Strait people, both in the Torres Strait Islands and in urban communities around Australia, to have separate funding, to be recognised in Australian communities and in the Torres Strait Islands as well. Second, because we are different nationalities, we would like to be recognised as Torres Strait Islanders throughout the Torres Strait and in urban communities as well.

CHAIR—Do you see ATSIC as being inappropriate to continue to represent adequately the Torres Strait Islander people?

Mr Mabo—Yes. ATSIC is supposed to be a Torres Strait Island organisation as well as an Aboriginal organisation. You walk inside some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and you can only see Aboriginal people working. There is only a handful of us working in those departments. In some other organisations you will not see any. The ones you do see can be false people. I mean, they came in the name of Torres Strait Islanders but they are other Islanders. There is a lack of my people put in those positions and there is no feedback from the departments to my community here in Mackay or Rockhampton or Central Queensland. That is why we want autonomy, to be recognised in the whole of Australia.

CHAIR—You believe that that can only be done if there is a new separate organisation for Torres Strait Islanders?

Mr Mabo—That is what we really need. We need to go through a Torres Strait Island office so that we can contact our own organisation and be fair with one another.

CHAIR—For my information, how many Torres Strait Islander people live in this area of Queensland?

Mr Mabo—Do you mean in the Mackay district?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Mabo—I think roughly 100 communities plus their descendants.

CHAIR—How do those people get their voices heard with state and federal governments and ATSIC, which is federal?

Mr Mabo—By individual people that go to ATSIC offices, talk to the officers who are in charge, like the field officers. Field officers go around and talk to the community. The individual community goes to them but the officers never follow what the individual people want. Only a few of us are continually banging on their doors and saying, ‘Hey, you’d better hear us. This is our need on behalf of our people.’ But not all of us that go—

CHAIR—Assuming, and I am sure this would be the case, that you are one of those Torres Strait Islander people who have been banging on the doors and have been insisting that you be heard, who are the people you have been going to to be heard in this area? What positions do they hold?

Mr Mabo—Especially office bearers in different departments—

CHAIR—Of ATSIC? Or what?

Mr Mabo—Some of them are office bearers of ATSIC and they are other government officials as well.

CHAIR—State government?

Mr Mabo—Yes.

CHAIR—Could it be said though that Aboriginal people also have the same difficulty as Torres Strait Islander people from this area when they go to seek some help or to put an idea forward?

Mr Mabo—Yes, some Aboriginal people as well.

CHAIR—What I am trying to do is clarify whether what you are saying is that it is because the Torres Strait Islander people are in a minority that they are not getting their voice heard or whether you are actually saying it is all indigenous people—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—who are not getting their voice heard in this area. Could you clarify that for me, please?

Mr Mabo—In the Mackay area, there is only a little Aboriginal community here. There is a lot of South Sea Islander community here—the majority of it. Second to South Sea Islanders are the Torres Strait Islander community. The Aboriginal community is few.

I think in the Mackay area, there are some Aboriginal organisations, but they are not doing the right thing to the Torres Strait Islander community here. I am only new here in the Mackay area, but in Rockhampton, I know my Rockhampton community—because it is only a handful of Torres Strait Islander community living in the Rockhampton area.

CHAIR—Could you give us some examples of particular issues put to ATSIC or the Aboriginal groups for help where you found you were not listened to or nothing happened as a result?

Mr Mabo—I am going to talk about the Rockhampton area. For years we have been trying to establish some Torres Strait Islander organisation in Rockhampton—for 10 years—but nothing has been done. Only two of our organisations just started recently a couple of years ago—two or three years ago. One is Wongai and the other is Saima. Wongai is exactly like the Dreamtime Cultural Centre except that it is for cultural activity. Saima means the outrigger of a canoe. It is a networking organisation that just started.

We have been fighting with the Dreamtime Cultural Centre. I have put a lot into the Dreamtime Cultural Centre—that is why it has been built up. I have been there from the start. The building is supposed to be split in half, an Aboriginal section and a Torres Strait Island section. But when you see it, there is only an Aboriginal section. There is nothing of the Torres Strait Islands. The t-shirt prints are only Aboriginal. The only good Torres Strait Islands part in the Dreamtime Cultural Centre is our Torres Strait Island village.

