



# **HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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

**Reference: Greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders**

**CAIRNS**

**Friday, 25 October 1996**

**OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT**

**CANBERRA**



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

Members:

Mr Lieberman (Chair)

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

Matter referred for inquiry into and report on:

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

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

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

**WITNESSES**

<b>AHMAT, Mrs Nanette, 23 Warner Street, Cairns, Queensland 4870</b> .....	<b>75</b>
<b>CLIVE, Mrs Delinah Rose, Chairperson, Pasa Gab Te, Torres Strait Islander Corporation, 14 Bradford Street, Whitfield, Cairns, Queensland 4870</b> .....	<b>75</b>
<b>CROWE, Ms Maryanne, Director, Pasa Gab Te, 112 Enmore Street, Manoora, Cairns, Queensland 4870</b> .....	<b>75</b>
<b>LUI, Mr Abiu, Pasa Gab Te, Cairns, Queensland 4870</b> .....	<b>75</b>
<b>NAKATA, Mr Thomas James, Pasa Gab Te, Cairns, Queensland 4870</b> .....	<b>75</b>
<b>NICOL, Ms Nerelle Joy, 28 Mornington Street, Kewarra Beach, Queensland 4879</b> .....	<b>89</b>
<b>O'SHANE, Mrs Mary, Director, Pasa Gab Te, 10 Almond Street, Holloway's Beach, Queensland 4878</b> .....	<b>75</b>
<b>WARRIOR, Miss Stella Yropi, Pasa Gab Te, Cairns, Queensland 4870</b> .....	<b>75</b>

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

*Greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders*

CAIRNS

Friday, 25 October 1996

Present

Mr Lieberman (Chair)

Mr Entsch

Mr Melham

Mr Lloyd

Mr Tony Smith

The committee met at 9.35 a.m.

Mr Lieberman took the chair.

**CHAIR**—I declare open this public hearing into greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders and I welcome witnesses and any members of the press and public who may be present. I would like to take this opportunity to say just a few words about this inquiry. Terms like self-determination and greater autonomy mean different things to different people. The object of this inquiry is to find a meaning for greater autonomy which can satisfy everyone. Having travelled around the Torres Strait and the mainland this week, I can say that finding this meaning will not be easy. Some may find the process of change slow, but it is not all bad news.

What I can promise is that members of this committee bring to the inquiry immense goodwill towards Torres Strait Islanders, wherever they may live. We will listen very carefully to what you have to say. We will be searching for solutions which will bring benefits to all Torres Strait Islanders and we will do this to the best of our ability.

**AHMAT, Mrs Nanette, 23 Warner Street, Cairns, Queensland 4870**

**CLIVE, Mrs Delinah Rose, Chairperson, Pasa Gab Te, Torres Strait Islander Corporation, 14 Bradford Street, Whitfield, Cairns, Queensland 4870**

**CROWE, Ms Maryanne, Director, Pasa Gab Te, 112 Enmore Street, Manoora, Cairns, Queensland 4870**

**LUI, Mr Abiu, Pasa Gab Te, Cairns, Queensland 4870**

**NAKATA, Mr Thomas James, Pasa Gab Te, Cairns, Queensland 4870**

**O'SHANE, Mrs Mary, Director, Pasa Gab Te, 10 Almond Street, Holloway's Beach, Queensland 4878**

**WARRIOR, Miss Stella Yropi, Pasa Gab Te, Cairns, Queensland 4870**

**CHAIR**—Ladies and gentlemen, the committee prefers that all evidence be given in public, however if you wish to discuss a matter in private you should say so—don't hesitate to tell us—and the committee will be happy to consider your request.

Thank you for coming. We have no written submission, so would you like to make an opening statement before members ask questions?

**Mrs Clive**—We have attended previous meetings about autonomy for the Torres Strait region. Our concerns can be summed up in this way: if there are big changes up in Torres Strait, will this include the Torres Strait islanders who live on mainland Australia?

**CHAIR**—Is there anything else you would like to say by way of an opening statement?

**Mrs Clive**—No.

**CHAIR**—Perhaps I can ask you a few questions. Although this is a public hearing we try to be as

informal as we can, so we want you to relax, feel at ease and talk to us frankly. I would like to ask about your organisation. How many members does the cooperative have?

**Mrs Clive**—Right now, including the chair, secretary and treasurer, we have 15 members.

**CHAIR**—How long has your cooperative been in existence?

**Mrs Clive**—Since 1979. In the early stages we had rather a low profile, but there has been more interest since 1994-95.

