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Submission to Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs

Dear Senators,

This is my personal submission. I am an elected councilor of Moyne Shire in South-West Victoria and I chair the council's Reconciliation Committee, which has as its majority membership base the local Aboriginal communities.

As some one who believes strongly in the principle of political representation I am appalled that both the government and the Labor Opposition have joined forces to abolish the democratically elected political voice of Indigenous peoples - the Board of Commissioners of the Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander commission.

It seems that our Government has no qualms about sending troops overseas to install a western concept of democracy in Iraq yet uses its armory of resources to abolish a democratically elected body in our own country. On top of this the Government has misled the Australian public on both these matters. I am a journalist of 30 years experience and the campaign waged against ATSIC has been one of the most sustained and misleading that I have witnessed.

ATSIC daily was blamed for all manner of disadvantage afflicting Indigenous people, when the blame should have been leveled at state, territory and commonwealth governments. ATSIC is not responsible for health, education or employment. These areas are responsibilities of government and it is government that has failed Indigenous people.

What concerns me is that with the abolition of ATSIC there will be less scrutiny on governments to ensure that programs and services are indeed making a positive difference in the lives of Aboriginal families.

More important, as a local councilor, I understand the need for communities to be driving policy development. These integral part of public policy development has been abolished. I fail to see how this can be viewed in any way as a positive development.

In my area, there are two organizations which have been wholly dependent on ATSIC funding to run programs and essential services. These two organisations are:

- Framlingham Aboriginal Trust
- Worn Gundidj Cooperative

I am concerned that under the new arrangements they will not be worse off. I have also a sense of alarm that local government may be required to provide municipal services to the Framlingham Aboriginal Trust. I can tell you from a local government perspective we know very little about providing services to Aboriginal communities.

Moyne Shire and its predecessor Warrnambool Shire have not been providers of services to the Framlingham Aboriginal Trust. Historically, the Shire has been happy to let the Commonwealth fund for a level of service to be delivered by the local Aboriginal community at Framlingham.

From my own experience as a local government councilor, we as a shire council are only beginning to open our eyes to a whole new world.

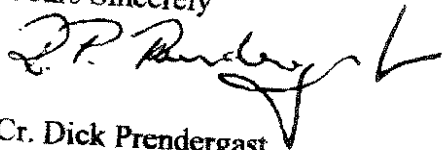
When I visit Framlingham Aboriginal Trust, I see a community which receives funding to provide and maintain municipal services (water supply, sewerage farm, roads, parks and gardens, garbage, dog health program) and a community housing program. Not only does the Framlingham Aboriginal Trust provide these services, it also of necessity provides at its own cost, employment support, legal services, drug counseling, family support, police liaison, individual counselling, conflict resolution, land management, and financial counselling.

On any measure this is a community which does much more than what it receives funding to do. If we were to use the 'mutual obligation' scale, what Framlingham achieves would shame government at many levels.

In relation to Worn Gundidj, which is the community development employment program organization for South-West Victoria, I have similar concerns. This organization provides employment support to half a dozen Aboriginal communities. There are particular needs and cultural sensitivities that need to be taken into account when dealing with long-term unemployed or under employed Aborigines. Worn Gundidj does a magnificent job with scarce resources in trying to provide opportunities to break people out of welfare dependencies. How can this work be done under mainstream policy agendas which have not delivered to date to Aboriginal communities.

As I learn more about Indigenous communities I have no doubt that all levels of government should be doing much more to support communities in their endeavours to improve life opportunities for their members. It does not appear to me that the abolition of ATSIC and mainstreaming of services will deliver these improvements.

Yours Sincerely



Cr. Dick Prendergast