

WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

11th SESSION

19 - 30 JULY 1993

MR. JACK BEETSON

THE NATIONAL COALITION OF ABORIGINAL
ORGANISATIONS (N.C.A.O.), AUSTRALIA

GENEVA

JULY 1993

MADAM CHAIRMAN,

ONCE AGAIN WE COME TO THIS FORUM WITH LITTLE GOOD NEWS REGARDING NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS IN OUR COUNTRY. THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL POSITION OF AUSTRALIAS INDIGENOUS PEOPLES HAS NOT CHANGED SIGNIFICANTLY SINCE OUR VISIT TO THIS FORUM IN 1992. IN FACT MADAM CHAIRMAN, THERE HAS BEEN VERY LITTLE POSITIVE CHANGE SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THIS WORKING GROUP TEN YEARS AGO.

THE N.C.A.O WISH TO RECORD THEIR APPRECIATION TO THE WORKING GROUP CHAIRED BY YOURSELF MADAM DAES, FOR THE HARD WORK IT HAS INVOLVED ITSELF IN DURING THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A DRAFT DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES - MADAM DAES THE N.C.A.O SUPPORTS THE TERM "PEOPLES" IN THIS DRAFT WITH NO QUALIFICATIONS.

THE NATIONAL COALITION OF ABORIGINAL ORGANISATION (N.C.A.O) INTENDS TO FOCUS ON THE FOLLOWING ISSUES:

THE COUNCIL FOR ABORIGINAL RECONCILIATION; THE LEGISLATIVE CHANGES TO THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLAND COMMISSION ACT; THE MABO HIGH COURT DECISION AND SELF DETERMINATION.

THE N.C.A.O HAS SUPPORTED A.T.S.I.C SINCE ITS INCEPTION AND HAS RECOGNISED IT AS THE PEAK ADMINISTRATIVE AND SERVICE DELIVERY ORGANISATION FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLES AND WE ARE PLEASED TO EXTEND OUR SUPPORT TO THE RECENT LEGISLATIVE CHANGES TO THE A.T.S.I.C ACT AS A RESULT OF BROAD CONSULTATIONS WITH THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY.

THE MOST NOTABLE CHANGES WERE THE DEVOLUTION OF POWER TO THE REGIONAL COUNCILS INSTEAD OF THE TOP DOWN APPROACH, THE BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS CAN NOW DECIDE WHICH PROGRAMS IT WILL FUND, WHEN PREVIOUSLY THE MINISTER HELD THIS POWER. THE BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS AND THE REGIONAL COUNCIL CHAIRPERSONS ARE NOW FULL TIME PAID POSITIONS. THESE ARE VERY POSITIVE STEPS FORWARD. HOWEVER THERE IS ONE CHANGE TO THE LEGISLATION THAT WE DO NOT SUPPORT WHICH IS THE REDUCTION OF REGIONAL COUNCILS FROM SIXTY TO THIRTY SIX.

THIS ALTERATION WILL CREATE AN ENORMOUS WORKLOAD ON THE ELECTED COUNCILLORS AND MINIMISE ABORIGINAL PEOPLES ACCESS TO THE A.T.S.I.C ADDITIONALLY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT CONTINUES TO MAINTAIN THAT ABORIGINAL PEOPLES MUST REGISTER WITH THE AUSTRALIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION TO BE ELIGIBLE TO VOTE IN A.T.S.I.C ELECTIONS. THE N.C.A.O CONTENDS THAT THIS IS A DENIAL OF OUR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE A.T.S.I.C ELECTION PROCESS AND IS ASSIMILATIONIST.

THE COUNCIL FOR ABORIGINAL RECONCILIATION (C.A.R) AS MENTIONED PREVIOUSLY AT THIS FORUM, IS THE FALL BACK POSITION TO THE BARUNGA STATEMENT (THE 1988 COMMITMENT TO NEGOTIATE A TREATY) AND HAS NOT MADE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TO THE ASPIRATIONS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLES REGARDING CONTROL OVER OUR LANDS, TERRITORIES AND NATURAL RESOURCES. ALTHOUGH THE (C.A.R) HAS INSTIGATED TWO PROJECTS WORTH MENTIONING, THEY ARE, THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDY CIRCLE KITS AIMED AT EDUCATING NON-ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS ABOUT ABORIGINAL CULTURE, HISTORY AND POLITICS. THE OTHER IS A SERIES

OF ONE MINUTE TELEVISION INTERVIEWS WITH PROMINENT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WHO REPRESENT ORGANISATIONS ACROSS THE NATION. THESE INTERVIEWS PROJECT A VERY POSITIVE IMAGE OF ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS AND THAT IN ITSELF REPRESENTS, WELCOME RELIEF FROM THE USUAL NEGATIVE MEDIA PROPAGANDA.

