

House of Representatives Standing Committee on ATSI Affairs

30th August 2002

CAPACITY BUILDING
INQUIRY
Submission No.22.....

To whom it may concern,

The following is my submission to the House of Representative Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous communities. I hope this is more specific to what you want. I have left the original letter I sent, in this submission also.

What makes a community run well?

Communities need to trust and believe in the ability of the people 'leading' them, the Council etc. This is imperative. Well scandal and rumour follow a council like a shadow, no-one believes anything but the worst, and this is usually what is happening. When councillors continuously rip off the community this does not lead to good feelings and good will amongst community members.

People need community activities to do together. Things for everyone like a market or sports club etc. Things where anyone can go and be involved no matter which family is running it, etc.

There must also exist the opportunity for people to become better than they are, to be more than their parents and to grow as individuals throughout their lives. We all need this whether it is met through work, education, or other experiences.

What makes a good community leader? Is this important?

Same again. People need to TRUST their 'leaders'. And yes, this is very important, and it is important to have leaders in a community. It is also important to recognise these 'leader' come in many shapes and forms and there needs to be some more emphasis put on highlighting the achievements of everyday leaders in the community as well as promoting the high achievers and politically minded.

How can communities make themselves stronger?

Before communities like Palm Island, where I live, can make themselves stronger, they must first become functioning. This sounds extreme but is true. There is such a high level of dysfunction in this community that there is no 'strength', there is barely a thread holding this place together.

If you want to ask, how do you re-weave the cloth of a community thread bare of any basic self respect, then first you must ask the government, why has this community been left without resources, training, education or funding to actually achieve the basic living standards of the average Australian?

Communities must be 'normalised', to use a term my partner likes. Things like cafes and community groups must be normal here, a place to eat and something to do. Kids must go to school. Men who beat their wives must be shamed in the community and punished in the courts. Those who harm [their] children must be made to see the wrong in their crimes.

What can government do to help councils run better?

Provide the SAME RESOURCES and funds etc to Aboriginal council as to every other local council, and then if there is an inequality, provide additional training for the indigenous people. My partner and I have been waiting over 6 months for the TAFE Workplace Training and Assessment course to be run. The State government school recently hired a private training provider to train all their teachers, however no-one in the community was given the opportunity to also do the course.

Government can expect indigenous communities to be accountable and responsible as any other incorporated body would be. Governments could be a little more scrupulous in assessing whether or not grants are spent on what they have been informed the money was spent on. Governments should be more on the ground and actually come and see how vastly different the living standards and indeed daily experience of living in an indigenous community are to those of white mainstream Australia.

Government should acknowledge and apologise for the wrongs of the past, for policies of genocide, which have fairly successfully destroyed the people of places like Palm Island. Government should acknowledge that it is because of this, these policies and the treatment of these people and their parents and grand parents, that things are like they are. My daughter's grandma was made to stand in line and get rations to eat. And they didn't eat; they saved the rations to make bread to sell for money. My daughter's grandma isn't even 50. How did you eat when you grew up?

Governments should have their offices in indigenous communities and live their. No more excuses, you need to be in the communities to understand them and the people their and we need to see government people actually here, physically doing stuff and available for the community to approach and talk to.

What skills to do people need to better manage communities?

People here need to understand the political, corporate and legal systems that they are expected to work within. This is basic stuff but sadly neglected. The people who get elected to council need to be taught the rules and regulations of conducting a meeting, of meeting procedure and how to take minutes, how to chair a meeting etc.

People need to be skilled in fiscal policy, management and accountability. Desperately.

How well do government departments work with communities?

Not very well.

Government departments do not actually come over here to see what is going on. Bureaucrats have told me personally that they were told not to come over here to liaise or talk with the community about issues. Who is telling them this? We are constantly told that people who do come over were either warned or racism, and/or violence from the community towards both 'outsiders' and 'white' people. Even the PIAC (Palm Island Aboriginal Council) do this. They probably have an agenda that favours people don't come over and see what's going on, and what's not.

There are some pretty obvious problems with this situation. And again, the people who actually have to live here are the ones who miss out.

Presently it seems the only interaction with the outside world is not with politicians or bureaucrats, but with the church. No less than 3 church groups, gear and equipment and accommodation facilities have all been shipped over here in the last 3 months. There groups have then all proceeded to preach to the community. Setting up such things as the 'tent of promise' where all the school kids are then taken. I'm sorry but this offends me. Diversity is fine, but where is there anything else to do? Are

you, we the council or who ever, still expecting the church and GOD to save the indigenous communities?

