

**OTHER *WAYS* TO IMPROVE
ABORIGINAL REPRESENTATION**

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This Chapter considers ways to improve Aboriginal representation in the NSW Parliament, other than dedicated seats. These options include: the establishment of an Aboriginal Assembly; non-voting Aboriginal seats; the right to make formal reports to Parliament; better Aboriginal representation in the major political parties; improved participation by Aboriginal people in elections; and Aboriginal participation in local government.

While there was general support for various options at the consultation meetings, there was no overall support for any one particular alternative. The majority of participants felt that dedicated seats was the preferred option and that other strategies to improve Aboriginal representation in the NSW Parliament should be employed *in addition* to dedicated seats.

A variety of opinion was expressed in formal evidence and submissions concerning alternative ways to improve Aboriginal representation, but no clear preference to dedicated seats emerged.

8.2 AN ABORIGINAL ASSEMBLY

One of the options described in the consultation brochure was the establishment of an Aboriginal Assembly in the NSW Parliament. It is proposed that this Assembly could meet several times a year to discuss current issues and legislation relevant to Aboriginal people. This Assembly would have an advisory role and would not have the power to draft or enact legislation. The brochure also suggested that this Assembly could build on the inaugural “Black Parliament”, a meeting of NSW Aboriginal Land Council and ATSIC representatives in the Legislative Assembly in June 1997. A second Black Parliament was held in the Assembly in September 1998.

8.2.1 SUBMISSIONS AND EVIDENCE

The former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Michael Dodson, recognised the potential advantages of a separate Parliament or Assembly for Aboriginal people. Unlike dedicated seats, he argued, a separate Parliament would allow a broader diversity of indigenous peoples to be represented. However, for it to be effective, it would need to have some authority or political power rather than be a purely advisory body (Submission 24).

Professor Garth Nettheim tentatively proposed the establishment of an Aboriginal Assembly or “convocation”, because he thinks that such proposals should come from indigenous people (Nettheim evidence, 26 September 1997).

The membership of the proposed convocation would comprise representatives of the NSW Land Council and ATSIC in NSW. It could meet four times per year, perhaps for one week when Parliament is not sitting, to deliberate on current issues and legislation which relate to indigenous people. Nettheim suggested the convocation should be a transitional arrangement for a period of approximately four years. During this time, one of the tasks of the Assembly could be to deliberate on a longer lasting arrangement for Aboriginal participation in the NSW Parliament, including dedicated seats (Nettheim evidence, 26 September 1997).

8.2.2 CONSULTATION MEETINGS

There was little support among most participants for an Aboriginal Assembly unless such a body was established “alongside” dedicated seats or as an interim measure.

- **The Benefits of an Assembly**

Participants were able to identify several possible benefits if an Assembly was introduced in addition to dedicated seats or in the interim. An Assembly could provide: a forum for Aboriginal people to meet; a training ground for Aboriginal people interested in politics; and access to Parliamentarians. It was also suggested that an Assembly could provide important back-up to a person in a dedicated seat.

- **The Need for a Charter**

Participants at Lismore were concerned that if established, the Assembly should be guided by a Charter. This Charter, which should be enshrined in legislation, would outline the role of the Assembly and its relationship to Parliament and the government. It would also include a mechanism to ensure the government would respond to the Assembly and its recommendations.

- **Membership**

Most participants agreed that the members of an Assembly should be elected from “grassroots Aboriginal communities” rather than appointed, but there was no agreement on the method of election. However, a group of participants in Wagga Wagga thought that members could be appointed from existing Aboriginal organisations or nations and suggested three possible alternatives for their nomination:

- a representative drawn from each ward of the ATSIC regional councils, in six regions (approximately 20 people);
- a combination of current Land Council representatives; or
- one representative from the various Aboriginal nations.

