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**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

Reference: Capacity building in Indigenous communities

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

Wednesday, 9 July 2003

Members: Mr Wakelin (*Chair*), Mr John Cobb, Mrs Draper, Ms Gillard, Mr Haase, Ms Hoare, Dr Lawrence, Mr Lloyd, Mr Snowden and Mr Tollner

Members in attendance: Mr John Cobb, Ms Hoare and Mr Wakelin

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

Strategies to assist Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders better manage the delivery of services within their communities. In particular, the committee will consider building the capacities of:

- (a) community members to better support families, community organisations and representative councils so as to deliver the best outcomes for individuals, families and communities;
- (b) Indigenous organisations to better deliver and influence the delivery of services in the most effective, efficient and accountable way; and
- (c) government agencies so that policy direction and management structures will improve individual and community outcomes for Indigenous people.

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Committee met at 9.32 a.m.**DREISE, Mr Tony, Executive Director, Strategic Partnership Office, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy****FLICK, Ms Barbara, Executive Director, Policy Directorate, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy**

CHAIR—Welcome. I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry into capacity building in Indigenous communities. We have been going for just over 12 months and have visited many parts of the country. We will be in the west in a month, and we have South Australia and Alice to go to. These visits, of course, connect with the various opportunities that we have in Canberra in sitting weeks to gather evidence from departments, ATSIC, the military et cetera. It is all very valuable for us—particularly in respect of our visit to Palm Island yesterday. Would you like to make a short opening statement? We have about an hour to chew over what we have done in the last couple of days. We went to Palm Island yesterday with some apprehension, given its reputation and the difficulties there, but we came away—I did personally, anyway—greatly encouraged in a whole lot of ways. There are huge issues, but I was greatly encouraged, which is not what I had expected.

Mr Dreise—I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak today. I apologise for Frank Rockett, our director-general. He has been called away today and is unable to meet with you. As you know, earlier this year through the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, Judy Spence, the Queensland government provided your committee with a submission on community capacity building. That submission pretty much unpacked the strategic policy directions of the Queensland government in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs.

I suppose our starting comment would be that our strategic approach is contained in a strategy called Meeting Challenges, Making Choices. Meeting Challenges, Making Choices was launched last April following a very extensive study undertaken by Justice Tony Fitzgerald through the Cape York Justice Study. Meeting Challenges, Making Choices is the Queensland government's response to that. The No. 1 element of the strategy is alcohol management. What the Cape York Justice Study unveiled, in no uncertain terms and very graphically—and, in fact, it reinforced previous research on similar topics, including that by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence—that alcohol is the No. 1 issue confronting remote Aboriginal communities on the mainland of Queensland. There are eight domains in which the Queensland government will pursue its policy agenda, but Meeting Challenges, Making Choices has alcohol management as its first cab off the rank.

What we have devised in Queensland is an alcohol management program, or AMP. The program has four elements and we are confident that they will go a long way towards curbing alcohol abuse in these communities. The first element is the formal and legislative establishment, for the first time, of community justice groups. In September last year, the Queensland parliament passed two new pieces of legislation. The first was an amendment to the Community Services (Aborigines) Act and the second was a new bill—the Indigenous liquor licensing act—which passed into legislation. The amendment to the Community Services

(Aborigines) Act provides, for first time, statutory backing and legislative support for community justice groups. We are confident that those sorts of alternative governance mechanisms are absolutely critical to Aboriginal communities.

From 1984 until last year, the only statutory bodies in deed of grant and trust communities were the councils. The community justice groups now provide communities with, I suppose, another supporting pillar to social and economic development. The community justice groups are particularly important in providing, revitalising and re-energising Indigenous law in both of its forms—law and lore. It is a key pillar in terms of restoring justice in communities by applying the first principle of justice—that is, it should be administered by your peers. So, for the first time, community justice groups will be recognised in legislation. Ten groups on the mainland have now been submitted to our minister to be processed through into statutory regulation.

CHAIR—So each individual council has to come separately to the minister for the legislation to apply? It is a request from a council, not a blanket?

Mr Dreise—No, the council is not involved in this process per se. Community justice groups are self-nominating and there is a community-driven process of recognition. The only criterion that the state applies—

CHAIR—I am sorry; I thought you said that there were 10 councils in the initial application.

Mr Dreise—No, they are community justice groups, not councils. Ten community justice groups have now been formed. The second element of the alcohol management plan is the establishment of alcohol management planning processes, where community justice groups, in consultation with communities, devise what restrictions on alcohol are going to apply in the community, whether it is in the form of takeaways or bring-ins to the communities. If there is a licensed premises in the community, the community justice group, through the alcohol management plan, will stipulate what the hours of trading will be, what sort of alcohol is sold and in what quantities.

CHAIR—Can we come to the specifics—the issue of Palm Island? Yesterday we listened with admiration to the community justice group and we saw the strength of the people there and the commitment that they have to what they see as their future and their problems. They had a frustration about—is it the Fitzgerald group? I had better check my names. I should have it. Anyway, they had a frustration with the partnership and choice issue. They felt as though they had been offered this opportunity but could not really go on with it. There were restrictions; they were really struggling to get involved. They explained the grog running to us. They told me the going price was \$120 a slab.

When we flew out to Palm Island, half of the cargo on the aircraft appeared to be slabs. That would be very expensive. When we came into Townsville, there was another significant load of grog ready to go out to Palm Island. Other committee members might tidy up some of the detail, but as I read it they felt that more could be done—it is a beer only community, and we are talking about community ownership—about the grog running and the restrictions. We saw it with our own eyes yesterday, and I was somewhat staggered. I have never seen that before. They are running grog—as my colleague reminded me, possibly legitimately—but why was that grog

not going in on the barge, at probably a quarter of what it cost to put it on that aircraft? I know it is expensive.

So I raise that with you and I would be interested in any response you would like to make, because we saw with our own eyes yesterday—and I have a photograph of it just to remind me—that very issue the community justice group was talking about. I could not ignore it. I would love to ignore it, but I could not, because there it was. I saw it with my own eyes. Can you hear what I am saying? I hear these people and their frustration. I hear them saying, ‘Yes, we are offered this opportunity and the rhetoric of the Fitzgerald inquiry, but we are powerless still and we are really concerned about this.’ Mr Cobb has something to add to that.

Mr JOHN COBB—The point they were making was that, as the chair said, they were empowered to do certain things but, when they came up with methods of doing them, they were pretty much countermanded and not allowed to go on with them. I realise there are other issues on Palm Island apart from the justice committee, and action probably has to be taken in other areas—the council is probably one of those areas—but they feel as though they were told to do something and empowered to do it and then, the minute they did, it was pretty much knocked on the head. If that is right then I would be very interested to know why, because I can imagine how frustrating it would be. It is frustrating enough from this side, trying to do what we have to do. We are normally not given the impression we can do something and then told we cannot. I realise there may be special circumstances attached to Palm Island that also affect this, but that was very much their frustration.

CHAIR—Meeting Challenges, Making Choices—can you hear what we are saying? I am glad Mr Cobb said that, because there are two parts to this. There is the expectation, and there are noble ideas. But then with my own eyes I saw what I think the community justice group really want to challenge—this grog running, at \$120 a slab—and yet they are powerless.

Mr JOHN COBB—Like the chair, I was very impressed with the justice group.

CHAIR—I will give you an opportunity to respond, and then we will move on. But I think we needed to report to you what we saw yesterday.

Mr Dreise—We need to take that on notice. Not having been there yesterday, we are not privy to the discussion, but I will make two points in response. I think what I heard is that there is a frustration amongst community justice groups outside of Cape York. The government, in its Meeting Challenges, Making Choices response, took a very hard decision and said, ‘Alcohol is a problem for all deed of grant in trust communities, not just those inside the cape.’ So of course Palm Island was affected, as were Mornington Island, Doomadgee, Cherbourg and Woorabinda.

On the specific matter of sly-grogging, community justice groups of course do not have the responsibility for policing the alcohol management plan. The Queensland Police Service and the liquor licensing division of the government have that responsibility, and that has been reinforced at law through the new legislation. All I can say in terms of what the community justice group reported yesterday is that we will need to feed that back to the Queensland Police Service and the liquor licensing division.

CHAIR—Before we get too hard on the police service, I would be interested in what opportunities are in the Liquor Licensing Act, because I suspect—in fact, I think I know—there is an issue for the police in how they can actually implement the act. These are all state matters, but we saw the community justice group yesterday so we wanted to have a discussion about it—certainly I did. I have so many other things I want to ask you and work through that I do not want to get hung up on it, but because you were talking about it I wanted to come in with that.

In terms of the magistrate and the diversion programs, there is a serious question about the effectiveness of diversion programs. That is another issue. I kept asking how much of the Commonwealth Tough on Drugs strategy money has been accessed by areas like Palm Island. There is an excellent police officer on Palm Island. He is a first-rate sergeant and he has significant experience in a lot of communities all over Queensland. There is no-one more respected on that island than the police sergeant. The soldiers on the AACAP program there are fast gaining respect as well. I just want to report to you that the police themselves, I think, are doing a first-rate job. I think it is the interface that we saw. Why would all those slabs of grog be coming out on aircraft when we know the barge would have to be cheaper? It might be proven that the barge is not cheaper, but I think it might be. I will leave that with you. You can give a quick response and then we need to move on.

Mr Dreise—I suppose your question has highlighted the absolutely critical nature of good relationships between community justice groups, the Queensland police and the liquor licensing division. I think that all players are on a relatively new field and these things will need to be ironed out. Those relationships generally are good and we are confident that they will only strengthen. On that specific matter, we would be keen for our departmental officers to talk to the community justice group, the local police and the liquor licensing division to see what can be done.

Mr JOHN COBB—I think that in this case the relationship between the police and the community justice group is excellent, but it also needs the cooperation of other spheres of government, et cetera, for them to be able to enact what they agree on, because neither the police nor the community justice group actually have the power to make it law—or local law, if you like. They only have the ability to decide what should happen. It still requires the cooperation of other government levels.

Ms HOARE—I could add to that. We also had general discussions—I do not think the fellow gave a formal presentation that is recorded in *Hansard*—with the fellow who runs the rehab unit on Palm Island following our public hearing yesterday. It followed discussions with the community justice group about diversionary programs and programs to follow on from rehab. Driving around, we heard that the rehab program over there has excellent results. I think Deniece said she would not like to go in there! But there did not seem to be a lot of follow-up support from maybe the Queensland health department. The COAG program is in place on Cape York. The state government departments really need to be drawn into that coordination. I noticed that in your submission you talked about the state-wide agreements in the 10-year partnership and the eight priority areas. How can that maybe link in with some of the stuff that the community justice group and the community seem to be crying out for on Palm Island?

