

**Building Effective Indigenous Governance Conference
4 – 7 November 2003
Jabiru, Northern Territory**

**Speaking Notes
of
Torres Strait Regional Authority
Alternate Deputy Chairperson
Mr Terrence Whap**

- Firstly, I acknowledge the traditional Elders and owners of this land, the Mirrar Country.
- I also acknowledge all other Elders who are here with us today.
- I thank the Northern Territory Government's Steering Committee for inviting me to speak at this conference today.
- For those who may not know me, my name is Terrence Whap and I am the Alternate Deputy Chairperson of the Torres Strait Regional Authority.
- Together with this, I hold the TSRA Portfolio for Arts, Language, Culture and Sport, and am also the Chairperson of Mabuag Island Council.
- I extend apologies from both Terry Waia, the Chairperson of the TSRA, and Margaret Mau, Deputy Chairperson of the TSRA, who are unable to be here this week due to a previous commitment.
- Just briefly, the TSRA is a Statutory Authority situated on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait.
- The TSRA was established in July 1994 and replaced ATSIC in the Torres Strait.
- It has an elected and administrative arm.
- Our elected arm is currently made of 20 Board Members.
- Eighteen of these members are also Island Council Chairpersons elected by their communities under the *Queensland Services (Torres Strait) Act 1984*.
- The other two are elected under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act (1989)*.

- Since its inception, the TSRA has always had a vision to empower our people to determine their own affairs based on our unique Ailan Kastom.
- For many years now, autonomy or regional governance has been around and discussed at length by many of the people in the Torres Strait with different models being proposed.
- The TSRA's journey began back in the mid 90's following the release of the report "Torres Strait Islanders: A New Deal" that was handed down by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs to the then Federal Minister, Senator John Herron.
- Out of this report came an invitation from Minister Herron to consult on the proposal outlined in the report.
- As a result of this report a committee involving a range of community members was formed to carry out consultations and progress regional autonomy.
- This committee was replaced with a special Autonomy Taskforce in 2000 to progress this matter further.
- The special taskforce, comprising of Mr Terry Waia, Chairman of the TSRA, Chairman of the Island Coordinating Council, Mr Henry Garnier and Mayor Pedro Stephen of the Torres Shire Council, initiated a comprehensive consultation process including all of our Torres Strait communities.

- After extensive consultations the Taskforce submitted options to the TSRA Board who decided on a model that sought to achieve a Territory form of government by building on the existing regional governance arrangements.
- This model became known as the “Bamaga Accord”.
- It also proposed, in the first instance, to advance through the TSRA legislative framework, a Commonwealth body established under the ATSIC Act and incorporating membership of the Island Coordinating Council (ICC).
- The transitional arrangements were to involve a new TSRA Act, separating the TSRA from the ATSIC Act and incorporating new arrangements for direct elections of regional representatives by all Island communities.
- The people would elect the Chair from Members elected to the regional body and the election of the governing body, with portfolio responsibilities, would be done by the people voting in clusters.
- These features were in response to the views expressed during the consultation process.
- The TSRA would provide the basic building block to take further steps to achieve the goal of a regional governing body.
- From this step, we planned to continue to improve indigenous regional governance towards the eventual goal of a Territory style of Government.
- With several other models also being discussed around the same time a Greater Autonomy Public Forum, was held on Thursday Island in May 2002 with people from all our outer island communities attending.

- At this forum there were several speakers who discussed their models, including the Bamaga Accord, and presented concepts of regional government and proposals and the way ahead.
- This forum endorsed a six member Steering Committee, separate from the TSRA, and made up of leaders and community members who took on the responsibility of developing other models and to identify a transition process towards progressing regional autonomy in the Torres Strait.
- In November 2002, the TSRA established a new Portfolio position for Regional Governance and Legislative Reform and appointed TSRA Member, Mr Getano Lui to this position.
- A proposal to Improve Regional Governance in the Torres Strait has been developed by Mr Lui and endorsed by the TSRA.
- A copy was sent to the then Minister of Indigenous Affairs, the Hon Philip Ruddock seeking his views.
- With recent changes to the Howard Ministry, we are currently awaiting a response from the new Minister, Amanda Vanstone.
- This proposal seeks to progress the TSRA Bill with amendments including the reconstitution of the TSRA from the current 20 Members to 6 Members and a Chairperson.
- A total of 7 members on the TSRA Board.
- Each of these Members would be representative of a division or cluster.
- The proposal involves changes to the electoral arrangements so that it includes:

& Divisional/Cluster representatives being elected by the people in their respective divisions/clusters; and,

& The TSRA Chairperson being elected at the same time by the people;

- The TSRA has provided this proposal to the community for discussion and so far we have received a couple of submissions responding to the proposal.
- What we have found over the past seven years is that there are a variety of views on how regional governance should be progressed.
- Our approach has always been one of inclusion and consistent consultation built into a robust political process.
- Although at times, it can become quite challenging it is about giving people time to understand, think about and discuss what is best for us all as a nation of people.
- From our experience we have learnt:
 1. the communities must agree on what they see as problems with existing regional governance;
 2. the communities must agree on a vision for governance in the short and long term; and,
 3. Once these two have been done, developing the strategies to make it happen.
- On this note, I would like to thank the Northern Territory Government's Steering Committee for giving me this opportunity to share our experience with regional governance with you all.
- Esso