It would be nice for a change to see some government department come over with some information stalls or a caravan and tent and put on some entertainment for the kids. For the fire brigade to drive the truck to school and turn the foam on, or the Environment Department to bring some animals over for the kids to see. I know this stuff happens regularly in other communities.

KEY TERMS

Your brochure identifies key terms 'frequently used which are relevant to the inquiry'. I would like to offer some comments in relation to 'service delivery' and 'governance'.

Firstly, service delivery. Defined as including physical infrastructure, roads, sewerage, power and housing; education, health care, aged care and policing and these to be funded by government even if they are delivered by someone else. Our roads are disgraceful, eroded and dangerous; sewerage constantly overflows into the creek in the middle of two schools, waste water vegetation is all dead; power is derived from DIESEL for the whole community despite options for solar and wind power being obvious in this environment; housing is significantly lacking, derelict where it does exist and generally poorly designed, located and not maintained; truancy is rife in the community most classes average less than half the enrolled students actually attending school; there is no GP or Drs surgery; the nursing home is disgusting and has been shut numerous times due to flea infestations etc; and it seems the police turn a blind eye to 90% of the crime in the community.

Your brochure mentions then that the private sector should fund and deliver services such as 'stores and banks'. Well the store on Palm is State government owned and run and has a terrible selection of food, which is tremendously overpriced and understocked. The local council runs the only 'bank' on the island. So what is going wrong? Why is it that even by your own idea of how a community should exist things are warped here?

Secondly I would like to address the term, 'governance', values - the processes and structures of community management. Questions, are leaders accountable? No. How are decisions made in a community? Behind closed doors, without any community consultation or involvement and without any meetings to discuss what is being decided. Do staff have the necessary skills and resources? No, and they do not understand what it is they do need to know or who to ask or how to go about learning the day to day details of being a director of a board.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The terms of reference identify the objective of this committee is to determine strategies to better manage service delivery, in particularly capacity building of,

1. Community members to help families, community groups and councils
2. Indigenous organisations to get better service delivery in efficient and accountable ways
3. Government agencies so policy and management help individuals and communities.

In relation to community members, I think the best outcomes will occur when people are empowered to be a part of the decision making process, but those in charge have to genuinely want this for it to happen. Community members need to feel they are a part of a good community. With things to do and activities to be involved in, even if this is actually deciding what things they want to happen and

then how to do it. Community members need to be able to know they are important individuals and what they think matters. That someone is listening even if the outcomes can never please everyone. For this to happen properly there must first be some reliable way for people to find out information, and on Palm Island we have no newspaper or radio station and so there is no means of communicating with the community. This must be addressed as a matter of priority. People here have voiced their desire and support for this over and over. All indigenous communities should have their own newspaper and radio station.

Indigenous organisations must be made accountable. I am unfamiliar with the specifics of the requirements of other local governments but the same rules need to apply to all local councils. The community here is constantly hearing of rumours of misappropriation of funds and money going missing. Last week apparently \$4000 disappeared from safe, and this hasn't been reported to the police. The money from the NIADOC week celebrations, some \$3500 has never been banked. There are many more examples. This cannot continue. I do not know how but indigenous organisations must not be allowed to rip off indigenous people any more. The council here is set up so people can rot the system, councillors appointing themselves to jobs and then getting 3 pay packets or council employees claiming ridiculous amounts of over time, or clocking on and going home.

This type of thing, very common here MUST STOP.

Government agencies and bureaucrats should get out of their comfort zones and into the 'real world' of the indigenous communities they are claiming to help and support. See what is and isn't being done. Talk to the community members. Understand for yourselves the day to day experiences of life here and then really commit to helping change things.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Capacity building is just another catch phrase that is being thrown around in an attempt to divert attention from the real issues of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, alcoholism, child abuse, sexual assault, and health statistics that would still compare dismally to those of many third world countries, let alone Australia. Stop kidding yourselves. Sitting around in your offices talking about this with each other is not helping the people here to get any closer to the basic living standards of every other Australian, let alone to become high achievers and leaders in the mainstream.

