



ATSIC

North West Regional Governing Council

Response to Senate Inquiry into the Administration of Indigenous Affairs

1. Introduction

ATSIC Regional Councils are elected for a purpose specific role and function and are elected to represent the needs of Indigenous people in the region.

ATSIC has had many direction changes, most recently with separation of powers in 2003; the ATSIC Review 2003; the announcement of the new arrangements for the administration of Indigenous Affairs and the introduction of the ATSIC amendment Bill.

Of these processes, only the ATSIC Review took a considered approach to consulting Indigenous representatives however the Review recommendations did not factor heavily in government decision making on the new arrangements.

1. ATSIC Amendment Bill

ATSIC needed improvement and updating like any structure. The ATSIC Review consultation process was aimed at addressing weaknesses in ATSIC. The review involved meetings with key stakeholders and regional councils and gathered views through 41 meetings with members of the public, organisations, agencies and individuals.¹

¹ Review of ATSIC page 23

It does not appear that this Review document or any of the recommendations was considered by government in proposing changes to ATSIC through the amendment bill.

The amendment bill has been drafted and introduced without a valid foundation through the participation of Indigenous Australians and therefore lacks validity and should not be passed.

Abolishing the elected arm will remove valuable corporate knowledge from the decision making process for example, IHANT has recently considered the removal of the Commission for the North Zone Northern Territory from the Board. This removes the knowledge of 5 years held by that individual from the Board. This will diminish the capacity of the IHANT Board.

Recent Achievements of Council

Regional Councils could be strengthened, however their achievements are often overlooked. North West Regional has taken an interactive and pro active approach towards engaging and talking with key government agencies providing information and seeking input into policies and the regional plan.

For example, some of the recent activities of this Council are:

- Finalising its regional planning process following extensive consultation.
- Portfolio Groups Meetings to draft policies for Council's consideration.
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- Policy development in all areas which incorporate and link all government agencies working together for community outcomes.
- Advocating for the needs of the people on the ground, for example:
 - Indigenous Women, Child Welfare and Family Violence;
 - Governance issues in Tiwi Islands;
 - Input into Review of *Community Welfare Act*
 - Input into Review of Adult Custodial Services
 - Community controlled Economic Development for the region; and
 - A school for Emu Point community.

Indigenous Voice

NWRGC are elected under a democratic process elected by people living within that specific region. (Regional map attached). This ATSIC election process is voluntary held every three years. NWRGC are concerned about the new proposed indigenous structure being appointed by the Prime Minister. Firstly, in mainstream the process is on people being elected why should Indigenous people have an appointed position?

Women's representation

Council also have concerns for the Women at present we have a Women's Advisory Committee that put recommendations to council in relation to issues across providing a gender balance of view and issues in the region. For

example, the Women's Advisory Committee formulated the Family Violence and Child Welfare Policies which were endorsed by the Regional Council.

2. Mainstreaming services

Government need to clearly set out the relationships and links between Office Indigenous Policy Centre, Urban Indigenous Co-Ordination Centres and Regional Councils. Council is concerned that there is a lack of recognition of Indigenous voice through representatives of Regional Council and is it taken into consideration by government agencies.

There is no evidence that COAG is a success, however it is being promoted as a fact that the COAG model is the solution to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. Council has two major concerns:

- Firstly that there is no evidence to date that COAG can deliver on its objectives, and
- Secondly, that even if COAG is a success in the trial sites, this model is not sustainable across Australia.

Delivery of services through mainstream agencies to remote regional Australia has failed to achieve equitable outcomes in key areas such as health and education. For example the lack of access services, doctors and specialists. The need is even greater for Indigenous Australian in the regional, remote communities. For example low enrolment/attendance in early childhood, snowballing into low literacy and numeracy as adults. If these services have failed in a mainstream context, it is difficult to see how they can improve the outcome for Indigenous communities.

3. Conclusion

This Council does not support the passing of the ATSIC amendment bill. This Council is concerned that the mainstreaming of Indigenous Affairs will not deliver outcomes on the ground.

Lawrence Costa
Chairperson