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BURNS ALDIS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL AGREEMENT ON CLOSING THE GAP 2026
RESPONSE TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

1. Introduction

Burns Aldis was established in 1992 with the purpose of offering community development services to Aboriginal communities in NSW. The firm quickly established an enduring relationship with communities in far western and north-western NSW, initially represented by the Murdi Paaki ATSIC Regional Council and, subsequently, by Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly and its constituent Community Working Parties. While discrete projects have been delivered in most parts of NSW, we would flag the continuous relationship with Murdi Paaki communities and a 30-year relationship with an Aboriginal community-controlled alcohol and other drug and SEWB service based in western Sydney as a constant in our professional life. The firm thus has a continuous engagement with Aboriginal communities from the pre-ATSIC days to the present, principally in remote and very remote geographies, and so we have witnessed the peaks and troughs of the impact of changes in government policy and practice over successive ideological regimes. Our work has included capital works project management and integrated labour force initiatives in domestic construction and institutional building; successive rounds of regional planning and community development planning; research, planning and implementation of housing and housing-related human services policy reform processes; economic development and workforce participation strategies at regional and local scales; health service evaluation and planning; organisational strengthening; and advocacy support for Aboriginal representative bodies and organisations. Our services are contracted generally by communities, not government instrumentalities.

2. Basis for this submission

This submission is made in our capacity as non-Indigenous practitioners. The views and interpretations expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of either Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly or Murdi Paaki Services Ltd.

Our responses to the questions in the *Call for Submissions* are, except where otherwise indicated, informed mainly by our recent experiences working with Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly and its operating arm, Murdi Paaki Services Ltd. The submission is based on our observations as a consultant of relationships between community and government over an extended period, and the effectiveness of policies and practices in improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal communities, families and individuals. Our overarching view is that, while some small improvements against the CtG targets are measurable over time, these have occurred despite, rather than because of, intervention by governments. Indeed, in our opinion, the behaviour of governments in supposed partnerships with Aboriginal representative bodies has not been directed to facilitating change but rather to frustrating community ambition for socio-economic advancement. Regional and local strategic reform proposals developed on the basis of evidence and aspiration, and advocated by community, routinely do not merit any regard.

We could comment at length on the failures of governments' governance, policy and associated initiatives to make inroads into closing the gap between Aboriginal peoples of western NSW and their non-Indigenous counterparts, there being few successes. Rather, we have summarised our experiences into key observations and provided a detailed narrative relating to two recent projects as case studies to illustrate, in one instance, the indifference displayed by governments to evidence-based proposals of Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly and, for the second case, bureaucratic manipulation to deny community-identified opportunities to improve the social housing and economic status of Aboriginal peoples of the Region.

3. Key observations

Our observations relating to Aboriginal affairs may be summarised as:

- Communities have the capacity and capability, individually and collectively, to assemble representative entities to plan, advocate for and guide service delivery to benefit their own wellbeing and advancement.

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The regional and local governance frameworks which have enabled Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly and Community Working Parties to adapt, survive and function effectively from the ATSIC period is described at https://mpra.com.au/uploads/images/MPLL%20Part%20B.pdf. Effective representation does rely on the goodwill of the Australian and NSW Governments to invest in the Assembly's community-led structures and so is at the mercy of capricious decision-making. The Assembly frequently states that it is continually required to prove its legitimacy and delegated authority to government agencies. Governments are still unwilling to acknowledge and respect the Region's long-standing model of governance;

