



# **HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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

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

**ALICE SPRINGS**

**Monday, 21 April 1997**

**OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT**

**CANBERRA**

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

Members:

Mr Lieberman (Chair)

Mr AlbaneseMr Lloyd  
Mr CampbellMr Marek  
Mr DondasMr Melham  
Mr EntschDr Nelson  
Mr HoldingMr Pyne  
Mr KatterMr 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**

**HODGSON, Mr Charles, Ingkerreke Outstations, PO Box 2427, Alice Springs, Northern Territory  
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**LOWAH, Ms Chuna, Torres Strait Islander Unit, PO Box 2427, Alice Springs, Northern Territory  
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**LOWAH, Ms Deanna, Arrente Council, PO Box 2427, Alice Springs, Northern Territory 0871260**

**LOWAH, Ms Sherry, PO Box 2427, Alice Springs, Northern Territory 0871 260**

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT  
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*Inquiry into greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders*

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Present

Mr Dondas (Acting Chair)

Mr LloydMr Tony Smith

Mr Marek

The committee met at 9.35 a.m.

Mr Dondas took the chair.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Good morning. I welcome you to the meeting of the Commonwealth parliament's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee. As you know, the committee is looking at whether the people of the Torres Strait would benefit from having a greater say in their own affairs and, if so, how this could be done; if the islanders did have a greater say in their own affairs, then what would this mean to Torres Strait Islanders, such as yourselves, who live outside the Torres Strait region; and whether ATSIC or the Torres Strait Regional Authority should represent Torres Strait Islanders, such as yourselves, who live outside the Torres Strait region. We have come to Alice Springs today to listen to what you have to say on those matters.

**HODGSON, Mr Charles, Ingkerreke Outstations, PO Box 2427, Alice Springs, Northern Territory 0871**

**LOWAH, Ms Chuna, Torres Strait Islander Unit, PO Box 2427, Alice Springs, Northern Territory 0871**

**LOWAH, Ms Deanna, Arrente Council, PO Box 2427, Alice Springs, Northern Territory 0871**

**LOWAH, Ms Sherry, PO Box 2427, Alice Springs, Northern Territory 0871**

**ACTING CHAIR**—We would like to ask Sherry Lowah to speak on behalf of the Alice Springs Torres Strait Islander community about these issues. We would like to hear about your corporation, Kain Marep, and what you do. We would then like to hear what others have to say. We also have some questions that we would like to ask you as we go through the morning.

We will be listening very carefully to what you have to say and will be reporting back to the Commonwealth parliament on your views. We want to report accurately to parliament about what you think and, for this reason, we will be recording your words so that we make no mistakes. Later we will send you a copy of what was said at today's talks so you can check that it is correct. Sherry, over to you for your prayer.

**Ms S. Lowah**—Before we begin, we would like to say a prayer.

*A prayer was said.*

**ACTING CHAIR**—Sherry, do you have an opening statement that you wish to make?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Yes, I do. Welcome to everyone this morning. I would like to thank you for coming. As you all know, this is a very important issue for the Torres Strait Islanders, and we are grateful to this standing committee for coming to Alice Springs especially to see us. Autonomy rights define the ability of indigenous people to determine the way in which they live and to control their social, economic and political development.

The panel consists of Mr Jim Lloyd, Mr Tony Smith, Mr Paul Marek and today's session will be chaired by the Hon. Nick Dondas, the member for the Northern Territory. Would you please make them welcome.

**ACTING CHAIR**—I apologise for Lou Lieberman, who is the chairman of our Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. I am aware that you met with Lou in Brisbane last year and

he promised that the committee would come to Alice Springs. I am pleased to be here with other members of the committee, but Mr Lieberman does send his apologies. He would have loved to have been here today, but unfortunately other pressures have prohibited him from being here.

The purpose of the committee, as you would be aware, is to get information and to listen to what members of the community who are not living on the Torres Strait Islands, especially in the northern part of Australia, have to say about the possibility of Torres Strait Islanders receiving more autonomy. Once this information has been gathered from interested communities and people throughout Australia, we will compile that information and make a recommendation to the federal minister, Senator Herron.

The committee has some questions it would like to ask you this morning, but is there anything else that you might like to say about the proposal to grant Torres Strait Islanders more autonomy? How would it affect you and your community, and what advice would you have to give to this committee?

**Ms S. Lowah**—We were just going to answer the three main questions first and then go from there to stimulate discussion, if that is okay.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Before we start the questions, would you like to give us a run-down on what is on the whiteboard?

**Ms C. Lowah**—That is part of our answer to the questions.

**Ms S. Lowah**—Is that okay if we go that way?

**ACTING CHAIR**—Fine, if that is how your mind is set. We just want to get the information out of you.

**Ms C. Lowah**—With that first question, this is the Torres Strait Islander Unit's view. The first question reads:

. . . whether the people of the Torres Strait would benefit from a greater degree of autonomy.

We believe it should read:

. . . whether all Torres Strait Islanders, on homeland and mainland, would benefit from a greater degree of autonomy.

That includes the mainland people.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So you believe that should be all Torres Strait Islanders?

**Ms C. Lowah**—All.

**ACTING CHAIR**—I think the reference does really mean that. But if you think it doesn't, can you explain to me why it doesn't?

**Ms C. Lowah**—Just how it is written—‘whether the people of the Torres Strait would benefit’. We are not in the Strait. We are here on the mainland. To us on the mainland, it does not seem like it is asking the question to us.

**Mr MAREK**—Moving on from what you have just said, we have spent some time in the Torres Strait and a lot of the Torres Strait people are saying, ‘We need greater autonomy up here. For those people who have left the Torres Strait and gone to the mainland, it was their decision to do that. We’re saying we want greater autonomy up here. This is where the funding should go.’ How do you feel about that? Would you like to comment?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Bear in mind that we have only been operational since last year, so this is a learning process for us. For us here in Central Australia, as Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland, if our people say they are going for greater autonomy—and we are hearing that across-the-board, not only from in the Strait—we have to go with that flow if we are working for Torres Strait Islander people. That is my answer.

**Mr MAREK**—I think the argument comes from the fact that, with greater autonomy, you look at the alliance with ATSIC. A lot of Torres Strait people have said that they do not want to be a part of ATSIC. They have said, ‘We want our own commission, which is the Torres Strait Regional Authority, and the Aboriginal people can have theirs. It is as simple as that. With that, we would get greater autonomy.’ That is what they are saying.

The only problem comes back to the economic side of it. Can the country afford to have two separate commissions? Can it afford to put money into the Torres Strait to look after the Torres Strait people, plus provide other funding for communities of Torres Strait people throughout the rest of Australia when they predominantly come from the Torres Strait? That is part of the argument, and that is why I come back to that question.

The Torres Strait people have said, ‘We are the people of the Torres Strait. For Australians, we look after illegal fishing, diseases coming from other countries, illegal boat people and all those sorts of things. We do that for Australia. In return for that, Australia gives us money to support us in the Torres Strait.’ What they are saying is that, if the other Torres Strait people on the mainland want that money, they should go back to the Torres Strait. That is what they have told us.

**Ms C. Lowah**—If we all went back to the Strait, there would be no room for us.

**ACTING CHAIR**—That is a very good point.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—In relation to your suggestion on terms of reference No. 1, I understand what you are saying. You are saying that you as Torres Strait Islanders outside of the Torres Strait should be included in No. 1—that is, whether you, the people outside of the Torres Strait, would benefit from a greater degree of autonomy. Terms of reference No. 3 covers the issue by saying:

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.

That is, the people not living in the Torres Strait. You have to bear in mind what these terms of reference are. We are given those terms of reference by the government and we have to operate underneath them. The implications for people who are Torres Strait Islanders and living outside the Torres Strait are really covered by No. 3. That is what we are looking at—what implications greater autonomy would have on you. So it is a slightly different variant of what you were saying—but not much, I don't think. It is just slightly different.

Following on from that, what do you think a greater degree of autonomy would mean to you as Torres Strait Islanders living outside of the Torres Strait?

**Ms C. Lowah**—We feel, see and know that ATSIC has not catered for the Torres Strait Islander people nationally. For example, with our own situation here, when it comes to grant applications through the ATSIC regional office here, there is ignorance within ATSIC as to where these grant applications go. They go to the ATSIC central office, then to OTSIA and then on to the TSRA.

As Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland in isolation, we have never been associated with the TSRA. We can only assume that they would be operating in a similar fashion to ATSIC on the mainland to a certain extent. But one main point that will arise from greater autonomy will be our cultural identity. Therefore, our answer is yes to the first one.

**Mr MAREK**—Do you feel as though ATSIC serves your needs in its current form and identity and in the way it operates?

**Ms S. Lowah**—No.

**Mr MAREK**—What would you like to see happen?

**Ms S. Lowah**—We would like a separate commission that caters for Torres Strait Islander people. Sorry, we are going in order form on the questions.

**Mr MAREK**—A lot of us have travelled around and we have our own ideas. What we are just asking is, from the heart, how you feel about some of the questions we ask. So if you haven't got it written down, it is just how you feel.

