

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE
ADMINISTRATION OF INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

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Reconciliation Australia

**Statement by Jackie Huggins, Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia, to the
Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs
18 February 2005**

I thank the committee for the opportunity to make this statement and apologise for not being able to present it in person.

I have worked in and around Indigenous affairs for some time now, some days it feels like a very long time. Of course, as an Indigenous woman I don't have much choice. It's an absolute privilege for me to be able to work with and for my people to try and build a better future for all of those who follow us.

You don't get much time to sit and think in this business and that's a real pity because I know that when we've had time for considered thought in the past we have managed to achieve a great deal. The last couple of years have given people who are passionate about a better future for Indigenous people very little time to reflect, consider and respond appropriately. Change is fine – as long as it makes sense and isn't change for the sake of it or even worse change for purely political reasons that bear little relevance to the daily lives of my people. It feels like we've seen too much of the latter in recent months.

There is a continual cry from whitefellas that we need to educate them about racism and our existence in this country – this is a good thing, but I get tired of explaining how racism affects us. I find myself on a regular basis educating non-Indigenous people – continually having to rebut ridiculous myths. But it is quite another matter to ask me to explain the history of racism, which is essentially the colonisers' history – a history that I don't own. Why set up the "victim" to explain the injustices of that history to the people who have perpetrated it in the first place?

That being said, a major contribution to the recent debate that has led to the formation of this committee was the ATSI Review which I presided over with John Hannaford and Bob Collins. I've copped a bit of flack from a whole lot of places about my role in the review and its outcomes. It was a very difficult decision for me to agree to join the review team, in fact I initially said no - twice. There were many reasons for me finally accepting the job.

Joining the review afforded me the opportunity as an Aboriginal woman to participate and contribute to something vital in shaping the future of Indigenous affairs. It was important to have a woman and an Indigenous person represented on the panel. I consulted with a few mentors who advised me to have a go at it. The stated bipartisan nature of the review was also an attraction and I guess I was the balancer on the panel. There was nothing more important at this point in history than to investigate the direction in which ATSIC was heading. I had never worked for ATSIC so I hoped I could maintain impartiality and objectivity. I came with no baggage and left with none either.

If I think about my career over time this was certainly one of the great landmarks - like being a member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and on the board of Reconciliation Australia, a Commissioner on the Stolen Generations Inquiry and founding and running the Department of Aboriginal Affairs Women's Unit in 1985. I have always hesitated before accepting appointments so that I might think through more clearly what value my involvement might add. I will never regret doing the review as I learnt so much about the operations of ATSIC, and other government and non-government organisations. Of course the highlight was the extraordinary characters we met and their efforts to deal with injustice in all its forms.

There were some important messages in the findings of the review that are relevant to the deliberations of this committee. I would particularly like to direct the committee's attention to the sections of the report that refer to the widespread support for further investigation of regional models of governance, our discussion of the dangers of mainstreaming and the critical importance of a nationally elected representative voice.

That last point is a critical one - brave, legitimate, responsible leadership at all levels is essential for success in our struggle. It has been a delight for me to part of the planning, conduct and now the follow-up of the Indigenous Leaders Meeting held in Adelaide in June 2004. With the help of the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre and Reconciliation Australia, this work offers hope that, with time, a suitable process and structures for national Indigenous leadership will be found.

The 200 voices we heard in Adelaide, and the many more since, were united in the desire for a legitimate, Indigenous designed and owned national representative voice - not one that is driven by non-Indigenous political maneuvering. I know that the outcomes of the Adelaide meeting have already been communicated to this committee but I think they are important enough to repeat here. The fact that we got 200 blackfellas in a room for four days and we all agreed on a shared set of principles is pretty remarkable. The principles as agreed at the meeting are:

1. We the Indigenous People of Australia and we alone have the right to determine who represents us locally, regionally, nationally & internationally.
2. We are determined to establish a sustainable independent National Indigenous Representative Body that reflects the aspirations and values of our peoples.
3. The National Indigenous Representative Body needs to gain its legitimacy from our people.
4. Any process to establish a National Indigenous Representative Body must acknowledge who we are, honour our diversity and commit to inclusive processes for all our people.
5. Our National Indigenous Representative Body must be open, transparent and accountable to the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples.
6. We respect and are committed to the right of our peoples to make free and informed choices for them, their families and communities.
7. We have an obligation to respect and protect our right to self-determination, our human rights, our humanity, our First Peoples' status and our inherent rights that flow from that status.
8. We have a duty to pursue social justice & economic development for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
9. Our duty is to leave a lasting legacy for our grandchildren's grandchildren.

I would also like to draw the committee's attention to the one point in the report of the ATSIC Review where I made a recommendation which was not supported by my colleagues, Mr Hannaford and Mr Collins. The recommendation reflected a belief I hold very strongly that Indigenous women must be represented at all levels of leadership and that this imperative must be enabled with the creation of designated positions throughout any future representative structure.

Men and women have always shared responsibility in Aboriginal society, and if women are not supported in leadership roles today and in the future, our communities have no chance of becoming viable.

In closing, I'd like to make a few broad remarks about the impact of all of these processes on Indigenous people. Inquiries such as this one and the ATSIC Review are western models devised for western ideologies and solutions. They seldom reach the guts and emotion of the matter. In this case they can't even scratch the surface of what is going on in Aboriginal peoples' lives, the despair,

death, trauma, sadness, sickness etc. To appear before this committee would offer me little consolation if we can all guess what the outcome will be. It's like doing an exam and we know we are bound to fail every single question.

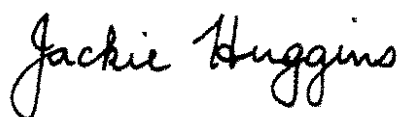
I say this not as criticism but by way of introduction to my one essential bid to you.

I ask you to consider and to promote the following point to your parties and to the bureaucracy who will implement the post-ATSIC changes in the administration of Indigenous Affairs: Indigenous Australians are engaged now in an historic process of determining the structures they want and need to represent them to make their communities healthy.

Do not expect it to fit within a western model of process or timing. If it is to work, if it is to provide some guidance on the leadership our people so desperately need, the process must be conducted on our terms.

This committee, having heard what you have, must support us in this in whatever ways you can.

Many people have said to me that this Inquiry will achieve nothing. I make this statement today, which is very personal, on the basis that the Senators involved are elected representatives of the Australian people and that they will have the integrity to make their work, and the words of all those who have made submissions, count for something.



Jackie Huggins
Co-Chair, Reconciliation Australia