CHAIR—No doubt Palm Island has had a list of committees and experts over a long period of time, and we do not want to add to that. We just bring personal glimpses of what we saw

yesterday because it is fresh in our minds. We need to move on to other things because we have all of Queensland to deal with.

Mr Dreise—The other elements of the alcohol management program are the establishment of Indigenous liquor licence boards and the transfers of licence. The Queensland government has taken the position that councils being licensees of liquor premises represents a significant conflict of interest. Local councils, or local governments more broadly, at the most fundamental level are of course concerned with the welfare of local communities, so what the government has decided in the case of communities that do have licensed premises is that those licences will be transferred to a community liquor licence board. With Meeting Challenges, Making Choices, there are a seven other elements that are of a more strategic nature, but the Queensland government position is that to allow capacity to flourish, you need to eradicate the aspects that are incapacitating Aboriginal communities, and there is none more so than alcohol. I do not know if you want to add to that, Barbara?

Ms Flick—I will let you finish your address and then I will speak.

CHAIR—Can I suggest that you only take another couple of minutes and then we can get into the general discussion. Barbara might like to have a couple of minutes as well.

Mr Dreise—There are a few other elements of our strategy that I would like to highlight. The most significant is negotiation tables, which will be the key enablers for both the 10-year partnership agreement and for the Meeting Challenges, Making Choices program, allowing them to flourish. Put simply, that means providing the forum where government officials can meet and negotiate with communities. That is another program that Queensland has adopted, where a CEO or a director-general of a state agency is a champion for a community. They will chair a government team to meet and negotiate with communities. It is based on the work of Noel Pearson and others and builds on the principles of reciprocity and shared responsibility and is also reflected in the COAG trials, so the Commonwealth is on board as well.

In the case of Cape York, we have established a Cape York strategy unit which is, I suppose, a first in Indigenous affairs, if not in Australian public policy more broadly, in that it is made up of interchange officers from a series of government agencies. We also have a Commonwealth officer in that unit and we believe that is a key enabler for getting a whole-of-government coordination and commitment, and that is vitally important.

The last thing I will point out is that in Queensland we are currently developing a new strategic policy framework. Over the course of the last few years we have had 10-year partnerships, we have had Meeting Challenges, Making Choices, which deals more concretely with issues of alcohol and associated violence, and we have also had Cape York Partnerships, which talks a lot about the principles of shared responsibility and reciprocity. We are looking to wrap and bundle all that up with supporting governance arrangements, not only in terms of governance in relation to the Queensland public sector but also governance in further strengthening the Commonwealth-state relationship. You will have seen towards the back of our submission that we attach a great deal of importance to the statement of Commonwealth collaborative activity. We are trialling that commitment through our work in Cape York, and we have very good relationships, particularly with the Commonwealth Department of Employment

and Workplace Relations, which is the Commonwealth sponsoring agency for the COAG trial. I will leave it at that.

Ms Flick—I want to put a human face to what we are attempting to do here. I am Yawallyi and Gamilaroi—that is the people that I belong to. I have spent the last 30 years of my life working in western New South Wales, Central Australia, the Kimberley, the Top End and Cape York. Through my experience, clearly the biggest issue for us is alcohol. Queensland is the first state that has attempted to make radical changes around the supply-and-demand issues of alcohol for Aboriginal people. It is such a critical issue that it requires legislative backing.

We have grown up in a community that has been materially poor—I grew up on the river bank in a tin house with dirt floors—but our fathers were shearers; they had employment. Education had been fought for and gained in western New South Wales at that time. Education was seen as important. We went to boarding school because our parents recognised that, to live in the world that we lived in, the future was to have an education, but also to know about who we were and where we had come from.

Marginalisation has been a big issue. We were marginalised then. People were not allowed to live in towns, so we lived on the edges of towns in those days. There is still a great degree of marginalisation that exists on deed of grant in trust communities that needs to be addressed. This certainly will be addressed through the green paper on community governance in Queensland. There are big questions being asked here. In the 21st century, should people be living in these discrete communities under a separate legislation or should we start talking about how inclusive we can make people's lives in this state so that the opportunities for all Queenslanders are the same? I suppose that is where we are heading.

The Fitzgerald study has been a long time coming. We have all known for years that alcohol is our biggest issue. There is a lot of taboo around talking about it. There is still a lot of taboo about talking about the abuse of children. So that was a long time coming. One year since the government's response to that study is a very short period of time, but I can tell you that the changes that I have seen in that short 12 months have been enormous. The biggest change has to take place in your head. My mother and my aunt desegregated the picture theatre at Collarenebri when I was 10 years old and forced the bloke to take down the ropes. For years after, our people still sat behind the ropes. Even though the ropes were not there any more, they still sat in those same seats. So I think it takes time for people to understand that they have power and to take hold of that power.

This week is particularly important to me—NAIDOC has chosen the theme of Our Children Our Future. We have to look to the future and we have to try and create a better society for them. I suppose in our minds as older people we are still caught up somewhat in the old days. The government is trying to address these things in Queensland. We had three major policy frameworks and a 10-year partnership that covered those eight areas that we talked about. We are working through those issues. We have a justice agreement in this state now that is signed between representatives of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the government. We have very ambitious goals around that, including a 50 per cent reduction in incarceration rates. We set the target high, and the people set the target high, because we want to aim high. There is a whole lot of work happening within government around that.

The law and justice CEOs committees are dealing with these issues about diversion and deferral. Community justice groups are taking a very strong role. I would like to tender to the inquiry a set of videos that we worked with with community justice groups that talks about the amazing skills that they have and the work that they do in their own communities—up until now without legislative backing. If you live in one of these communities where there are a lot of vested interests and the community councils are rife with nepotism, it is really hard for a group without any power to make any changes. But legislative backing has allowed them to do that. Public sector reform has been a major issue for us, so you are right about raising those issues. We are trying hard to work better together with the other agencies—liquor licensing, police, the health department and ATSIC. We have a senior officers group. We have a CEOs committee that provides six-monthly reports to cabinet on these communities and the activities that are happening, including economic development activities.

Regarding the ‘government champions’ concept, I talk to my colleagues around the country and they cannot believe that directors-general actually champion these communities. My experience of 30 years in the NGO sector is that a lot of people thought that if you went to the receptionist and they knocked back your submission that was the end of the story. Mr Wakelin and I met up in Broken Hill when I worked in Wilcannia. The relationship you need to have at a local and a federal and a state ministerial level is important to bring about those changes, so public sector reform is incredibly important to us.

The changes that have taken place so rapidly are immense. I sat with my director-general and another director-general who champions a community to have a discussion the other day. The great passion and the understanding of the other directors-general about what it is really like to live out there—what does it really look like; what has been the experience of people—has grown. They are thinking about how we can use government resources to achieve what the community requires. For instance, there was a discussion about a community that said they wanted a police presence, but not a seven-days-a-week one. They did not really need a police presence in that community but, in order to support the community justice group and the enforcement issues around the alcohol restrictions, they needed it. So there was a discussion around bringing in the police from the nearby central town for a couple of days a week and building a little building in the middle of the community where you could have a recreation centre for the children—sport and rec would contribute to that. The police wanted to put in an activity centre. So there is now talk of sharing and pooling resources.

CHAIR—We saw the new plans for the police yesterday—

Ms Flick—At Palm Island.

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Flick—I worked in Cape York from 1994 to 1998 and I have seen changes since then. We were pushing uphill in the battle to get any resources, but now there is goodwill. I think there are two important elements to this: the political will of government in Queensland is such that you do not have to push things up anymore—it really does give you a lot of space to move to make these reforms—and there is always the will of the people to try and make things better. I believe that has always existed. When you bring those two things together, you have an opportunity to make real change.

If I can just wrap up, what we are looking to do is integrate the three major policy frameworks that we have, and to go beyond that. We have a performance measurement system in place. We can measure any of these changes now. We are using the MCATSIA-COAG measurement framework and we can demonstrate clearly that there have been some changes in the communities that have introduced the alcohol management plans. But there is an issue about it. It is not just the government of Queensland and Indigenous people who need to have a partnership or a relationship; it is the private sector and the philanthropic sector as well. When you look at who benefits from the land base that we had 150 years ago, it is not just the government that has benefited.

We are putting negotiations on the table with the other parties. The mechanism of negotiation tables, which Tony will probably talk more about, is moving away from consulting with Aboriginal people. We have been consulted with for all our lives. If you have a problem, the fact that you can get your government champion or a government senior official to bring a group of agencies together on one side of the table, with you and your community on the other side, to nut out a solution, is a radical change. I chose to work in the Public Service at this point in time. I have been here for about 18 months and I am truly excited about the changes that I have seen and the opportunities for the future, understanding that a whole lot of work still needs to be done. I think that what is happening in Queensland is very exciting and it is probably going to show the way ahead for the other states.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Barbara. I share your optimism in a broader context because I think there are so many opportunities, although it is looking a little bit untidy in some areas, and I think we all know what I am referring to. ATSI has got a few hassles but I think the opportunities that are being created now are hugely significant. I told the minister the other day that, from a federal perspective, it is the most exciting time in Aboriginal affairs in the 10 years I have been in parliament because I see there are some opportunities opening up for COAG, the Cape York Partnership and for philanthropic corporate sector involvement.

There are three or four areas I will touch on quickly and then my colleagues will come into the discussion. It is probably a bit early yet, but I wondered about what has occurred in the COAG discussions and whether people are starting to define clearer areas of responsibility. Your submission and many others talk about the nature of our federation and the overlapping that occurs. It seems to me that in the COAG arrangements one of those clear challenges is to try to define who is doing what and how it is done and then to set priorities. I wondered whether either of you could offer anything on that. You have set alcohol as a priority and that is entirely appropriate.

With the Cape York Partnership program, we were quite disappointed; we thought we were going to meet with Noel Pearson. Many MPs came from all over Australia to meet with Noel Pearson in Cairns and it was a no-show, so we were deeply disappointed by that. But it is not just about one person; that is the first thing to acknowledge. But the principles that Noel is able to enthuse people about and challenge them on and bring new thinking to are the exciting aspect. So there is this issue about moving beyond the leader to community involvement. For me that seems to be critical. We are but the humble backbench of the parliament; we are not the Tony Abbotts and the Noel Pearsons but we like to think we have a role as well and that we can add to the debate and, at the very least, backfill and tidy up the loose ends and bring forward things that

need to be brought forward. So I will put a plea in and I would welcome a response: it is not just about the elite leadership; it is about everybody.

I want to talk about education. I could talk about the Collins report and I could talk about the discussion within ATSIC at the moment and the review of ATSIC. I will not even start to try to deal with the issue of sexual violence; the Prime Minister has got something going on that and we will see where that goes. I think that is essential. Mick Dodson has been immensely helpful on that as well.

