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Many claim Australia's longest-running Indigenous body failed. Here's why that's wrong

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The Voice to parliament, if established, would not be the first Indigenous advisory body in Australia's history.

In 1973, Gough Whitlam established the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee, which was superseded by Malcolm Fraser's National Aboriginal Conference in 1978. Both were elected bodies that were advisory only, and there were other later attempts.

The longest-running body was the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), which operated for 15 years before being abolished by the Howard government in 2005.

It's characterised by some commentators as a failure mired in bureaucratic dysfunction.

For those who promote "no" to the Voice to parliament proposal, ATSIC is either an example of why we don't need a Voice, or, because of the way it was abolished, of government duplicity not to be trusted.

But here's why it wasn't a failure.

What was ATSIC?

ATSIC opened its doors as an independent statutory authority in 1990, following legislation passed by the Hawke government in 1989.

According to then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Gerry Hand, it was recognition of Indigenous aspirations to be involved in the decision-making processes of government.

It was innovative because it ran programs and delivered services in addition to providing advice.

It consisted of 35 regional councils around Australia of 10-20 councillors elected every three years, who would elect a representative to sit on a national commission on which sat a government-appointed chair, deputy chair and chief executive.

ATSIC's primary roles were to formulate and monitor programs, develop policy proposals, advise the minister and coordinate activities at all levels of government. It spent Commonwealth government funds on specific programs, measured in terms of achieving social justice.

Like any complex, multi-layered institution, ATSIC had its challenges and critics. On announcing its abolition in April 2004, Howard said the "experiment in separate representation [...] for Indigenous people has been a failure", a claim that was not explained or supported by evidence.

Looking through its archive in the National Library of Australia, it's impossible to sustain this judgement.

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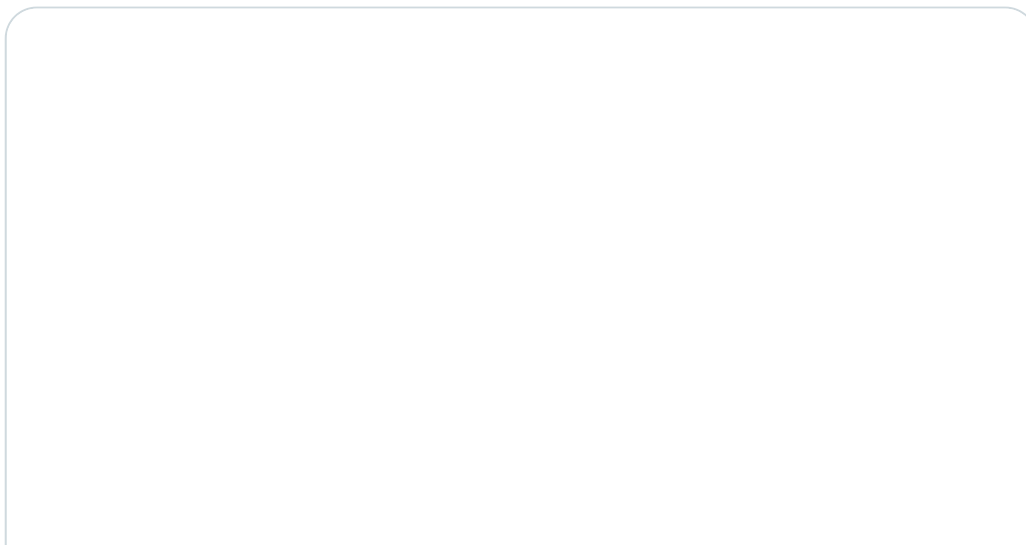


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What did ATSIC do?

It organised its programs around key areas of economic, social and corporate affairs, with a range of sub-programs such as land, law and justice, and heritage.

It had two highly successful flagships. This included Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) which, by 2003, employed 35,000 people in 270 projects, as well as the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP). In 2002-03 alone, CHIP built 500 new houses and renovated 1,000 more for Indigenous people.

It supported and seeded other programs, including in areas such as sport, the arts, repatriation, legal aid, and revival of languages. It funded a broadcasting for remote Aboriginal community scheme and lobbied for a national Indigenous broadcaster.

It commissioned reports and provided advice to governments in reviews and parliamentary committees.

In 1993, ATSIC led the Indigenous vanguard in defence of native title, clawing it back from total extinguishment.

Misconceptions

At the time, and since, misconceptions about ATSIC's funding have prevailed. As a supplementary funding body, intended to augment federal, state and territory funding, it administered less than 50% of the total federal government budget for Indigenous affairs.

It did not have primary responsibility for health, employment or education. Around two-thirds of its budget was taken up with the CDEP and CHIP programs, and a quarter with providing local services such as waste disposal, water, sewerage and so on.

As soon as the Howard government came to office in 1996, it cut \$470 million of ATSIC's budget (over four years), resulting in a 30% reduction in programs.

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It commissioned an ATSIC-funded special audit of Indigenous organisations to determine whether they were "fit and proper" to receive public funds. About 95% of the 1,122 organisations surveyed passed and were cleared for further funding.

ATSIC had its own internal audit office, and was one of the most scrutinised agencies of public administration. From 1990-2000 it had ten clear audits, on occasion earning the praise of the National Audit Office.

Governments failed, not ATSIC

If there was failure, governments must bear some responsibility. A 1994 evaluation of the National Health Strategy found that ATSIC was a convenient scapegoat for governments' failure to deliver.

In 1999 and 2001 the Commonwealth Grants Commission found a system of blurred responsibility between all levels of government, duplication and buck-passing, and that ATSIC funds were overburdened through barriers of access to mainstream departments.

The Howard government's 2003 report into ATSIC didn't advocate abolishing it, but did point to the limitations of funding services through mainstream agencies:

Time and again ATSIC had been used as a scapegoat for poor Indigenous affairs outcomes [...] many mainstream services and program providers avoid accountability, preferring to leave the impression that ATSIC is at fault.

The parliamentary select committee, appointed in July 2004 to examine the provisions of the ATSIC Amendment Bill giving effect to its abolition emphasised that

The overall failure of public policy to successfully overcome the grave disadvantage suffered by Australia's Indigenous people is not a sign that ATSIC itself has 'failed' [...] The Committee considers that national performance in Indigenous affairs should be carefully, continuously and transparently monitored. The Government as a whole must be held accountable.

The committee recommended governments adopt ATSIC's model of capacity building and sustainable development.

The Voice is not ATSIC

The Voice will not be another ATSIC. It won't run programs or deliver services, nor will it have a budget to administer. This means it can't be scapegoated for policy failure.

However, ATSIC demonstrated the importance of an Indigenous voice in the administrative mix, and it did meet expectations.

Perhaps we need to take seriously ATSIC's biggest lesson: the need for governments to be accountable and meet theirs.