It's a sad and horrible story to tell, the history of the treatment of the first people of this country, by the colonialists, our forefathers. I am ashamed to be an Australian sometimes, when I think of the inequality between the 'black' and 'white' communities in this country. I am saddened by the fact that the whole country is not outraged by the state of the indigenous communities. I am hopeful that one-day things will change.

OPEN LETTER

I am writing to raise very serious concerns about the functioning of the Palm Island Aboriginal Council (PIAC). I have numerous complaints, however all this amounts to what I could describe as the Council being none other than entirely dysfunctional and unable to carry out the duties and responsibilities of a local government.

The Council is derelict in its role as the governing body of this community. According to the Community Services Act, the role of an Aboriginal Council is identical to that of any other local council, as identified in ss25 of the Community Services Act, however this is not the reality here. Local Councils are able to derive revenue through rates, however this is not the situation on DOGIT communities, as no one can own land, and the Community Services Act restricts penalties on

infringements of by-laws. Real local councils also receive significantly more funding than Aboriginal councils. It seems governments, both federal and state, have just shrugged responsibility for providing basic services and expect Aboriginal councils to do this without the expertise or knowledge of politics and government, corporate law or economics and fiscal management.

Houses, owned by council, are run down and in need of repair, in breach of the Residential Tenancy Act. There is a desperate need for more housing with only ~320 government owned homes and somewhere between 2500 and 3000 people living on the island. We have waited over 4 months for a leaking in the roof which lets water run into a light fitting, two broken windows and a smashed shower screen to be fixed. All were in the condition they are in before we moved in and we were told they would be fixed ASAP! Our flat is in comparatively good condition.

Instead of encouraging businesses, Council has closed the locally owned and run video shop, and are now trying to shut the clothes shop and fish and chip takeaway, both locally owned and run. Meanwhile, the chairperson has opened a mobile video hire van and another councillor opened a new video shop this week, in the old shop premises. This is typical of Council behaviour. Other councillors' families now sell bread out of their cars and other goods and they will have the monopoly on sales now the shops are all being shut.

Services are lacking; there is no chemist, café or fruit and veg shop. School truancy is rampant, and this is ignored. Sewerage is constantly overflowing into the creek in town, between the 2 primary schools. The store, State Government owned, is poorly stocked and overpriced.

Council meetings never happen when scheduled, often starting hours or even days later. It is next to impossible for community members to get on an agenda, and if this does happen you are then expected to wait and wait until they are ready to let you talk to Council.

Resolutions are not proposed or passed and although it seems the CEO takes minutes, none are ever accepted by Council. After waiting 5 weeks for a meeting to come to us on the agenda in July, we have now been told, again that no minutes have been written up or passed by Council, yet their August meeting has happened, apparently. Surely this is illegal? Sections 34 and 38 of the Community Services Regulations (particularly ss38.3) refer to the requirement by Council and clerk to ensure minutes are recorded and accepted and signed. And surely Corporate Laws apply to the PIAC as an incorporated body? I have been informed no minutes have been written or accepted for many months. Does this mean no decisions are legal and the Council is in effect not functioning?

Section 48 of the Community Services Regulations, 'Financial information to be presented to post election meeting', was not adhered to after the last by-election, and it is very, very difficult for anyone to find out information about the financial management of Council. We have also been attempting to get a copy of the PIAC by-laws, however this has again taken months and we have been advised to contact the Minister's office.

Council cannot provide roads maintenance, erosion here is horrific, there is no street signs, or rusty unreadable old ones and there are barely any streetlights. People drive wherever they like, on the 'footpath', over the oval, through the mall and both police and Council ignores this every day. We have no hall or community centre, no toddler's playgroup or short courses. There are no kids' playgrounds or picnic areas, BBQs or proper walking tracks. There are no industries here and no incentive for any to be established with land tenure dubious and Council not prepared to support outside investors. Many problems in this community stem from the issue of land tenure and the fact that no one here can even own their own home, let alone a business premises.

Council has finally acknowledged the connection between alcohol and the level of domestic violence and child abuse, however banned alcohol except beer, so they can still run the pub to generate income. Despite the new by-law having not even being discussed in the community, officially displayed, or presented to the Minister, the council had the police confiscate all alcohol, which was

not beer, off people coming in on the ferries. Again, surely this was illegal? Are the police at the beck and call of the council here?

