



National Community and Social Services Sector Joint Statement Indigenous Affairs in Australia – at a critical junction

ACOSS Info 365 – 3 October 2004

We, the undersigned community and social services sector organisations, believe the future for Indigenous peoples in Australia is at a critical junction.

Both major political parties plan significant changes in the way Indigenous affairs are to be administered. The Australian Liberal Party is planning to disband the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and mainstream many community and social services. The Australian Labor Party has outlined a new national and regional representative structure and improved accountability for the delivery of services.

We acknowledge that ATSIC required reform, but believe that disbanding ATSIC prior to the formation of a new representative regional and national body is not the solution. Indeed it will mean that progress in supporting and promoting the health and wellbeing, education and living standards of Indigenous peoples, and broader community wellbeing and capacity, will be significantly restricted.

It is critical that future policies embody principles essential to the Reconciliation process, as these are the basis to achieving real progress for Indigenous people in terms of better health, education, work opportunities, housing and cultural identity.

Any changes to ATSIC need to be determined in consultation and negotiation with Indigenous peoples. An inclusive and transparent process should be developed to establish a sustainable, independent national representative Indigenous body. This process must recognise the diversity and traditional authority structures of Indigenous groups and communities, and allow the time required to achieve this. There are no short cuts to this step.

ACOSS INFO 365— ISBN 085871 552 X — ISSN 1442 486 X
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Indigenous Australians must determine future structures and processes for the administration of their own affairs. Australia is a signatory to international human rights treaties and conventions that demand this. We have a responsibility under the United Nations' *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) and *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) to promote and support the social, economic and cultural development of all Indigenous peoples and communities. Both *ICESCR* and *ICCPR*, affirm the fundamental importance of the right of self-determination of all peoples. Any revised Indigenous representative structure must support Indigenous peoples' self-determination.

As community and social service sector organisations, we do not support the mainstreaming of Indigenous controlled services. Programs designed to support and promote the wellbeing of any groups in society are most effective when those groups have a voice in how those programs are developed and delivered. This needs to occur for both Indigenous controlled and non-Indigenous services. Mainstreaming Indigenous controlled services has inherent dangers and has been found to have failed to protect and promote the health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples by both the Productivity Commission¹ and the Commonwealth Grants Commission².

The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in health, education, employment and housing is not changing and in some areas is worse – these are areas for which services are already mainstreamed. The statistics below tell the hard truth of the failure of mainstream services for Indigenous Australians:

- Life expectancy for Indigenous males is 56 years – 21 years lower than for non-Indigenous males, and for Indigenous females, 63 years – 20 years lower than for non-Indigenous females.³
- Indigenous infants are around 4 times more likely to die before their first birthday⁴ and 5 times more likely to succumb to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome⁵.
- Indigenous students are half as likely as non-Indigenous students to continue to year 12⁶.
- Unemployment is 2.8 times higher among Indigenous people compared with non-Indigenous people⁷.
- Suicide rates for Indigenous people are nearly three times that of other Australians⁸.
- Hospital separation rates for assault are more than 13 times greater for Indigenous Australians compared with non-Indigenous people⁹.
- Indigenous people are 15 times more likely than non-Indigenous people to be in prison¹⁰.

For too long, Australian Federal, State and Territory Governments have not done enough to overcome these gaps. They have merely worked to 'manage' them. Improved accountability for the services provided to Indigenous peoples and communities by both mainstream and Indigenous controlled organisations is required.

The current and previous Federal Governments have controlled much of the spending on Indigenous policies in these areas. It is the Federal Government, rather than Indigenous administrators, who have failed to produce good outcomes. ATSIC has administered 15% of the Indigenous community and social services budget, but has received 85% of the blame failure in these areas.

Indigenous issues in Australia are at a defining moment. We call on the major parties to commit to and deliver on:

- Demonstrating strong leadership to help Australia find its path to Reconciliation,
- Implementing an inclusive and transparent process to establish a sustainable, independent national representative Indigenous body, and
- Reinstating and strengthening Indigenous controlled organisations and service delivery functions,
- Ensuring all government departments, agencies and service delivery organisations are accountable for the delivery of services to Indigenous peoples.

As a community, we should embrace a future in which Indigenous culture can enrich Australian society and Indigenous peoples can fairly share in Australia's resources.

Signed:

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Andrew McCallum	President	Australian Council of Social Service
Patricia Byrne	Federal President	Australian Education Union
Jill Iliffe	Federal Secretary	Australian Nursing Federation
Tony Nicholson	Executive Director	Brotherhood of St Laurence
John Wilson	Acting CEO	Brotherhood of St Laurence
Adam Wright	Board Chairman	CAN - <i>Country AIDS Network (Victoria) Inc</i>
Maria Bohan	Executive Director	Carers Victoria
Peter Whiting	Chair	Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace
Susan Campell	Acting CEO	Catholic Social Services Victoria
Charles Balnaves and Sherry Balcombe	CoChairs	Catholics for Australian Reconciliation
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Cath Smith	CEO	Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS)
Julie Hansen	President	Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA)
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¹ Productivity Commission, 2003, Report on Government Services 2003 – Indigenous Compendium, Melbourne: Commonwealth of Australia, <http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp>

² Commonwealth Grants Commission, 2001, Report on Indigenous Funding 2001, Commonwealth of Australia.

³ ABS 2002, Australian Social Trends 2002: Health – Mortality and Morbidity: Mortality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, ABS Canberra

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Read, A. 2002 What are the national rates for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants? in Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health 2002 38:2 p 122

⁶ ACOSS 2003, Paper 133: Blueprint for a fairer Australia, ACOSS Sydney

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid