

To **Senator Trish Crossin** - The Chair of the Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs Committee.

Committee – **Senator David Johnston**  
**Aden Ridgeway**  
**Kerry Nettle**  
**Senator Kerry O'Brien**  
**Bill Heffernan**  
**Nigel Scullion**  
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Date 11 July 2004

Dear Senate Select Committee,

Please find attached **Submission** in regard to ATSI and the illegal act of the Australian Government in removing the power of an elected National body of official Commissionaires.

The focus of topic is **Aboriginal cultural importance.**

My Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kay Adlem".

Kay Adlem



Most people will respect an area if there is meaning to the place in which they live. Up until a few months ago my research had a positive feel to it with stories from Aboriginal participants. They spoke openly of ATSIC providing many local Aboriginal organizations with information and funding for a variety of projects. I now see insecurity and confusion spread across the community. It has been absolutely heartbreaking to sit on the side lines and watch the stripping away of ATSIC staff and facilities. The community fear, what comes next!

I would like to begin this submission by telling a story. There was an experiment carried out in the early 1960's called 'flight instinct'. It is a well known story and is used here as a 'metaphor' which relates well to an understanding of why Indigenous run organizations are needed.

### **Wiring the Cage**

They wired the right hand side of a cage with an electrical impulse and placed inside a dog<sup>1</sup>. Each time the dog stepped into the right side of the cage it got a painful shock (*Invasion*). The dog adjusted, avoiding the unpleasantness staying to the left. They then wired the left hand side only and again the dog adjusted (*Being moved from place to place*).

They then wired the whole cage (*Taking the children*). The dog was at first confused, it then panicked. Finally it gave up, laying down accepting the pain, no longer trying to outsmart the onslaught (*Welfare and Missions*). Then the cage door was opened but the dog did not rush out, it lay there still taking the pain. It had adapted to the abusive violence and its healthy instinct to flee had diminished. This was to be known as "learnt helplessness".

We are horrified at this type of experiment today. Yet this explains what has happened to Aboriginal Communities all over Australia. After isolating you from everything you had known, your economic base, your religion, your language and your family the government assimilates you into another culture that does not connect to Country. We see the outcome all around us in alcohol and drug abuse, bad social behaviour and family violence.

- What does the story about 'learnt helplessness' tell us?

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<sup>1</sup> This story is told as a metaphor. I believe humans are first and foremost animal, vegetable and mineral.

- The dog, in this case, is trapped suffering 'learnt helplessness' under complete control of another. What would make the dog come out of the cage after a once healthy instinct to 'fight or flee' had been destroyed?
- Would you come out into the arms of your captive?

This has been the reason behind organizations such as ATSIC: These are organizations elected on a national scale by Aboriginal people and run by Aboriginal people and controlled by Indigenous Communities. This is important on a number of levels.

- (i) ATSIC gives Aboriginal Australia a National voice in an International arena;
- (ii) ATSIC has the ability to unit all Aboriginal Communities through good coordination.

The cultural importance of Land was seen by Earl Grey in 1850 when he put in place an assurance of coexistence with pastoral leases (Goodall, 1996:48-56). Over a century later H.C. Coombs, (1984) mentioned that Government was not allowing enough 'time' for Aboriginal run organizations to settle and adjust to their own set of rules.

When we look at elected Aboriginal organizations, Government is continually moving the goal posts. Take for instance three National Indigenous Organisations.....

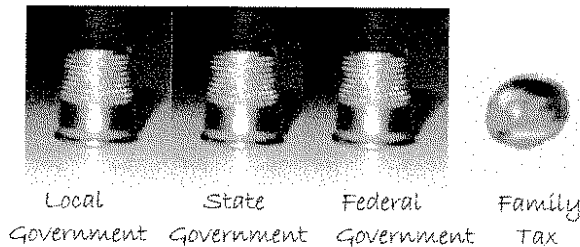
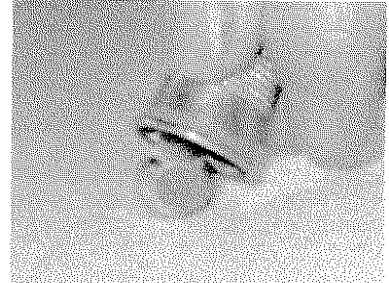
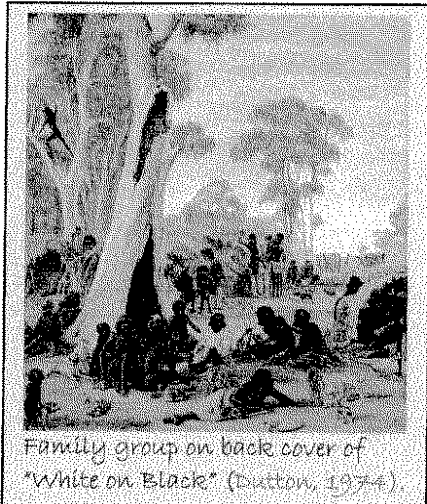
1. the National Aboriginal Consultative Council (NACC) 1973
2. the National Aboriginal Conference (NAC) (Coombs, 1984)
3. the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (ATSIC).

