



Submission: New Remote Engagement Program

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With thanks:

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About ANTaR

ANTaR is a national advocacy organisation working for Justice, Rights and Respect for Australia's First Peoples. We do this primarily through campaigns, advocacy, and lobbying.

Our current national campaigns include:

- Constitutional Recognition and Equality – for Constitutional change to recognise Australia's First Peoples and remove discriminatory elements from our founding document; and
- Advocating for treaty and agreement-making processes across Australia.

We also engage in national advocacy across various policy and social justice issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including native title, languages and cultures, economic and community development, remote communities' services and infrastructure, health, and human rights.

ANTaR is a foundational member of the Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee, the Change the Record Campaign Steering Committee, and the Redfern Statement Alliance.

ANTaR has been working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and leaders on rights and reconciliation issues since 1997. ANTaR is a non-government, not-for-profit, community-based organisation.

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to provide commentary for the consideration of the proposed ***New Remote Engagement Program (NREP)***.

ANTaR acknowledges the work of the Government to provide employment support and opportunities to Australia's First Nations peoples. Addressing the disparity in employment rates between First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous people is critical in Closing the Gap. The Government has a responsibility to provide meaningful and effective employment support and follow through with the commitments to Australia's First Nations peoples.

ANTaR bases its comments throughout this submission on the views and positions of the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations, partners, and friends we have worked with, and for, over the last 25 years. We hope that an adequate New Remote Employment Program will address the failures of previous Community Development Programs and build upon its successes. We leave the more technical responses to come from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment sector leadership and will use this submission to highlight some core principles that should underpin the NREP.

The *Closing the Gap Report 2020*¹ indicates that, as of 2018, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment rate is around 49 per cent compared to about 75 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians. In major cities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are employed at a rate of 59 per cent, whilst in very remote areas that figure drops to 35 per cent.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment rates have remained relatively stable over the past decade. Between 2008 and 2018–19, the national employment rate for First Nations peoples increased slightly from 48.2 per cent to 49.1 per cent. The Government has introduced and amended multiple adaptations of the current *Community Development Program*, yet none have produced positive and sustainable results. The Federal and State governments did not meet the target to halve the gap in employment outcomes within a decade.²

¹ Close the Gap Report, *Employment*, 2020.

- See html <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/employment>

² Close the Gap Report, 2020.

For Australia's First Nations Peoples, the impacts of unemployment and under-employment are critical. The disparity of regional and remote opportunities results in First Nations communities facing inadequate income to cover living expenses, overcrowded housing, poor mental and physical health from frustration, anxiety and depression, and the amplification of family and domestic violence.³

In the Senate's inquiry into the *Appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation, and evaluation of the Community Development Program (CDP)*⁴, Mr Nathan Vinson, Community Development Program Manager at Campbell Page, explained:

If people do not have jobs, then rent can't get paid—they can't pay their power bills either, telephone bills. Basic services will start to fail...you will find a lot of family members will be living in the same house together. As they do in a community, they all come together and help facilitate the lack of funding that they might have. [If] somebody doesn't have a job, then somebody else will help them out.

Australia's regions experience inequality in several areas, including a lack of education, employment, and infrastructure. Further, inner-city incomes growth has consistently outpaced regional growth rates.⁵ Despite sizable efforts to raise employment and reduce inequalities in regional and remote areas, the governments have failed to produce sustainable results which has led to poorer health and wellbeing outcomes.

Once participants are working in the program, the wages and working benefits are barely liveable, as Dr Shelley Bielefeld, a Research Fellow at CAEPR, has stated⁶:

Thousands of CDP participants are locked into work at a rate well below award rates, with no work entitlements or protections and with little or no prospect of earning additional income or leaving income support.

³ National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), *Inquiry into regional inequality in Australia: Senate Standing Committee on Economics*, 2020.

⁴ The Senate, *Finance and public administration references committee: Appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation, and evaluation of the Community Development Program*, 2017, p. 43.

⁵ Regional Australia Institute, *The indicators of, and impact of, regional inequality in Australia*, 2018.

- see html <http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/180503-RAI-The-indicators-of-and-impact-of-regional-inequality-in-Australia.pdf>

⁶ The Senate, 2017, p. 46.

