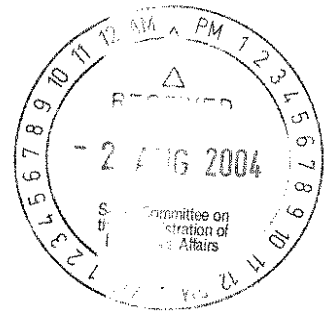


To the Senate Select Committee on Indigenous Affairs
Parliament House,
Canberra.



I write to express my concern at the abolition of ATSIC and the ongoing poor state of health and living conditions in which Aboriginal people find themselves. At a time of record economic growth in this country and despite its claim that "practical reconciliation" is the way forward, our Federal Government shows scant concern for this appalling situation and uses ATSIC as a scapegoat for the lack of progress. This organisation has had problems to be sure, but its removal would do significant harm to the cause of reconciliation as Aboriginal people are feeling they have lost their voice in matters which affect their lives directly.

No one would say that the current situation with Indigenous Affairs is the fault of any one government - these problems have a long history dating back over 200 years and have no easy solution, but to abolish the main umbrella organisation which is there to represent the views of Indigenous people is an extreme step. It is also contrary to the conclusions of the Government's own review committee into these matters which recommended reform rather than abolition.

The proposal to appoint a hand-picked body with no decision making authority is particularly odious, not only to the people concerned but to many in the wider community who have supported Indigenous Australians in their campaigns for their voices to be heard and long for the day when Australia is able to demonstrate progress in the health and wellbeing of its most disadvantaged people.

Indigenous health is currently in crisis, a situation which many commentators believe is due to the failure of mainstream health provision. ATSIC does not have responsibility for primary health care funding. The AMA has estimated that additional funding which is required to achieve equitable health outcomes for indigenous people amounts to the equivalent of about one week's defence spending! Society makes provision for groups with special needs, e.g. disabled people, and it is time that we recognised the very special needs of the first Australians. In recent years, the infant mortality rate and adult life expectancy have been compared with third world statistics and ours are the worst in the developed world!

Aboriginal people have a right to have input on possible ways to make progress in this and other areas which have such a huge impact on their lives. Recommendations from the various inquiries suggest devolving more responsibility to the regions which would bring decision making closer to the grass roots.

While the wider community wants progress in these matters, we must also be ready to be patient and allow time and resources for proper consultation amongst Indigenous people in a manner which is comfortable for them. I therefore call on this Senate Committee to act wisely in accordance with its powers to represent more than narrow interests. Will we ever see the day again when both major parties in government have a bi-partisan policy commitment to ensure just outcomes for our Indigenous people?

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to have my say.

Yours sincerely,

Dorothy Sutherland.

cc. to my local member, the Hon. Petro Georgiou.

28-7-04.