



Speech by

**Hon. JUDY SPENCE**

**MEMBER FOR MOUNT GRAVATT**

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Hansard 25 November 1999

**MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities**

**Hon. J. C. SPENCE** (Mount Gravatt— ALP) (Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Minister for Women's Policy and Minister for Fair Trading) (10.02 a.m.), by leave: The March 2000 local government elections stand to be a watershed for the residents of Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. At the start of a new century and at a time when indigenous people are increasingly rallying for self-reliance, these elections present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the opportunity to set a new direction for their own communities. The Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development is working with the 32 communities covered by the Community Services Act to ensure that they take full advantage of the local government elections.

Old Mapoon near Weipa is receiving special attention. Its citizens, who have valiantly rebuilt their community since it was razed by Government forces in 1963, will elect a new community council for the first time. For the benefit of all communities, departmental officers are now preparing a handbook for candidates, updating a manual for returning officers, planning training sessions for returning officers, and distributing copies of the department's newsletter, *Namalata Thusi*, which includes a special section on election awareness.

The importance of these elections cannot be overstated. Events in Doomadgee in the past week have highlighted the importance of leadership. Strong, mandated leadership will be a feature of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that achieve a new level of independence early in the 21st century.

If the full potential is to be tapped, more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must start putting themselves forward as candidates. At present, only 26 from a total of 156 councillors are female. Of the 31 chairs, three are women. But the recent ATSIC elections augur well for Queensland's indigenous women. This week, two well-known Aboriginal women, Pat Thompson and Jenny Pryor, have been elected ATSIC commissioners. The State's ATSIC council, for which the commissioners are drawn, now boasts almost 30% women. This statistic would be the envy of most Australian Parliaments. The proportion of councillors who are female is roughly equivalent to the percentage of women who stood as candidates. That result shatters the myth that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are disinclined to vote for women. Women have long been the *de facto* leaders in their communities. Their positive influence is manifest in the community's increased willingness to own up to the dreadful reality of family violence.

At last, leading women are stepping out of the wings. Despite bearing the brunt of social and cultural upheaval in many communities, they are mustering the energy to run for political office and their communities are responding by endorsing them. I hope that women will take heart from the ATSIC outcome. To run for council, they need to have lived in their communities for only six months, or two years for the Torres Strait; be enrolled to vote; be nominated by two eligible voters; and pay \$25.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councils have wide responsibilities—much broader than the duties of non-indigenous councils. They also face increasing expectations of accountability from the general community and from Governments. People who take up the challenge of office must be strong enough to endure these outside pressures as well as the complex demands of their own grassroots. That is not to say that indigenous Queenslanders should limit themselves to candidacy for indigenous

councils. On the contrary, I would urge them to explore the option of running for office in local government at all levels and giving their people a stronger political voice.

Finally, I would like to express to the family and friends of the missing Mornington Islander people my prayers and those of the workers in the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development.

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