We asked that there be two cultural officers: one for the Aboriginal side, one for the Torres Strait Island side. But nothing has been done. The one cultural officer covers both cultures, but there are two different cultures, two different languages, two different people. In the Torres Strait Island village they built a dugong for us to play with, to shut us up. They are building other buildings around the dreamtime area. There is a theatre restaurant in the Dreamtime Cultural Centre itself. In the theatre there are Aboriginal paintings instead of two types of paintings. We have our painting as well. And we Torres Strait Island people perform. Sometimes we perform; sometimes we do not. I am a cultural person. I cannot perform with the Aboriginal paintings as my background. I love to be like at home, with my paintings in the background—Torres Strait headdresses, drums, shakers, rattlers all that. That is why there are two people not happy with one another.

CHAIR—Have you tried to talk this over?

Mr Mabo—We have talked. There is nothing. I have given up hope. The only thing to do is for us Torres Strait Island people to walk out of the Dreamtime Cultural Centre. You go inside the dugong and there are all artefacts there. There is no new artefacts. We still make them today. Our culture is very rich and alive here in Queensland. The Dreamtime Cultural Centre is getting those boomerangs made in Japan. If you go and buy a little boomerang for a souvenir you can see that it was made in Japan. We can make ours today. These sorts of things. That is why I am not happy with it.

CHAIR—I was interested in the advice on how much influence Torres Strait Island people on the mainland should have in the affairs of Torres Strait Islanders on the islands. Have you any thoughts on that?

Mr Mabo—I attended some national conferences of Torres Strait Islanders in different areas, and we have talked about the question of us the urban Torres Strait Islanders that left a long time ago if the Torres Strait Islands go. My suggestion is that we must have the linkage between the urban people and the people in Torres Strait or the bridge across so that can go back to Mer Island and back. We do not want them to be the Torres Strait Islands themselves, for us to just carry the name of Torres Strait Island and for the bridge to be broken. I want the linkage to still be with Torres Strait Island people living here in urban cities and the Torres Strait Islands themselves.

CHAIR—Is that a cultural linkage?

Mr Mabo—Cultural linkage, family linkage, because the people who are living here in urban cities own those islands, we own land, we are the land-owners of all of the Torres Strait Islands in Torres Strait. If there is a separation, what about our land, our forefathers' land? Take Mer Island, for instance. I am a Mabo descendant, the heir and the older son of Eddie Mabo. What will happen if they become separate? No-one will stop me going to Lass village, because I was born and brought up there and I left school there.

CHAIR—Let me see if I have understood you correctly. If there were a separate authority representing the Torres Strait Islanders in the islands, you would like the mainland Torres Strait Islanders to be guaranteed that their existing rights to go to the island would be preserved—

Mr Mabo—Yes.

CHAIR—And that your cultural links would be strengthened and maintained?

Mr Mabo—Yes.

CHAIR—What about the third aspect, Mr Mabo, of telling the people on the islands how to run the affairs of the island? How much say, if any, should mainland Torres Strait Islanders have in that regard?

Mr Mabo—Mainly, when the urban Torres Strait Islanders go over there they have little to say because they are not living on the islands any more and they have made their homes here. But if I go and stay for two years, by the law of the community council I can then have my say about Mer Island or I can run for the council election or I can do anything else on that island. But during those two years I have no say. We can give an idea or a suggestion to the island people in the Torres Strait but we cannot do anything because they are the people who live there.

Mr ALBANESE—It is unclear to me whether that is as you see it now or whether that is your preferred option. It is just a bit unclear to me, Mr Mabo.

Mr Mabo—What do you mean by—

Mr ALBANESE—It is unclear to me whether you are saying that that is the situation now. Is that right?

Mr Mabo—This the situation now, yes.

Mr ALBANESE—Is that how you would like it to stay, though?

Mr Mabo—Those islands concern us. We want the right to have a say about our islands and about our people who live in the islands as well. Families live on the islands. We would like to have every right, together with the people who live on the Torres Strait Islands: the right of making suggestions, the right of speaking.

Mr HOLDING—Is it just the right of speaking or the right of making a suggestion? It is understandable that people living on the islands—although there are family and cultural relations—say, ‘Look, we’re here. You’re living some miles away.’