**Mr LLOYD**—It is very much as we discussed in our informal discussions yesterday. A lot of the information you gave us yesterday in the informal discussions is important to the committee. So if you can recall them at different times—

**Ms S. Lowah**—Question 2 says:

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

We say, considering the above—that is, what Chuna just said—in the past, Torres Strait Islanders have

requested, needed and wanted but now today we demand a separate commission that will represent all Torres Strait Islanders, regardless of where they are located, whether in the Strait or here in mainland Australia.

**Mr LLOYD**—You said that you feel you are discriminated against by ATSIC in applications for funding for Torres Strait Islander people. Have you any particular examples of that, or can you provide the committee with that at a later date? Are there examples of where you have applied for funding for specifically cultural projects and they have been denied? You mentioned earlier that you have to apply through the TSRA.

**Ms S. Lowah**—At this point in time, because we are not incorporated and we come under this Aboriginal organisation which is incorporated, we go through them for funding. Yes, we have had assistance, but the overall attitude can be called, I suppose, institutional racism that is very subtle. You know it is there. You can feel it in the way they react to what we want. We put in a grant application and we thought, ‘Oh, well, it will be okay because we’re with an Aboriginal organisation.’ But still there is an attitude there, especially with us here in Central Australia. It is like, ‘Yes, but why don’t you want to do this?’

**Mr LLOYD**—Do you feel it will be better when you are incorporated?

**Ms S. Lowah**—That is another story. It could be that, yes, there is that attitude there now because we come in under an Aboriginal organisation. But it could get worse when we become incorporated because then we are separate, we would come in under a Torres Strait Islander organisation. There could be a different reaction. Some of our island committees are incorporated and they are just sitting there with a name. That could happen to us.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Could I ask you a question in terms of your incorporation. Obviously, there must have been some justification for you to have your Torres Strait Islander community incorporated here in Alice Springs. Was that because the government had made a decision to have an inquiry into more autonomy for the Torres Strait, or is it something that would have happened anyway?

**Ms S. Lowah**—This is something that would have happened anyway. Our family has always felt, mainly for cultural revitalisation reasons for young people like ourselves, that we should take the initiative and, because we are the first Torres Strait family here, that we should lead the way. This has been an idea that has been with our family for a long time, so it is not like a new idea has just popped into our head. It has always been there.

**ACTING CHAIR**—If, for example, the government accepted our recommendation that more autonomy be granted to the Torres Strait Island—if that was what we felt positive about—how would you see the Torres Strait Regional Authority helping you here in Central Australia or communities in Broome, Perth, Darwin or wherever?

**Ms C. Lowah**—If the TSRA had to cater for all Torres Strait Islanders, I believe it would be like ATSIC for us on the mainland—we couldn’t get access to funds. The homeland would be more catered for than the mainland.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Because of the comments Sherry made—in that there was this racial discrimination in terms of Torres Strait Islanders and the Aboriginal community here—if you had the TSRA and it was completely autonomous, you would see them as the main body you would go to in terms of funding for various things you might need to do. Would you see a separate fund coming into Alice Springs from the TSRA to purely look after your health needs, for example? Or would you see the TSRA providing you with financial resources to promote your culture and identity in Central Australia?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Depending where we go, but our organisation, like I said, is more to do with that cultural revitalisation thing. We seek funding for that. But how we see it from our unit's perspective is that we are not looking at a TSRA. We are looking at a Torres Strait Islander Commission that is located on mainland Australia that would cater for people up in the homeland and in mainland Australia. That one body.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So the Torres Strait Regional Authority should just be the Torres Strait Islander Commission?

**Ms S. Lowah**—We would rather the words Torres Strait Islander Commission.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Which is the same.

**Ms S. Lowah**—Yes, which is the same. The Aboriginal people have their commission. We access funds from just that one body that caters for all Torres Strait Islanders.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Would you like to go through the whiteboard now on how you see your perspective?

**Ms S. Lowah**—This is how we see it to save doubling up and that sort of thing because you hear everyone say, 'You're getting two bites of the cherry.' We see one commission that's situated on mainland Australia. The reason we say 'mainland Australia' is that's where the majority of Torres Strait Islanders are. Probably our brothers and sisters in the Strait may disagree with that, but we just see ourselves situated on mainland Australia. Here you have your communities and organisations from within the Torres Strait and mainland Australia. So you get funding from the federal government straight through the Torres Strait Islander Commission and it would come down like that.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So all those boxes mean homeland—

**Ms S. Lowah**—Yes, they are just representing the communities and the organisations.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Do we have any questions on that?

**Mr MAREK**—No.

**Ms S. Lowah**—That's how we feel. That's our perspective. That's the build-up to greater autonomy for us. We know you just can't go in one big leap. You have to take steps to get there, wherever greater autonomy will lead us. We are only young people, but we hear people talking about it and they want it so we

have to go with the flow because we don't want to be left behind. We also want our community to be aware of that. So, to us, that's a step to greater autonomy by having a separate commission.

**ACTING CHAIR**—What do you see as the definition of greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islander people?

**Ms S. Lowah**—From my personal perspective, we would still have to remain part of Australia, because we are part of Australia, but more controlled, for example, with fishing rights, health things and things like that. I suppose that's how they would see it in the Strait. We would have more control over sea rights, fishing rights and all that—more control, more of a say, being able to make decisions, being able to run things, being able to do things the Torres Strait Islander way.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—My question relates to what you just said and also what you earlier said about there being no room if you all went back. I imagine that you are saying that on the basis of what you currently see in the Torres Strait. At the moment, housing is difficult, there isn't any economic infrastructure of note and there are no real jobs of a sustainable variety in any event other than, perhaps, council type work and police work. So you are looking at it as it currently is, not what it perhaps can be; is that right?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Yes, that's right, but it's mostly to do with population. How are you going to fit 27,000 or 28,000 people from the mainland on those islands? We have increased in population. We are everywhere.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Of course, I guess not every one of those people would want to go back to the islands anyway. Many people have made their lives here and are quite happy. But, in terms of greater autonomy, if there was developed something of an economic base, say, tourism, a fishing industry or a market gardening industry that could produce jobs and produce some sort of economic basis for living where there are jobs because that's what it's all about—I guess that is why a lot of you come here; it's because of jobs and education—if there was a basic infrastructure developed there, would you agree that that would then lead to an autonomy which would, in effect, breed a little self-government situation, a bit like a territory? It could ultimately be a Territory of the Torres Strait, if there is an economic infrastructure that develops over time. That eventually will bring with it buildings, houses and all those sorts of things which may cause people to move back, or some people to move back? Do you agree with that?

**Ms S. Lowah**—That's a very good question because it's a hard one, especially for mainlanders. I suppose some people would go back, if things were structured better up there.

**Ms C. Lowah**—It depends on the individual.

**Ms S. Lowah**—Yes.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Were you born in mainland Australia or on the island?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Born and bred here.

**ACTING CHAIR**—In terms of where the communities are going—you have the Australian community of the Torres Strait Islanders—for example, how would the people living on the islands feel about the mainland taking over and the Torres Strait Islander Commission being located on the mainland, so to speak? Where would you locate it? Would you locate it in Rockhampton, Cairns, Brisbane, the top of Cape York, et cetera?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Definitely not located in Canberra. That word is just a big blockage. It makes you feel uncomfortable anyway. I'd say something like Brisbane. It would have to be in Queensland, I suppose. It could be anywhere. We don't really care as long as we get a separate commission. That's all we're worried about. It would have to be on the mainland.

Naturally, our brothers and sisters in the Strait would disagree. They might want it there and all that. We see through that Torres Strait Islander Commission we'd have national representation so that communities and organisations from, say, Central Australia, Western Australia, Victoria, or wherever, don't miss out. So they'd be represented within that Torres Strait Islander Commission.

**ACTING CHAIR**—But it could still be located on one of the islands, the main island, and then have regional representation from Western Australia, South Australia, the Northern Territory, Queensland, et cetera. My own personal view is that to take the authority or the commission out of the islands certainly would be a very, very difficult thing to achieve because you're scattered throughout the Australian continent. Whilst there are many islands in the Torres Strait, there still seems to be some cohesive recognition through what is now the Torres Strait Regional Authority, and that's actually starting to obviously develop and could become a commission. That's my own personal view; it's no view of the committee.

I would have thought it would be very difficult to achieve a commission located on the mainland. If you ever got your commission and if it was in the Torres Strait, you could then take the next step to say each of the areas of Australia would have to be broken down to zones and there would be zone representation on that commission.

**Ms S. Lowah**—With us, we just thought of mainland Australia because of the population.

**ACTING CHAIR**—You have 30,000 in Australia, but they're not all in the one spot?

**Ms S. Lowah**—We don't really care where it's located as long as it isn't Canberra because there's that feeling about the word 'Canberra'. It automatically cuts you off. As long as you have a Torres Strait Islander Commission that's catering for all Torres Strait Islanders, that's all we are worried about.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So that Torres Strait Islander Commission could be situated anywhere, but not Canberra?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Yes.