It is a pity that all three are not running together today because.....

- (1a) the NACC was an "implementation" Council
- (2b) the NAC were "advisers" to government
- (3c) ATSIC are "coordinators" with financial responsibilities until 2003.

In the light of recent events to the ATSIC history (Schubert, 2003 – Morris, 2003) the Howard Government has turned the clock back to at least the NAC days. Some people are saying this takes them back 100 years to the days of 'welfare mission mentality'.

Welfare, in short, is known as the ... **"Pea and thimble trick"**... "... giving to people what had previously been taken from them" (Beilharz, 1992:38). It can be seen that the only people who benefit under the welfare scheme are the bureaucracies of government, "...whose interest is to push the family out of its traditional functions" (Encel, 1989:26).



In taking control of ATSIC funding the government advances 'assimilation' and takes away Indigenous self-determination. This further 'robs' Australia of genuine cultural meaning to Country.

A story from the Yolnu Region of Arnhem Land explains "communicational break-down". Assimilation or the 'mainstream' system is seen as 'ineffectual' (Trudgen, 2000:126-132) by the community and they tell a story about the 'River Babies'.

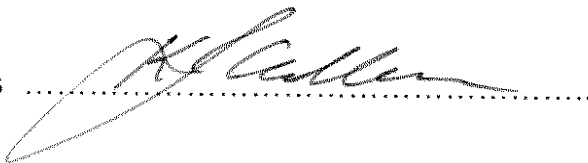
The babies float down the river. They are taken out of the river by the people and looked after by families. Over time more and more babies come down the river. Someone suggested they are orphans and that an orphanage should be built. When the orphanage was built it had to be maintained. People of the village found that they spent all their time dealing with the orphanage, leaving little time for their own interests and families. Through all this no one wondered or questioned what was happening up the river (Trudgen, 2000:214-216)!

## To Conclude

A culture never stands still and Australia needs Aboriginal run organizations for the simple reason of connecting to Country. Recommendation is as follows.....

- (i) Say **NO** to the legislation to abolish ATSIC and continue to encourage the elected representatives as "coordinators" with financial responsibilities. This responsibility may well be shared by Regional Councils and other Indigenous organizations.
- (ii) Bring back an Aboriginal "implementation" Council. This committee to be a 'grass root' operation; consisting of people who are at the 'work face' or 'on-site' or 'in the field'. Possibly Indigenous Regional Councils.
- (iii) Bring back Indigenous "advisers" to government. Possibly "Elders" chosen by Aboriginal Communities. Not Government.
- (iv) Respect cultural tradition at meetings which keep responsibilities grounded. For example tradition tells us that all things eventually crumble and return to Country. We do not have to spend time destroying or bringing people or organizations down. Concentration would be better used building and maintaining what is important to us. This way we form a positive society rather than a re-active and negative society.
- (v) Re-visit some of the "visions" and 'statements' made by Aboriginal People and organizations in the past. For example the Aboriginal Consultative Group sent a report to the School Commission in June 1975 (Aboriginal Consultative Group, 1975:3). This statement stands up well today (Appendix 1 attached).
- (vi) To listen and understand why Aboriginal self-determination is important to everyone.

My Regards .....



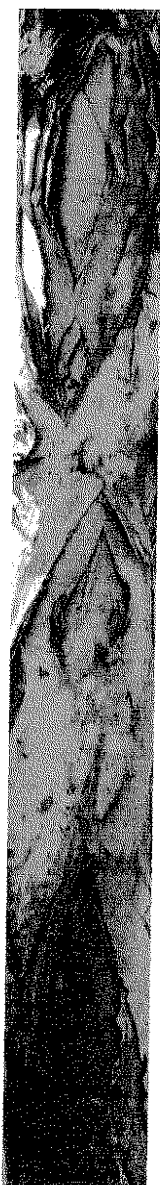
Kay Adlem July 2004

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## Appendix 1

The Aboriginal Consultative Group in June 1975 sent a report to the School Commission. On page 3 of that report 1.2 "Our Vision" it states ....



We see education as the most important strategy for achieving realistic self-determination for the Aboriginal people of Australia. We do not see education as a method of producing an anglicised Aborigine but rather as an instrument for creating an informed community with intellectual and technological skills, in harmony with our own cultural values and identity. We wish to be Aboriginal citizens in a changing Australia.

Education should be a constructive process, building on what a child is and developing his or her natural potential, not destroying and denying his birthright.

It would be a tragedy to destroy one of the last remaining people who do not worship material values. Our vision of education is not compatible with the current education system with its over emphasis on manpower orientated goals that most Australian people know.

We see the need for a change in education for both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, their teachers and their children; to create an Australia where the values and cultures of both people thrive. The process of achieving this will require many major changes in direction for your education. It is also ours, but does not serve us well as it does you; nor do we completely understand it, but at least we are aware of where it most fails us."

(Aboriginal Consultative Group, 1975:3).