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**C**entre for  
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**A Torres Strait Islanders  
Commission? Possibilities  
and issues**

**W. Sanders and W.S. Arthur**

**No. 132/1997**



**DISCUSSION PAPER**

ISSN 1036-1774  
ISBN 0 7315 2567 1

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April 1997

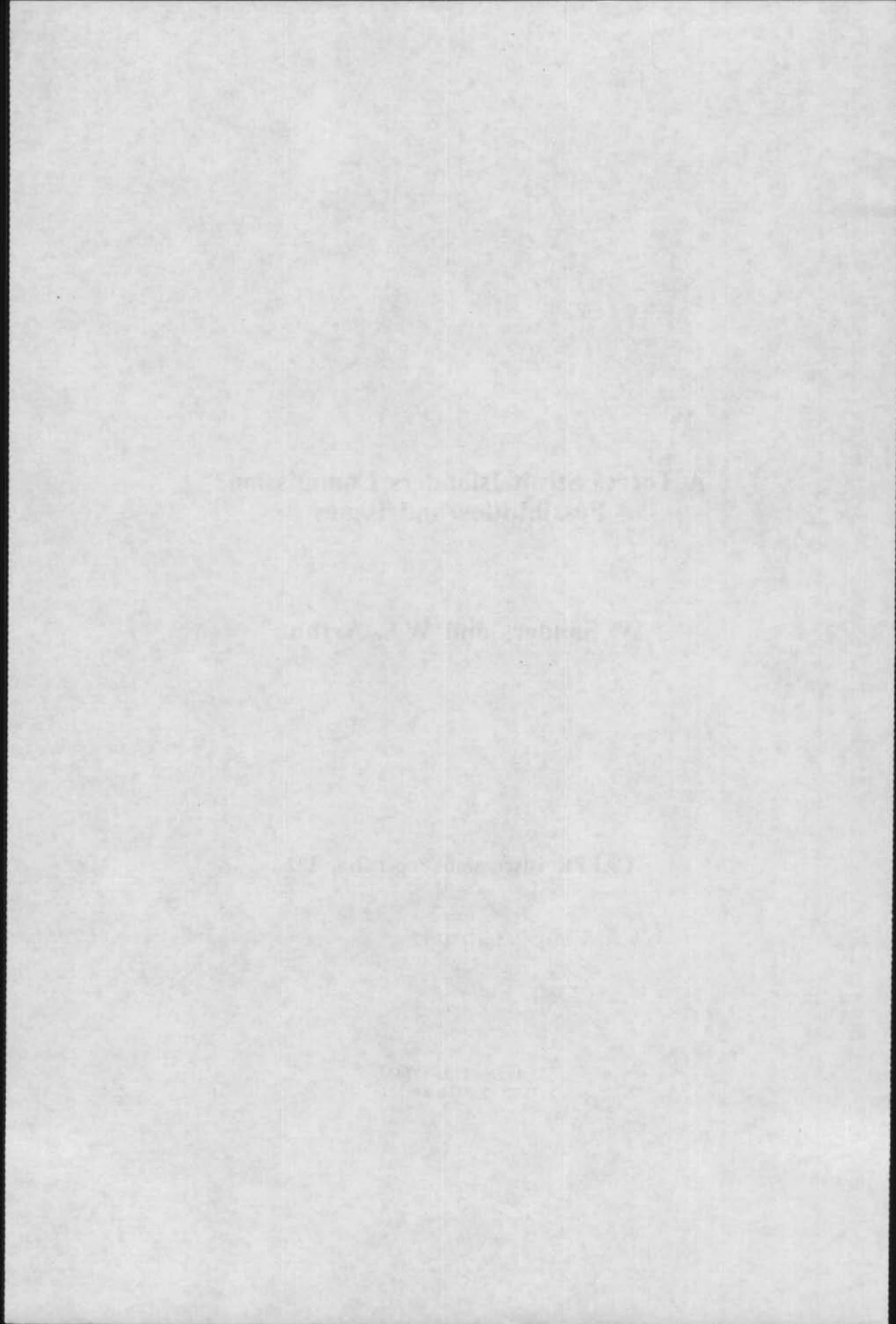
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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper has been written as CAEPR's second response to the terms of reference of the current HRSCATSIA inquiry into greater autonomy for 'the people of the Torres Strait'. It notes that Islander submissions to this inquiry have predominantly interpreted these terms of reference as being about Torres Strait Islander autonomy, as a cultural group Australia wide, and have used the inquiry to further calls for a national statutory Torres Strait Islanders organisation; a Torres Strait Islanders Commission as we have indicatively referred to it.

The paper explores the demographic background to this call for a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission and also the position of Torres Strait Islanders within the current ATSIC structure. It then goes on to discuss issues that are likely to arise in a move towards a Torres Strait Islanders Commission, under the headings of representation, funding, organisational scale, dual identification and Aboriginal people in Torres Strait. The paper argues that a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission is a real possibility, but that it would raise some quite significant and difficult issues. Because of this, the paper also discusses another reform possibility; better representation and funding arrangements within ATSIC and the TSRA for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait. The paper argues that Torres Strait Islanders themselves must determine which of these reform possibilities they want to pursue and to facilitate this it suggests a national Torres Strait Islander convention as a necessary next step. The final brief section of the paper attempts to clarify relationships between reform towards a Torres Strait Islanders Commission, or better representation and funding arrangements within ATSIC and the TSRA for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait, and reform towards Torres Strait regional government. Both, it argues, can be legitimately pursued under the rubric of seeking 'greater autonomy for the people of the Torres Strait'.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thanks to Jin Liu who assisted with Figure 2, Krystyna Szokalski for editorial and final layout work and Linda Roach and Hilary Bek for proofreading. OTSIA officers engaged us in useful discussions and provided us with access to unpublished reports of national Torres Strait Islander workshops.

