



**SADIE U STEVENS OAM
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**The Secretary
Senate Select Committee on the
Administration of Indigenous Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra 2600**

Dear Sir/Madam

I respectfully provide input to the Committee's Inquiry on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Amendment Bill 2004 and the proposed related changes to the administration of Commonwealth Indigenous Affairs policy. The deferment of this Amendment Bill to allow time for a Select Committee Inquiry into Administration of Indigenous Affairs is an important step in the process of reconciliation and healing.

In any review of the social health of Indigenous Australians there is an unacceptable difference compared to the remainder of the population in the percentage of clients accessing programs of good health, wellbeing and preventative services. The Indigenous Australians are over represented among the clients using acute health care, juvenile justice services and child protection. Indigenous families are more likely to be economically disadvantaged with much lower median incomes. The outcomes for Indigenous Australians quality of life and opportunity have improved far too slowly.

To acknowledge this does not provide grounds for the regressive paternalistic approach foreshadowed in the Amendment Bill. Practical measures are needed to address the disadvantages experienced in health, education, employment, housing and opportunity. But improvements in practical measures without a strong symbolic recognition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the First People of Australia will achieve little.

Indigenous Australians require practical measures and strong symbolic recognition; a partnership approach with government in addressing their needs; and recognition of the right to their own beliefs, values and cultures. The current Amendment Bill and related changes should not be approved for the following reasons:

- Australia has obligations under International law to respect and protect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples right to self-determination, human rights, and First People's status. The current bill and related changes will breach these rights.**
- The current Bill dismantles the elected representative structure for Indigenous people and violates their right to determine who represents them locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.**

- **The current bill and proposed administrative structures reduces Indigenous people's involvement to an advisory role and thereby effectively removes meaningful involvement in decision making affecting their lives and communities.**
- **The right of representation and decision making in their own affairs has been shown to be critical factors in improving the well-being of Indigenous Australians. Overseas experience supports the critical factors, as the most important in developing successful economic and social development of Indigenous communities.**
- **Indigenous Australians have endorsed the need for a National Indigenous Representative Body. It must be sustainable and independent. Reflect the aspirations and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. Be accountable to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The structure of this Body should be achieved by negotiation with Indigenous people and should only be determined on the basis of their informed consent.**
- **Current programs that are performing well should continue to be funded whilst a New National Indigenous Representative Body is formed.**
- **Lack of accountability from government mainstream departments and agencies as well as ATSIC in the delivery of services to Indigenous people has been identified as a significant impediment to improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians. To mainstream all services would be a backward step. The new model should include rigorous monitoring frameworks and the ability and training of Indigenous people to exercise such accountability.**
- **To encourage a broad base of representation in the processes of the new National Indigenous Representative Body training and support in the skills of governance, communication and accountability should be available to communities.**
- **The establishment of a new Body will require the provision of resources and assets. The current assets of ATSIC must be preserved for transfer to the new Body.**

Yours sincerely



Sadie Ursula Stevens OAM