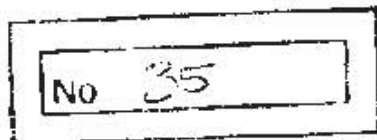


Hon John Mickel MP
Member for Logan



Queensland
Government

Your ref: Spec 55
Our ref: MC05/0967
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Minister for Energy and
Minister for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Policy

24 NOV 2005

Dr Lesley Clark MP
Chair
Legal, Constitutional and
Administrative Review Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000



Dear Dr Clark

Thank you for your letter of 12 July 2005 in relation to the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee's inquiry into young people's engagement in democracy in Queensland.

The inquiry is an important first step in identifying strategies to increase the engagement of all young Queenslanders with formal democratic processes. As such, the inquiry represents an important opportunity to investigate the specific circumstances impacting on the engagement of young Indigenous Queenslanders and build on the committee's previous work in this area - *Hands on Parliament: A parliamentary committee inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation in Queensland's democratic processes* (Hands on Parliament report).

The Indigenous population is relatively young (27.2 per cent are in the 12-24 years age group, compared to 18.2 per cent in the non-Indigenous population). Indigenous young people are also likely to be more profoundly affected by the factors identified in the inquiry's discussion paper as contributing to low levels of engagement than their non-Indigenous counterparts.

In addition, many young Indigenous Queenslanders also contend with the following:

- The relatively low priority accorded to democratic participation in the face of clearly identified levels of Indigenous disadvantage, including high rates of mortality and morbidity, poverty and chronic social problems.
- Greater feelings of alienation and exclusion from mainstream political processes, including in some cases a profound distrust of government and its institutions.
- The ambivalence of many parents and Elders towards mainstream political processes.
- Poor literacy levels and a lack of understanding of basic enrolment and voting procedures.

Level 17
61 Mary Street Brisbane Queensland 4000
PO Box 15216 City East
Queensland 4002 Australia
Telephone - Energy +61 7 3225 1861
Telephone - ATSIP +61 7 3227 7537
Facsimile +61 7 3225 1878
Email energyandatsip@minister.qld.gov.au

- The impact of traditional authority structures on young people's participation in community-based civic processes where Elders rather than young people are the primary participants.
- The higher proportion of Indigenous young people living in rural/remote areas and the effect of geographic isolation on young people's engagement with formal democratic processes. However, in this regard the committee should note that while geographic isolation appears to be a factor detrimentally impacting on Indigenous young people's engagement with state and federal processes, young people from isolated areas are more likely to participate in local government and community-based civic processes than their urban counterparts. By contrast, their urban counterparts are likely to be disengaged from all four avenues of civic participation: state, federal and local governments and community-based.

In this context, the committee may wish to consider the importance of the following matters in developing its recommendations:

- acknowledging and being responsive to the diverse range of circumstances and experiences of Indigenous youth, including specific cultural and socio-economic issues impacting on their lives
- recognising that participation in youth-specific or community-based civic activities may lead to increased participation in formal democratic processes and therefore ought to form part of any long-term strategy to improve democratic engagement
- identifying ways to build on the participation of Indigenous young people in some areas of the state in local government and community-based civic processes
- using sport as a mechanism to encourage greater levels of civic participation, including using young Indigenous sports personalities as 'ambassadors'
- ensuring that current engagement mechanisms, such as those being implemented in response to relevant recommendations of the Hands on Parliament report, are meeting the needs of Indigenous young people and are, in fact, reaching those young people
- identifying how existing mechanisms can be linked to broader initiatives focused on youth development and the creation of social capital
- ensuring that all departments with responsibilities for developing policies around youth issues make genuine and appropriate efforts to engage with young people about the issues that impact on their lives

Each of these issues is discussed in more detail in the attached issues paper, which has been prepared by the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy (DATSIP). I hope that the issues paper provides the committee with an initial frame of reference for further inquiries into the specific issues impacting on Indigenous young people.

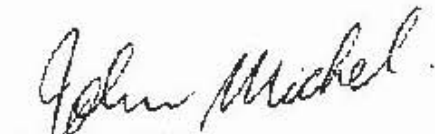
The committee may also wish to consider the relevance of *Partnerships Queensland: Future directions framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy in Queensland 2005–10* (Partnerships Queensland) to this issue. As outlined previously, a relatively low priority is accorded to democratic participation by Indigenous youth in the face of clearly identified levels of socio-economic disadvantage. Partnerships Queensland represents the government's commitment to addressing that disadvantage and is a critical component in providing Indigenous young people with the 'space' they need to involve themselves in civic activities. Further information on Partnerships Queensland is set out in my forthcoming response to the committee about the implementation of government's response to the Hands on Parliament report.

