

Townsville Bulletin

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Aboriginal legal family 'corrupt'

MALCOLM WEATHERUP | June 26th, 2008

A FEDERAL MP has made a scathing parliamentary attack on alleged nepotism and incompetence by an Aboriginal family said to control the indigenous legal service for North Queensland, based in Townsville.

In an extraordinary speech, Peter Lindsay accused the Akee family of 'influence, incompetence, nepotism and irresponsible behaviour' in various members' roles in not only the legal service, but also the ATSI Cultural Centre at Reef HQ, the aboriginal radio station 4KIG and the Townsville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Service.

"This weak capacity and corruption cannot continue," Mr Lindsay said in a speech to the House of Representatives on Tuesday night.

"There must be an Australian Government inquiry into the way the Akee family has inappropriately managed and spent millions of dollars that were given to these four organisations for the benefit of the indigenous community, not for the benefit of the Akee family.

"The inappropriate nepotism, misuse of public money and lack of ethical behaviour should be investigated, and the outcomes and recommendations for action reported to the community," Mr Lindsay said.

"It is well known that nepotism and rotting the system is behind the Australian Government seeking the re-tendering of the legal service contract (in North Queensland) _ the only one in Australia required to do so."

Referring to the fact that next month, the Brisbane-based southern Queensland aboriginal legal group will take over indigenous representation throughout the state, Mr Lindsay was blunt and sarcastic about recent efforts by ATSIL (NQ) chairperson Angie Akee to suggest that the Government was encouraging a southern takeover of North Queensland operations and pushing aside local organisations and networks.

"The Akee family are now squealing at being slung off the local legal service gravy train. (They are basically asking) why their family should lose the ability to employ all the rellies (sic) at way above market salaries, why they should lose access to the car fleet that they have given to everyone.

"(It will mean) no more lavish up-scale weekends away at resorts in the guise of workshops and so forth, not to mention first class jaunts to Canberra for greatly inflated delegations of family and friends, which I have personally witnessed," Mr Lindsay said.

"Never mind the legal service clients sitting in jail waiting for proper legal interviews to get them into the court system and waiting on remand longer than any period they might be sentenced to for their alleged crime

"This is what happens when the family pays its family, as administration staff, more than the professional legal staff, and it is terribly wrong."

Mr Lindsay said he had details of the family employment in the four named organisations.

"It gives me no joy to speak out about this issue, but it must be done in the interest of the hundreds of thousands of decent 'first' Australians whose reputations and quality of life are so dreadfully impacted by the few who get themselves on the gravy train and misuse it," Mr Lindsay said.

The Townsville Bulletin sought comment from Angie Akee yesterday, but she had not responded when the paper went to press.

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Townsville Bulletin

What the family says: Record plain for all to see

KATHLEEN SKENE | May 7th, 2011

PROFESSIONAL jealousy and personal grudges are behind complaints about local indigenous organisations, according to those who stand accused.

Instead of "running to politicians", community members who were unhappy with the way local groups operated should put their hands up and help out themselves, they said.

Townsville Aboriginal and Islanders Health Services director operational services Angie Akee defended claims she and her family had abused their many board positions to their own advantage.

Family first

What the Elders say: Where has the trust gone?

Family members

What the employees say: We're proud to work for TAIHS

Chief executive director Tanya Akee, Angie's daughter, said the service was within its rights to refuse information requests by Herbert MP Ewen Jones.

"He's not a financial member so he doesn't have access to that information ... we've already advised Mr Jones that if he wants that information, he needs to go to our funding bodies," she said.

"We've been through reviews from the funding bodies and, as you can see, we're still operating.

"I think we're getting to the point now, where we're saying 'enough's enough'."

Whenever these claims surface, valuable time and money was directed to refuting them, Tanya said.

She said a minister, whom she would not name, had told her TAIHS records were "none of Mr Jones's business".

In response to suspicions over her family's level of involvement in local organisations, Tanya presented an eight-page document listing politicians who had hired family members.

Former Herbert MP Peter Lindsay brought the claims to Federal Parliament in 2008, mentioning Angie Akee by name and accusing her and her family of "nepotism, rotting, misuse of public money, and a lack of ethical behaviour".

Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin's office yesterday confirmed an investigation of four government departments conducted following Mr Lindsay's claims had not resulted in further action

"I was mad that I was mentioned ... but I'm still here," Angie said.

