

Introduction

Referral to Committee

- 1.1 This is the report of the inquiry by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs ('the Committee') into the needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 1.2 After correspondence with the then Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Senator the Hon John Herron, the Committee formally commenced the inquiry on 30 August 2000. A copy of the terms of reference is at page xii.

Conduct of the Inquiry

- 1.3 The Committee advertised the inquiry in September 2000 and distributed an information pamphlet throughout Australia. The pamphlets, over 1000, were sent with a letter from the Chairman inviting submissions to the inquiry.
- 1.4 During the course of the inquiry, the Committee received over 110 separate submissions from a range of individuals, Aboriginal and private sector organisations and Commonwealth, state, territory and local governments. A list of the submissions received by the Committee is at Appendix A. A list of other documents of relevance to the inquiry that were formally received by the Committee ('exhibits') is at Appendix B.
- 1.5 The Committee held a number of public hearings and meetings with those who had forwarded submissions to the inquiry as well as with other

relevant parties. A list of organisations and individuals who gave evidence can be found at Appendix C.

- 1.6 Copies of the submissions that the Committee received in electronic form, transcripts of the public hearings and a copy of this report can be found on the Committee's internet home page.¹

Scope of the Report

Chapter Outline

- 1.7 This chapter outlines the contents of the report and the core themes that guided the Committee as it considered its recommendations. The second chapter sets the context for the rest of the report. It draws out distinctions between the needs of urban and non urban Indigenous people and presents a demographic and socio-economic profile of the two groups and the broader Australian population.
- 1.8 Chapters three to eight respectively address the dot points of the terms of reference for the inquiry. Each chapter contains relevant case studies or examples of good practice as Members felt it was important to highlight the many successful and innovative ventures being undertaken by Indigenous people and others in urban areas, much of it under the leadership of the Commonwealth Government.
- 1.9 Many of the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are intertwined – poor housing and infrastructure, for example, can lead to ill health and thus poor school attendance which, in turn, can lead to low achievement and less chance of finding employment. Similarly, the elements of the inquiry terms of reference are interconnected and this should be borne in mind when reading individual chapters.
- 1.10 In the final chapter, the Committee outlines its vision for a positive future in which Indigenous people (urban and non urban) maximise their potential and can fully participate as equal members of the Australian community.

What is 'Urban'?

- 1.11 There has been some discussion about the most appropriate definition of 'urban' in the context of the terms of reference. The Committee has used the formal Australian Bureau of Statistics definition of urban Aboriginals

1 At www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia/index.htm.

and Torres Strait Islanders as being those living in population centres of more than 1,000 people.² This definition incorporates people living in a wide range of circumstances. It includes Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders living in mixed, predominantly non Indigenous communities ranging in size from small country towns to capital cities. The definition also incorporates traditionally oriented Aboriginals living in predominantly Indigenous communities in remote areas, some of which have populations of up to 2,500 people.³

- 1.12 Some of the evidence to the Committee has used the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) to categorise the location of Indigenous people. The ARIA ratings define location on a rating of service accessibility from 'highly accessible' to 'very remote'.⁴ The definition of 'urban' would loosely fit centres falling within the categories of 'highly accessible', 'accessible' and 'moderately accessible' and, in some cases 'remote'.⁵ The ARIA ratings are being used increasingly by planners and government agencies with the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, for example, basing its funding formulae on ARIA ratings.⁶
- 1.13 The Committee has not wished to be pedantic in its application of any definition – to be so would be of no help to those suffering disadvantage. There is a continuum rather than an absolute distinction between urban and non urban contexts.⁷ Indeed many of the Committee's observations and recommendations apply to all Indigenous people wherever they live.
- 1.14 Regardless of whether defined in terms of population or service access, the Indigenous population is not homogeneous. The Northern Territory Government distinguishes between four categories of 'urban' dwelling people, including:
- long term urban dwellers, sometimes for several generations, including the traditional owners of the land on which the urban centre is based;
 - those who have permanently relocated from other areas in search of different or better opportunities;

2 See Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Occasional Paper: Population Issues, Indigenous Australians*, 4708.0, 1996, pp. 28-29.

3 Such as Wadeye, Port Keats, Maningrida and Galiwinku.

4 See www.health.gov.au/hfs/ari/aria.htm.

5 For example, the Committee has considered Alice Springs an urban area although it has an ARIA classification of 'remote'.

