

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

**NATIONAL INDIGENOUS
BUSINESS & ECONOMIC
CONFERENCE**

Alice Springs NT,

5th to 9th September 1993,

NIBEC Conference, (1993)

It is important that position papers such as the first National Indigenous Business & Economic Conference (1993) are able to be accessed by future generations to use as source document for research or the formulation of negotiation strategies. This speech provides the reader with the thinking of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business community in the late 1990's soon after the June 1992 Mabo decision was handed down by the High Court of Australia. The conference was attended by over 350 delegates the delegate list had Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that ranged from University students to people with 20 years of experience in various industries.

The National Indigenous Business & Economic Conference (NIBEC) was held in Alice Springs NT, 5th September – 9th September 1993, was hosted by the Arrernte Council of Central Australia, President Charles Perkins and Vice Ted Hampton. Rod Williams and Graham Atkinson were asked to perform the role of Facilitator/Managers for the conference.

On the final day, the conference strategy was presented back to the forum and could be placed under three headings: Political Structures, Support Structures and Financial Structures that formed the basis the to the Facilitator/Manager's speech on the 8th September 1993.

FACILITATOR MANAGER SPEECH – Rod Williams

8 September, 1993

Rod, a Bundjalung from the north coast of New South Wales, is a strong advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders community involvement in local economic development and gaining self-management for their own affairs. He has pursued a private sector career which extends across the industrial relations, finance and mining industries.

Rod started his private sector career in February 1980 as a trainee Industrial relations officer with the Northern Territory Confederation of Industry and Commerce in Darwin. After graduating from the South Australian Institute of Technology, he joined National Mutual Funds Management in Melbourne as a Resource Analyst in 1988. In May 1990, Rod joined Normandy Poseidon Ltd in Adelaide as the corporate and exploration consultant and developed the company philosophy and policies on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues. Normandy Poseidon during this period introduced a sensitive but commercial corporate approach to Aboriginal issues which concentrated on communications.

I would like to first comment on the work of the facilitators and the people who participated at the workshops over the last two days. The work has been both intense and productive because we have done it ourselves; there have been no white advisor or

experts. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander facilitators ranged from young Academics to people with a wealth of industry experience. In the back room no one worked harder than your facilitators. Our business vision is based on your thoughts and the information which has been collected by your facilitator. As Facilitator Managers Graham Atkinson and I would like to thank you for your efforts.

The information that was produced by the workshops at the conference can be broken into three areas, these being: Political Structures, Support Structures and Financial Structures. I will now outline each area in more detail.

Political Structure (Dispelling the Myths)

Based on the discussions that took place at the Alice Springs conference as based and my 26 years of business and private sector experience there were two Myths that need to be dispelled. The first is that the Aboriginal portfolio spends plenty of money on Aboriginal Economic Development. Over the years there have been plenty of comments made to the media from various non business representatives suggesting that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business receives plenty of money. To obtain a real picture around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic development we have to exclude from that formula CDEP. While CDEP funding is a large parcel of money, its target is creating community employment not community enterprises. All we can say to the media is do not believe everything you hear.

The other myth that was destroyed at the Alice Springs conference was that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not want to go into business. Many of the delegates to the conference paid out of their own pockets and if that is not telling Australia that we mean business then nothing ever will.

Another issue emerging from the conference was that attitudes of public servants need to be changed in order to assist communities find a balance between social and economic funding outcomes. The only way that this can balance can be achieved is by educating Public Servants and ATSIC Councilors (those who may not be economically minded), to reorientate government policies and programs from being focused exclusively on social welfare and to have a larger percentage of Indigenous Affairs portfolio funding earmarked to economic development initiatives. This is the only way we are going to move away from the welfare cycle, and generate our own funds/profits.

It was strongly expressed at the Alice Springs meeting that Government has to service our economic aspirations and needs. When I use the word Government it refers to all Departments and agencies including Industry specific departments and agencies. Why is it that when you are black they say that you are ATSICs responsibility. Does that mean we do not have the same economic opportunities that other Australians have access to? The delegates to the Alice Springs conference proclaimed that they had had enough of the wider Australian community, business and Government attitudes of saying ATSIC should solve all of our problems. Australia has a responsibility to assist us in business.

”Australian business and Government you have to start listening to us”.

Although the Alice Springs was primarily a business conference discussions did occur around the Mabo decision it was felt by delegates that the Mabo discussions should not dominate the agenda. The Mabo decision was a very significant issue for Indigenous Australia at the time of the conference and it was seen as a good thing by all at who attended the conference. Mabo had given us native title recognition, as the first Australians. It was felt by conference participants that Indigenous Australians need to build upon the foundation which Mabo had opened up and ensure that the corporate sector and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people become business partners, not just the social clients.

