

**BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS:
KEEPING AN EYE ON THE BIGGER PICTURE**

SESSION: PATHWAYS TO REGIONAL AUTONOMY

**REGIONAL AUTONOMY:
*LOST CAUSE, BROKEN PROMISE OR NEW AGENDA?***

***The new Agenda:
Re-connecting Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people***

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1. Summary

In presenting this paper I take as my reference point the experience of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council in charting a course towards regional autonomy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Murdi Paaki Regional Council is one of 35 Regional Councils in Australia constituted under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989*,

Our approach, along with that of other regional councils, responded to the government's election policy commitment at the time to explore ways of achieving greater regional autonomy within the existing ATSIC structure.

I am approaching the subject of regional autonomy in five parts:

- a) the background to regional autonomy
- b) the public policy setting
- c) the experience of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council in implementing regional autonomy
- d) the government's new administrative arrangements for service delivery for Indigenous people
- e) a consideration of where those arrangements might take us.

Given the expectations that the government itself had built up, we have every right to feel let down. We need to re-group to make the new policy of *Connecting Government* work for us, just as we made ATSIC and Regional Councils work for us.

If responsibly implemented, *Connecting Government* offers an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to maintain the principles, if not the reality, of regional autonomy established in the last decade with ATSIC.

For the first time, government agencies will be accountable to the higher order of government for their performance, dependent, in part on the way they work with each other and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We need also to make them accountable to us. In the absence of ATSIC there will be no one else to blame.

2. Background to regional autonomy: Empowerment and Governance

At the time of its creation, ATSIC was seen as a model partnership – between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and government, on the one hand, and between elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives and the Administration on the other. It foreshadowed new relationships. It focused on the big picture.

The ATSIC Act was built on two inter-connected systems: 35 Regional Councils directly elected by the people and a national Commission of 17 members elected by regional Councils meeting in zones.

A central feature of regional autonomy was empowerment through good governance.

Empowerment was a central pillar of the ATSIC system and the government's contract with it.

The ATSIC discussion paper on greater autonomy defined empowerment as “people having information, knowledge, skills and abilities to do things themselves and to take responsibility for their actions.” Behind empowerment lay the need to build the capacities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to take that responsibility.

Empowerment is directly linked to governance, which is about the structures and processes for decision-making which give effect to empowerment. The two are inextricably linked. Regional autonomy was a process for drawing the two together in legislative form.

At the national level the ATSIC Act was a pathway to participation in government decision-making as a Commonwealth Statutory Authority. At the regional level the Act incorporated a statutory planning and coordinating mechanism as a platform for developing agreed strategies and priorities and entering into service agreements to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

ATSIC's role and performance

The objects of the ATSIC Act recognised the past dispossession and dispersal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their present disadvantaged position in Australian society. By any measure, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the most disadvantaged.

The objects of the act provided for:

- Maximum participation in policy formulation
- The development of self-management and self-sufficiency
- Economic, social and cultural development
- Coordination among Commonwealth, State, Territory and local governments without detracting from their responsibilities to provide services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Within this legislative framework, the Government's own outcome statement endorsed as part of the budget process for ATSIC gave primacy to empowerment. The outcome for which the Government funded ATSIC was:

“The economic, social and cultural empowerment (I underline the word empowerment) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in order that they may freely exercise their rights equitably with other Australians.”

Recent internal reform of the ATSIC administration was based on elevating the advocacy role of the organisation and enhancing the capacity of regional councils against a background of devolving decision-making.

The functions of Regional Councils included formulating a regional plan, cooperating with other government bodies, making proposals for Commission expenditure, and representing and advocating the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents of the region.

Any reading of the ATSIC Annual Report and of the 35 regional council reports will demonstrate the high level of professional commitment to providing effective and efficient services through what are known in that strange public service language as “output groups.”

We should not lose sight of the fact that the ATSIC program budget represented less than half total Commonwealth outlays on Indigenous Affairs. Half of that budget again represented a transfer payment of the normal entitlements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to unemployment benefits. These payments funded the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP).

The preamble to the ATSIC Act incorporated these sentiments as expressing the will of by the Australian Parliament.