Moving on to COAG, how are we going on the priorities? Does anyone have anything on that? How do you feel that process is going? What are its strengths and weaknesses? We agree with the principles but, as I said to my people in the Pitjantjatjara just a few weeks ago, it all sounds good, but we have heard it all before and until I see it I will not believe it. I am as cynical as that and I think is a healthy cynicism because as a local member I have heard it all before to a degree. This is more exciting because it walks the talk a little more. So can we talk about how you think it is going, where you think it is at and how we are going to set some of those priorities?

Mr Dreise—With the COAG trial, like anything else, you have to crawl before you walk. We are a long way off sprinting in the COAG trial. We had to establish the relationship and a commitment to a new way of working. We have moved on from that phase. We were presented—being the good bureaucrats that we are—with the question: what sort of structural and governance arrangements do we need in place to ensure that the COAG trial works? To date we have had the Cape York Partnership CEOs committee, of which Dr Boxall has been a member, as has Wayne Gibbons from ATSI. That has allowed, at the most senior levels—including and principally through our director-general—that relationship to take hold. Underneath that, all parties—ATSI, the Commonwealth through DEWR, our department and the Department of Premier and Cabinet in Queensland—have committed to a COAG working group. It is there that we would be working out the areas of responsibility and putting some meat to the bones of an implementation plan that says the Commonwealth will do this and the state will do that.

That leads to another part of your question in relation to communities and the extent to which their involvement and their take-up of responsibilities has taken hold. We have had the first and second waves around alcohol management. As Barbara was pointing out, that is leading to fundamental rethinks in communities in terms of them taking on responsibility. We quite often hear the rhetoric, whether it be from Australian parliamentary leaders or Aboriginal community leaders, about people taking responsibility. That is going to take time. We have had decades of practices of passive welfare dependency, and turning that around is going to take time. We have really thought hard about our strategic and incremental steps towards this and we are confident that you have to clear the environment of alcohol, which will lead to a reassertion of some moral authority in families. That is absolutely fundamental. Getting the reassertion of moral authority in families is the hardest challenge of all and it is not one in which the state can simply talk rhetoric about or indeed legislate to impose. It is more than that. It is the change in head thinking that Barbara was talking about. Getting that community participation is absolutely critical to us.

We are having discussions at the moment with ATSI in relation to the community participation agreements and seeing how that program might apply and roll out in Queensland. That is something that can easily be done from a government level. But again, getting those

cultural shifts in communities is very difficult. The way we are approaching that challenge is by investing in some leadership programs. You have to invest in the leaders. We have to diversify the leadership in this state, if not nationally.

CHAIR—I am going to have to interrupt you and come in quickly so my colleagues can come in as well. I want to talk about education. We heard—and it is on the public record, so Deniece will forgive me—Deniece Geia from Palm simply saying that for her it was the key. We met a wonderful woman there yesterday. We were hoping to get her on the public record but we did not quite get her—the deputy principal. There is no doubt about the commitment—there is the justice committee and Ms Geia, who is the chair of that. They are just dynamic, strong people.

There are two schools on Palm, and they are feeling it very clearly—the literacy, the numeracy, the standard. They want to go further; there is no doubt the aspiration is there. I do not underestimate the challenge. Can we have just a couple of minutes from Tony and Barbara on the education system. This is really very much in the state's court. The committee had the department before us a week or two ago, and we talked about what they were doing towards best practice and trying to drive the general issues, but at the end of the day it is going to rest very much with the states. As much as the Commonwealth wants to lament, lecture, cajole or whatever, it is going to be up to the state parliaments. Can you give me anything on education and a different way of connecting? You would be familiar with the Collins report?

Ms Flick—Yes.

Mr Dreise—Yes.

CHAIR—Okay. So we know the statistics. We know that there will be no progress unless there is that improvement. Can you give me just a bit of hope on the education front?

Ms Flick—Yes. There are two sides to this coin. The state does have a responsibility to children and other people for their education, and family also has a responsibility. Alcohol has been identified as a major impediment to children even attending school or being school ready—that is, having slept the night before and having had breakfast.

Mr JOHN COBB—Is that alcohol use by the parents or by the children themselves?

Ms Flick—By the parents. If there is a party in the house and you are not sleeping or you have to give your bed up, you are not going to want to go to school the next day. It is really interesting that, within three months of an alcohol management plan being introduced in the community in December last year, we saw school attendance rising. We thought that that was our first performance measure. Let us measure children attending school. Let us not start even measuring literacy or numeracy rates and comparing them with the state and national standards, but let us start at what is real.

CHAIR—And the evidence is on your side—

Ms Flick—And the evidence is that 20 per cent—

CHAIR—because it is clear that with attendance you will get results as good as anywhere else.

Ms Flick—Because we are also dealing with the restriction of the supply of alcohol, we have had an 80 per cent decrease in presentations at the clinic, which frees up the nurses to do the other things around hearing and immunisation—making sure that children are healthier when they attend school. We have had a reduction in the percentage of Indigenous people who have been charged with offences related to alcohol abuse—a dramatic decrease. We are also freeing up the police to follow truancy procedures. So just by dealing with one issue we are getting more children going to school. This has also placed a burden on the state because, before this, the states supplied the teachers to teach a particular number of children. Now that they have more children going back to school, the burden is on the state to provide more teachers.

We are hoping to get to a situation where there will be formal agreements between the education system, the schools and the community about education outcomes. So to get a good education outcome what does a community have to do? They have to promise to send their children to school. They have to promise to support them at home—supervise their homework and read to them, like we do as parents. And the education department have to promise that they will provide a proper curriculum and enforce the standards and the discipline required to ensure that those children reach those standards. So that is the next stage. From the very beginning our aim is to see, through an evidence base, whether or not the restriction of the supply of alcohol creates an environment where children are more school ready and are attending school.

CHAIR—There was some criticism of the current delivery system, and I wondered whether you were familiar with anything that has a stronger connect on exactly those issues you have raised. Is there a way to develop that so it is strengthened? The alcohol is a critical issue—I accept that. I just wondered if there was a capacity for innovation. There might be something. Although you are not in the education business and the question might be more appropriate to educators, you are our best shot today.

Ms Flick—I have had discussions with senior officers across government about the rate of incarceration of juvenile offenders, for example, or the incarceration of Indigenous Queenslanders. As I said, it starts here. It starts with antenatal care; it starts with addressing foetal alcohol syndrome and smoking and the other things. It starts with providing preschools. Until you start building up the front end, we can measure these statistics down here forever and they are not going to change. They will probably increase. We need to address this question about alcohol in the communities—and not with prohibition. We have to work with the community to get them to set the standards, not have government imposing the standards.

CHAIR—I have done exactly the same thing. We all agree with that. My worry always is that there is always the here and the now. There are those kids who are dealing with it now. I propose just leaving an open question about the here and now of those kids and how we engage them and those parents who so desperately want our systems to be able to deliver in a stronger way. I am leaving that as an open question.

Ms Flick—It has something to do with what is being written about at the moment in international policy areas for Indigenous people. There is this thing called ‘imaginings’. If we have a child today, we have plotted this from before the day they are born: they are going to go

to this preschool, they will go to this university and they will have these opportunities. I do not know whether we have those same imaginings for Indigenous people.

If we are talking about going to school and getting an education, we need to be providing the other support. The question for me always has been: education for what? What are the opportunities? Children have to believe in and engage with that. It is interesting that two weeks ago Canada announced its First Nations University of Canada. They are way ahead of us. We are looking at some of their experiences.

CHAIR—I will give you a slight glimpse. Last week I was in the Flinders Ranges. The operation involved 120 young people at risk working with a new experience. What they were talking about was the same kind of principle—imaginings. They were trying to give them their childhood back. I am talking about really going in hard on that so we do not lose these kids who are there now. I will leave that there because I am going to get shot by my colleagues.

Ms Flick—It is an interesting discussion.

Ms HOARE—Going back to COAG and linking that in to the 10-year partnership as indicated in the submission in the eight priority areas, I share the concern of the chair about education and getting children to school. But education is not on that list of priority areas and nor is health. I can understand how it links in in relation to the alcohol management plans and all those other issues that you spoke so well about. I commend the Queensland government department also on the programs that are in place. But I want to see where that linkage is going to be.

Both of them, the 10-year partnership and COAG, would have been developed separately. Now all of a sudden we find ourselves in the situation where they are being implemented together or have emerged at the same time. I am wondering what role you see for governments, both the Commonwealth and the state, in trying to ensure those processes complement each other rather than go along parallel lines.

Mr Dreise—Where is that reference? Is that in our submission on page 6?

Ms HOARE—Yes.

Mr Dreise—What we have given there is an example. Just by way of clarification, under the 10-year partnership, the first agreement—the state level agreement that has been signed—was the justice agreement. There are agreements around education, health et cetera, so they are not being left out. The justice agreement is the one that has been signed. We have another three that are currently out to consultation at the moment around family violence—

Ms Flick—Economic development and land heritage.

Mr Dreise—Health and education were both within MCMC and 10-year partnerships are features. I will just clarify that further in terms of integration. In 2000 the Queensland government signed off on 10-year partnerships. In 2002 they signed off on Meeting Challenges, Making Choices. In 1999 they committed to Cape York partnerships. So we have had a public sector that can be forgiven for thinking that everyone is heading for the right destination but they

are all paddling different canoes. So what we need to do through the strategic policy framework is wrap that up and integrate the effort as much as the strategic direction. We have set up some governance mechanisms. For example, we have a senior officers group, and domain working groups will fall out of that. So in the case of education we would want the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, Education Queensland, and DET, to be working and putting the meat on the bones of those agreements and those strategic directions. That is how we are pursuing it in a policy sense. We are putting the governance in place and whole of government coordination is absolutely critical. I refer to a speech that Dr Peter Shergold gave at the forum on COAG trial sites in Canberra the week before last—and I was in attendance at that. He pointed out that getting whole of government to work is one of the toughest challenges in the public sector. That is certainly our experience. To get three levels of whole of government to work we would need divine intervention.

CHAIR—It would be like mustering cats.

Mr Dreise—It will be a challenge but I think we are achieving coherency in the policy framework. If you follow logic, you get the policy settings right and then the effort follows in terms of implementation. That is our approach at the moment.

Ms HOARE—Is there a different or better role for the Commonwealth in that process?