In recent weeks Council has employed approximately 15 staff. Appointed to positions, including 6 senior and management jobs, without advertising of vacancies, nor apparently any requirement for qualifications. Needless to say, these jobs have nearly all gone to either Councillors or members of their families. The community is justifiably upset and people angry that the few jobs that are here are given to Councillors and their family without any chance for anyone else to even apply! Is this not in breach of industrial relations laws?

This includes yesterday's appointment of the CEO. A woman, who was initially employed some years ago as a cleaner, and who is under investigation by the CJC. Allegations have been made of interference with minutes, which she allegedly took in hard copy and on laptop, to the casino and left there. According to the Community Services Act, (which I would be the first to describe as a completely inadequate and insubstantial piece of legislation), the only person with a 'responsibility', for basically providing services and functions of the Council, and all local government requirements under the Local Government Act, is the Council clerk or CEO. In fact, under section 52, ss52.1 'the clerk of and Aboriginal Council has the role of implementing the council's policies and decisions' 52.3, 'the clerk alone is responsible for organising the presentation of reports and reporting to council, conducting correspondence between council and other persons, managing and overseeing the administration of the council and coordinating activities of the employees'.

Council workers are striking this week because of these appointments and Councils bad management, so including other services the post office and Council run bank are both shut. The Australia Post post office, which I'm sure Australia Post would be embarrassed to be associated with. Parcels only come once a week, they don't even sell envelopes and hours are irregular anyway, but now many people who are expecting welfare cheques will not get them.

People here are unhappy and upset with the Council, and often voice this opinion. A petition with over 560 signatures was presented to government not long ago, asking for the Council to be sacked. Nearly as many people signed this petition than voted in the last election, yet this was ignored because it was apparently worded incorrectly. Why wasn't this 'instrument seeking to dissolve local government', tabled in Parliament within 14 days of being received, as is required under the Queensland Constitution, ss 72-76?

A large group of Palm Islander's protested during NAIDOC week, walking under the banner of the "Progress Tribe", carrying placards saying things like, 'Abolish the Community Services Act', 'We want more shops', '1st home owners rebate for Palm Islander's too', etc. People here want a chance to make a go of it, like every other Aussie, but you start a mile behind the line when you come from an Indigenous community in Queensland.

Allegations of council corruption and financial mismanagement are rife in the community. Funds and grants are spent inappropriately or on entirely unrelated projects or acquisitions.

Environmental issues, which I am particularly concerned with, are basically not addressed at all. Foreshore erosion outside the council offices is nearly 6foot deep, hundreds of horses, and goats on the outer islands, are destroying the ecology and rainforest, tonnes of sediment wash onto the reef, the new sewerage project was never maintained and all the vegetation supposed to absorb waste water, has died. Raw sewerage often overflows every couple of weeks, into the environment.

Dogs run all through town and are constantly fighting. There are apparently by-laws to prevent people owning more than a certain number of dogs, or requiring people to walk dogs on leashes etc, however these are not enforced. There are no Council by-laws officers or animal control officers to give out infringement notices. In fact even State and Federal laws do not seem to apply here, and are definitely not enforced.

Children don't go to school. People walk around all day drinking, including children. People drink and drive, and drive into the servo drunk to buy fuel. There are fistfights in the streets and people just watch. This is normal if you live on an Indigenous community in Australia. I've seen two 12 year old girls fist fighting with about 50 people watching, including adults. There are posters in the hospital showing how its 'deadly' to ride in the back of truck and utes, yet nearly every vehicle on the island carries people illegally. There is no public transport. Most vehicles are unroadworthy and unregistered and many utes and trucks even have seats on the trays for people to sit on. The Council and CDEP trucks often have 10-15 people on the back at once.

Maybe this is all termed 'culturally appropriate' policing or governance, but I find this offensive and discriminatory. Like most government policy, there is a completely different set of 'rules' for black people here, as opposed to white people everywhere else. I often feel like I am living in another county, another time and definitely another reality to what I have known growing up in 'white' Australia.

Perhaps the situation here is a logical progression, the socialisation stemming from what people on Palm have been subjected to over the past 80 years. The results are obvious, many of those people abused in the mission days, abuse the people they love, and the problem becomes socialised, acceptable, 'normal'. Alcohol becomes the medicine and the sick get sicker. It is 'normal' to let your man beat the life out of you. It is 'normal' for children to throw rocks at each other if they get upset. It is 'normal' to have nothing better to do than prostitute yourself for a foil of yarndi, for both boys and girls. It is not uncommon for kids to have babies when they are as young as 12, and it is 'normal' for 14 and 15 year olds to be pregnant.

