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Mountains Outreach Community Service Inc.



13th November 2002

The Secretariat
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee
Room S1.61, Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senate and Legal Constitutional Committee members,

RE: Inquiry on progress towards national reconciliation, including the adequacy and effectiveness of the Commonwealth's response to, and implementation of, the recommendations contained in various documents.

This submission is prepared by Lyn Bevington, Community Development Worker. I have worked to progress reconciliation in the Blue Mountains since 1997. During the time that the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was in existence this work was greatly supported by their newsletter and other publications, by the leadership CAR provided and by the media profile on reconciliation that they achieved. My work in supporting reconciliation has been much more difficult under the approach of the current Federal government as there has been a vacuum of leadership, resources and encouragement.

In the Blue Mountains we see reconciliation as an opportunity for us all to work together on a process that acknowledges our history and the injustices committed, and assists us to remove impediments to indigenous justice. This opportunity is not being realised by the current Government's approach to reconciliation.

Attached are further comments.

Yours sincerely,

Lyn Bevington
Community Development Worker

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National leadership and bipartisan support is now lacking

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) received unanimous cross-party support as well as being adequately resourced and its functions being mandated by Parliament. These factors contributed enormously to the success of its work and none of these conditions now operate. There is no longer a formal process of reconciliation with mandated objectives and there has been a massive reduction in funds for the reconciliation process. This has meant that the reconciliation process no longer has the national leadership, profile and impact that it had under CAR. In the Blue Mountains there is a great deal of goodwill around reconciliation and a large degree of frustration about the lack of leadership now being shown. There has been a failure by the Government to capitalise on the goodwill generated during the ten year term of CAR.

Commonwealth's actions have encouraged community division

The approach the Federal Government has taken in the last six years has frequently placed it in direct conflict with the long-held aspirations of indigenous leaders and communities, particularly regarding recognition of indigenous rights and cultures and the addressing of past injustices. The Federal Government's position is in fact in conflict with the Documents of Reconciliation produced by CAR. These Documents had been developed through extensive consultation with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and show the goals of the people with regard to reconciliation. The *Bringing Them Home Report* recommended a national apology which has been actively opposed by the Prime Minister even though an apology has been made by every state and territory parliament in Australia.

Indigenous Australians and all Australians who support reconciliation want comprehensive, negotiated approaches which incorporate social justice and cultural rights in recognising indigenous disadvantage. The Government's 'Practical Reconciliation' is an assimilationist approach which does not allow for recognition of cultural difference. Recognition of difference, the internationally accepted standard of 'substantive equality' is necessary for genuine reconciliation and justice for Indigenous Australians. This 'Practical Reconciliation' approach has not had significant impact in the lives of Blue Mountains Aboriginal population. In fact, there is a general feeling of being abandoned by the Federal Government and not supported or resourced. In particular, the refusal to apologise has had a very negative impact on the local community.

The Federal Government has actively opposed the right of self-determination for Indigenous peoples and the Government has promoted racially discriminatory attitudes and policies towards native title.

Government's Formal response to CAR's Final Report

This has been very inadequate with most of the recommendations being given no substantive response. The Government has provided no detailed program of implementation for reconciliation as set out in the CAR Final Report. As this Report had been drawn from 10 year's of extensive consultation it should have been the blueprint for Government action. This failure to develop long term strategies and monitoring of the reconciliation process has meant that much of the good work achieved by CAR has not been built on or has been undermined.

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