Mr Dreise—I think we are keen to build on the foundations that are there now. Optimising Commonwealth-state relations is something that is not exclusive to Indigenous affairs. We have the dual challenge of getting that bilateral collaboration as well as working in a tough area of public policy. I think the Prime Minister, in his discussion with Dr Shergold the other day, pointed out that we are talking about one of the toughest—if not the toughest—area of public policy in this country. So we have no illusions in terms of the grand challenge in front of us, but getting agreement on the policy setting and governance mechanisms should put us in a better position to respond adequately to community demands. Negotiation tables will be our key enabler. We have the Commonwealth's agreement to participate in those negotiation tables. That is a very positive development. In addition, I talked earlier about the community participation agreements from ATSI, which I understand is in the vicinity of \$30 million. I suppose that is the 'hook'—for lack of a better word—to get the community to participate, which is vital in the partnerships model.

Ms Flick—I think a really interesting discussion is happening now through the ATSI review and through our memorandum of understanding about the role of the Commonwealth and the state, and separating service delivery and other responsibilities. I think one of the issues—and we certainly talked about it—in education is that if more children are going back to school we will require more teachers in those schools and maybe we will require more secondary education facilities closer to these communities. Whatever the case may be, it will require more resources. The separation of advocacy and service delivery are integral to this and I applaud the discussion that is being raised within the ATSI review about that. In the same way, I think that the Commonwealth and the state have to discuss how to best utilise the available resources, especially in terms of funding, for the community. We raised the names of Noel and other people. I think without their advocacy much of this work would not have started. That is the role of advocates, especially Indigenous ones.

There is a separation, then, between those who are policy advocates and those who are service deliverers. So take it up to government and say, 'This needs to be done; this needs to be examined. We need to have a closer look at this.' Government will make a decision, and then it is up to the bureaucrats to work with the community at a local level, with the state and federal resources—whether they are in ATSIC or these Commonwealth departments—to ensure that the teabag that goes from one cup to the next is not too weak when it gets to the end. So, if we can knock out a couple of those processes, we can get the best brew.

I really hope that there is a strong discussion about the role of the Commonwealth and the states in service delivery. That is probably the biggest red herring there is because all sorts of things hang off that. But we must talk seriously about the people on the ground at the lowest possible level—families, individuals and communities—getting the benefit of what we all in good faith set out to do. None of us have any malicious ideas about what we are doing in this day and age; we are all trying very hard. But I think that we need to review the role of ATSIC. I think it is a good opportunity to talk about some of these issues and, through COAG, I think that there should be another discussion.

CHAIR—My hope would be that the investment in that relationship development would be sufficient to make progress to meet the ideals of the elite leadership. That is something that is so critical.

Mr JOHN COBB—I want to turn back to where we were a while ago. It was not just on the island; in our travels we quite frequently struck the issue that it seemed as though the bureaucracy wanted one scenario to fit all places. Particularly in relation to the alcohol management plans, when we come up with something that suited us rather than the guidelines, there was a problem. I bring that up not necessarily expecting you to answer it but just for you to note that they believe that they should be able to sort these things out with regard to what suits the local region. That makes sense to me.

I would, obviously, agree that alcohol is a major problem. My knowledge is of western New South Wales. But I would also make the point that, if we could get people into jobs, it would have the same effect as tackling alcoholism. But I suspect that we think that getting rid of the alcohol is easier than getting people into jobs. It probably is, in some ways. Do you agree that, if we could get people into jobs, it would have the same effect as—probably even on a broader scale—and have more overflowing effects than simply addressing alcoholism? Do you think that we are simply tackling alcohol because it is an easier problem than unemployment?

Mr Dreise—No, I think that they are interrelated: I think it is hard to find and sustain a job if you have an alcohol addiction. I think that, in relation to the communities we are looking at here, we are not talking about normal job markets, so we have to take a broader definition of what employment is. Getting the CDEP scheme firing on all eight cylinders is the key challenge—particularly for the Commonwealth, as it is a program that the Commonwealth administers. But we would like to support it through vocational training initiatives; getting a better marriage between CDEP and vocational education and training is critical. We have had discussions in the case of Cape York under the COAG trial, and we are having discussions with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations in terms of our whole approach to employment policy.

In the absence of industries and job markets, what does employment look like in these communities? Indeed, is the challenge in creating pathways from communities to the bigger regional centres, where there is a more real and less gaminé job market? I think that they are the key challenges. In relation to economic development policy, we keep coming back to what the Queensland government's position is. If we do not arrest and curb alcohol abuse, economic development will continue to be infant. Therefore, the creation of job markets will continue to be retarded. So it is not a case of us seeing alcohol as more important; we just see that it is one of the first steps before you can pursue the more strategic and longer term issues around employment, economic development and job markets.

Mr JOHN COBB—This is probably a more delicate issue. As we go around we are finding acceptance by Aboriginal people of the necessity for separation of policy from the administration of finance. Are you looking at that at all?

Mr Dreise—From the Queensland government's point of view, we support, in terms of the ATSIC review, the separation of political advocacy and service delivery. In reinforcing Barbara's earlier comments, we are also committed through our policy to service delivery being, as much as possible, localised. We are not supportive of big regional models nor are we supportive of big central models. For community capacity building to flourish, the activity has to be local. I will give this as a kind of example: trying to build the capacity of Kowanyama from Cairns is as difficult as trying to build the capacity of Alice Springs from Canberra, so our policy approach is for activities to be localised. We would welcome that and in our ATSIC review submission we intend to make the point of the absolute fundamental importance of getting service delivery and activity down to the local level. If you cannot do that, because of economies of scale or whatever, then have a cluster model and if you cannot do that then have a regional model, with the policy preference being localised activity, as opposed to regional empires.

CHAIR—Queensland is the hope of the team in a sense because you are the most decentralised state. There is a whole lot of political dynamics about that which allows some opportunity, although I am sure it may create difficulties; there is always a bit of a trade-off. Queensland, because of its very nature with 50 per cent of the population living outside—or is it 40 per cent or 60 per cent?

Mr Dreise—It is 60 per cent.

CHAIR—So you are the hope of the side in terms of those regional models at that level. It is very important for us to understand that as well.

Mr JOHN COBB—I realise that you do not run the department of police—and I am not sure what it is called in Queensland.

Ms Flick—It is the Queensland Police Service.

Mr JOHN COBB—Right. Do you advocate on behalf of communities to have, where necessary, higher than normal police numbers when they are requested by the justice groups? Do you advocate on their behalf with the Police Service or the minister?

Mr Dreise—Yes. In fact, we have a forum in which that discussion can take place, being the CEOs forum whereby directors-general and the police commissioner meet. The visits by the respective directors-generals mean that if policing is raised as an issue, as it has been in a couple of communities, that is reported right back to the highest level. We are aware, and from our department's point of view we appreciate, that policing is one of the big challenges facing us at the moment and that it will be an emerging policy challenge for the government in terms of levels of resourcing, particularly as you implement these alcohol management regimes. So it is a mounting issue.

CHAIR—I have two quick questions before summing up. Following on from the issue for the public sector generally in the regions and Queensland having the most decentralised model in Australia, what incentives are there in the public sector—and, indeed, do you see a need for incentives—for people to move out from Brisbane? I live in the most centralised state, South Australia, and have 90 per cent of South Australia as my electorate; there is tension there all the time. What are the incentives for capable, professional public servants—who are critical; I shy away from this 'elite leadership' tag, because it is those key people in the middle management and senior management at regional level who are going to be critical in the long term—to be there? What are the financial, hard dollar incentives? Does the government have a policy, or do you, as an advocate, see the need for such incentives in relation to the Aboriginal issue but generally speaking too? Can you give us a comment on that, whether in relation to the police service, the health service or some other service?

Mr Dreise—I will make one quick comment and then throw to Barbara. Our challenge is to move beyond regions. In the case of Queensland, of course, we are heavily decentralised and I think the existing incentives for people—nurses, teachers, doctors and other professionals—to live in major regional centres, such as Rockhampton, Mount Isa, Townsville, Cairns et cetera, do not represent our challenge. Our challenge in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs is getting good, high-performing professionals located in communities. I have two comments on that front. Firstly, we are currently planning for outposted officers in our own department. We already have an officer located on Mornington Island, we have another one at Mackay and, as resources permit, we are looking at a strategy for outposted positions—which could include, in time, Palm Island, Weipa and Cooktown—to get our human resources closer to our clients. Secondly, the issue of the sorts of incentives for CEOs of councils is something that we are fully aware of. What packages do we need to put in place to get the best-performing council administrators that we can as CEOs in these remote communities? That has been the subject of discussion between the department of local government and us. It is not an issue that we face solely. We do not have a monopoly on it—

CHAIR—Can I also put the police department in there?

Mr Dreise—The big shires, which are not Aboriginal shires or Aboriginal councils per se, face the same dilemma.

CHAIR—Exactly.

Mr Dreise—Under our community governance improvement strategy, that will be one of the elements we are keen to tackle: what sorts of packages do we need in place to attract high-performing CEOs to these councils?

CHAIR—I am not just talking about CEOs; I am talking right across the board about those key people in all levels. I repeat: we cannot overlook the police department. If you are talking about alcohol strategy, the police and the magistrates are a key part of that. My advice is that there is not an incentive for people in your police service to go into more remote places. It is no different, wherever they live in Queensland. So there is an issue there as well and, as advocates, I am sharing with you what we are picking up—

Mr Dreise—We thank you for that.

CHAIR—encouraging you and putting it on the public record. I have one quick question on ownership, investment and the land tenure model. We talked yesterday—it is on the record—with one of the senior gentlemen about the lack of incentives for home ownership and ownership of land. It is clearly going to be an ongoing issue. How are you looking at that?

Ms Flick—There is an interdepartmental committee looking at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander home ownership in this state. That is being managed through the Department of Housing. If you would like us to get you more information about that, we would be happy to provide that.

CHAIR—You could take it on notice, thanks. It was expressed to us quite strongly yesterday and, clearly, there are emerging issues about proper incentives and ownership. Would you like to give a 30-second wrap-up? Is there anything you would like to quickly add?

Ms Flick—At 52 years of age, I have lived a quarter of the history of this country, and I have seen enormous changes. I am really excited about what is happening in Queensland and that people are really benefiting at a local level. The hard issues are being tackled. It is not always easy for us in the public service or for people such as community justice group members on the ground, living in the community. It takes a lot of courage for them to be involved in these things that we know are right and true if we are going to have a future for our children. I think that time and evidence will show that addressing alcohol, supporting communities and putting in place a proper governance system in the community will deliver good outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Some of my friends are from Wilcannia, and I want to close down the pubs there tomorrow. They are wonderful people. They have wonderful ideas and such a capacity to bring resources into their community, but until we deal with alcohol a lot of that opportunity is wasted. I think that there are many exciting times ahead for us here in Queensland. We are very keen to, and are highly optimistic that we can, begin the process of change, not end it.

CHAIR—On that note, that sense of realistic optimism, we will close. Thank you very much.

[10.50 a.m.]