The vast majority of the population here is unemployed, over 85%. There is no industry or business here except for the Council. All work for the council goes to outside tender and otherwise you can get appointed to a council job or be a 'normal' Palm Islander. Its next to impossible for kids to get an education here and most parents who care about their kids and can afford it, send them to high school on the mainland. I mean would you go to school if it was basically optional? If no one was to make you go, or encourage you to learn or help with your homework? If your dad offered to take you fishing instead, wouldn't you go with him, even if he were drunk?

People cannot afford to buy cars, and those who can, cannot repair or maintain them easily. There is no mechanics as such, or spare parts shop. There is no public transport. You can only actually leave Palm Island on Thursdays, Fridays or Saturdays, unless you can afford the \$55 one-way ticket on the plane. It costs \$45 per adult return and \$25 per child return, to go to Townsville on the ferry, a lot of money to the unemployed of Palm. Compare this to the cost any other rural person would have to pay for the bus fare to the nearest shopping centre. And despite this, people from Palm have to constantly go to the mainland to buy things, as you just can't buy most goods on Palm. Last time I went on the ferry to go and buy food, there was about 25 school-aged kids on the boat. The only way you can go one day and come back the next, thus avoiding more costs of staying in Townsville, is to leave on Thursday and return on Friday, so the kids don't go to school. When you ask, them why they aren't at school, they reply 'we're goin' shopping' and this is totally normal and acceptable.

So, the police turn a blind eye, to most things. And it would be unfair to impose the laws of the mainland here, when nothing else applies. I have travelled around Australia and Asia and living here is closer to the latter. My sister described visiting here as like staying in a caravan park in Thailand.

I can go on and on, and I will, as I intend for you to feel what it is like, the frustration and the desperation to actually have to live like this, in Australia, in the year 2002.

Most of the population is young. Over 50% are under 25, yet council has no councillors under 25, or 30. There is NOTHING for kids, or anyone, to do here aside from fish or some kids ride the wild horses. Often you can watch children in the community just throwing rocks at walls for something to do, or playing in the derelict, should be condemned, buildings around town. There is no bike track, skate ramp, pony club or movies, no arcade or games shop etc. You may think this is not so different

from many kids living in remote, rural and isolated areas. However we are not really so rural. Palm Island is only ~60km from Townsville, the biggest city in North Queensland. A 15min plane ride. When people go to the nearest shops for food etc, they go to Townsville, and see exactly how different things are between, 'us' and 'them'. I have wondered whether there is any correlation between the proximity of Indigenous communities to large urban centres, and the level of dysfunction in these communities, ie the closer people are to 'real Australia' the harder it is to accept, or deal with the reality they have to live in.

Council did put on a bit of entertainment for NAIDOC week, however despite hundreds and hundreds of people turning up, there wasn't one rubbish bin provided! Obviously providing rubbish bins is a Council function. There was tonnes of rubbish from the week long celebrations, which all blew off the oval and onto the beach. I reported this to the EPA, although I doubt they did anything. Council provides no bins anywhere in the community, people are just expected to throw all their rubbish on the ground and this is what happens. Even the kids I know who go to school and have a bit of respect throw their rubbish on the ground as I doubt they've ever seen anyone do any different here. There's certainly no clean up Palm Island campaigns, or keep Palm beautiful.

There are no public toilets, so people often go to the toilet in the building that was the Town Hall. This building should be condemned and demolished or restored, but for the past 18months or more the Council have ignored this derelict, dangerous building. Everyday people go there to go to the toilet, especially during the NAIDOC week...this is disgusting, not to mention unhygienic and unsanitary. Kids then go and play in there, especially when it rains, as there is no shelter anywhere in the community, from sun or rain.