However, in the context of this inquiry, it is worth mentioning that Partnerships Queensland also recognises the critical importance of developing social capital. This is reflected in its adoption of community engagement mechanisms, such as negotiation tables and community justice groups, as the preferred way for government to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The first young peoples' negotiation table was held in Bundaberg on 14 November 2005 and represented an important step in seeking the views of Indigenous young people in that region on issues that impact on their lives.

These initiatives need to be supported by action across the whole of government to support and encourage Indigenous civic participation in formal and informal settings and at all levels of government. Therefore, I trust that the matters outlined in this letter assist the committee in developing its recommendations for strategies to encourage all young Queenslanders to exercise the full extent of their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

If you require any further information or assistance in relation to this matter, please contact Mr Tony Dreise, Executive Director, Strategic Policy and Partnerships Directorate, DATSIP on 3224 2518.

Yours sincerely



JOHN MICKEL
Minister for Energy and
Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy

Enc

**Civic Participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in Queensland
– Issues for consideration by the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative
Review's inquiry into young people's engagement in democracy in Queensland**

1. Methodology

There is no objective data on Indigenous enrolment and voting patterns. Therefore, this paper relies exclusively on information provided by the regional offices of the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy's (DATSIP) to questions prepared by DATSIP's Strategic Policy and Partnerships Directorate. A copy of the questions addressed to regional offices is included at Attachment A. Responses were received from all DATSIP regional offices.

The paper differentiates between the following forms of civic participation:

- **formal**
 - enrolling and voting
 - other formal government and parliamentary mechanisms (e.g. Queensland Youth Council, youth parliaments, etc).
- **Informal**
 - Mechanisms that provide Indigenous young people with opportunities to get involved in decisions that impact on their lives (including community, regional or state-based mechanisms). Such mechanisms can be Indigenous-specific (e.g. negotiation tables) or broad based (e.g. political parties or interest groups).

2. Contextual issues

Voices and Votes Discussion Paper

- The discussion paper does not address the specific issues impacting on Indigenous young people's engagement with democratic processes, nor does it acknowledge that many of the factors identified as contributing to low levels of enrolment, voting and participation are likely to be more profoundly felt by Indigenous young people than their non-Indigenous counterparts.
- This omission on the part of the discussion paper may result in Indigenous young people feeling that the inquiry itself is marginalising their experiences. As such, it may add to perceptions of exclusion and deter Indigenous young people from directly responding to the inquiry.
- In relation to this latter point, it is noted that the example of the Wild Rivers Bill provided on page two of the discussion paper, could be regarded by some Indigenous young people, particularly in the Cape York region, as insensitive given the impact of this legislation in that region.
- It should also be noted that much of the research underpinning the discussion paper is based on surveys of Year 12 students. Given the limited numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people that stay in education until Year 12, it can be assumed that research will have had little or no Indigenous input.
- Young people were invited to make written submissions or respond directly to the inquiry by email. Again, it can be assumed that these response mechanisms may disproportionately disadvantage Indigenous young people given, on average, their more limited access to email and greater problems with literacy.

Relative youth of the Indigenous population

- Statistics show that 27.2 per cent of Indigenous Queenslanders are between the ages of 12 and 24 as compared to 18.2 per cent of the non-Indigenous population. Given population growth patterns, this differential is only likely to grow, which suggests that the need to address civic participation rates for this cohort is only likely to become more pressing.

Diversity of circumstances and experiences

- The circumstances and experiences of a young Aboriginal person in Inala will be different from the circumstances and experiences of a young Aboriginal person in one of the state's Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) communities, and different again from the circumstances and experiences of a young person growing up in the Torres Strait. This diversity of circumstance and experience needs to be taken into account in developing effective strategies to combat low rates of civic participation
- That being said, there appear to be certain core issues that impact on participation rates across the state, with certain exceptions in relation to participation in local government and community processes in more remote areas and the DOGIT communities. These issues are discussed in section 3.