Employment lies at the heart of socioeconomic opportunity. It provides direct economic benefits to individuals and families, including financial security, increased social mobility, and access to higher living standards.⁷ It is time that the Federal Government delivers a program that successfully works for Australia's First Nations peoples. The ***New Remote Engagement Program*** needs to be constructed wholeheartedly with the priorities and recommendations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, community, and peak organisations at the centre of its design. This cannot be another failed scheme.

Lessons from CDEP and other past programs

In 1977, the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) commenced creating employment opportunities in communities with no access to a mainstream labour market. The CDEP, at its peak in 2002-2003, delivered services to 35,000 participants through 260 providers across Australia.⁸

Under the Howard Government, the CDEP was reformed to focus only on regional areas after being expanded to many urban and metropolitan areas during the 1980s to 1990s.⁹

Australia's regions experience inequality in several areas. The Senate's *Final Report and Inquiry into the indicators of, and impact of, regional inequality in Australia* highlights.¹⁰

[W]hat is well recognised is that living standards across Australia are not equal. People in regions away from the capital cities generally have lower incomes, poorer health outcomes, less access to services, and fewer opportunities for their children. Many factors contribute to these discrepancies, and they can reinforce each other to create a spiral of disadvantage.

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Indigenous Employment*, 2021.

- See html <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-employment>

⁸ House of Representatives, *Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs: Report on Indigenous participation in employment and business*, 2021.

⁹ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *A half-hearted defence of the CDEP scheme*, 2009.

- See html <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2009-01/apo-nid144391.pdf>

¹⁰ The Senate, *Economic References Committee Final Report: Inquiry into the indicators of, and impact of, regional inequality in Australia*, 2020, p. 2.

- See html <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2020-12/apo-nid309905.pdf>

First Nations peoples have a higher residence outside of major cities than non-Indigenous peoples. From the 2016 census data¹¹, only 37.4 per cent lived in major cities whilst about 23.7 per cent lived in inner regional towns, 20.3 per cent lived in outer, 6.7 per cent in remote, and 11.9 per cent in very remote areas. Regional inequality is especially pertinent and crucial in understanding the unemployment epidemic in First Nations communities.

First Nations Peoples in rural and remote areas want to work but have limited opportunities to do so. There are a range of complex and interconnected issues of employment, reported by NACCHO and their *Inquiry into Regional Inequality in Australia*¹² as:

- the lack of jobs and market opportunities;
- high levels of unemployment and reliance on income support payments;
- lower levels of job retention due to limited access to and high costs in transportation and communication, as well as family, cultural, land and other responsibilities/obligations;
- racial bias on the job or in recruitment processes, with employers and employment agencies not having undertaken cultural awareness training;
- poor health conditions and inequities in social determinants of health (including housing, education, social relationships, income, incarceration rates and poverty), which compounds challenges in finding and keeping a job;
- difficulty affording costs associated with searching for employment, including the purchase of suitable clothing for an interview and safety clothing and equipment, as well as transportation and communication costs;
- difficulty finding and maintaining employment due to not having a drivers' license;
- short-term, unsustainable contracts; and
- inadequate and inappropriate education and training opportunities.

These issues provide a substantial barrier to increasing the employment rate and must be the focus of the NREP's design. They need to be addressed to meet the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap's targets to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 who are employed to 62 per cent by 2031.

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*, 2016.

- See html <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release>

¹² NACCHO, 2020, p. 3-4.

The CDEP had its successes amongst the challenges. First, the design of the CDEP dealt with disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in their access to social security and mainstream labour market programs and opportunities. It was beneficial as it enhanced the exercise, on an equal footing, of relevant social, economic, and cultural rights of First Nations peoples. Secondly, the program was adapted to the concrete circumstances of First Nations communities. The CDEP scheme assisted in overcoming difficulties arising out of the remoteness of many First Nations communities.¹³

However, there was a lack of consistency in the treatment of CDEP participants by Commonwealth Departments and Agencies.¹⁴ CDEP participants were treated as ordinary wage-earners and were denied access to the NewStart Allowance and a wide range of associated benefits. Further, CDEP participants' incomes were not protected by the Government, as there were upper limits to the amount of revenue they could earn, but no lower limit. Lastly, there were issues of choice between unemployment schemes. There 'was a high risk of periods of no income for many people' if they fell 'between the two income support systems'.¹⁵

After CDEP was wound up in 2012, participants were transferred to the Remote Jobs and Community Program (RJCP), which was renamed the Community Development Program (CDP) in 2015.¹⁶ The CDEP/CDP program has been re-evaluated and reformed multiple times over the past 45 years, and it is not delivering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.¹⁷

The current CDP operates in over 1,000 remote communities, covering 75 per cent of Australia's landmass. According to the National Social Security Rights Network¹⁸, as of June 2018, there were approximately 32,000 CDP participants and more than 80 per cent of participants identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Evidentiary issues with the CDP include¹⁹:

¹³ Race Discrimination Commissioner, *The CDEP scheme and racial discrimination*, 1997.

