

ANTaR Queensland

Submission to the Review Panel on ATSIC

ANTaR Qld appreciates the opportunity to supply comments to the Review and submits the following for the Panel's consideration:

Changes made to ATSIC, with the justification that they are made in recognition of Indigenous dissatisfaction with ATSIC, can be made only by negotiation, consultation, and input from Indigenous people if such changes are to be perceived as genuinely motivated. Whatever attitudes to the organization are thought to prevail in the Indigenous community, such attitudes must not be simply exploited in order to usher in options which are merely the Government's preferences.

From this standpoint, it's for the Government, not ATSIC, to demonstrate its credibility; and the continuing involvement of Indigenous people is the key. Otherwise the idea of ATSIC as an elected representative body is meaningless.

Consistent with the above, ANTaR Qld submits that the Review Panel ought to enunciate explicitly that

1. The Australian Indigenous community have, and will continue to have, special requirements in relation to policy, (just as the government readily admits is the case with, for instance, the business community). One of these very requirements is that Indigenous people control the funding, formulation, and implementation of such policy. Otherwise the Government will continue to find itself in the position of simultaneously deploring and compelling a condition of dependency. (A position which can only too easily be understood - unfortunately - in terms of its usefulness as a basis for paternalistic myth-making.)
2. Alongside the fact of special needs addressed exclusively by ATSIC, those mainstream agencies which have an interface with Indigenous communities, be they at Federal or State level, ought to be required, as part of their mission, to recognise the relevance of advice from ATSIC. Likewise to be cognizant of input from ATSIC in monitoring the capacity of such agencies to deliver services to Indigenous communities. This proposition takes into account the localised structure implied by ATSIC's regional offices, rendering ATSIC an invaluable source of factual (and verifiable) information. It also recognises that non-government organisations have a vital democratic role, a role to be played by an Indigenous organisation no less than by any other; and it reaffirms that the special needs of any community can not be portrayed as somehow incompatible with those of a wider society. Such a relationship with mainstream bodies ought to be defined as a constitutional prerogative of ATSIC. The alternative is a situation where ATSIC is seen as either a government body overstepping the limits of its jurisdiction; or else an Indigenous (therefore non-government) organisation whose advice is, at best, of value only at the Government's discretion. In either case the organisation is liable simply to be ignored. In other words, a return to paternalism.
3. The organisation is entitled to explicit defence by the Government whenever personality- related issues are publicised and sensationalised, resulting in confusion, suspicion and misunderstanding in the public perception of ATSIC's role and functioning. The obvious distinction between individuals and the organisation by which they are employed seems never to be made as far as ATSIC (and only ATSIC) is concerned; while the Government's interest in making that distinction comes across as less than enthusiastic.

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