AND WHEREAS it is the firm objective of the people of Australia that policies be maintained and developed by the Australian Government that will overcome disadvantages of Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders to facilitate the enjoyment of their culture;

AND WHEREAS it is appropriate to further the aforementioned objective in a manner that is consistent with the aims of self-management and self-sufficiency for Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders;

AND WHEREAS it is also appropriate to establish structures to represent Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders to ensure maximum participation of Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders in the formulation and implementation of programs and to provide them with an effective voice within the Australian Government.

Will the repeal of those words by the Australian Parliament put an official end to self-management, self-sufficiency and empowerment? Will the new arrangements replace empowerment with disempowerment? Is that the real political agenda, to deny us a legitimate voice in national affairs?

Will dispossession and dispersal manifest themselves in a new administrative form.

3. The Policy Context

Indigenous communities operate within a difficult public policy environment. They have a special relationship with government, not because of continuing dependency but a relationship that derives from the shared history of this land. That history gives voice to self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Self-determination is fundamental to control by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over their own destiny. As the original occupiers and owners of this land, Aboriginal people had their own customary traditions and structures of law-making. As a consequence, without agreements or treaties, we have a relationship with government that embodies what I would describe as “a constituent sovereignty.” Such a relationship gives primacy to negotiation, recognising our rights as Indigenous people.

There is much debate about what the right to self-determination means. I am attracted to the view of Professor Behrendt:

“The key to the way forward is in the concepts and rights that *we* have implied into the terms “self-determination” and “sovereignty” when we use those words to describe a vision of what we would like our communities to be like and the way we want to live our lives as Indigenous peoples. This is an approach that takes the starting point for self-determination from the way in which it is expressed by Indigenous peoples at a grass-roots level, rather than by imposing concepts as they have been developed in international forums on to Indigenous communities. It is a bottom-up, rather than top-down approach.”¹

Whatever our desire for autonomy, there is no framework of Indigenous self-government in this country as exists in other countries, such as Canada and the United States. We may draw on and be encouraged by their experience, but in the end self-determination must be moulded to our own special circumstances, whether we live in urban, rural or remote areas. Dispossession has meant different stages of development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The delivery of programs and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represents the greatest of challenges for today’s public sector management. A proper balance needs to be struck between the legitimate aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, on the one hand, and public sector performance on the other.

Implementation of effective and sustainable regional governance arrangements is directly associated with the fulfilment of human rights, the achievement of equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the strengthening of Indigenous capacity to promote community development on their own terms, and to have restored to them authority and responsibility.

Within this framework, there is a strong notion of reciprocal responsibility between Government and Indigenous people which can lay the foundation for a new reconciling relationship.

¹ Behrendt, Larissa: *Globalisation and Self-determination: The challenges for sovereignty and Governance*, Indigenous Governance Conference, 3-5 April 2002, Canberra

4. The Murdi Paaki Experience

In September 1999, the Chairman of ATSIC, Mr. Gatjil Djerrkura, and the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator John Herron, jointly issued a discussion paper to give effect to the Coalition's election policy statement to accept the recommendations of the ATSIC Board to provide greater regional autonomy.

The policy statement committed the Coalition to working with the Indigenous community and ATSIC to develop regional models, and to devolve, where possible, decision making and management to the local level.

The review of the operation of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* (Section 26 Review) provided to the Minister in February 1998, following extensive consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, found that there was a strong desire to see more authority devolved from the centre to the local and regional levels."

In response to this policy commitment various regional councils were encouraged to develop proposals for regional autonomy. The Murdi Paaki Regional Council spent more than five years developing a scheme of regional governance in consultation with the communities concerned. Whatever the future course, our system of regional governance was a creation of the region and the people living in our communities. They own it. It cannot be taken away from them.

What do we mean by autonomy?

Autonomy has many meanings: autonomy for what purpose? How autonomous can Indigenous communities be? Regional autonomy differs from the autonomy of functional Aboriginal organisations which may come together to promote regional autonomy. We need to know what we want to achieve when we use the word autonomy and the framework for achieving it. Regional autonomy may be achieved under both State and Commonwealth legislation. It may have a local government focus or be specific to Indigenous people. It may be a combination of all three.

