


Anna Bligh MP

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LEGAL, CONSTITUTIONAL AND
ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW
COMMITTEE



**Queensland
Government**

Minister for Education

20 August 2003

Ms Karen Struthers MP
Chair
Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Dear Ms Struthers *Karen,*

Thank you for your letter regarding the *Inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Participation in Queensland's Democratic Process*.

Please find attached Education Queensland's submission to the Inquiry. I sincerely apologise for the delay in Education Queensland's response.

Should you require any further information please contact Ms Claudia Whitton in my office on telephone (07) 3235 4366.

Yours sincerely


Anna Bligh MP
Minister for Education



Response to
HANDS ON PARLIAMENT –
A Parliamentary Committee Inquiry Into
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Peoples' Participation in Queensland's
Democratic Process

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Introduction

The ways in which participation in the democratic process happens are fundamental to the rights of individuals so they have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. People participate in diverse ways at different times and through different structures within their communities with varying patterns of equality and inequality. Participation is particularly salient for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose history reflects substantial exclusion from the political process. The results of which continue to manifest inordinately across a range of social and economic measures.

Increasing indigenous peoples participation in the democratic processes of Government is a critical step towards ensuring better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. To this end, Education Queensland is firmly committed to providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people with the foundations for social equity, informed citizenship and quality of life.

Education Queensland's Strategic Plan 2001-2005 promotes a vision for all Queensland students to become active participants in community, economic and political life. Related to this strategic direction is the strategy *Partners for Success*. This strategy links schools with their communities and families, and programs that value diversity and services for alternative education.

Education Queensland provides initiatives critical to reducing a range of social problems encountered by Indigenous youth and their communities and to improving social cohesion. Within this context of achieving quality educational experiences that have broader impact, there is a need to consider the issues presented in the Hands on Parliament issues paper and their implications for Education Queensland.

Barriers to Participation

1. What are some of the reasons that Indigenous peoples are underrepresented in the Queensland Parliament?

2. What are some of the reasons that Indigenous people might choose not to be involved in Queensland's Parliament and government?

3. What factors make it difficult for Indigenous people to participate in Queensland's system of democracy?

- Past policies of dispersal, segregation, protection and assimilation have resulted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities being excluded from decision-making processes.
- A flow-on effect is that many Indigenous communities have diverse cultural knowledge and or experience of the democratic processes which is different and additional to the current democratic systems and processes operating today.
- The history of engagement between the State and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples means that relationships with Government institutions are often viewed with caution and contributes to the limited participation of Indigenous people in the processes of governance.
- Other factors that impede participation include low literacy levels in the adult population, geographic isolation and rurality.
- It is a fundamental precept that individuals have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. In this light, Indigenous peoples should be afforded access to the democratic processes, which recognise their historic disengagement from such processes and actively seek to include them.

STRATEGY ONE – Enhance Participation in the Existing Processes

4. Is more civics education and voter education targeted specifically to Indigenous people, necessary?

- Education Queensland currently delivers a number of syllabi that addresses issues related to the education of democratic process in schools. Civics education is embedded within *The Studies of Society and Environment 1 to 10 Syllabus* as is a range of Modules developed by the Queensland Studies Authority, for example, *Active Citizens*, *Australian Governments: Australia's Democracy*.
- Continuation of the annual *National Schools Constitutional Convention* with funding made available by the *Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST)*, provides engagement of senior students in informed discussion about contemporary constitutional issues. Education Queensland selects two Indigenous students every year to attend the National Convention in Canberra.
- There is a need for civics education and voter education to specifically target Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. In this sense, it may be useful to develop materials specific to the local context that engage students with the democratic systems as they interface with the variables introduced by cultural differences.
- If schools are to prepare children for participatory democratic life, then school governance, structure, curriculum, and instruction must model democratic ideals. For these ideals to survive, education must bring young people together to explore the meaning of democratic life. Schools must strive to model such a life and must offer students equitable opportunities for the individual achievement necessary for full participation in democratic society.

5. What other strategies might promote greater participation by Indigenous people in the existing democratic process?

Because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are distinct peoples with distinct cultures and their own values, asserting some recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governing structures could enhance the issue of promoting greater participation with existing democratic processes.

STRATEGY TWO – Direct Input into Parliament

6. Would avenues for bodies, which represent Indigenous people to have direct input into Parliament, enhance the participation of Indigenous peoples in the Parliament?

- Such processes would enhance participation because under existing arrangements the only avenue for direct Aboriginal representation in the Queensland parliament is through the electoral process.
- There are numerous peak organizations representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Queensland. These organizations provide a ready base to engage Indigenous peoples and communities concerning major policy and governance issues affecting their interests.

7. Is it a good idea to enable bodies, which represent Indigenous peoples to have direct input into Parliament? Why or why not?

- At the same time, it must be noted that there is also tremendous heterogeneity in the Indigenous communities of Queensland with both mainland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples residing in this jurisdiction. Within these two groupings there is even more diversity with culturally and linguistically distinct subgroups and clan structures.
- As such, the use of peak bodies should be relied upon as one strategy among many underpinned by a comprehensive and systematic framework through which to engage Indigenous peoples in the democratic process.

8. If a representative body with direct input into Parliament was to be established how should it operate?

- As a government agency, it would be inappropriate for Education Queensland to have a position on this issue. This is a matter for broader community debate.

STRATEGY THREE – An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Assembly

9. Would an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Assembly contribute to the participation of Indigenous people in the democratic process in Queensland. See 8

10. Is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Assembly a good idea? Why or why not? See 8

11. If an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Assembly was to be established, how should it operate? See 8

STRATEGY FOUR – Dedicated Seats

12. *Would dedicated seats enhance the participation of Indigenous people in the democratic process in Queensland?* See 8

13. *Are dedicated seats a good idea? Why or why not?* See 8

14. *If dedicated seats were to be introduced, how should they operate?* See 8

15. *Should there be a referendum about the introduction of dedicated seats?* See 8

STRATEGY FIVE – Changes to the Electoral process

16. *Should Queensland's electoral system seek to achieve representation of minority groups in Queensland?* See 8

17. *Should the electoral system be reviewed to ensure that it is the most effective electoral system to represent the diverse interest of the Queensland community?* See 8

18. *Would a different electoral system be likely to ensure greater representation of Indigenous peoples?* See 8

General Considerations

19. What other strategies could be used to enhance the participation of Indigenous people in the democratic process in Queensland?

- At the secondary and tertiary levels, strategies that would enhance the participation of Indigenous peoples in the democratic process could include two levels. These include:
 - a) Technical competence – students learn to master new knowledge and ideas about global, state and local issues, to understand and become conversant with, facts and concepts. This is the stretching of the mind to a technical competence.
 - b) Integrating diversity for the purpose of decision making - training to analyse and ask the right questions, to choose, judge, consider certain political issues. This will increase the application and extension of knowledge.

20. What strategies or combination of strategies would best achieve enhanced participation of Indigenous peoples in the democratic process in Queensland?

- Promote active and representative participation toward enabling Indigenous community members to meaningfully influence the decisions that affect their lives, will contribute to greater participation in the democratic process.
 - Engage community members in learning about and understanding community issues, and the economic, social, environmental, political, psychological, and other impacts associated with alternative courses of action.
 - Incorporate the diverse interests and cultures of the Indigenous community in the community development process.
 - Work actively to enhance the leadership capacity of Indigenous community members, leaders, and groups within the community.
 - Be open to using the full range of action strategies above, to work toward the long term sustainability and well being of the community.
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