**Mr LLOYD**—There is a fairly strong argument among many of the communities in the islands that the Torres Strait Islander people in mainland Australia have access to better infrastructure and, therefore,

don't need a separate commission. You have access to schools, education and health facilities that those in the islands just don't have, and that's why their argument is that they're the ones who are in need.

In answering that, could you give us some details of the members of your community in Alice Springs—you mentioned there are 20 or 30 of them—and give us an indication of whether you feel they have a higher level of unemployment, a poorer standard of health or a better standard of health than your Aboriginal brothers and sisters, just to give us an indication of how you feel about that?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Naturally, we're going to have a better infrastructure and everything because this is mainland Australia. Yes, you have better education and all that sort of thing. In the Torres Strait Islander community, you would say fifty-fifty would be employed or unemployed. But, as far as we're concerned and where we're coming from for cultural reasons, we need access and equity to run programs to develop, to do research into our culture. That's where we're coming from.

We do access Aboriginal organisations like the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress because that's for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We understand there would be a varying degree or big degree of difference between us on the mainland and our brothers and sisters. We have more opportunities for education and that sort of thing, but the main thing is for us to be able to access the funding from the main funding body, ATSIC.

**Mr MAREK**—Are you trying to say that ATSIC is stacked in a way—

**Ms S. Lowah**—The odds are against you anyway.

**Mr MAREK**—The Aboriginal people get it because there are more of them than there are Torres Strait Islanders on the board?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Yes.

**Mr LLOYD**—How many Torres Strait Islanders are you aware of who are living in this community, in number?

**ACTING CHAIR**—In Central Australia would be a better question.

**Mr LLOYD**—All right, in Central Australia, approximately?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Say, about 40 to 50.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Do you think it's feasible that the Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland should be having a say in what's happening in their own area, for example, in the Torres Strait? The reason I ask that question is, for example, you have mentioned Canberra and everything stops at Canberra. We were much the same at self-government when you were here at self-government before 1978—all the decisions were being made in Canberra. The local people were not making their own decisions.

The question now is, if you had a Torres Strait Islander Commission, how would the people in the Torres Strait Islander Commission, or living on the islands, make up their own minds about what they want in relation to the people living on the mainland? You have two distinctive groups: you have one group living on the mainland trying to develop its cultural identity and its purpose and then you have another group living on the scattered islands, like the Aboriginal communities in Yuendumu, et cetera.

They're all over the place. You spend hours in the air to get to the different communities. So they really have no cohesive connection amongst themselves except through the TSRA. How would you see yourselves having an impact, not just you but the Torres Strait people in Australia, on some of the decision making processes in the Torres Strait itself?

**Ms S. Lowah**—When you say 'you', do you mean as an individual or as a group?

**ACTING CHAIR**—As a group. There has to be some mechanism.

**Ms C. Lowah**—I think it will come through the organisations in each region.

**ACTING CHAIR**—You see the regional infrastructure coming together in a national body and then decisions being made for the good of everybody at that body whether they be on the mainland or in the Torres Strait itself?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Yes. Like I say, national representation.

**Ms C. Lowah**—Having your organisation for each region or your council for each region and then wanting regional offices is doubling up instead of working through your organisation that you have in that region.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Do you see it being parallel to what ATSIC does now? ATSIC has so many different regions throughout Australia but, obviously, there are a lot more indigenous Australians living in those communities throughout north-west Australia and all around. How do you see a region? For example, would it be one region for the Northern Territory, one region for South Australia and one region for Western Australia and the other states, or would there be sub-regions?

**Ms C. Lowah**—Sub-regions.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So there would be a northern region for the Northern Territory, a southern region and a central region?

**Ms C. Lowah**—Yes.

**ACTING CHAIR**—It would be much the same for Western Australia because it's so big.

**Ms S. Lowah**—Yes.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—In relation to what you are saying about the commission though and the numbers, there are 30,000 Torres Strait Islanders and a large proportion of them are on the mainland. Would you propose that the commission be controlled by so many commissioners spread across these regions? Wouldn't the Torres Strait Islanders living on the Torres Strait be swamped by the mainland islander numbers? That would cause enormous resentment, I would think.

**Ms S. Lowah**—To us, you would have that equal representation. As an example, you would have about three people coming from WA—because it is such a large state—two from the Northern Territory and then you have the Top End and Central Australia. There is a big difference there. Quite possibly, several would come from the Torres Strait, so they are not overloaded from the mainland, I suppose.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—What are you saying? That you would weigh it so the islanders living in the islands would always be able to outvote the mainlanders because of their special position living on the islands? Would you say that there would be weightage given to the islanders because they live there? Is that what you are saying?

**Ms S. Lowah**—No. A balance.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—But my point is there never could be a balance because you only have a very small percentage of that 30,000 actually living on the islands. Therefore, they would be outvoted constantly by the mainlanders.

**ACTING CHAIR**—The line of questioning is good, because we could very well be asked at some stage how we see a commission being set up and what the voting rights of the various regions would be. We could be asked that question by the minister, so we would like to have some information on it.

**Ms S. Lowah**—As I said before, you would have representation, I suppose, from each island just to balance it out with the mainland. Naturally, we know that you are going to have more representatives coming from each state in Australia. Then you have the Torres Strait with those representatives from each island to balance it out. We see this Torres Strait Islander Commission as being a great benefit as it will balance things out. There will be access and equity for all.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Can I use an old-fashioned expression and play the devil's advocate. If I were living on the Torres Strait Islands, I would say that the Torres Strait Islanders who are living there should get priority in terms of any funding decisions because they actually live there.

**Mr MAREK**—Yes.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Therefore, if we had a situation as you describe—where you would have representation from WA and so forth—because of the greater number of Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland, the islanders themselves would not have those numbers because of their small numbers. Isn't that what you are saying? Therefore, they would always be outvoted by the mainland and that would cause enormous resentment.

**Mr Hodgson**—I am an Aboriginal. I am married to Chuna Lowah. This involves my kids so I see it as important. I will use the board. As I see this, this is good and people know all the people in there, so in the long run everybody knows where everybody is through all these authorities.

From the islands, they have five central groups. If you have five representatives from there for a start and you have five from Australia, then you have your balance. Western Australia and the Northern Territory could be one together, but in there could be subgroups like they are saying. Your central part is different. That could be a bit hard too, because South Australia comes into this a lot through Central Australia and the Northern Territory. Queensland is a bit harder too because you have two separate mobs. You have a lot of people there so the numbers count.

But with the islands being one group, the people are not split. I hear through hearsay that TSRA is a bit against what the people are for too, and people are not understanding what it is about, where the money is really coming from. So if it comes back to one central group, the people have one say.

Coming to their rights from the mainland back to the islands, they have their say through these organisations. They are represented through these organisations and the people will see the need to put all their names and acknowledge everything. I know from my island brothers that they do have a lot of trouble throughout Australia with the Aboriginal people, just being island people because of the sheer weight of numbers and how things happen. They do need to have their own thing. My kids are right because they can come under Aboriginal things, but I do hear stories and I do see things that it is a bit harder for our islander people.

So I see five from the islands—central, northern, eastern, western and southern; however it goes—and five from the mainland. So you have 10 even groups. Even though the numbers are a thing, the weight of needs still outweigh the things. So the 10 people there can do it.

**Ms S. Lowah**—That is really good. Even though ATSIC has its regional councils, we have not, unfortunately, got any Torres Strait Islander regional councillors in our area. But, even if we did, you are outnumbered anyway. You have one Torres Strait Islander up against all the rest, our Aboriginal brothers and sisters. The way that it goes, from what we have heard, is that, if an islander issue is tabled, the Torres Strait Islander person has to go out of the room while the other people make the decision. That is not a balance.

With the structure we are looking at, I see that as a better balance than what is already in place. I can see that working and uniting our people. Because when they say 'Aboriginal', like I said yesterday, they mean all Aboriginal people across-the-board. But for some reason, they say 'homeland' and 'mainland' Torres Strait Islanders. With our unit, because we are a young group, we want to unite our people and stop this homeland and mainland. Just Torres Strait Islanders as one group.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Autonomy may bring that together?

**Ms S. Lowah**—That is what we want.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—I also ask ultimately where this is leading. In our terms of reference here, we

are looking to whether a greater degree of autonomy is going to benefit Torres Strait Islander people. As I read that, I do not read it narrowly, I read it very broadly. That is, it is not just autonomy with a commission, it is maybe one day a territory—like the Northern Territory. The Territory of the Torres Strait which is part of Australia but self-governing.

**Ms S. Lowah**—Like I said, you cannot take that big leap and just go bang. You need to take steps. We see that as a step. Wherever we go, it could take until the year 2000 or whenever, when I am sitting in my 40s. That is how long it could take for our people to have greater autonomy. We just see that as a stepping stone.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—A stepping stone to what I am even suggesting—that one day there will be an independent territory.

**Mr Hodgson**—Then you have a record of all the people and all their involvement in it. They are in one group with greater autonomy, royalties and whatever the situation is. You might be crossing other people's lands throughout with their bigger state or whatever. People will be one and will be able to go back and things like that—to have real access. But the true situation is that not everyone is going to go back.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Some will.

