

SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS by The Hon Peter Howson.

This submission is based on my long experience with policy on Aboriginal issues. That experience included my membership of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Committee in 1961 that recommended votes for the Aborigines for Federal elections; my position as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the McMahon government in 1971; and my continued involvement since then in developing policy on such issues that has included visits to Aboriginal communities and the publication of numerous articles based on conclusions drawn from analyses of the situation of Aborigines. The articles include two published in *Quadrant* in 2004, one in June giving reasons for my support of the decision to abolish ATSIC and to abandon any idea of an elected body representing Aborigines; and the second in November on the announcement by Minister Vanstone at the Bennelong Society conference last year that sit-down money would cease to be provided. I am forwarding copies of these two articles by separate mail as part of this statement. Finally, I am vice president of the Bennelong Society whose objects include "to influence public opinion so that prospects for amelioration of the present appalling plight of many contemporary Aboriginal people are improved."

In support of the abolition of ATSIC, I submit five reasons. First, the concept of a having an elected body not answerable to the federal parliament but completely funded by it is contrary to the principles of responsible government. It was also based on the totally romantic idea that Aborigines would eventually establish a separate State within Australia, a development that would never be accepted by most Australians and that would be contrary to the interests of Aborigines themselves. Secondly, the fact that less than 30 percent of eligible Aborigines has chosen to vote in ATSIC elections clearly shows that its policies have failed to establish support amongst most Aborigines themselves over the 15 years it has operated. The report by the ATSIC Review Committee confirmed that. Third, given the continued evidence of the poor life styles being led amongst the 100,000 or so Aborigines living in remote communities, it is clear that ATSIC policies have failed in practice to help lift Aborigines. Fourth, it appears that a significant proportion of the funding supplied to ATSIC has been used in ways designed more to attract votes than to meet Aboriginal needs: one egregious example was the money allocated by Commissioner Robinson to Charleville compared with that going to Cunnamulla. Fifth, there have been many failed enterprises, of which the handing over of cattle stations in the Pilbara, which are now non-producers, is but one example.

The important question now is how to implement the mainstreaming of service delivery.

It is worth quoting the historic policy change announced by Minister Vanstone on 3 September 2004, viz:

'welfare dependency is to become a thing of the past'.

This effectively signals the end of 30 years of separatism and sit-down money. The policy initiated by the Whitlam government in 1974 and for 30 years has caused complete misery and suffering to the indigenous people in the north of Australia.

This decision raises a major issue in regard to the extent to which services continue to be provided to remote communities by Commonwealth and State government departments. The problem was identified by two important reports that were issued in 2004. The first was the Productivity Commission, which showed that the degree of disadvantage and suffering by Aboriginal communities increases with their degree of remoteness. Secondly, a paper by Yvonne Helps of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, which shows that the degree of preventable mortality, and occurrences such as suicide, homicide, and road accidents, is also higher the greater the remoteness of the community.

I remind the committee that when I last addressed it a year and a half ago I drew attention to a paper by Dr Bob Birrell of Monash University, published on 18 August 2002. Using the results of the census of 2001, that paper showed there was a great gulf between the 300,000, or 73% of indigenous people who lived in the cities and the rural towns, and the 100,000 living in the remote and very remote parts of Australia. Policies in regard to the latter group of Aborigines require radical change.

Let me briefly outline the situation of these 100,000 people. For instance in the Northern Territory outside Darwin and Alice Springs, there are 40,000 people in 55 communities with more than 300 people each but 870 small communities with an average of less than 50 people. The question that arises is the extent to which attempts should be made to continue to provide services to these small communities in particular. The alternative is to encourage their residents to move.

My visit to the Northern Territory and the Kimberley in July 2004 confirmed my view that, when people are educated and had skills sufficient to get jobs, that increases their chances of obtaining employment and improving their standards of living. But I saw far too many who were unemployed and too dependent on sit-down money, leading to degrees of domestic violence and degradation worse than anything found in any third world countries. The education problem is highlighted by the high truancy rates in, for example, Arnhem Land (73%) and in the Kimberley (more than 50%).

There are also considerable difficulties in finding employment in areas where there are no effective labour markets. In 1971 there were cottage industries and most indigenous people had some form of employment: but it is doubtful that such conditions can be revived today.

Amendments to the Northern Territory Land Rights Act to allow individual leasehold of land and homes, as suggested by Claire Martin on 23 December, would help those Aborigines prepared to start small enterprises.

I submit that what the new mainstream delivery policy needs to recognise most of all is that the needs of the 300,000 Aborigines in the cities and rural towns in places such as New South Wales and Victoria are quite different to those of the 100,000 in the remote communities. The residents of the latter have for too long suffered from the separatist policy adopted after 1974, accompanied by the scourge of sit-down money, and our task is to give them the opportunity and encouragement to escape from the life style from which they are still suffering.

Senator Vanstone has provided an opportunity now to rescue them from their misery and that is that task this committee should now address.

February 2005