- See html https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/race_discrim/cdep_scheme.pdf

¹⁴ Race Discrimination Commissioner, 1997.

¹⁵ Race Discrimination Commissioner, 1997.

¹⁶ House of Representatives, 2021.

¹⁷ Race Discrimination Commissioner, 1997.

¹⁸ National Social Security Rights Network, *Community development program: The impact of penalties on participants*, 2020.

¹⁹ The Senate, 2017, p. 41.

- High financial penalties;
- Reduced pay and conditions;
- Limited ability to engage with external bureaucracy;
- Social dislocation in remote communities;
- Lack of a functioning labour market economy in many remote communities;
- Absence of meaningful and valued work-like activities; and
- Limited ability for the bureaucracy to engage with participants.

It looks like the issues with CDEP have continued through CDP with *the House of Representatives Report on Indigenous Participation in Employment and Business* stating:

A key criticism was the lack of genuine long-term job opportunities created under the CDP. A number of stakeholders contended that the compliance requirements for CDP participants are more onerous than those for people on other income support programs. There was also criticism of the lack of traditional and culturally-relevant activities that can be undertaken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants under the current program.

ANTaR proposes that the NREP be developed with clear direction and input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for their communities. The NREP must be built on self-determination, cultural competency, a commitment to value-adding to the community, and a shift away from the old ‘mutual obligations’ approach to compliance that is not fit for purpose or understanding of cultural and community needs.

Self-determination

In the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP), Article 3 states:²⁰

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

²⁰ United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, p. 8.

Self-determination is a collective right of people to act or decide for themselves, and is a right granted to Indigenous peoples across the world, as stated in Article 3. The UNDRIP has been endorsed by the Australian Government and is now an obligation in our policy development considerations.²¹

Further, Article 4 states:²²

Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.

A successful and thriving employment program must involve Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in its design and implementation. Further, co-design inevitably diversifies local economies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rural and remote communities. When First Nations communities have control of their affairs, localised and tailored solutions must develop.²³

The NREP should complement existing programs that employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to continue critical environmental and cultural heritage protection work such as the much loved Indigenous Ranger Programs.²⁴

ANTaR endorses the advice of NACCHO²⁵, which recommends: regional development initiatives focus on expanding industry and creating jobs specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people via negotiation and co-production with ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.'

²¹ Creative Spirits, *Explainer: What is self-determination?*, 2020.

- See html <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/selfdetermination/what-is-self-determination>

²² United Nations, p. 8.

²³ NACCHO, 2020.

²⁴ Country Needs People (Program) - https://www.countryneedspeople.org.au/indigenous_rangers

²⁵ NACCHO, 2020.

Cultural competency

The Centre for Cultural Competence Australia has highlighted that cultural competence involves²⁶:

A set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

They further describe how cultural competency is operationally defined as:

The integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services, thereby producing better results.

Human beings are cultural beings. Culture shapes how we see the world and make sense of it. We acquire culture from others in our community, and we share it amongst groups of people. Cultural competency is vital in providing services, training, and support to people within an employment space to accurately respond to a culturally diverse population's needs.²⁷

Employers', and NREP administrators', cultural awareness and competency is essential due to the diverse cultures and life circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples currently employed or have employment impending. A culturally competent NREP that understands the impacts of colonisation, generational trauma and contemporary cultural practice and protocols will deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.²⁸

²⁶ Centre for Cultural Competence Australia, *Imagine a culturally competent Australia*.

- See html <https://www.ccca.com.au/Frontend/Content/WhiteLabel/c2166960-06b0-4408-b022-2902999866bf.pdf>

²⁷ Working with Indigenous Australians, *Culture*, 2020.

- See html http://www.workingwithindigenoustralian.info/content/Culture_1_Culture.html

²⁸ Centre for Cultural Competence.

