

## CHAPTER 30

### **Murdi Paaki Regional Council Hands Over the Reins**

The Murdi Paaki Regional Council ceased to exist on 30 June 2005. Its last act as a Regional Council was to see the transition of its responsibilities to the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly.

The Chairman of the Council, Mr. Jeffries, said the Council would leave a record of achievement as its legacy for the future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It had set a benchmark of performance. The Regional Council had been proactive and forward thinking since its inception in 1993 when the Far West Regional Council and the Wangkumara Regional Council were joined together under a restructure of ATSIC and became the Murdi Paaki Regional Council.

Mr. Sam Jeffries said:

The Regional Council has been preparing for its abolition by ensuring arrangements developed as a result of community initiative in the last decade remain in place to continue to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their engagement with government. It is a sad day to see an elected regional body which was working and which had achieved so much in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage in social, economic and cultural development disappear.<sup>1</sup>

On a positive note, Mr. Jeffries said:

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the abolition of the Regional Council represents yet another new beginning for us.

If there was a 'bold experiment' at all it was the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and its associated Regional Councils which provided the foundations for regional participation, empowerment and governance in dealings with all levels of government.

The government has unfortunately progressively whittled away the powers of elected representation and replaced the Council with voluntary bodies which will have limited funding capacity to enable them to provide government service providers with advice on regional and community priorities.

Mr. Jeffries commended the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the Murdi Paaki region for the way they had responded to the new arrangements, while regretting the loss of the Council. They had established community representation and regional participation in a way that gave them ownership of it. It was of their making. It was genuine self-empowerment.

Mr. Jeffries said:

Even as we end our period in office we have developed the basis of a regional partnership agreement to be negotiated with the Commonwealth Government. It is one of the first Regional Councils to have done so. Several communities have already entered shared responsibility agreements. The Charter of Governance developed by the Regional Council and the interim Assembly together will be an

---

<sup>1</sup> Sam Jeffries, Chairman, Murdi Paaki Regional Council, 30 June 2005.

integral part of the new arrangements and further reinforce our quest for self-determination in forms we decide.

The important legacy of the Regional Council will remain in the efforts of communities to maintain their participation in regional and community development and to ensure that the government's 'quiet revolution' achieves real outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This will mean governments now accepting their responsibilities to provide effective and efficient programs and services in accordance with the needs and priorities identified by the new Regional Assembly and Community Working Parties and tailored to those needs.

Mr. Jeffries said that through the continued operation of Community Working Parties, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would be able to guide coordinated public investment in the region.

The Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly held its first meeting under the government's new arrangements in Indigenous Affairs on 1-3 August 2005. The first agenda item after formalities was 'SRA: Sign Off.'<sup>2</sup> Present for the signing of the Shared Responsibility Agreement were the Parliamentary Secretary to the Commonwealth Minister for Education and Science, the Hon Pat Farmer, MP, and Mr. Trevor Fletcher, Director General, NSW Department of Education and Training, representing the two lead agencies associated with the COAG trial.

The Shared Responsibility Agreement (SRA) with the Regional Assembly<sup>3</sup> took the form of an amendment<sup>4</sup> to the agreement which had been entered into with the Murdi Paaki Regional Council on 22 August 2003 as the framework for the COAG trial in the Murdi Paaki region.

The amendment took into account the cessation of the Regional Council and recognised the Assembly as the peak regional Indigenous community structure in the Murdi Paaki Region, representing the 16 Community Working Parties.

The Assembly automatically became the partner to other Shared Responsibility Agreements already signed with the Council since the inception of the COAG trial<sup>5</sup> and any new ones to be signed.

The new shared responsibility agreement outlined the responsibilities of each party.

The Commonwealth Government provided initial funding of \$157,370 and the New South Wales Government \$48,000 to support the 'effective engagement' between the government and the Indigenous people of the Murdi Paaki Region. Each undertook to work collaboratively with the Assembly to achieve improved outcomes for the Indigenous communities in the Murdi Paaki

---

<sup>2</sup> Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, Bourke 1-3 August, 2006, Meeting Agenda.

<sup>3</sup> Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination, Shared Responsibility Agreements, *Fact sheet*, Murdi Paaki- Regional Assembly, New South Wales, Recognising Regional Representation, undated.

<sup>4</sup> Shared Responsibility Agreement between the Murdi Paaki Assembly, the Commonwealth Government and New South Wales Government, 1 August 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Urbis Keys Young, Evaluation of the Murdi Paaki COAG trial, Final Report 25 October 2006.

region.

