

**UNITED NATIONS**

**Working Group  
on Indigenous Populations.**

**SIXTEENTH SESSION**

**27 - 31 July  
1998.**

**Intervention by Mr. Francis Tapin,  
President  
National Secretariat of Torres Strait Islander Organisations  
AUSTRALIA**

**Agenda Item 4. 28.7.98  
a.m.**

**Review of Developments.**

WGIP 98/OCE. Aus/7

Greetings

I am Francis Tapim, Torres Strait Islander.

I am proud and honoured as President of the National Secretariat of Torres Strait Islander Organisations in Australia to address this most important forum.

This is the first time at this forum that a non government organisation has spoken on behalf of the 25,000 Torres Strait Islanders who live on the Australian mainland. Unfortunately, the Chairman of the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board, Mr. Terry Waia, is unable to be here. But such is the partnership between the Secretariat and the Board that I can speak also on his behalf.

Our Secretariat has only recently been established to represent the interests of Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland.

We appreciate the decision of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission to fund the establishment of the national secretariat and to provide capital for its own building, which will provide an economic base for us.

The aim of the Secretariat is to provide a professional service for members. It will have a focus on economic development involving an income generating asset through the Secretariat's own building; and a program of assistance for Torres Strait Islanders to tap into funds available for this purpose.

As a non government organisation we seek to work with Government to chart our own destiny alongside our indigenous brothers and sisters. We seek equal access to Government programs, and to preserve and promote our distinctive culture as Torres Strait Islanders.

As Torres Strait Islanders we assert our rights as a separate race of indigenous people in Australia. We seek definitional distinction from other indigenous Australians on the basis of differences in language, customs, traditions and heritage. Our own unique *Ailan Kastom* has statutory recognition in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989*.

Torres Strait Islanders who live on the mainland wish to maintain the strong ties to our homelands, to recognise that we are 'one' with all Torres Strait Islanders. These attachments to the Torres Strait derive from our culture and our communal ownership of our homelands, links which, as traditional custodians, cannot be destroyed or taken away.

But historical circumstances have, in fact, created different social and economic environments for Torres Strait Islanders living in the Torres Strait and those living on the Australian mainland, resulting in particular needs, which we seek to address.

We are conscious that on the mainland we are an indigenous minority within a minority. Because we have left our homelands, we live on Aboriginal land. We acknowledge this.

Just as Torres Strait Islanders are the traditional inhabitants and original owners of the islands to the north of Australia, where we have lived since time immemorial, Aboriginal people are the original occupiers and owners of the Australian mainland and Tasmania. Torres Strait Islander people give full recognition to the rights of Aboriginal people as traditional owners.

While Torres Strait Islanders may not have experienced the same dislocation from our traditional lands as that suffered by Aboriginal people, together we face the difficulties associated with limited economic development opportunities, the lack of infrastructure, and the need for health, education and other social services.

I come from the Island of Mer, in the Torres Strait. You will have heard of the Island of Mer. You may know it as Murray Island. It is the homeland of Australian native title.

For me, and others, the words of the highest court in Australia handed down in the Historic Mabo judgment have special meaning.

In 1992, the High Court declared that:

"the Meriam people are entitled as against the whole world to possession, occupation, use and enjoyment of the lands of the Murray Islands" in accordance with our laws and customs.

My very dear friend, Eddie Mabo, was instrumental in bringing this about through his unrelenting search for justice.

Now a recent decision of the Federal Court has recognised that for certain people on Croker Island, in the Northern Territory, native title can exist over the sea and sea-bed in accordance with traditional laws and customs.

For Torres Strait Islanders, for whom the sea is part of our tradition and heritage, this is an important decision.

These events touch me deeply. They recognise the depth and strength of our culture and our status as indigenous people in Australian society.

Unfortunately that status in recent times has come under challenge from some political quarters who would seek to deny us the equality we have achieved. We must remain vigilant – Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal together – to protect our rights and to ensure that the tide of change is not turned back on us.

I make these few remarks to tell you of some important things which are happening in Australia today in relation to indigenous affairs and for Torres Strait Islanders, wherever they live.

Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland are concerned to ensure equality of access to services, recognition of our status as indigenous people, the maintenance of links with our homelands, and our empowerment within the structure of indigenous affairs within Australia. We seek autonomy and the power to make our own decisions on those matters of vital concern to us.

One of the most significant developments for us involves proposed new arrangements for Torres Strait autonomy. These arrangements have been recommended by a Parliamentary Committee which recently presented its report to the Parliament. Among its recommendations is the creation of a Torres Strait Regional Assembly, representing all residents of the Torres Strait.

The Committee's report has important implications for Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland. The Committee has recommended improvements in the structures associated with Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland. Among its recommendations are that the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board be elected and that its Chairperson be a Commissioner on the Board of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. This would give us a direct voice on the Commission. It would help to remove some of the concerns we have about missing out on ATSIC programs and funding.

While we would like to be linked with our homelands in this autonomy, it has been decided we must live within mainland structures and rely on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission for the services and programs that assist us.

