

1.7 THE GOVERNMENT'S OFFICIAL REPORTS: SOME EXTRACTS

The following extracts are from a range of Commonwealth government reports and have been included to show that they have some idea of the language and rhetoric but that this is not necessarily what happens - in fact it rarely does. They are selectively chosen to illustrate some of the difficulties of raising process issues because the government policy departments claim that they are following due process, despite the fact that it is certainly not the view of either its major standard setting agencies or of the recipient communities.

A. 2013 FaHSCIA Closing The Gap: Prime Minister's Report

These extracts come from a summary document designed to showcase best items and good processes' intentions and are therefore not likely to be critical. They do however make frequent mentions of the need of consultation, self-management etc. Some examples of admissions of the rhetoric in the reports have been included to show shortfalls between the language and the results!

We note that attendance levels are not mentioned nor are any local engagement strategies, just provision of services. The report includes a lot of positive items which are not necessarily backed up by any data but which indicate at least the report writers know the right language for describing what should work.

This is the government account of the NACCHO consultation process covered in the last section. It shows a rare example of an apparently well thought through consultation process, which led to an agreement, according to community reports. It is still not clear whether the agreed plan will be implemented by the new Government. (January 2014)

B. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan.⁶

This may have been appropriately handled

A Stakeholder Advisory Group has been established to guide its development. The advisory group brings together representatives from state and territory governments and representatives with expertise in Indigenous health, the health sector, and the social determinants of health

An extensive community consultation process (which) is occurring prior to the drafting of the health plan. A series of 16 nation-wide community consultations were held in urban, regional and remote locations throughout October to December 2012. A separate consultation was also held at the National Centre

⁶http://www.naccho.org.au/download/naccho_health_futures/NACCHO%20Healthy%20Futures%2010%20point%20plan%202013-2030.pdf

of Indigenous Excellence in Redfern, Sydney, from 19–22 September 2012 to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.

Another two examples below show that apparent understanding doesn't result in changed processes.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have also been heavily involved in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan—from its development to its implementation and monitoring.

The Government understands Indigenous communities and their needs differ across the country and that the most effective way to deliver services is to work with the communities and utilise local service providers wherever possible.

The Government also appreciates that to engage with and understand remote communities, staff should be living and working in these communities. Staff who are aware of local needs, know who's who and can understand their languages and customs.

Working together

The Australian Government has embraced a partnership approach based on working with Indigenous communities to deliver positive change. The Government engages with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at all levels—in communities and across regions, states, territories and the nation—to provide opportunities for local people to work on local projects and have more ownership and responsibility for the programs delivered in their communities.

This is an interesting item as reports from on the ground communities in the NT have not indicated that the following positions have had much local support and trust.

For this reason, the Government is continuing to build and improve its network of locally-based staff, including Government Engagement Coordinators and Indigenous Engagement Officers (or their equivalents), to provide vital on-the-ground links to local Indigenous communities—and build stronger relationships.

Government Engagement Coordinators are responsible for coordinating government business in the Indigenous communities where they are located. They work closely with Indigenous Engagement Officers who are drawn from the local communities and understand local culture and languages.

These staff work for Indigenous Coordination Centres and Regional Operations Centres which take a whole-of-government approach to service delivery and

feed back local knowledge to inform the development and implementation of policies and programs.

Government staff are continuing to consult with Indigenous people living in remote communities on major initiatives such as Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory, the Remote Jobs and Communities Program, Remote Service Delivery and the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing to hear their views about the programs, how effectively they are being delivered and the outcomes achieved.

Criticisms of this process are multiple including the documentation of the problems with the Stronger Futures so-called consultation. While it is possible that the views of the local communities on the proposals were 'heard', there is no evidence that these views affected any aspects of the proposals or its delivery.

Why is it important?

During the Stronger Futures consultations held in 2011, Aboriginal people requested improved face-to face relationships with government so that government can work more closely with them and for their views to be more actively conveyed to government.

The way that government manages its business in communities is important. It can support better local planning processes and governance, ensure that services are effective and accessible and enable government staff to work more effectively at a regional level.

The Abbott government claims it is setting in place systems which will correct some of these errors, yet the evidence so far is not convincing. We await the results of the IAS funding round.