**CHAIR**—What is the principal objective of the cooperative?

**Mrs Clive**—To support the needs of mainland Torres Strait Islanders.

**CHAIR**—How often does the cooperative meet?

**Mrs Clive**—On a monthly basis.

**CHAIR**—I wonder whether you are familiar with our terms of reference. We have been asked by the minister to inquire into the effect of greater autonomy, including any change affecting mainland Torres Strait Islanders, so what you have just said is very much in our focus. So that we can understand your concern about that, could you please tell the committee why you are so anxious to see Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland represented in any organisation that might come about as a result of the government considering our report? In other words, have you had some experiences?

**Mrs Clive**—According to the statistics of mainland Islanders living in Cairns, there are about 800 Torres Strait Islanders who are not able to be involved in our committee. I suppose that is due to lack of transportation. Most of our people have to rely on public transport. We usually run our meetings at night—

**CHAIR**—I quite understand that even though you have only 15 members, there are at least 800—probably more—Torres Strait Islanders who are interested in your work. What I want to establish is why you are urging us to include Torres Strait mainlanders in the running and decision-making of the Torres Strait Islands. Can you give me some reasons why you feel that way?

**Mr Nakata**—If it is to be a separate authority from ATSIC then we will get the benefit down here. The TSRA basically looks after Torres Strait. The people down south do not really have a representative within the commission itself to enable them to approach it to get any funding or financial assistance.

**CHAIR**—At present you have to go through ATSIC?

**Mr Nakata**—Yes, at present we have to go through ATSIC and very often you find that Islanders are disadvantaged by going through that system.

**CHAIR**—How are they disadvantaged?

**Mr Nakata**—Because we are a smaller group. We put forward projects that would meet our needs, but the majority of the projects are for Aboriginal people and they override ours.

**CHAIR**—Can you give us some examples of that, please?

**Mr Nakata**—You only have to look at housing. I know it takes a long time for Aboriginal people as well, but housing funding for Islander groups is very hard to access because the budget is so limited.

**CHAIR**—So you are telling us that you are concerned about the long delay in applications for housing for your people. You are also saying that you understand there is also a long delay for housing for Aboriginal people in this area. Are you saying that the delay is even longer for Torres Strait Islanders than it is for Aboriginals?

**Mr Nakata**—We believe it is. We have that feeling.

**CHAIR**—Can you give us any evidence of that or any examples that might reveal that this is the case?

**Mrs Clive**—In Cairns, the three recognised housing organisations are Woompera Muralag, the Kozan Cooperative and our own Pasa Gab Te, and we find it very difficult to get assistance from ATSIC.

**CHAIR**—Are the waiting lists on each of those three the same or different?

**Mrs Clive**—I cannot answer for the housing area—we do not have a representative here who can do so.

**CHAIR**—So you do not have an understanding of the numbers on the waiting lists, but you would like us to find out what they are? We will try to get them.

Do you have any idea how many Torres Strait Islanders are seeking housing in this region?

**Mrs Clive**—About 50 per cent of the Torres Strait Islanders living in Cairns are waiting. There is a lot of overcrowding in Torres Strait Islander housing at the moment.

**CHAIR**—What other programs do you believe have been considered by ATSIC in which Torres Strait Islanders have sought to be a part but where, in your opinion, they have not had equitable distribution of funding or recognition?

**Mrs Clive**—I forgot to bring the operational plan. When we first put together the organisation, we drew up this plan which explains the overall activities that we proposed. One of our projects was for an information centre, to be run voluntarily through the Pasa Gab Te organisation; the other concerned cultural guidance activities, such as dancing, for the Torres Strait Islander youth.



**CHAIR**—So applications were made, but no funds were received at all?

**Mrs Clive**—Not this year. Next financial year, maybe.

**CHAIR**—Are you aware of Aboriginal groups of similar objectives receiving funds this year?

**Mrs Clive**—No.

**CHAIR**—Why is it that you say you feel you have not been treated equitably?

**Mrs Clive**—What we have got so far for 1996-97 is nothing at this stage. The funds we have got in our account are limited so we can only operate on that until June 1997.

**CHAIR**—Do you think that if a separate authority for the Torres Strait Islands were established—you have asked that mainland Torres Strait Islanders be given a voice in that new authority if there is one—people of Torres Strait Island descent on the mainland should have a vote on how money is spent in the Torres Strait Islands? Or do you think mainland Torres Strait Islanders should leave it to the Torres Strait Island communities to decide how the money is spent on the islands?