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## Acronyms

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| ABS       | Australian Bureau of Statistics   |
| ATSIC     | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission                                    |
| CAEPR     | Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research                                      |
| HRSCATSIA | House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs |
| ICC       | Island Co-ordinating Council  |
| NATSIS    | National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey                               |
| OTSIA     | Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs  |
| TSIAB     | Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board   |
| TSRA      | Torres Strait Regional Authority  |

In August 1996, the Commonwealth Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Senator John Herron, made the following reference to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCATSIA):

Inquire into and report on:

- Whether the people of the Torres Strait would benefit from a greater degree of autonomy; and
- If so, what forms should a greater degree of autonomy take; and
- What implications would greater autonomy have for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Torres Strait region including whether the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission or the Torres Strait Regional Authority should represent the interests of such residents (HRSCATSIA 1996a: 1).

This reference can be read in a number of different ways. In an earlier Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) Discussion Paper and Submission to the Committee we discussed the issue of autonomy primarily in geographic terms; as autonomy for the Torres Strait region through the development of a more fully-fledged form of Torres Strait regional government. However, it is now apparent that a number of Torres Strait Islanders are interpreting these terms of reference as primarily about Islander autonomy, as a cultural group, Australia wide. By February 1997, the HRSCATSIA had received 12 submissions from Torres Strait Islander individuals or community organisations, 11 of which sought greater autonomy for 'the people of the Torres Strait' through the development of a national statutory organisation devoted to Torres Strait Islanders. Most of these submissions referred to the proposed organisation as a Torres Strait Islanders Commission; 'taking the TSI out of ATSIC' (the existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) as it has catchily been put. Some, however, referred to the proposed organisation as a Torres Strait Authority; taking the 'regional' out of the current Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA). Any difference in thinking which was evident in this different terminology was slight.<sup>1</sup> All 11 submissions sought a national statutory organisation for Torres Strait Islanders; somewhat like ATSIC is now for both Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. For convenience, the terminology adopted here for the organisation being sought is a Torres Strait Islanders Commission. This, however, is only indicative.

This Discussion Paper is an attempt to identify possibilities for such a Torres Strait Islanders Commission and to anticipate issues which might arise were such possibilities to be further developed. It begins by establishing the demographic context of this push for a separate Torres Strait Islanders Commission, looking at recent Torres Strait Islander population growth and dispersal. It then analyses the position of Torres

Strait Islanders within the present ATSIC structure and perceptions of problems with this position, particularly among Torres Strait Islanders resident outside Torres Strait. The paper goes on to discuss a number of issues which might arise in the push for a separate Torres Strait Islanders Commission under the headings of representation, funding, organisational scale, dual identification and Aboriginal people in Torres Strait. This discussion suggests that while a Torres Strait Islanders Commission is a real possibility, the development of such a Commission could encounter some quite significant and difficult issues. For this reason the paper then discusses better representation and funding arrangements within ATSIC and the TSRA for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside Torres Strait as another reform possibility. Deciding between these possibilities is, the paper argues, a matter for Torres Strait Islanders themselves and it suggests a national convention of Torres Strait Islanders to take the matter further. Finally, the paper argues that the idea of a Torres Strait Islanders Commission, (or better representation and funding arrangements within ATSIC and the TSRA for Islanders resident outside the Strait), is quite separate from the idea of a more fully fledged Torres Strait regional government, as discussed in the earlier CAEPR Discussion Paper and submission to the HRSCATSIA inquiry (Altman, Arthur and Sanders 1996). Both these reform ideas could, indeed perhaps should, be progressed together under the rubric of seeking 'greater autonomy for the people of the Torres Strait'.

### **Torres Strait Islander demography: recent growth and dispersal**

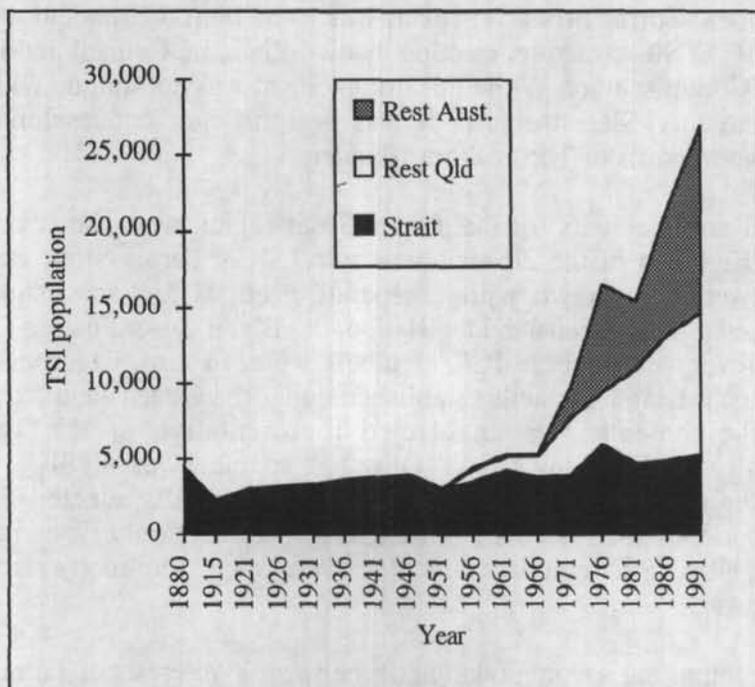
At the time of British colonisation, there were probably some 4,000-5,000 Islanders living in Torres Strait (Beckett 1987: 26). National census data and other evidence suggest that the Islander population remained at about this level until the 1960s. Since then, however, the population of Torres Strait Islanders has increased rapidly to over 25,000 in the 1990s (see Figure 1).

Recent population growth has been accompanied by, and is probably related to, significant population dispersal.<sup>2</sup> Islanders have taken up residence in other parts of Queensland and increasingly also in other parts of Australia (again see Figure 1). This recent dispersal of the population has been so great that Torres Strait Islanders living away from the Strait now outnumber those living in the Strait by four-to-one. The number living in the Strait has remained fairly constant, around 5,000.

This recent population dispersal and growth among Torres Strait Islanders in many ways sets the context for the current HRSCATSIA inquiry into 'greater autonomy for the people of the Torres Strait'. It renders somewhat inevitable the dual focus of the inquiry and the importance of the issue of

the relationship between Torres Strait Islanders living away from the Strait and those living in the Strait.

**Figure 1. Torres Strait Islander population distribution.**



Note: Where data are unavailable, particularly in the period to 1946, figures used average earlier and later estimates.