**Mr Hodgson**—Some will, but a lot would still like to know that their country is being looked after.

**Mr MAREK**—I have a few questions here. Some of them may overlap on what the others said, but I just want to make sure I have it focused. In relation to representation, you really believe that you would be well represented if you had your own commission. That is right, isn't it?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Yes.

**Mr MAREK**—As mainland people, should you have a direct say in what happens in the Torres Strait? You sort of half answered that before. I think Nick asked it. Could you follow on from that?

**Ms C. Lowah**—It depends on the situation.

**Mr MAREK**—Do you understand that it would be perceived as unusual that the Torres Strait people want to set up this commission in mainland Australia, especially owing to the point that the government gives you funding because of the important role you play in the Torres Strait area? Now you say you want a commission and funding to live in mainland Australia. Can you understand that would be perceived as unusual because the government says, 'You people play a very important role up there. This is one of the main reasons we can justify giving you money in the Torres Strait'?

Now you say that you want to have your own commission—which is fine—but have it set up in Australia. Can you understand that it would be perceived as unusual from the rest of the Australians? I do not want to make it sound like this, but some people might say, 'Gee, this is a bit of a money grab.'

**Ms S. Lowah**—I suppose. We just said mainland Australia because we are mainland Australians and, like I said, because of the population. As far as we are concerned, as young people, we want unity, access and equity. We want one Torres Strait Islander Commission and we don't care where it is located as long as it caters for all. It is a very strong message from our perspective.

**Mr MAREK**—Back to the bit where you should have a say in relation to what happens on the Torres Strait, to what extent should you have a say?

**Ms S. Lowah**—We don't mean really a say, more of an awareness. If mainlanders through this commission are sitting around a table with your brothers from the Torres Strait, you are more aware of what is happening in their area and they are more aware of what is happening in our area. I think that is better than how it is now.

**ACTING CHAIR**—There is no dialogue at the moment. Is that what you are saying? There is no dialogue at the moment between the mainlanders and the islanders, apart from this meeting you had in Brisbane last year. That was the first meeting, was it?

**Ms S. Lowah**—It was the second. There is to a certain extent. I will give an example. We have a big issue with the customary adoption. We want that recognised, legislated. There was a national workshop which involved Torres Strait Islanders from everywhere—from the Strait and from here—because you have to come together to make that decision, especially with something like customary adoption.

**ACTING CHAIR**—That was only the second time that the islanders and the mainlanders have met to discuss a particular issue.

**Ms S. Lowah**—We don't really know what has been happening all these years. Like I said, bear in mind we have only been operational since 1996. We had to jump up and down ourselves and say, 'Hello, there are Torres Strait Islanders in Central Australia.' These people are making decisions and we heard about this greater autonomy thing and all this blah blah. Our people here weren't even aware of it. They didn't know.

So our unit is here as a resource—like an administrative body—where we let people know what is happening at a national level and, to the best of our ability, what is happening within the Torres Strait, because these people were not aware before this unit started what was happening. They said, 'Gee, we didn't know they were going for greater autonomy. Customary adoption, what is that?'

**ACTING CHAIR**—Presumably these meetings will be held every year. What you are saying is that the last time you put in an application to ATSIC for funding to go to this conference, they would not give you any funding. Is that what you said earlier?

**Ms S. Lowah**—The first time we went, they did. That was about \$2,000 and there was a lot of jumping up and down, like I said. There were a lot of questions—'Why? Why? Why?' At those national seminar workshops, they deal with all different national Torres Strait Islander issues. When we went last year, we did not get any help from them, did we?

**Ms C. Lowah**—No.

**Ms S. Lowah**—Arrente Council had to give us the money to go, because they realised how important it was.

**Ms C. Lowah**—That came out of our wages and we're still paying for that.

**Ms S. Lowah**—That was deducted out of our wages anyway. We want to attend these national forums so we are aware of what is happening with our people. In the past, we were not included. All of a sudden we rocked up in 1995 in Brisbane purely for observation reasons. Everyone else was aware of what was happening all around Australia except for us. So we said, 'Hello.'

**Mr MAREK**—Do you see a conflict in relation to fighting for funds—in that Torres Strait people may miss out as the mainland people now have the opportunity to stack their own commission? We have a situation where we are saying that ATSIC has more Aboriginal people on it than Torres Strait Islanders, so they stack it, they get all the money and the Torres Strait people miss out.

We have spoken to so many different groups of people here and in the Torres Strait, and the Torres Strait people are saying, 'The money must come here. The commission must be here. It must stay here. The Torres Strait people who have left here have left here and they can look after themselves.'

Now we are talking to people on the mainland and they are saying, 'No. We want a commission and we want it set up on the mainland.' What could happen is that, because there are more numbers on the mainland, the mainlanders could stack the commission and the Torres Strait Islander people would miss out. Can you see the problem we are having here—that we could end up with another commission that is stacked? The other ethnic and Caucasian people in Australia are happy to give money to the people in the Torres Strait Islands because they serve a purpose. What we are saying is that, all of a sudden if it goes the other way, they might start missing out. Can you understand that?

**Mr Hodgson**—I see your point there, that is why I was going back to the five island groups there. You have five from the islands and you only have one from each state. So five from the whole of Australia depending on numbers. You have one from Queensland automatically, haven't you? And there is one from New South Wales. As it spreads out further like that, you spread the groups out. Then it gets hard when you come to Western Australia, the Northern Territory, Central Australia and South Australia because the numbers are not so many out here. But there are a few people as you go towards Broome. People are scattered throughout here and South Australia and it is longer and more difficult.

That way you should have the numbers pretty much even, and the islands will have more of the power. The states are only getting one each, and a couple of the states are going to be sharing, so you will have to have good representatives from the spread out areas.

**Mr MAREK**—One from each island.

**Mr Hodgson**—From the five groups—northern, central, eastern, western and southern. So you have

five main groups there and you have five from mainland Australia. So they have the balance there in the first place and their needs are met.

You can't have greater autonomy without eventually people going back. As I understand it, people are unsure and they are thinking, 'Mainland people are okay over there.' But mainland people want their culture, too, just like any other people in Australia keep their culture and identity. They live their life. With this, people might be saying, 'It's a money grabbing thing,' but how can they spread it out when they do make money and do become a state?

They are one mob, but people think they are separate because the mainland mob think the island people are different and the island people think the mainland people are different—instead of being one group. The island people will have more of the say, more of the needs, because their problems are more difficult. But representatives from Australia have to represent the people who do want to keep their culture and their identity, just like any other mob. They might find that in the long run they have a say back in their lands. They might have big says, but they just don't know it at the moment.

**ACTING CHAIR**—What Sherry is really saying is that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission is really not an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission—it is just an Aboriginal Commission. Maybe the focus out of this committee could be that we will have the chair write to the chairman of the Torres Strait Regional Authority to say that they have an obligation to try to have a register of those Torres Strait Islanders living in the Australian communities. They can then be on some kind of fact stream or correspondence list, so when things are happening in the Torres Strait Islands, those organisations that are set up in Australia could be informed.

Because at the moment, you are saying that you are not hearing anything that is coming out of the TSRA. You have no idea what is going on. You are going to regional conferences unfunded. You are going up there and they are discussing certain things of customary law which are important to you and which have an impact. Maybe there ought to be a mechanism set up with the TSRA—and that could come out of this committee, even before you went for more autonomy or it was granted—that gives people on the mainland some idea of what they were thinking. Would that be of some benefit to you?

**Ms S. Lowah**—I think it would, but their answer probably would be that we are just here for the Torres Strait Islanders in the Torres Strait.

**ACTING CHAIR**—They can't be for the time being because the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission is here and is really representing everybody. Maybe we could get the chairman to write not only to the TSRA but also to ATSIC and say, 'Whilst this imbalance is going on, there are Torres Strait Islanders living in the Australian community who feel that they are being disadvantaged through a lack of information and a lack of support.' Would anybody disagree if we asked the chairman to write that to them?

**Mr LLOYD**—No, I'm very happy with that.

**Mr MAREK**—I have a few questions here and I've structured them in a way because I'm trying to get a particular focus here. Do you understand that the European people of Australia are saying, 'We don't

want more commissions for the indigenous people. They cost a lot of money to run and they are very, very expensive. If we're not careful, the other indigenous groups—or, should I say, ethnic groups—will want commissions financially supported by the government as well'?

**Ms S. Lowah**—But we are indigenous, not ethnic.

**Mr MAREK**—The answer you give is probably the answer I'm after, but I just want it for the record. Do you understand that maybe ethnic groups might turn around and say, 'If there's a commission for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait people, why shouldn't there be one for the Japanese, the Chinese, and so on?'

**Mr Hodgson**—Yes, I see that, but from my point of view the white people has come into this land, Australia, and they come to the islands and they took over the islands. They use this place. They're here now, but when war come they had to use the people there. Things like that.

Work come. Throughout the old days and all them things, they used the people for work. They used the closest mob right next to Australia. Really they were part of Australia anyway, but it's just they're island people and their identity is there. But I see Australia as being really obligated to giving Torres Strait Islanders their own commission because they're bringing too many people here.