Therefore we must improve the arrangements on the mainland which determine the way we interact with the Commission and Regional Councils.

The legislative arrangements establishing Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board and the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs complement ATSIC and its regional councils as the structures which represent and empower indigenous peoples in mainland Australia. They were part of special arrangements for Torres Strait Islanders which were incorporated in the original ATSIC Act.

TSIAB's function is to provide advice to the Minister and to ATSIC on furthering the cultural, social and economic advancement of Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait area. A great deal has happened since those arrangements were first made in the ATSIC Act.

In the last few months, TSIAB has set out to develop a framework for new directions, to give us a stronger voice. The National Secretariat of Torres Strait Islander Organisations is now an important new mechanism for consulting with Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland and as an adjunct to decision-making.

Recently TSIAB released its strategic plan, which provides a basis for going forward and negotiating our future. In that plan TSIAB identified our goal in the following terms.

**"To secure for Torres Strait Islanders our inherent and special rights as a separate race of indigenous people and, in recognition of these rights, to ensure that Torres Strait Islanders have equality of opportunity and access to services within Australian society."**

The Commonwealth Government has indicated its intention to do something about the fundamental causes of Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal disadvantage – in health, education, employment, infrastructure, economic empowerment – and to redirect priorities to achieve it. The strategic plan outlines priorities for mainland Torres Strait Islanders.

A fundamental issue for Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland is equitable access to ATSIC services, programs and funding. Recently, a review has been completed of Torres Strait Islander access to services provided by ATSIC.

While it is important not to duplicate services, it is imperative that ATSIC addresses the specific needs of Torres Strait Islander people as a separate indigenous group.

One of the most significant things to come out of the report is the recommendation to provide a national program for Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland to sustain our culture and cultural activities. The report recommends that funding for a national Torres Strait Islander-specific cultural support program be established and administered by OTSIA.

A recent Review of the ATSIC Act has concluded that the interests of Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland should continue to be represented by ATSIC through the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board.

The report observed that Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland have the same rights of participation in ATSIC programs as Aboriginal people, and the same right to seek representation on Regional Councils and the Commission.

In March we held our first national planning meeting involving the TSRA, OTSIA, TSIAB and, for the first time, the National Secretariat.

The seventh National Torres Strait Islanders Seminar/Workshop saw more than 140 delegates come together to plan future strategies on a number of significant issues.

Among the issues discussed were greater autonomy, the National Secretariat of Torres Strait Islander Organisations, Native Title, Economic Development, Customary Adoption, and Culture and Education.

The 8<sup>th</sup> National Seminar/workshop will be held in Broome in October. Planning has already begun for the Seminar.

The workshop is an important event on the calendar each year for Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland.

The Federal Government has confirmed its commitment to reconciliation. We look forward to achieving positive outcomes from the reconciliation process. How it continues into the future will be the real test of this nation's commitment to equality and justice for all.

If it is to be meaningful, it must be the result of a real coming together, a real recognition of what has happened in the past, and a commitment to overcome the many disadvantages indigenous people still face in this country.

We, as Torres Strait Islanders, are anxious to ensure that reconciliation involves recognition of the special and distinct culture of Torres Strait Islanders.

All Australians must now come to recognise the sense of destiny involved in recognition of our shared future. We all recognise the significance of this forum in promoting indigenous rights and interests throughout the world in a real sense of coming together for the good of indigenous people everywhere, united in one brotherhood.

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**Agenda Item 5.**

**Indigenous Peoples:  
Education and Language**

## **Indigenous Peoples: Education and Language**

**Madam Chair**

This is an important topic for indigenous people. In this short presentation, I seek to put it in the context of our survival as a separate race of indigenous people. There is a strong connection between education, language and culture. Education underpins our economic participation and contributes to our equality in mainstream society. It is bound up with how mainstream society understands and recognises us. It is bound up with being prepared to take our position in society on the basis of equity. It prepares us for jobs and therefore for economic development opportunities to lift us out of the poverty cycle and dependence on Government assistance.

It is difficult to talk about education and language without acknowledging its basic foundation to all these things and the way it acts as a lever for overcoming our disadvantage. But needs to be properly undertaken. It must take into account the circumstances of our people – the special circumstances of indigenous people.

We are disadvantaged in many ways.

- We do not have the same income levels as others in society.
- For us and our children, English is often a second language
- Lack of recognition of our cultural heritage inhibits the teaching process
- The education process needs to instil pride in our children.

Reinvigorating education for our children therefore requires recognition of our present circumstances, our history, our leaders, ourselves as indigenous people.

For me the issue is highlighted by the way we in Australia now celebrate Mabo Day – the birth of native title through the court action undertaken by Eddie Mabo and others

Eddie Mabo is recognised as a leader. In celebrating his achievement, our children learn about him and are inspired by him.

In learning about him, we are acknowledging our own history, and through his actions we better understand the circumstances of our past and our future destiny.

Thus education is about a sense of indigenous identity.

