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## CONGRESS ASSERTS THAT WE HAVE THE SOLUTIONS SO WORK WITH US

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (Congress) welcomes the report by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) on the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS). The ANAO report duplicates many of Congress' assessments of the IAS.

"Congress was prepared to countenance the plan by the Commonwealth to consolidate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support into five streams, and in the name of efficiency and effectiveness for these to be administered by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. However, it was apparent from the earliest stages that the program had run off the rails," said Mr Rod Little, Congress Co-Chair.

As summarized by Senator Dodson, the ANAO report documents "deep flaws in the strategy, including substandard design, poor risk management, inadequate consultation, sloppy record keeping and breaches of Commonwealth probity requirements and no evidence of improved outcomes for Indigenous peoples."

"Further, over \$500 million was cut from the overall budget. Many of our organizations that provide essential services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were thrown into chaos by funding uncertainty," said Dr Jackie Huggins, Congress Co-Chair. "Some were advised that their funding would be reviewed in a few months' time, which led to staffing and program instability. Others were forced to divert resources to prove to the Government that their work was essential, which led to severe compromises in service provision over many months," she said.

"As a result of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, there has been a significant decrease in the number of organisations either located in the communities they are serving, or run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. \$2.2 billion, or over half of the funds allocated up to August 2015, were granted to organisations and businesses not headquartered in the communities they were supposed to work in. Furthermore, firms owned and operated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have received just 26% of the funds allocated under the policy. Without adequate funding, community organisations are unable to engage in vital frontline work, such as the provision of healthcare services, shelters, and education," said Dr Huggins.

"Furthermore, the transferral of power from local groups operated by or in consultation with our peoples to larger businesses based in urban centres is likely to further exacerbate our loss of self-determination, and reinforce the assumption amongst bureaucrats that they know what is best for us," said Dr Huggins.

"The poor implementation of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy has further contributed to the profoundly negative effect it has had on our communities. A lack of accountability due to a reliance on primarily verbal negotiations with organisations; a failure to assess funding applications in

accordance with policy guidelines; and inadequate record-keeping of meetings with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders has made assessment of the policy's effectiveness and efficiency difficult. The rapidity of the reorganisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs has also led to confusion, amongst both local community members and service providers, and in many cases has led large amounts of money to be spent on administration costs instead of our wellbeing," said Mr Little.

He added, "The result of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy has been the continued failure to meet the targets set out by the Australian Government in its 'Closing the Gap' goals. The target to halve the gap between the employment rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians by 2018 remains unlikely to be reached. Likewise, little progress has been made overall in the attempt to close the gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians, despite reasonably large decreases in the number of fatal instances of circulatory diseases. The rate of school attendance amongst our communities remains similarly unchanged."

"In order to meet these targets, the Australian Government must begin to work with us and provide funding for local organisations which further our self-determination, instead of continuing to pursue a paternalistic and assimilationist approach to engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities," said Dr Huggins.

We need to ask, Who are the main beneficiaries of the IAS? Unacceptably high proportions of the IAS budget have gone to funding programs delivered by various government departments or used as administrative overheads to support the move from various departments to Prime Minister and Cabinet. Huge contracts have been awarded to corporations and prominent charities. By the time the public servants and large companies have taken their cuts, relatively small amounts find their way to the people were supposed to benefit from these programs.

We close by again quoting Senator Dodson, who recently asked the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, "When will the government abandon the idea that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be managed, and start working with communities, leaders and organisations? We have the solutions! To effect positive change, governments must begin to collaborate with our peoples' national representative body and other organizations.

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