

**SETTING THE AGENDA: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS AT  
THE ATSIC NATIONAL POLICY CONFERENCE  
25 –27 MARCH 2002**

**GEOFF CLARK\***

As is our custom I'd like to begin by acknowledging we are on Ngunnawal country. I'd also like to acknowledge my fellow commissioners and welcome the many representatives of government and business here today. I'd also like to welcome Minister Ruddock and thank him for his ongoing support of ATSIC. This is the first of what we hope to be ongoing biennial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs policy conferences.

The theme, setting the agenda, is an apt one. It's what we have been striving to do since ATSIC opened its doors just over ten years ago. I'm sure everyone in this room will agree it can be extremely difficult. There is still a fundamental inability on the part of many of our politicians and our mainstream media to recognise—let alone understand—what ATSIC is, what it does, where it fits, and the complexity of Indigenous affairs.

Indigenous affairs is one of the few policy arenas where most, if not all, government and non-government agencies and individuals, play a part and have a degree of responsibility. There is also widespread misunderstanding of the complex relationship between our fight for the recognition of the inherent rights of our people and ATSIC's supplementary role in the delivery of services to our constituents. We also have to engage in the emerging debate on welfare dependency and the responsibility of line agencies in delivering services without losing sight of what we have done, who we are, and where we are going.

At the same time we must continue our work in an increasingly complex federal funding structure. This involves relationships and interaction between the three spheres of government, and within governments. Added to this the Commission is still working its way through a major internal restructure which will see it emerge with a much stronger policy and advocacy role.

In my view ATSIC is up to the challenge. I believe we can take pride in what has so far been achieved and the groundwork now being laid for the future. ATSIC has given Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples a far stronger political voice. We are playing an increasingly important role at all levels of government in seeking the economic, social and cultural empowerment of our people.

We are working to ensure a shift in public funding from a welfare orientation to investment in the sustainable development of our Indigenous communities and people and their futures. At the same time we are working to

---

\* Chairman, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission

ensure the misinformation about our roles and responsibilities does not erode the substantial gains we have made.

As the most prominent Indigenous agency we are often wrongly blamed for the fact that our people remain gravely disadvantaged. It is not widely understood that ATSIC's budget is designed to complement the funding provided by the government to other Commonwealth, state and territory agencies. It is not there to replace it or relieve them of their responsibilities.

We do not, for instance, have primary funding program responsibility for health (which includes family violence, petrol sniffing), education, employment, or housing and infrastructure. We do, however, have a strong policy advisory and advocacy role in these areas and limited program funding.

The much quoted figure of \$2.3 billion Commonwealth funding for services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples this financial year is mistakenly understood to be expended primarily by ATSIC. It is not. The ATSIC budget this financial year is \$1.1 billion. That is less than half of the total Commonwealth outlays. The lion's share of our budget is spent, under government and commission quarantine, on programs commonly described as practical reconciliation.

Have a look at our major program, CDEP. This accounts for more than half of our budget. It is funded primarily by offsets associated with unemployment benefits. This is not widely known or understood. Even less well known is the work our management of this scheme allows us to do within the fractured policy responsibilities which characterise the mainstream employment programs available to Indigenous Australians. The same can be said for our other major program, the community housing and infrastructure program which will absorb more than \$360m of our funding this year.

We need to redouble our efforts to make all Australians aware of this work. We also need to be far more active in letting people know of the work we have been doing in recent times. I'm referring here to our long term policy directions, including a stronger focus on Indigenous rights and refocusing programs on the sustainability of communities. This includes our work on developing new models for regional governance.

But let me be clear about this. ATSIC, in my view, is here to stay. We are a key change agent in Indigenous affairs in this country. We will remain so. We have worked hard in recent years to overcome negative political, media and public perceptions. We will continue to do so.

I believe the current political environment is a positive one. We now have a minister in the Federal Cabinet to represent our interests. That has not always been the case. The minister has made it clear that he sees ATSIC as his principal source of Indigenous advice and values it. That presents us with a challenge. We must meet it. We have let it be known publicly that we are happy to continue working with the Howard government on its 'practical reconciliation' agenda. We have also made it clear that we will continue to pursue our rights agenda. The challenge for us is to demonstrate to the Federal Government, and others, on how one can inform the other.

We are also working co-operatively with all state and territory governments. Our work with them is putting in place a range of agreements that will further empower our people. Policies and strategies within Indigenous affairs will continue to evolve and I believe ATSIC will remain at the forefront of public debate on all of the fronts I have mentioned.

Just last week we were forced to place on the public record again our ongoing concern about the amended Native Title Act. We had to remind the Federal Government that the United Nations agreed with our view that the present Act does not comply with race discrimination laws. The latest report from the United Nations Special Rapporteur has again highlighted this fact. It is simply not good enough for the Federal Government to talk this away by pointing to some factual errors in the report. They must deal with the substantive issues.

This is just one example of our ongoing advocacy. But we must ensure we never lose sight of what I consider to be the core issue. This is the desperate lack of adequate and recurrent funding, co-ordination, and culturally appropriate programs to our people. These would allow them to do what they have been asking to do ever since they first started exercising their still limited political and economic power in this country. That is, to fix their problems themselves.

We will inevitably argue with others about our policy responses in this regard but no one can dispute the facts. The Commonwealth Grants Commission report late last year again highlighted the critical problem of unmet need. It also highlighted how little our people, even in urban areas benefit from mainstream services. To improve allocation of funds the Grants Commission made the following recommendation: Indigenous control of, or strong influence over, service delivery expenditure and regional and local service delivery arrangements that emphasise community development, inter-agency cooperation and general effectiveness.

This has been a crucial aim of ATSIC's advocacy for many years. As I have said we are a change agent. We want to achieve true self-determination. We will not be happy accepting the strangled form currently permitted us, and which is failing utterly. That's why we need conference such as the one we are attending today. We hope this conference will assist us in achieving this. We hope it will stimulate discussion on innovative but deliverable policy positions based on concepts of self-determination, our citizenship rights, and our inherent rights as Indigenous peoples.

Other speakers will tell you what we mean by these terms to encourage you to actively participate in these sessions and promote each other's understanding of what these concepts can do for us. Indeed, I urge you to participate actively in all the sessions of this conference. We want you to go home tired from lots of creative effort rather than from lots of listening.