Under the heading *What communities will do* the following responsibilities were outlined:

Adhere to and implement its Charter of Governance, including:

- Liaise with regional bodies and CWPs to determine local priorities and formulate / revise a Regional Plan to improve the economic, social, and cultural status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities of the region;
- Work with Commonwealth, State and local government bodies to implement the regional plan and address regional priorities through agreement making at the regional and local level;
- Without favour, represent the 16 Murdi Paaki Community Working Parties (CWPs) at the regional level;
- Contribute to the coordination of the activities of Commonwealth, State and local government bodies that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the region;
- Monitor the implementation and effectiveness of programs and services delivered by government and non-government agencies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the region; and
- Provide feedback to Government, through the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee, on outcomes of Assembly meetings and emerging issues in the region.

Under the heading *What community strengths can be built upon?* The agreement incorporated the following:

- Strengthened community regional governance through the effective representation of Indigenous people in the Murdi Paaki region;
- The Assembly is recognised by governments as the peak Indigenous regional body and the preferred primary point of Indigenous community contact, coordination and input;
- Engagement between governments and the Indigenous people of the Murdi Paaki Region is effective in progressing Indigenous priorities in the region; and
- Practical solutions and realistic measures to overcome Indigenous disadvantage are generated by the Assembly.

Under the heading *What are the agreed two-way feedback mechanisms and SRA monitoring strategies? Include how often and by whom* the following is included:

- Within six months of the signing of this attachment, the Assembly will advise the governments, through the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee, on its progress in developing a regional plan for the Indigenous people of Murdi Paaki;
- Governments will undertake an evaluation of funding of the Assembly within 12 months of the signing of this attachment, including

taking in the views of the CWP's and the Wider community;

- The Regional Assembly will report regularly to CWP's on the operations of the regional Governing Body, Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Government, non government agencies and local organisations; and
- The Regional Assembly will advise Governments on a quarterly basis, through the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee, on the operations of the Regional Governing Body.

During its establishment phase, while the Regional Council was still in existence, the Assembly was variously known as the Regional Planning Forum (from April 2004) and the 'CWP Chairs Forum.'<sup>6</sup> Following the announcement of the Government in May 2004 to abolish ATSIC, the name was changed to the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly (July 2004) and planning began to assume the role and responsibilities of the Regional Council.

By the time the Shared Responsibility Agreement formally acknowledged its role as the regional representative body, the Assembly had already worked in tandem with the Regional Council as it managed its dissolution and transition, meeting on six different occasions to advise the Council and plan its future operations.<sup>7</sup> These arrangements facilitated the ultimate transition from the Council to the Assembly.

At a direction-setting meeting in March 2005, the Assembly began to lay the foundations for its recognition as a regional representative body.<sup>8</sup> Two items of significance were consideration of a letter the Regional Council had sent to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs seeking the Minister's agreement to establish a regional governance framework consistent with the government's new arrangements for service delivery and the draft of a charter of governance.

The letter to the Minister stated:

While there are no specific guidelines for the establishment of new regional networks, we have proceeded to consolidate the outcome of consultations which have been taking place in the Murdi Paaki Region over the last five years as part of a process to improve the relationship between regional governance, community engagement with government and service delivery.

Our arrangements have now been informed by and adjusted to our understanding of the dimensions of the government's intentions to improve the way government departments deliver services and to develop better ways of representing Indigenous interests at the local level.<sup>9</sup>

The letter stated that while the abolition of Regional Councils would leave a significant void in regional leadership, representation, participation and

---

<sup>6</sup> Urbis Keys Young, Evaluation of the Murdi Paaki COAG trial, Final Report 25 October 2006.

<sup>7</sup> See Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, Minutes of meetings 2004-2005.

<sup>8</sup> Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, Agenda of meeting 14-15 March 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from the Chairman, Murdi Paaki Regional Council, to the Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 18 May 2004.

decision making, it had been the Council's aim and that of community representatives to work within the new arrangements and develop a scheme of regional governance which both met and sought to improve the government's 'whole of government' mainstreaming framework. It saw the arrangements flowing from and being incorporated in a Regional Partnership Agreement.

At the Assembly's sixth and last meeting<sup>10</sup> prior to its formal recognition, it met jointly with the Murdi Paaki Regional Council on the eve of the Council's abolition. Government and non-government representatives briefed the Assembly on future arrangements in Indigenous Affairs and on the operations of continuing non-government organisations in the Murdi Paaki Region, including the Murdi Paaki Housing Corporation, Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation and Marrima Health Corporation, each of which had been an initiative of the Regional Council. At the same meeting the Regional Council formally transferred responsibility for the Murdi Paaki Regional Plan to the Assembly. The meeting resolved to retain Mr. Sam Jeffries, Chairman of the Regional Council, as Chairman of the Assembly.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly Meeting, Cobar, NSW, 1-2 June 2005, Minutes.

<sup>11</sup> Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly Meeting, Cobar, NSW, 1-2 June 2005, Minutes, p. 8.