There is a lack of walking tracks, mostly people have to walk on the road with their prams, mind you these cement roads, if they are sealed, are barely wide enough for two cars, and not wide enough for a truck and car to pass easily. So what happens if a truck and car and a pram are on the road? The roads generally are in an appalling state; erosion gullies several metres deep, loss of soil and vegetation. I would estimate that several million, \$10-20 million, needs to be spent just to fix our roads, and as there are not many roads here, and people pay over a \$1 per litre for fuel, its not unreasonable to expect the government fund this urgent problem. I have spoken to the Department of public roads or main roads and they told me, of course, that it is the responsibility of the local government, to provide and maintain roads. How is this supposed to happen however, when the total budget for the council to provide every service is only 2-3million per year?

There is no Drs surgery here, so if you need to see the doctor you have to go to hospital. All the doctors are currently male, most come and go pretty quickly and there is no real 'getting to know your local GP' kinda vibe you would get in any other country town doctors practise. I went to the doctor last week and when I asked if he was going to stay for a while, he replied, 'no, this isn't the type of place you'd want to live in". I told him I've been here two years and it's not so bad. But it is. We have no chemist, so to get something as simple as baby panadol, easily available to every other Australian over the counter, you have to wait hours to see a doctor to prove that, yes your baby is getting a tooth and needs panadol. I mean what is this all about? The hospital pays for all medications, apparently as the doctor told me a coupled of days ago, because it's a public hospital, funny 'cause I've never received free medicine anywhere else before in a public hospital. I would much rather be able to go freely to a chemist and buy what I want, than be made to wait around and feel inadequate as a mother. As if I don't know when my child needs panadol, because we live in a black community, in a racially segregated country, Australia? Besides the fact you're more likely to get sicker by going to the hospital.

I have honestly felt, over and over, that I am living in a community in a country with a very effective system of apartheid. There is blatant segregation in relation to housing and employment on the island, white jobs, white housing, on the beachfront etc, and there is the fact that we who live here are all segregated form any mainstream Australian way of life, where services are available and shops open, where kids have a playground and there are streetlights so women and children are safe

to walk home. There is discrimination on many levels from the government, beginning with the fact no indigenous Australian in Queensland can own their own home or land or business in their communities. The government subsidises travel for pensioners and concession card holders living on Magnetic Island, a mainstream white community a few kilometres from us, where it only cost about \$15 full fare anyway to get to Townsville, and you can leave up to 10 times a day, 7 days a week. However, there is no subsidy for Palm Islander's, and we only get 3 ferries a week on top of this.

People from Palm HAVE to go to Townsville because you can't really buy clothes here, you can't buy toys for your kids, fabric or hardware goods, you can't even buy a dog leash that you are supposed to use to walk your dog(s). Most days there is little fresh food and the store as mentioned, is pitifully understocked, most little IGA general store/supermarkets would have a greater diversity of stock. We can barely buy fresh food at all, yet towns on the mainland with similar sized populations, have main streets full of shops. I know, I grew up in one of these small country towns, with fewer people living in it than Palm has, but more shops, and that was over 20 years ago.

The worst part is, that the only store here, is actually government owned. You are the ones doing this to us directly. It stocks things like, powdered milk, white bread, white sugar soft drink, baked beans and spam. These main items can take up a ¼ of an aisle, for white sugar or baked beans, instead of having more things to choose from. The food is very overpriced, out of date, fruit and veg often off, or mouldy or just not there, and then you have to pay \$4.30 for 3 pieces of garlic, or \$40/kg for squash – where are we living, Mars?

So obviously, the 'rules' are applied differently on Indigenous communities, there are "aboriginal laws", a constitutional right the government has to make separate laws for black people, as opposed to everyone else – can you deny this is apartheid? Racial segregation? There are such things as the "aboriginal accounting standards" – this is particularly funny, what do Murri's count differently to everyone else, or is this to allow for the misappropriation and expenditure of funds?

Bureaucrats who do come over, talk about how they were 'warned' not to come, and advised against actually visiting, how their supervisors told them they would not be responsible for anything that happened to them over here, how people here are racist, and possibly violent towards outsiders. This is a joke. This is why things are f*^\$#@d on Palm Island, because you all think you are doing such a great job, yet your bureaucrats won't even come here. I heard recently that the EPA was going to employ 2 people to deal with Palm Island issues, except they will be based in Townsville and visit Palm, quote "you'd be lucky to have them over a couple of days a year". So how are things ever going to get better?"