Source: The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Censuses; Beckett (1987); Caldwell, Duncan and Tait (1975); Fisk, Duncan and Kehl (1974).

### Torres Strait Islanders in ATSIC

When the Hawke Labor government first proposed the establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in July 1987, it envisaged an organisation representing *all* Indigenous Australians through a geographic system of 28 regional councils. The government was also aware that in constructing the Commission, it would need to pay some attention to the specific minority Indigenous interests of Torres Strait Islanders, alongside those of the Aboriginal Indigenous majority. Torres Strait was identified as a proposed ATSIC regional council area, despite having somewhat less than 1/28th of the national Indigenous population. Also, of the seven Commissioners to be 'selected' by Indigenous people, one was to be 'selected by the Torres Strait Islander Community'; the other six being selected on a State/Territory basis (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives vol. 158, 10 December 1987: 3153).<sup>3</sup>

During 1988, through negotiations with both Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the proposed ATSIC structure changed considerably. The number of regions was increased to 60 and the number of 'elected' (rather than 'selected') Commissioners increased to 17. These Commissioners were to be drawn from zones which were, in most cases, aggregations of three or four regions. Torres Strait, however, was to be both a zone and a region within the ATSIC structure, electing its own Regional Council and its own national Commissioner. While this arrangement was not unique within the renegotiated ATSIC structure, it was a significant concession to the distinctive interests of Torres Strait Islanders.<sup>4</sup>

Electoral arrangements for the Torres Strait region were, however quite unique. Eighteen of the 20 members of ATSIC's Torres Strait Regional Council were to be drawn, without separate election, from an existing body established under Queensland legislation, the Island Co-ordinating Council (ICC). Seventeen of these ICC members were, in turn, Chairpersons of elected local Island Councils established under the Queensland legislation and the eighteenth was an elected representative of the Tamwoy community on Thursday Island. Only two members of ATSIC's Torres Strait Regional Council were, therefore, specifically elected for that purpose, rather than drawn from existing organisations. Elsewhere, by contrast, all ATSIC regional councillors were to be specifically elected for that purpose.

Another important accommodation of the specific interests of Torres Strait Islanders within the revised ATSIC was to provide for two *national* structures specific to Torres Strait Islanders; an Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs (OTSIA) and a Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (TSIAB). The TSIAB, which was to meet at least quarterly, was to be chaired by the Torres Strait Zone Commissioner and have six ministerially-appointed Torres Strait Islander members drawn from the States and Territories.<sup>5</sup> The OTSIA, as well as servicing the TSIAB, was to 'monitor' the programs and policies of the Commission and other government agencies to 'evaluate' the extent to which they met the 'needs' of Torres Strait Islanders (see ATSIC Act 1989: section 81).

These changes in the ATSIC proposal relating both to Torres Strait and to Torres Strait Islanders were the product of some fairly heated negotiations. Even at the end of these negotiations, however, Torres Strait Islanders were far from convinced that ATSIC was what they wanted. Torres Strait Islanders tended to perceive that their interests as Indigenous Australians had in the past been dominated by those of the larger Aboriginal population and many retained this sceptical perception in relation to ATSIC, even with the changes negotiated.

During the early 1990s, Islander experience of the ATSIC representative structure tended to reinforce this scepticism about Islander interests not

being well served within structures for all Indigenous people. Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Strait appeared to be the most dissatisfied. Within their ATSIC regions they saw themselves as outsider minorities whose interests were being overlooked or overridden by Aboriginal majorities. They also saw that they had no call on or voice in the Torres Strait Regional Council, which was explicitly restricted to representing and servicing Indigenous people resident within Torres Strait. While these Islanders living outside the Strait did have representation on the TSIAB, this was only an advisory body. Also OTSIA, the Canberra-based administrative office which was closely associated with the TSIAB, had very little program funding on which Islanders living outside the Strait could draw. Indeed, apart from OTSIA funding for an annual national Torres Strait Islanders workshop, virtually all ATSIC funding remained within 'general' program structures.<sup>6</sup> These general ATSIC programs were, in principle, open to Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders alike. However, Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait had little faith in gaining access to resources through these programs, since they perceived themselves as marginalised and under-represented in regional council structures.

These problems which Islanders perceived with the ATSIC structure were being clearly enunciated by early 1993 when the ATSIC legislation was being reviewed with a view to amendment after three years of operation. The official ATSIC review noted a 'perception' among Torres Strait Islanders that, with only one elected Commissioner among 17 and one Regional Council among 60, they were 'disadvantaged in the allocation of funds'. The review report went on to state, however, that the 'Commission' did not believe that such disadvantage was 'in fact, the case' and that:

At the same time from among Aboriginals and members of the Commission itself there was questioning of the desirability of the specific provisions for Torres Strait Islanders in the Act. These mechanisms include the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs and the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board.

It is argued that the structure and composition of the representative arm of ATSIC gives Torres Strait Islanders the same opportunities for representation on the mainland as the Aboriginal community and that the special provisions are inequitable and unnecessary (ATSIC 1993: 36).

This dismissal of Torres Strait Islander perceptions of disadvantage by the official Commission review, and siding with converse Aboriginal perceptions, could only have confirmed Islander views about their interests within ATSIC being dominated by Aboriginal ones. While clearly not convinced of Torres Strait Islander disadvantage within ATSIC structures, the ATSIC review did however attempt to accommodate such perceptions by recommending that consideration be given to 'advancing the autonomy of the Torres Strait' by creating a 'Torres Strait Authority' within the ATSIC Act (ATSIC 1993: 37).

In March 1993, participants at the third annual OTSIA-funded national Torres Strait Islanders workshop reacted positively to this recommendation for a Torres Strait Authority within the ATSIC Act. They argued, however, that the new Authority would need to represent and fund services for all Torres Strait Islanders, whether resident in the Strait or elsewhere. They even suggested an appropriate balance of representatives within the Authority, with five being drawn from the Strait and eight from elsewhere in Australia (Magani Malu Kes 1993: 7-12).