- **Limitations of an Assembly**

Participants' concerns about an Assembly were two-fold. First, that an Assembly would lack real political power:

if you have an Assembly that actually does not give them any power, you are perpetuating an injustice...While ever we keep them outside the decision-making process, it remains unjust (Devitt evidence, Dubbo);

To me, an Aboriginal Assembly, if it has not voting rights and cannot address the Parliament, is very paternalistic (Parkinson evidence, Coffs Harbour).

Second, an Assembly may overlap with existing representative Aboriginal organisations:

I cannot see the point of a group of Koori people meeting in Parliament to discuss legislation or policies when we have already got structures set up to do that now. What does the Department of Aboriginal Affairs do? They advise the Minister and talk to him about relevant policies and procedures. We have the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, which is the principal adviser for Kooris to State governments (Amatto evidence, Dubbo).

8.3 NON-VOTING SEATS

The Issues Paper and consultation brochure also proposed non-voting Aboriginal seats as a possible way to improve Aboriginal representation. Representatives in these seats would be able to speak on issues relevant to Aboriginal people and serve on Parliamentary Committees but they would not be entitled to vote. Both documents describe how non-voting tribal seats operate in the state of Maine in the United States to allow representation for two of its Indian tribes (see Section 3.3).

The consultation brochure stated that the establishment of non-voting seats would not need to be approved at a referendum. However, subsequent to the publication of the brochure, the Committee was informed this may not be the case. Please see Section 9.7 for further discussion of this issue.

8.3.1 SUBMISSIONS AND EVIDENCE

While the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs does not have a formal position on dedicated seats, one of the "options" it considered in its submission is the appointment of two or three non-voting Aboriginal members to either House of Parliament to trial the

concept of dedicated seats. These appointments could be drawn from the ATSIC Commissioners for NSW and NSW Land Council representatives. Alternatively, these delegates could be appointed from a list of 20 people elected by peak Aboriginal organisations (Submission 21).

The NSW Aboriginal Reference Group strongly opposed non-voting seats because it considers that indigenous representatives should be afforded full voting rights, even during a trial period (Submission 23). The NSW Aboriginal Land Council opposed non-voting seats in the Upper House because it would be seen as creating a “second class MLC” (Submission 22). Michael Dodson said he “would not give this option a high priority” (Submission 24). He argued that non-voting seats would lack much of the symbolic value of a representative with full voting rights. However, Mr Dodson acknowledged that non-voting seats may “more easily accord with public expectations of democratic representation...” (Submission 24). He also noted that the benefits of parliamentary privilege and administrative resources could help ensure indigenous issues are heard in the political domain (Submission 24).

Professor Nettheim suggested a slight variation on the idea of non-voting seats. He proposed that two Aboriginal people nominated by ATSIC and the NSW Aboriginal Land Council be available on invitation to address either House or Committees on issues of particular concern to Aboriginal people:

This way, Aboriginal people...would have a voice and the NSW Parliament would have the benefit of hearing directly from Aboriginal people...(Nettheim evidence, 26 September 1997).

He suggested that, unlike dedicated seats with full voting rights, the introduction of non-voting seats would probably not need to be approved at a referendum (Nettheim evidence, 26 September 1997).

8.3.2 CONSULTATION MEETINGS

Participants were generally opposed to the establishment of non-voting seats as an interim measure or as an alternative to dedicated seats. They felt it was imperative that Aboriginal Members should have the same rights and responsibilities as non-indigenous Members of Parliament. Anything less was tokenism:

There is no way the Aboriginal community of New South Wales will embrace representatives who couldn't vote. It would just be tokenistic and another symbolic gesture...We should have representatives in Parliament the same as everyone else with voting rights (Carroll briefing, Wagga Wagga).

One participant was more positive about the potential benefits of non-voting seats. He argued that because it would probably be easier to get approval at a referendum for a

non-voting seat, their introduction could pave the way for dedicated seats with full voting rights. In the meanwhile, the non-voting Members would perform an important monitoring role in Parliament (Matthews briefing, Wagga Wagga).

