

**From:** J. David Hall [mailto:mldhall@ozemail.com.au]  
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**To:** Committee, Indigenous Affairs (SEN)  
**Subject:** Senate Inquiry on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs

## **E-mail Submission to Senate Inquiry on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs**

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this Inquiry. I am not an expert, but have extensive experience in public administration and the perspectives of indigenous communities. My involvement extends over thirty years, initially working directly with indigenous groups and individuals in North Queensland, then policy development and program administration in Canberra and Melbourne. Roles with the Social Welfare Commission, the Royal Commission into Australian Government Administration and as a Commissioner for the National Inquiry Concerning the Human Rights of People with Mental Illness gave me additional insights into factors of particular relevance for indigenous people.

The first observation is that efficient and effective administration of Indigenous Affairs must recognise the diversity of indigenous perspectives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have different cultures and histories; and there are as many variations within their communities as between non-indigenous Australians. From my experience, lip-service is paid to this fundamental fact but program administration is still too often based on broad generalisations and stereotyping.

Secondly, it is also easy to nod our collective heads at the well-documented need for different approaches to consultation with indigenous communities than typically are used by Governments and their administrative agencies. 'Mainstream Australia' is uncomfortable with the exhaustive deliberation that comes naturally to indigenous communities. 'Consensus' for non-indigenous Australia is a power play—whoever has the strongest coalition of voices 'wins'. I came to see that this is anathema to Aboriginal groups. Indigenous 'opinion leaders' must be given time to move their communities with them.

Related to this, may I urge that the Committee seek the input of Richard Trudgen, author of the book *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die*, which presents many valuable insights? I will not attempt a summary of his masterful analysis of 'the cultural/ language divide' that has beset many well-intentioned policies and programs for indigenous people, based on his experience with the Yolnu people of Arnhem Land.

Finally, though it may seem quaint, I believe that the 1976 Report of the Royal Commission into Australian Government Administration is still relevant. The statements of principles and 'best-practice' (though not yet a buzz-term in those days) of the RCAGA stand the test of time. The report of the Commission's Task Force on Regional Administration may be especially pertinent.

I trust that these brief comments will contribute to your Inquiry, at least to the extent of demonstrating the ongoing interest of someone who was once intimately involved in the matters you are investigating afresh!

Yours sincerely

David Hall

70 Scott Street

Beaumaris 3193

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