On a closer reading of the ATSIC review, however, it is apparent that the proposed Torres Strait Authority was not intended by ATSIC to represent and fund all Torres Strait Islanders. It was intended 'to replace the Torres Strait Regional Council' (ATSIC 1993: 37). This would perpetuate the distinction within the ATSIC structure between Torres Strait Islanders living in the Strait and those living elsewhere. And, indeed, this is what happened. Amendments to the ATSIC Act were passed which in July 1994 established the TSRA; a stronger and more autonomous body than an ATSIC regional council but still one designed to represent and service Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines living in Torres Strait, rather than all Torres Strait Islanders. Torres Strait Islanders outside the Strait remained represented and serviced through ATSIC regional councils in the areas in which they were resident. (These 1993 amendments also reduced the number of ATSIC regions from 60 to 36.)

Thus, the establishment of the TSRA in 1994 left intact the problems that Torres Strait Islanders, and particularly those living outside the Strait, perceived with ATSIC. These Islanders resident outside the Strait were still not represented on the increasingly-autonomous Torres Strait body established under the ATSIC Act and they were still directed for resources and representation to the ATSIC regional councils in the areas in which they resided. They felt cut off from the agency which was representing their homeland with increasing authority and autonomy, the TSRA, and they felt marginalised and dominated, by Aboriginal interests, within their ATSIC regions.

Figure 2 sets out the demography on which these feelings were based. Using 1991 Census data relating to Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines, it suggests that these feelings of marginalisation and domination do have some demographic basis. In 33 of the 36 post-1993 ATSIC regions, Aborigines greatly outnumber Torres Strait Islanders. In the Cairns and Townsville regions, Torres Strait Islanders are still a clear minority, but they constitute a more significant proportion of the total Indigenous population; 41 and 25 per cent respectively. Only in one region, the Torres Strait, are Torres Strait Islanders the majority Indigenous population, with Aboriginal people constituting only 4 per cent.



of Aboriginal and Islander concerns. The fifth national workshop passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a separate body, somewhat like ATSIC, covering just Torres Strait Islanders; but all Torres Strait Islanders whether resident in the Strait or elsewhere in Australia (IINA 1995: 28). This led, in turn, to a protest outside Parliament House in Canberra in February 1996, during the Federal election campaign, which attempted to elicit commitments on this issue from the major parties. The protest, however, received little media attention and was somewhat lost in the larger election campaign. No clear commitments from the major parties were forthcoming.

The 1995 national Torres Strait Islanders workshop resolution also led to a submission to the ATSIC Board of Commissioners in April 1996 from two mainland Torres Strait Islander representatives. This submission called for a separate Torres Strait Islanders Commission and evoked a number of ATSIC responses (ATSIC 1996: 10). The then ATSIC Chairperson, Lois O'Donoghue, wrote to all ATSIC Regional Councils reminding them of their responsibilities for Torres Strait Islanders within their regions. The Board also undertook to direct the Office of Evaluation and Audit (OEA) within ATSIC to evaluate the access of Torres Strait Islanders to ATSIC funding and programs. There was also a rather more tentative suggestion that some feasibility study of a separate Commission might be looked at.

Meanwhile in June 1996 the new Commonwealth Coalition Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Senator Herron, visited Torres Strait and spoke with a number of Islander leaders, including Getano Lui (Jnr), Chairperson of the TSRA. A month later, Lui met with Prime Minister John Howard in Sydney and requested a 'single line appropriation' for the TSRA, independent of ATSIC. Although Lui's concerns, as Chairperson of the TSRA, were primarily with Islanders living in the Strait, in making his funding request he explicitly invoked the idea that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were 'two separate races of people' (*The Canberra Times*, 16 July 1996). Perhaps not surprisingly then, Lui's visit was reported as being part of a 'campaign of Torres Strait Islanders to be treated as an indigenous people separate from mainland Aborigines' (*The Australian*, 16 July 1996); as indeed at one level it was. However, Lui's role as Chairperson of the TSRA somewhat compromised him in this call, since the TSRA did not represent or have responsibility for Islanders resident outside the Strait and it was this arrangement which those calling for a separate Torres Strait Islanders Commission wanted changed.

A month after Lui's meeting with the Prime Minister, the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs made the reference to the HRSCATSIA on 'greater autonomy for the people of the Torres Strait'. Term of reference three, in particular, opened up the issue of Torres Strait Islanders living outside Torres Strait and their relationship to ATSIC and

the TSRA. This ensured that the HESCATSIA would be seen as a significant opportunity by Islanders promoting the idea of a separate national Torres Strait Islanders Commission.

### **Support and issues for a Torres Strait Islanders Commission?**

How strong is support among Islanders for a separate Torres Strait Islanders Commission? At one level, it would appear to be very strong. The annual national Torres Strait Islander workshops have been keen on the idea since at least 1993 and have gradually clarified and strengthened their stance. However, it does need to be acknowledged that these annual national workshops are largely attended by Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait and serve primarily as a focus for their concerns. What about Torres Strait Islanders resident in the Strait? These Islanders would seem, at one level, to be much happier with the ATSIC/TSRA arrangement; with Lui and others pushing primarily for greater autonomy for the TSRA from ATSIC. However, it is interesting to note that of the 11 Islander submissions to the HRSCATSIA inquiry (as at February 1997) seeking a national statutory organisation for Torres Strait Islanders, seven were from Islander organisations or individuals located in Torres Strait. This suggests that the idea of a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission does have some breadth of support among Islanders both in the Strait and elsewhere. The idea of a separate Commission, and the issues which it may raise, would seem at least worthy of further exploration.

Were the idea of a separate Torres Strait Islanders Commission to be pursued, a number of quite significant issues would be likely to arise. Perhaps foremost among these would be representation and funding issues, particularly as between Torres Strait Islanders resident in the Strait and those resident elsewhere. However, other issues, such as organisational scale, dual identification and Aboriginal people in Torres Strait, would also probably arise. All these issues are raised in submissions by Torres Strait Islanders to the HRSCATSIA inquiry and ideas expressed in these submission, are drawn on extensively in the following discussion.

#### *Representation*

If a Torres Strait Islanders Commission were to be created, how would representation of Islanders within the new Commission be structured?

Were representation to be structured solely on the basis of population, Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait would clearly dominate. This would be unacceptable to Torres Strait Islanders living in the Strait, who are wary that Islanders living outside the Strait may gain too much influence over a national Islander body and, through that, over local and regional affairs within Torres Strait.