"Let me just say that I don't put myself on these boards, like everybody else, we get elected to sit on committees.

"Unlike a lot of other non-indigenous people in this community, I get involved in other organisations, . . because I take to the board value that enhances their capacity.

"I have a husband who's got a chronic disease, and if he says that it's OK for me to be involved in these things, then it's OK - but it's nobody else's business."

Angie said she had received awards for her commitment to the community and that her family had a history of fighting for indigenous rights.

"I had a father who was in the army and, you talk about discrimination, he served for this country and he couldn't even get a beer in a pub, and there's no way that I'm going (to) allow that for future generations of ATSI people," she said.

"He fought for better housing for our people in Garbutt here, so we come with a history of wanting to be involved and to enhance our people's capacity, in employment, community development, health, education."

Angie said TAIHS was answerable to 13 different programs to obtain and maintain its funding.

The service regularly underwent on and off-site examinations, including two so far this month. The results of an "on-site risk assessment" by the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health on April 13-14 were not yet finalised.

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Townsville Bulletin

Family first

KATHLEEN SKENE | May 7th, 2011

THERE are calls for a sweeping audit of Townsville's indigenous organisations amid long-running claims of nepotism, mismanagement and bullying.

The family at the centre of the allegations has denied wrongdoing, saying they are sick of defending themselves against people who are "jealous" of their positions.

Herbert MP Ewen Jones said he had been approached by "at least a dozen" people who claimed board members and management had abused their positions on as many as nine local organisations to benefit their family and friends.

Aboriginal elders, former staff and other community members have spoken of their frustration.

The Family members

What the Elders say: Where has the trust gone?

What the family says: Record plain for all to see

What the employees say: We're proud to work for TAIHS

"The main things they've spoken about have been a lack of accountability ... and not being able to get the information they have been chasing," Mr Jones said.

"Also, bullying - if (staff) do raise a question, they are hounded out of the organisation or made to feel uncomfortable about it."

Many of the complaints have centred around executive staff and board members of the Townsville Aboriginal and Islanders Health Services, who have refused written and in-person requests to provide information that could clear or condemn them.

Mr Jones called on the Federal Government to examine a number of Townsville indigenous organisations simultaneously to ensure funds were not being moved between them.

Mr Jones offered funding for a thorough audit of their operations so the organisations would not be financially disadvantaged, an offer that was declined.

TAIHS director of operational services Angie Akee said claims against her family were grounded in "professional jealousy".

Chief executive officer Tanya Akee, Angie's daughter, said the organisation's effectiveness was evident in its many achievements.

"We're very proactive in getting out there and going to the community as opposed to waiting until the community comes to us," she said.

"We are not here for personal gain ... it's about servicing the community."

The Akees said, after receiving legal advice, the board had made the decision not to provide the documents Mr Jones requested.

The TAIHS Salaries Budget for 2010/11, obtained by the Townsville Bulletin, shows 64 staffing positions at TAIHS, funded both by Medicare and the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health.

The budget shows two staff members employed in two full-time positions each - with each position paid for a 38-hour week.

TAIHS organisational development officer Kathy Anderson said no employee was paid for two 38-hour weeks, and the document was probably not yet finalised.

Angie Akee's brother Emmanuel Ross is listed as a program co-ordinator for the service, and the three only non-medical positions commanding six-figure salaries are held by Angie, Tanya and director of Corporate Services Dorothy Erichsen, understood to be a cousin of Angie's brother-in-law.

The Akees said they had a large, Townsville-based family of community-minded people, so the involvement of relatives in local indigenous groups was not unusual.

They said staff members were employed on their merits, using set procedures.

"Overall, we're run by a board of 10 people, we're accountable to those 10 board members," Angie Akee said, although five board positions are currently vacant.

She said people complaining about the family were disgruntled former staff with their own personal grudges.

Ms Anderson said the service was subject to so many checks and balances from its funding bodies, they would not have remained operational if it was being improperly managed.

Mr Jones said if such an audit was conducted and showed that the organisations were operating effectively, he would happily support them to end speculation.

"It comes down to this - they have an opportunity to completely silence their critics, but (their refusal to co-operate) does leave the question, 'Do they have anything to hide?'," he said.

