



What comes after ATSIC?

Effective alliances with Indigenous Australians

Reconciliation has been pushed off the government agenda, Indigenous health continues to disintegrate, and Indigenous representation and self-determination has been undermined. We have a government that is racist, assimilationist and paternalistic in its approach to Indigenous affairs.

It is up to non-Indigenous people to create the conditions in which Indigenous morale, self esteem, health, and wealth can be re-built by Indigenous people themselves. This workshop will look at what we as individuals, members of our communities, workplaces and organisations can do to address racism and take meaningful steps towards creating a just society in which indigenous peoples rights are and their status as first peoples is acknowledged and valued. The majority of the population of Australia, the 98%, have to do something. The 2% can't do anything if our foot is still on their neck.

At the end of this paper are listed a number of papers written by Indigenous and other people that are relevant to our central concerns to find a way forward via individual and collective acts, towards an Australia that can be proud of our relationships with the 'First Nation' peoples on this continent.

It is also central to our argument that nothing more needs to be said about what needs to be done. Aboriginal people and others have been telling us for at least a hundred years what they want, and what has to be done.

What is lacking is not knowledge, but activity. This workshop will be about participants working out what they can do in their spheres of influence.

A great deal of background information can be found in any of the web sites and articles listed at the end of this paper. There are many more, including over 100 Indigenous sites – search for Mick or Patrick Dodson for example.

Following is some background information on the current situation of Indigenous people in Australia.

Did you know?

- Aboriginal peoples have inhabited Australia for approximately 60 000 years.
- At 30 years per generation, a non-Indigenous person who has been in Australia for less than 100 years will have 3 generations, on average, an Indigenous person will have 2000.
- A referendum allowed the Federal government to make laws for the benefit of Indigenous people in 1967. Prior to this, Indigenous people were not counted in the federal census and were instead controlled in each state and territory under a different act such as the flora and fauna act of NSW.
- 30% of Indigenous people live in urban areas, compared to 67% of the non-Indigenous population. Over 26% of Indigenous people live in remote or very remote areas, compared to only 2% of the non-Indigenous population living in rural areas. (HREOC: 2004)

Indigenous Disadvantage

Australian governments have failed to deliver real outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Indigenous people continue to be the most disadvantaged in Australia despite Howard's "Practical Reconciliation" policy.

Health and mortality

- The life-expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is 20 years. This gap increased over the period 1997-2001. In the USA and New Zealand, the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous is 5–7 years.
- About 45% of deaths among Indigenous males, and 34% of deaths among Indigenous females, occur before age 45. The corresponding proportions for other Australian males and females were 10% and 6%, respectively. Most Indigenous males (76%) and Indigenous females (65%) die before age 65.

- Indigenous infant mortality rates are 2.5 times that of other Australian infants and are almost twice as high as those of the NZ and US Indigenous populations. Indigenous babies are also twice as likely to have low birth weight, with little improvement since 1991.
- Death from Preventable Conditions - Diabetes: 8 times higher; Respiratory conditions: 4 times higher; and Circulatory conditions: 3 times higher.
- Chronic Disease - Heart disease: 3 times higher; Respiratory conditions: 9-11 times higher; and Kidney disease: 9 times higher.
- 93% of children in remote communities suffer hearing damage from middle ear infections. (HREOC)

Poor Education

Indigenous Australians are not 'keeping up' with the rest of Australia. The proportion of the Indigenous population with post-secondary qualifications and the proportion of Indigenous teenagers staying at school is far less than the non-Indigenous population. Only 33% of Indigenous children complete schooling.

Overcrowding and other housing issues, remoteness of communities, access to the internet and other facilities, the preference to stay close to family and health problems all effect a young Indigenous person's ability and desire to continue with formal education. (CAEPR)

Unemployment

The official unemployment rate is 20% for Indigenous Australians, but 41% if including the people participating in the Community Development Employment Projects (Indigenous 'work for the dole' scheme), compared to 5-6% for the entire Australian labour force. (HREOC: 2004; Democrats:2004)

The Justice System

Since the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody very little has changed and is actually getting worse. A national strategy for implementing the recommendations of the commission is still needed.