**Mr Lui**—I think it is up to them up there, the Torres Strait Islander people up there, to decide what they will do with the money. We are living down here on the mainland. We want our representatives here to tell us how the money will be spent here.

**Ms Crowe**—I feel that the Torres Strait people that are living down here should vote for how the money should be spent. Torres Strait people in the Torres Strait have their own concerns and they don't seem to want to look after us as well. So we need to handle our own affairs down here.

**CHAIR**—Is that the general view of all of you? I am very interested to hear your view today on that issue.

**Miss Warrior**—At the last conference we had, we were quite aware of what was going to happen if things like that did happen. We want our voice there. We understand that they make the decisions on Torres Strait because the islands are up there.

**CHAIR**—So you agree with Mr Lui?

**Miss Warrior**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Does anyone disagree on that principle? You seem to all accept the principle that mainland Torres Strait Islanders should be part of a new authority for Torres Strait Island people but that mainland Torres Strait Islanders should not tell the people on the Torres Strait Islands how the money should be spent? That should be a matter for the Torres Strait Islanders?

**Ms Crowe**—Yes.

**Mr LLOYD**—Do the people you look after on the mainland have links with the Islands? Are they strong links culturally and emotionally? Do you have a lot of people that come down south from the Islands temporarily for education, health reasons or whatever? Do they return or do they stay here?

**Ms Crowe**—We do have strong links with the people in the Torres Strait. We keep our culture very strong and we communicate with them, but we do things our way. When the kids come down for education, they see that there are housing problems. There are not many hostels that can accommodate the students. I work at one of the community education councils, at Trinity Bay High School, and I have a lot of Torres Strait kids coming through. You get some that go to uni or TAFE, but most of them go back.

It goes back to learning in primary school. The learning is different in the Torres Strait. Down here they are way ahead. There is failure; there is achievement. They are good in sports and that sort of thing. We would like to put a lot through university so they can go back and work. Some of them go back and work in the Islands, in the council office, as a teacher aide or something like that. It all goes back to money, housing and that sort of thing.

**Mrs Ahmat**—I can't talk the lingo like up in the islands because my mother went and evacuated from there to Darwin and we evacuated during the war and landed here, and I am stuck in Cairns. But the roots are always there. Education is very hard for us. English is our second language. I agree with what Maryanne is saying. It is very hard for our children to go along to tertiary education, as you well know. We are the lay people and you are the educators.

My son is doing economic law. He was doing it at Sydney University but came back this way because he found it so hard struggling for his cadetship. He had to go through Armidale. We are involved with different organisations and we can work within the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, but our hearts do plead for our people because we know the problems that we have on the mainland.

It is terrible at times when we are sitting with our Aboriginal brothers and sisters and all of a sudden we have to identify ourselves. I would have to get up and say, 'I am of Torres Strait Islander descent.' There are a lot of Torres Strait Islanders who have become teachers and have got economics degrees.

I won't mention the private school name, but I remember that my brother and my sons were the only ones at that time going to the school. Mary knows that there are a lot of our people going through that school now. Coming from the Torres Strait, you are in a new world. When I say new world for them, it is a new world of white people.

**Ms Crowe**—It is the culture shock, as well.

**Mrs Ahmat**—So we have taken the relations in and sent them to school. A couple of girls have gone on to business college. Torres Strait Islanders have to know that we are suffering down here. It is very hard when my son goes to Sydney University but has to come back to Cairns and go through Armidale because he's having the same problem with different culture and different race in New South Wales as well.

**Mrs O'Shane**—I would just like to let you know about giving money out to organisations in Cairns. I

am part of that, too. I don't think we have not given money to any organisation or discriminated against any organisation at all. I think we have been fair to all organisations. That is including organisations that I belong to also—Pasa Gab Te. We have given them money to start them off. I think there is more work to be done yet, to do the groundwork to get them going. We can't top up their funds when it has not been shown yet that they are doing something.

**CHAIR**—Can I interrupt you, because I am not following. Whose money are you giving away?

**Mrs O'Shane**—ATSIC money.

**CHAIR**—How do you find yourself in a position to decide ATSIC money being given away? I didn't catch your involvement.

**Mrs O'Shane**—I am on the ATSIC regional council.

**CHAIR**—I just wanted to get that on record.

**Mrs O'Shane**—We allocate that money to different programs that are being run by different organisations—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in this region.

**CHAIR**—How were you elected to the regional council?

**Mrs O'Shane**—By community people.

**CHAIR**—Who do you represent?

**Mrs O'Shane**—I represent both Aboriginal and Torres Strait people because both people elected me to be on the council.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. Do you identify yourself as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

**Mrs O'Shane**—Torres Strait Islander. I identify myself as a Torres Strait Islander and an indigenous Australian.

**CHAIR**—Thanks for that background. Now, what you are saying is that you have not been able to support or vote for some of the applications for funding by Torres Strait Islander organisations because they have not been ready for it? Is that what you were saying?

**Mrs O'Shane**—I didn't say that at all.

**CHAIR**—I am asking you what you are saying.

**Mrs O'Shane**—I am saying that any application that is given to the ATSIC council we look at when we sit down to make budget decisions. That is for Cairns and district. If there is any Torres Strait

organisation, we don't decline them at all. We give them money also, but we have to look at what they have got to do. If it is a program that will benefit people in the region, then we give it.

It is like when you go down to the bank to get money. You have to tell them how the money is going to be used. That is how we make our decision. In any other areas of Australia you will find that an organisation does not get money at all because maybe the two races don't get on together. Here in Cairns we do not have that at all. We get on well amongst the Aboriginal people.

The second point I want to make is to Mr Lloyd. People come down from the Torres Strait Islands for various reasons—hospital, holiday or whatever—and they go back to their community. Some people end up getting jobs. You people would know, if you been up to Torres Strait, that it is hard to get a job up there. They come down here and get a job down here so they stop down here. Up there you can't get very good houses. People are still waiting on houses.

I do my visit to Torres Strait three times a year because I have to travel up there with the principal of the school to talk to parents of kids attending the school that I work at. While I am doing that I again talk to council and look at all those things that islands should be doing for people living up there.

As far as I can see, very little has changed up in the Torres Strait. There is a lot of work to done up there. A lot of good things could be done up there, but you have to have the idea and the vision to do them. People do go back to the Islands; mainland Torres Strait Islanders do not necessarily stay down here. The Torres Strait is their home—they are used to the lifestyle up there, so they go back.

Another point I want to make is about this hearing: we did not have people informing us that you people were coming to talk to us. We would have liked people from, say, TSIAB to come here, meet with us and explain to us about you lot who are now putting all these questions to us. There are a lot of changes we would like to see for the Torres Strait. There are some things we agree on and other things we disagree on. We still have families living up there.

**CHAIR**—Would you like to tell us some of the things you agree and disagree on?

**Mrs O'Shane**—People who are going to make decisions for the Torres Strait should get in contact with all those individuals who live up there—not just the leaders, but the grassroots people as well. They must all agree to what they want for Torres Strait before any decisions are made to change things. I keep in close contact with people in the Torres Strait and they tell me that they do not agree with what is going on now.

**CHAIR**—What is going on? Tell me what you don't agree with.

**Mrs O'Shane**—For a start, there is self-government. The people up there don't really understand how this self-government is going to work for Torres Strait. You really need to explain to people how it is going to work. People from here must go up there and have a meeting with people up there and explain to them. Half the people who go to meetings are sitting there asleep. No wonder they do not understand what is going on or what is being said.

**CHAIR**—Do you think the present arrangement of ATSIC handling both Torres Strait and Aboriginal affairs is appropriate?

**Mrs O'Shane**—I think it is all right.

**CHAIR**—Do you think it should be changed in any way?

**Mrs O'Shane**—There might be some changes needed there. There is a chairperson for ATSIC sitting over there and she is a Torres Strait Islander—

**CHAIR**—No, I want to know what you think.

**Mrs O'Shane**—I think that ATSIC is going all right. I would like to see more Torres Strait Islander people involved in council and making decisions. The change I would like to see in ATSIC is that we run our own affairs without the white bureaucrats. They say that ATSIC is for black people, but we still have white managers. We want ATSIC to be run by us.

**CHAIR**—That is a great idea.

**Mrs Clive**—What will happen if the Torres Strait has its own self-government? Will a white person be the administrator or the secretary?

**CHAIR**—Your advice would be that if there is a separate authority, the administrators should be Torres Strait Island people?

**Mrs O'Shane**—Yes, properly trained Torres Strait Islanders.

**Mrs Ahmat**—I want to pick up what Mary O'Shane is saying about not knowing you were coming. Had my son known what you were on about, he would have been here with me today. He is running the organisation for the displaced people. We put him there so that in the afternoons he can do his research and study at the library. My son should have been here to answer some of the questions.

