

REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENTS

SPEECH BY THE CHAIRMAN OF ATSIC AT THE UN WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

Madam Chair,

Distinguished members of the Working Group,

Indigenous brothers and sisters from other parts of the world.

The last twelve months have been difficult for Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

It is both comforting and sad for me to know how many of our indigenous brothers and sisters are concerned about what is happening in Australia.

Australia is a great country and we love our mother land.

However, Australia has in recent times lost its political way and direction.

Evil has crept into the body politic.

It is being fueled by a cocktail of anger, fear, and ignorance.

Disillusion with the major political parties has resulted in a backlash from regional Australia.

The most disadvantaged people in Australian society – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples- are among the chief scapegoats targeted by an increasingly vocal minority.

A new right wing political party has emerged.

It is called One Nation.

It is conducting a malicious campaign of disinformation against ATSIC.

The campaign—which centres on unsubstantiated allegations of corruption and massive monetary waste—is designed to underpin one of its key policy goals—the abolition of ATSIC.

But One Nation wants to go one step further.

It wants to abolish all special programs for Indigenous Australians.

It says, for instance, that it would legislate Native Title out of existence.

This would be unconstitutional.

But such details do not stop One Nation.

It is tapping into a seemingly rich vein of discontent with the policies of rapid change being pursued by our major political parties.

Many Australians—particularly in the rural and remote hinterlands—are hurting from the policies of economic rationalism and globalisation.

They are turning the economics and lifestyles associated with many of Australia's traditional primary industries on their head.

The policies are closing government agencies and services.

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Many rural and remote residents are seeing their towns die, their markets disappear to a wave of cheap imports, their young abandoning the family farm for the cities.

Many of our outback towns want no part of the global village.

Many of their residents, fearful about their own future, resent programs for Indigenous peoples.

They wrongly see them as extra benefits and privileges which they don't have.

They are constantly bombarded with false stories that billions of dollars have been poured into Indigenous communities with no tangible results.

There is evidence, thankfully, that the more racist elements in One Nation's platform are only important for a minority of those who support the party.

Nonetheless, at the recent Queensland election in June, One Nation won 11 seats in the State Parliament with the help of the incumbent conservative Government, which lost power in the process.

Recent opinion polls show One Nation's national support at around 13%.

This may see One Nation gain a substantial position of power in the national parliament, despite its minority status.

Regrettably, I have little positive to report in terms of the actions of the National Government in the face of this new right wing agenda.

The One Nation agenda is abhorrent but their agenda is very clear.

The Federal Government sends out mixed signals on indigenous affairs.

It continually undermines ATSIC and the principle of self-empowerment while publicly professing its commitment to the principles of the Commission

It does so by promoting a false debate about a lack of accountability in Indigenous affairs.

Indigenous organisations, which are among the most accountable in the country, are portrayed as being among the worst.

This feeds straight into the agenda being pursued by One Nation.

I will give you one example.

Recently the tabloid press mis-reported the cost of a conference organised by the Kimberley Land Council in West Australia.

The Government did not wait to check the facts, which showed the cost was within industry guidelines.

It seized the opportunity to publicly justify a Special Audit of all conferences, seminars and meetings resourced by ATSIC over the last two years.

No such accountability requirements are imposed on the activities of mainstream agencies.

The Special Audit is a dangerous and costly act of discrimination against our people.

We are being singled out from the other government agencies.

No matter the findings, it will perpetuate the myth that every black dollar somehow ends up in the red..

At the same time the Government rails at what it terms the "Aboriginal industry."

with claims that many Aboriginal leaders do not represent their people.

We, it seems, should be a silent minority.

The National Government has quarantined two thirds of our budget from the discretion of the Board of Commissioners and has also taken vital resources from the ATSIC budget to fund its own Office of Indigenous Policy.

The Government has presided over the passage of amendments to native title legislation which result in a substantial reduction of Indigenous common law property rights.

Recently, the Government shut Indigenous leaders out of the deal that was finally struck on amendments to the Native Title Act. But it had the time to consult its mining and pastoral industry constituency.

As a consequence Indigenous people will have less say about exploration and mining on traditional country.

We will have no effective voice about the effect of exploration and mining on native title on pastoral leases.

There is concern about the continuing prospect of extinguishment of native title and the limited access of native titleholders to pastoral leases.

The outcome of the legislation will be to limit the future well being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples .

We will be unable to fully protect those property rights which underpin our cultures and our social and economic well-being.

Moreover native title is to be the subject of state based land regimes.

There is no history of sympathy to Indigenous interests by state and territory governments.

Not only has the National Government reduced indigenous property rights it also threatens to step back from national leadership in the protection of Indigenous heritage.

Legislation currently before the national Parliament would see the setting of state minimum standards in a way which lends no confidence to the serious objective of protecting Indigenous heritage and culture.

Moreover, there will be no recourse to reconsideration of state based decisions at the national level.

If the national government's record in respect of Indigenous rights is poor it has taken few initiatives to act on those matters such as housing, employment, education and health which it has set as the Government's priority.

I acknowledge that some Ministers – notably Dr. Kemp, Dr. Herron and Jocelyn Newmann – have fought hard against the odds to protect expenditure on those indigenous programs for which they are responsible.

Dr. Wooldridge is to be congratulated on those important initiatives he has been able to take in the health area.

But overall the Government's commitment to budget restraint has impacted at least as much on Indigenous people as on the rest of the Australian community.

But we have not lost heart, Madam Chair.

We have developed a new approach to economic development for consideration by the Government, an approach based on partnership with the private sector.

We believe we need to combine Indigenous policy making with the skills of the private sector in ensuring that we maximise the use of the resources available for business programs and home lending.

We have embarked on an ambitious program for the reform of Aboriginal legal services which has received government support.

We have reviewed the operation of the ATSIC Act.

Important recommendations have been made to strengthen the operation of ATSIC at the regional level including through regional agreements and regional authorities.

We are working constructively with government to implement the review with a view to ensuring a positive and timely response.

Madam Chair, Indigenous peoples in Australia have been fighting for 200 years for our rights.

In the early 1990's we seemed an ace away from achieving justice.

My faith in the majority of my fellow Australians leaves me still in hope that the evil in the body politic of Australia will be lanced.

While there is evil in the body politic there is also good in the majority of Australians.

Many hundreds of thousands of Australians took part in National Sorry Day on 26th May this year to mark the separation of Indigenous children from their families.

There has been an immense groundswell of support from the community for the protection of native title rights.

The people's movement for reconciliation is growing in strength.

Its growth demonstrates there is still a strong sense of common decency running through Australian society.

Thank you