

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

Ms Libby Gott
50 Hillside Rd
Rosanna 3084
Victoria

29th July 2004

Dear Committee Members,

I write to you in regards to the Government's draft legislation to abolish ATSIC, and the subsequent proposed changes to the future administration of Commonwealth Indigenous affairs policy.

I sincerely appreciate having the opportunity and privilege to provide input into the Select Committee's inquiry. As a non-Indigenous Australian, I am deeply saddened by the injustices prevalent within this country - particularly the vast disparities in education, health and welfare between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples - and the lack of understanding and respect shown towards the traditional owners of this land. I write to you with the knowledge that many Australians do not have the resources, time or ability to individually submit their thoughts and opinions on this issue either because they have little understanding, or they are simply intimidated by the process.

The Australian Government first and foremost has an obligation to respect and protect the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to self-determination under their status as First Peoples'. In the context of a Commonwealth governing body for Indigenous Australians this includes the right to choose representatives, the right to meaningful involvement in decision-making affecting their lives and communities, and the right to the provision of services that accommodate Indigenous people. These protocols are central to addressing the current discrimination faced by Indigenous Australians and in preserving their right to determine and maintain their political and cultural identities. The latter is especially important as too often in Australia "Indigenous" peoples are regarded as 'one' group under the same umbrella, rather than many distinct cultures. I must reiterate to the Committee that Indigenous Australia comprises more than 400 traditional owners, with over 200 distinct languages. This diversity should never be underestimated, nor overlooked. By mainstreaming services to such groups will undermine that which makes them unique. More rather it must be celebrated and promoted so that its preservation is secured for future generations.

ATSIC was not a recent phenomenon; it had previously come in the form of many guises that have constantly been reinvented to suit the government of the period. The lack of accountability of such bodies in the past has enabled these governments to scapegoat institutions such as ATSIC as being solely responsible for the failure to improve outcomes for Indigenous Australians - even though the majority (85%) of Indigenous expenditure has always been controlled by mainstream departments and agencies. It is now time for the replacing representative body of Indigenous Australians to encapsulate the *needs* of Indigenous peoples, rather than the wishes of those with legislative power.

These needs include:

- The right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to determine who represents Indigenous Australians locally, regionally, and nationally.
- The right to enhanced localised and regional autonomy, where representatives work directly with Indigenous communities to advise at the national level, ensuring that the chain of accountability stems from the ground - up.
- The right to a fair and accountable governing body that will not be compromised for a political agenda.
- The right to be an inclusive, independent and sustainable structure that is more than merely an advisory role.

Of course the details of such a model and structure are matters for negotiation with Indigenous communities and should only be determined on the basis of their informed endorsement. I hope that the Select Committee agrees and heeds these principles when informing Government.

Yours Truly,

Libby Gott