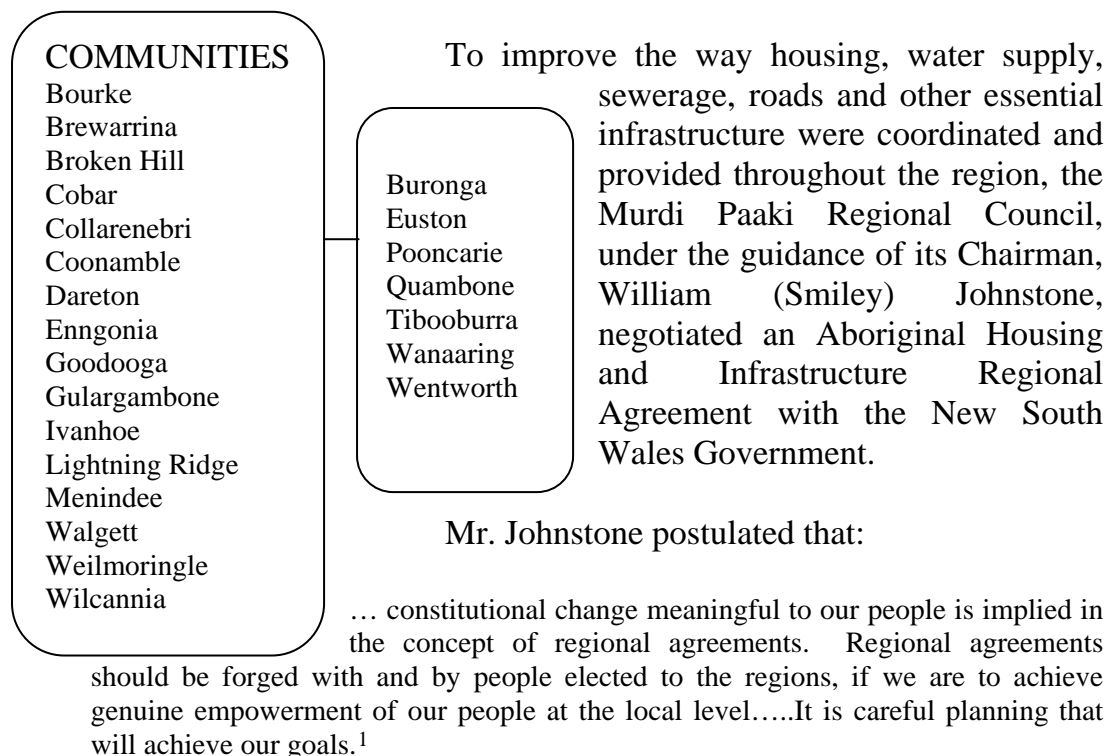


CHAPTER 2

The Idea of Community Working Parties

A key issue for the Murdi Paaki Regional Council was the way the respective governments in the region were delivering housing and infrastructure. There was general consensus that a new approach was needed to overcome gaps and lack of coordination in the delivery of housing and infrastructure.



Mr. Johnstone's vision was that:

We need to see that all Government service providers and agencies are accountable to the Indigenous community. This may entail an education process to ensure that agencies, including ATSIC, understand their own task in terms that are meaningful and relevant to our people.²

At the centre of the agreement was the idea of Community Working Parties as a mechanism to ensure that the local Aboriginal people were involved in the decisions made under the agreement.³

The Regional Agreement created what was then described as 'a whole of

¹ Murdi Paaki Regional Council, *Annual Report*, 1994-95.

² Murdi Paaki Regional Council, *Annual Report*, 1994-95.

³ Murdi Paaki Regional Council, submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2001, Canberra. *We can do it: The needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2001, Canberra..

government and whole of community approach' to coordinate and deliver housing, water supply, sewerage, roads and other essential infrastructure services to Aboriginal communities in western NSW. The Agreement called for service providers to focus collectively on identified disadvantage to bring about a measurable improvement in the health and well-being of Aboriginal people living in the region.⁴

The partnership gave Aboriginal people in the region more say about how, where and when things got done, and brought people to work together who never did before. The process was directed by the whole of the community through its representatives at 'grass-roots' level. A comprehensive manual was issued and up-dated from time to time to support implementation of the agreement.⁵

The agreement mandated service providers to deliver housing, environmental health infrastructure and related programs and services to all communities in the region in a coordinated and accountable way.⁶ The Regional Council's position was stated in the Implementation Manual as being:

Regional Council expects all Commonwealth, State and Local Government agencies and non government organisations to review and tailor their resourcing and programs to provide for a coordinated, integrated and holistic response to identified and documented need that is consistent with the objectives set by the Council.⁷

The objectives were:

- Increased community participation through the Working Party structure in the formulation and implementation of suitable housing and infrastructure services to meet identified need and community set standards as documented in a Housing and Environmental Health Plan;
- More effective, efficient and appropriate policy and program framework and delivery of services for housing, environmental health and community infrastructure through inter-agency coordination and cooperation;
- Integration of multiple and fragmented programs, whether directly or indirectly related, into one seamless long term program as a step to rationalisation of principles of:
 - Empowerment, self-determination and self-management;
 - Economic independence and equity;
 - Negotiation with, and maximum participation by, Aboriginal peoples;

⁴ Murdi Paaki Regional Council, *Aboriginal and Housing Infrastructure Agreement, Implementation Manual*, 25 August 1999.

⁵ Murdi Paaki Regional Council, *Aboriginal and Housing Infrastructure Agreement, Implementation Manual*, 25 August 1999.

⁶ Murdi Paaki Regional Council, *Aboriginal and Housing Infrastructure Agreement, Implementation Manual*, 25 August 1999.

⁷ Murdi Paaki Regional Council, *Aboriginal and Housing Infrastructure Agreement, Implementation Manual*, 25 August 1999.

- Maintenance of Aboriginal cultural practices by unreserved involvement of the community in the decision-making process in related sectors.
- Increased monitoring of environmental health services that government departments and agencies deliver to Aboriginal communities, and the setting of a framework for accountability for achieving improved health outcomes for Aboriginal people by identifying and targeting those most in need and most at risk;
- Sustainability of community assets through improved management and practical and implementable strategies for maintenance;
- Structured fully funded site based training and employment resulting in accredited outcomes; and
- Development and support of social and economic initiatives flowing from the agreement to provide for the long term betterment of communities' health and well-being.

The Regional Council exhorted agencies to accept that programs would be directed within the framework of the Regional Agreement by the Community Working Parties in all cases to meet community aims. The Council insisted that the focus be on outcomes and not process.

At the same time the Council expected that communities would work in a cooperative and accountable way in the interests of all sections of the community to derive the most benefit from the programs delivered.

For its part, the Council established the first of three regional entities to facilitate the delivery of services. The Murdi Paaki Regional Housing Corporation (MPHC) had as its charter to coordinate and streamline the management, maintenance, and purchase of houses within the region and to provide high level expertise in sustainable housing management for organisations which were unable, or did not wish, to continue to manage their own assets. By 2000 the MPHC was managing 500 houses and collecting 92% of rent with consultative arrangements in 21 communities.

Other regional entities which the Murdi Paaki Regional Council established to manage programs on a regional basis were in health and economic enterprise involving regional management of Community Development Employment Projects.

To further assist communities in identifying need, the manual outlined the programs available to them and sources of funding, identified projects which communities could undertake, and showed how a project manager could assist in implementing projects.