Were representation, on the other hand, to be based on an aggregation of existing numbers of representatives within the TSRA and the TSIAB, then Islanders resident within the Strait would dominate by 20 to six. This would probably be unacceptable to Islanders living outside the Strait.

One submission to the HRSCATSIA from a mainland Torres Strait Islander organisation suggested what might be acceptable to this portion of the Torres Strait Islander population, while also conceding considerable ground to Torres Strait Islanders resident in the Strait. The submission noted:

In submitting this proposal we unhesitatingly concede some degree of priority for the Torres Strait Islander representational structures of the Homelands. We, the Torres Strait Islanders of the diaspora fully recognise that the Homelands Torres Strait Islanders have 'held the fort' so to speak since the time of large-scale Torres Strait Islander emigration to southern centres, and that the continuing presence of a permanent Torres Strait Islander population in the Homeland communities, together with neo-traditional representational infrastructures, have gone a long way to maintaining Torres Strait Islander entitlement to our domain and continuing *Ailan Kastom* (HRSCATSIA 1996b: 123).

This submission went on to argue that representation from Islanders of the 'diaspora' and those of the 'Homelands' should be 'approximately equal in spite of the disparity in population numbers in favour of the Torres Strait Islanders of the diaspora' (HRSCATSIA 1996b: 123).<sup>7</sup> Another submission from a mainland Torres Strait Islander resident also independently suggested equal representation of these two rather different sections of the Torres Strait Islander population; with a suggested seven representatives on the new national body being drawn from the Strait and seven from elsewhere (HRSCATSIA 1996b: 93).

Such 'approximately equal' representation of these two sections of the Torres Strait Islander population would involve either a scaling down of current TSRA representation of Islanders resident in the Strait or a scaling up of current TSIAB representation of Islanders resident elsewhere. Ideas about both these possibilities have been expressed in a number of Islander submissions to the HRSCATSIA.

In the first of two submissions to the HRSCATSIA inquiry, one of the Strait's Island Councils, the Erub Community Council, identified five traditional, largely autonomous political and geographic regions within Torres Strait: Maiem, Kulkalag, Maluilgal, Gudhamaluilgal and Kaurareg. It argued that ATSIC's Torres Strait regional structures had 'commenced an erosion' of this traditional regional political autonomy, which ought to be reversed (HRSCATSIA 1996b: 52-56). Two other Islander submissions suggested that these same five traditional regions of the Strait ought to be a basis for representation on a national Torres Strait Islanders body; rather than the 17 individual Island Council Chairpersons and three

additional elected members as on the TSRA. One of these submissions also noted that Islander communities now existed at Bamaga and Seisia on the tip of Cape York, just outside these five traditional Torres Strait regions, and that a representative from this area would also be required (HRSCATSIA 1996b: 93). We would note that the Kuarareg region, which includes the administrative and business centre of Thursday Island, has by far the largest Islander population of these six regions within Torres Strait and may, on this ground, perhaps claim more than one representative. Following from this, a possible representative arrangement on a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission for Islanders resident within Torres Strait is shown in Table 1 (together with 1991 population figures).

**Table 1. Torres Strait Islander populations of regional groups of Islands within Torres Strait, 1991, and possible numbers of representatives on a Torres Strait Islanders Commission.**

| Regional Group of Islands/Communities                | Torres Strait<br>Islander population | Representatives? |
|--|--------------------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Maiem Group</b>                                   |                                      |                  |
| Mer, Waier, Dowar (Murray Islands)                   | 306                                  |                  |
| Erub, Ugar (Darnley and Stephens Islands)            | <u>205</u>                           |                  |
|  | 511                                  | 1                |
| <b>Kulkalag Group</b>                                |                                      |                  |
| Masig, Kodal (Yorke Islands)                         | 238                                  |                  |
| Poruma, Warraber (Coconut and Sue Islands)           | 303                                  |                  |
| Lama (Yam Island)                                    | <u>219</u>                           |                  |
|  | 740                                  | 1                |
| <b>Maluilgal Group</b>                               |                                      |                  |
| Badu (Mulgrave Island)                               | 466                                  |                  |
| Moa (Banks Island)                                   | 321                                  |                  |
| Mabuiag (Banks Island)                               | <u>172</u>                           |                  |
|  | 959                                  | 1                |
| <b>Gudhamaluilgal Group</b>                          |                                      |                  |
| Saibai   | 245                                  |                  |
| Dauan (Cornwallis Island)                            | 97                                   |                  |
| Boigu (Talbot Island)                                | <u>240</u>                           |                  |
|  | 582                                  | 1                |
| <b>Kaurareg Group</b>                                |                                      |                  |
| Waiben (Thursday Island)                             | 1,567                                |                  |
| Keriri, Ngurapai (Hammond and Horn Islands)          | 408                                  |                  |
| Muralug, Gialug (Prince of Wales and Friday Islands) | <u>29</u>                            |                  |
|  | 2,004                                | 2                |
| <b>Cape York Group</b>                               |                                      |                  |
| Seisia and Bamaga Communities                        | 604                                  | 1                |
| Total population - all six regions                   | 5,400                                | 7                |

Source for population figures: ABS Census 1991.

Two Islander submissions to the HRSCATSIA inquiry express ideas relating to scaling up the representation of Torres Strait Islanders resident outside Torres Strait from the current six representatives on the TSIAB. These ideas relate to a second, or even third, Queensland representative and a second Western Australian representative (HRSCATSIA 1996b: 93; 1996c: 218). Table 2 suggests that two Queensland representatives from Islanders resident outside Torres Strait could be justified on population grounds, but that the case for two Western Australian representatives would have to rely on grounds other than population.

Tables 1 and 2 together suggest a possible representative structure for a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission comprising 14 members divided equally between Islanders resident in the Strait and those resident elsewhere. The purpose of this discussion is not, however, to definitively determine the exact numbers of regional representatives that might constitute a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission. The discussion is merely intended to canvass likely representation issues and to suggest that, in ideas already being expressed by Islanders in their submissions to the HRSCATSIA, there are the seeds of a reasonable resolution of such issues. Representation issues should not be insurmountable in designing a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission, but equally they could be quite contentious.