8.4 REPORT TO PARLIAMENT BY NSW ATSIC REPRESENTATIVES

Participants at three of the consultation meetings suggested that representatives of ATSIC in NSW should be allowed to report to Parliament:

as the Ombudsman does, at least maybe once or twice a year on matters that the Parliament needs to address (Mackay evidence, Armidale).

A participant in Moree felt this report should be made by NSW ATSIC representatives because they are:

representatives of the Aboriginal people, so we could at least feel we were part of that process through electing people to ATSIC in the first place (McGray evidence, Moree).

Participants' main concern about this proposal was finding a way to ensure the government would respond to the proposed reports within a set time frame.

8.5 ABORIGINAL REPRESENTATION IN POLITICAL PARTIES

The role of political parties to facilitate Aboriginal representation in Parliament was an important theme at most of the consultation meetings and in some submissions and formal evidence. It was generally felt that the major political parties should do much more to enhance Aboriginal political participation. Given these expectations, the Committee invited representatives from several political parties in the NSW Parliament to give evidence about what they were doing to encourage Aboriginal participation in their organisations.

8.5.1 EVIDENCE - THE POLITICAL PARTIES

A representative from each of the state branches or divisions of the major parties in the NSW Parliament was invited to give evidence to the Committee about Aboriginal representation in their party structure. The witnesses were Eric Roozendaal from the Australian Labor Party (ALP), David Mendelssohn from the Australian Democrats, Remo Nogarotto from the Liberal Party of NSW and Paul Davey from the National Party. The Committee also invited the Reverend Fred Nile and Pastor Peter Walker from the Christian Democrats to appear because Pastor Walker is an Aboriginal candidate for the NSW Legislative Council at the forthcoming election in 1999. Each of the witnesses was asked the same questions.

- **Data on Aboriginal membership and participation**

None of the parties collect details on the Aboriginality or ethnicity of their members and were therefore unable to give accurate figures on Aboriginal membership or participation. Reverend Nile told the Committee, "We have not asked for race or cultural background. If it did it might indicate a racist attitude" (Nile evidence, 19 August 1998). Most of the witnesses admitted that the number of Aboriginal members was very low, except in some parts of the State where there are fairly large Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal participation as office holders and in branches was also estimated to be low.

- **Preselection of an Aboriginal person to state or federal seats**

The ALP, Christian Democrats and the Australian Democrats have pre-selected an Aboriginal person to a state or federal seat. However, only one of these endorsements could be considered to be for a "winnable" seat, and that is the Senate seat won by Aden Ridgeway in the recent federal election on behalf of the Australian Democrats.

According to the Reverend Fred Nile, Pastor Peter Walker, who is number two on the Christian Democrat's ticket for the Upper House for the 1999 election, "is in reach of a winnable seat" (Nile evidence, 19 August 1998). The National Party has not preselected an Aboriginal person to a federal or state seat, but Paul Davey did not think there were any barriers to their preselection:

There is no barrier within the structure of the National Party that would prevent an Aboriginal person from coming forward for preselection, winning preselection and going on to win a seat...you could argue that we do not actively encourage them, but we do not actively encourage it among anyone else either (Davey evidence, 19 August 1998).

Eric Roozendaal acknowledged that the "robust" nature of ALP preselection could make it difficult for an indigenous person to participate in this process. He also said that the introduction of positive discrimination to facilitate the preselection of an Aboriginal candidate would require a reassessment of the party rules (Roozendaal evidence, 19 August 1998).

- **Concern about the level of Aboriginal participation**

The witnesses were asked if they were concerned about the level of Aboriginal participation in their parties. David Mendelsohn said:

I think it would be putting it too highly to say concern but we would welcome more involvement (Mendelsohn evidence, 19 August 1998).

Eric Roozendaal also questioned the use of the word "concern":

I do not know whether the word "concern" is the right word. As a broadly based membership party we are interested in encouraging all ethnic and indigenous groups to participate in the party... (Roosendaal evidence, 19 August 1998).