A fundamental issue is how Indigenous communities connect to the wider society and retain control over their futures, maintain Aboriginal identity and culture, have Indigenous community structures based on custom and traditional law, and have the capacity to make their own decisions. External assistance should contribute to rather than define the process. Regional and community leadership must be able to filter Government interventions while re-building community capacity and leadership. Government assistance must be managed responsively to achieve material results. The process begins where the decisions are made.

An important aspect of empowerment is full participation in the design of public policy and programs, the way funding is distributed, and the more efficient and effective delivery of services. Structures will be influenced by the size, composition, location, land base and economic potential of the region concerned.

The government's commitment to regional autonomy was specific to the ATSIC system and decision-making on the funds appropriated to ATSIC. It was about improving regional and community governance. It was not about self-government. It did not threaten existing Aboriginal organisations or State relationships. It recognised the role of other organisations, such as Land Councils, with their specific autonomous responsibilities. Regional autonomy meant bringing these stakeholders together within one Commonwealth legislative framework to achieve specific ends.

Our approach to regional autonomy linked four key elements of reform – self determination, regional autonomy, good governance, and improved service delivery. We saw these principles as being a pathway to overcoming the profound disadvantage of poverty identified by the Commonwealth Grants Commission by returning to us the controlling influence over our lives and making agencies more responsive to our needs.

Devolution of programs and financial transfers offer opportunity for greater control by Aboriginal people. With that devolution must go accountable structures of governance. Aboriginal communities must deal with the immediate and practical issues of economic development, housing, health, social policy, education and many other public policy concerns. Achieving better outcomes involves structures at both the national and regional level which give Aboriginal people the capacity to manage the process.

To give effect to these proposals, our submission to the ATSIC Review outlined a framework of regional governance involving the establishment of a Regional Authority (similar to the TSRA) incorporating a new system of community representation and participation more appropriate to the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Murdi Paaki region. The creation of the TSRA was a breakthrough in regional autonomy and demonstrated the capacity of the ATSIC Act to achieve it.

Our focus was on regional and community governance and its alignment to service delivery at the community level. This was consistent with our understanding of the terms of reference for the ATSIC Review which had two arms to them:

- how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be best represented in the development of Commonwealth policies and programs to assist them; and
- the appropriate role for regional councils in ensuring the delivery of Government programs and services to Indigenous Australians.

Our community governance arrangements involved the creation of Community Working Parties as an integral part of the Regional Council's operations. Community Working Parties pre-dated our approach to regional autonomy as mechanisms to achieve coordination and community input in the delivery of housing and infrastructure.

Community Working Parties are a broader based participative forum which brings together all community organisations, interest groups and individual community people. They operate on a community governance philosophy as opposed to corporate governance ideology. They are unincorporated bodies, they provide the policy, planning and advocacy functions and they get their legitimacy from their communities. They are owned by the communities themselves because they are of their making.

Regional autonomy associated with the development of Indigenous governance was, therefore, a mechanism to connect empowerment with the way services are delivered by all spheres of government. It aimed to integrate program delivery within a single regional outcome bringing together the resources of all stakeholders.

The framework specifically distinguishes between governance and service delivery but links them structurally through elected community representation and engagement with service providers to ensure that communities play a central role in developing and implementing strategies and taking responsibility for their own improvement, and have an effective voice in all matters that affect individual and family well-being.

The Murdi Paaki Regional Council proposed to achieve its governance reform in two stages. The first stage has involved the establishment of Community Working Parties. Using our present powers under the ATSIC Act, our aim was to give communities a direct voice in the council's decision-making through the establishment of a Regional Assembly, comprised of community representatives, to advise the Regional Council. This would run alongside the election of regional councillors under a ward system.

The next stage would involve negotiating with government changes to the ATSIC Act so that, in the future, community working parties (or councils) established within the governance framework, as an evolution of the present community working parties, directly elect a Regional Authority as the regional decision-making body with new powers of negotiation, coordination and funding to support communities.

Just as we thought we were making progress and were ready to negotiate new arrangements, following a comprehensive review, the Government announced its decision to abolish ATSIC and, in twelve months' time, regional councils. As a consequence, all that has been achieved in the decade since ATSIC was established was seemingly irrelevant. Regional autonomy, both in the form in which it was meant to function, and how it might have functioned, has been set aside.