ACKFUN, Mr Alex, General Manager, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing, Queensland Department of Housing

McMURRAY, Ms Patricia Ann, Acting Manager, Program Development Unit, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing, Queensland Department of Housing

SPRY, Ms Leanora, Project Support Officer, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing, Queensland Department of Housing

CHAIR—Welcome. I remind you that these are legal proceedings of the federal parliament. Would you like to make a short opening statement? As you would be aware, we spoke to your people yesterday, so we will have a fairly informal discussion and let it go where it might.

Mr Ackfun—My opening statement is not very extensive. I understand that you have had the benefit of our submission from the Department of Housing. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to that submission and any of the other issues that might have arisen over the last couple of days. We will also be available in the future if you turn up other issues that you want to talk about. I acknowledge the traditional owners on whose land we are meeting today and recognise that the spirit of those people is still with us. Their descendants are certainly with us today. The opportunity to talk to you today is a good one for us, because it will give you an opportunity to see some of the work we are doing within the policy frameworks that are being developed around housing not only within Queensland but across the whole of the nation. I know that we have a big job ahead of us. I leave it to you to commence proceedings.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I do not remember seeing it in the brief—if I did, I apologise—but, regarding the housing stock and the longevity of the housing stock, what sort of housing stock do you own in public and private ownership, and what sort of a lifespan do we expect in the maintenance structure?

Mr Ackfun—We are talking about two different programs within the department. I understand that you will be concerned about the community managed and owned properties on deed of grant in trust communities.

CHAIR—We are very interested in that, but my interest is in the broader context of your housing stock.

Mr Ackfun—The Department of Housing has about 50,000 units of accommodation across a number of programs through public housing, community housing and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing. The housing stock within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing that the department manages numbers about 2,778 units of accommodation.

CHAIR—That is not ‘about’; that is very precise.

Mr Ackfun—Yes. That is spread across the whole of the state—mostly in rural, remote and regional Queensland. About 86 per cent of our stock is in rural and regional Queensland. The other side of the equation is the grants program, where we provide grants to Indigenous community councils. They build and manage their own houses, and they employ people to do that for them. In some cases they get in contractors to do that work but, in the main, 28 of the discrete communities—and there are 34 in number—have their own construction teams. We have got some very good results over the last five years, where the employment of Indigenous tradespeople and apprentices—trainees, really—is quite extensive. I can give you those numbers. That stems out of a five-year capital works program that we have implemented.

CHAIR—So we understand that the department owns 2,778 places, or something like that, and that would be a separate stock.

Mr Ackfun—That is a separate stock.

CHAIR—Do we have an idea of what sort of stock would be there?

Mr Ackfun—At the last count, we were looking at around about 3,500 houses on these deed of grant in trust communities and the Aboriginal shires.

CHAIR—What sort of numbers would there be for the annual additional stock? We have the Commonwealth—

Mr Ackfun—The Commonwealth funding through the Aboriginal rental housing program comes into the state authority. ATSIC funding comes into there as well. Under our bilateral agreements we try to have a notional pooling of that money to target the communities. Unfortunately, you will see since we started this particular process that Indigenous community councils have been replacing old stock. The numbers of houses that we would have hoped to have gotten if you were in a conventional market on the mainland would have been quite substantial. Over the last five years, including this year, in the vicinity of \$176 million worth of housing has gone into those deed of grant in trust communities alone.

CHAIR—Is that a 12-month program?

Mr Ackfun—No, it is a five-year program. The 12-month program is in the vicinity of \$21 million to \$25 million.

CHAIR—That does not buy you a lot of houses.

Mr Ackfun—It does not—not when you are taking old stock down. Those houses are generally unsafe and not able to be lived in.

CHAIR—There is probably a lot of asbestos around and all the rest of it, I guess—all those sorts of issues.

Mr Ackfun—That is right.

CHAIR—That then leads into the private market and the rental market. Do you have some interest in that?

Mr Ackfun—In the community program, there is no private market in those deed of grant in trust communities. You do not have, as one of my colleagues said beforehand—

CHAIR—I seem to remember in the submission's six outputs 'private housing assistance'. Can we talk about that, generally?

Mr Ackfun—Okay. That is really a part of the Department of Housing's other output areas, which I am not involved in. It generally provides assistance to—

CHAIR—The question then becomes: do we have an approximate number of Aboriginal people in private rental, as some sort of a general context?

Mr Ackfun—I am not aware of—

CHAIR—Or private ownership? I am just trying to get a picture. Then we can go on to what the shortfall is. You will hear that all the time. The shortfall is maybe 30 per cent; 50 per cent, some would say.

Mr Ackfun—In the program that I run, there is in the vicinity of 2,700 people on our wait lists for houses. I cannot comment—

CHAIR—But that would not include the community?

Mr Ackfun—No, that is a different—

CHAIR—Do you have an estimate on the community? You would not have a ballpark figure for the community, because that data would not be available, but would you estimate that it would be at least that in the community as well?

Mr Ackfun—I am not able to comment on the ATSIIC funded Indigenous community housing organisations. There were around 80 of those here in Queensland.

CHAIR—The purpose of all this is to try to get the picture on the public record. My poor staff are aware that we are looking for some kind of understanding of the assets in all areas, so that we can at least start from the basics. The question then becomes for me: what is the longevity? What is your average housing life? You talked about replacement.

Mr Ackfun—Within the rental stock that we manage in the state, we have been asked to look at constructing houses that last potentially up to 80 years. Of course, when you go out onto communities you have a different scenario and different use—you have got overcrowding—

CHAIR—You have anywhere between 15, if you are lucky, and maybe 25, if you get really lucky.

Mr Ackfun—That is right. That is a challenge for us in what sorts of houses you build.

CHAIR—Some used to say seven. I do not know. What do you—

Mr Ackfun—I have seen houses without the appropriate support that have lasted only 18 months. I have seen houses that were built in a previous era that have been standing for 50 years. I suppose we are looking at between 20 and 30 years, and that is at an optimistic level from my point of view.

CHAIR—How do you run your maintenance program? What sort of budget do you end up with for maintenance? Your maintenance program would be a separate line item, wouldn't it?

Mr Ackfun—It is.

CHAIR—These would be rental properties?

Mr Ackfun—That is right. It depends on which program you are talking about, which part of it. If you are talking about the rental program, which the state manages, then you have the data for that.

CHAIR—I will be specific to the state.

Mr Ackfun—We have around \$6 million allocated for maintenance and rates, and then we have a separate budget of around about \$5 million for major upgrades of that state managed stock. I suppose that is not very much, but that is available to us each year. We collect rent to feed those budgets. Community housing available on the deed of grant in trust communities is a bit more difficult, where low rents—and we are trying to improve the situation—go to feed those responsibilities in terms of maintenance.

CHAIR—In terms of the work force.

Mr Ackfun—That is right; yes.

CHAIR—What are the outcomes for your maintenance procedures and building gangs? Do you run building gangs?

Mr Ackfun—Yes, we do.

CHAIR—What sort of Indigenous participation do you end up with?

Mr Ackfun—At the present time we have around about 32 Indigenous apprentices within the state managed program.

CHAIR—What percentage would that be of your work force?

Mr Ackfun—That is part of the 100-odd trade staff that we have. I have 140-odd staff right throughout Queensland, and most of that is made up of construction crews.

CHAIR—Yesterday the issue of land ownership came up. It is a hugely difficult issue, I would imagine. You are coming out of a period from 1985 with the land still held in trust. I know in South Australia we have a title called inalienable freehold title; I am not sure what Queensland calls it, but I guess it is the same principle. There are many issues in the communities around private individual ownership. Would you like to take us through where you think the debate is at and whether, indeed, individual ownership is feasible?

Mr Ackfun—You heard from our colleagues before from DATSIP that an interdepartmental working group has got a mandate from government to go away and look at financing options and tenure options for deed of grant in trust communities. The Department of Natural Resources and Mines has embarked on a review of the Aboriginal Lands Act—I am not sure whether you knew that, but it is there. That hooks into all the tenure work that we need to do from natural resources and then links into whether or not that particular tenure around a private market is actually going to be available for Indigenous residents of those communities. It is a fairly complex piece of work. Obviously, we have to look at native title as well.

CHAIR—I want to draw out where the debate is at. I see the natural aspirations in communities and there would be what I would call a natural resistance. There will be a debate about a private and public ownership and the long-term consequences. I am keen to try to understand the legislative impediments in terms of what actually has to happen if it were possible. Government has to look at the long-term consequences of these things. There are those two dimensions. It is difficult for someone in the public service to comment on a debate but is it fair to say that there is that tension between views, or is there a tendency for people to say, ‘Yes, we’d like to see some private ownership.’ Where is that debate at?

Mr Ackfun—I should just say to the committee that the government is already on record as saying that it wants to provide opportunities for home ownership in deed of grant in trust communities and has sent away a group of public servants to work on that.

CHAIR—That is a self-evident fact and it is probably in the briefing—I just wanted to get that on the public record. Are you able to say what a couple of the impediments are? Is it just a matter of carving up the land, getting someone out there, paying some dollars and getting it surveyed off? I am trying to think through what the implications are for planning over the next five, 10 or 20 years time.

Mr Ackfun—We have already seen some implications of special leases in some of the communities. Those leases that were handed over to people to maintain and look after the asset on it have, in most cases, had to be given back or surrendered because the asset on it has been left to deteriorate. Our Indigenous reference group—which is made up of the ACC, the ICC, the Torres Strait Regional Authority—gives us particular advice on how to proceed down this very complex path. It presents a community view as to how we should work those issues through.

You will find with some of the chairs and the CEOs of those deed of grant in trust community councils—whilst they recognise that home ownership is a very desirable aspiration and are working towards giving us the advice to proceed along those lines—there is always going to be a question of whether or not we are talking about the same thing. Home ownership, in some instances that we have recognised, may mean succession of tenancies. Certainly where there is the tenure question on deed of grant in trust communities there is no private market. As you

rightly acknowledged, the land is held in trust by the council. Then we have to look at how you stimulate that particular—

CHAIR—You have touched on native title and those sorts of things.

Mr Ackfun—Yes, that is right.

Ms HOARE—We have talked about how long a house lasts and the different aspects to that issue. I would like you to expand a bit more on tenant support activities. I imagine there is a specific program and field officers that go out and talk to communities. Could you expand on how tenant support activities link in with the community-council-run homes as well.

Mr Ackfun—On the community council side, we do not have a program for tenant support ourselves because we do not own the houses. Those councils own and manage them themselves. But within the Department of Housing, with our public housing and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing stock, there is a tenant participation group where tenants can provide advice back to the department about their various requirements and make suggestions about how the department should run its business or provide them with a particular service. In terms of tenant participation on deed of grant in trust communities, we generally rely on funding through the ACC and the ICC and our interaction with communities through the Community Housing Resource Worker Program. Those community councils go out and talk to their residents and tenants and explain not only what a tenant's responsibilities are but also what the council's responsibilities and obligations are. There is no particular program that the department runs that looks solely at tenant participation on the deed of grant of trust communities.