Remo Nogarotto told the Committee that the short answer to this question was "yes" - they would like to see a more heightened involvement from that important segment of the community (Nogarotto evidence, 27 August 1998). The Reverend Fred Nile said his party has always been anxious "...to encourage Aboriginal candidates to stand for Parliament" (Nile evidence, 19 August 1998).

Paul Davey said the National Party was interested in encouraging participation from the whole community, rather than particular sections (Davey evidence, 19 August 1998).

- **Steps to encourage Aboriginal participation**

Party representatives were asked if their parties had taken specific steps to encourage Aboriginal involvement in their structures. Eric Roosendaal said the Party had produced a recruitment brochure targeted to Aboriginal people and that Aboriginal candidates received the full support of the ALP office. He also said there had been talk in the party that the 20 per cent loading for female candidates in preselections could be extended to indigenous candidates, but this idea had not progressed very far (Roosendaal evidence, 19 August 1998).

The Australian Democrats have not taken any special initiatives to encourage Aboriginal participation:

If we are talking about steps specifically to encourage Aboriginal involvement in the party I would have to say no. We have a fairly open party structure. Anybody can join and get involved. But we do not actually target particular groups to try and recruit them (Mendelssohn evidence, 19 August 1998).

Several witnesses commented that the most important thing their party could do to encourage membership was to make their structures accessible to everyone, as Remo Nogarotto suggests:

From our end, from a formal party end, we need to make sure that the structure, the symbolism and the forums within our structures are accommodating to indigenous people. Beyond that, I am not quite sure what we can do (Nogarotto evidence, 27 August 1998).

However, he had some concerns about encouraging certain sections of the community to join a political party:

There are some dangers in a political party seeking out - for want of a better term - better representation from some segment within the community and not allowing the process to work in reverse, that is, allowing people of a like philosophical mind to naturally gravitate towards activism within that political party (Nogarotto evidence, 27 August 1998).

Paul Davey also thinks political parties should encourage participation, but not necessarily from specific groups:

I think parties can always do more to encourage greater interest in the parliamentary processes and the political processes ...across the whole community (Davey evidence, 19 August 1998).

It was suggested to Mr Davey that the National Party has strategies in place to encourage participation by particular groups, such as women and young people. Paul Davey responded that women in the party have not received special treatment:

Those women have achieved on an equal basis with anyone else, not because the party has done anything specific to push women forward. It is evolutionary (Davey evidence, 19 August 1998).

None of the parties indicated how they could make their structures more appealing to Aboriginal people nor if they had plans to consider this issue in the near future.

- **A stance on dedicated seats**

None of the parties has a formal policy on dedicated Aboriginal seats.

The Christian Democrats were concerned that dedicated seats may be perceived as tokenistic and could undermine these Members' contribution to Parliament. While the party is formally opposed to dedicated seats at present, it would be prepared to revisit the issue if Aboriginal candidates fail to be elected in the usual way.

The National Party is formally opposed to dedicated seats. The Liberal Party does not have a formal position on the question but "would be uncomfortable with dedicated seats" (Nogarotto evidence, 27 August 1998).

While the Australian Democrats do not have a policy on dedicated seats, Mr Mendellsohn said his party is very supportive of indigenous self determination and reconciliation and the party may support dedicated seats if it could be shown that such a step would advance these goals. Their support would also depend on how the dedicated seats were established. Mendellsohn said he was attracted to a proposal for two dedicated seats, one nominated by the ALP and the other by the Coalition, after consultation with the Aboriginal community. The key advantages of this model is that

it would not affect the numbers in Parliament and could depoliticise Aboriginal affairs in the Parliament (Mendelssohn evidence, 19 August 1998).

Eric Roozendaal told the Committee that while the ALP does not have policy on dedicated seats, "quite rightly, we will be debating that" (Roozendaal evidence, 19 August 1998). However, he envisaged some difficulties with the concept of dedicated seats under present party rules:

Because we have a system of democratic election of candidates to the rank and file preselection system, it is a bit difficult for us to accommodate these sorts of issues within our present rules as they stand. For us to consider some positive discrimination...would require an reassessment of the party rules (Roozendaal evidence, 19 August 1998).