**Mr MAREK**—In other words, our indigenous people, such as Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people, were here first. For everybody else who came here, it was their decision to come.

**Mr Hodgson**—That's right. It was their choice, plus they were really the closest neighbours anyway to Australia. They were the next mob. They're the neighbours.

**Mr MAREK**—That's why it should be a responsibility of the government and the people who have come here to support the people who were originally here?

**Mr Hodgson**—That's right.

**Ms S. Lowah**—We're not ethnic; we're indigenous. It's human rights.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—I believe I am indigenous too because I have lived here all my life.

**Mr Hodgson**—But I see that in the old days that was a main trading move. That was the main mob, the next-door neighbours.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—I keep sort of looking ahead. Nothing would make me happier personally as a third generation Australian to ultimately see a Territory of the Torres Strait. I think that would be fantastic. You could have your own self-government. You wouldn't have to worry about a commission. You wouldn't have a government like the Northern Territory, ultimately. You would be controlling your own affairs. You would have an economic basis to work with. You would have all your culture, your fishing, your market gardening and all those sorts of things. That is the long-term dream.

I know what Sherry is saying—that is, you're building blocks towards that, but you have to be so careful that the blocks don't become the foundations rather than the goal. You can be so swamped by the notion of a commission. In the Torres Strait, we heard a lot from leaders there saying, 'We're sick of the commission. We would rather the money come straight to our door, to the council—no commission, straight to the council—so that money isn't siphoned off everywhere.' There's that aspect too. Look at the ATSIC bureaucracy in Canberra. It's huge. By the time the money gets to you, it's a trickle.

**Short adjournment**

[10.55 a.m.]

**ACTING CHAIR**—I understand that Sherry may have some documentation that she may care to provide to the committee, which can be incorporated into *Hansard* in view of the fact that she had some structured answers there that may not have appeared in our record. So that will be picked up.

The incorporated document from Kain Marep, on motion by **Mr Paul Marek**, read as follows:

**ACTING CHAIR**—In terms of the meeting this morning, Sherry, Deanna and Chuna, is there anything else that you might like to say which could be important to the final deliberations of the committee that you feel you would like to get on the record that has not been discussed this morning? In knowing that there are only a very small number in your organisation and you are infant, you might like to place the history of your committee on the public record this morning.

You are only a new organisation. You have not been established very long. The purpose of the organisation is, obviously, to try to represent the Torres Strait Islander people in Central Australia and to try to encourage greater involvement for some of those members in our community who are of Torres Strait Islander background, connection, birth or something. You might like to say what the organisation is all about—how long ago it started, just a little history. Would that help you?

**Ms S. Lowah**—Like I said, we are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Solomon Islander people. I suppose I have always wanted to do something like this, mainly on the cultural side.

**Ms C. Lowah**—We've found it hard finding help for ourselves like in situations when our relatives pass away, who are mostly in Queensland. We have approached the Aboriginal organisations or even ATSIC to get help, to get funding or just to get a bus. So that has also encouraged us to try to set our own thing up.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So isolation within isolation has become a major problem for you?

**Ms C. Lowah**—Yes.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Deanna, would you like to make any comment this morning at all?

**Ms D. Lowah**—In the past, there have been islander people coming here and being stranded and things like that and there is no assistance whatsoever for them. That's why Sherry and Chuna started up something like a support for Torres Strait Islanders.

**ACTING CHAIR**—That is a good start.

**Ms C. Lowah**—We have seen a lot of our people, even when we were younger, come here and end up in the creek and even die from alcohol. Plus, because we are the only Torres Strait Islanders who live here and have been here for a long time, it's like it's left up to us to find out who their family is, arrange their funerals and stuff like that. It's hard because sometimes we don't know who their family is.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Are you getting help to incorporate from anybody? Is anybody advising you on that?

**Ms C. Lowah**—Yes, the Central Land Council.

**ACTING CHAIR**—There being no further questions or further statements, I would like to thank you very much indeed for being with us this morning and providing us with a valuable insight into what you're attempting to do in Central Australia in terms of the Torres Strait Islander Unit that you're trying to set up. I

wish you well with your endeavours. Maybe next time we come back to talk to you, you'll have a few more in your group.

The information we have received from you will be valuable for the committee. At the same time, I think you have learnt a bit about where we're coming from in terms of the questions we put to you. Most of the members have travelled extensively through the Torres Strait Island region. In fact, this committee will be going back to the Torres Strait, I believe, in May to have further hearings. Once we have gone through that particular exercise, I think the committee will be in a position to make some kinds of recommendations to the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs at some time later in the year. Thank you very much, indeed. We wish you well.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Lloyd):

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

**Committee adjourned at 11.03 a.m.**



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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

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

**DARWIN**

**Monday, 21 April 1997**

**OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT**

**CANBERRA**



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

Members:

Mr Lieberman (Chair)

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

Matter referred for inquiry into and report on:

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

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

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

**WITNESSES**

**GRANDE, Mr Joe, Saam Kerem Torres Strait Islander Corporation, PO Box 1776, Broome,  
Western Australia 6725 . . . . . 288**

**STEPHENS, Mr Bill, Saam Kerem Torres Strait Islander Corporation, PO Box 1776, Broome,  
Western Australia 6725 . . . . . 288**

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

*Inquiry into greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders*

DARWIN

Monday, 21 April 1997

Present

Mr Quick (Acting Chair)

Mr Lloyd

Mr Tony Smith

The committee met at 3.41 p.m.

Mr Quick took the chair.

**GRANDE, Mr Joe, Saam Kerem Torres Strait Islander Corporation, PO Box 1776, Broome, Western Australia 6725**

**STEPHENS, Mr Bill, Saam Kerem Torres Strait Islander Corporation, PO Box 1776, Broome, Western Australia 6725**

**ACTING CHAIR**—Good afternoon, thank you for coming from Broome to talk to us. As you know, the committee is looking at three specific areas: firstly, whether the people of the Torres Strait would benefit from having a greater say in their own affairs and, if so, how this could be done; secondly, if Islanders did have a greater say in their own affairs, then what would this mean to the Torres Strait Islanders, such as yourselves, who live outside the Torres Strait region; and, thirdly, whether ATSIC or the Torres Strait Regional Authority should represent Torres Strait Islanders, such as yourselves, who live outside the Torres Strait region.

We are very interested in listening to your comments on these three issues. We also have some questions on these matters which we would like to talk to you about. We want to report accurately to parliament what you think. For this reason, we will be recording your words so that we make no mistakes. Later we will send you a copy of what was said at today's talks so you can check to make sure it is correct. Can you tell us, firstly, about the Torres Strait community in Broome?

**Mr Grande**—I am the public officer of Saam Kerem. I am their accountant and also their office manager. Bill is the elder of the community representing the chairperson, Lennie Pitt, who at the moment is feeling sick.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Would you like to start, Bill, and tell us about the community, the number of Torres Strait Islanders over there, the historical reason they are there and not somewhere else and some of the concerns? Then we will start talking to you about some of the things we are interested in.

**Mr Stephens**—I will hand it to Joe.

**Mr Grande**—Basically, the Torres Strait Islander community has had a long association with the Kimberley, through the early pearling days and also because of some labour intensive stuff in the Pilbara—the railways and what have you. Most of them found their way to the community through working in the pearling industry. There were quite a number of them at any given stage—up to 150 or 200 of them—especially when the pearling industry was at its boom.

By about 1992, most of the guys from Kuri Bay had left. They were shipped back to the Torres Strait Islands, but most of them—about 40-odd Torres Strait Islanders—remained because of their family associations, with the new partners they found over there. They now have a little community there which is called Saam Kerem.

Saam Kerem represents all the Torres Strait Islander people throughout the Kimberley region. As you are probably aware, the Kimberley is fairly large. Saam Kerem is based in Broome and it has basically been there, as I said, since 1989. It actually started off as a dance troupe in 1989 and made a split to become a

community in its own right in 1991. It has been involved in fishing ventures with other Aboriginal communities. It actually went into a fishing venture with a company called Admiralty Pty Ltd, which fished up in the Admiralty Gulf.

The community has a special commercial fishing licence—for Trochus shells and for Beche-de-mer. We have just secured a lease on a commercial fishing licence to fish the open waters of WA.

We have about 15 people who are currently employed under CDEP. Basically that works because we are actually under another Aboriginal organisation. Because we can't get CDEP in our own right, we have to affiliate to another Aboriginal organisation, which means we are a totally separate incorporated organisation under the Aboriginal act of associations. But we still aren't eligible to tap into CDEP funds because of the bureaucratic structure that forces us to go under another Aboriginal organisation.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So you need to go under a greater umbrella?

**Mr Grande**—Yes.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So ATSIC covers you?

**Mr Grande**—We have gone to ATSIC in the past. We are on the record as going to ATSIC in the past to ask for our own CDEP program so we would have control of the issues involved in CDEP and would not be forced into a situation where we are under an umbrella group which has representation of something like 20 or 30 other Aboriginal corporations. Once again, you become a minority within another sort of bureaucracy apart from ATSIC.