**Table 2. Torres Strait Islander populations outside the Torres Strait, 1991, by State/Territory and possible numbers of representatives on a Torres Strait Islanders Commission.**

| State/ Territory   | Torres Strait<br>Islander population | Represent atives? |
|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Queensland (outside Strait)                              | 9,249                                | 2                 |
| News South Wales and the<br>Australian Capital Territory | 4,984                                | 1                 |
| Victoria and Tasmania                                    | 4,261                                | 1                 |
| South Australia  | 1,593                                | 1                 |
| Western Australia  | 777                                  | 1                 |
| Northern Territory                                       | 623                                  | 1                 |
| Total population outside Strait                          | 21,487                               | 7                 |

Source: ABS Census 1991.

### *Funding*

Another set of issues which would need to be addressed in any move towards a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission would be funding. What level of funding could such a body reasonably expect? And how might this funding be reasonably apportioned between Torres Strait Islanders resident in the Strait and those resident elsewhere?

Since Torres Strait Islanders constitute roughly 10 per cent of the Indigenous population of Australia, one might anticipate that a separate Torres Strait Islanders Commission might command 10 per cent of the current ATSIC budget; roughly \$100 million out of a current annual budget of \$1 billion. However, since much ATSIC funding is notionally linked to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander socioeconomic disadvantage, and Torres Strait Islanders appear somewhat less socioeconomically disadvantaged than Aborigines (see Taylor and Gaminiratne 1992), this may be somewhat too much to expect.

Another way of approaching the funding issue would be to try to ascertain what is presently being spent by ATSIC on Torres Strait Islanders and to utilise this as the basis for future funding. In the case of Torres Strait Islanders living in the Strait, this is relatively straightforward. The TSRA has in recent years spent approximately \$24.5m per annum within its region (TSRA 1995: 62); and by virtue of the demography of the region virtually all this is directed to Torres Strait Islanders. However, for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Strait, deriving such a figure is simply not possible. There are some 20 or more Islander community organisations around Australia which are recognised by OTSIA and some of these have received ATSIC funding in recent years ranging from a few thousand to a few hundred thousand dollars per annum.<sup>8</sup> However, any total figure for what has been spent by ATSIC on Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Strait cannot be ascertained. Indeed this is part of what fuels Islanders' perceptions of disadvantage within ATSIC.

Certainly a Torres Strait Islanders Commission would need to be able to provide Torres Strait Islanders within the Strait with a funding level at least equal to that provided in recent years by the TSRA. It would also need to be able provide some funds for Torres Strait Islanders living elsewhere. At what level this latter type of funding might need to be available is difficult to determine. Torres Strait Islanders living in large urban centres would probably not be looking to a Torres Strait Islanders Commission for provision of basic infrastructure services, but clearly they do desire funds for cultural activities, community organisation and some service provision.<sup>9</sup> It would certainly not be impossible to envisage some \$10 million or even \$15 million per annum in grant funding being quite quickly taken up by Torres Strait Islander organisations outside the Strait. Over time, as funding helped these organisations to develop their capacities, applications for funds could be for considerably more than this.

A further funding issue might be how to maintain, or change, the division of funds between Islanders in the Strait and those resident elsewhere over time. Without some clear longer term commitment on how this issue was to be handled, it may be difficult to attract both Islanders resident in the Strait and those resident elsewhere into the one organisation. It is possible that within the one organisation, the representatives from Torres Strait and

those from elsewhere might operate as two fairly distinct organisational sectors, each with their own quarantined budgets and a considerable degree of internal organisational autonomy.

As with representation issues, however, the purpose of this brief discussion of potential funding issues within a Torres Strait Islanders Commission is not to derive some definitive formula, but simply to indicate the likelihood of such issues arising and the likely grounds of debate. Although Torres Strait Islanders refer frequently to their 'oneness', they are also acutely aware of the different circumstances of those resident in the Strait and those resident elsewhere. Dividing funds between these two different populations in very different geographic circumstances could well be a major issue in attempts to develop a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission. Some indicative, fairly long-term division of funding would probably need to be built into the legislative framework of such a Commission.

#### *Organisational scale*

Funding issues relate also to organisational scale issues, particularly as these effect the small numbers of Torres Strait Islanders living not only outside Torres Strait, but also outside the major urban centres of Torres Strait Islander population, such as Cairns, Townsville, Brisbane and Sydney. How could a small organisation, with a budget of probably considerably less than \$100m per annum both represent and service these small numbers of Torres Strait Islanders spread right across Australia? (see Figure 2).

At the very least, a Torres Strait Islanders Commission would require an office network corresponding to its mainland representatives, plus a major office in Torres Strait. Such a network of eight or more offices could itself consume a significant proportion of Commission resources; perhaps 10 per cent or more.

Beyond such an office network, community-based Torres Strait Islander organisations would obviously play an important role in keeping the Commission in touch with its constituency. Whether such organisations would be viable among very small localised populations of Torres Strait Islanders, even with Commission funding, is a real issue. However, there is some evidence to suggest that such organisations can be viable. The Saam Kerem Torres Strait Islander Corporation in Broome, Western Australia has been operating successfully for some years now with a membership of 35 in a region where the 1991 census only identified 55 Torres Strait Islanders.<sup>10</sup>

Saam Kerem and other organisations like it could not, however, in all probability provide specialised services to their members, such as health or legal services; as combined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health

and legal services organisations presently do in many parts of Australia. The issue of organisational scale in relation to these more specialised services is, therefore, a significant one. One possible solution may be for Torres Strait Islanders still to have access to combined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in these more specialised service areas, while having specifically Torres Strait Islander organisations for more general cultural and service activities. This points to a need to maintain cooperative links between a Torres Strait Islanders Commission and an Aboriginal Commission, were such a two Commission structure to be developed.

The inevitably small organisational scale of a Torres Strait Islanders Commission and the community-based Torres Strait Islanders organisations that it would support is an issue which calls for careful consideration and institutional design.