To retain this identity, we need to maintain traditional language, teach it in our homes and schools, so that their own self-esteem and identity are elevated.



Armed with knowledge of what we want to achieve through education, we must work out the structures, curriculum and course content to achieve better education outcomes for our people.

Knowing what we want to achieve through education is empowering us to control the education of our children and future generations.

Because in the Torres Strait situation, island communities are increasingly becoming fragmented, individuals experience a severe sense of loss of their unique cultural identity. They need to be inspired to retain it through the education system.

Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland are dispersed widely and risk losing contact with each other. They need reinforcement. This comes from community, a sense of belonging to each other, and through the education system which helps a new generation to reinforce and understand their identity.

Identity must gain prominence alongside other educational issues. Otherwise we are swamped, and our language and culture will die out. A sense of indigenous identity must be integrated in the education system

There is a parental and family responsibility involved, but that does not take the place of formal education when children are away from their homes all day

It is not just about educating our own children, but the wider Australian community so that they better understand our heritage and culture and give their own reinforcement to the education process.

It is necessary, therefore, that the nation's formal education system understands and meets the changing needs and interests of Torres Strait Islanders, taking into account the full dimension of their social circumstances, of which attachment to culture is an integral part.

Because culture is what makes Torres Strait Islander people unique, there is a need for a comprehensive and continuing approach to practise, preserve and maintain what is uniquely Torres Strait culture.

It is important that links be maintained with the Torres Strait to ensure the preservation of our culture, especially for the new generation.

None of this can be brought about effectively if there is no national strategy based on information and continuing research. Such a strategy is essential to improve educational outcomes for Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland.

To bring this about requires working closely and cooperatively with State education Departments. Torres Strait Islander teachers need to be involved in policy-making and have input into the development of curricula for Torres Strait Islander children.

We are ultimately dependent on the education system, and in Australia this means the responsibility of State and Territory Governments. Because the Commonwealth also

has a broad national policy role in education, it can promote strategic planning and innovative initiatives.

Clearly educational institutions have had difficulty responding to our needs, and the rate of change therefore has been slow.

Because of these circumstances, islanders ultimately face reduced opportunities and life chances for successful participation in both education and employment

Many positive steps have been taken but there is an overriding and compelling need for more Torres Strait Islander involvement in decision making in relation to education.

While funds have been made available for innovative programs to improve the delivery of educational services and to improve educational outcomes for indigenous peoples, surveys have shown that indigenous people remain the most disadvantaged group in the schooling system.

There is a need for a concerted approach by everyone, including States and Territories with primary responsibility for the provision of education services.

The three keys are:

- access,
- participation,
- outcomes

Add to this the need for a strategic approach across all education sectors, better coordination and cooperation among educational institutions, with indigenous people fully involved in determining the policies and programs.

Before it can effectively respond, the education system needs to comprehend the aspirations and objectives of indigenous people. Better understanding will be supported by greater dialogue between the service providers and indigenous people.

In Australia we have suggested the creation of a new national independent body to oversee education for indigenous people. There is an urgency to develop a national strategy, with indigenous input a crucial factor in its success.

The overriding aim is to achieve access and participation rates for Torres Strait Islander students across all sectors of education that are more equitable with other Australians, and to ensure the education system has meaning for indigenous people.

Academic programs and practices will need to be adjusted progressively to bring this about and, in particular, to remove the feeling of intimidation indigenous people often feel with government structures.

The disadvantages indigenous children face through economic background are not always recognised and understood, especially when combined with their cultural background.

Indigenous children often also have low levels of literacy and numeracy skills which directly inhibits their access, participation and academic outcomes in the schooling process.

Thus the education system needs to be connected to the particular needs of indigenous people in a more creative way. Programs need to be tailored directly to these needs and not seen as a modified afterthoughts to existing programs.

Otherwise children can become lost to the system and their disadvantages perpetuated throughout their entire school experience and their later lives.

It is not enough to say 'the answer lies in your hands'; it must be a cooperative effort, government, schools, teachers, families, children – all working together.

For Torres Strait Islanders, it is important that the centrality of cultural issues transcends all other areas. Indigenous children must be encouraged to practise and maintain their culture, history and identity. Community people also need to be engaged in the teaching of islander culture, history and contemporary societies. This may be extended to giving the wider community a greater appreciation of island culture.

Maintenance, awareness and recognition of Torres Strait culture are very important. Children and parents want to know about the elements that threaten or erode their cultures. They want to safeguard the traditions and practices that they impart to their children at home, thus reinforcing the significance of communication within the home and exposure to wider communications influences.

It is not enough to say we need to preserve their distinctiveness as an indigenous group. It calls for continuous nurturing of individual islander identity in times of converging and competing cultures.

As well as preparing indigenous children for the future, education, above all, should aim for a better representation of who we really are and reinforce positive attitudes. It is that knowledge and understanding which is the foundation of our identity as indigenous people and our continued survival as a separate race of indigenous people, proud of who we are and secure in our future.