6 See also Senator the Hon John Herron, *Submissions*, pp. S1401-53.

7 Warawara, Department of Indigenous Studies and Prof A Hamilton, Macquarie University, *Submissions*, p. S64.

- those (often with their families) forced to relocate to urban centres, often unwillingly, to access specialist services, such as renal dialysis; and
 - medium and short term visitors who may visit for specific purposes but do not intend to stay permanently.
- 1.15 These categories accommodate a key feature of Indigenous urban populations - their mobility - with people moving between houses, suburbs, towns and to and from remote areas. The categories also encompass those living in the suburbs of capital cities, small towns and the town camps that adjoin a number of rural centres in more remote areas. The key to remember is that, regardless of definition, urban dwelling Indigenous people encompass a range of groups with widely differing backgrounds, needs and aspirations.⁸

Other Relevant Inquiries

- 1.16 The breadth of the terms of reference did not allow the Committee to examine all issues as fully as it wished in the time available. However, many of the issues have been examined in other inquiries - even if without an urban specific focus. Members of the Committee have also drawn on their wider experience on the Committee to assist them to develop recommendations in this report.
- 1.17 In November 1992, this Committee completed a similar inquiry into the needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁹ Many of the issues before this inquiry are the same as those raised nearly a decade ago. The Committee is pleased to note that progress is being made. There is no doubt that the mood now of the Australian community is overwhelmingly in favour of reconciliation as the Prime Minister has observed:

It has become an unstoppable force... the nation has been enriched and is better and more united nation as a consequence.

and:

our collective priority must be to strengthen support for the ongoing process and, most importantly, improve the lives of Indigenous Australians.¹⁰

⁸ Northern Territory Government, *Submissions*, p. S1361.

⁹ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Mainly Urban: Report of the Inquiry into the needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, November 1992. The Hon Warren Snowdon MP is the only Member who has served on the Committee for both inquiries.

¹⁰ Hon John Howard MP, *Australia and Reconciliation Today*, MRC News, Summer 2001, pp. 5-6.

1.18 Similarly, the Leader of the Opposition has commented:

there has been movement in the right direction. Anyone who had taken part in last year's [2000] marvellous marches across bridges all over the country knows there is a groundswell of opinion in favour of reconciliation...¹¹

1.19 All governments, Commonwealth and State acknowledge that "basic living standards from employment to health, from education to mortality rates" - remain unacceptable:

It is true...that past policies designed to assist have often failed to recognise the significance of Indigenous culture and resulted in the further marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the social, cultural and economic development of mainstream Australian society.

This led to a culture of dependency and victimhood, which condemned many Indigenous Australians to lives of poverty and further devalued their culture in the eyes of their fellow Australians.

The inconsistencies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches remain at the root of much of the current difficulty.¹²

1.20 The Committee urges all governments - Commonwealth state and territory to continue to address Indigenous needs with determined and focused policies and to measure the progress being made and their deliberations in policy against core Australian values. In the Prime Minister's words:

the principle of equity and a fair go, at the heart of the Australian character, is also at the heart of practical reconciliation programmes.¹³

and as expressed by the Leader of the Opposition:

What we want is for Governments to create the environment in which a more open, generous and creative spirit can flourish in this country.

These are imponderables: they cannot be measured in a Government's Budget Papers or laid out in a bar graph.

And yet Governments can take the lead on issues at the heart of how we will come to feel about ourselves as a nation, on issues

11 Hon Kim Beazley MP, *Address, NSW Reconciliation Dinner, 2 June 2001*, p. 2. www.alp.org.au/media/0601/kbsprec020601.html (August 2001).

12 Hon John Howard MP, *Australia and Reconciliation Today*, p. 7.

13 Hon John Howard MP, *Australia and Reconciliation Today*, p. 9.

that reflect the values we would like to see for your children and their children.¹⁴

Other Parliamentary Inquiries

- 1.21 The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs tabled its *Health is Life* report of its inquiry into Indigenous health in May 2000.¹⁵ That Committee's comments on the delivery of health services to Indigenous people have been of relevance to this Committee's examination of the delivery of health and other services to Indigenous people in urban areas. The two committees have also had an overlapping membership which has assisted in the deliberations for this inquiry. This Committee generally endorses and supports the recommendations of *Health is Life* and notes, with pleasure, that the Commonwealth Government has embraced that report.
- 1.22 At the time of this inquiry, the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs was conducting an inquiry into the social and economic costs of licit and illicit substance abuse. While this broad ranging inquiry is not Indigenous specific, its findings should be of relevance to reducing the rate and impact of Indigenous substance abuse.
- 1.23 In March 2000 the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee completed an inquiry into the effectiveness of education and training programs for Indigenous Australians. The report of that inquiry has also provided a backdrop for this Committee's consideration of the situation and needs of Indigenous young people and the opportunities for economic independence in urban areas.¹⁶

Commonwealth Grants Commission Inquiry

- 1.24 In October 2000 the Commonwealth Grants Commission released a draft report for its inquiry into the distribution of Commonwealth funding for programs that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.¹⁷ While having a financial focus, the data collected by the Commission has been of

14 Hon Kim Beazley MP, *Address, NSW Reconciliation Dinner*, p. 3.

15 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, *Health is Life: Report on the Inquiry into Indigenous Health*, May 2000.