#### *Dual identification*

Another issue which will arise in any move towards a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission is dual identification of some Indigenous Australians as both Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal. One of the Torres Strait Islander submissions to the HRSCATSIA inquiry which raised this issue suggested that with the creation of a separate national statutory Torres Strait Islanders organisation such people would 'have to make a decision which way to go' (HRSCATSIA 1996b: 100). This seems to us a somewhat unnecessary requirement. Australia has many individuals who, through diverse ancestry, can legitimately claim to identify with more than one cultural group. Rather than requiring people with both Islander and Aboriginal ancestry to choose between these identities, a more realistic and liberal solution is simply to allow dual identifiers to participate in both cultures and both organisational contexts, if and when they wish.

Debate about this issue could be usefully informed by data on the extent of dual identification among Torres Strait Islanders. National censuses, however, provide no information. Recent census questions have specified Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal as two alternative 'origins' and, in the case of those of mixed origins, directed them to choose the origin to which they 'consider themselves to belong'. In the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS), the ABS adopted a slightly different approach. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander were once again specified as alternative 'origins', but there was no further directive to those of mixed origins. Respondents could, if they wished, choose both origins. The results of this NATSIS experiment allowing dual identification are set out in Table 3; though only for Queensland, broken down by post-1993 ATSI region.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 3 Torres Strait Islander populations of ATSI regions in Queensland, and those identifying as also of Aboriginal origin, 1994.**

| ATSI region    | Number identifying as of Torres Strait Islander origin (A) | Subset of A identifying as also of Aboriginal origin (B) | B as per cent of A |
|----------------|--|--|--------------------|
| Brisbane       | 1,055  | **174  | 16                 |
| Roma           | **108  | **0  | 0                  |
| Rockhampton    | *363   | **66   | 16                 |
| Mount Isa      | **24   | **21   | 88                 |
| Townsville     | 3,906  | 797  | 20                 |
| Cairns         | 2,713  | 947  | 35                 |
| Cooktown       | 1,175  | 454  | 35                 |
| Torres Strait  | 6,375  | **0  | 0                  |
| All Queensland | 15,719   | 2,459  | 16                 |

\* indicates relative standard error between 25 per cent and 50 per cent.

\*\* indicates relative standard error of 50 per cent or more.

Source: 1994 NATSIS tables prepared for ABS/CAEPR 1997.

These figures concerning dual identification as both Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal should be treated with some caution. They do suggest a significant degree of dual identification among Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait. However, in many regions they may be statistically unreliable, as indicated by the asterisks. They also tell us nothing about the relative strength of feeling these people have for each identity. Do such people identify primarily with one culture and only secondarily with the other? Or do they identify with both equally? How would these people feel about an organisational context which distinguished more strongly *between* Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders than the present ATSI? And would they choose to participate in just one organisation or two?

NATSIS dual identification figures cannot answer any of these more contextual questions. Perhaps the most that can be said on the basis of the NATSIS figures is that, in debates about a separate Torres Strait Islander Commission, some attention does need to be paid to the issue of dual identification. The issue is probably, however, a more minor one than funding and representation issues between Torres Strait Islanders resident in the Strait and those resident elsewhere.

#### *Aboriginal people in Torres Strait*

The same Islander submission to the HRSCATSIA inquiry that raises the issue of dual identification, also raises the issue of Aboriginal people in Torres Strait; and particularly the Kuarereg Aboriginal people whose

homelands are in the southern Torres Strait. It argues that the Kuarareg ought to have representation on a national Torres Strait Authority - alongside six Islander representatives from Torres Strait and seven from elsewhere around Australia (HRSCATSIA 1996b: 93).

This may be an instance where there is some significance in the different terminologies of 'Torres Strait Authority' and 'Torres Strait Islanders Commission'. The Torres Strait Authority terminology does allow a slight areal focus, even though it is primarily intended to draw in all Torres Strait Islanders Australia wide. Because of this slight areal focus, an organisation developed under this terminology could be designed to draw in Aboriginal people in Torres Strait; who numbered 217 in the 1991 census (see Figure 2).<sup>12</sup> The Kuarareg Aboriginal people, who are traditional inhabitants of southern parts of the Strait, would have the strongest claim to being included in this way. However their inclusion would slightly compromise the idea of the new body as a national Torres Strait Islanders organisation and make it instead something of a hybrid. The new body would be partly focussed on a cultural group and partly on an area.

An alternative approach for Aboriginal people in Torres Strait, would be for them to become part of the constituency of the body that was left over once Torres Strait Islanders had been removed from ATSIC; the Aboriginal Commission, as it might hypothetically be termed. This would leave the national Torres Strait Islanders Commission clearly focussed on a cultural group, and not at all on an area.

Which of these approaches should be pursued is a matter for Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people in Torres Strait to work through. The issue would be another minor one to be dealt with in any move towards a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission/Torres Strait Authority.

### **Better representation and funding arrangements within ATSIC and the TSRA for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait: another reform possibility?**

A national Torres Strait Islanders Commission is, in principle, a very real possibility. However, the above discussion does suggest that in attempting to move towards such a separate Commission, there are likely to be a number of quite significant and difficult issues to be resolved. Taking the TSI out of ATSIC may not be entirely straight-forward. Because of this, we here identify another reform possibility, either as an interim measure on the way towards a separate Commission or as a longer term alternative to such a Commission. This other reform possibility is better representation and funding arrangements within ATSIC and the TSRA for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait.

Within current ATSIC structures, there are a number of fairly obvious reforms which could be made to improve representation and funding arrangements for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait. The first would be the election, rather than appointment, of TSIAB members from the States and Territories. Once elected, these Torres Strait Islander representatives could also be given executive power similar to other elected ATSIC office holders, rather than having just an advisory role. A second obvious reform would be an increase in the program funding available to community-based Torres Strait Islander organisations outside the Strait via OTSIA, beyond the present rather minimal current annual national workshop grants.<sup>13</sup> Program funding through OTSIA could be expanded considerably, without in any way taking over entirely from other program areas within ATSIC. The TSIAB could probably also have a role in overseeing this expanded OTSIA program budget as part of its new executive role.

