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Ms Joanne Towner
Secretary
Standing Committee on Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Dear Ms Towner

In his letter of 16 March 2005, the Chairman of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Mr Barry Wakelin MP, invited the ACT Government to make a submission to the Committee's Inquiry on Indigenous Employment.

The Government's submission, with supporting documents, is attached.

The Government would be happy to provide any additional information the Committee might require on this issue.

Yours sincerely

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Chief Minister

09 MAY 2005

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**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Affairs**

Inquiry into Indigenous Employment

Submission by the Australian Capital Territory

Background

The ACT is a relatively new jurisdiction. It achieved self-government in 1989, and a separate public sector administrative structure was only put in place in 1994. For many years, therefore, employment policies and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Territory were part of broader arrangements put in place and managed by the Commonwealth.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Patterns in the ACT

According to the 2001 Commonwealth Census, 3548 people, or about 1% of the population of the ACT, identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The booklet *A Social and Cultural Profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Canberra* (the Profile), produced by the Chief Minister's Department in 2004, provides a comprehensive analysis of the status and conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT, and a copy is attached.

The overall conclusion of the Profile is that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT are better off in many key areas than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nationally, and while their living conditions are generally improving at a better rate than the rest of Indigenous Australia, they continue to lag behind non-Indigenous residents of the ACT and there remain significant areas of concern, including stress, violence and over representation in the justice system. There are also significant pockets of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents who are not benefiting from these overall improvements.

As the Profile indicates, these patterns tend to be reflected in employment trends. On the one hand:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incomes in the ACT are considerably higher than those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the rest of Australia and are comparable with those of non-Indigenous people nationally. However, they lag behind non-Indigenous incomes in the ACT, and the figures are an average that mask low levels of income for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents; and
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a relatively high level of participation in the workforce, in that they are either employed or looking for work. In 2001, 68% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were in the workforce, compared to 72% of non-Indigenous people and 63% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nationally. The Profile noted, "...high level of participation in the workforce indicates that [Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander people] in Canberra have better engagement and skills to participate in the workforce than nationally”.

On the other hand, the unemployment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was 13.6% of the workforce, much higher than for non-Indigenous people (5.1%) and higher than for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nationally. Half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unemployed were under 25. Moreover, only 19.7% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 and over have a degree, compared with 35.4% of the non-Indigenous population in that age grouping.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees tend to be clustered in particular industries. In 2001, 32% of employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT worked in public administration, compared with around 24% of non-Indigenous residents. By comparison, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were underrepresented in property, business, retail and education.

Most of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed in public administration in the Territory worked for Commonwealth departments and agencies. They tended to be employed at lower classification levels and to work in agencies or areas that focussed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues and in the management of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and services. In 2002, nearly one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT, who were employed, worked for what was then ATSIC.

The bunching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in public administration jobs in the Commonwealth has important implications for the future of Indigenous employment in the ACT. As *The Economic White Paper for the Australian Capital Territory* points out, while the Commonwealth will continue to be a major player in the ACT's economy, there has been a significant decline in the Commonwealth's share of total employment in favour of the private sector.

The representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian Public Service has slowly but steadily declined, and this slide has been more pronounced in recent years. Representation declined from 2.5% in June 2002 to 2.3% in June 2004. This is exacerbated by the fact that while the Indigenous population of the ACT is younger than the non-Indigenous population, the overall ability of the Commonwealth to employ young people is declining. The percentage of employees under 25 declined from 12.6% in 1995 to 4.2% in 2004.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in the separate ACT Public Service (ACT PS) is low, with only 0.5% of ACT PS employees identifying themselves as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in June 2004. It has been suggested that one reason for this is the perception of the broader opportunities offered to Indigenous job seekers, at least up until now, by the Commonwealth. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in the ACT PS are not always identified, either because of reluctance on their part or because of gaps in data. The ACT PS lacks diversity data on almost 24% of its staff, but this is typical of most Australian jurisdictions.

It is also important to remember that the ACT PS is a very young service that only had its tenth anniversary in June 2004. Its main priorities during that period have been to develop and set up the basic governance and industrial frameworks to hold together a functionally diverse workforce.

But while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people tend to be over represented in the lower classification levels of the ACT PS, there is, relative to their numbers, a significant level of occupational and professional diversity. They include teachers, disability workers, legal officers, rangers and IT professionals.

The Challenge

The ACT Government is strongly committed to Reconciliation, including practical measures to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage. The key overall framework for addressing this is the 2004 *Canberra Plan*, comprising three elements: the Social Plan; the Spatial Plan and the Economic White Paper, that sets the overall strategic direction of the ACT for the next 10 –15 years. Put succinctly, the aim of the Canberra Plan is to expand the Territory's economic and skills base and enhance and diversify job opportunities while maintaining a commitment to equity, social justice, a viable community lifestyle and protection of the environment.

Copies of the *Canberra Plan* documents are attached.

As we have seen, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are employed tend to work in those industries that, in the ACT, are increasingly less able to provide employment and career opportunities. It is essential to ensure not only that the general disadvantages suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are addressed, but also that they develop skills and experience that will enable them to participate in and contribute to the Territory's changing economic base.

Building our Community: The Canberra Social Plan includes, among its goals and priorities, the reduction of the length and the level of unemployment experienced by vulnerable groups toward the ACT average. Specific actions to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment disadvantage involve working in partnership with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to implement the priorities of the national report *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage; Key Indicators 2003*.