Then you are fighting two bureaucracies—ATSIC itself and this other CDEP organisation which is receiving the funding from ATSIC which subsequently filters to our organisation. The other interesting aspect of that is that we have direct funding from ATSIC in some other programs, but through our CDEP program we have to tie into this other corporation.

**ACTING CHAIR**—How many CDEP programs are there in the Kimberley that you are aware of?

**Mr Grande**—I am personally aware of about 50 separate programs. I know there are three major umbrella organisations, because I am the accountant with those groups as well. They are more or less administrative bodies to filter out the dollars, but the money doesn't actually go to the communities first. They just purchase everything via this umbrella group.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So you have 15 Torres Strait Islander people employed under CDEP. How many could you have if you ran your own?

**Mr Grande**—We could have up to 30 or 40.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So you are 25—

**Mr Grande**—Twelve is the number for us because that is all we could get to jump into this program. This is a town based CDEP program which we were not even on to start off with, but we jumped on board half way through because we could not get CDEP in our own right. They were looking for numbers to get into the program so we shifted across to this. That has grown from there. We'd grown to 18 at last count, but we can't increase those numbers at our discretion. That is at the discretion of the other Aboriginal organisation.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Is that program based in Broome?

**Mr Grande**—Yes. As I said, we have Torres Strait Islanders who are in other communities within the Kimberley region. There are some in Fitzroy and quite a few in Derby, but they are on other CDEP programs with other Aboriginal organisations.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Would it be any easier for you if you had your own program to administer—despite the fact they are spread over an area probably five times bigger than Tasmania?

**Mr Grande**—Yes. Those individuals who are in other communities can remain part of those CDEP programs because they have to be directly related to those particular jobs. Whereas with ourselves, we're looking at getting involved in commercial fishing. We should be able to draw from our own resources, and the guys are part of that resource because they have fishing skills.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So Social Security said that it is ATSIC's problem?

**Mr Grande**—We have gone to ATSIC. ATSIC have not supported us in any way to establish a CDEP program, because obviously there has been a push and there still is a push in the Kimberley to have one umbrella group for several CDEP groups. One of our qualms has always been, 'No, wait a minute. We're a separate organisation. We've got our own identity. We've got our own set of objectives. We developed a strategic plan to take us into the year 2000 and we want to work towards that strategic plan.' We can't work towards that sort of plan if we are told, 'No. You can't be independent. We have to chuck you in here,' and that is what has happened. There have been a couple of other examples where Torres Strait Islander issues have not even been considered or talked about.

In our submission, there is a bit of a funding history. As you can see, there has been very little funding coming from ATSIC at all. In 1994-95 we had our first lot of funding ever as an organisation, and I dare say that was only because we jumped up and down and went through the ombudsman, commissioners and what have you. I think there was a bit of pressure put on behind the scenes. That was the first lot of funding we got. Funding since then has gradually decreased to one grant of \$9,000.

**ACTING CHAIR**—I notice in 1995-96 you have land acquisition of \$200,000. Have you put any applications in under the land fund as part of native title?

**Mr Grande**—Not as part of native title.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Because there is a land fund worth \$45 million a year.

**Mr Grande**—That has only recently happened.

**ACTING CHAIR**—This is the second year, I think. The act was passed in December 1993.

**Mr Grande**—There is a bit of a story to that \$200,000 land acquisition fund in itself. We put that application forward. To this date, we haven't had any response. We have put letters to the chairperson of ATSIC and they always referred it back to our region. The region doesn't know anything about it because they referred it back to the national level because it was a national program. We're forever being passed backwards and forwards in relation to that.

Also, there was some jumping up and down from other Aboriginal organisations in the region because this actual land acquisition submission had a lot of support from the commissioners and what have you. The word we got back, even though it was unofficial, was that there was far too much money going into the Kimberley region and the Kimberleys didn't deserve any more funding.

**ACTING CHAIR**—It says here, 'Referred to B.E.C.' What is that?

**Mr Grande**—That is the Business Enterprise Centre.

**ACTING CHAIR**—At Broome?

**Mr Grande**—Yes.

**ACTING CHAIR**—And you had not heard anything about that in 1995-96, so you put it back in 1996-97?

**Mr Grande**—We are forever putting in the same applications over and over again. As I said, we actually got funded because we put a lot of pressure on through the ombudsman to the local office about what happened to one of our applications which seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth. That sort of started the ball rolling because we put pressure on outside of the ATSIC structure—through appeals and lobbying with regional councils. At the end of the day, you really have to look for the support, and there is very little support for Torres Strait Islanders outside of ATSIC.

**ACTING CHAIR**—I notice in 1995-96 you put in for a vehicle and it was declined so you put it in again. Has your organisation got any transport to get around the community and service them?

**Mr Grande**—We have a Triton trayback which is supposed to get all the guys to the jobs. The guys do a lawn mowing business and that serves as their vehicle. It is only a two-person vehicle, but it has a trayback. They all jump in the back and are driven around. They drop them off at the jobs, come back and do whatever business they do, such as taking the oldies to hospital and what have you. We have a few people who are critically sick. The chairperson has throat cancer and needs regular attention in hospital, so he drives himself off in the trayback.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Do you know how many vehicles ATSIC has in the Broome region?

**Mr Grande**—I wouldn't be able to tell you. I know they have quite a few.

**ACTING CHAIR**—How many roughly? We are not going to hold you to it.

**Mr Grande**—About eight or nine.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Can you access any of those?

**Mr Grande**—No.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Why?

**Mr Grande**—They are not seen as vehicles that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be driving around in.

**ACTING CHAIR**—What does ATSIC stand for though? It is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

**Mr Grande**—That is exactly right. We have no qualms about that from our point of view, because we often use that as a throwback line to ATSIC. The name itself represents Torres Strait Islander people as well.

**ACTING CHAIR**—If we recommend that there is some greater autonomy, how do you think that would be viewed in the Kimberley region? Will that cause greater dissent? I am asking you for two reasons—how the Aboriginal community and the white community in the region will see it.

We were in Broome on the native title committee and there was some feeling about the whole land fund issue and native title. If we did say, 'You guys can get what you want—greater autonomy and greater financial self-responsibility,' how would that be received by people who are currently running ATSIC in the Kimberley?

**Mr Grande**—It is interesting you say that. From our point of view, it would be very well received, because we think we would be able to tap into dollars to help the community at the end of the day.

As for ATSIC and the other Aboriginal organisations, I think they would be more happy and comfortable with that, because we have actually had that said to us. When the Torres Strait Regional Authority was introduced, we would go to ATSIC and they would say to us, 'Wait a minute. You've got your own body now; go see them.' But the Torres Strait Regional Authority just represents the people of the Torres Strait. The regional councils are still responsible for indigenous people within those regions—Torres Strait Islanders or Aboriginals.

We've had it said to us, especially after recognition of Mabo, that there has been a door opened for Aboriginal communities in relation to native title and what have you. But the other issue of funding the Torres Strait Islander people has not brought them together any closer. It has made them probably wider. So I'm not sure. Overall, I really don't think there would be any great impact on that.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So they would see one of their problems resolved?

**Mr Grande**—Yes. I dare say it would be a problem resolved for them, because then they wouldn't have to deal with us knocking on their door every week asking, 'What's happening with us?'

**ACTING CHAIR**—So what representation do you have on ATSIC bodies, regional councils?

**Mr Grande**—None.

**ACTING CHAIR**—None at all?

**Mr Grande**—No.

**ACTING CHAIR**—You can't get any of your members up?

**Mr Grande**—No.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Despite the fact that we hear stories that 40 votes can get you on the council?

**Mr Grande**—Bill actually went for an election with the regional council and didn't make it. I don't know how they do their election there, but it's sort of a bit strange. I think it was the very first election of ATSIC and I think they did it in block voting, and Bill was about third or fourth on the list. Even if everyone in his community voted for him, he probably still wouldn't have got in there because of the distribution of the preferences.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So they haven't done anything as imaginative as saying, 'You've got a certain number of people here and you're a part of the CDEP program, we'll allocate as a favour to you a couple of positions on the commission'? How many are on the commission in Broome?

**Mr Grande**—There are 10.

**ACTING CHAIR**—They would at least give you a couple, surely.

**Mr Grande**—As I said, with the region being so wide, you would have three in Bidyadanga, which represents all of the Bidyadanga people; three in One Arm Point, which is all those people from that plain; and then the town based people. So basically you are pushing it to put your people across, especially if you have groups with the numbers in town in particular. So that's a regional thing.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So is the sense of frustration in the Torres Strait people really marked?

**Mr Grande**—Yes.

**ACTING CHAIR**—And getting worse?

**Mr Grande**—Yes. CDEP has helped that a bit, but it hasn't enabled us to develop commercial enterprises as much as we would like to because we're still caught in the CDEP programs and there is very little scope to do anything because you're caught up in this umbrella situation.