**Mrs O'Shane**—My husband is part Aboriginal and my children are a mixture of Islander, Aboriginal, Irish and whatever. If there was a separation, how would my children identify themselves? It is not just our family. There are many other Torres Strait Islander people who have married into Aboriginal families. Their children are like my children. What will happen there?

**Mr TONY SMITH**—With respect, why do you ask us what is going to happen? You are going to determine your own destiny. Each individual will determine his or her own destiny.

**Mrs O'Shane**—Yes, I know that. But you people are coming around getting information from us because of this thing called autonomy.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Let me say something in reply to that. What we have seen in the Torres Strait

is that there is a great potential up there. As you said earlier, there are good things that can be done and they are not being done. For example, tourism. There are totally untapped reserves up there. There is a chance—and at this stage I put it no higher than that—to become autonomous. In the future, could there not be a Torres Strait territory like the Northern Territory, which is totally self-governing?

**Mrs O'Shane**—There could be, there is nothing stopping that; just as long as they don't put some kind of bar up, like 'You can't come in here because you are an Aboriginal person.' As long as that gate is open, so that children who have connections with both cultures, can go up there and work. I can see that there is a bigger need for tourism up there. I wanted to go up there and do that.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Why couldn't you?

**Mrs O'Shane**—Because I have work down here. I am working with disadvantaged kids from the Torres Strait who come down here to the independent school. In my 10 years at that school, I have been a great help; I have pushed kids to go through to year 12 and then to university. As a result of my being at the school, we are going to have our first Torres Strait doctor at the end of this year.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—That is fantastic.

**Mrs O'Shane**—I am still trying to get my message through, through Catholic education, because I feel there is still a lot that needs to be changed to help disadvantaged kids from the Strait and Aboriginal children from remote communities.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Do you think that things such as tourism open up the possibilities of developing the islands—not in a big flashy way, but in a nice, friendly way? Do you think a lot of your people would want to go back if there were jobs up there?

**Mrs O'Shane**—Yes, I do—if there were jobs. Jobs are the only problem.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—So a lot of people really miss the Torres Strait, but feel they have to be down south to get jobs and so on?

**Mrs O'Shane**—Yes—jobs and accommodation. I travel up to the Strait and I find it is not the Torres Strait I once knew. I lived on Murray, Yorke and Darnley Islands and they are not like they used to be. People just rubbish the place now. If you travel round the islands you see piles of rubbish everywhere—it is such a shame. It wasn't like that once—before the white man brought in all his machinery. We had a real village life—as little kids we would carry baskets of coconuts and clean the village from one end to another. Today you don't get that sort of thing anymore. Sure, they have CDEP, but I will tell you what: in the old days we did not get paid and the islands were a lot cleaner than they are today.

**CHAIR**—That is a very interesting comment.

**Mrs O'Shane**—People who are working for CDEP stand around and laugh, yarn and smoke. You still find soft drink cans and bottles lying around.

**CHAIR**—Mary, you said a very interesting thing a few minutes ago and I would like you to expand on it. We asked you whether you thought ATSIC should continue to represent Torres Strait and Aboriginal people and you said, ‘Yes, but Torres Strait people should have more representation.’ Could you just help me a bit by expanding on that? How many more representatives do you want, and on what committees or bodies of ATSIC?

**Mrs O’Shane**—Torres Strait people should be involved in more organisations—not just those like ours. They should spread themselves around in other Aboriginal and Torres Strait organisations—those like the legal service, Woompera Muralag housing organisation and so on. We should spread ourselves and be involved.

**CHAIR**—What you say is very sensible. Why is it that your Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters are not getting involved? Is there something that stops them, or is it just that they are shy?

**Mrs O’Shane**—Perhaps they are shy. I do not know—they are just different. Me, I am outgoing, I don’t care. I can be here, there or wherever.

**CHAIR**—What you are saying is that we need to have some positive program to increase the involvement of Torres Strait Islanders. If we keep ATSIC as the body for both Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, we need to increase the involvement of Torres Strait Islander people. That is your advice to us today, is it?

**Mrs O’Shane**—Yes.

**Ms Crowe**—My school has 200 or more ATSI students, the majority of whom are Torres Strait Islanders. I am involved in a lot of organisations, and my surveys and talking to the parents of my students show that the problem is getting to meetings. Transport is the biggest problem, followed by finding someone to mind the kids and communication. When you go to meetings you find that they are in English. Even in ATSI meetings English is used. Our people do not always understand the terms that are used, and as a result they do not bother to go to the next meeting.