HOWEVER MADAM CHAIR IT MUST BE NOTED THAT THE (C.A.R) HAS BEEN THE TOPIC OF MUCH DEBATE WITHIN THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY REGARDING ITS POWER TO RESTORE TO US OUR BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS THAT WE ONCE ENJOYED. THE (N.C.A.O) MAINTAINS ITS SUPPORT FOR THE PROCESS HOWEVER WE ARE CONCERNED THAT IT IS VERY VAGUE IN ITS TERMS OF REFERENCE AND THERE IS NO GUARANTEE FROM THE FEDERAL PARLIAMENT THAT IT WILL IMPLEMENT THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE (C.A.R'S) FINAL REPORT.

MADAM DAES, THE NATIONAL COALITION OF ABORIGINAL ORGANISATIONS WOULD LIKE TO RECOGNISE THE POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION THAT THE KEATING LABOR GOVERNMENT, IS MAKING TO THE QUESTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE WAY THEY ARE ADDRESSING THE HIGH COURTS DECISION ON "NATIVE TITLE".

THE MABO HIGH COURT DECISION HAS CREATED A DILEMMA FOR THE FEDERAL AND STATE GOVERNMENTS AND A GLIMMER OF HOPE FOR AUSTRALIANS INDIGENOUS PEOPLES WHO IN THE MAJORITY ARE A HOMELESS, LANDLESS PEOPLES WHO RESIDE AT THE VERY BOTTOM RUNG OF AUSTRALIA'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC LADDER.

THE MABO HIGH COURT DECISION WAS A SIGNIFICANT STEP FORWARD. THE EXISTENCE OF INHERENT PRE EXISTING INDIGENOUS RIGHTS TO LANDS WAS RECOGNISED BY THE AUSTRALIAN LEGAL SYSTEM FOR THE FIRST TIME.

HOWEVER, THE DECISION FAILED TO ACKNOWLEDGE OUR PREEXISTING POLITICAL RIGHTS. THE POLITICAL NEGOTIATIONS ON ISSUES ARISING OUT OF THE MABO DECISION ARE NOT BEING CONDUCTED IN THE CONTEXT OF PRINCIPLES OF INDIGENOUS SELF DETERMINATION. THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL AND STATE GOVERNMENTS WILL IMPOSE A SOLUTION ON US. WE ARE NOT EQUAL PARTNERS IN THE PROCESS. HYSTERICAL RACIST COMMENTS ARE BEING LAUNCHED AGAINST OUR RIGHTS.

EDUCATION IS AN ISSUE OF MAJOR CONCERN IN OUR COUNTRY IN PARTICULAR THE RIGHT FOR ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONTROLLED SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES TO UNCONDITIONALLY DETERMINE THEIR OWN CURRICULUM.

HILST THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAS SUBSTANTIALLY INCREASED FUNDING TO ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY EDUCATION CENTRES FOR ADDITIONAL STAFF AND AWARD WAGE STRUCTURES. THE FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING (D.E.E.T) OFFERS VERY LITTLE CAPITAL FUNDING TO IMPROVE FACILITIES; CONSEQUENTLY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE ARE LEARNING IN OVERCROWDED SUB-STANDARD FACILITIES WHICH MINIMISES INSTEAD OF MAXIMISING POSITIVE OUTCOMES.

MADAM CHAIRMAN,

THE N.C.A.O INSISTS THAT SELF DETERMINATION IN RELATION TO OUR EDUCATION CURRICULUM IS A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT AND WHILE THAT RIGHT DOES NOT EXIST AND OUR FACILITIES ARE NOT EQUAL TO THOSE OF NON ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS, EDUCATION FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WILL

CONTINUE TO BE ASSIMILATIONIST AND CULTURALLY BIASED.

FINALLY THE NATIONAL COALITION OF ABORIGINAL ORGANISATIONS WOULD LIKE TO TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO REMIND THE PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA MR. PAUL KEATING OF HIS STATEMENTS DURING HIS SPEECH TO LAUNCH THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND CALL UPON HIM TO EXPEDITE THE PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THESE STATEMENTS.

MADAM CHAIRMAN,

WE WOULD LIKE TO CONCLUDE BY THANKING YOU PERSONALLY AND THE OTHER DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THE WORKING GROUP FOR YOUR COMMITMENT AND EFFORTS DURING THIS ELEVEN YEAR PROCESS. WE WISH YOU WELL.

THANK YOU MADAM CHAIRMAN