

Employment a key to Indigenous future

Some mining companies are leading the way in employing Indigenous Australians, according to evidence presented to a House of Representatives inquiry on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban areas.

The inquiry is being conducted by the House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, which recently visited the John Forrest Vocational Training and Education Centre at Murrin Murrin in Western Australia. The Centre was established with joint industry, Western Australian and Commonwealth Government funding under the leadership of Anaconda Nickel Limited. It is successfully training local Aboriginals to acquire the skills to enter the mining industry and presents a model for other industries and other States.

Submissions to the inquiry have indicated that improved education and improved employment opportunities are the key to a more positive future for Indigenous people, particularly young Indigenous people.

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The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) has told the Committee that, while there have been improvements in education levels among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, parallel improvements in the overall population mean that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders are not catching up as quickly as they might. The overall low educational attainment, according to ATSIC, leads to significant over-representation in unskilled and low-skilled jobs. That's why the efforts of some companies in the mining industry have been so important in encouraging Indigenous participation in their workforce.

Committee Chair, Lou Lieberman (Member for Indi, Vic) agrees that the key to a better future for Indigenous Australians lies in active partnerships – partnerships within communities, between communities and business, communities and governments, and between governments.

The Committee has received more than 100 submissions, covering the major issues of the inquiry, which are:

- existing programs and services to urban dwelling Indigenous Australians and how service delivery can be made more effective;
- extending the involvement of urban Indigenous people in decision-making that affects their local communities; and
- the situation and needs of Indigenous young people in urban areas.

In his evidence to the inquiry, Senator Herron (the then Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs) spoke about the particular needs that exist for Indigenous Australians living in urban areas. "All the information available indicates that, as a group, Indigenous people comprise the most disadvantaged component of our community. Despite the strength of the physical infrastructure and the wide range of services available in urban areas, the health, housing, education and employment needs of urban-dwelling Indigenous people are still great compared to non-Indigenous people."

Senator Herron told the Committee that the Commonwealth Government has a number of Indigenous-specific initiatives and services, with total spending now reaching some \$2.3 billion per annum. Although the funding to Indigenous programs and services is substantial, according to Senator Herron it cannot meet all the needs of a rapidly growing Indigenous population. That population growth occurs mainly in urban areas, through both natural growth and migration from rural areas.

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In 1992 the National Commitment to Improved Outcomes in the Delivery of Programs and Services for Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders was signed by all Australian governments. It provides a framework for Commonwealth, State, Territory and local governments to cooperate, establish national objectives, principles and shared responsibilities. ATSIC's view is that while progress has been slow to kick off, there are now bilateral agreements created in housing, essential services, health and infrastructure. ATSIC told the Committee that it looks forward to a "reinvigoration of the initial motives".

The means of building and maintaining the good health of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders has long been a matter of concern. The Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care advised that it now uses a two pronged approach to improve Indigenous health outcomes:

- ensuring that mainstream health and aged care services are more responsive and appropriate for Indigenous people; and
- supporting community controlled Aboriginal health services to provide primary health care services.

This latter approach echoes broader comments that government programs will be most effective for Indigenous people if the people are consulted and involved in the planning and implementation stages.

The Health Department also informed the Committee about improvements in infant mortality and childbirth weights, and in the control of infectious diseases among Indigenous people.

Other witnesses drew the Committee's attention to the high levels of petrol sniffing in some communities. At the same time, it was pointed out that practical steps are now being taken to reduce this abuse. A number of projects are being funded to produce information kits for communities and to fund recreational activities for young people.

The Committee is planning further public hearings to build on the evidence it has received by way of written submissions.

Mr Lieberman is confident that, with goodwill on all sides and a willingness to try innovative approaches, many of the hurdles facing urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be overcome. He believes that the range of issues and the sources of submissions (whether government agencies, community groups or individuals) exemplify the Committee's longstanding role as a major point of contact between the Parliament and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

For further information

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