Mr Mabo—Yes, that is what they are saying now.

Mr HOLDING—‘We don’t think it is fair that you should have an equal say with people who actually live on the island about the organisation and the government of this island,’ is it not? What is our answer to that? That will be put to us. What do we say when we recount the view that is put to us by people living on the mainland that there is a cultural connection and a genuine concern about the future of the island, but that there is also a question of what sort of structure we could create which would not get a level of opposition if we were to say, ‘Well, the people outside, people not living on the island, should have a say in the creation of a structure’? Are you saying you should have equal say or some say?

Our problem is: how do we create a structure to allow those things to happen? Are you saying you should have some say but that it should be advisory? Are you saying that people living outside the island should have an equal vote to people living on the island?

Mr Mabo—It is a hard decision, but we would like to have a say exactly like the people who live in the islands—a right to a say—because it affects us. If we ever talk about the Torres Strait Islands, it affects us here.

Mr HOLDING—Have you, as islander people, ever had a conference where the people who are the elected leaders of the various islands meet with the people who are the leaders of the Torres Strait Island communities on the mainland? Have you ever sat down at a conference and tried to discuss problems about the islands, the maintenance of culture and some of the issues that you have raised with us today?

Mr Mabo—Yes, we did have a couple of conferences. The people on the mainland always say that the bridge must be there.

Mr HOLDING—Yes, we understand that, but when was the last conference that took place between mainland representatives and the people who are the representatives of the people living on the islands?

Mr Mabo—We had our Torres Strait national conference in 1994 at Sydney University. That is the last time I attended.

Mr HOLDING—Did any suggestions come out of that conference?

Mr Mabo—They talked about the Torres Strait representatives. They talked about autonomy. When we broke up into discussion groups, people came out with ‘linkage’: that there must be linkage between our urban people and the people of the Torres Strait.

Mr HOLDING—I do not think there is an argument about linkage. The problem we have as a committee is how you formalise and structure that. Was there any discussion about what structure could be created to enable that to happen?

Mr Mabo—In 1994 at Sydney University we had the Torres Strait national conference. That was the last time I attended.

Mr HOLDING—Did any suggestions come out of that conference?

Mr Mabo—The Torres Strait representatives were talking about autonomy. When we broke into discussion groups people came out with the idea of linkage. There must be linkage between our urban people and people of the Torres Strait Islands.

Mr HOLDING—I do not think there is an argument about linkage. The problem we have as a committee is how you formalise and structure that. Was there any discussion about what structure could be created to enable that to happen?

Mr Mabo—I think there was. Some work on structure has been done by the leaders of the Torres Strait Islands like coordinating counsellors and the executive members of different organisations here in Queensland. All over the state the leaders of various organisations, especially the chairs of different groups like INA in Brisbane and Magani in Townsville, and the executive members get together and have their discussions. Some of us got feedback from them. Some people get feedback; some do not.

Mr HOLDING—What is the Islander population here?

Mr Mabo—I think there are about 100.

Mr HOLDING—Do you have a local organisation?

Mr Mabo—We have a local organisation here. It is known in the community as the Meriam Co-op. There is also a council of elders. It is called Tarim Le, which is the heads, the elders.

Mr HOLDING—Are they local?

Mr Mabo—Yes.

Mr HOLDING—Do they meet regularly. Do they have conferences or just cultural events?

Mr Mabo—They meet regularly. They will meet on 3 June, and the 1 July celebration will come. They will meet and discuss how they will run it here for this community.

Mr MAREK—You know that there are many organisations and groups up there in the Torres Strait. How would you feel if they basically all operated under one umbrella rather than having all these different identities?

Mr Mabo—My suggestion is that if there were one umbrella it would be good for all the Torres Strait Island people.

Mr MAREK—And step away from ATSIC?

Mr Mabo—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you Mr Mabo. Your evidence closes the formal side of the hearing in this city. We wish you well in the work that you do. I hope that we are going to be joined shortly by some of your brothers and sisters in public meeting in an informal atmosphere. There is no more formal evidence to be given.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Lloyd):

That this committee authorises publication of the evidence given to it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 1.45 p.m.