Ms HOARE—Has there been any whole-of-community participation in some of these programs? We see the benefits in other social areas, such as domestic violence, child abuse, alcoholism and kids going to school, where the whole community is educated and the whole community gets behind the ideas that it is not right to bash your wife, that you have to send your kids to school and that it is right to treat your home decently because you may not be there forever and you will be leaving it for somebody else to live in at a later time and that the community pays the price for people who abuse the homes they live in. Has there been any kind of community participation or groundswell of community support for that type of ideal?

Mr Ackfun—Probably not to the extent we would like. We are dealing with fairly different developmental stages of community councils themselves, and the resources we need probably outstrip the availability of the resources that we have and that we provide through the Aboriginal Coordinating Council, the Island Coordinating Council and our own community housing management strategy. The extent of community participation will depend on the willingness of the local council to provide a mechanism for those community residents to participate. I have been on a number of communities where the local chairman, when he comes back from a meeting, has another meeting—and I have sat in on this—to talk to the whole community about what he was doing. That was my personal experience. He talked about where he had gone, with whom he had met and the range of discussion points that he had had with particular community groups or government departments, and then he invited feedback from the community. That can only happen in circumstances where that process is an inclusive one and invites residents to participate.

Some other communities that I have been to do not have that particular mechanism in place and have a different mechanism of sending out newsletters or letters to residents or pinning notices up on noticeboards et cetera. It really depends, from our point of view, on the engagement that community councils have with their own residents. Certainly, through our housing resource worker program and the work we are doing through community housing management, we tend to try to get them to recognise what their obligations are to their tenants. The development of that particular process is going to take a long time.

Ms HOARE—We were at Palm Island yesterday, as you would be aware. They are unique because they have the Army in there building houses for them at the moment. The response from the community is: we have designed these houses, we have picked our own colour schemes, this is the way we want our homes to be. It is in a beautiful part of the world and it was remarked that the houses are set in the bush, amongst the trees. That would indicate ownership by the community of those houses. You indicated in the initial stages that you could not talk about the waiting list, for example, for community council housing but you had your own waiting list. Can you guesstimate how many houses would be required for everybody in these communities to be housed adequately?

Mr Ackfun—I think I can tell you that in another couple of months time when all our data comes in. We are going through a process at this moment where we are collecting demographic information plus information around the standard of the stock on each deed of grant in trust community. That would be information that will not only go to our minister but also be available on the public record.

Ms HOARE—I do not know the difference in cost to the state or to the community in having the Army, private contractors or your own community contractors come in to build the houses, but how much would it cost to provide the amount of housing required? Would it be a good thing for the Army to go around in the next 10 years and build houses where required in all these communities?

Mr Ackfun—We welcome the efforts that the Army put into these communities. Certainly, ATSIC needs to be commended for supporting that program and for initiating it in the first place. I suppose what we do, for example, in communities like Palm Island is to sequence our infrastructure and housing starts together. We are working under a bilateral agreement with ATSIC—the Aboriginal Coordinating Council, the Island Coordinating Council and the Commonwealth. The issue about how we provide housing on Palm Island, for example, is one where we get in there together to look at the best options for housing subdivisions and the types of housing to put there and then work out who delivers that particular housing, whether it is delivered through the local Indigenous construction crews—who, I might add, are a little costlier, given the training component involved with that proposal—though private contractors coming in and providing their services to build the houses through a tender process, or through the Army.

I think what we have found on Palm Island is that it is a costly exercise to have the local group do it, for the reason I stated before. Having contractors and tradespeople coming onto the island is probably not so easy, given that the housing boom in Australia is such that the availability of tradespersons is not as great as it would be in a downturn in the economy, when people are actually looking for work. Palm Island is always going to be difficult in the sense that, for some

reason, the market is the market in terms of the provision of housing and it seems that the cost of housing on the island is a little dearer than on the mainland.

CHAIR—\$390,000.

Mr Ackfun—That is right. When you go into some of the more remote parts of Queensland you will find even more so that you will have some indexes that show a 150 per cent increase on Brisbane costs.

Ms HOARE—On Palm Island, too, people do not tend to leave and, as somebody said yesterday, women are encouraged to have lots of babies. So the population is just going to keep on increasing.

Mr Ackfun—Our last look at those census figures indicates that about 60 per cent of Indigenous people are under the age of 30, so you have a propensity for new families being formed and therefore additional pressure on the need. We have to manage that.

Mr JOHN COBB—I could not have let that one go either, because the issue of costs seemed to me to be a bit out of proportion. I come from an area where you expect to pay 10 to 15 per cent over what you would pay in a major centre to get a house, but it seemed to me that what was being quoted to us there was over the norm by any standards. I am not making any accusations. I am simply saying that I think that is something that has to be looked at. Getting back to the question brought up by the chairman that you addressed at length about ownership et cetera—and I agree with you about the different concepts of ownership et cetera—I find it very hard to get into the minds of the people we talk to about that to see where they are really coming from. I also get the impression that a lot of it is resentment at having to pay rent on land they believe they own anyway, rather than actual ownership of that structure. I have not worked that out in my own mind, let alone expect you to be able to tell me exactly what they do believe or where you are going. It seems to me that the issue is as much about rent as it is about ownership.

Mr Ackfun—I might answer that in this way: we have got a little work to do with the residents in explaining to them that, even if you do own a house, you have to maintain it. If you change your thinking about that rent and think of it as a maintenance fund, a sinking fund, that you would actually use—

Mr JOHN COBB—Which in effect it is.

Mr Ackfun—It is. Unfortunately, when you look at the cost of putting a house on Palm Island, for example, it is about \$250,000 or even more. You then look at the amount of rent that people are being charged, and it will not cover the cost of maintenance. So I think it is that business of: yes, you have to recognise the aspirations and the feelings about ownership of the land. There is some dispute about whether or not traditional owners have more say than historical owners. That is probably not for this committee to discuss but to recognise that that particular complexity is there. We then need to talk about maintenance. If you were going to maintain a house properly for one family, then you would need about \$5,000 to maintain that house properly over the year. If you are not even getting that from a particular house and people are paying only \$30 or \$48 or whatever, then you will always have a declining stock. I think that has to be recognised.

Mr JOHN COBB—I agree. The issue of ownership is not easy to define. I think it is more about rent than ownership, but I might be wrong.

CHAIR—Let us do some rough calculations: \$390,000 is \$400,000 to me. I would accept Mr Cobb's point about what could be done to lessen that. If you are going into private ownership, clearly that is a fairly significant amount of money.

Mr Ackfun—Especially if you are only getting CDEP wages, which is the equivalent of a Centrelink payment.

CHAIR—In your submission you talk about your housing network program. What I understood from a quick read of that and from talking to people about it was that it is about engaging with people to explain the reality out there. I would like to get on the public record the various levels of discussion you have with your tenants. There is also the overlapping issue of the community's tenants. There is a real issue in terms of understanding basic money. Putting the issue of TOs and that other issue aside for another time, could you give us a picture of what happens when your staff go out to talk to people? Do they have community meetings or one-on-one discussions? What are the various reactions? What level of understanding are we talking about? We are talking about literacy and numeracy here as well.

Mr Ackfun—In terms of our framework for having partners not only within our community providers but also within government, we tend to use our community providers and our funding of positions within the Aboriginal Coordinating Council and the Island Coordinating Council to do a lot of that work with their own communities. We have a number of staff from our Brisbane office who go out on a regular basis. They are probably out more than they are in the office. We have a philosophy that it is probably better for us being out there than sitting in an office in Brisbane, that we do our best work out there. It does depend on the receptiveness of the local council and the local community, the engagement that a housing resource worker has with that particular community and any assistance that we have from the limited staff we have available to go with them.

I know that there have been very good outcomes in relation to the housing resource networks that we run, in any case. People are always saying we should have more of those. I suppose for us we say, 'Yes, that's that one, but let's go away to our communities and see what we take back to them and what progress we can make towards a particular framework or a vision that we might have around developing those communities.' You have to recognise—as we do—that each community is different: it has a number of drivers and imperatives in its own right. When we were doing the local planning with the DATSIP 10-year partnership framework, we found that some communities put housing right down the bottom of the list. They said they would rather have activities or some program for youth, for example. Others have said: 'Give us a swimming pool. We'd rather have a swimming pool than build a house.' So you have to go into each community accepting that the local community itself will want to decide its own priorities.

CHAIR—I accept your point about differences, but my question goes to the fundamental understanding. Picking up on Mr Cobb's point about whether it is rental or ownership, and the understanding we are talking about, it seems to me that there is a real gap there. I wonder what role your people have. It would not be an easy one to overcome.

Ms Spry—As Alex said, one of the things we do in the community housing management strategy is to work directly through our partnerships with the peak bodies and the housing offices there. I am particularly talking now about discrete communities, DOGIT communities—deed of grant. We are starting to develop with them the concept that the rental strategy is not about whether or not you own the land; it is about whether or not you get to live in that house for 20 years as opposed to 18 months. We are in the process of developing a total asset management plan which we want communities to roll out and to talk about the stuff that Ms Hoare is talking about with tenancy management—the way we relate to how tenants have rights and councils have rights with tenants—and the relationship with what you do with your rent in terms of maintenance. When we are engaging with a rent strategy, we are not collecting the income for ourselves; it is actually churning back into the community. It is for the community to take recognition and control of the fact that it is—

CHAIR—A community development exercise.

Ms Spry—That is absolutely it. Every moment in the rental strategy is a tense moment because you are telling people that the money you are collecting is actually for your own dwelling. It is a responsibility you have with council to develop that relationship, and that is what that capacity building stuff is about. Home ownership in Indigenous communities can actually mean succession of tenancy. We cannot presume what it means at the moment—and that is what that dialogue will be about—but it could actually just mean succession of tenancy.

CHAIR—That has been very valuable. Thank you. We met Rione yesterday—I think that is his name—who is part of your team, I think.

Ms HOARE—With the community renewal project.

CHAIR—I do not know whether you have met him or not, but he is a bright young fellow—bright-eyed and bushytailed.

Mr Ackfun—That is the enthusiasm of youth.

CHAIR—We wished him well. Do you want to add anything?

Mr Ackfun—I do not have anything else to add. I have a package of information here, which I will leave with the committee to look through. It has a contents page and it will give you the policy frameworks and the programs that we are operating within. I want to thank the committee on behalf of the team for hearing what we had to say.

CHAIR—Thank you for your comprehensive submission. There is a lot of work in that, and we appreciate the effort that has gone into it. Thank you.