Other organisations under a cloud include the Townsville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation for Women, The Townsville Cultural Centre Unit Trust, Magani Malu Kes Townsville Limited and the ABIS Community Co-op Society.

Relatives of the Akees - including members of the Ross, Tapim and Illin families - are well represented in many local organisations.

For example, the Office of the Registrar for Indigenous Corporations (ORIC) names Angie Akee as a director for the Women's Corporation, and of the 29 financial members listed, more than half are believed to be related to her by blood or marriage.

Meeting with the Townsville Bulletin this week, the Akees would not answer claims about organisations other than TAIHS.

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Townsville Bulletin

Charity houses its board, family

KATHLEEN SKENE | May 11th, 2011

A COMPANY set up as a charity for indigenous housing is providing homes for members of its board and their family.

Public records show a Kirwan home owned by the ABIS Community Co-operative Society is occupied by one of its directors, Angie Akee.

Ms Akee's sister Agnes Tapim is the chairwoman of the society, which receives generous tax breaks through its registration as a charitable institution.

Homes occupied by another of Ms Akee's sisters, Sandra Santo, and another director, Mamam Martin, are also owned by ABIS.

Names of the ABIS directors were obtained from the Office of Fair Trading, their addresses through the electoral roll and the property ownership through an online database. Among the directors named in the Fair Trading records are two women, believed to be Ms Akee's aunts, one of her Townsville Aboriginal and Islanders Health Services workmates and one deceased man who is listed twice as a director.

Ms Akee's involvement with a number of indigenous organisations was questioned in a special report in Saturday's Townsville Bulletin. She is in a \$120,000-a-year paid position with TAIHS.

Her sister, Ms Santo, is a director on the TAIHS board.

Yesterday, Ms Akee did not want to answer or even hear the claims, saying she did not need to defend herself as she had done nothing wrong.

"I'm not prepared to make any more statements about me," she said.

"These people running off to (Herbert MP Ewen) Jones - you need to question them about their actions. What are they doing about homelessness in our community, deaths in custody and the health and education of our people?"

Townsville City Council community safety committee chairman Dale Last, who has been working on possible solutions for homelessness in the city, said the revelations were disappointing.

"You would like to think that all the relevant government organisations and authorities set up to deal with these issues are generally working towards providing accommodation," he said.

"It disappoints me to hear stories such as this when there are so many people working so hard to solve these particular problems.

There's an extraordinary amount of money that gets spent on these particular issues in this city and we really have to question whether there is any headway being made in terms of addressing these problems, and situations such as this certainly don't help."

Speaking about co-operative societies in general, local lawyer Evan Sarinas said providing private benefits clashed with societies' registration as a charitable institution.

"It is incongruous for a charity's objects to provide for private benefits," he said.

Australian Government records show that ABIS is exempt from income tax, receives a rebate on Fringe Benefits Tax and a concession on GST.

An Australian Taxation Office spokesman yesterday said the status of charitable entities could be reviewed, with

their status revoked and tax concessions repaid if necessary.

"Where an entity is no longer considered to be charitable it is no longer entitled to charitable tax concessions and standard business taxes would apply," he said.

"This action could also be retrospective where an entity is found to have not been a charity for a period of time.

"The ATO grants charitable status ... and certain elements, such as being not-for-profit and not making distributions to members must be clearly included.

"If the organisations is incorporated it may be subject to further legal activity for acting contrary to the terms of its incorporation which may take place at the state or territory level."

What the Bulletin says ...

THE latest revelations about largesse within the local Aboriginal elder community is a disgrace and grounds for a full and open inquiry.

A company set up as a charity for indigenous housing is providing homes for members of its board and their family, even though several family members earn more than \$100k a year.

Public records show a Kirwan home owned by the ABIS Community Co-operative Society is occupied by one of its directors - Angie Akee.

Angie's sister Agnes Tapim is the chair of the society, which receives generous tax breaks through its registration as a charitable institution.

A home occupied by another of Angie's sisters, Sandra Santo, is also owned by ABIS.

Federal MP Ewen Jones has questioned the labyrinth of organisations being run by the Akee family in Townsville, unsuccessfully seeking an audit of their books.

Labor politicians such as Mandy Johnstone, Jenny Macklin and Karen Struthers have become strangely silent since the latest revelations were made public.

This is taxpayers' money that is being used. We deserve answers. The sooner the blowtorch is applied to the way the funding is distributed, the better.

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