The role of informal processes

- As observed in the discussion paper, it is also reasonable to expect that Indigenous youth are *more likely* to become engaged in formal democratic processes if they are already involved in informal processes at the local level. On this basis, DATSIP considers that long-term strategies to improve democratic participation ought to:
 - in the first instance, ask Indigenous young people what issues they would like to have a say in and how they would like to have that say
 - use the results of that consultation to develop a range of whole-of-government initiatives that provide Indigenous young people with positive opportunities to engage in informal citizenship activities in relation to issues of particular concern to them.

Cultural issues

- Traditional authority structures, under which young people are expected to defer to Elders, may limit the opportunities for Indigenous young people to participate in many community-based civic activities.

3. Core issues impacting on participation

Democratic participation is a low priority

- For many Indigenous youth, issues such as family violence, homelessness, crime and substance abuse are problems they face everyday. These types of issues, where Indigenous young people are significantly over-represented in the juvenile justice system¹ and constitute 24 per cent of all children in care, take precedence over democratic and civic participation for many Indigenous young people.
- However, it should be noted that this phenomenon is less applicable to the activities of local government and community institutions in rural, remote and DOGIT communities. Within this context, where family/kinship relations underlie local political processes, Indigenous youth tend to take a more active interest in local civic processes, on the basis that there is a clearer and more direct link between individual and community involvement and outcomes (e.g. where local governments in DOGIT communities are the primary service providers).

¹ In the 10-14 age group, Indigenous children account for approximately 60 per cent of all children in the juvenile justice system.

- By comparison, those young Indigenous Queenslanders who live in urban centres (and who constitute a majority within this cohort) appear to feel as alienated from the activities of their local governments as they do from state and federal politics.
- It should also be noted that many Indigenous young people appear to prioritise involvement in sporting activities over civic participation.
- Having regard to the foregoing, there would appear to be utility in developing strategies that build on the participation of Indigenous young people in some areas of the state in local government and community-based civic processes and the interest of many Indigenous young people in sport.

Alienation/cynicism

- With 39 per cent of Indigenous Queenslanders living in rural, remote or very remote areas, distance from regional centres is a major contributing factor to Indigenous youth feeling alienated from democratic processes at the state and federal levels.
- However, more direct causes of low voter enrolment and civic participation in Indigenous young people appear to include:
 - feelings of marginalisation as distinct peoples within mainstream political processes
 - the failure of mainstream political processes to address issues of ongoing concern
 - a deep-seated distrust of government and its institutions arising out of historical practices
 - alienation from the activities/policy concerns of the major parties
- It should also be borne in mind that Indigenous Queenslanders were, prior to the 1965 citizenship referendum, denied state voting rights. This has meant that many Indigenous youth do not have the benefit of, or receive only limited, encouragement and advice on political matters from their parents and Elders.
- The demise of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) may also have deepened the perception among Indigenous youth that mainstream political parties and institutions do not value input from Indigenous people and their representative bodies. The abolition of ATSIC has also had the effect of removing those ATSIC regional councillors who were positive role models for young people in their regions and a source of encouragement to getting involved in political processes.
- Feelings of alienation and cynicism are also often compounded by the actions of the media, which either does not cover issues of concern to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or who, in their reporting of 'Indigenous issues', perpetuate negative cultural stereotypes.
- It is also worth noting that alienation and cynicism will be reinforced whenever the 'race' card is played in political processes in other jurisdictions or at the federal level. This was arguably the case when, for example, the political and media storm following the Wik native title decision resulted in the 1998 amendments to the *Native Title Act 1993* and delivery of 'bucket loads of extinguishment'² to Indigenous people across Australia, including Queensland.

² A term used in 1997 by the then Deputy Prime Minister, Tim Fischer, to describe the proposed effects of the legislation

Insufficient knowledge/literacy

- In a number of regions this was identified as the single most significant barrier to Indigenous youth participating in democratic processes. In this regard, it is understood that, in some areas, Indigenous youth who attended polling booths for recent local, state and federal elections did not understand that they needed to enrol first and required assistance to fill out the ballot.
- It is understood that many Indigenous youth at the recent state election had no knowledge of the mainstream parties' policy platforms and allocated their votes simply on the basis of 'knowing' the candidate rather than supporting their policies.
- This raises obvious questions about the impact of poor standards of literacy on the ability of people to meaningfully exercise their citizenship entitlements and adequacy and reach of civics education being taught in schools. DATSIP considers that these matters should be raised with the Department of Education and the Arts in the context of the committee's separate inquiry into the implementation of the government's response to the Hands on Parliament report.
- It is also suggested that the committee raise with the Australian and Queensland electoral commissions the need to ensure that electoral education campaigns are alert to these issues in an effort to ensure that Indigenous youth are in a position to make informed choices when exercising their democratic rights.
- School visits and community meetings by local, state and federal members, where their role as members of Parliament and relevant electoral processes could be explained and discussed, is another action that could be taken to improve the enrolment and participation rates of Indigenous youth. The regular occurrence of such visits outside of electoral cycles may also help to reduce cynicism about such visits.

