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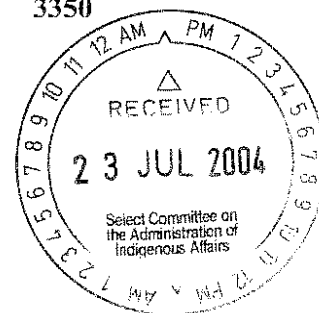
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20 July, 2004.

The Secretary  
Senate Select Committee on the  
Administration of Indigenous Affairs  
Parliament House Canberra 2600



Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments to the Committee's Inquiry on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Amendment Bill 2004 and proposed related changes to the administration of Commonwealth Indigenous Affairs policy.

In reducing Indigenous involvement to an advisory role, the Government will effectively remove the right of Indigenous people to meaningful involvement in decision-making affecting their lives and communities. The wholesale return to mainstream-focused service delivery will be a backward step to a failed paternalistic approach to Indigenous affairs. Indigenous people are poorly served by mainstream services and there will remain the need for Indigenous-specific services controlled by Indigenous people themselves

These changes also contradict the Government's own review of ATSIC which endorsed the need for national elected Indigenous representation, and greater control at a regional level.

The rights of representation and determination of their own affairs have been shown to be critical factors in improving the well-being of Indigenous Australians. Outcomes are significantly better where there is full and effective Indigenous involvement in decision-making, strong Indigenous organisations and governance, and appropriate cultural recognition within both Indigenous and non-Indigenous institutions.

Indigenous Australians have endorsed the need for a National Indigenous Representative Body which reflects their values and aspirations, and which is open, transparent and accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This body should have primary roles in representation and advocacy, be the principal source of Indigenous policy advice to government, and have control over the provision of Indigenous-specific services.

Finally, any replacement for ATSIC must be determined in consultation and negotiation with Indigenous stakeholders, on the basis of their informed consent. The Committee's report should provide strong endorsement of this principle.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Susan Sheridan