Canada has been to the forefront in governance arrangements for Canadian Indians. According to the Institute on Governance, there is mounting evidence that sound *governance* is a necessary condition for communities and nations to make rapid progress in improving the wellbeing of their citizens.²

Its conclusions are based on the premise that an 'outside' party like the federal government can do little to improve governance without working in close collaboration with Aboriginal groups. The conclusions are supported by the findings of the World Bank in its efforts to eradicate poverty and promote development.

Canadian Indians themselves have stated their belief that "providing the tools for good governance will improve conditions for economic and social development."

Based on the premise that governance matters, the Institute on Governance argues that an understanding of the principal governance challenges facing Aboriginal communities leads to an immediate agenda for change.

² John Graham and Jake Wilson, *Aboriginal Governance in the Decade Ahead: Towards a New Agenda for Change*, Canada, 2004

5. The new reality: from empowerment to disempowerment

There is now a new reality.

ATSIC and Regional Councils have now been caught in the matrix of the government's policy approach called in the new bureaucratic language *Connecting Government*. While there are shared objectives in ensuring that mainstream agencies meet their obligations towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, what is lacking from the proposed arrangements is any notion of empowerment.

Connecting Government to achieve the government's ends is a bureaucratic design which, in its implementation, denies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people direct participation in government decision-making.

The new framework that will replace ATSIC and Regional Councils incorporates:

- an advisory body of distinguished Indigenous people appointed by the government
- the mainstreaming of all programs
- unspecified arrangements yet to be negotiated with the states at the regional level;
- existing offices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services will become Indigenous Coordination Centres, and will represent the interests of Departments with responsibilities for Indigenous programs.

The reaction to the government's decision to abolish ATSIC forthwith has been mixed. This is not surprising. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been through and survived many other innovative government initiatives.

There are a number of reasons for the Indigenous reaction. One reason is that ATSIC was not the flavour of the month. Many Indigenous communities and organisations felt the ATSIC system was irrelevant to them and that ATSIC and Regional Councils interposed themselves in their own relationships with government and funding agencies. State Governments had their own mechanisms of consultation and advice and while they were all now working with ATSIC and Regional Councils, there remained some uncertainty about the relationship.

The policy aim of *Connecting Government* is to ensure government agencies work together to deliver meaningful results for the monies appropriated to them for the services they provide. This approach has public policy value for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is a direct response, identified by ATSIC, Regional Councils and the Commonwealth Grants Commission, to the past failure of government agencies to work together in accepting their program responsibilities towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Because the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are multi-dimensional, the provision of specific programs and services lends itself to what is being called in today's public management "joined-up government."

The two missing links in the chain of responsibilities which will connect government agencies are empowerment and governance.

Empowerment is now incidental to the achievement of government funded outcomes through an administratively driven process of coordination.

Empowerment has been replaced by disempowerment. We have been disconnected from the machinery of government. Indigenous governance, a centrepiece of the Council of Australian Governments' own prescription for change, has lost its sense of purpose in the narrow channel of administrative reform.

In blowing a large volcanic hole in regional autonomy, the new arrangements have also left a mushroom cloud of uncertainty at the regional level. For us the arrangements represent bad governance. The issue of reform is not just about government services. It is about responsibility for determining how those services are provided.

A question mark still hangs over whether the government's decision to disperse decision-making on Indigenous programs throughout seven different agencies, each with its own jurisdictional interests, will work.

The absence of a national legislative framework may make it more difficult to negotiate and implement Indigenous governance arrangements and to reclaim our futures. We will now have to re-build from the bottom up. I see our goal being to re-connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with government.

Role of mainstream agencies

We welcome the Government's commitment at last to ensure that mainstream agencies accept their responsibilities and play their part in delivering equitable services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The securing of our rights brings obligations on their part. Whether agencies can do any better than they have done in the past remains to be seen. Improving accountability to us for the services they are funded to provide has always been part of the Indigenous agenda for reform.

It has never been ATSIC's sole responsibility to deliver outcomes for Indigenous people. Mainstream agencies must answer for their own failures. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have never lost sight of their determination to achieve real outcomes by those responsible for delivering services. The struggle has been how to achieve it.