The *Economic White Paper for the Australian Capital Territory* includes an Indigenous Business Development initiative aimed at the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business and employment opportunities. Action 20 of the Economic White Paper commits the Government to:

- establishing an Indigenous Business Support Officer within BusinessACT to work with the Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Unit of the Chief Minister's Department and the Capital Region Employment Council to facilitate indigenous business access to mainstream programs;
- providing seminars and networking opportunities for ACT and region Indigenous businesses;

- providing culturally appropriate business training for the Indigenous community;
- revamping mainstream business program material to ensure that it is accessible to Indigenous businesses; and
- providing cultural awareness training for agency staff delivering business programs to the Indigenous community.

The ACT Public Service

The ACT Government has given priority to the improvement of the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT PS in order to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment opportunities, to enhance their skills and experience and to set an example to other sectors of ACT industry. We are mindful here that the particular characteristics of the ACT, including its combined State and local government responsibilities, the breadth and diversity of its occupational groups and its strong service delivery focus, are likely to mean that there are more employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other disadvantaged groups than in the Commonwealth.

The Government is currently developing an overall strategic framework to guide progress across the ACT PS in addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public sector recruitment and retention. The detail of the framework – The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy for the ACT PS - has still to be considered and agreed by the ACT Government, but its objectives have been clearly spelled out. They are:

- to integrate awareness and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues into the work of all agencies and for this awareness to be reflected in all areas of policy and program development;
- build a capacity for staff at all levels and across all ACT Government agencies to support the recruitment, retention and career development of Indigenous employees;
- identify and develop partnerships with external and stakeholder organisations to encourage and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment; and
- evaluate, consolidate and build on achievements.

Current planning is that the strategy will be put in place in financial year 2005 – 06.

In the meantime, trends in the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT PS are being closely monitored, including through the State of the Service Report that is made annually by the Commissioner of Public Administration to the Chief Minister. This reporting indicates that progress is already being made in addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, with a number of

specific initiatives put in place to enhance the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

On a service wide level, the ACT PS Certified Agreement Template, which provides a set of core service wide employment conditions, includes ceremonial leave which can be granted to an employee of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent for ceremonial purposes connected with the death of a member of their immediate or extended family, or for other ceremonial obligations.

Other important initiatives have been developed and implemented by individual agencies. These include cultural awareness training for non-Indigenous staff, the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traineeships and cadetships, the use of identified positions to bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander skills to policy and program development, the establishment of agency based Indigenous employee networks, and the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander study awards. Initiatives currently under consideration by agencies including the mentoring and coaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander managers and the broader use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander liaison officers to enhance relationships with Indigenous clients.

Current or recent initiatives of particular interest include:

- Arts, Heritage and Environment (AHE/Chief Minister's Department) has recruited Indigenous staff through a traineeship arrangement that involves targeted recruitment for park rangers, park workers, visitor services and administration staff. Trainees' skills and interests are matched to the work opportunities available and support is provided through an Indigenous workers network;
- The Heritage Unit (AHE/Chief Minister's Department)) employs an Aboriginal liaison officer to work on the registration and conservation of Aboriginal sites listed on the ACT Heritage Register. The officer also has a role in the promotion of Aboriginal sites and indigenous culture. The Unit also encourages and supports the local Aboriginal community in their applications for, and assistance with, Heritage Grant projects;
- There are currently two Indigenous members on the ACT Heritage Council who are remunerated as non-government members. Aboriginal people with traditional affiliation to the ACT are also employed on a contract basis as Aboriginal site monitors on projects likely to affect Aboriginal sites;
- Indigenous representatives have been included on selection panels for trainees and other positions that are directly relevant to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and modified selection processes have been undertaken for trainees;
- Contract employment of local Aboriginal people to survey the fire trail network on ACT conservation reserves and forestry land;

- An Indigenous Landcare Coordinator facilitates opportunities for unemployed indigenous people to be involved in volunteer land care projects;
- Arts, Heritage and Environment has also developed training courses in partnership with local communities to enhance the skills and increase employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The training programs delivered include:
 - *Cultural Interpretation Presentation Skills* - designed to provide Indigenous Australians with the skills and confidence to deliver cultural presentations;
 - *A Heritage Site Survey Course* to provide local Aboriginal people with skills to identify and monitor Aboriginal sites.
 - Short-term training programs in *Walking Track Construction* have been delivered in Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.
- The Department of Education and Training has improved its intake of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers through a campaign of targeted recruitment involving advertising in the Indigenous media and visiting universities with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness training is compulsory for executives and Senior Officers. The Department estimates that these initiatives have contributed to an increase in the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers from 3 in June 1999 to 8 in June 2004;
- ACTION, the major ACT public transport authority, has implemented a Structured Training and Employment Program targeting 21 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers over two years. To date, three have permanent jobs as ACTION bus drivers. Cross cultural awareness is also included for non-Indigenous staff; and
- The Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services has an Indigenous services coordinator in its Office for Children, Youth and Family Support, to network with and support Indigenous staff across the agency to improve the retention rate of Indigenous staff.

The ACT PS has also gained high quality Indigenous staff through normal recruitment and selection processes. The Director of Public Prosecutions has on staff two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are employed as prosecutors and who were selected through a standard open selection process.

Conclusion

The ACT is a relatively new jurisdiction. It has nevertheless had some important local successes in training, recruiting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in some public sector agencies. Its main focus now is getting in place broader strategic plans and programs to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and it will be closely monitoring their implementation and outcomes. The ACT Government is very strongly committed to Reconciliation and to

building and nurturing programs that will not only ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same employment opportunities as other Territory residents but that the skills and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are available to the broader ACT community.