

5 October 2010

The Hon Jenny Macklin, MP
Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister

I am writing to express the disappointment, dismay, and anger my wife and I feel at the failure of indigenous employment and economic development programs to make conspicuous progress in Alice Springs over the last 20 years in fostering indigenous employment in retail businesses and in improving the level and scope of indigenous participation in commerce. Both objectives have not just failed but have GONE BACKWARDS since 1991.

We have just completed an extensive tour of northern South Australia, Central Australia, Kakadu, Arnhem Land and the Kimberleys that took us into many remote communities. It was our first visit in over 20 years to some regions and communities.

It is this comparison of 'what was' with 'what is' that has led to our feelings of anger, dismay and disappointment.

Let us give you an insight into some of our observations regarding Alice Springs in particular. However what we about to say here was also reflected to various degrees in other places that we visited in the NT and Kimberley.

As we had an extensive stay in Alice Springs we were able to visit many commercial and retail outlets of a wide variety. These included 3 service stations; 3 automotive service centres; 2 supermarkets; 2 hardware stores; 2 camping stores; 4 cafes; 2 restaurants; 1 licensed club; 1 liquor outlet, 1 bank, 3 art galleries specialising in indigenous art; 2 clothing shops; 3 souvenir shops; 2 newsagents; the Visitors Centre; 2 caravan parks; 1 motel; 1 canvas maker; 1 bakery, 2 travel agents, and the Telegraph Station. We were stunned to find that in the 20 years since our last visit we saw no evidence of any indigenous employment in any of these business activities.

Let us emphasize that - *we did not sight a single indigenous employee in any of them. Not one.*

On the other hand it was not unusual to be served by foreign backpackers who seem to have little difficulty finding casual work. Not just in Alice Springs either, but also sometimes in the remote communities we visited. Twenty years ago the casual visitor to Alice Springs could expect to find some indigenous people employed or on traineeships in shop front positions in various businesses such as souvenir shops and

food outlets. Yeperenye Shopping Centre was opened in 1986 and there was a belief among indigenous leaders that this was an 'ice breaker' which would pave the way for other large indigenous controlled commercial developments and more Aboriginal employment to follow in Alice Springs. It appears this has not happened.

At 1045 am one day we went into the 'Aboriginal Employment Service Office' in Todd Mall because we wanted the local addresses of Indigenous Business Australia or the Indigenous Land Corporation. The person we spoke to had never heard of either organization. After they had thumbed through a typed listing of telephone numbers without success they advised us that the Manager would probably know, but he was 'out to lunch' (at 1045am!) and would be back in after 1 pm. Appalling, but if this apathy is endemic and if it has been entrenched for years then it might help explain why the level of indigenous employment in the retail sector in Alice Springs is a disgrace.

As we travelled through a number of communities we could not see any tangible progress in economic or community development since the 1980's. There was the ubiquitous community store, or the occasional roadhouse, but always with non-indigenous management and cash register check out staff, some of whom we discovered were foreign travellers. Back in the 1980's a combination of TAFE training and Commonwealth Government sponsored traineeships was being used to create skilled indigenous staff capable of doing some of these jobs so that the need for non-indigenous staff would lessen. While these initiatives showed promise of good outcomes it appears they have not been successful over the long term. Worse, the evidence indicates nothing else has worked successfully since then either, i.e. assuming other initiatives have been tried. No-one expected quick and easy results, but to have 2 decades of lost opportunity is not acceptable.

And we observed non indigenous people doing the sort of unskilled and semi skilled work that in 2010 we expected to see indigenous people doing in their own communities – e.g. operating small earth moving plant, working on grounds and building maintenance, cleaning of public amenities, etc. To find this in 2010 was disheartening. Again, 2 decades of lost opportunity is not acceptable.

Minister, your predecessors and their administrations carry full responsibility for these deplorable failures. You are in the position where unless real change is made you too will be seen as another link in that chain of failures. So what can you do?

I suggest that you need assistance of a very high calibre from outside of the established agencies and networks (because they are implicated in the present situation) to analyse the effectiveness of some current programs and structures and to recommend change. **The focus should be on those programs and structures that have either or both indigenous employment and economic development as objectives. The Government's overriding objective must be to make whatever changes are necessary to policies, programs and organisational structures to produce meaningful participation for indigenous people in mainstream employment and economic development.** An ancillary benefit is likely to be an improvement in the standard of indigenous community development and management.

The person chosen to head the review group needs to be an independent eminent person, not just highly respected and intellectual but a person of insight with a flair for the analytical. They need to be able to balance vision and pragmatism. That person need not be indigenous. A retired judicial officer would be worth considering.

The review group under the control of that person should have highly capable non-political and non-aligned members including indigenous person/s who have relevant highly credentialed capabilities. Although the detail of those capabilities could be thrashed out with the nominated head person, those capabilities could include for example analytical experience relevant to organisational structures and development models for delivery of employment and economic development programs to deprived minority groups. It could also include expertise in the delivery of education, training, employment, economic, business, and community development programs in the same context.

The Government would need to demonstrate that it's serious about this by committing wholeheartedly to this process. The review group will need to be geared up with adequate resources, flexibility, authority and timing to do the task well. The head appointment is key.

We write from a position of considerable front line and senior executive experience. My wife is indigenous, and I spent 16 years with the Commonwealth Government specialising in indigenous affairs including a period in the Senior Executive Service. Our individual duties over many years involved extensive travel to numerous remote indigenous communities. We retain some close relationships from that period. Some of these people consider that their communities have gone backward because of the failings of respective Governments/agencies over many years.

We have been in a unique position. After a break of 20 years we have been able to compare our first hand observations over the last few months with recollections of some places in the pre 1991 era. Our observations are a telling benchmark. We hope you take them seriously.

Best wishes,

Wayne Prior

Cc Chris Hayes, Member for Fowler.

Cc. Dr Andrew MacDonald, Member for Macquarie Fields.

Cc. Paul Lynch, Member for Liverpool.