[11.32 a.m.]

PITMAN, Ms Svea Ingrid Bai (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome. I remind you that these are legal proceedings of the parliament and, in effect, it is the same as speaking in the House. The deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as contempt of parliament. We prefer that all evidence be given in public, but, should you wish at any stage to give evidence in private, you may ask to do so and the committee will give consideration to your request. As you know, we are here to talk about capacity building in Indigenous communities. We cannot talk about specific cases, name individuals or deal with issues which are in the jurisdiction of state agencies.

Ms Pitman—I am representing myself as an individual who was living on Palm Island during the time the capacity building inquiry was initiated last year. Since then I have moved to Brisbane.

CHAIR—As you know, we have received your submission. Could I request a two- or three-minute opening statement—just a summary—and then let us talk about it. We need to conclude in about 25 minutes, so we just have a brief opportunity to talk about the issues. We appreciate you taking the effort to participate.

Ms Pitman—Thank you. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are today. Secondly, I would like to introduce some of the issues that I think are most important in my submission in relation to Palm Island. I think a lot of it comes down to legislative reforms that are under way at the moment and the changes that need to happen to the Queensland Community Services Act, which in essence defines how the communities are run through the councils. That is the gist of a lot of my letter that I submitted to the committee.

I would also like to apologise for a few spelling errors in my initial letter. I acknowledge that that was because I found out about this committee through my mother, who sent me the newspaper article from Victoria. Even though I was living on Palm Island at the time, there was no advertising whatsoever in the community that this capacity building inquiry was going on. So I wrote the submission at the last minute and I sent a letter that I had already distributed to many Queensland politicians as an open letter. That is the substance of my submission. I am happy to be questioned on any of the issues that come up under that submission.

A lot of things that I talk about relate to the fact that the community does not have any economic independence. It is next to impossible for any of the programs and things that are suggested at the government level—either state, federally or even regionally—to be undertaken when there is so little capacity within the community to actually get behind things. I think a lot of that comes down to basic land tenure issues and the fact that in communities in Queensland you cannot own your own home or a business in your own community. Because of that very reason, there is no economic base that anybody can use to build on—to either loan against or to use for further investments to develop any of the ideas that come from the communities or from anywhere else. So one of the most important issues is the land tenure and the Community Services Act.

CHAIR—Anything else you would like to add?

Ms Pitman—I have bought along a few props, but I might discuss them in closed session if that is possible. I have some photos of some of the horse abuse issues on Palm Island, which is what I was working on when I wrote the submission at the ranger's station dealing with the neglect of the animals. I am not sure that that is something you are interested in.

CHAIR—That would be more a state jurisdiction—animal welfare issues and that type of thing.

Ms Pitman—Yes, and I do not necessarily want to make them public on the Hansard, that is why I am just explaining—

CHAIR—I will be guided by my fellow members, but my own judgment would be that that it is probably something that is more appropriate within the state jurisdiction and for specific authorities and not something that the committee can—

Ms Pitman—No, that is fine. I do not want to make them public at all. The other thing that I brought along is a whole lot of props from the government and from community groups that were representing themselves at ATSIC this week. This is all the information that is available to Indigenous people in Brisbane. There were maybe 200 to 300 people there at the opening on Monday. I also have the photos of NAIDOC week on Palm Island last week, where we had maybe 500 or 600 people and not one government agency and not one newspaper. We had a whole week of amazing events and great activities in the community—a really positive event, and there was not one government anything there. I wanted to make the point that living in Brisbane—even though I have only been here couple of months—there is so much available. There is so much the government is doing that—living on Palm Island—you would never even know existed.

CHAIR—You are talking mainly about state agencies here, aren't you?

Ms Pitman—Yes, there are a few different state agencies; there are different Aboriginal corporations and that sort of thing as well. There were a couple of federal ones as well that were there on the opening days—it was a mix.

CHAIR—I think you can make a general point about your concern there, but what I would really be interested in talking about is this land tenure and the development issue—I think it is quite critical. We have already had some discussions—perhaps you did not hear our previous discussions with the departments.

Ms Pitman—No, I was with the kids outside.

CHAIR—I think that you have really nailed it, if you like, in terms of the importance of trying to understand this issue. You would be aware that there is a state committee looking at it—

Ms Pitman—I am, yes.

CHAIR—and they are taking advice from Indigenous communities on these issues. Issues raised could be native title, it could be what do people understand the tenure system to be, what is rent and what is ownership and what is the difference with the lot of them—basic understanding issues like that. But in terms of running a small business, getting to development and then into employment, there are some critical issues in that. What I hear implied—and I do not want to put words in your mouth—is that, by some private ownership and business opportunity, you can see opportunities opening up for communities like Palm Island.

Ms Pitman—Absolutely, and I think there are people in the communities who want the chance themselves to be the people who own those businesses.

CHAIR—You reminded me of something just now, because the store is actually owned by the state government—and I meant to ask the state government about that and I did not. Can you give us some examples of the sort of businesses that you think might flourish on Palm Island? I can think of quite a few.

Ms Pitman—As it is, there is a real lack of basic services that you would find in any rural town. There is no hairdresser, there is no chemist, there is no hardware store—there is none of the basic, everyday services. There is no vet that is regularly there. There is not even a doctor's surgery as such; you have to go to the hospital to actually see a doctor for a knock on the knee or whatever—general GP sort of issues. There is none of that in the community. All of those things could be private businesses. I do not know that the capacity exists within the community economically now to fund establishing all those sorts of businesses, but there has to be some way that the community can work in partnership to businesses.

CHAIR—Do you know whether the council can grant the right? I come from South Australia and a very large area of that state is Aboriginal land under native or freehold title. In my area, the council can, although it rarely does, grant private business the opportunity to, for example, run a store.

Ms Pitman—That has not happened on Palm Island, although private businesses can lease—

CHAIR—Do you know whether they have the ability to do it under the legislation?

Ms Pitman—I guess it does exist. The legislation is the Community Services Act. I am definitely not a legal expert in any way, but I have come across various pieces of legislation in my years of working in different areas and it is the worst, most insubstantial piece of legislation I have ever read. It is very hard to understand where a lot of the lines are drawn. I guess you could say that the ability is there to have those businesses.

CHAIR—I say that about a lot of legislation.

Ms Pitman—I am sure you do. I wish I had brought a copy of it. I brought the rest but I did not bring the Community Services Act.

CHAIR—But you believe that the council, if it so wished, could grant that ability to have private business on the island?

Ms Pitman—Yes, but not actually to own the premises. They can approve a business to exist, but not change the land tenure. My mother-in-law runs a shop through council premises. She rents that shop in a derelict building which she cannot get any maintenance done on. She does not have the ability to spend \$50,000 or \$100,000 building her own building and she could not do it on council land, because she would then own the building and they would own the land—or the community DOGIT would own the land.

CHAIR—It is an excellent challenge.

Ms Pitman—It is a conflict. There is no way to get secure tenure, and you cannot tell me that any businessperson is going to invest when they do not have tenure over the land.

Mr JOHN COBB—Actually, they do. None of the businesses you have described so far make it necessary to own the land to run that business. There are any amount of businesses that do not own their own land.

Ms Pitman—Yes, but the council cannot provide appropriate buildings or premises that are available for businesses. The council is the only body within the community that has the money to build the buildings—the actual infrastructure—for the businesses to run out of. They do not have the financial capacity to build decent infrastructure in the first place.

CHAIR—Can I hold it there for a minute. Mr Cobb makes an excellent point. Much of Australia's commercial life, particularly in the cities, is based on renting premises. Your issue is about the maintenance and the quality of the facility that you can run a viable business from and the series of options that may be available for further development.

Mr JOHN COBB—So may the answer not be there in the same way that housing works on that particular island and in most Aboriginal communities—that is, that the rent goes towards the upkeep of the building?

Ms Pitman—Having lived in a number of different houses on Palm Island that are owned by the council, I can tell you that they are not maintained and they are not at the standard that you would expect. Even the Residential Tenancy Authority acknowledges that Palm Island Council is not an adequate organisation to run those houses—they do not maintain them to the level they should. One of the things the state government is currently reviewing is the fact that expenditure on house maintenance is really down on Palm Island in the last financial year, and that shows again that the housing situation is quite desperate there anyway.

Mr JOHN COBB—If we could just put the activities of that particular council aside for a moment, in theory, though, what I say is right?

Ms Pitman—That the council could run the businesses like they run the housing?

Mr JOHN COBB—Not run the businesses, no—absolutely not.

Ms Pitman—Well, rent the business premises?

Mr JOHN COBB—Rent the properties and put the rental back into the maintenance.

Ms Pitman—Yes, they could, but in reality, that does not work, because that is what is happening now. I do not have a photo of the shop. You saw the shops on Palm Island. They are council owned and maintained shops. That is the standard that the council is able to deliver and you are talking about capacity building. That council does not have the capacity to actually look after tenancies and things like rental properties. I do not necessarily believe that it should be the council's responsibility to have the huge burden of looking after all these rental properties and then to add business premises to that as well.

Mr JOHN COBB—Okay, if we put that on hold for a minute, then, who would you suggest could take responsibility for the buildings that might be put up for people to operate private businesses out of?

Ms Pitman—My personal opinion is that the land tenure situation needs to be reviewed. Some capacity for freehold title needs to exist so that people can buy the land themselves and then use the value of the land to invest in their own buildings as individuals.

Mr JOHN COBB—We are talking about a community in which the capital probably does not exist for people to buy the land in the first place.

Ms Pitman—Definitely, but if they had ownership of the land the banks would let them borrow against the value of the land to build the building. There is also the potential income, living on an island where you have a niche market, where you are going to be the only service provider for that business. Any business is going to do well on Palm Island. What is so frustrating about it is that you are on an island and you cannot get anything unless you go to Townsville. Businesses would do well if they could exist there, as they do everywhere else.

Mr JOHN COBB—I accept that and I am sure businesses could run there. What I am trying to get back to is that it would be community owned. Simply granting community ownership would still not help individuals start up a business.

Ms Pitman—I do not necessarily think that people in the community want everything to be community owned. That is one of the big issues at the moment—this idea that everybody who lives in an Aboriginal community wants to live communally and that everything should be community run. That might be a good idea with such things as the store. Maybe a co-op or community-run store would be a good thing, because food is a huge issue, a basic human need, and you cannot get good food on Palm Island. I do not think it should be a private business. It is an example of a business that should be kept in the community. But why should there not be a private hairdressing business, for example?

Mr JOHN COBB—The capital probably does not exist to buy the land in the first place. Nobody would be happier than me to see some private business get up—community, sure, but I do not think you need to change much for a community business to get up. But to get people interested in doing a few things individually, as families or whatever, I would think that rental is a far better option—whether it be for 20 years, 30 years or whatever—than ownership. I imagine that can happen now. Would it not be more to the point to get individuals trained in running a business—getting individuals or immediate families to do that—rather than worrying about land tenure? Surely if they have a long enough lease period that is not their biggest issue. It is not with most businesses anywhere.

