

CHAPTER 22

ATSIC is Abolished

The Murdi Paaki Regional Council's aspirations towards greater regional autonomy and Regional Authority status took a new direction when the Prime Minister on 15 April 2004 announced that ATSIC and its associated Regional Councils would be abolished.

From now on, it was government policy not to fund elections of elected representative bodies.¹ The focus of the government's new arrangements was to be on direct engagement with communities, families and individuals.² Key elements of the new arrangements were the establishment of a national advisory body and the transfer of all programs to mainstream Departments.

Announcing the government's intentions to move to new arrangements in Indigenous Affairs, the Prime Minister said:

As a result of examination of (the report into ATSIC and related matters) and also a very extensive examination of indigenous affairs policy, we can announce that when Parliament resumes in May, we will introduce legislation to abolish ATSIC. ATSIC itself will be abolished with immediate effect from the passage of the legislation. The Regional Councils will be abolished by the 30th of June 2005.³

Outlining the government's future policy intentions, the Prime Minister said:

Our goals in relation to Indigenous affairs are to improve the outcomes and opportunities and hopes of Indigenous people in areas of health, education and employment. We believe very strongly that the experiment in separate representation, elected representation, for Indigenous people has been a failure. We will not replace ATSIC with an alternative body. We will appoint a group of distinguished Indigenous people to advise the Government on a purely advisory basis in relation to aboriginal affairs. Programmes will be mainstreamed.⁴

The Prime Minister said that Regional Councils would have a role in the interim as the government established different mechanisms at a local level through consultation with communities and with local government and with state governments.

The abolition of Regional Councils, he said, did not in any way preclude processes whereby Indigenous people themselves will in different areas, according to their own priorities, elect bodies and people to represent them, and the Government will, in the course of consulting different sections of the

¹ Evidence before the Senate Select Committee on Indigenous Affairs.

² Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination, *The New Arrangements*.

³ Transcript of the Prime Minister, the Hon. John Howard, MP, joint press conference with Senator Amanda Vanstone, Parliament House, Canberra, 15 April 2004.

⁴ Transcript of the Prime Minister, the Hon. John Howard, MP, joint press conference with Senator Amanda Vanstone, Parliament House, Canberra, 15 April 2004.

community, be very keen to consult any bodies that may emerge from that process.

Describing the functions of the new representative arrangements, the Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Senator Vanstone said:

In keeping with the Government's desire to engage at the community level, the new bodies are to act as the interface between communities and governments. They will help articulate community views and provide a framework for contributing to Regional Partnership Agreements.⁵

Simultaneously with the government's decision to abolish ATSIC, the Management Advisory Committee (MAC) of the Australian Public Service, chaired by the Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Dr Peter Shergold, launched a new policy of 'Connecting Government.' The policy was outlined in a document *Whole-of-Government Responses to Australia's Priority Challenges*.⁶

Formally launching the document, Dr Shergold said:

Now comes the biggest test of whether the rhetoric of connectivity can be marshalled into effective action. The Australian Government is about to embark on a bold experiment in implementing a whole-of-government approach to policy development and delivery. It is an approach on which my reputation, and many of my colleagues, will hang. I refer to the abolition of ATSIC and the embrace of a quite different approach to the administration of indigenous-specific programs and services.⁷

Subsequently, when the arrangements were under way, the Minister, Senator Vanstone, described them as 'a quiet revolution.'⁸

Refuting claims that 'mainstreaming' might be seen to be a return to the past, Dr Shergold said:

No new bureaucratic edifice is to be built to administer Aboriginal affairs separate from the responsibility of line agencies. 'Mainstreaming,' as it is now envisaged, may involve a step backwards - but it equally represents a bold step forward. It is the antithesis of the old departmentalism. It is a different approach, already piloted in a number of trial sites. Selected by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), eight communities have revealed a glimpse of what can be achieved through collegiate leadership, collaborative government and community partnerships.

From the perspective of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council, the creation of ATSI as the service delivery arm had already weakened the Council's case

⁵ 'Minister announces new representation arrangements', Press Statement by the Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Senator Vanstone, 29 June 2005.

⁶ Management Advisory Committee, Report No 4, 20 April 2004.

⁷ Dr Peter Shergold, Secretary Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet *Connecting Government, A speech to launch Connecting Government: Whole-of- Government Response to Australia's Priority Challenges* Management Advisory Committee, Report No 4.

⁸ Senator Amanda Vanstone, 'Address to the National Press Club', Canberra, 23 February 2005.

for a Regional Authority with full powers over programs and expenditure. It had already argued to the Review of ATSIC that ATSI and ATSIC should be re-joined so that the 'elected arm' of ATSIC could continue to influence the directions of program expenditure.

The prospective abolition of Regional Councils was a direct and immediate threat to the Council's aspirations towards better governance.