I do believe in self determination for Indigenous people, but the current situation with DOGITs and "Aboriginal Councils" in Queensland means services and the living standard for indigenous people will always be lacking, significantly, when compared to mainland Australia, predominantly white, mainland Australia. This is apartheid. This is segregation. This is discrimination. Until the Australian dream of owning your own home is a reality for indigenous people too, nothing will change. There has to be equality, a level playing field and then the right for indigenous people to choose the way they want to live.

I believe in Queensland it would be a sensible and obvious next step, to make Aboriginal Councils, Local Councils under the same legislation and with the same funding, and rights for people to own their own home and land, and thus ability to derive rates, as everywhere else in Australia. All local councils must be accountable in the same way, to the same laws. If the situation is such, that for Indigenous people to be able to meet these laws and rules of operation etc, that there is a need to provide education and training to allow indigenous people to be empowered, and able to participate EQUALLY in the [whiteman's] system of governance, then this should happen. I think that assuming everyone can operate at the same level and then rectifying the inequalities so this can occur is a far more productive approach than the current method. In essence the current approach seems to be to assume Indigenous people can't do the same job as every other local government and then try

to blame these same people when this happens. There is no training to teach people here how governments, politics and corporate laws apply to local governments, so it seems the Community Services Act was passed to allow for this incapacity.

Another aspect of the Community Services Act which I find particularly hard to deal with, and which would be rectified if the community became a true local council area, is the fact I am required, by law to vote here in local elections, but I am not allowed to run. I have taken this issue up with many government departments, the Electoral Commission and the Anti-discrimination Commission, however it seems the constitution allows the government to make racist and discriminatory policies, with regards to indigenous people. I find that this is an affront to my democratic rights in this country, or do we not even have the right to democratic government on Indigenous communities? When you look at this situation you will find I am one of about 7-10 white people who have married into this community, out of a population estimated at between 2500 and 3000 people. And as my sister-in-law said to me, even if you'd never get elected, you white mob should still have the chance to run. I mean isn't that what democracy is all about, people getting to chose who they want to govern them? Whether or not they want to run for Council. My father-in-law has lived here for 30 years, and never had the opportunity to run for local council.

Our Council is struggling at present to even meet, keep minutes or staff. People here are upset and unhappy with council, and often voice this opinion. Yet we are told that the state government will not intervene until the community hits rock bottom, total crisis point and people are screaming from their roof tops, because of a perception the state government might be portrayed in the media, as racist!

Palm Island is a beautiful, naturally rich place, and the potential for this community to develop sustainably and become economically stable is very real. The main impediment seems to be the Council. Often projects etc are proposed and put to Council, to help people here or the community in some way, but Council inevitably stops things, wont meet or wont agree to approve the project, funds or whatever, and thus none of these things happen. For example, the vet who services the island, one day a month, has offered to castrate the wild horses to stop them breeding and thus reduce the impact on the environment, at a significantly reduced fee. He has been waiting over 6 months for a response. Yet at the same time, the RSPCA has proposed a similar project, and will contribute half the costs, some \$12,500, and this has been on the Council agenda for over 18months. The horses are still breeding.

Or the store, State Government owned, and managed disgracefully. Apparently the government wants to sell the store to the community, to the Council. Well, the process I have been informed of goes something like this. Several thousand (\$7000 I was told), was spent getting a Councillor to Brisbane for meetings on this matter, however despite going to Brisbane, numerous times, apparently the Councillor never made it to any of the meetings. Rumour has it that this same Councillor is trying to go into partnership to own the store themselves, rather than it becoming a community asset and legitimate source of income for the Council. This is totally typical. If you know the PIAC is unable to be responsible or even legitimate in its business how, can you, the government and politicians, continue to allow this to happen, you are paying for it, and profiting from it, when you should be making sure the kids here can eat!

I hope that I have created some picture of what it is like to live on Palm Island. And why many of the problems stem from poor governance and mismanagement. Its not that I don't think there should be allowances for culturally appropriate and traditional behaviour and customs in Indigenous communities, however this is not what's happening as a result of current government policy and legislation. One government bureaucrat said to me, ' its not discrimination, its positive bias to compensation for historical injustices". Well if that what the government really thinks, the injustices are by no means historical.

30th August 2002

Page 11

I am writing to you out of desperation. Things are bad here. Council is rotten to the core; incapable of doing its job and it seems continued community protests are falling on deaf ears. If you are reading this then, you, can do something to help change things for Palm Island.

Sincerely,

Svea Pitman