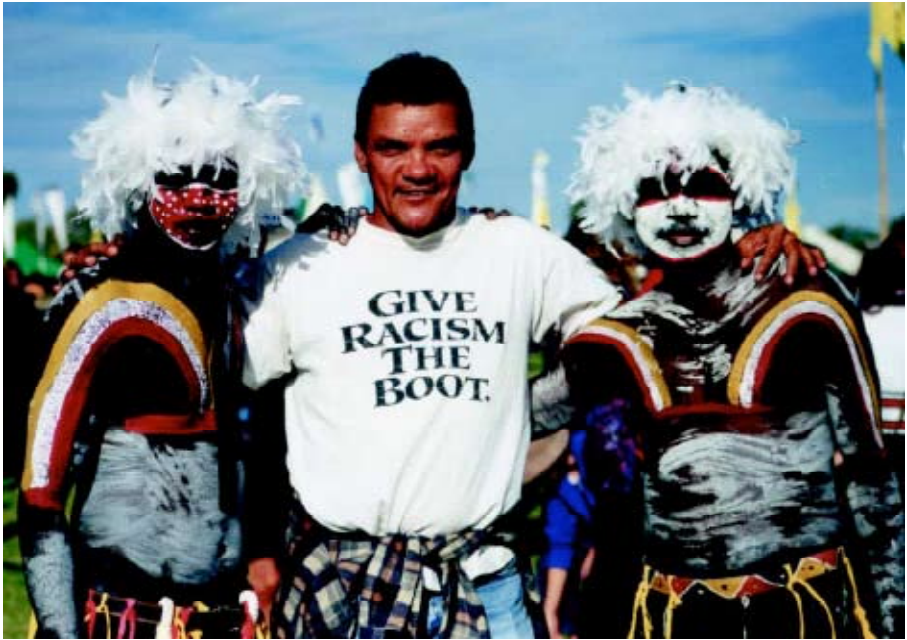


ABOLISHMENT OF ATSIC: A 'NEW ERA' . . . OR BACK TO THE 'WAY WE WERE'?



GEOFFREY 'JACKO' ANGELES

KUNGARAKAN/GURINDJI

TRADITIONAL OWNER FOR LITCHFIELD NATIONAL PARK

NORTHERN TERRITORY

As I understand it and putting it bluntly, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was set up to be a significant voice for Indigenous Australians to ensure that Indigenous people's rights were being harnessed and protected in an equitable fashion. This was also to be an avenue for supporting self determination initiatives, such as business enterprise projects, and appropriate home ownership schemes. ATSIC was seen to be one of the major political voices for Indigenous people when dealing with government initiatives that involved and/or affected Indigenous people in any capacity. Something I (and I'm sure others) thought was going to last a long time!

But now we are expected to accept that "this was only a trial," and now that the trial or probation period has expired, everything reverts back to "normal." We are being told today, "you all knew this was coming," almost as if "we" — the Indigenous people of this nation — were put through some rigorous government research to see how well we fare and cope. Well now that we are told the study (trial) is over, and that "we" have failed, everything will now go back to "normal," or, how it was before we had a voice. That is, back to the old cliché — "blacks at the back."

ATSIC and the people elected to positions within ATSIC were voted in by the Indigenous population. The government's abolishment of ATSIC also suggests that Indigenous people didn't know what they were doing when they voted for people (whom they thought) would represent and advocate on their behalf on all "Indigenous issues." However, we still weren't allowed to handle the affairs and concerns of our own education and health matters.

Retrospectively, do Indigenous people know what they're doing when voting for non-Indigenous people in federal government elections to run "their" country and handle "their" affairs? Answer: Apparently yes?

Hence, if Indigenous people didn't know what they were doing when voting in ATSIC elections, then why should Indigenous people be forced or expected to vote in federal elections? We get fined if we don't vote today, yet we weren't allowed to vote 37 years ago! Things just don't add up or make sense anymore.

ATSIC was never responsible for Indigenous Health or Indigenous Education, yet Indigenous people suffer some of the worst ill-health statistics in the world; and a majority still has relatively below standard English literacy levels, resulting in low and limited employment opportunities. Given this, how can the government convince or provide some glimmer of hope that Indigenous health and education are going to improve? Their (trial) formula didn't work before!

Who, how, and what, are questions that are probably on everyone's mind, as to this "new government initiative" in mainstreaming and handling Indigenous affairs. There are still some small pockets of Indigenous agencies that deal with Indigenous affairs, such as land councils, etc, etc; and there are some companies formed like Yothu Yindi Foundation, etc, that foster a process for reconciliation, education, and the sharing of Indigenous culture to the wider community. ATSiC also did this. Therefore, another question on many people's mind must be — "who's next"?

There may have been cases of bad management, wrongful financial decisions, or the odd misappropriation of funds, and/or inappropriate behaviour of ATSiC officials and representatives, but do you close everything down — or do you weed out the perpetrators? If other business, companies, agencies, and governments alike, had what ATSiC had done to them, Australia would be a 3rd or 4th world country, and many more Australians would be in poverty. So why does this reek of racism and discrimination?

But just like Darwin's theory — "survival of the fittest" — if you're not in the gang, expect to be harassed or seen and treated as inferior. This "act" is no different to the old schoolyard bully mentality, mirroring that of the not so long ago White Australia Assimilation Policy.

I think the decision came as a shock to many Australians, and not just Indigenous citizens. The decision to abolish ATSiC has connotations reflective to that of terrorism: we didn't see it coming; striking without warning and only targeting a certain group. As a result, it has created sadness, grief, a sense of hopelessness, and resurfaces dormant anger. I refer dormant anger to the fact that Indigenous Australians have relinquished a lot of hurt, anger, and distrust, through past atrocities inflicted upon their people and their lands. There will always be this "generational scarring" within.

There maybe a sprinkling of distasteful and unpalatable dialogue in this letter, but there is a whole lot more that is unsaid, unseen, and unfelt. The governments' decision has raised a lot of uncertainty, without any vision for well-being guarantees.

But given these setbacks, I shall still try to offer something proactive rather than being too reactive. It is the blood that is within me — it comes from my grandfather. He fought way back in the 30's, 40's, 50's and 60's; against harder opposition and having no rights at all. Racial discrimination was accepted, it was blatant, and it was maintained in a way to "keep Indigenous people down." But my grandfather could not accept this and bravely took a stance against this! He cleared a path for us in all adversity, and against all and

greater odds. I am indebted to him, therefore I shall carry his voice and his "wish for fairness" until just like him, the day I die. His greatest saying was, "All I ever want, is to enjoy the company of my fellow man; black, white or brindle."

Ending on something proactive: *don't do what you think what is best, or select who you think is best, but rather consult and negotiate about what is best.*