Part of the outcome of Mabo is the Social Justice Package. There needs to be a balance between social and economic considerations or otherwise we are never going to get out of the Welfare Cycle. Our future is in business development rather than the Government controlling our future.

Support Structures

1. There had been discussion at the Alice Springs conference on developing a representative body to give us a business voice; An Indigenous Chamber of Commerce. Some of the names presented were:
 - a) NICIC - National Indigenous Chamber of Industry & Commerce
 - b) INTAC - Indigenous National Trade Agreement Congress
 - c) NIBEC - National Indigenous Business Economic Council

Currently we do not have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business voice. There is strong support for a National body and ATSIC can not represent our business interests.

In structuring a national representative body we must ensure that it caters for our economic and business aspirations. National strength will come from the building of the State and Regional Associations. Unless there is support and commitment from the indigenous business people, the concept will never succeed

2. Need for a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Business and Economic Strategy. To focus on change and identify how we can better utilise our human resource and assets. Unless we start to have a better understanding of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander market, money flow and economic bargaining power of our human and capital resources, they will never be utilised to their maximum potential.
3. The need for specialist Industry Management Support Services. e.g., the Stores Program, Tourism Management, Pastoral Management Services, Housing Industry

and others. The industry workshops of the conference identified that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses have similar problems, and solutions can be found when industry representatives cooperate.

4. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander - Business Register - Black Pages
 - a) Consultants and Resource people;
 - b) Individual Business house.
 - c) Funding Bodies and their criteria for funding

We need to get the Black Economy moving by doing business with one another. Ray Nagas the house builder is going to build my house in Brisbane. Just think about the business we can do with one another. Quality and service is what we need to providing one another.

5. Business and Economic Support Units
In some States they are working well in others they are not. Our businesses need support. New businesses need assistance in the preparation of business plans. Support is needed when individuals start to consider going into business and support is needed in the early stages of setting up the business.
6. The Utilisation of current Organisation Support Structures.
Land Council Resources - to give business support
Legal Aid Services - should have access to Contract or Commercial Legal advisors in each State or some of the larger Regions for commercial contracting difficulties
7. Protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Assets is very important.
 - a) Cultural Values: to ensure that these are not exploited.
 - b) Patents and Copyright: Patent to protect indigenous flora and fauna.
Copyright designs and information which is currently being exploited by national and international business interests.
 - c) Economic Assets: to utilise our capital assets more effectively. Remove restrictive legislation which prevents the capital asset being used as equity. Educate our own people about the economic value of the assets they control :
eg: housing companies and other organisations.

Financial Structures

Access to mainstream banks and financial institutions was an issue raised at every workshop at the Alice Springs conference. Where can we go to seek funds and how do we present the required information? Access to mainstream Financial Information, Services and Support at both a National and International level is non existent.

We need to get access to the mainstream information, services, support and finances at a national level.

There need to be more Joint Venture arrangements between business and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. There are examples around Australia and many of these in the township of Alice Springs. For example Peter Kittle Toyota a Joint Venture between Peter Kittle, the Central Australian Aboriginal community and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commercial Development Corporation.

There needs to be the development of community controlled Banks and Credit Unions at a Regional, State and National level.

Barriers between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business community and the Australian Financial institutions need to be broken down. If we can not do it here with our domestic Banks then there is no other choice except to go to international institutions for financial support.

Others Issues Raised at the Alice Springs Conference

Develop a national Data Base of Bad Consultants (those people who have been ripping us off for years). We all know who the bad ones, and it's time we cleaned out the books.

Conclusion

If we calculated how much is being spent in the Black Economy each year, which is made up of the Aboriginal Affairs budget, the 2% of other Government Departments contracts that should be directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business and the income generated by doing business with one another, imagine the control and benefits the Black Economy can give us.

Today many of our people measure financial benefits by how many social programs Government has implemented that year. Real financial change is about getting the Black Economy moving in a direction that will benefit both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and individual business houses.

We need to support one another. The concept of a culture supporting one another is not new in Australia the Greeks, Italians, and the Vietnamese have been doing it for years. We as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to support one another in business to succeed.

While the strategy of the Alice Springs conference was being put together on the blackboards by the facilitators in the back room, during the day I took various reporters into the strategy room to give them an overview of the business information that we as delegates were compiling. When I did this one reporter from the Australian newspaper questioned the strategy. Where is Government, ATSIC and DEET on the blackboard? Shouldn't they be critical or more dominate. My reply was, that if we wait around for Government to set up our business or economy it is never going to happen and we will have to wait another 200 years. It would be nice if they support us in getting the support

structures in place and balance the social and economic needs of our people.

The message I had received from the delegates at the conference was that we are not going to wait around for Government to do it. We are going to set up the black economy and get on with doing business whether they help us or not.