They have problems understanding how the meeting is run. They see people in there who are very strong people and they think, ‘You are there for me. We put our faith and trust in you. You do it. We will sit back.’ So we give them the feedback. If you have someone to mind the kids—we tried that once—you get a few more parents.

It goes back to education. Even with our kids that come from the Torres Strait, even from Edward River or some of the outer communities, they are quite intelligent and smart kids. They speak language that our kids down here don’t speak. Our Torres Strait kids can’t speak language. They come with their language and their skills into this education that they don’t understand and they try very hard. You find a lot of them will say they are very intelligent kids. They would say, ‘Forget it. I’ll go back and work for CDEP.’ I think more needs to be done up there in the community to prepare them for the mainstream school.

**CHAIR**—Are there any other matters that you would like to raise?

**Mr Lui**—You are talking about two separate organisations—Torres Strait and Aboriginal. With anything you come across, the first step is education. Then you know what you are doing. Torres Strait Islanders have to come together as a group and talk about what we are talking about now. Those people up there are living up there. We are living down here. We don't see what is going on up there. We can support them, but we want representation for us down here. That is my own personal opinion. We need a voice down here. We have to go to representatives here to voice what we want. Then they will tell us what to do.

It won't happen overnight. This is only the foundation. But if you prepare yourself before the time comes, you will be ready to face that thing. If you want a position, you have to educate yourself first. Without education, you can't run a business yourself because you are not educated for that purpose.

The parents need to teach their children at home before they take the first step. Today it is different altogether. The older days are gone now. I used to work in Torres Strait. I see how the Torres Strait has changed because kids come down here. You see our people living here. They go back and say to those people up there, 'Look at them down there.' How are you going to correct them? We have to correct the children first.

**Mrs Clive**—I am a full blood Torres Strait Islander. My grandparents were from Papua New Guinea. I have a teacher's background. I could not have that sort of a position anywhere in education here in Cairns, but I am recognised as a teacher aide. But if I go back to Torres Strait, I will be a registered teacher.

I have a health background. I am a health worker. Our interests relate to people travelling from north to south. The reason I am saying that is just to make it clear to the people sitting in front of me. The word Pasa Gab Te means 'a gateway to Torres Strait'. We are here as a bridge to Torres Strait. We need to be recognised on the mainland as well.

I am proud to be an Australian. My husband is a teacher. He is a white bloke. In relation to the question that was asked before on intermarriages and all that, surely we are going to find it difficult to get back and find positions in the Torres Strait. It is in the interests of our children to make their own decisions.

**Mr ENTSCHE**—If it is any consolation, can I tell you that at every single community we went to in the Torres Strait, one of their priorities was always that the mainland people be always part of the island community. I am talking about the island people. They have that same strong bonding, whether they be Islanders living in Broome, Sydney, Melbourne or wherever. There was probably one single individual in every community we visited right throughout the Torres Strait that suggested that they should look after themselves first, but he was strongly overridden by the entire community. Every community said the same thing: we are all one. There were concerns about the land-holders that have been living down here, traditional land-holders who have large holdings in the Torres Strait but had not lived there, and may not have even been born on Torres Strait. That message has come through very strongly.

**Mrs Ahmat**—We always go back to the education. I agree with what Mr Lui is saying about the education of the kids. I think Narelle and Mary can back me up. We have not got one solicitor in Cairns as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. That would be going back 20 years. When my son was an articled clerk with the legal service, no lawyers came up to show him what to do. This is where we are going back to



the education. To have professional people and qualified people in those positions, we know that they have to go to get qualified.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Where did he do his articles? Up here?

**Mrs Ahmat**—He was more or less an articled clerk through our legal service. He was working for the Far North Legal Service. When they had the split, he worked with our legal service down here. The former minister for Aboriginal affairs gave him a cadetship, but that is what it gets back to. If the lawyers do not show our people—field officers or articled clerks—the proper way to do the law, they are not going to learn. That is why we are saying we have to have qualified people.

**Mr LLOYD**—I just wanted to respond to a few things Mary said. You seemed a little bit concerned about this inquiry—a mob of white blokes sitting up here making decisions. I just wanted to say that the whole idea of this trip was for us to learn. We are not questioning you or anyone here. We have travelled many thousands of miles over the last week and we have gone out to the people to listen. It is no good us sitting in Canberra saying, ‘We know what is going on,’ because we don’t. We have learnt a lot this week and that is what it is all about. It was not questioning you or saying that any decisions have been made, because no decisions have been made.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Nothing will be imposed on you by this committee, I can assure you of that.

