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30 July 2004

The Secretary  
Senate Select Committee on the  
Administration of Indigenous Affairs  
Parliament House  
Canberra 2800

Dear Sir/Madam,

***RE: Input to the Committee's inquiry on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Amendment Bill 2004 and proposed related changes to the administration of Commonwealth Indigenous Affairs policy.***

Australia and the Australian Government have an obligation to protect the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to self-determination. Central to the enjoyment of these rights is the ability of Indigenous People to determine who represents them locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

The proposed bill and proposed administrative arrangements will deny these fundamental rights. As part of the concept and push for self-determination, Indigenous Peoples' fundamental right to meaningful involvement in decision-making effecting their lives and communities.

Through its involvement with the Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council (MLALC), our organisation, the Hunter Economic Zone, has seen first hand the way self-determination by dint of the current system has proved a critical factor in MLALC improving the well-being and quality of life of its community.

Established in Maitland, NSW, in 1985, the MLALC is an intrinsic focal point for the local indigenous community around Maitland, Kurri Kurri and Cessnock in the Hunter Region.

MLALC currently has over 250 members who meet on a monthly basis. Decision-making on anything significant to the Land Council includes all of the membership in open forums.

The main focus of the Council's operations is its Cultural Centre in Metford, near Maitland. This is a meeting place for local and visiting Indigenous People and some 500 people go through this centre each week. Without the centre, these people would not have the opportunity to celebrate their culture and community.

Built in 1991, the multipurpose centre is home to an extensive museum, or Keeping Place, for aboriginal artefacts with an impressive range of permanent displays. It also runs an onsite pre-school, library, community gymnasium and education centre.

The Land Council has a wide agenda targeting various sectors of the community. Its services include:

- developing education and sporting opportunities for indigenous children and youth;
- running cultural camps for disadvantaged children
- providing affordable housing for its members;



- and establishing and maintaining key training and employment opportunities for local aboriginal people.

The Council's core operation is the acquisition and claim of Crown Land under the Land Rights Act of 1983. MLALC was successful in its land claim for approximately 200 hectares of land in what is now known as the Hunter Economic Zone. A number of MLALC members are traditional owner from the Country in that area.

MLALC is a joint landowner in the Hunter Economic Zone (HEZ) project, owning approximately 23 per cent of the developable land and Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council has been extensively involved in the project since 1997.

MLALC knows that the Hunter Economic Zone project is vital to the building of capacity for its people. It provides them with Future Dreaming for its people such as self-determination, employment, education, independence, and dignity. But the platform for the partnership and the Future Dreaming is the current ability of Indigenous representatives to be involved meaningfully at a regional level.

The HEZ project gives MLALC the control of their Future Dreaming and a means to compete with mainstream Australia.

The 3,200 hectare HEZ business estate is one of the largest in Australia. The partnership between MLALC and HEZ Pty Ltd ensures continued consultation with MLALC and the progressive incorporation of the narratives and history of local Indigenous People into the theming, signage, and development of the estate.

This partnership is living, working proof of outcomes being significantly better where there is a full and effective indigenous involvement in decision-making, strong indigenous organisations and governance, and appropriate cultural recognition within both Indigenous and non-Indigenous institutions.

We believe any replacement for ATSIC must be determined in consultation and negotiation with Indigenous stakeholders, and on the basis of their informed consent. We would urge that the Committee's report should provide strong endorsement of this principle.

Yours sincerely,

**HUNTER ECONOMIC ZONE**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian Tasker', written over a horizontal line.

**BRIAN TASKER**  
Managing Director