Ms Pitman—I think there are a lot of individuals in the community who would really like the opportunity to run a business themselves, but there are very limited places where that can happen.

Mr JOHN COBB—Have they applied? Have they asked for the relevant authorities to get the lease over land or a building?

Ms Pitman—I do not know. I could not tell you. There is quite a lot of infighting in the community about who gets to run those few businesses that already exist. There are people that want the chance to do it. If you take a new suburb in Brisbane, a shopping centre is built which is probably worth \$2 million or \$3 million. It has a little supermarket and five or six very nice little shops and a set of public toilets. Who is going to come into Palm Island and do that? Somehow that capacity needs to exist so that the developers who develop those shopping centres are in partnership with the community if that is what you need. You need millions of dollars to build it. That is what you need. There is nowhere on Palm Island that you can put businesses. Someone has to start investing in the community to look towards where those businesses are going to go.

CHAIR—I agree with Mr Cobb that there are a number of steps to go through to run a successful business. There are at least two dimensions: the local Aboriginal population and an outside population. There would be a discussion about whether locals should do it and develop all the skills necessary, and that is a huge demand. Most Australians do not want to be involved with business. That is the truth. It is too hard, too demanding, too difficult. Therefore, it is tough and difficult for anybody. That is the first point. Are you able to indicate whether this would be people outside coming in to do business or would the local people be doing business?

Ms Pitman—I think the local people should be given the opportunity, first, to run businesses in the same sorts of premises that are available to the wider mainstream community. They should not be expected to run a shop out of a tin shed and do well with that business. That is my point.

CHAIR—Developing the capacity to run a successful business is very difficult for most Australians. You would know the failure rate. It is pretty tough stuff.

Ms Pitman—I am not saying that would not be hard on Palm Island, but it should be possible to run a business in nice premises with decent security and lighting and that does not get broken into every single night or three nights a week, as my mother-in-law's shop does. She loses thousands of dollars worth of merchandise because the security is so poor. The police do not work after 10 p.m. and there are only four police on duty at a time anyway. So there is no general policing in the community to make sure that people who have shops actually have security, so they know that their stuff is not going to get stolen. She pays insurance rates that are through the roof, because she gets broken into 50 times a year. Those are the sorts of issues that you are dealing with. She has run that business uphill like that for 20 years. She has gritted her teeth and she is still there trying to do it.

Mr JOHN COBB—What sort of business is it?

Ms Pitman—It is a clothing shop, actually. They sell merchandise for the local football team and children's clothes. It is the only clothing you can get on the island. It is one of I think four shops on the island.

Ms HOARE—Can I go back to a point that you made in your initial statement. You said that last year, during NAIDOC celebrations, there were no government representatives to participate in that. We were in Cairns on Monday talking to the Indigenous Enterprise Partnership being run there. This goes to the business side as well. They have come a long way to get to where they are now and they still do not necessarily have the representatives from the Commonwealth, in particular, in a couple of areas that we mentioned, supporting small businesses starting up. I am not talking about infrastructure here. I think that would eventually come through community support for local businesses, which would then support employment of young people and local people.

There are systems working and there are government programs which should support those systems. For example, if your daughter wants to set up a hairdressing business on Palm Island, Commonwealth assistance is available. What we found in Cape York was that those programs are not necessarily promoted out there and community members do not know about them. So you need partnerships like the Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships to be formed with the support of the local community. You then get the expertise of people who are in the know—whether it is a private organisation, like the Boston Consulting Group, or a philanthropic one—and who can access the kinds of things that are available. Your vision for Palm Island is to be commended and I think it is a starting point. I think you have large challenges ahead of you, but it may mobilise the community and maybe eventually we can get some Indigenous enterprise partnership happening on Palm Island. I thank you for that.

Ms Pitman—I do not know about that one in Cairns, but, on that point that information is very hard to disperse in the community, in terms of capacity building, there are issues with the fact that there is no newspaper or radio station in the community. So, when things like this happen or if there is an opportunity for funding or support for business enterprises, most people do not know about it and they do not hear about it. That is a really fundamental issue. When I first came in 2000 they were verging on having a radio station set up. It has been about to happen for the last three years. I do not know why the receiver has not been put in, but they keep talking about putting a receiver on the island so that they can actually have some local content, even on one of the Murri stations from the mainland. That is really important. There is not even a news sheet. Some of the different groups within the hospital or health organisations print their own little news sheets, but they do not generally pick up on what federal or state funding is available.

When I first started working at the ranger's station I was doing some submission writing for the council. I found that there were numerous submission grants available and submissions could be put in, and I had more than enough work to do. But they did not actually know what to do when the grants came through. It was quite sad that, when I left, I had actually got some funding from the families department to start a project with youth. It had to do with the horses and the abuse that happens with the horses, which was what I was doing. I had to leave the money because the council could not accept the administration of it. It was only \$15,000, but they were not even able to take that grant on. So, after spending months doing it and working up a project that was viable, where I was going to employ someone and which involved local employment of

a mentor and that sort of thing, it all ended up just being nothing. That is what happens over and over again.

Ms HOARE—The local radio issue is a good one. I do not know who the federal member is for Palm Island, but the community could approach whoever the federal member is because it is a federal issue. I would encourage you to take that suggestion back.

Ms Pitman—It is supposed to be happening. According to the local agenda, it is on the table and it is happening—but it has just been happening for three years. What is really frustrating is that it takes so long for these things to get off the ground. I know and I appreciate that that is part of the political process.

Ms HOARE—Not only on Palm Island!

CHAIR—We need to start wrapping up. Glancing back, I see that you have raised so many issues in your submission, and they are all commendable. I think you have put a fantastic effort into bringing these issues to our attention. But what I must say to you—and in no way to mislead you—is that we cannot deal with them in one big bite. There are so many underlying issues in there, so I must not mislead you. The best I can do is to compliment you on your effort and commitment that you have shown in doing what you have done.

I have one issue to raise, and then I will conclude by inviting you to give a 30- or 40-second wrap up about what you would love to see happen in six months, maybe 10 years on Palm Island. What are your aspirations? Can you think of one or two pointers as to how we might do things? You have suggested some things, and we have them on the public record. Can you think of a couple of things that you would love to see happen and how do you think they should be done? With respect to the Public Service, in your submission you say:

Bureaucrats have told me personally that they were told not to come over here to liaise or talk with the community about issues.

That is pretty sad. Can you give us a reason why you think they do not want to come or, indeed, why would they even say it?

Ms Pitman—The person who said that was a federal bureaucrat, not a state bureaucrat, but it has happened at the state level as well.

CHAIR—Why do you think they would say that?

Ms Pitman—They think that there is a violent attitude, a racist attitude on Palm Island towards white people—and I would have to say in some sense that is true. But there is no threat of violence to outsiders. Palm Islanders are probably, understandably, racist towards white people. They are defensive about people from the outside in general—government, private individuals or whoever—coming into the Island community because they live on an island. That feeling is always there and it has been there for a long time. I think it is an unfortunate undertow in the way governments think about Palm Island.

CHAIR—You think there is a resistance because of the attitude of the islanders?

Ms Pitman—I think that historically it was a really violent place. There is a lot of bad press associated with Palm Island and that has just carried on. So that when people—and the bureaucrats as well—think about Palm Island, they think about violence and they think, ‘I don’t necessarily want to go there.’ Bureaucrats do not make the effort to come over because, honestly, I think that is in the back of many people’s minds.

CHAIR—We need to wrap up. I invite you—you may not choose to do so—to think about where you would like to see Palm Island in 10 years time, and how? We have talked about land tenure, attitudes and policing. We met the senior police officer yesterday.

Ms Pitman—He was probably a different officer from the one who was there a couple of months ago, when I was there.

CHAIR—He is a great young man. We met the community justice group and there are some terrific people in that. We came away with a lot of positive feelings and a lot of issues—problems, no doubt. What would you like to see Palm Island become? I think you have told us but, in your own words, what could Palm Island become? It is in a fantastic part of the world, for a start, isn’t it?

Ms Pitman—It is. It is one of the most beautiful places, if not the most beautiful, I have ever been to. I think that Palm Island has the potential to be a sustainable community in a really beautiful place. I think there is some opportunity for businesses such as tourism, but the community needs to maintain control of that. In 10 years, I would like to see people owning their own houses; decent shops; a good high school, where you could finish school on Palm Island; real jobs for people there; and proper housing, where 15 children are not living in three bedrooms and are not being abused by their uncle who happens to live in the same house. All that stuff should have ended 30 years ago, and it makes me really sad.

CHAIR—I pushed that issue pretty hard yesterday.

Ms Pitman—That is happening so much on Palm Island. You can walk down the street and talk to anyone and they will know of those stories; they can tell you themselves. I hope that in 10 years that will not be the case and that those who are kids now are not doing that to their kids. I really think that Palm Island has the ability to be in 10 years time a really prosperous, amazing place in which to live, a really positive place. I think one thing that needs to be acknowledged is the artificiality of communities like Palm Island. In 10 years time maybe the infighting and the community fighting that is happening, because of the historical situation of people being forced to live there, might be resolved in some way and the native title and traditional owners are acknowledged, and the culture that was on that land is reinvigorated and people can express their connection to where they came from and their connection to being born on Palm Island as Palm Island and move forward together as one group, as Bwngcolman people.

CHAIR—Fantastic! That is a wonderful way to complete this. We really appreciate your effort. I did not even pick any spelling errors in your submission, I have to tell you.

Ms Pitman—Didn’t you? I was so shocked when I read it.

CHAIR—I have to tell you that is a fantastic effort and we are really appreciative of it.

Ms Pitman—Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk to you. I really appreciate that. I wish that more people would take up these opportunities.

CHAIR—We must not mislead you, though, as we are very limited.

Ms Pitman—I appreciate that.

CHAIR—We can listen, and we have already raised a few issues with some of the departments this morning. But it is not going to happen overnight, and I think you know that.

Ms Pitman—I know that. Thank you for going to Palm Island. Thank you for taking the chance to go there, because one of the things that is missing is that a lot of politicians and bureaucrats do not go there. Maybe they need to live there and so be there more permanently.

Ms HOARE—We will be recommending it, because we know that other people have been discouraged from going. We have discussed that. We were actually pleasantly surprised when we went there.

CHAIR—I am a glutton for punishment: I may even go back and spend some time with the Army there in September, so we will see how my diary goes. Thank you for your attendance, Ms Pitman.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Hoare**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the electronic parliamentary database, of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 12.02 p.m.