

**Steering Committee for the
Review of Government
Service Provision**

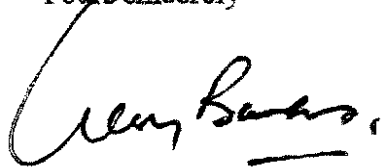
24 February 2005

Mr Jonathan Curtis
Secretary
Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs
S1 107
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Curtis

Attached please find my response to the questions upon notice that were forwarded by Ms Alison Kelly on behalf of the Committee on 22 February.

Yours sincerely



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Chair

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Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs

Questions on notice

1. Would it be fair to say, as a broad summary of the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, Key Indicators 2003 Report*, that the government service provision has failed Indigenous Australians? If there are some areas which you would be reluctant to include in that statement, or some areas that you consider have performed better than others, are you able to discern what factor of the service delivery, from which departments, has contributed to any level of success?

The 2003 Report affirmed the widespread disadvantage among Indigenous people in Australia. The reporting against the 12 headline indicators confirm that disadvantage is broadly based, with major disparities between Indigenous and other Australians in most areas. Reporting in the seven strategic areas for action also confirmed that disadvantage is endemic and of long standing.

The Report on *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* has a framework which focuses on high level outcomes that are amenable to change due to policy actions undertaken by a number of government agencies. But the Report does not address service delivery as such and, therefore, it is not possible to comment on individual outputs. It was, however, possible to discern slight improvements in the apparent retention rates for secondary school Indigenous students, and a moderate improvement in juvenile detention rates. Both indicators nevertheless show significant gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous rates.

2. Are you familiar with the 2003-2004 State of the Service Report, which found that the proportion of the public service that is Indigenous is at a ten-year low? That, in fact, the engagement rates of Indigenous APS employees has decreased and the separation rate has increased over the last 10 years?

The Committee was told, in response to concerns with these figures, that actually, there were different ways of reading the report; that the percentage of Indigenous APS employees who are in senior positions has increased from (I think the figures were) .7% to .9%; and that the main reason for the reduction in Indigenous APS employees was because of the abolition of APS level 1 & 2 level jobs.

From your experience in economic and social research, is the statistic of "percentage of Indigenous employees who are in senior positions" misleading in these circumstances? What, if anything, could this statistic actually tell us?

In my capacity as Chairman of the Steering Committee, I generally do not comment on the performance of individual jurisdictions including the Australian Government. That said, the secretariat has looked at the analysis of the Indigenous employment in *the State of the Service Report 2003-04*, and it is our view that it is consistent with the data provided. We cannot, however, comment on the interpretation in respect of the senior positions as we don't know the basis of these calculations and how they were arrived at.

3. Are you familiar with the Shared Responsibility Agreements already announced by the government? I'm thinking of the agreement in Mulan, WA, according to which the government provides two petrol bowsers and the community washes children's faces with the intention of reducing trachoma. As a social researcher, how would you say this kind of agreement could be evaluated? What concerns, if any, do you have about the effectiveness and/or evaluation of Shared Responsibility Agreements?

We have not been party to the development of the Shared Responsibility Agreements and do not feel able to speculate about an appropriate model of evaluation. It would probably be reasonable to posit, however, that if such an agreement has been arrived at in collaboration with the community concerned then the monitoring and evaluation process would also involve community engagement and assent.

Outside of the Shared Responsibility Agreements, where there has been collaboration, the measures have sometimes been highly innovative and effective. For example, the 'no school, no pool' program has been voluntarily implemented in a number of country towns with the involvement of community leaders. The outcomes extend beyond improving school attendance. The results from one study show that the health of the children improved in each place where a community pool program was introduced, with a reduction in the prevalence of skin and ear problems.

4. In the *Key Indicators 2003 Report* is a copy of a letter dated 3 May 2002 from the Prime Minister John Howard. Are you aware of what COAG have done with the 2003 *Key Indicators Report*? Have there been any changes made in COAG trials, for example in the way governments are fulfilling their roles in the partnerships as a result of the report? Are you aware of how the COAG trials are being evaluated and when we can expect the evaluations to be available?

As we explained to the Committee during our attendance on 18 February, we understand from what we have been told informally, that some State/Territory governments have adopted the framework for whole-of-government reporting and are looking at how the framework might be applied in some of the COAG trial sites.

We have no information about how the COAG trials are being evaluated or when any evaluations will be available. Clearly, however, such evaluation will be critical to our ability to learn from this important exercise.

In addition there were some general questions that the Committee wanted to put on notice, which are listed below.

1. Under the new administrative arrangements, the Government has given assurances that a high level of transparency and accountability will be required by mainstream departments delivering Indigenous-specific services.
 - a. What are the benchmarks against which you believe service delivery should be monitored?

Given the diversity of the Indigenous population in terms of its geographic distribution and other factors (such as cultural, social and economic) there may be a variety of benchmarks that would be appropriate. For example – non-Indigenous to Indigenous, urban to rural remote, region to region, and mainstream to Indigenous specific. It might also in given circumstances be appropriate to benchmark against international standards.

There may also be the opportunity to be more creative about the approach to benchmarking. For example, picking up from my earlier comment, some of the initiatives that have been most successful for Indigenous people are those that have been developed through collaboration between service providers and Indigenous communities.

- b. Who should conduct the monitoring?

We have no view on this, other than to observe that a degree of independence from the service provider is often desirable.

- c. What is the role of the Australian Bureau of Statistics in providing overall information on Indigenous Communities?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics is the major provider of national information on the Indigenous population.

The role of the ABS in undertaking the Census and Indigenous surveys is a critical one in providing key information on Indigenous people, particularly in rural and remote communities. By including an Indigenous identifier in its general surveys, the information base has also been improved (although as is the case with administrative collections the information by region cannot always be used).

In respect of Indigenous communities, the administrative collections are not well placed to provide information at that level, and even when data are available, the numbers are often too small to be able to publish.

The lack (or reliability) of data collections remains a problem in some key areas – not only those for which the ABS is responsible. This is an issue that does require greater concentration and which we will continue to highlight in forthcoming reports.

2. Could the Indigenous Compendium on Government Service Delivery be a future reporting mechanism?

The Indigenous compendium includes data that already appear in the annual Report on Government Services. Apart from Housing, the data all relate to mainstream services. The indicators have been developed to assess the (comparative) performance of governments in these service areas, against common objectives.

- a. What are the strengths and limitations of the Productivity Commissions measures?

The Report on Government Services is the product of the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. The Productivity Commission provides the Chair and Secretariat while Australia's nine governments are the stakeholders. That is one of its major strengths – that the measures contained in the Report have national agreement against an agreed set of objectives for each area that is reported.

The national focus of the Report could also (from some perspectives) be seen as one of its limitations in that it tends not to report on areas where common data are not available – or where there are not similar services.

- b. Does this report ask Indigenous people themselves on their satisfaction with Government Service delivery to their communities?

The Steering Committee's Report encompasses performance reporting on the delivery of services to all Australian people along with some special needs groups – Indigenous people, people from a non-English speaking

background, and people living in communities outside the capital cities. While some chapters of the Report draw on customer satisfaction surveys to reflect the quality of services, to date, they have not been used widely.