Cultural awareness training must be made compulsory for all staff involved in job creation and recruitment, and those determining eligibility for and providing support to access income support payments. Further, training must be delivered by ACCOs, NACCHO affiliates and Aboriginal-led consulting companies focusing on increasing understanding and appropriate responses to the barriers of employment faced by First Nations peoples.²⁹

Value-add community development

The NREP has the chance to make a meaningful contribution to the communities it aims to support.³⁰

Community Development is a holistic approach grounded in principles of empowerment, human rights, inclusion, social justice, self-determination, and collective action. Community members must lead community development programs at every stage, as they are the experts in their lives and communities and value community knowledge and wisdom.³¹

Rural and remote towns have the challenge of identifying new sources of income and employment for their community members. Creating local livelihoods (whether in jobs, businesses, or self-provisioning activities) is vital in maintaining rural and remote towns as viable places to live. Revitalising a local economy is no small challenge, as more jobs, businesses, customers, and services are needed. Yet whatever approaches are taken, the community – the local people themselves – play a role.³²

The CDP attempted to tackle these challenges by providing a platform for employment opportunities for First Nations peoples in rural and remote areas. However, the absence of an employment market in remote communities hindered the CDP from being viable. The *Community Bridging Services* commented:³³

There is not enough opportunity, infrastructure and community support in remote regions to support the current Work for the Dole type of activities of 25 hours a week. There is also inequity in the requirements for CDP clients

²⁹ NACCHO, 2020.

³⁰ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *What is community development?*, 2019.

- See html <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/expert-panel-project/what-community-development>

³¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2019.

³² Eversole, R, Value-Adding Community? Community Economic Development in Theory & Practice. *Rural society*, 13(1), 2003.

³³ The Senate, 2017, p. 58.

– mainstream clients are required to do 15 hours per week, CDP clients need to do 25. That is why there are so many reported infringements.

One of the most controversial features of the CDP is its focus on Work for the Dole, involving unsupervised and work-like activities that ended up forcing participants to undertake relatively meaningful tasks. Further, the disconnect between training and activities, and the job opportunities, did not set up participants for sustainable, long-lasting, and reliable jobs or skills for future employment. There are real jobs in remote communities, and these jobs must be set up outside of employment programs. For example, *Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory* stated:³⁴

There are clearly many worthwhile, meaningful jobs that need to be done across remote communities. Many of these are jobs that address gaps in local infrastructure and services available to Indigenous communities—a legacy of historical underinvestment. They are not 'make work' or 'add on' jobs, but address genuine needs of communities. Many are in the health, community services and education sectors – sectors in which employment growth is strong, and expected to continue. Others are in areas like construction, housing and municipal services. There is also important work to be done in preserving and strengthening Indigenous culture and lands—work which requires specific skills and knowledge. This work, and these jobs, are an important part of maintaining and strengthening cultural identity—critical to 'Closing the Gap'. These are 'real jobs'. They cannot and should not be done under 'Work for the Dole' schemes for \$11 per hour.

Lastly, reiterating that the effective pay rate is well below minimum wage, the CDP offers no incentives for participants to work. Under the CDEP, participants could top up their incomes, giving providers the ability to provide incentives for increased participation. Participants were paid the equivalent of award rates of pay and conditions such as superannuation and extended service leave. Under the CDP, though, as Mr Gerard Coffey, *CEO of Ngaanyatjarra Council*, stated:³⁵

We could go back a little bit. The CDEP—we were paying \$17 an hour. This was less than \$10 an hour [for] this program [CDP]. You are obligated to

³⁴ The Senate, 2017, p. 61.

³⁵ The Senate, 2017, p. 47.

commit 25 hours a week on remote CDP to get your full unemployment benefits. Under the CDEP, it was 16 or 17 hours, and you received more money.

The lack of self-determination, and the low employment and income rates, have practical implications on people's physical and mental wellbeing. There needs to be a radical change to eradicate these failures effectively.

As stated above, the Ranger Program is a perfect example of how community development programs can be successful. The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)³⁶ affirms that the Ranger Program supports First Nations peoples to combine traditional knowledge with conservation training to manage and protect their land, sea and culture. The program has created more than 2,100 full-time, part-time, and casual positions providing meaningful employment, training, and career pathways for First Nations people.

The Ranger Program is a robust and successful example of how a genuine partnership between grassroots Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community initiatives in land and sea management, and thoughtful government policy, can deliver valuable jobs for local people and a healthier environment for all³⁷. The local community are the experts in their own needs, and the Ranger Program is evidence of how this is put into practice through self-determination.

This should be the type of employment activity that the NREP invests in and supports.

