



*This Q & A factsheet is part of a series Reconciliation Australia is producing aimed at informing the community and stimulating conversations about the issues that affect us all.*

## **National Indigenous Representative Body**

**This week 100 Indigenous representatives from around the country are meeting in Adelaide to lay the groundwork for a new Indigenous representative body. The issue of a national representative body for Indigenous Australians has sparked debate and raised questions; here are answers to some of those questions.**

### **What is a national Indigenous representative body?**

A national Indigenous representative body is an organisation that would represent Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, giving them a say in decisions about their lives and future. Currently, there is no such national "voice" for Indigenous Australians, which makes it difficult for government, industry or media, or anyone wishing to hear the views of Indigenous people to know who to talk to.

Past governments have created various Indigenous representative organisations, including the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). But Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have never had the opportunity to shape a national representative organisation of their own. The Australian Government has said it will support the establishment of a new national Indigenous representative body.

### **Why should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have their own national representative body?**

Most major groups in the community have their voices heard through representative bodies. There are representative bodies for older people, people with disabilities, non-English speaking people, businesspeople, members of trade unions and women to name a few. Representative bodies help ensure groups are listened to, so it makes sense that Indigenous people should have a body to speak on their behalf in public debates and on policy that will affect their lives.

### **What makes a good representative body?**

A good Indigenous representative body would ensure that the views and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are taken into

account when decisions are made about issues that affect them. Any representative body must be able to reflect the views of the people that it is representing. It would also need to have real decision-making power; be accountable and have good leadership and the resources to do its job well.

### **How would an Indigenous national representative body help 'close the gap' in Indigenous life expectancy?**

International evidence makes it clear that an essential ingredient in overturning disadvantage is the close, respected involvement of the community itself. Australia has the biggest life-expectancy gap of comparable countries with Indigenous populations. Statistics from the US, Canada and New Zealand show that it's essential to closing the gap for Indigenous people to have control over their own lives and be able to make their own decisions .

Having a "voice" for Indigenous people at the national level is an important aspect of involving Indigenous Australians in shaping policy that affects their lives.

### **Would a new national representative body be just like ATSIC?**

The Rudd Government has said that a new, independent body would not be the same as ATSIC, the body that was abolished in 2004. ATSIC was not created by Indigenous people and while many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people believe ATSIC achieved good things, the roles imposed on the body by Government were confused and its leadership attracted a lot of criticism.

The development of a new national body must involve wide consultation with Indigenous communities and organisations. Its roles *could* include:

- Providing policy advice on Indigenous issues to the Federal Minister
- Overseeing relations with State/Territory governments on Indigenous issues
- Monitoring and evaluating the performance of government programs and services for Indigenous people, including arrangements for independent scrutiny.

### **How would members of a representative body be chosen? Would they be elected or appointed?**

A representative body should represent the diversity of the Indigenous community and therefore it should be established through a more democratic process than earlier bodies, such as the National Indigenous Council (NIC). The NIC was not a representative body. Members were appointed by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and its main purpose was to advise the Minister.

There are **some potential** models for deciding on the members of the body, such as:<sup>1</sup>

- Direct election, where Indigenous people elect members of the body
- Delegate model, where regional and state/territory branches of the body nominate representatives to the national body

## **How are Indigenous people represented in other countries?**

### **Canada**

The Aboriginal peoples of Canada are represented by the [Assembly of First Nations](#). They also have constitutional and other legal rights, meaning all levels of government must take into account Indigenous issues when conducting legal and policy work.

### **New Zealand**

The Maori Representation Act ensures that there are a minimum of 4 Maori seats in New Zealand's parliament and today 17 of the 122 members of New Zealand's parliament are Maori. There is also a Maori political party and a special government department, [Te Puni Kokiri](#) whose function it is to represent the many dimensions of contemporary Māori culture and guide Māori public policy by advising government on policy affecting Māori. 70% of Te Puni Kokiri staff are Maori.

### **USA**

The largest national Indian political organisation with a membership of around 250 tribes is the [National Congress of American Indians](#). The NCAI serves as a forum for consensus-based policy development. It informs the public and the federal government on tribal self-government, treaty rights, and a broad range of federal policy issues affecting tribal governments.

Indian Nations are recognised in the US Constitution as sovereign governments with individual treaties signed with the President. Tribal governments provide a range of government services, including law enforcement, environmental protection, emergency response, education, health care, and basic infrastructure.

### **Sweden**

The Sami people in Sweden are represented by the Swedish Sami Parliament, which has an overall objective of preserving a living Sami culture. It is a publicly elected body and is controlled by the Swedish Government.

## **How would the Australian body be funded?**

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Calma, Building a Sustainable National Indigenous Representative Body – Issues for Consideration, 2008,

It's likely that a new national body would be funded, in part or wholly, by the Australian Government. How and how much an Indigenous representative body would be funded will be part of the consultation and discussion being undertaken by the new [Indigenous Steering Committee](#) which is advising on the developing a model for a new National Indigenous Representative Body to present to the government in July 2009.

**For more information:**

**The Australian Human Rights Commission's comprehensive *Community Guide* [Towards a New National Indigenous Representative Body](#)**