Indigenous adults are 15 times more likely to be imprisoned, and make up 20% of the prison population (Source HREOC). Young Indigenous people make up 4% of the overall population and 43% of all juvenile detainees. They are incarcerated at a rate that is 19 times higher than non-Indigenous juveniles. Indigenous women are the fastest growing prison demographic, representing half of the female prison population. They are over-policed for minor offences and suffer from under-policing as victims of violence.

Access to well-funded and culturally appropriate legal services is seen as crucial in dealing with the accused and the victims of crime. The government push to mainstream Aboriginal legal services will undermine this.

Housing

There is a significant disparity between the living conditions and health status of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and those of other Australians.

According to 1996 Census data, 6.2 per cent of Indigenous households include more than one family, compared with 1.1 per cent of other Australian households. Overcrowding leads to faster deterioration of housing and exacerbates environmental health problems. 64 per cent of Indigenous households are in rental accommodation, compared with the overall Australian rate of 24 per cent.

Indigenous average household size, as shown in Census results, has decreased to 3.7 persons per dwelling in 1996, compared with 4.6 persons per dwelling in 1991. However, the overall Australian household size in 1996 was 2.7 persons per dwelling. According to 1996 Census figures, an additional 34,527 bedrooms were needed to adequately house Indigenous people compared with a shortfall of 35,205 bedrooms in 1991. However, Australia's Indigenous population increased by 33 per cent between 1991 and 1996.

There is a direct link between poor health and unsatisfactory housing and housing related infrastructure. In many areas where substandard housing exists, contaminated drinking and washing water, poor sanitation and unsafe housing are major factors associated with preventable illness and high morbidity rates. (ATSIC briefing paper on housing 2001).

The Stolen Generations and the need for a national apology

From the outset of non-Indigenous occupation of Australia, governments have carried out or sanctioned the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, particularly so-called 'half-caste' children. These 'stolen' children were raised in institutions or fostered out to white families. In most cases they were completely cut off from any contact with their families and culture, under policies of 'assimilation' intended to erase their Aboriginality. Many found themselves used as cheap labour or servants, or subject to abuse by the institutions charged with their care.

In May 1995 the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families was established. The Inquiry's final report, [Bringing Them Home](#), concluded that in the period from 1910 to 1970, when the practice was at its peak, between 10 and 30 per cent of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities. No family was unaffected. Yet the non-Indigenous community has been largely ignorant of this history and the trauma it caused. The needs of its victims and their families remained unaddressed. (ANTaR)

Hundreds of thousands of Australians have signed 'Sorry' books, over 200 000 people walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000 for reconciliation and both the Senate, and the Opposition apologised for past wrongs. The Government has adamantly refused to apologise, labeling the recognition of past injustices as a 'black-arm band' view of history.

Stolen wages

For decades governments throughout Australia literally stole or misappropriated the money of Aboriginal people who were under their care and protection. The sums run to hundreds of millions of dollars.

The monies stolen include wages earned for forced or indentured labour, or other monies due to Indigenous people such as child endowment payments. This was possible because governments directly controlled Aboriginal wages and entitlements.

Indigenous affairs has historically been the responsibility of state governments (except in the Northern Territory where the Commonwealth took over responsibility from 1911 until 1978) and different laws and administrative arrangements pertained to Aboriginal people depending where they lived.

This has meant that the exact nature and extent of monies stolen or misappropriated varied depending on the state or territory involved. However, such practices occurred throughout Australia.

Currently there are active campaigns on the stolen wages issue in Queensland and NSW, however work is also underway to research and address the issues in other states and territories. (ANTaR)

Treaty – long overdue but not too late

A treaty between Indigenous peoples and Australia could have recognised and protected Indigenous rights and led to a just constitutional basis for the Australian Federation. Instead, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were completely overlooked as relevant parties in the formation of the Australian Federation.

It's important to realise that a national treaty does not stop Indigenous communities and other local, regional, state and territory stakeholders from signing treaties with each other at those levels.

Canada, USA and New Zealand all have treaties with Indigenous peoples and it is time for Australia to reach for the same recognition of partnership.

