

29th July 2004

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

Dear Sir/Madam,

I would like to make a submission to the Committee's Inquiry on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Amendment Bill 2004 and the proposed changes to the administration of Commonwealth Indigenous Affairs Policy.

Central to Australia's commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be the principle of self-determination. These are our First People and they must have the right to determine the policies and practices which then impact on their communities. Central to this right is the ability of Indigenous people to determine who represents them locally, regionally, nationally and internationally – that is they must be represented by an Indigenous body that Indigenous people vote in not a Government picked advisory body. Also this body must have the power to make and implement decisions as the ability to determine their own affairs is crucial to improving the well-being of Indigenous Australians. Outcomes of interventions are significantly better where there is full and effective Indigenous involvement in decision-making and where the decisions are implemented by well resourced Indigenous organisations.

The current bill and proposed administrative arrangements will deny these rights and will effectively remove the right of Indigenous people to meaningful involvement in decision-making affecting their lives and communities. These changes also contradict The Federal Government's own review of ATSIC which recommended a restructuring of the organisation with greater emphasis on Indigenous decision-making at a regional level. It also runs counter to overseas evidence on the importance of self-determination in addressing Indigenous disadvantage.

Indigenous Australians see the need for a National Indigenous Representative Body which reflects their values and aspirations and which is open, accountable and transparent to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This body would advise Government on Indigenous Policy and have control over the provision of Indigenous specific services. The need for Indigenous specific services which are culturally appropriate to the differing needs of Indigenous communities across Australia is critical to the well-being of Indigenous Australians. These services would work in partnership with mainstream services to provide comprehensive services to Indigenous communities. Mainstream services must be culturally sensitive in provision of services and be accountable to Indigenous specific services when they are providing services to Indigenous people.

Any replacement for ATSIC must be determined by full consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and must be governed by the obligation to respect the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-determination.

I have just had the pleasure of reading the ATSIC NEWS June 2004 issue which is full of discussion of the importance of Indigenous people having a voice and of Indigenous people having control over delivery of services to Indigenous people. It is also full of examples of successful projects which are really inspiring and informative for our local community.

When the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation existed it produced an excellent newsletter about reconciliation issues and about projects advancing reconciliation that were occurring across Australia. Since CAR ended and this publication stopped there has been a loss of direction in the progress towards reconciliation even though other bodies have supposedly taken on this focus.

The abolition of ATSIC will mean the end of ATSIC NEWS and the end of one national body writing a publication about issues affecting Indigenous people and about Australia wide projects which are working effectively with and for Indigenous people. This is a HUGE loss.

Yours sincerely,

Lyn Bevington
Community Development worker