Adequacy/appropriateness of civics education

- As noted previously, there are significant question marks over the adequacy and reach of civics education being taught in schools.
- Concerns have also been raised over the appropriateness and relevance of the curriculum.
- In this context, DATSIP suggests that consideration needs to be given to:
 - Teaching civics education as a subject in its own right.
 - Supplementing school-based initiatives with community workshops to reach young people who, for whatever reason, are not attending secondary school.
 - Expanding civics education to primary schools.
 - Ensuring that civics education is taught in a way that is relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. In this regard, orthodox teaching methods are often inappropriate and consideration needs to be given to the adoption of more 'hands on' and practical teaching methods.
 - Ensuring that civics education highlights Indigenous involvement in civic processes (e.g. Wave Hill Station and the Bark petition) and the contributions of Indigenous political leaders to Australian political developments (e.g. Neville Bonner, Eddie Mabo, Charles Perkins, Lowitja O'Donoghue and Noel Pearson) and the reconciliation movement (e.g. Jackie Huggins and Patrick Dodson).

4. Adequacy of existing mechanisms

- The committee has previously made recommendations relevant to increasing the participation of Indigenous young people in the state's democratic processes³.
- Implementation of the majority of those recommendations is the responsibility of other government departments. However, in conducting research for this inquiry, the following issues were identified⁴.

It is unclear to what extent local governments have responded to the recommendation to establish formal youth advisory mechanisms.⁵

- Further consideration should be given to ensuring that DAI SIP regional offices are recognised as a key conduit for information from line agencies with responsibility for organising regional parliamentary and government events to Indigenous youth networks in any given region.
 - To the extent that regional offices were aware of opportunities to participate in formal processes and events, it was felt that more opportunities needed to be provided.
 - The rate at which existing opportunities are being taken up by Indigenous youth is unclear. However, a significant deterrent to the participation of Indigenous youth representatives from remote areas in formal processes and events is being isolated from their family and support networks.
 - There was some concern that the limited pool of young Indigenous people participating in such events can lead to a 'tall poppy' syndrome.
 - There was also concern that there may be more limited opportunities for Indigenous young people from rural and remote areas than their urban counterparts to participate in formal processes and events.
 - Of particular concern were comments from one regional office that a young Indigenous representative who recently attended a regional youth council condemned it as tokenistic and vowed to refuse any further requests to participate in such forums.
- It should also be noted that many young Indigenous Queenslanders' only experience of Parliament and Cabinet is as one-off observers at a regional Cabinet meeting or on school excursions to Parliament House in Brisbane and Canberra. While these experiences are not to be belittled, they arguably do little to increase the knowledge base and enthusiasm of Indigenous youth or inspire them to participate in democratic processes. Conversely, they may in fact reinforce perceptions of alienation, exclusion and irrelevance.

³ Recommendations 4,6,7 and 8 from the 2003 Hands on Parliament report.

⁴ In addition, please note our discussion of civics education and electoral education campaigns in section 3.

⁵ An exception identified by one regional director was a youth council recently formed by the Diamantina Shire Council. However, this was the only example of its kind in their region that they were aware of. Another exception from a neighbouring region was the Speak Out initiative undertaken by the Hinchinbrook Shire Council.

