

Senator Crossin
Chair
Senate Select Committee
Administration of Indigenous Affairs
Via e-mail: indigenous.affairs@aph.gov.au

Thank you for the opportunity to make comments on the issues associated with the “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Amendment Bill 2004.”

The following are some brief comments which I will expand upon in a further written submission early next week.

(a) the provision of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Amendment Bill 2004:

- I strongly disagree with the passing of this bill as I do not believe in the abolishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.
- I believe that ATSIC as an entity, and its Commissioners, Regional Councillors and staff (ATSIC and ATSI) have made considerable impact on the delivery of policies, programs and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over many years – either directly through ATSIC or indirectly through other Australian, State, Territory and Local Governments agencies and private and community sector organisations, groups and individuals.
- ATSIC and its many parts as described above, has assisted in the development of many different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in urban, regional and remote locations and has assisted organisations, groups and individuals.
- Two of the most important things that ATSIC does are: being open to ideas from Indigenous people and treating Aboriginal and Torres Strait people as equal – regardless of their backgrounds and situations.
- The presence of ATSIC is a continual reminder to all Governments, private and community groups and Australians generally that Aboriginal and Torres Strait people are not only the original inhabitants of Australia, but that we still form an integral part of Australian society. It is also a symbol to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that we are considered by governments in Australia as an important part of Australian society.

(b) The proposed administration of Indigenous programs and services by mainstream departments and agencies:

- I do not believe that mainstream departments and agencies at the federal, state, territory, and local level are ready to completely deliver appropriate policies, programs and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at a national, state or local level. I will concede that some mainstream departments and agencies have some programs within their organisations that may be doing a

good job at looking after the needs of specific groups or individuals, but as a whole, they are not yet set up physically, structurally and mentally to take on such an important task at this point in time.

- Some agencies have corporate leaders that advocate strongly for the rights of Indigenous people or for the delivery of our programs, services and policies. However, often this level of interest does not go down through all areas of the department or agency. In addition, these people also are often good at other tasks as well and so are moved on to other mainstream areas. The result is that the agency then starts to revert to its old ways of operation.
- I believe that at this point in time there is still too much competition between the different levels of government and between staff in different agencies on 'who is doing the best for Indigenous people' – which ends up meaning that the Indigenous people miss out.
- I recommend that a more phased and planned move of programs from ATSIC to mainstream would be in the best interest of Indigenous people.

ABOVE VIEWS BASED ON:

I am an Aboriginal woman from Darwin and am a Traditional Owner with responsibilities for land, culture and family. I have worked for thirty years in the Australian or Northern Territory Governments. I have spent about 17 years in mainstream areas and the rest in Indigenous areas. I have had a small business for seven years involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees and clients from the Northern Territory and Australia. I was the first chairperson of Yilli Rreung Regional Council of ATSIC, and have spent many years on mainstream and Indigenous organisation boards and committees. I have watched the operation of ATSIC from the inside (employee about 6 years) and outside (since It stated in the early 90s.)

Lenore Dembski
Paperbark Woman
20.8.04