

To the Director of the Aboriginal Policy Unit,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on and make a submission to the government's discussions about the creation of a new Office for Accountability and Advocacy in Aboriginal affairs in WA. As somebody who has worked for Aboriginal communities and organisations for almost 30 years I was pleased to see that the discussion paper identifies and seeks to address some of the many serious, long-term issues facing Aboriginal people, communities and organisations. Whatever happens with the current review I wish you well in your considered efforts towards engaging some of the most pressing and challenging issues that Aboriginal people face. The creation of an independent Aboriginal Advocacy Office along the lines proposed in this discussion paper is a very good concept and could potentially make a positive and ongoing impact by re-establishing faith that the government can be an ally of Aboriginal people and communities.

As time is short I have taken the liberty of organising my comments in a slightly different way than was requested in the discussion paper. I have done this to make a series of more general points and observations and then I will finish with direct comments to the questions raised.

Speaking generally it can be argued that Aboriginal affairs is in quite a mess. There are so many overall challenges - government(s) policies and programs have been so often misaligned and so often ill directed and people's culture and knowledge has so regularly been undervalued - that Aboriginal people and organisations are exhausted and are disengaged on a scale that I don't think we have seen for many years. The cumulative effects of funding cuts, policy prescriptions and social ostracisation over so many years have created circumstances where even generating a view on how to proceed is difficult to envisage. But a start has to be made. A well-directed and properly resourced Aboriginal Advocacy Office could help to make such a start. Some observations are listed here to throw some general light onto the current impasse:

- *Things not are working on the ground:* To people on the ground it has come to seem 'normal' that policies and programs proceed with either the wrong or at least misdirected aims. A classic example is the regime of compliance around the CDP program which readily and regularly leads to participants being cut off from Centrelink benefits for 8 weeks or more. The 'aim' might be to force reciprocal work actions in return for receiving welfare benefits but the much more immediate effect is to cause increased poverty as members of a household previously in receipt of benefits come to rely on other household members (often pensioners) to meet all costs of living until a penalty period is served and benefits can be reinstated. 'Reinstatement of benefits' is in itself an enormously difficult process and any analysis of this process would identify a whole series of 'things not working on the ground' moments through which frustrated people have to pass. In each case the original aim of a program (or its core aim) has been utterly overshadowed by far more complex factors to which the original aim is blind to or has now become incapable of addressing.

Over time massive resources have been directed to communities in behind these policies and programs that are not actually working and as such the programs themselves (and those built around them) have come to confirm a belief that nobody cares that a program doesn't actually work. Privatised service contracts have bred an environment where ticking boxes becomes the most important and valued register for testing how dollars are committed and assessed. An excellent example of where and how money is being siphoned off and lost to more valuable uses would be the awarding of contracts to manage CDP services. Winning the next CDP contract becomes the primary focus and underpinning activity of a current contract. Compliance and meeting KPI's measured in the crudest and least community relevant ways become the focus for organisational staff involved in delivery. In this way one of the largest and potentially most valuable community based programs is reversed to become an ongoing tool of frustration and disengagement within the very community that the program is supposed to serve.

In the current morass around Aboriginal affairs the theme of 'things are not working' is tremendously common and generates enormous resentment and disengagement. A courageous and sustained effort to confront this reality will be required. Establishment of an Aboriginal Advocacy Office could help lead efforts to confront this reality by opening up space to ask 'why is this not working'.

- *Things are not presented:*

In communities and organisations there is often a feeling of working and living within disconnected silos. In part this is brought about by the constant feeling of working at crisis point (and this may be a crisis point of funding, resources, staffing levels, magnitude of tasks ahead, cumulative frustrations of members etc.) but it is also because of feeling isolated from the broader world of economies and populations. Aboriginal people and organisations are marginal; there is at least a perception that there are many more differences with the outside world than there are things held in common. And yet there are actually many connections and successes within and between communities.

Between Aboriginal communities, organisations and people there are many good news stories that require publicity. The sense of isolation and also the sense of marginalisation could be somewhat blunted if connections, similarities and successes were more widely publicised and 'felt'. An Office of Aboriginal Advocacy could begin to fulfil this role almost immediately. There are entire 'networks of successes' out there which could be identified and promoted between communities and to the outside world. 'Join us up' could be a refrain that guided the new Office and staff. Even allowing articulation of

the shared circumstances (and frustrations) of communities would help and could perhaps lead to then focussing on successes.

The flip side of this identification and publication of networks of success would be the process of what could be called 'Reverse Advocacy'. Reverse advocacy would be the process of challenging Government Departments (and other state and non-state actors) with an analysis and holding to account of their own performances with regard to communities and organisations. Most organisations feel that in recent years they have been the subject of intense scrutiny and critique with regard to community life and a welling up of frustration has been caused by what seems like an unequal application of this level of scrutiny to only one side of the ledger. Since in recent years organisations have watched as previously community managed services have been migrated towards privatised service programs it would be fantastic to see the application of what could be termed 'KPI's for DIY's'. An Aboriginal Advocacy Office that boldly pursued a process of holding to account those who expend funds in the name of Aboriginal people and organisations would inject an element of optimism and positivity (and realism) back into the sector. Many Aboriginal people and organisations feel like their concerns, frustrations and critical insights have fallen on deaf ears as they have been subjected to one directional programming developed by and developed through external service providers without regard to community concerns, interests or aspiration.

Holding agencies and external service providers to account, having the chance to articulate frustrations, and seeing evidence of the networks of success portrayed would build on and empower the resilience present in organisations and communities. Pursuing these three themes would identify and acknowledge the resilience (which has actually been shown in abundance by communities) and thus could in itself make space for a regeneration of hope. It will be crucial to reactivate a sense of hope and possibility to overcome the levels of disengagement and exhaustion currently being experienced by communities.