Recognising that existing mainstream programs need to perform better for Aboriginal people, the Government will now put in place "robust machinery" to ensure that mainstream agencies accept their responsibilities and are accountable for outcomes. We welcome this long awaited initiative if it can be done. We've been trying for years to achieve it, working with government at all levels to bring it about. The library of framework and service agreements attests to that effort.

We have some idea of how the new machinery of government arrangements will work:

- To ensure improved outcomes and better coordination a Ministerial Taskforce will be established immediately.
- Improving performance will be written into performance agreements with Departmental heads.
- The Productivity Commission and the Commonwealth Grants Commission will have an important role to play.
- A new Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination will monitor the performance of mainstream agencies.
- The government will raise the whole issue of service delivery and coordination at a grassroots level at the next COAG meeting.

The government's proposed new arrangements for delivering services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identify five general characteristics:

- Collaboration
- Regional need
- Flexibility
- Accountability
- Leadership

Collaboration is, of course, the key to the new arrangements. The Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Dr. Peter Shergold, defined collaboration this way:

“All the key agencies of the Australian government will be required to work together in a coordinated manner. That collaboration will be reflected in a new framework of cooperative structures that, according to Dr Shergold, stretch from top to bottom – from a Ministerial Task Force and Secretaries’ Group in Canberra to a network of regional offices around the nation.

Over time the object is to build a single “shop front” – Australian Government Indigenous coordination centres – in which all the services delivered by key departments – employment, education, community services, legal aid and health – will be represented.

The offices will work with Indigenous communities to deliver services in a coordinated way. The foundation will be negotiated Framework Agreements through which government and community work as partners to establish their goals and agree their shared responsibilities for their achievement”

These principles themselves were already embedded in proposals for regional autonomy and were capable of being further developed within the ATSIC system. Bringing all government agencies together to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander was at the heart of Indigenous regional autonomy.

As we indicated in our submission to the ATSIC Review:

“The regional decision-making and service delivery arrangements aim to align Government program and service objectives with community needs and aspirations to overcome fragmentation, promote inter-sectoral collaboration, provide a mechanism to pool funding to achieve a single stream of delivery and ensure accountability of all program and service providers to the community.”

COAG has recognised the Regional Council and Community Working Parties as the key frameworks of engagement by government in the business of Indigenous affairs.

It is worth noting at this time as the COAG Trial roles out across the Region we are learning some real lessons, communities are being more exposed to government processes, they are becoming more involved in the business of Regional Council, we are all witnessing a relationship develop between the Commonwealth and State Governments, in our neck of the woods, is a rare occasion indeed, in some instances its worth paying money to see.

But the processes are slow and one small example of that is where you have Ministers holding onto the purse strings, to achieve progress in an efficient and timely manner,

delegated authority must be where the action is. What we are learning can be used for future approaches in achieving real outcomes on the ground.

The COAG pilots have yet to be formally evaluated.

As instruments of both the government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Regional Councils are in a strategic position to provide leadership in a developmental process where needs are identified at the community level and regional and community plans provide the architecture for investment in community and individual welfare.

Achieving these goals requires mainstream agencies to align their outputs with community needs and priorities identified in regional plans.

Regional and Community Planning

Clearly, the new arrangements will continue to require an efficient and effective process of coordination at the regional level involving all spheres of government. This has been demonstrated by COAG's own coordination trials, which have been a key feature of the government's policy approach working with regional councils and communities in partnership. The government has identified the same need by now seeking to replace regional councils with Indigenous Coordination Centres.

The Commonwealth Grants Commission in its review of Indigenous Funding reported that the common themes in the preconditions for achieving advances in the circumstances of Indigenous peoples and aligning resources to needs were that Indigenous peoples:

- are enabled to participate fully in identifying needs and in making decisions on the provision of services;
- have increased financial capacity within the current resources;
- have control of service provision at the community level as far as practicable; and
- have the capacity to enter into productive collaborative arrangements with the main service providers — State (and local) Governments.

