

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

**Inquiry into the Administration of Indigenous
Affairs**

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To Whom It May Concern

As a response to what we perceive as the failings of the NSW State Government's Service Delivery Partnership Agreement, signed between ATSIC and NSWALC and the NSW Government 2001, Aboriginal people from the nine communities of the Northern Tablelands of NSW have developed a unique community driven regional governance model that aims to provide greater level of regional autonomy and self-determination for Indigenous people and which will provide the framework for engaging government and non-government organisations.

There is a type of paradox in the way that government deals with the Aboriginal community. On the one hand government increasingly seeks to scale down its public sector responsibilities and form profitable alliances with business and community sectors while on the other hand their dealings with Aboriginal organizations continue to reveal centralist tendencies that resist the concepts of partnership, community and participatory governance. Far from giving Indigenous communities a greater involvement in public-policy making, governments inhibit the drive towards self-determination by making them the subject of bureaucratic program management

Aboriginal people have a long history of seeking strategies for greater self-determination. We have felt that the inter-related nature of our problems stems from the disintegration of our once strong relationships, kinship and consequent codes of practice. These systems represented our way of relating to the world, they provided our healthcare, our knowledge transfer practices, our specialisation for productive activity, our policing framework, our recreational outlets and consequently our cultural and spiritual worldview. The renewal of these structures is the key to the restoration and invigoration of the Aboriginal nations. It is also the key to establishing a model of participatory governance in which the inherent and traditional grass roots structure of Aboriginal communities can be activated as a contemporary structure of management, a platform for self-determination and for public policy making.

With the emerging emphasis on participatory and integrated governance and non-government organizations delivering services previously delivered by government, Aboriginal planning organizations are in a strong position as non-government players to bring relevant knowledge and experience into the policy making process. However,

there remains an entrenched colonialist attitude towards dealing with Aboriginal people.

The media continues to debate the extent and intent of Aboriginal displacement in Australian Colonial history; however, the lived experience for surviving Aboriginal people is still one of alienation and generic displacement. Social services, economic opportunity and independence are ostensibly available, but only as a politically calculated 'gift' to appease the burden of government rather than as an intrinsic right of the traditional landowners or a far-reaching policy towards Aboriginal emancipation.

Policies aimed at resolving the complex nature of the indigenous/colonialist nexus in which Aboriginal people are both part of the body politic of Australian society while maintaining a special status as Indigenous people have had a fragmenting rather than cohesive effect. The incentive structures built into these policies often meant that Aboriginal communities acted in competition with each other for government funding and support.

The fact that certain Aboriginal organizations or communities are, for various reasons, able to tap into Government resources while others are ignored or marginalised naturally creates certain tensions and suspicions within the Aboriginal community. This fragmentation is now one of the crucial issues facing our Aboriginal peoples in their quest for an acceptable level of independence and self-governance. The time is now right to confront these issues as governments increasingly seek more sophisticated approaches to public policy.

International trends suggest that governments can benefit from undertaking a separation of the government's role as both service purchaser and service provider. This can be achieved through a greater reliance on the emergence of community-based governance structures and non-government organisations to articulate and implement policy.

However, at present emergent Aboriginal governance structures continue to find themselves in competition with a far better resourced public sector to be a service provider for Aboriginal communities. This lack of support prevents the strengthening of Aboriginal governance and the positive flow-on this will have in Aboriginal civil society. While Governments profess to be experimenting with new ways to provide policy with an emphasis on participatory governance there is program-focused reluctance to share power in relation to Aboriginal issues.

The Aboriginal community is constantly told of the need to build Aboriginal capacity before we can do anything for ourselves. However, our experience is that our own capacity building strategies are continually negated by a patriarchal "mission-management" mentality that purports to know what is best for us while at the same time robbing us of our own potential to more fully participate in society. Recent investigations into the practices of NSWALC and ATSIC demonstrate the stifling scrutiny that Indigenous organizations are put under and show little or no awareness of how Aboriginal communities actually operate and why they operate the way they do.

In response to this problem, this paper will describe in some detail an Aboriginal governance initiative that seeks to achieve sustainable outcomes for Aboriginal people. This is not a remote and isolated community but rather an integrated network of communities implementing a regional planning initiative that has emerged in response to the trend for regionalism, as a governance structure, in contemporary Australia.

The pilot regional planning approach being undertaken on the Northern Tablelands of NSW is based on agreement among the Region's Aboriginal Elders that a greater level of cooperation between Aboriginal communities and a stronger alliance between the organizations that represent Aboriginal people will promote their capacity to determine their own future.

Under the auspices of the Regional Elders representative working groups, the region's nine Aboriginal communities are engaged in a process of broad consultation resulting in the signing of a 'statement of cooperation' and establishment of the Northern Tablelands Aboriginal Communities Planning Forum.

The significance of this first phase is in building trust and working collaboratively to find new ways of doing business. The Forum's nine communities spread across a vast tract of land from Armidale to Tenterfield and Inverell to Dorrigo. Historically, relations have been strained between these communities and government policy, by promoting competition for funding, has often inflamed these tensions. The first positive outcome of the Forum was the recognition that the future demands an integrated and cooperative planning and development strategy.