At the end of the day, we tried negotiating for direct funding as part of the CDEP. What actually happens is that we have a couple of young people in our group, we want them to get the real jobs out there—the training in the office, et cetera—but the umbrella group selects whoever they want to select and we say, 'Why can't you give us the money? We'll still account back to you. Give us the money and we'll employ two or three people in the office and develop their office skills that way.' That is talked about, but it doesn't happen.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So, if you get some of this money that you're asking for, would you have greater financial freedom to do some of the things—for example, set up your own office?

**Mr Grande**—The office is actually at my place, but we have a multipurpose shed, which has a bit of an area for an office, and we have plenty of room to put someone in there—there is a telephone, a fax and all that sort of thing.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—You have made a comment under terms of reference No. 1 in respect of autonomy and you say that autonomy will mean different things to different islander people. What does it mean to you? Do you have a collective view, an individual view, or what, about that?

**Mr Grande**—We actually developed a strategic plan. I do not know if I actually submitted it. It was an actual strategic plan which identified where this organisation was heading to the year 2001. It does not look like it's there. I should have actually brought a few copies of it.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Have you got a copy you could give to the committee?

**Mr Grande**—I have actually submitted an extra part of this document, but it doesn't appear to be here. I overlooked to bring some with me, but we actually sat down about that and discussed all those things. To us, the people there, autonomy would mean being able to manage ourselves day to day. They are their own bosses. They will determine their own destiny.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—The people on the Torres Strait Islands?

**Mr Grande**—No, I thought you were talking about our particular region.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Under terms of reference No. 1, I take that to mean the people of the Torres Strait, meaning the people who are there in the Torres Strait. That is the way I read that because when you look at No. 3 it specifically addresses the needs of the people who are living out of the Torres Strait and living on the mainland, so do you have any particular view about autonomy for the people of the Torres Strait?

**Mr Grande**—Personally, I don't. I can't speak for the people of the Torres Strait Islands.

**Mr Stephens**—It's up to the Torres Strait delegate to answer that.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—If, as Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland, you want a separate commission, obviously you're not saying a separate commission for the mainland and a separate commission for the islands, are you?

**Mr Grande**—No, I don't think we're saying that.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—So, if it's a separate commission that includes the Torres Strait people on the islands and the Torres Strait people on the mainland, and having regard to the numbers on the Torres Strait Islands and the much greater numbers on the mainland, how should that representation be? I guess you would have to look very carefully at that sort of thing because the people in the Torres Strait Islands might say, 'Hang on a minute, we're living here and we don't want the mainland Torres Strait Islanders deciding the destiny of the Torres Strait Islands.'

**ACTING CHAIR**—Because there are a lot more on the mainland than there are, say, over on the islands—probably four times as many.

**Mr Grande**—Basically, we have sort of covered it by the illustration we have here. At the second line of the commission, the funding development obviously is from the Torres Strait Regional Authority, which is actually already in existence. Basically all we're saying is, 'They've got that. They can run all their business up to there within that structure, and whether it needs modifications it's up to them to decide at that level.' As far as a mainland authority would be concerned, it would still be under that one umbrella of Torres Strait people, but there would be issues affecting mainland islanders which only mainland islanders could deal with. So you would have representation—

**ACTING CHAIR**—Do you think that at the bottom level there ought to be some linkage across because surely there is still some movement between the islands and the mainland?

**Mr Grande**—Yes.

**ACTING CHAIR**—The only link is upwards. There is no sort of cross linkage between, for example, the communities at a basic community level. There must be some communities on the mainland that are very close to the islands themselves whereas you are a lot further away, so when you come to the Torres Strait Regional Authority and the Mainland Regional Authority there ought to be some dialogue across ways rather than up to a peak body.

**Mr Grande**—I agree with that. This is basically structured out on a regional approach, so you're looking at the representation of Torres Strait Islanders who live in those communities and mainland communities. So I don't think there would actually be a direct link between the communities because of the geographical reasons.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Do you have any links between Broome and Darwin with the Torres Strait committee?

**Mr Grande**—Yes, but they are all captured under this authority. There is no necessary link.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—In relation to the autonomy question then, you look at it more as an individual autonomy from ATSIC as far as mainland Torres Strait Islanders are concerned, is that what you are saying? You're looking at an autonomous situation for mainland Torres Strait Islanders away from the umbrella of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, as it is presently constituted.

**Mr Grande**—Basically, yes. We're a separate entity in our own right.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—I'm not quibbling with it.

**Mr Grande**—I'm trying to make the point that we're a separate entity, but we're not allowed to be a separate entity because we're told, 'You've got to be under this umbrella to get your CDEP funding, you've got to go over there to get this other funding and you've got to go over there to do this other business.' But we just want to be able to trap those dollars and go away and do what the priorities are for those communities—health, education, employment, all those basic conditions.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—In terms of what I call the wider issue of where the Torres Strait people are heading in a general sense, I guess it's true to say, isn't it, that a lot of Torres Strait Islanders, and in your own particular case at Broome, left the Torres Strait Islands looking for work, and work was in the pearling and fishing industries around Broome? Is that pretty well right?

**Mr Grande**—Yes.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Now because of the downturn, and I think you meant restructuring here and so forth—which is the term for sacking people these days; isn't it—what has happened is that some Torres Strait Islander people have gone back to the islands; is that right?

**Mr Grande**—Yes.

**Mr Stephens**—Some people, but not most.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Ultimately, if there was a developing tourist industry, fishing industry or a combination of all those things that started to get moving in the Torres Strait Islands and, therefore, with it was brought work and opportunity, do you think Torres Strait Islanders from the mainland would trickle back to their homeland?

**Mr Grande**—Not in great droves because you have to look at the numbers. I don't think the economy within the Torres Strait could sustain a massive move of Torres Strait Islanders from the mainland back to the Torres Strait Islands.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—If you envisaged a big change in a lot of things such as developing an economic infrastructure, that could change, couldn't it? It's like any growing community—that is, it doesn't look like anything at the moment. When I visited, I noticed that the tourist potential up there is limitless. I'm

talking about the ecotourism, not big high rise. I'm talking about bungalow type tourism and all of that.

Many of the islanders said that with that a lot of their cultural identity would be brought back such as fishing, making baskets and market gardening, in particular. All of those things have been eroded because of, basically, a lot of factors, and I won't go into them now, but a lot of those things have been lost.

As I see it, and this has been said to me also by some of the islanders, economic autonomy is a first base thing to ultimate autonomy such as a territory of the Torres Strait. As in the Northern Territory, there could well be a territory of the Torres Strait. Do you see that, if things started to boom, as it were, up in the Torres Strait Islands—if the islands became flourishing little communities—people would go back home?

**Mr Grande**—There would be a proportion that would. I don't see you would get the whole lot because you have vast numbers. For instance, most of the people within our own community have been there for the last 10 years now. They're all married into local families and what have you and it's sort of becoming a strong community within itself.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—I am surprised at that actually, only 10 years in Broome?

**Mr Stephens**—They would inform the chairman before they come to an elder. I kicked off Saam Kerem in Broome because, when some of the Torres Strait boys get sacked from Kuri Bay and are going back to the island, they did not know they have to come back to me in Broome. So I would sit with my public office here and there is a traditional land up in Kimberley further up from Mitchell Plateau that's got something interesting with the fishing, with the Trochus, pearl, oysters and crab, which the Torres Strait Islander has a skill for.

I sit there. I am the one that make the breakaway for the Torres Strait Islanders in the Kimberley. I said to the fishery, 'Can we get a licence or something like that?' but the fishery told me that before I could go ahead I had to sit with the traditional owner, which I did. I sit with them up in Kimberley, the four traditional owners. Their people don't know how to work, but I sit with different agreement with you, 'If we do a joint venture with the land, my people will teach you boys how to do the diving and all that,' so we'd be coming together like that.

So when I come to the fishery department, they told me that I had to get a community development licence. They own the land, but we are the workers. We can teach them how we are going to create the boat community together, and that is why I sit with them. Now we've got the community development licence. We've got the other licence from Joe, but the funding from ATSIC is not with us. I give my resignation to Lennie. Since Lennie got sick, I just come up automatically. I am his voice. That is why I am here. That is all I can say.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Just sort of following on from that from your own experience, it seems to me that the big picture demands that, ultimately, this sort of patronising approach of the government, whereby they give money all the time and ventures get started and they go under, isn't really the idea of autonomy. Autonomy is really breaking away from this paternalistic, patronising sort of approach because it doesn't work. It clearly didn't work in the case of these ventures, I noticed, and doesn't work whenever a government

starts giving money to ventures.

**Mr Grande**—The government didn't give any money to those. They're self-funded ventures.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Where did the money come from?

**Mr Stephens**—I am only talking about the people on the mainland. I am not talking about the Torres Strait people. If Torres Strait people want to go back, they can go ahead. That has nothing to do with us on the mainland.

**Mr Grande**—Admiralty was a proprietary limited company which put up the funds to start the fishing industry.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—So there was no government money in that at all or ATSIC money or anything?

**Mr Grande**—No, we have never had any money from ATSIC to support us in any economic aspect. That's what we're saying. We've actually gone out to our external resources to attract funds, but not everyone understands what issues are involved.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Is there a tourist potential up there where you are?