Without a recognised process of regional participation and accountability the outcomes of the new “robust” arrangements will remain questionable. They may not be as robust as we might think. This is not an assumption. It is based on the evidence of the performance of regional councils over the last decade and the interaction between Commonwealth, State, Local Government and Regional Councils.

Fundamental to the implementation of the governance and service delivery framework is the role of Regional Councils in developing regional plans and in assisting communities in preparing community plans to facilitate the determination of needs, priorities and funding and the investment in services.

If the notion of “joined up government” is to be meaningful, it needs the architecture of regional planning to bring agencies together. Federalism's complex web of shared and shifting responsibilities does not make it any easier.

Murdi Paaki's vision for an effective regional planning and service delivery process sees the regional plan being the indicator of need for the Region so that Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments can “invest” in the plan's vision of improved service delivery and capacity building initiatives to both enhance community and regional governance structures and to ensure the more efficient and effective delivery of services.

6. Conclusion: Re-connecting Government and Indigenous people

What, then is the future for regional autonomy?. What should our focus be? Can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations work together in the next twelve months to ensure that any replacement for regional councils preserves the foundations of self-determination and empowerment?

The abolition of the ATSIC system in its entirety and with it any immediate structure of regional autonomy represents a denial of self-management and self-sufficiency which were expressed as Parliament's will in the preamble to the ATSIC Act. Empowerment is being replaced by disempowerment. Its abolition by a vote in the Australian Parliament also demonstrates how fragile the relationship between the government and Indigenous people can be without constitutional recognition of our position in Australian society.

Here then is the next challenge for our leadership, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

The government has stated that it will work with state and territory governments and Indigenous communities to find the best mechanism for input at the local and regional level. We would argue that we already have an appropriate mechanism through the continued operation of regional councils. It is for us to demonstrate in the next 12 months that regional councils should remain in one form or another.

We must ensure that our voice is heard, to participate in decision-making, and to ensure that services are provided in accordance with regional and community priorities and not as a result of another bureaucratic task force or working party. We must ensure that the principles of empowerment, self-management and self-sufficiency as an expression of Parliament's will are maintained.

Regardless of structure, which may vary between regions, the issue is really about shifting decision-making powers from centralised departmental control out to "where the people live." Because Aboriginal society is so diverse flexibility is required to ensure that structures are appropriate to the special circumstances of individual communities and regions, building on their own functional, community and regional organisations.

"Joined up" government is not just a question of determining how each Departmental program might be delivered in a coordinated way with other Departments. It is about determining with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as the first priority, what the outcomes are to be, what interventions are necessary to achieve those interventions, and how those interventions are made.

It is one thing for Departments to appear before Senate Estimates Committee to explain how *their* appropriations are being spent and for what purpose: it is another to be able to assess the impact of Departmental outputs on the cultural, social and economic well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Programs need more than coordination: they must be integrated in a holistic way into one regional outcome to which all the outputs contribute. This alignment is fundamental to the achievement of outcomes both for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and government. The starting point is what the people themselves determine is necessary to improve their livelihoods and well-being.

Regional autonomy and ATSIC's role in it was a way of empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and connecting Indigenous priority-setting and decision-making with government in the whole cycle of planning, delivery of services and accountability.

Instead, the focus of what is now seen as a “whole of government” approach is on administrative structures. The client has been left out of the delivery process.

I believe that both in its content and implementation the new arrangements do not serve the public interest as they relate to an important area of national policy – the rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their status as significant stakeholders in the policy and national development process.

I see the process being advanced through the development and management of regional budgets, bringing together all the outputs of individual agencies. The new Regional Coordinating Centres must be responsive and accountable to an Indigenous regional governing body. This to me is what *Connecting Government* is all about.

Now that all Indigenous program expenditure is being integrated within mainstream agencies, and for the first time they must accept responsibility for the outcomes, we have access to a wider pool of funding, management expertise and accountability mechanisms.

With regional and community structures determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the directing force in the new arrangements, regional autonomy, empowerment and good governance can survive. I believe that from that foundation a national body will emerge, one that is more than a lobby group but is integrated with government decision-making at the national level, in a genuine partnership between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The national interest requires a new relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There can be no relationship without partnership. There can be no partnership without participation. The so-called “bold experiment” excludes us from both.