

# Strong Indigenous organisations show the way

**Gary Banks**

**Chairman, Productivity Commission**

Today, there is a good news story about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. But if the past is any guide, you may not get to read much about it or see it on TV. That is partly because it deals with a pretty dry topic, ‘governance’. But also because it does not fit with the image of dysfunctional Indigenous communities and organisations that most Australians have been led to believe is the norm.

How do I know about this? Because it has been my privilege to be on the judging panel for the ‘Indigenous Governance Awards’ sponsored by BHP-Billiton and Reconciliation Australia. I must admit that I accepted Professor Mick Dodson’s invitation to join the panel without high expectations. But the Productivity Commission’s research for COAG on Indigenous disadvantage had convinced me of the crucial importance of good governance, and the value of supporting a venture that seeks to promote it.

This is the third set of Awards and the second with which I have been associated. My experience has been the same on each occasion: I have been bowled over twice! Each time, around 50 Indigenous organisations across diverse areas and functions stepped forward to be assessed. The majority were worthy contenders with important stories to tell. The eight finalists, with which I became more familiar, distinguished themselves as exemplary organisations.

I would go further — the best among these Indigenous bodies actually outclass most mainstream organisations or enterprises in Australia. How so? Well, they do everything that mainstream organisations should do to reflect good governance principles and practice. They have strong leaders, clear goals, accountable boards and effective administrations. And they have sound policies for making decisions, strategic planning and dealing with disputes. But they have something more: a profound connection with community and a cultural fit that makes the best of them truly remarkable organisations.

Let me give just two examples. During the 2006 Awards, Mick Dodson and I visited WuChopperen Health Service in Cairns, an essential healthcare facility established in 1979 to serve Indigenous people in the region. Since that time it has greatly surpassed its humble beginnings, providing first rate services in a first rate clinical setting. It is an Indigenous-run organisation, with a strong Indigenous presence among its medical and other staff. From our initial meetings with the CEO and Board, to those at the end of the day with an assembled throng of stakeholders and clients, it was clear to us that this innovative, caring organisation was achieving excellence at many levels. What stood out was the passion and commitment to serve the community, allied to the highest professional standards and impressive attention to detail in service delivery. People said they felt ‘at home’, and it was obvious that they did. As one patient put it “They take the time to listen. We have a beautiful gem”. The judges agreed, awarding WuChopperen first prize.

The second organisation, Murriajabree, at Deception Bay just north of Brisbane, could not be more different. It has only existed for a few years and still occupies a modest house owned by its Chairman, Uncle Allan. It has only a few staff and most are volunteers. For an outsider like me, it takes a little while to get to know. But in a visit last month with Mick, and fellow judge Heather Ridout (from AIG), it became clear that this little organisation, whose name means ‘gathering together’, was achieving something very special. Its mission, to meet the social and other needs of a diverse and hitherto fractured community, was pursued not only with (unassuming) professionalism and dedication, but also with a degree of inclusiveness and community involvement well beyond what could be imagined in any organisation as successful in getting things done. This was all encapsulated for me by one person’s heartfelt comment that “Murriajabree’s boomerang is bringing us all in”.

Now I don’t pretend that such organisations have done it easily — on the contrary — or that they will not face challenges in the future. After all, they are seeking to meet a range of objectives in situations far more complex than those faced by most mainstream organisations. Yet, like other organisations, they need adequate resources and the continuing commitment of talented individuals.

What these organisations and others like them have clearly demonstrated, though, is that Indigenous organisations are achieving excellence in governance, providing examples that others can learn from. But for that to happen, the experience of those organisations needs to be accessible and shared. Despite decades of Indigenous policy development, involving a myriad of programs, governments have not done enough to encourage good Indigenous governance. Yet it is the bedrock on which the success of many other actions and policies directed at overcoming disadvantage depend.

Recognition of the importance of good governance is at last gaining momentum, drawing inspiration from the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. Its work is reinforced by the Australian experience that successful institutions generally have much in common, but are also closely attuned to local circumstances and contexts. The finalists in the 2008 Indigenous Governance Awards, which will be presented today at a lunchtime ceremony in Melbourne, deserve public acclaim for showing the way.

It would be gratifying to see this and other Indigenous good news stories actually making the news. I'm not saying that the media should dwell only on the positives and ignore the negatives. But the public needs a realistic picture of both. If we choose to recognise Indigenous success more, we may just see more of it.