

COMMITTEES

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee Report

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (4.30 p.m.)—Small business is the core of Australia's economy. Three-quarters of a million Australian small businesses employ 4.1 million Australians. There are 1.1 million non-employing small businesses, many of them independent contractors who are former employees and may eventually take on employees of their own. These businesses deserve our support—and, indeed, Indigenous Australians deserve our support to start their own businesses. As the *Open for business: developing Indigenous enterprises in Australia* report states:

In 2006, six per cent of employed Indigenous people indicated they worked in their own business. This compares with 17 per cent of employed non Indigenous people.

The proportion of employed Indigenous people who worked in their own business ranges from seven per cent in major cities to two per cent in remote areas.

Business involves risk, as do all endeavours, and, while the research clearly shows that only one-third of small businesses make it to the 15-year mark, without them Australia would be in significant economic trouble. Small business is, as they say, the engine room of the nation. As you would know, Madam Deputy Speaker, the electorate of Fadden joined with those of Moncrieff and McPherson represents the small-business half of the nation. As the founder of my own business, and after nine years growing it into a truly national firm, I understand the risks and I certainly understand the rewards that come from a successful small business. I also understand that founding and developing a business and going through the challenges, meeting the risks and dealing with the red tape and all of the issues that business confronts you with is difficult. It demands tremendous risk-taking, it demands resourcefulness, it demands courage, especially in the early days, and it demands an enormous amount of hard work. It demands patience, it demands great levels of communication and skill and, at the end of the day, it demands the perseverance to keep going when all around may tell you to stop.

Across the nation there are a great range of Indigenous businesses and Indigenous people behind them keen to build those businesses, keen to take advantage of strengths and look to the future, with a resolve to face the hardships, face the risks and persevere until they have achieved what they set out to do. Indigenous self-employment and participation in the ownership of Indigenous enterprises enable individuals, families and ultimately communities to reduce reliance on government assistance and to improve their overall sense of self-sufficiency. To see members of their community striving to succeed in the business world can only help to provide additional role models for young people, as it does in the broader community. Despair breeds despair; success lifts all around it. Likewise, successful Indigenous enterprises help to strengthen employment, improve the local economy and help local people develop their skills.

I can testify to this personally, having lived for 12 months in the Torres Strait and worked throughout all of the 12 Torres Strait Islander communities on the 11 inhabited islands of the Torres Strait. I can see the many indigenous enterprises thriving, and the men and women driving those enterprises seeing the success and the fruit of their labours. Many indigenous businesses already have a head start in various industries—the competitive advantage some indigenous communities already enjoy include culture based industries, the tourism sector or industries that are location or land based such as land and resource management, and of course a range of service opportunities around the mining sector.

The aim of increasing and strengthening Indigenous businesses is certainly a noble one and may be a key to partly addressing Indigenous disadvantage, which the parliament is so acutely aware of. There are opportunities out there that with the right support could and should flourish. With the right support Indigenous businesses need not just solely be not-for-profit, community owned or government subsidised. With the right support we could and should see a huge diversity of Indigenous businesses not only servicing other Indigenous areas, communities or people but the broader community as a whole.

While many Indigenous business remain not-for-profit, community owned or government subsidised there is no reason that this must be the case and that Indigenous businesses could not be supported and encouraged to operate in the normal free market as other businesses continue to do. Indigenous businesses should be supported, especially to become for-profit based. The coalition supports those recommendations that will lead to wider awareness of Aboriginal business successes and especially the recommendations which aim to create more for-profit business for Aboriginal people whether they be sole traders, members of partnerships or individual shareholders.

The coalition members of the committee did share some reservations about recommendations which might restrict free negotiations involving Aboriginal people. Running a business should not primarily be about going to meetings or securing program grants. It is about seeing an opportunity, seizing that opportunity, developing skills, taking risks, reaping the rewards of providing a service to the community, and getting out there and making things happen.