**Mrs O’Shane**—You are going around speaking to organisations here and in Townsville. Out of all that information, what are you going to do? Is it just for your information?

**Mr LLOYD**—The minister has asked us to report back to him on the idea of the possibility of autonomy, of looking after yourselves as Torres Strait. He has asked us to go out and talk to people. We will report back to the minister on what we have heard and it will all be recorded.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for what I believe has been a wonderful contribution by grassroots Torres Strait Islanders representing the views of the mainland. I reiterate the message that Mr Lloyd and Mr Smith mentioned, that we benefit so much from the opportunity to talk to you. We are wanting to listen and learn from you all because we have been asked to give a lot of thought to this issue. We intend to do that. I thought your evidence today was marvellous.

**Mrs O’Shane**—We do not see you so often. Whenever you go around there are always time limits on you. Why don’t you come and spend half a day with us? I know that you are busy people and that you work in Canberra. But we are all busy people and we want more time to sit and discuss these matters with you.

**CHAIR**—We will be back.

**Mr ENTSCH**—We do not have any pre-conceived ideas. That is why we keep telling everybody everywhere we go to speak their minds. The recommendations that will come from this committee will come out of what has been said to us at these meetings. We have been to a lot of the islands—to Mer, Moa, Saibai, Horn and so on—over the past week. A lot of people have wanted to have some input. A lot of the things

you are saying are being reaffirmed by almost every community. You mentioned the need to recognise both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders cultures. A lot of communities do that. When you go up to the peninsula area, you find that a lot of people identify themselves with both cultures—Horn Island and Umagico for example. Although there are a lot of Torres Strait Islanders at Injinoo, they want to identify solely as Aboriginals, as do those in New Mapoon. We are getting a lot of information and a lot of what you say has been reaffirmed elsewhere.

**CHAIR**—Thank you for your evidence. We have one more witness who would like to speak today and who has been waiting patiently for a long time.

**NICOL, Ms Nerelle Joy, 28 Mornington Street, Kewarra Beach, Queensland 4879**

**CHAIR**—Welcome to our hearing. Nerelle, would you state your position in the community, please?

**Ms Nicol**—I am just a member of the indigenous community. My mother is from the Torres Strait.

**CHAIR**—You are chairperson of—

**Ms Nicol**—I do not appear in that capacity today.

**CHAIR**—No, but could you just tell us what you are the chair of?

**Ms Nicol**—I am chair of the ATSIC Regional Council.

**CHAIR**—How long have you held that position?

**Ms Nicol**—Three years. At the moment we are in a caretaker period, as you would know. I am here today in a private capacity.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak. I would just like to pick up on your closing comments and on some of the remarks that other speakers have made. I have certainly been in front of House of Representatives standing committees before and I am probably a little more fortunate than most of our people because I am involved in the politics of the country, but for many people the terminologies and roles of these committees are not really known. People do not understand where their evidence will go and in what context it can develop. It could develop into some sort of process that will not reflect what they are trying to portray. They do not understand what these committees are about, what the recommendations are or what they lead to.

As a younger person who has been involved in politics in this country for quite some time, I think what we have seen here is a deterioration of values and principles, not only within the indigenous community but throughout our society in Australia. I say that because I believe that provides a basis for talking about the indigenous peoples of this country and how they wish to move into the future.

Within Australia we have two nations of indigenous peoples—the Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines on the mainland. That has been mentioned on a number of occasions. Some years ago there was a huge movement of Torres Strait Islanders down to mainland Australia to participate in developing this country's economic wealth. They participated in the fishing industry, in building railways and in the sugar and other industries. Society enjoys the benefits of that, but it appears to me that indigenous people do not share in that enjoyment of benefits—even though we have participated actively in building this nation.

We live collectively as a community. When my grandfather left the Torres Strait and brought his family down here, there was a place called 'Malay Town' set up in Cairns where a whole range of people lived—Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders, Malays, Chinese, Indians; in fact, everybody except Europeans—and there were probably one or two of them that no-one else wanted. There was no discrimination in Malay

Town at that time, or any need to be questioned as to who or what you identified with.

I spoke earlier about the values and principles of society—I feel that they have been eroded throughout the country. In those days people survived and worked together and did things so that they themselves as human beings living in a country would be able to pass something on to their children. Today those principles and those fundamental reasons for survival have been eroded, because all we need to survive on now is money. You don't really have to work. As long as you are getting money from somewhere, it doesn't really matter where, but in the old days our people worked together collectively because they had to survive to keep their kids and to be healthy. That ethos has eroded from Australian society generally, but at the bottom of that rung are our people. What we have seen is 208 years of processes of assimilation and erosion of our culture.

