



**Submission to
the Select Committee on the
Administration of Indigenous Affairs**

This submission was authorised by Ms Anne Turley, CEO,
and written on behalf of Melbourne Citymission by Dr Mary-Ann Robinson.

For further information, contact:

Ms Anne Turley,
Chief Executive Officer,
Ph: (03) 8625 4444

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Introduction

MCM welcomes the attention of the Committee to the administration of Indigenous affairs, as a question of national significance. As an agency that has provided a wide range of services to the community for 150 years, Melbourne Citymission wishes to comment on the proposed administration of Indigenous programs and services by mainstream departments and agencies. Attention to this question demonstrates Melbourne Citymission's interest in the future plans of Indigenous communities and our commitment to offering support to communities as they find solutions to the significant challenges that they face.

About Melbourne Citymission

The primary focus of Melbourne Citymission is to work alongside people who are marginalised, at risk, disadvantaged, frail or denied access to other services. Melbourne Citymission's broader aim is to build an inclusive community through personal and social transformation. We work towards this by providing a range of support services to people across all life stages in order to empower them, enhance their well being and maximise their dignity and human potential. The organisation's broader role includes leadership, in partnership with the community, through research, policy analysis, education, community awareness and advocacy.

Melbourne Citymission assists over 18,000 Victorians each year through programs in the following areas:

- Aged Services
- Children, Youth, Adult and Family Services
- Disability Services
- Palliative Care
- Youth Homelessness Services
- Employment, Education, Training and Support Services

Melbourne Citymission works with people across all life stages, from early childhood to the end of life. The breadth of this work reflects the organisation's interest in life transitions and the ways in which people can best be supported to achieve sustainable transformation in their lives.

While MCM does not deliver services specifically designed for Aboriginal Australians, some Indigenous people do access our services. Comments and observations in this submission are based on our experience.

Poverty and disadvantage

Reviews of poverty or disadvantage in contemporary Australia invariably note that Indigenous Australians remain the most disadvantaged people in Australia (Senate, Report on Poverty and Financial Hardship, 2004:301-322). This has been the case for many years (Henderson, Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1975:258-268). Ill-health, life expectancy and infant mortality continue at unacceptable levels. Similarly, low school retention rates and subsequent high unemployment all fuel significant levels of

dependence on social security. Sustained high rates of incarceration produce extremely negative outcomes for those imprisoned and for their families and communities.

It is a sobering experience to read the Henderson Report chapter on 'Aboriginals', written in 1975, and then to read the Senate Committee's *Report on poverty and financial hardship* chapter on 'Indigenous Australians', written almost 30 years later: While measures and indicators of disadvantage now reveal the situation with greater accuracy and in more detail, there has been little improvement over 30 years, and in some areas things have deteriorated. Such an exercise reveals not only the dimensions of disadvantage but also the failure of existing approaches. Significant resources and sustained efforts at communication are both needed to continue to work with Indigenous communities to find approaches that work.

Significance of self-determination.

Built on the history of dispossession and a failure to recognise the original inhabitants of the land, a series of governments and non-government agencies have made the mistake of making decisions for Indigenous people "for their own good" (Patrick Dodson, *Beyond the Bridges and Sorry*, National Reconciliation Week Address, 25 May 2004). The outcome of such an approach is reflected in the ongoing experience of social and economic deprivation by Indigenous people and is a great source of shame for a developed nation such as Australia.

The history of welfare and service provision by mainstream agencies to Indigenous groups, with few exceptions, reflects an outdated approach that has in the past led to insensitive and damaging practices, however well intentioned. There is a significant risk of repeating these practices if we do not learn from history in this area. Mainstream services are developed and designed for large numbers of people, in a situation where 'one size fits all'. However, service provision operates quite differently in sensitive areas, where people face significant barriers to economic and social participation. In such circumstances, where clients have complex needs and face multiple barriers to participation, mainstream services are rarely effective. Our experience shows us, for instance, that young homeless people facing barriers to participation do not find it useful to access mainstream employment services. Their situation demands a response that is tailored and responsive to their particular needs. Frequently, the issue of housing needs to be addressed before considering employment, training opportunities or some other form of participation that might lead to independence.

Melbourne Citymission's experience as an organisation offering a range of services is that Indigenous people do not access services without first establishing contact through Indigenous networks and community connections. This reflects a justified reluctance to seek assistance or support, based on a history of interventions leading to loss of control over family, relationships, language and culture. Further, we have learned that most effective programs and services are developed through partnerships with community, rather than being simply 'delivered' to individuals. A program that is developed without detailed knowledge of the needs and cultural sensitivities of any group is likely to be poorly received.

Effective assistance therefore requires that Indigenous communities lead the direction and develop the content of programs and services that work in their communities.

ATSIC and formal representation

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission is not a perfect structure and has certainly had difficulties in recent years. However, just as the Victoria Police and the National Australia Bank are undergoing radical review, renewal and improvement, dissatisfaction with ATSIC over time should not be addressed by dissolving the entire organisational structure. Certainly, improvements in both structures and processes should be considered. Any organisation charged with such significant responsibilities should monitor its governance and accountability structures on an ongoing basis.

Against the backdrop of a history of paternalism and various attempts at cultural 'assimilation', ATSIC was eventually established as the 'one small formal voice of indigenous people' (Dodson, 2004). ATSIC remains the sole existing structure for Indigenous Australians to select elected representatives and must be treated with respect for this reason alone. To abolish such a structure, without any reasonable proposed alternative, sends an anti-democratic message to all those Australian citizens who have a special entitlement to elect representatives by virtue of their Indigenous status in this country.

Equality, difference and respect

A simplistic understanding of principles of equality might suggest that each of us should have exactly the same treatment and access to services, provided by government and mainstream services. The provision of services and programs in a population such as Australia, with significant cultural and linguistic diversity, requires a sophisticated appreciation of the need for a range of services – this does not amount to 'special treatment' or unfair access. It amounts to respect for all Australians and recognition of our differing needs.

In conclusion, Melbourne Citymission opposes dismantling the functions and structures of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission where no alternative structure exists. This approach is essentially a negative vision for the development of policy in this area. A more comprehensive proposal is needed before such a move can be contemplated. Any such proposal must include a national Indigenous voice. The form that this takes is essentially a matter for the Indigenous people of this country:

The determining of how an Indigenous voice that represents the views and aspirations of all our peoples is established must be a matter for Indigenous people. We must have available the necessary time and resources to identify the nature of the representation we require and it must be agreed by our people (Dodson, 2004).