- **Other ways to improve Aboriginal participation**

Witnesses were asked to comment on other ways to improve Aboriginal representation in Parliament. David Mendelssohn suggested that a proposal to improve women's involvement in Parliament which had been discussed recently in his party could be extended to Aboriginal people. Under this proposal, if parties fail within a certain time to put up a reasonable number of Aboriginal candidates in winnable seats, their electoral funding could be reduced (Mendelssohn evidence, 19 August 1998).

Eric Roozendaal suggested that any steps taken by the Australian Electoral Commission or the NSW State Electoral Commission to encourage Aboriginal people to participate in federal and state elections would be welcome (Roozendaal evidence, 19 August 1998).

Remo Nogarotto suggested that improving the education and economic standing of Aboriginal people would facilitate Aboriginal representation (Nogarotto evidence, 27 August 1998). Paul Davey commented on the need to encourage more people, including Aboriginal people, to pursue a political career:

when one looks at the overall community...a parliamentary career is becoming increasingly less popular..We have to do something about that (Davey evidence, 19 August 1998).

8.5.2 SUBMISSIONS AND OTHER EVIDENCE

John Ah Kit, an Aboriginal Member of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly, does not support dedicated seats but seeks:

a profound and lasting change to the political parties of Australia in their approach to indigenous representation....(Submission 10).

He argued in his submission that virtually none of the major political parties in Australia had taken any real steps towards getting indigenous representation in their parties - "let alone" safe seats for candidates.

The machine bosses regard the process as belonging to them, and certainly not to the indigenous people who are expected to vote for them come election time...Aboriginal people have, at best, been preselected to fight hopeless causes in seats they have no chance of winning (Submission 10).

John Ah Kit calls on the "party machines" to ensure skilled indigenous Australians are not locked out of the political process (Submission 10). Garth Nettheim also argued that the political parties should assist Aboriginal people to obtain representation in Parliament:

one way to achieve this would be for the political parties to seek to encourage Aboriginal membership and Aboriginal candidates and for Aboriginal people themselves to seek through one or other of the various political parties to go for office. They have not done so in the past and probably the numbers are such that they would need active encouragement and active endorsement from the political parties for this to occur (Nettheim evidence, 26 September 1997).

Political scientist Dr James Jupp told the Committee that while political parties should play a key role in improving Aboriginal representation in the NSW Parliament, "they have done very little about it". Aboriginal people, like many other minority groups, are disinclined to join political parties because:

Parties have problems recruiting anybody, but they particularly appear to newcomers, whether it is immigrants, Aborigines, women or new members - to be very cliquey and self-contained. ..Most political parties in Australia are very narrow. They have their own language, practices and rules, and they often seem hostile to outsiders (Jupp evidence, 19 August 1998).

According to Jupp, one way to overcome the barrier to Aboriginal participation in political parties, is to establish Aboriginal branches within parties, as in the Northern Territory:

I know some people think it is branch stacking but it seems the way to go. People from the various minority groups are more comfortable with each other than they are coming into the often very hostile atmosphere of party politics (Jupp evidence, 19 August 1998).

Jupp acknowledges that the Aboriginal population is much higher in the Northern Territory but suggests such branches may be relevant in parts of NSW with a significant number of Aboriginal people, such as Blacktown, Redfern or Bourke. He also told the Committee that the Northern Territory Labor Party is the only Australian political party with an affirmative action policy for Aboriginal people.

8.5.3 CONSULTATION MEETINGS

A consistent theme at the consultation meetings was that political parties should do more to encourage Aboriginal representation in Parliament. The following suggestions were offered: Political parties could recruit Aboriginal people as members; select Aboriginal candidates for winnable seats; and introduce mentoring programs and quotas for indigenous people. Ted Lancaster thought it was important to convince the political parties that Aboriginal people:

...can play a big role in winning or losing seats in particular areas...(Lancaster evidence, Dubbo).

