

-----Original Message-----

From: Elsa Story [mailto:elsas@fishinternet.com.au]

Sent: Saturday, 31 July 2004 1:01 AM

To: Committee, Indigenous Affairs (SEN)

Cc: reyburn@mpx.com.au; Organ, Michael (MP)

Subject: Senate Select Cttee on Administration of Indigenous Affairs

TO

Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs

SUBMISSION RE ABOLITION OF ATSIC 2004

Since the referendum in 1967, Aboriginal people have had a 'representative voice' in Federal Governments. Before this change to Australia's Constitution, Aboriginal Australians were denied human rights in their own country, ie, classified as 'flora and fauna'. We must never allow this to happen again!

The abolition of ATSIC, the democratically elected representative body of Indigenous Australians at the federal government level, is a step towards that never-to-be-repeated denial of Indigenous humanity. For an unfathomable reason, the newly-elected Labor Leader announced his intention of abolishing ATSIC should Labor gain Office, delivering a golden opportunity for the Prime Minister to do what he has always wanted to do. Thankfully, the proposed legislation has been referred to your Senate Select Committee, where I trust that good sense and goodwill will prevail.

What's it all about, this abolishing ATSIC? The Government's own Review did not recommend it. Respected Indigenous leaders did not advocate it. It comes out of John Howard's determination to assimilate or destroy Indigenous people.

The old mission days are back. Whitefellas still think Indigenous Australians want to be whitefellas in black skins. And if they don't want to be, they will be dominated, oppressed and controlled and their lives made a misery.

Some Indigenous people complained about nepotism and that ATSIC was doing nothing for them. Nepotism occurs in non-Aboriginal society too, viz. the Packers, Murdochs, Fairfaxes and any other 'big-wig' you can think of.

As for 'doing nothing for them', this could be because:

- available funds were not targeted to those most in need;
- there were not enough funds in the budget to fix all the health, housing, education, employment and other needs identified;
- 70% of ATSIC public servants were non-Indigenous – white people profiting from black money;
- ATSIC received bad and unfair publicity – being accused of 100% of the blame when it was only ever designed to 'top up' state and local programs.

Incidentally, DOCS was not abolished when it was having (and still has) huge problems delivering services to families and children. The NSW State Parliament was not abolished when the hospitals and the trains were having operational crises. Why another rule for blackfellas? When we constantly judge, criticise, review (and

ignore the findings), find fault, change the goalposts, can one blame Indigenous people for being unable to deliver, work, plan, do?

The proposition that change is inevitable is a ruse of the powerful and wealthy to confuse and destabilise the less wealthy and powerful. Aboriginal people can do anything if we let them get on with it, are not constantly breathing down their necks, provide the training and support they ask for (not that we impose) and provide sufficient funds. The miserly dribble of funds that all levels of government allocate to Indigenous issues is contemptible and designed to keep them trapped in the 'cycle of poverty'. Weak Indigenous peoples are less likely to fight for their human, civil and political rights and more likely to be occupied in just surviving, day by day.

Under Lowitja O'Donohue, the first ATSIC Chairwoman from 1990-96, ATSIC

- became involved in the United Nations (which government doesn't like)
- obtained representation on COAG
- was a leader in the Native Title negotiations (1993)
- changed number of Regional Councils from 60 to 35
 - improved representation from smaller centres by adopting ward structure
- recommended 'separation of powers', but not to extent of ATSI.

Ms O'Donohue identified the conflict of interest for Indigenous people in serving two masters, ie, balancing features of cultural strength (family and clan ties) with demands of public office (whitefella structure using taxpayers' money). This tension is not a reason to abolish ATSIC. After all, taxpayers' money going to Aboriginal people is only rent for the theft of their land.

She strongly argues that Aboriginal organisations must have their own secretariat and own staff, not a staff of public servants. Successful boards such as the IBA, Aboriginal Hostels and ILC recruit their own staff and work very well.