I have heard people today talking about education. Indigenous people can be made to feel that their processes of education within their own communities and cultures are subservient to or less intellectual than a western concept of education. Those values need to be reinforced and those processes recognised. Our people have worked in the fishing industry. They know when to go hunting and gathering. That is not based on any technological findings that your society operates on, but I think we have an opportunity in this country to all work together as one.

The saddest thing that ever happened to me was four years ago when I was asked to claim my identity. As I said in my opening comments, my mother is from the Torres Strait. I was asked that by an indigenous person. That, to me, is an insult. But the indigenous person who asked me that question was a victim of the system, of having to justify who and what they are. Government policies and legislation force us to identify who we are and prove it. We are indigenous people, whether we are from Torres Strait or the Australian mainland. We shouldn't have to prove to white people who or what we are.

**CHAIR**—You don't have to prove anything to this committee.

**Ms Nicol**—No, but you can see the process that we are in. We have all these white people coming around asking us to say what we feel. We are living in a system that we do not have any control over. So it goes beyond just politicians sitting in Canberra and us as indigenous people. It goes to the very core of fundamental principles of rights and recognition of people. It is insulting for me to have to come and sit in front of all these white people and say, 'Well, I think this should be good for us'. That's what's wrong with this country. For too long non-indigenous people have told us what is good for all of us.

I would rather look up to my elders. That is why I didn't mind waiting this morning—there are older people in this room who needed to speak. Those are the principles I was brought up on. Our older people have an education process in place, but they have been made to think that the white man's education in the school is better than theirs. Yet if you walk around the streets you may well be asked how that education system has helped any white or black kid. Your system is failing miserably, right throughout the world. Indigenous people have let go of a lot of their education, culture and spirituality but yours has never helped us and it will never help us.

We must start recognising the fact that you can no longer make us feel that who and what we are is

subservient to the process that you feel is so superior throughout the world. Your process is failing the world. For you to come and ask us what we identify as—and I know you asked Mrs O'Shane that question—is an insult. She has children with Aboriginal blood. My father is an Aboriginal person. I don't want to prove to anyone who or what I am. I am an indigenous person of this country.

I know that throughout Australia within the ATSIC process there are communities where Torres Strait Islanders have been discriminated against. Those are processes that we have to work through. Perhaps Torres Strait Islander people want the Torres Strait to be the governing centre for mainland Torres Strait Islanders too. But you need to work through the answers of what is going to happen to those people like myself and like Mrs O'Shane's children because through this whole debate I have never heard anyone address that issue. I do not want to be a lost generation and I do not want to be forced into a position where I have to choose between my mother's and my father's identity. There are a huge number of people throughout Australia who are in the same situation as I am, particularly in the Cairns area. As I said, when people came down from the Torres Strait, it didn't matter what nationality you were; it did not matter if you married an Aboriginal person or a Malay person because we were all one. But now it is becoming an issue because the government agenda is to ensure that we all live in some process.

I think that terminologies such as 'grassroots people' are an insult because they bring about class distinction for indigenous people and that is not something that we are used to.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—It is something we have heard from your people.

**Ms Nicol**—Oh, yes. But that is not a word that we have initiated. It was initiated by you fellows and we have taken it on amongst ourselves. It is just a divisive process.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—That might be your view, but it is not necessarily the view of people living out in the islands. They have said to us, 'Why aren't you talking more to the grassroots people?'

**Ms Nicol**—I hear our people say that all over the place. But it is a divisive process initiated by your people. I think you have totally missed the plot. You didn't get what I was getting at there. I am just saying that our own people talking about 'grassroots' is a divisive mechanism that has been put in place in this country to make us play the game of being divided.

We have an education process; we have spirituality; we have culture and ideas. My grandfather was a fisherman all his life, but he objected to the process of having to bow down to a state government that told him what to do. He was doing economic development way before time; he sailed the ocean by the stars—he didn't need a map. A lot of our people are like that, but they don't enjoy the wealth of industries such as the fishing and trochus industries. So we have to look at the really fundamental issues and, like I said, a lot of people will talk to you, but they will not realise where all the information they are giving you will lead them. We need to pick that up.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. I must now close this meeting because I have another public hearing, which must begin now.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Tony Smith, seconded by Mr Lloyd):

That, pursuant to the power conferred by paragraph (o) of standing order 28B, this committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 10.53 a.m.**