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Media Release: A voice cries in the wilderness

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) of the National Council of Churches in Australia condemns the decision by the Federal Government to abolish the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). This decision jeopardises our aspirations as Indigenous peoples to self-determination and totally ignores the recommendations contained in the Report on the ATSIC Review, *In the Hands of the Regions - a New ATSIC* released in November 2003.

NATSIEC acknowledges that ATSIC is in need of structural reform as reported in the ATSIC Review. Abolishing ATSIC and replacing it with a non-elected advisory body flies in the face of the principles of self-determination and the democratic process.

Federal and State Governments must share responsibility for the current state of ATSIC and the current problems within the Indigenous community. ATSIC should not be used as a scapegoat for the Governments' inadequacies in addressing current disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians.

NATSIEC believes that it is imperative that the Federal Government exercise wisdom and act justly in determining its approach to Indigenous affairs. The process must be conducted in close consultation and negotiation with Indigenous peoples. In any democratic society it is recognised that this is best achieved through an elected body. The Government sought consultation yet has chosen to completely ignore the recommendations from the resulting Review - a tremendous waste of taxpayers' money and an insult to the contributions made by organisations, government agencies and individuals.

Therefore NATSIEC demands that the Federal Government recognises the importance to the Indigenous community of having a direct say in matters that affect our lives through elected representatives in accordance with the recommendations of the Government's own review.

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