Mr Djerrkura, appointed ATSIC Chairman in 1996, died recently at the young age of 54 years – of sadness (my belief). It is important to mention this because his age at his death is representative of the young age at which Aboriginal Australians die compared with their non-Aboriginal contemporaries.

While Mr Djerrkura understood the urgent needs of Aboriginal Australians, he also understood the importance and power of symbols that embody ideals, identity and beliefs and signify change, hope and intent. Without hope and purpose, life is not worthwhile, and this is what many Aboriginal people feel.

In 1990 Robert Tickner, then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, advocated a billion dollar Bicentennial Fund to fix the major Aboriginal 'cycle of poverty' problems. This proposal was rejected by Paul Keating PM. Mr Tickner was on the right track. It's such a small problem – concerning only 2% of our population – so why not just fix it? We could if the will was there. Federal Governments, Labor and Liberal, since 1967 have been remiss in not **dramatically improving** the lives and living conditions, hopes and aspirations of Indigenous Australians, particularly Aboriginal Australians. However, Bob Hawke PM reneged on a promised Treaty in 1988. John Howard PM pretends a modern Aboriginal culture does not exist.

Aboriginal Affairs or Indigenous Affairs needs its own portfolio, not to be tacked onto immigration and multicultural affairs. Immigrants to Australia post-World War II have closer links to the First Fleeters (less than eight generations) than to Aboriginal Australians (more than a thousand generations). Aboriginal Australians did not emigrate to another country to get away from their oppression, suppression and cultural genocide.

The ATSI Review, which cost one million dollars, did not recommend the abolition of ATSI. It emphasised the role of Regional Councils – grassroots sitting and talking about problems, talking to local governments, businesses, others to form alliances. More than 900 Indigenous organisations have ‘moved down the path of’ delivering services that mainstreaming failed to deliver.

Mainstreaming services and programs has never worked for Indigenous people and cannot possibly work. One reason is that health bureaucrats **impose** their ‘white’ ideas and latest medical fads on Indigenous people, without knowing anything about culturally appropriate services. Many have never studied Aboriginal cultural mores or attended an Aboriginal cultural awareness session. Some health professionals are racist and institutional racism exists against Aboriginal people.

We non-Aboriginal Australians all know the value of clean water, effective sewerage and appropriate infrastructure on good health. Do we ensure that all Aboriginal people have these things? No. We worry about diabetes and kidney disease, ignoring the fundamentals of good nutritious food, sanitary conditions and clean water on the primary health of babies and children.

The most obvious reason that mainstreaming Indigenous Affairs won’t work is that government departments are hierarchical, so they are not suited to Aboriginal holistic and communal ways of doing things. Aboriginal Health was mainstreamed in 1996 and there is no improvement in the mortality or morbidity rates for Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal Medical Service model delivers holistic medical services that suit Aboriginal people, but is grossly underfunded. The Aboriginal Legal Service delivers culturally appropriate legal services to Aboriginal people but the Howard government intends to reduce funding to them (when they are crying out for increased funding).

Conservatives argue that Aboriginal expectations (of control over their own lives) have been raised too high by successive ‘politically correct’ governments and authorities. They complain about ‘black armband’ views of history, support Keith Windschuttle in the ‘history wars’, believe the Mabo High Court decision was ‘judicial activism’ and generate fear about ‘Aboriginal societies (being) essentially socialist enclaves’ (Tony Abbott). All of these points can be refuted but the conservatives are currently in power politically.

Does this mean that Political Justice for Indigenous (especially Aboriginal) Peoples is off the agenda while John Howard remains in Government? Will the Howard Government implement the Social Justice package, the third part of the Native Title Act 1993 negotiations? The millions of dollars spent on so many consultations and reviews of Aboriginal issues – only to ignore most of the findings – is a disgrace.

ELSA STORY
30 July 2004

PO Box W.10
Wollongong NSW 2500
Phone: 02 42264215