Aboriginal Communities across the Northern Tablelands are currently at varying levels in terms of development and planning for the future. A coordinated approach is being developed to maximize the resources available to the region's Aboriginal organizations and to provide greater parity in resource provision and capacity building tools. Beyond fundamental services the communities seek the means to develop a culture for self-reliance, self-determination and empowerment. The organizational processes of the Northern Tablelands Aboriginal Communities Planning Forum is seen to be a vital step in building capacity to further develop this culture. In the first instance it provides a grass roots democratic organizational structure that is highly representative and provides a strong negotiating capability.

The emphasis on developing priority issues from 'the ground up' is purposeful to target the specific requirements for development in each Community. The intention being to link these concerns using an integrated regional planning approach. Allowing Aboriginal people to work in a way we understand and live the issues fosters our capacity to develop our own strategies regarding a broad range of issues. In developing such an approach it will be ensured that Aboriginal Communities have access to the necessary skills and expertise to allow them to engage fully with the Process. With time the structure and enhanced level of cooperation this regional planning process provides will facilitate and support a range of potential in these Communities. These will include the identification, development and funding of a

broad range of integrated projects aimed at Aboriginal people's locally identified concerns and secondly to further enhance Aboriginal people's capacity to negotiate with a range of area based management frameworks.

There is a great need for continuity to provide the building blocks for a more empowered Aboriginal civil society. This process requires ongoing resourcing, something that is difficult to achieve within the framework of program focused funding. In Aboriginal communities concerns are interlinked and this situation is not compatible with a program focus that only seeks to target specific issues.

The planning and governance model

The planning and governance model is unique in that it represents a departure from top-down administrative paradigms and does not reflect the authoritative decision-making structure dominant in our society. It separates itself from the type of overarching structures that have historically dominated and oppressed Indigenous people. The model is cyclic in structure. The origin and initial drive is instigated by the Elders of the region who have customarily taken responsibility for social order in our communities. By symbolically 'coming together' through the formation of a Regional Elders Council and promoting a spirit of cooperation the Elders endorsement of the planning model sets the cycle in motion.

The second component of the process sees the establishment of a Regional Aboriginal Communities Working Forum. Here any interested parties from the nine communities come together for dialogue and information sessions and clarification on the general direction, strategy and proposed outcomes. These meetings are our tribal council where we discuss our concerns. Representativeness is determined by the collective. This is an Aboriginal way of doing business.

The third component sees the setting-up of Local Working Forums in each of the nine communities. It is at this local community level that priority issues and concerns are established and documented. These will be local issues such as employment initiatives, language programs, youth resources, environmental strategies and problems with schools. Designated representatives then take part in a broader process of consultation at the level of Regional Working Forums. Localised issues are analysed and interpreted in a regional context so that areas of common concern can be identified and responded to in a coordinated and mutually beneficial way. For example, if several communities expressed concern about the progress or treatment of Aboriginal students then the Forum could negotiate directly with the Dept. of Education on behalf of the communities. At this regional level there is the potential to pool and share resources and develop holistic policy and programs for shared issues such as education, environment, employment and business opportunities.

Consultation at this regional level among working forum members will lead to the development and evolution of a local and regional planning policy. This planning

process will creatively link priority issues and will be strategically designed to enter efficiently and effectively into negotiations with governments and industry.

High-level negotiation requires good resources and developed skills and in this respect the Forum is supported by a small core group of professionals who work for the Forum as the Aboriginal Research Foundation. This group, under the direction of the Forum, prepares background papers for negotiation, writes policy briefs and generally assists local areas with the implementation of regional strategy. This is an expert referral point and clearinghouse for professional input.

There is a project focus to funding arrangements. Organisations collaborate to get projects funded with the support and endorsement of all organizations in the region. The process of issue identification and project conceptualization leads to the emergence of the project team to work on the issues. In this way communication channels are developed and strategies and objectives are agreed. This is the approach being developed by Catchment Management Authorities at the regional scale. DIPNAR have provided their resources to support this activity. The Catchment Management Authorities have specialist people financially supported to facilitate this activity. Currently the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services is providing this funding to the Northern tablelands Aboriginal Communities Forum. This funding needs to be supported by other Government organizations.

By acting strategically at a regional level, Aboriginal communities will possess greater political impact. By representing a greater number of constituents and providing a stronger group of negotiators than isolated individual communities, a regional forum will be in a better position to establish regional agreements and partnerships. The potential exists to further democratize and link this type of strategy to a broad array of concerns faced by Aboriginal communities. However, we must be 'enabled' to nurture appropriate structures to respond to these emerging regional frameworks and structures. What is required is a change in thinking away from program management and to the support of emergent regional governance. The Northern Tablelands Aboriginal Communities Planning Forum represents an Aboriginal way of doing business that is both supported and informed by contemporary national and international trends in public policy.

Tom Briggs