A properly negotiated binding treaty will deliver –

- agreed standards;
- a framework for settling relationships between Indigenous peoples and governments at local, regional, state, territory and federal levels;
- legal recognition including constitutional recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have inherent rights which must inform all processes of governments in Australia; and
- improved services such as health, housing, education and employment in accordance with the legitimate aspirations of Indigenous peoples. (Treaty Now)

Where to for self-determination?

In 2003 Howard split ATSIC into the elected arm (ATSIC) and the funding arm (ATSIS – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services). This left the elected arm, ATSIC, with no decision-making responsibility for the provision of services.

The Government introduced the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Amendment Bill 2004 [2005] to legislate for the complete abolition of ATSIC. This legislation was passed on March 16, 2005, but the Government, with the support of the Opposition, had already passed a raft of regulations (they do not require legislative change), which have stripped ATSIC of its funding, and many of its responsibilities. The government's opinion is that the ATSIC model was a failure, and therefore self-determination is also a failure.

These decisions were made with no consultation, and after the Government had even crippled ATSIC's ability to participate in the Senate Select Inquiry into Indigenous Affairs. The government has also failed to propose a model for an Indigenous elected representative body and instead formed a government appointed advisory board, called the National Indigenous Council, who will be listened to when it suits the government.

There are no specific proposals from the government about how the proposed systems will actually work, how the decision-making and responsibility will be shared between communities and the institutions the government creates.

The government policy direction now is to 'mainstream' specialist services that were run by and for Indigenous Australians. The money for these programs will be folded into mainstream Australian government agencies. The specialist organisational and cultural knowledge developed will be lost. (Senate Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs: 2005).'

Think about what YOU can DO

Start by thinking about what your sphere of influence is and what are you actually able to do. For example: combat myths and prejudices on a personal level, in your family, among friends, community, start a local reconciliation group, write letters, support an organisation that is working in your area or on an issue you support.

References, further reading and some campaign web sites

- Tony Cutcliffe, 2004, Take it or leave it; How COAG is failing Shepparton's Aboriginal people, The Eureka Project, Melbourne www.eurekaoz.com
- Altman, J & Hunter, B, 2003, Monitoring practical reconciliation: Evidence from the reconciliation decade, 1991-2001, [Background Paper for the Cranlana Symposium 'Articulating a Reconciled Australia' 4-5 September 2003], Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra
- <http://www.gtcentre.unsw.edu.au/Larissa-paper.doc>
- <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/indexb.html>
- <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/rsrch/smnrs/papers/dodson.htm>
- Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs Report – *After ATSIC -Life in the mainstream?* 8th March 2005
- N. Biddle, B.H. Hunter, and R.G. Schwab , *Mapping Indigenous Education Participation*, DISCUSSION PAPER No. 267/2004, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU <http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/>
- HREOC Reports, A Statistical overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, Jan 30, 2004; and *The Native Title Report 2004* April 8, 2005. <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/>
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Issues Briefing papers - <http://www.atsic.gov.au>
- Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation – www.antar.org.au [especially see the "Health Rights Campaign" link] and ANTaR Victoria: <http://www.antarvictoria.org.au/> or phone (03) 9419 3613
- Reconciliation Australia – www.reconciliation.org.au
- Your Voice - <http://www.yourvoice.org.au/>
- The Greens – http://www.kerrynettle.org.au/300_campaigns_sub.php?deptItemID=40
- The Democrats – http://www.democrats.org.au/campaigns/Indigenous_affairs_and_reconciliation/
- 'Rebutting the Myths', by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (note that most of the statistics are from the 1990's) <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/parliamentary/rebutting/RTMDONE.RTF>
- Treaty Now Campaign website – <http://www.treatynow.org>

Good hunting and we look forward to a vigorous discussion regarding what we will actually do over the next 12 months to change Australia.

Written by Melanie Gillbank, Now We The People, and Frank Hytten, convenor of ANTaR Victoria, for the conference '**Advance Australia Fair – Building sustainability, justice and peace**' 30-31 July 2005 For more information about the conference, how to register, this particular workshop and the Now We The People network, please visit www.nowwethepeople.org.

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