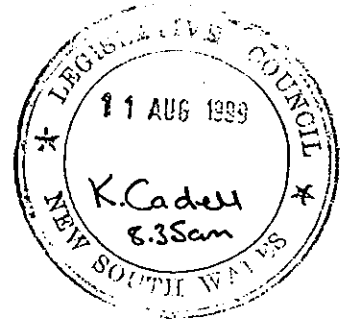




Treasurer of New South Wales
Australia



10 August 1999

Mr John Evans
Clerk of the Legislative Council
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Sir

Please find attached, the Government response to the Report of the Standing Committee on Social Issues Report No. 18, entitled "Enhancing Aboriginal Political Representation".

The Government is required to respond to the Standing Committee Report within six months of the Report being tabled in the Legislative Council.

Would you please arrange for the Government response to be tabled in the Legislative Council.

Yours sincerely

Hon. Michael Egan
TREASURER
MINISTER FOR STATE DEVELOPMENT

Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues

Report Number 18: Enhancing Aboriginal Political Representation Inquiry into Dedicated Seats in the New South Wales Parliament

NSW Government Response

Conclusion One

The Committee considers that the following steps must be taken before dedicated seats could be introduced:

- *further consultation with Aboriginal people about how dedicated seats would operate;*
- *the conduct of an education campaign about dedicated seats, which involves individual Members of Parliament, political parties and the community;*
- *an assessment of the level of support for dedicated seats in the existing political parties and the community;*
- *the development of a proposal for dedicated seats and its adoption by the people of NSW at a referendum.*

These steps pose formidable challenges to the advocates of dedicated seats. The Committee is firmly convinced that Aboriginal people should formulate the initiatives to improve Aboriginal representation and believes that the establishment of an Aboriginal Assembly should be considered, as an interim measure, by the Aboriginal community.

NSW Government Response

There is a clear need for a more extensive community debate on the issue of dedicated seats before any conclusions can be drawn about an appropriate model to be put to a referendum. Certainly, the Committee was unable after extensive consultation, hearings and submissions, to formulate specific recommendations on how dedicated seats would operate.

The NSW Government notes that there was considerable support at the community consultation meetings held by the Committee for more time to discuss the complex issues surrounding the mechanisms for dedicated seats. The NSW Government concurs with the Committee's view that Aboriginal people should formulate initiatives to improve Aboriginal political representation.

The NSW Government supports continued and informed debate in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities on achieving greater Aboriginal participation in our political system.

The reconciliation movement provides formal mechanisms for considering issues of Aboriginal political representation. The NSW State Reconciliation Committee is organising a State Reconciliation Convention, to be held in

Wollongong on 13-15 August 1999. NSW Government agencies are represented on the Committee and will participate in the convention.

The second day of the convention is devoted to the theme of citizenship and includes a workshop on indigenous participation in government. It is understood that the State Reconciliation Committee will submit convention resolutions to the Government for consideration.

In addition, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has released for public comment its draft Documents for Reconciliation. The draft National Strategy to Promote Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rights proposes the development of strategies for increased representation of Indigenous people in Australian parliaments. The NSW Government will be assisting the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in its community consultation in NSW on this and the other documents.

Conclusion Two

The Government members of the Committee believe that an Aboriginal Assembly to meet in the NSW Parliament should be established as an interim measure to further Aboriginal representation at all levels of government. The Assembly should be guided by a formal charter and be adequately resourced. The Assembly should only be established if it has significant support from the Aboriginal community in NSW.

Other members of the Committee do not support the establishment of an Aboriginal Assembly at this stage.

NSW Government Response

It is clear from the Committee's report that there are complex issues about the constitution and functions of an Aboriginal Assembly that would need to be resolved prior to its establishment. The Government agrees with the Committee's finding that such an Assembly should only be established if there is significant support from the Aboriginal community in NSW.

The NSW Government supports greater community discussion, both within the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities about the need for, and structure of, an Aboriginal Assembly. The NSW Government notes that it established the Black Parliament, first held in the Legislative Assembly in June 1997, followed by a second Black Parliament in September 1998. The Black Parliament may serve as a starting point for discussion on how an Aboriginal Assembly might operate.

A forum for discussion of these issues will include the State Reconciliation Convention, to be held in Wollongong in August 1999. As noted above the convention provides an opportunity to consider indigenous participation in government.

Conclusion Three

A majority of members of the Committee concluded that every political party represented in the NSW Parliament should be asked to develop an action plan by March 2000. This plan could detail the steps the party might take to encourage Aboriginal participation, including the methods to encourage Aboriginal people to join their party, participate in committees and policy development, stand as candidates for winnable seats and gain employment as support staff to sitting members of Parliament.

Each party could be invited to make an annual report to the NSW Parliament on the progress of their action plan.

The other members of the Committee believe that the political parties could do more to encourage Aboriginal participation and seek their commitment to improve this situation.

NSW Government Response

The NSW Government acknowledges that political parties have an important role to play in enhancing indigenous participation in the NSW political process.

The Government encourages every political party represented in the NSW Parliament to carefully consider this conclusion of the Committee and to note that the Committee's report contains a number of suggestions as to how parties might achieve greater Aboriginal participation.

The Government notes that the Australian Labor Party is interested in encouraging all ethnic and indigenous groups to participate in the Party, and undertakes to bring the Committee's report, and this conclusion in particular, to the attention of the General Secretary of the NSW Branch of the Australian Labor Party.

Conclusion Four

The Committee supports the Local Government Mentoring program and considers that if the foreshadowed evaluation shows that mentoring is effective in encouraging Aboriginal people to serve in Local Government, the program should be extended to the elections in 2003.

NSW Government Response

The Government has made a commitment to expand the Aboriginal Mentoring Program to more councils. An evaluation of the program is currently underway, involving six councils: Leichhardt, Maclean, Kempsey, Gosford, Moree and Marrickville. This evaluation will assess factors that may limit the program's effectiveness as well as how it could be made more effective. It is anticipated that the final report will be released by March 2000.

Conclusion Five

The Committee urges the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs to request the federal Special Minister of State to reconsider funding an information and education program for indigenous people about the electoral system.

NSW Government Response

The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Hon Andrew Refshauge, MP has written to the Commonwealth Special Minister of State, Senator the Hon Chris Ellison, suggesting that funds be directed to an on-going public information and education campaign for Aboriginal people on the electoral process.