- Indigenous specific engagement mechanisms, such as negotiation tables and community justice groups have, to date, rarely contained youth representatives (see section 2, Cultural issues). Accordingly, consideration may need to be given to the establishment of youth-only forums that provide Indigenous young people with opportunities to raise issues that concern them in an environment where they feel comfortable to do so. In this context, it is noted that the first young people's negotiation table was held in Bundaberg on 14 November 2005.
- In relation to examples of other types of initiatives relevant to the question of broad civic participation, police citizens youth clubs are expected to form youth management teams as part of their community obligations. Examples exist at Mornington Island, Palm Island and Charters Towers. These teams are responsible for organising, running and managing activities/functions that bring together youth from their region. Members of these teams are often involved in two-week courses in regional centres where they undergo training and youth leadership development. Although such initiatives do not have increased democratic participation as their focus, they afford Indigenous young people valuable opportunities to develop their leadership skills and gain the confidence required to participate in civic institutions/processes.
- There are a significant number of other youth development, leadership and resiliency-type initiatives that are coordinated and resourced by other line agencies (e.g. the departments of Communities and Employment and Training). In this context, and given the point made previously⁶, DATSIP considers that the committee should look at how programs directed at youth development and leadership can be linked to existing state and federal initiatives that are focused solely on increased participation in formal democratic processes. As mentioned previously in the context of Indigenous-specific engagement mechanisms, DATSIP considers that there is a need to increase the reach and relevance of youth-only forums and other mechanisms that specifically target youth, and that Indigenous young people must be provided with equal opportunities to participate in such mechanisms.
- Any new initiatives in relation to these matters need to be coordinated across government to maximise linkages and impact. In addition, they need to be responsive to the issues being identified by young Indigenous people themselves and flexible in terms of acknowledging young people's preferences for informal settings and after-hours/weekend events
- Fundamentally, it is suggested that all departments with responsibilities for developing policies around youth issues make genuine and appropriate efforts to engage with young people about the issues that impact on their lives.

⁶ That long-term strategies to improve democratic participation ought to incorporate a range of whole-of-government initiatives that provide Indigenous young people with positive opportunities to engage in informal citizenship activities in relation to issues of particular concern to them.

5. Conclusion

DATSIP suggests that the committee needs to further consider the following issues in the course of its inquiry:

- the specific issues impacting on Indigenous young people, including distinctions between the circumstances and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and the different experiences of Indigenous young people living in urban and rural/remote areas
- the role of youth specific and community-based civic activities in increasing Indigenous participation in formal democratic processes
- how existing informal participation practices and interests can be used to increase engagement with formal democratic processes
- ensuring that engagement mechanisms, such as those being implemented in response to Hands on Parliament, are meeting the needs of Indigenous young people and are, in fact, reaching those young people
- identifying how existing mechanisms can be linked to broader initiatives focused on youth development and the creation of social capital.

Questions addressed to DATSIP regional offices

- Do Indigenous young people in your region enrol and vote in state and local elections? If not, what are the major reasons for their lack of engagement in these formal democratic processes?
- Are Indigenous young people in your region involved in other formal parliamentary and government mechanisms? For example, the Queensland Youth Council, youth parliaments and school-sponsored attendance at regional parliaments. If not, what are some of the barriers to their involvement in these types of activities?
- Do local governments in your region (including, but not limited to, Aboriginal shire and Island councils) provide opportunities for Indigenous young people to input into local government matters? If so, how successful are these types of initiatives in terms of getting Indigenous young people involved and delivering benefits to both the young people and their communities?
- What other mechanisms exist in your region that are successful in providing Indigenous young people with an opportunity to get involved in decisions that impact on their lives? These 'citizenship activities' may include local, regional or state-based mechanisms and can be either Indigenous-specific (e.g. negotiation tables and/or Indigenous leadership initiatives) or broad based (eg political parties and non governmental organisations advocating on particular issues).
- Are Indigenous young people in your region more likely to be engaged in community-based citizenship activities compared with formal democratic processes (i.e. enrolment and voting in state and federal elections)?
- Has the demise of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission had any discernible effect on Indigenous young people's attitudes to, or participation in, formal democratic processes and/or citizenship activities in your region?
- Is civics education in schools having any positive impact on the engagement of Indigenous young people in either formal democratic processes (enrolment and voting) or other citizenship activities? If not, why not? Reasons could include the course content not being reflective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences with the state's democratic institutions and/or children already having dropped out of school before civics education is taught.
- In broad terms, what are some of the barriers to young people engaging in democratic processes/citizenship activities in your region? Reasons could include early disengagement from education, financial constraints, feelings of hopelessness or marginalisation, lack of information, lack of parental/community encouragement and/or cultural issues (e.g. deferring to Elders in particular situations).
- In your opinion, what sorts of strategies would be most effective in increasing the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in democratic processes/citizenship activities at the state and local levels?

Regional offices were also asked to publicise the inquiry to youth groups and networks in their regions.