Not everyone felt that Aboriginal representation would be furthered by political parties. A participant in Moree thought it would not be possible to require the political parties to improve Aboriginal representation. Others were sceptical about the willingness of the major political parties to pre-select Aboriginal candidates:

If Aboriginal people are going to wait for the political parties to show equal representation for males and females, and likewise for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, they will be waiting a long time (Mathews briefing, Wagga Wagga).

Some people commented that many Aboriginal people were disillusioned with politics and did not want to join political parties.

8.6 IMPROVING ABORIGINAL PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS

One way to improve the political influence of Aboriginal people is to maximise the number of Aboriginal people who vote in elections. Concern about the low rates of registration and voting in Aboriginal communities was expressed by participants at the community meetings and in evidence and submissions.

8.6.1 SUBMISSIONS AND EVIDENCE

The NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs notes that while the number of people who voted at the ATSIC election in NSW in 1996 increased by 17.8% from 1993, a significant number do not participate in elections. The Department cites several reasons for this tendency and expressed concern over the recent withdrawal of funding

for electoral education in Aboriginal communities provided by the Australian Electoral Commission and the fact that the NSW State Electoral Office only provides electoral education on an ad hoc basis (Submission 23). Between 1992 and 1996, the Australian Electoral Commission provided electoral education to Aboriginal communities across NSW through ATSEIS, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Electoral Information Service. The service ceased in 1996 because of a budget cut to the Electoral Commission (Clancy evidence, 27 October 1997).

In her evidence to the Committee, Ms Pat Dixon also criticised the withdrawal of funding for the Australian Electoral Commission's Aboriginal voter education program (Dixon evidence, 26 September 1997).

Dr James Jupp told the Committee that Aboriginal voter turnout is even lower for ATSIC elections than for Commonwealth or State elections for which registration and voting is compulsory (Jupp evidence, 19 August 1998).

8.6.2 CONSULTATION MEETINGS

Concern about Aboriginal participation in elections was a common theme at the consultation meetings:

In all Aboriginal elections there is a very small proportion of the people on the electoral roll who actually vote and we have got to try and overcome that problem (Matthews briefing, Wagga Wagga).

Participants at the Parramatta meeting noted with concern the demise of the electoral education program previously provided by the Australian Electoral Commission:

The Electoral Commission, I believe, has let us down...we need people going around all the time to each group of people. Even if they sat down with an organisation for one day in a medical centre and said, "Excuse me, are you on the roll?" and say "I want to show you some of the posters, and why you should vote, and where your vote will count" (Leslie Snr evidence, Parramatta).

A participant from Moree suggested that the lack of political education in schools was one of the reasons for the small number of Aboriginal people who vote in elections. Several participants across the consultation meetings commented on the need for education about the political system in Aboriginal communities. Mr Warren Mundine said the strategies in local government, particularly in places like Armidale, could improve voter registration and turnout (Mundine evidence, Redfern).

8.7 ABORIGINAL REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

There has been an increasing awareness of the importance of Aboriginal representation in local government and as a possible "stepping stone" to participation

in state politics.

On many occasions throughout the Inquiry, the Committee was told about the Local Government Aboriginal Mentoring Program which is sponsored by the Department of Local Government. The aim of the program is to enable Aboriginal community members to gain a greater insight into local government, and to encourage more Aboriginal people to run for office at the local government elections in 1999. Under the program, a currently serving councillor acts as a mentor to a representative of the Aboriginal community. The scheme was piloted in Kyogle and is currently operating in eight other Local Council areas: Maclean, Coonamble, Tumut, Moree Plains, Kempsey, Leichhardt, Severn and Gosford City. Marrickville, Randwick and Port Stephens Councils have endorsed the scheme and are in the process of selecting mentors and candidates (Personal communication, Department of Local Government).

