

2 August 2004

Mr Jonathan Curtis
The Secretary
Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs
S1 107
Parliament House
Canberra 2600

Dear Mr Curtis

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's Inquiry on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs.

I write as the Chairperson of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, SNAICC, the national non-government peak body representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (A&TSI) children and families.

General Comments

SNAICC disagrees with the abolition of A&TSIC without the establishment of replacement national and regional elected A&TSI bodies to guide government policy, program development and expenditure for A&TSI people, and represent and speak for A&TSI people regionally, nationally and internationally.

Australia has an obligation to protect the right of A&TSI people to self-determination. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we must have the right to determine who represents us and speaks on our behalf. Beyond the issue of rights however the health, development and well being of our children, who represent the future of A&TSI communities, will not be advanced by the mainstreaming of ATSI services and the abolition of ATSI.

Central to the argument to abolish ATSI is the assumption that this will necessarily generate better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from mainstream government departments. SNAICC is not convinced that this is the case. This argument seems to be based on two assumptions. Firstly that mainstream government departments are currently under performing in their responsibility towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and secondly that performance will be improved by abolishing ATSI. SNAICC

agrees with the first part of the argument – that mainstream government departments are under performing – but not the second.

In our view it must be understood that as a supplementary program provider ATSI has not had the lead responsibility for delivering better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in areas such as health, education and child and family welfare.

Preschool education, child care, children's services, child protection, family counseling and family support are all key areas for which ATSI has never had any significant funding responsibility. In all these areas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children depend entirely on mainstream government departments, Commonwealth, State, Territory and local, for support and assistance. In all these areas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are less likely than other Australian children to receive the developmental, preventative and crisis intervention support they need.

This type of systemic failure has little to do with ATSI and will not be overcome by abolishing ATSI. In our view proponents of the case for abolishing ATSI have failed to demonstrate how doing so will improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. As such SNAICC cannot support ATSI being abolished.

SNAICC 's concerns about the impact on children of the abolition of ATSI and ATSI focus on **service delivery, cultural initiatives and national policy and planning.**

Service delivery.

As noted above mainstream departments have a poor record on meeting the needs of A&TSI children and families who are, for example, seven times more likely to be removed from their families for child protection reasons than other Australian children. To provide only one example of current service delivery deficiencies, there are too few childcare services to meet community needs and many of those that are operating are too narrowly focussed. The A&TSI community has a relatively high and increasing proportion of children and young people, and child care and other early childhood services have enormous potential to address a range of family and community issues and support the healthy development of A&TSI children.

An expansion of the number and operation of the range of Commonwealth funded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's services such as Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) Playgroups, JET Creches, and resource agencies is urgently needed. Currently Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are up to four times less likely to have access to a Commonwealth funded childcare service or program than a non-Aboriginal child.

SNAICC could provide evidence of similar inequitable access by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to other major programs of the Department of Family and Community Services and other Commonwealth Departments. Calls from SNAICC for the expansion of services and programs have largely gone unheeded by the Department of Family and Community Services. The importance of child care and early childhood services to A&TSI children's development is simply not sufficiently recognised by public servants and politicians running mainstream programs.

Cultural initiatives.

SNAICC recently published a statement of its policy priorities *7 Priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families* (attached). You will note that this is headed by a call for a national apology for the Stolen Generations. This heads our list of priorities because of our view that acknowledgement of past injustices and the building of pride in identity, family and culture promote healing and build health, optimism, resilience and care for self and others; the cornerstone of bringing up happy, healthy children. Funding for symbolic and cultural initiatives is essential to the effectiveness of direct service delivery funding.

Funding for cultural initiatives for A&TSI children has rested with ATSIS in the past rather than the Department of Family and Community Services. Cultural initiatives which are an integral part of Indigenous community life across the country include annual NAIDOC week activities. Each year NAIDOC and other children's activities funded through ATSIS and ATSIC form part of the cultural life of A&TSI communities. SNAICC for example is funded each year to produce the National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day poster (2004 poster attached), for which there is now no source of funding.

These programs and activities build pride and confidence within communities, provide opportunities for self expression and create a positive media focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There is building concern in the community that these initiatives will be lost in the mainstreaming of service delivery because they won't fit neatly into any particular mainstream funding program. These concerns need to be immediately acknowledged and addressed by the provision of clear information about what funding source these initiatives will have in the future and what the process will be for applying for this funding.

National policy and planning.

Planning for the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families is currently inadequately thought-through, ad hoc and uncoordinated. The needs of children cut across the silos of government departments and are best considered in a holistic and integrated manner. Currently there are no mechanisms which bring together all the relevant stakeholders from the government and non-government sectors to focus on the needs of our children.

Better planning and co-ordination in response to the needs of A&TSI children and families is needed within and between portfolios, between the different levels of government and between the government and non-government sectors. The non-government sector, (NGO sector), and Indigenous communities and agencies require appropriate input into policy development and program planning because they hold information and ideas which will add value to the process.

Since the establishment of ATSIC successive Commonwealth Governments have tended to utilise the advice and experience of national bodies such as SNAICC on an adhoc basis. In our experience Commonwealth Departments are often uncertain about the role organisations such as SNAICC and other national bodies can play within policy formulation and program delivery. This uncertainty has included in what circumstances they should seek advice from ATSIC or from SNAICC or from a combination of organisations.

The strength of community based organisations such as SNAICC is our direct connection to communities, families and children. The strength of ATSIC has been its direct connection to Commonwealth and other governmental policy forums including COAG. Unfortunately SNAICC has encountered barriers in seeking to bring these two strengths together.

SNAICC sees ATSIC, or an alternative nationally elected A&TSI representative body, as an equal partner in a wholehearted national approach to improving policy, planning and co-ordination for investment in the futures of A&TSI children.

Elements of this approach should include:

- Development and monitoring of national and state benchmarks for all government services to ensure planning takes account of the high proportion of Indigenous people under the age of 30 – (70%) and the increasing demand for services focused on children;
- Development of an A&TSI Family Policy (underway within ATSIC , but its future is now unclear)
- Development of national A&TSI child welfare standards and legislation.
- National monitoring of the implementation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.
- Provision of advice in relation to compliance with and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child for A&TSI children
- Development of a nationally co-ordinated approach to the expansion of early learning and care services, programs and support to meet the needs of the increasing population of A&TSI children.

SNAICC has long advocated that the above planning and co-ordination initiatives require the establishment of a National Indigenous Child Welfare and Development Council, supported by and reporting to the Council of Australian Governments. SNAICC's model for this council was that it would be comprised of ATSIC, SNAICC, other national A&TSI organisations and the Australian and state and territory governments. ATSIC was seen as an essential element of the council because of its broad scope and representative nature.

Conclusion

Regional and national representative bodies to which A&TSI people are elected through an open and transparent process are essential if our people are to take the lead in shaping the policies, services and legislation that affect our children. History has shown that acceptability, cultural relevancy and effectiveness remain elusive without Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership. Without effective national leadership to drive far reaching service reforms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will continue to face an uncertain and difficult future.

SNAICC recently celebrated twenty years of successful operation, success made possible we believe because our decision-making executive committee is comprised of A&TSI people who are elected by and representative of A&TSI service providers across the country.

SNAICC trusts that these comments will assist the committee in their important deliberations. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss SNAICC's views on the future of ATSIC with the Committee and request that you contact SNAICC to make arrangements for this if it is within the scope of the Committee's approach to this Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Muriel Cadd
SNAICC Chaiperson