**Mr Grande**—Broome is probably one of the booming towns in the north-west.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—As far as what you could do yourselves?

**Mr Grande**—The Indonesians come in and steal thousands of thousands of Trochus, Beche-de-mer and other fishing resources. We have a Torres Strait Islander community up there that has the skills to fish those resources. No-one else fishes those resources. One group has an exclusive area where they fish Trochus shells, and those enterprises need large capital costs up front. You need a good boat to be able to collect the amount of tonnage to make it profitable.

We've been working for the last 3½ years with fisheries to get into a situation where we can do that. We've gone down a fair way now and we have, as I said, a commercial licence to do things and community licences. We just don't have the capital to start a venture of this size. We've actually talked to other investors. We're actually talking to some investors now from Perth, mainly of Chinese influence, but that's all in the early days at the moment until we get a final decision.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Chinese? Not Taiwanese.

**Mr Grande**—Chinese.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—I might say that Taiwan is an area where you could make some inquiries, too. There is a lot of capital investment being made out of Taiwan to various places.

**ACTING CHAIR**—So what sort of money are you looking at? Six figures? Seven figures?

**Mr Grande**—We are probably looking at \$500,000-plus. ATSIC does not throw that money at you and we would not expect them to throw it at us. I am sure a joint venture arrangement could work. As I said, we have the licence and we have the boys ready to work. We just need someone with a boat to come to us and say, 'Here's the boat. Let's go out.'

**Mr LLOYD**—You focus very much on the financial side of things—as in funding, grants and all that—which is great. How much do your people relate back to the islands? Do they feel they have a family connection to the Torres Strait Islands? Do they travel backwards and forwards to the islands at all or are they basically established in Broome and Derby?

**Mr Stephens**—As for me, I left after the war. I came to Australia looking for a job. According to my relationship, my bloodstream is from the island. People have come back to me in Broome and said, 'There is nothing for us here to work,' or something like that. I just run into some of the boys today where they have been in the Kuri Bay. They are still without a job. You see them in the park. They were just finding out if I had anything going on in Broome, but we haven't got the capital to go ahead.

**Mr LLOYD**—Do you still feel that you have land back in the Torres Strait?

**Mr Stephens**—I don't think so. Because I can see there is no future for me.

**Mr Grande**—Other community members feel that, too. There are other members—

**Mr Stephens**—Because I have the land from the Aboriginal traditional owner and everything. As far as I'm concerned, I can work on anything. I can bring something from my community and my people in the east and west Kimberley, so there is no sense in me going back there.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Do we need to restructure ATSIC to make it more effective for the TSI in ATSIC to really work? Would that be a better way? Part of this greater autonomy might not necessarily mean for the mainland Torres Strait people that the restructuring of ATSIC will reflect the numbers that you have got and the potential that your people have got? Have you thought about that?

**Mr Grande**—There has been thought. To me, personally, that would make more logical sense, but you have to remember that these people have historically copped the full brunt of being with that organisation. So I am not prepared to make a direct comment to that myself.

I could see the sense of restructuring ATSIC in that particular area. I've been to a few other link-ups with other mainland islander groups, and the call nationally has been for a separate commission. I think that is the more favourable outcome as far as the mainland groups are concerned.

**ACTING CHAIR**—I just thought I would throw it in.

**Mr Grande**—There have to be a few guarantees with that. There is still not going to be that faith

between the two groups. It is probably a hard thing to say, but it is something we have found to be quite true. There is a bit of discrimination within those organisations.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Following on from that, if we set up a separate autonomous group like you have here, because you are virtually on the other side of the country thousands of kilometres away from the Queensland Torres Strait Islander people, their needs are probably totally different in some regards to yours. I would imagine there would be some Torres Strait Islander people down in Perth as well who are doing a different type of assimilation to whatever community they are following in. How difficult would it be?

ATSIC has trouble reflecting the various regional needs, and when we get together and draw up something as complicated as native title, the needs of the Mornington Island Aboriginal community are totally different from the needs of the Kimberley Aboriginal community. Would you have the same difficulties if we said, 'We will give you guys autonomy'? Do we have to have it state by state, region by region? We could have a national body but how effectively would it work, because ATSIC does not seem to be working and reflecting community needs?

**Mr Grande**—I see that as the biggest problem in the whole thing we are talking about—how you structure something to be most effective. From what we have seen at the national level of Torres Strait Island mainland people, we have already moved towards something like that. There has been a move already to incorporate a national secretariat to deal with those mainland issues. Whether this bigger thing that everyone is talking about is going to be a progression of that sort of set-up is yet to be determined, and I think this will have a great impact on how far it does go.

**ACTING CHAIR**—At the moment, Bill can't get on a 13-man or 14-man commission. What is the number of Torres Strait Islanders in Broome compared to the, say, 20,000 mainland Torres Strait Islander people? He still might be excluded because of this numbers game. So how do we weigh it so that people in each of these disparate regions around Australia are represented on a regional body that you have set up here?

**Mr Grande**—In 1994 we held the first joint Pilbara/Kimberley conference of all Torres Strait Islander corporations, so we have been able to link that. The year after, it developed into a state-wide thing. We were able to get all the opinions of all the organisations in Western Australia.

From that point of view, we think we can coordinate something to represent the interests of all WA Torres Strait Islanders. Torres Strait Islanders in WA would probably be harder to deal with because there has been a lot of labour intensive work that has gone into the Kimberley/Pilbara region from Torres Strait Islanders, but there has been no recognition at all from the state government, federal government, local communities or whatever.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—It really seems to be from what you are saying that you are not getting anywhere with ATSIC, so it is a question of having a mechanism so you can get these sorts of projects moving along. It is really about money, isn't it? It is about getting money.

Let me just put something in the ring. Would it not be a preferable thing for mainlanders—perhaps

you cannot speak for all mainlanders, but just take your own situation—to have funding going direct to their corporation? You are then dealing with an official who would be responsible for determining whether your mainland islander corporation has some viable projects that it wants to get up. Wouldn't that be preferable, then you would avoid all this problem about commissions?

**Mr Grande**—That is exactly why we have gone to getting a commercial licence. We want to bypass all this ATSIC stuff because we know it is not going to get us anywhere. At the end of the day, all it is going to get us is hard work.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Do you, just as a general comment, see that perhaps as a way of resolving what could be an awful problem when it comes to representation on a commission, because you have the competing interests of islanders living on the islands and islanders living on the mainland? You do not have to comment. I am just asking but, generally speaking, is that a way of resolving electoral weightage or whatever?

**Mr Grande**—Probably. Going back to the question of what it means to different groups, it means different things to different people. To us, economic autonomy is going to give us all the other things.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Yes.

**Mr Grande**—That is all we have ever said from the start and that is what we will continue to say. That is featured through our strategic plan and our community plan.

**Mr LLOYD**—I would like to comment that the submission we have before us from Saam Kerem is probably one of the better submissions that I have seen. You have put a lot of work into it and the community should be congratulated on that.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—I agree.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Joe, is there anything we have not asked you that you would like to mention and put on the record?

**Mr Grande**—Not particularly. Do you want to ask anything, Bill?

**Mr Stephens**—No.

**Mr Grande**—One of things I said in our report was that we were surprised we never got any information about this inquiry being in existence. I assume that we are a registered Torres Strait corporation in Canberra; actually I know we are because I do the books every year. The first time we found out about the inquiry was when we went to a national conference in Brisbane, and that was after the closing date for submissions.

**Mr TONY SMITH**—Is there a register of all these corporations?

**Mr Grande**—We incorporate under the Aboriginal incorporations act. It is just amazing that we did not know. To me, that reflects how business is done within ATSIC. If we can't get a simple thing like that right—which is a major thing—how are we ever going to get representation, equity and justice out of that program?

**ACTING CHAIR**—When you got together at that conference in Brisbane last October, were the feelings and attitudes that you express to us today commonplace in the Torres Strait Islander people who are on the mainland and who are perhaps in a similar situation to you where they are outnumbered?

**Mr Grande**—I will talk about our state-wide conference. We had that conference two weeks before we went to the national conference so we could put all our feelings on the floor at the national conference. There were the same stories of having very little representation on the ATSIC councils and very little support, even within the staffing networks.

I will give an example. A project officer at ATSIC in Broome was invited to our conference. He gave us confirmation that he would be there, but he didn't turn up. That is the sort of stuff that really flags the priority of Torres Strait Islander people within that structure.

**ACTING CHAIR**—On behalf of the committee—and I apologise that there are not more of us here, but we are busy politicians—I would like you, Bill, to convey back to your people our appreciation for your fine submission. Could you convey also to them our desire for our recommendations to reflect the wishes of the Torres Strait Islander community, both on the islands and on the mainland. We do admire and respect the work that you are doing in the Kimberley region. If you can convey those feelings back to your community, we would appreciate it on behalf of the House of Representatives committee. Thank you, Joe and Bill. Thank you, Jenny and Rosalyn, from *Hansard*.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Lloyd**):

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

**Committee adjourned at 4.35 p.m.**