Addressing Mutual obligations

The National Social Security Rights Network have stated that:³⁸

In the first year of CDP operations, there was a 413% increase in financial penalties compared with the preceding remote employment services

³⁶ National Indigenous Australians Agency, *Indigenous Ranger Programs*.

- See html <https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/environment/indigenous-ranger-programs>

³⁷ PEW, *Government Review Finds Big Benefits from Indigenous Rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas*, 2016.

- See html <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2016/07/18/government-review-finds-big-benefits-from-indigenous-rangers-and-indigenous-protected-areas>

³⁸ National Social Security Rights Network, 2020, p. 14.

scheme, the [RJCP], which had less onerous obligations and greater flexibility over choice of activity. As more than 90% of remote participants identify as Indigenous, the result of this escalation in penalties is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people receive significantly more financial penalties than other people on income support across Australia.

Further, Lisa Fowkes at the Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Development found that:³⁹

Between July 2015 and July 2018, the small number of CDP participants (around 30,000 people) received 53.3% of all the penalties applied overall, despite the fact that there are around 905,000 participants in other employment service programs. Over the period from July 2015 to June 2018, Indigenous people received almost 60% of all penalties applied to job seekers nationally.

Financial penalties and suspended payments lead to increased poverty, crime, and social issues. In the Senate's inquiry into the *Appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation, and evaluation of the Community Development Program (CDP)*, one contributor noted the psychological effects, along with poverty, on the community:⁴⁰

The depression—it's so oppressive, it's unbelievable. You've got these people with these penalties for eight weeks and no money. They can't pay their rent, they can't pay their bills, and they can't put food on their table. What happens then, particularly in the remote townships, where the general store relies on this income to function and work, is that they're not getting paid. It's a bit like the ripple effect: throw the people in the pond, and then it ripples out into the community. It also adds an extra burden on other family members that have to cover those costs for eight weeks. It's quite an oppressive situation to be in. People need to understand and realise how hard it is to struggle.

³⁹ National Social Security Rights Network, 2020, p. 14.

⁴⁰ The Senate, 2017, p. 54.

Further, the YEAR Senate Committee⁴¹ noted that domestic violence is often caused by a lack of money in dry communities. Suspended payments can have detrimental effects on individuals, their behaviour, and their communities, as observed by Inspector Glen Willers, Assistant District Officer for the Western Australia Police Force's Goldfield's-Esperance District:

It's clear that small matters like being cut-off become huge in these places. Recently up at Warakurna, which is very isolated, one of the adult males there basically, as they described it, ran amok and did damage all around town. When they got him back to the police station, calmed him down and asked, 'What was the problem,' he said: 'I've been cut-off, and I don't know how to get back on. The other day, I was on the phone for half an hour. The people don't understand me, so I hung up.' So there you have a frustrated man [in] your community who is a really good person—he's just frustrated because he has no money, he's isolated, and he can't get back on the program.

Another vital issue is the social dislocation experienced in remote communities. Financial penalties and reduced pay and conditions drive many First Nations Peoples to take drastic measures to stay afloat. These include seeking money from others in the community for essential items or leaving remote communities to live in regional centres, all due to a lack of financial security.⁴²

The NREP must drastically change its mutual obligation requirements to better address the adverse psychological, physical, and cultural effects of penalties on First Nations Peoples and their communities.

Finally, in relation to the CDP system of fines, NACCHO⁴³ stated that:

[The] CDP does not benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities. The program does not achieve the goals it set out to do and is discriminatory against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who comprise more than 80 per cent of participants across

⁴¹ The Senate, 2017, p. 55.

⁴² The Senate, 2017.

⁴³ NACCHO, 2020, p. 12.

Australia. Fining members for missing a session, with no consideration at all to the complexities of the social determinants and cultural obligations facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is unacceptable and directly discriminates against them. A program that is targeted at remote employment and development must recognise that there is a significantly greater burden of disease and higher mental health conditions among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared to other Australians and that these issues can greatly impact program attendance.

The incentives and disincentives used in past programs demonstrably do not work. Compliance and obligations are important, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and expertise is essential and should be engaged to design a NREP that employs the right obligations and holds itself to the highest account for quality service and support.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide a submission on this important program.

ANTaR offers our ongoing support to a program that meets the expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We would also welcome the opportunity to meet with the Government to discuss any points raised in this submission.

Sincerely

Paul Wright

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