16 Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, *Katu Kalpa: Report on the Inquiry into the effectiveness of education and training programs for Indigenous Australians*, March 2000. A Government response to the report was tabled in the Senate on 8 March 2001.

17 Commonwealth Grants Commission, *Draft Report of the Indigenous Funding Inquiry*, Discussion Paper IFI 2000/2, 2000.

assistance to the Committee. A final report was provided to the relevant Commonwealth ministers on 28 March 2001. The Committee recognises that this report will need to be examined on the basis that the final Grants Commission report may lead the Government to modify its response to some of this report's recommendations.

- 1.25 The Grants Commission was to: develop a methodology to measure the relative needs of groups of Indigenous people; identify and measure the relative needs of Indigenous people in regions for specific services; and consider how well the distribution of Commonwealth resources for each service accords with the relative needs of those regions.¹⁸ If its findings are adopted by government, the report will have significant impact on future programs as it will provide a whole of government methodology to improve the efficiency of service provision. However, the Committee believes that most existing and future services will require individual assessment and monitoring and the exercise of judgement.

McClure Report

- 1.26 The report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform, provided to the Minister for Family and Community Services in July 2000 ('the McClure Report') has been particularly influential in the redesign and delivery of mainstream social support services.¹⁹ Much of the philosophy and many of the recommendations of the McClure Report are reflected in 2001-02 Commonwealth budget initiatives and will have an impact on the services used by Indigenous people in urban (and non urban) areas. The Committee anticipates that these initiatives will provide more efficient and effective services for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders.

Core Principles

- 1.27 Committee Members found it useful to agree to a set of core principles to assist them assess the inquiry evidence and consider possible recommendations. The core principles or values underpin the report and are discussed below.

18 The Commission based findings on ATSIC regions where possible.

19 Reference Group on Welfare Reform, *Participation Support for a More Equitable Society*, Final Report, July 2000.

Equal Access to Government Services for all Australians

- 1.28 All Australians should have the same rights, opportunities and obligations. Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, as Australian citizens, therefore, have a right to reasonable and equitable access to mainstream government services. It is the responsibility of governments to ensure that their programs and services are accessible by all Australians who need them.

Community Focus

- 1.29 Communities and individuals should be encouraged to develop services to meet the needs of their community. They are generally better able to do this than governments. Communities are also more likely than governments to find the best solutions to local problems and challenges. Government programs need to be developed with this understanding.
- 1.30 Governments should help local groups articulate their needs and manage their resources so that they can successfully interact socially, politically and economically with the wider community.

Partnerships

- 1.31 It is desirable for all levels of government, the private sector, Indigenous groups and individuals to work together to maximise opportunities for individuals and ensure that services designed to meet the needs of people are delivered as efficiently as possible.
- 1.32 The Committee believes that through such cooperative strategies the entrenched disadvantage and alienation suffered by many Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders living in urban areas will be successfully challenged. This will require new ways of thinking.

Rights and Responsibilities

- 1.33 The unique identity and culture of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders living in urban areas should continue to be recognised and respected by all Australians.
- 1.34 At the same time there should be a balance between rights and obligations. All Australians – Indigenous and non Indigenous - need to take an appropriate level of responsibility for their own actions and respect the rights of others and the broader community.
- 1.35 The Committee accepts that the capacity of some Indigenous people to accept individual responsibility may be affected by the long term

disadvantages referred to throughout this report. Nonetheless, these structural factors do not alleviate the need for Indigenous people, at the individual, family and community level to share responsibility with the wider community for urgently addressing such issues as domestic violence, alcohol and substance abuse, truancy and parental responsibilities. There is much evidence available to indicate that many Indigenous leaders agree. Evelyn Scott regards welfare dependency as 'almost totally destroying Aboriginal culture'; Peter Yu asserts that communities are being 'crushed with the weight of the welfare economy'; and Noel Pearson argues persuasively that 'the scale and nature of Indigenous problems changed dramatically after passive welfare became the economic foundation of their communities'.²⁰

Focus on Mainstream Services

- 1.36 In urban areas at least, the urgent priority should be on meeting the needs of Indigenous people through better access to existing mainstream services. This means that mainstream services need to be appropriately designed and delivered in culturally sensitive ways that reflect regional differences and cultural diversity. It also means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need to be involved in program design and service delivery. It may be necessary to invest in parallel Indigenous specific structures or services where mainstream services are inadequate or non-existent.
- 1.37 The Committee acknowledges that there are many mainstream government services that Indigenous people find currently neither easy to use nor appropriate to their circumstances. However, this is not a reason for doing nothing. Appropriate plans need to be developed to overcome these obstacles. They should not be perpetuated.