These reforms to current ATSIC representation and funding arrangements would have some potential to alleviate the perceptions of Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait that they are disadvantaged within general ATSIC funding and regional council representation structures. The reforms may, of course, also provoke adverse Aboriginal reactions, along the lines of those expressed in the 1993 official review of the ATSIC Act. However, the Aboriginal majority within ATSIC needs to seriously consider (and respond to) perceptions of the Torres Strait Islander minority, including those resident outside the Strait. Not to do so would be inconsistent with the general claim of Indigenous people that dominant majorities need to respect and accommodate the rights and points of view of numerically dominated cultural minorities.

The other possible area of reform is within the current TSRA structure. Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait have expressed dissatisfaction with having no representation on this body and hence being cut off from the affairs of their homeland. One obvious way of including these Islanders would be to give them a seat on the TSRA. One of the (newly) elected TSIAB representatives could sit on the TSRA. This would provide both representation for these Islanders on the TSRA and a coordinating link between the TSRA and the TSIAB.<sup>14</sup> Beyond this representation and coordinating link, there would also be the issue of whether TSRA funding was available to these Islanders resident outside the Strait. This would be possible, but somewhat unlikely if there was also enhanced OTSIA funding on which these Islanders could draw.

### **A national Torres Strait Islander convention: a necessary next step**

Which of these reform possibilities Torres Strait Islanders might want to pursue is, we would argue, a matter for Islanders themselves. While

Islander submissions to the current HRSCATSIA inquiry give some idea of current Islander thinking, they cannot explore reform possibilities and issues among Islanders in an interactive or authoritative way. To do this, we would argue, would require a large national convention of Torres Strait Islanders.

Two Islander submissions to the HRSCATSIA inquiry have in fact suggested such a convention. The Townsville-Thuringowa Torres Strait Islander Action group has for some time now suggested a national 'Torres Strait Forum' with equal representation from Torres Strait Islanders of the 'homelands' and those of the 'diaspora' (HRSCATSIA 1996b: S123). The Erub Community Council has suggested 'a people's congress, very similar in nature to that being proposed for the greater Australian nation to review the Australian Constitution' (HRSCATSIA 1997: S244). We would endorse these suggestions and even argue that there is no other obvious way in which to progress reform possibilities. A national Torres Strait Islanders convention focussed specifically on the possibility of a Torres Strait Islanders Commission or alternative institutional reforms is, in our view, a necessary next step.

### **Relationships to Torres Strait Regional government reforms: a clarifying addendum**

One final matter which needs to be raised as a clarifying addendum is the relationship between reform directed to greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders nationwide, as discussed in this paper, and reform directed towards a more fully fledged form of Torres Strait regional government, as discussed in the earlier CAEPR Discussion Paper and submission to the HRSCATSIA inquiry (Altman, Arthur and Sanders 1996). These two lines of reform are, in principle, quite separate and different. Both could be pursued independently under the rubric of seeking 'greater autonomy for the people of the Torres Strait'. At a practical level, however, there is some sense in relating each line of reform to the other.

Suppose, for example, that reform was proceeding towards a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission, or possibly towards better representation and funding arrangements within ATSIC and the TSRA for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait. One effect of this might be to allow reform towards Torres Strait regional government to proceed without having to pay too much attention to the role that Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait might play in that regional government. Suppose, on the other hand, that reform towards a national Torres Strait Islanders Commission or towards better representation and funding arrangements within ATSIC and the TSRA for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Strait was *not* proceeding. One effect of this might be that debates about Torres Strait regional government would now need to

pay more attention to the role of Torres Strait Islanders resident outside Torres Strait within regional government (Altman, Arthur and Sanders 1996: 6-7).

These hypothetical scenarios suggest the practical relatedness of these two lines of reform. However, the more basic and important point, in the context of the HRSCATSIA inquiry, is that both lines of reform can legitimately be pursued under the rubric of seeking 'greater autonomy for the people of the Torres Strait'. The HRSCATSIA inquiry has a wide ranging opportunity to both respond to and further stimulate Islander calls for reform.

### Notes

1. We will return later in the paper to one slight difference in thinking evident in one submission which used the Torres Strait Authority terminology.
2. Dispersal can fuel growth by leading to larger numbers of Islanders forming unions and having children with non-Islanders. Assuming these children identify as Torres Strait Islanders, such 'out marriage' mathematically increases population growth.
3. There were to be only six Commissioners representing the eight States and Territories because Victoria and Tasmania were to share a Commissioner and so too were New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory.
4. There were four other regions within the original ATSIC structure which were also zones for the purposes of electing national Commissioners. One of these was Tasmania and the other three were southern metropolitan centres with significantly larger Indigenous populations than Torres Strait: Sydney, Brisbane and Perth.
5. As with the original proposal for 'selected' ATSIC Commissioners, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory were to share a TSIAB member and so too were Victoria and Tasmania, thus giving six representatives from the eight States and Territories.
6. 'General' here means applying both to Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people.
7. This submission also called for a fairly large Torres Strait Islander forum as a preliminary step towards a national Torres Strait Islander organisation and it was in the context of the makeup of such a forum that these comments about representation were in fact made.
8. For example, in 1994-95, the Magani Malu Kes Resource and Information Centre located in Townsville received ATSIC grants of \$200,893; the IINA Torres Strait Islander Corporation located in Brisbane received ATSIC grants of \$598,453; and the Saam Kerem Torres Strait Islander Corporation in Broome received an ATSIC grant of \$36,000.
9. For example, the Au Karem Le Torres Strait Islander Corporation of Logan and West Moreton says in its submission to the HRSCATSIA that it is seeking \$300,000 per annum to support its community service activities (HRSCATSIA 1996b: 50)

10. See Figure 2 for the 1991 Census figure and HRSCATSIA (1996c: 216) for Saam Kerem's current membership figure.
11. Beyond Queensland, numbers of Torres Strait Islanders in the NATSIS sample were so small that the data was considered unreliable (see ABS/CAEPR 1997)
12. It should be recalled here that the censuses have not in the past encouraged dual identification as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.
13. In 1994-95, the OTSIA expended \$260,200 on national workshops and seminars for Torres Strait Islanders (ATSIC 1995: 138).
14. The current coordinating link between these bodies is that the Torres Strait Zone Commissioner, a member of the TSRA, is also a member of the TSIAB. Indeed, the Commissioner chairs TSIAB, but this may be only because the other members are not presently elected.

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