8.7.1 SUBMISSIONS AND EVIDENCE

Michael Dodson believes that while local government is not a substitute for the involvement of Aboriginal people in State Parliament, it is an extremely important level of government for Aboriginal people. He suggests that Aboriginal participation in local government could be facilitated by making areas with sufficient numbers of indigenous residents separate local government areas and making areas with a high concentration of Aboriginal residents a separate ward, effectively guaranteeing the election of an aboriginal candidate.

Ms Pat Dixon, Deputy Mayor of Armidale, told the Committee that Aboriginal involvement in local government was crucial to the well being of Aboriginal communities. Ms Dixon, who has spent the past 17 years in local government, suggests that participation in local government allows Aboriginal people to become involved "in all sorts of areas from employment to dealing with political procedures" (Dixon evidence, 13 October 1997). She also informed the Committee of the importance of the network of Aboriginal councillors across NSW established by the Department of Local Government (Dixon evidence, 13 October 1997).

- **Mentoring**

Dr James Jupp suggested that one of the reasons for the under-representation of Aboriginal people in politics is the generally poor levels of education in Aboriginal communities. He feels that a mentoring program for Aboriginal people may be a valuable way to encourage Aboriginal people to get involved in politics.

Michael Dodson also supports the objectives of the local government mentoring scheme which he believes should be monitored and given additional resources if shown to be effective (Submission 24).

8.7.2 CONSULTATION MEETINGS

- **Mentoring**

Several participants commented favourably on the role of the Local Government Aboriginal Mentoring Program and a few suggested it could be extended to State Parliament.

Mick Coombes believes there is broad support for mentoring in the Aboriginal community. He said that delegates to the 1997 national reconciliation convention resolved that other states should adopt the program at the local level and that the program should also be adopted by State *and* Federal governments (Coombes evidence, Parramatta).

While there was considerable support for mentoring, a few participants thought such programs were “patronising” to Aboriginal people. Another participant at Moree suggested it would be very difficult to introduce such a program at the state level. A participant at Wagga suggested a mentoring program in reverse whereby parliamentarians learn from Aboriginal people.

8.8 FURTHER OPTIONS

Several other suggestions to improve Aboriginal representation in the NSW Parliament were raised at the consultation meetings and in evidence and submissions. In most cases, very little detail was provided. The Committee has included these options to indicate the variety of ideas suggested at the meetings to enhance representation for Aboriginal people and does not consider they are of less value than other options discuss. The other options include:

- a treaty between black and white Australia;
- amendment of the NSW and Australian Constitution to recognise Aboriginal custom and law;
- creation of a Sovereign Black Parliament, to operate parallel to the NSW Parliament with full voting rights and powers;
- adaption of aspects of Canada’s approach to indigenous representation;
- establishment of an Aboriginal political party;
- local and regional agreements; and
- electoral reform.

8.9 CONCLUSION

While the primary objective of this Inquiry was to consider the introduction of dedicated Aboriginal seats in the NSW Parliament, the Committee also received submissions and evidence on other ways to improve Aboriginal representation. Indeed, several witnesses and submissions called on the Committee to consider dedicated seats as only one element in a package of measures to improve Aboriginal representation.

The Committee found conditional support for the establishment of an Aboriginal Assembly and non-voting seats in the submissions and evidence. Supporters of these strategies felt an Assembly might be an effective way to represent the diverse views of Aboriginal communities. Others suggested that non-voting seats would enable Aboriginal people to have access to Parliament and an opportunity to gain valuable parliamentary experience. However, it was generally felt that an Assembly and non-voting seats were “second best” options to dedicated seats with full voting rights and that these initiatives would only be supported in the interim or in addition to dedicated seats. The views of the Committee on the establishment of an Assembly are discussed in Chapter Ten.

During the Inquiry concern was expressed over the lack of encouragement by political parties in NSW for Aboriginal participation as members and candidates. As will be discussed in Chapter Ten, Committee Members were not able to agree on the obligations of political parties to provide this encouragement.