

A.T.S.I.C. - HAVE THINGS CHANGED?

Koorier, 3 December 1989, Editorial p. 2.

Is the ABORIGINAL and Torres Strait Islander Commission just another Government initiative that proposes to bring about self determination and self government for Aboriginal people and their affairs?

An Aborigines Advancement League publication "Smoke Signals" (June 1964) published an article by C D Rowley, "What is the solution to the plight of the Aborigine...?"

"A forward step would be to transfer control, and the assets of the welfare settlement to the Aboriginal people. There would have to be some properly constituted body to which the transfer might be made, so perhaps the first stage would be legislation providing for the recognition of councils and setting up the machinery for their election by the people themselves."

The concept of Aboriginal self determination and self government is not new. Ex Prime Minister Whitlam established a policy for Aboriginal self determination and set up the Department of Aboriginal Affairs back in 1972. Today, Mr. Hand wants to reorganise relevant Government Departments and agencies and put them all under the one umbrella. A monolith. A big bureaucratic structure suffice to say that these Departments and agencies will be autonomous, working as they did prior to A.T.S.I.C. What is more disturbing is that the same Public Servants who are now working in these departments will still be working under the A.T.S.I.C. regime.

Will Aboriginal people be involved in key decision making areas?

Our experience has provided us with the knowledge that Aboriginal people who are employed by these Government Departments are destined to be the clerks, receptionists, on temporary positions or merely on work experience.

Mr. Hand suggests in his address to Parliament (11 April, 1989) that "A.T.S.I.C. will be provided with proper training and resources..."

Will this training mean the Aboriginalization of Government Departments? Will Aboriginal people be trained to replace white bureaucrats, or for that matter black bureaucrats?

So long as these people remain in their almighty positions A.T.S.I.C. will become a Government farce. The reality being that they can't relate or even hope to achieve an understanding of Aboriginal identity, culture and needs.

Mr. Hand states that "... a system of Regional Council elected by Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders resident in that region will determine priorities, develop regional plans and represent the interest of the region.

A.T.S.I.C. in theory suggest that the control and decision-making process will be determined by the Aboriginal community however the overall power broker there in this self-management process is the Minister, Mr. Hand.

He has the overriding power to take on Ministerial accountability. He has the power to determine the correct and efficient use of public funds.

"Smoke Signals" May 1967. Official government reports from eight years ago reveal an attitude which hasn't changed all that much. "Under capable management there is no reason why an Aboriginal community given reasonable material to work with, should not be trained to develop the resources of their land for their own benefit and social improvement, for they possess gift necessary for successful training but their inherent traits of character will always make it essential that the work of organisation and control remains in the hands of their teachers."

Why does the Minister insist that Aboriginal people who vote for their Regional Councillors must be on the electoral roll? Moreover that the Councillors and Commissioners who represent us must be on the Australian electoral roll? Many Aboriginal people do not see themselves under any

jurisdiction. When the British Crown discovered and settled here, they maintained that the country was “terra nullius”. Aboriginal people to this day have never renounced sovereignty of this country. So many Aboriginal people refuse to go on the electoral roll, because to vote would undermine the concept of prior ownership and customary laws.

Gordon Bryant’s speech which appeared in the publication “Kirinara” (March 1969) spoke of policy and decision making. “People who make housing policy don’t know what a problem it is to build a house. People who make transport policy travel in Commonwealth cars, and people who make Aboriginal policy don’t know much about Aborigines.”

Why can’t the Aboriginal communities establish their own roll. Similarly to their National Aboriginal Conference (N.A.C.). If the Minister believes that A.T.S.I.C. ensures a democratic process then the Aboriginal roll suffice to say makes his dream a little more realistic.

Unfortunately even this process is fallible. We vote for our community representatives on the Regional Councils. The Regional Councillors vote for our Commissioners. However, the Commissioners who are pre-selected by the Minister have veto over our community representatives and the Minister has veto over the Commissioners.

Is this how democracy works?

What percentage of these candidates will be women?

With their self gratification and paternalistic policies, governments and their Ministers haven’t seemed to change much. They still have this inane ability to pre-determine our lives. To show us “the way ahead”.

A speech published in ‘Smoke Signals’ (December 1970) by Mr. Tom Mitchell MLA under the heading “We can co-operate with the first Australians”. (Victorian Land Rights Bill).

“We can tell the world that we trust our Aborigines and that we have put them in charge of their own Affairs. We can tell the world that we are confident that they can make a success of it. If they cannot make a success of it, we will stand excused in the eyes of the world because we gave them their chance. This is their chance.”

Since the 1967 referendum the Commonwealth has provided an overwhelming directive to proceed with the emancipation and rehabilitation of Aboriginal people. Over the years large sums of money have been expended in the name of ABORIGINAL Affairs but little has changed in the condition of our people.

Is A.T.S.I.C. the answer?