- *World of Things; opening doors and linking things:*

There has always been a need for 'translations' between the world of communities and the outside world. So often this is either not done (or is not acknowledged as a valid need) or is done badly or is done in a simplistic way. I would argue that as communities have been defunded and capacity on the ground has decreased (whilst things like compliance and narrowly focussed concepts of deliverables and KPI's have increased) the need for broadly conceived and nuanced translations has never been greater.

An Aboriginal Advocacy Office could play a very important role here in four crucial areas. First, in directing organisations to services and funding opportunities that exists at state, federal and non-government levels. Second, in offering to or making connections between organisations and others (this could include mentoring, training, research, connections to educational institutions etc.) with shared interests. Third, in directing organisations towards work, governance training, contracts, upskilling opportunities etc. which could enhance the interests and activities of communities. Forth, in advocating that community aspirations, ways and goals must be made central to the processes of community programming (with particular emphasis on the need to engage and seek the active participation of communities in all programming).

Communities and organisation generally operate in a world without allies or even 'friendly ears'. An Aboriginal Advocacy Office could step into this space and immediately become a significant and serious player working on the side of communities and organisations. A 'big friend' could quickly start opening doors and making connections. A successful friend would inspire others that hope is possible. This factor alone would be a big change from the kind of landscape without friends model that has characterised recent years.

- *Things we have missed:*

Part of the reason that communities and organisations feel they operate in a world without friends and allies is that there are so many significant components of the Aboriginal world that are misunderstood or more likely missed altogether. It's culturally disconcerting if major components of your ways are neither valued nor acknowledged as significant. Of things missed I would include here what I would call the 'Big Four'; Law, Language, Culture and Heritage.

I would argue that we need a new 'era of recognition' through which the big four are valued, supported, legitimised, enhanced, prioritised (as in actually given priority) and resourced. Of course there are a huge number of issued raised behind these four themes and much work would need to be done to analyse specific circumstances and to identify and direct resources. What I am talking about though is a start in which a fundamental shift in focus brings in the energy released by identifying crucial components of life that have been for the most part ignored in the administrative affairs of Aboriginal programming and policy. This shift would be critical to a new age and would open into and could feed off thinking which is often referred to in contemporary times as health and wellbeing factors. Taking the big four seriously, or better still respecting the big four, would immediately earn the Aboriginal Advocacy Office respect and would indicate a strong desire for engagement.

- *Talking about things:*

I think about the potential of the Aboriginal Advocacy Office to fulfil a role as an advocacy portal for communities and organisations. As a portal the Office could work at overcoming the many barriers between groups and participants that are currently (or perceived to be) in place. The portal would at the very least function in this way as a border crossing, allowing a flow of resources and ideas across previously difficult or impassable terrain. The process will not be easy as the landscape is currently quite barren and communities and organisations are frustrated and withdrawn. Acts of confidence and acts of genuine invitation from the Office could have a rapid, positive effect on getting the conversation moving again.

Specific comments:

What the Department is contemplating doing in establishing an Office of Advocacy and Accountability in Aboriginal Affairs is very important. At the same time what is being contemplated is too big and too difficult but that is OK as a start needs to be made. Now is the time to be bold in this endeavour.

For so long the voice of Aboriginal organisations and communities has hardly been heard. For so long there have been no ears to hear what communities and organisations have been trying to say.

As a result of this institutional and cultural deafness the level of disengagement and disillusion within Aboriginal communities and organisations is at historic levels. The Office should expect that a degree of resentment and angst will be articulated through and at the new institution once established. Handling this will be a crucial (and actually valuable) first test.

Establishing the Office is effectively an announcement that a voice for Aboriginal organisations and communities and ears to listen to the voice of Aboriginal organisations and communities has been launched. This is a good thing. This is a bold move. This voice and ears announcement is the right place to start.

To generate realistic optimism and to handle the range and rate of interest unleashed the Aboriginal Advocacy Office will need to have regional offices and will also need to establish and maintain some form of community visit program. Perhaps the strongest way to project and emphasise the 'we are serious about a new voice and ears' message is to travel to the home turf of organisations and communities and allow people direct access to and input into the Office and its staff.

An office for advocacy and accountability in Aboriginal affairs – Submission

Submission from: Dr Peter Twigg

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Related to the above and in the interests of emphasising engagement the Office could host a regular program of community presentations. Organisations and communities could be invited to visit and present to the Aboriginal Advocacy Office about their issues, aspirations and needs. Potentially this process could be extended to include presentations to ministers, staff, potential partner organisations etc.

In terms of the focus of the Offices' overtures there isn't an easy answer. As mentioned above there is much angst and resentment currently laying across organisations and communities. Allowing this build up to vent will be necessary and this will require the Office being open to approaches from any and many different levels of organisation. That said I think Prescribed Body Corporates (PBC's) should be targeted as key organisations for engaging with communities and community people. PBC's have already gone through much administrative process and are and should be treated as the primary organisations of Traditional Owners. Of course not all groups have access to or relationships with relevant PBC's and efforts must be made by the Office to cater for these requirements. A significant example here would be Noongar groups whose voice is significant and whose needs should be very relevant to the new Office.

Appointment to this role will be tricky, however it is undertaken. It will be important to have staff and an 'advisory board' type support around the role which will provide gravitas but will also allow for some accommodating of the many (at times competing) interests relevant to the role. I would be suggesting appointment through a nomination and selection process run through PBC's and peak organisations.

I look forward to watching this important process develop and watch the new office become an active voice for Aboriginal people, organisations and communities.

Dr Peter Twigg