- Explicable then are the actions of governments to introduce into or otherwise support competing Aboriginal peak representative entities in a space where the Region's community developed model already exists and is functional to the satisfaction of communities. For example, the move by the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (NSW CAPO) with the assistance of the NSW Government to deliver the Supporting Local Partnerships project in the Region with a mandate to 'shift power to grassroots, Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and local communities to design and drive solutions tailored to their specific regional needs', is both divisive and provocative.
- Closing the Gap reports, because much of the analysis and reporting is at a relatively coarse grain, fail to bring to public attention the true picture of disadvantage in NSW remote and very remote communities, conveniently allowing policy makers the opportunity to ignore the hard work necessary to address critical deficits. Different geographies present different policy scenarios. Other than perhaps for headline provoking disturbances in Wilcannia, the Region is largely invisible in the national gaze. The attached community-led strategic effort to address underperformance in education, employment and economic development is an example where public sector effort, generated in response to concerning statistics, would have been expected but has not materialised;
- Agencies, both central and line agencies, including planning instrumentalities, have a reasonable skill set in relation to service planning but are dismally poor at conceptualising and initiating a response to decline or even stasis in regional and remote contexts such as the Murdi Paaki Region. The public sector does not have sufficient 'skin in the game' to actively partner to produce meaningful outcomes over the longer term. At this point in time, there is little to see in terms of planning for the consequences of demographic change at local government level as the proportion of the Aboriginal population in some communities exceeds or begins to exceed the non-Indigenous population;
- There is little evidence in the Murdi Paaki Region of any active steps to build the community-controlled sector or transition services to ACCO control. If the treatment of the Assembly's operating arm, Murdi Paaki Services Ltd (MPSL), is a guide, governments are more interested in weakening community control rather than enhancing it. Despite being established as the primary knowledge-based entity and central point of entry into the Region for governments, the private sector and NGOs, MPSL has never been adequately resourced to pursue the ambitions of the Region and yet has endured suffocating scrutiny and, more recently, of poor performance. The inadequacy of resourcing is identified in an evaluation of OCHRE decision-making as impacting upon the Murdi Paaki Region[1] available at https://cipr.cass.anu.edu.au/files/docs/2025/6/Stage_2_OCHRE_LDM_Evaluation_MPRA_Report.pdf. While MPSL was intended to correct the resource imbalance that led to governments having all the power, and MPRA, little, the future of the organisation has always been at the mercy of its funding agencies. It has never had the capacity to develop its business model to become self-sustaining. Had the structures discussed at Case Studies 1 and 2 been supported, then the Region might be witnessing a brighter future. Considerable scope exists to progressively build a productive Aboriginal enterprise sector, and support broader regional economic growth in an area of acute skills shortage, but obtaining buy-in is a lost cause;
- While Governments espouse the principle of self-determination and assert that Aboriginal peoples know best, space is rarely allowed for communities to enact their own strategic priorities. Each of the sixteen

[1] O'Bryan, M and Markham, F, (2022), *Ochre Local Decision Making Stage 2 Evaluation: Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly Evaluation Report*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

Aboriginal communities located in the Murdi Paaki Region and represented by the Assembly have their own Community Action Plan and Housing and Environmental Health Plan (https://www.mpra.com.au/hehp) but there is no evidence of these influencing government decision-making. An analysis of successive plans will reveal a constancy over time in need, proposed solutions and priority areas for action, suggesting an enduring state of inertia and disavowal. It is interesting to note that the NSW Aboriginal Land Council has withdrawn from the NSW Closing the Gap framework following ongoing inability of the NSW Government to deliver genuine partnership, shared decision-making and accountability. Clearly, systemic deficiencies abound;

- Governments are resistant to acknowledging that communities situated in remote and very remote geographies experience the effects of Government policies and practice differently to those located in regional and metropolitan settings. This is clearly evidenced by 'market failure' in human service delivery where procurement practices create perverse outcomes (a constant theme in community strategic planning). The systemic disadvantage felt in NSW remote and non-remote communities is recognised in the case study at §4.2 with the creation of a new Region-specific governance framework for Aboriginal social housing but it has not been allowed to flourish;
- Evidence produced by community is disregarded in policy setting and decision-making even when it is compelling and incontestable, and need indisputable. Again, the case study at §4.2 is a prime example of community-led research not driving change. Access to corresponding government-held data is limited, as may be data quality, so the veracity of policy setting and decision-making cannot be established;
- Scope for innovation is stifled. There appears little scope for developing a culture of evaluation within agencies; the bureaucracy is not a policy learning environment. Many bureaucrats display an overwhelming commitment to stasis; the expectation that they journey beyond their comfort zone is not welcome and can be counterproductive;
- Governments will not introduce accountability mechanisms to ensure the efficacy and effectiveness of policy, programmes and projects. Measurement, where it performed, is still focussed on outputs and not outcomes, shielding the bureaucracy from scrutiny for poor and sometimes damaging performance;
- It is our perception that relationships between governments and community have become more strained, exacerbated in part by the adverse impact of the defeat of the Voice referendum. Defeat appears to have given bureaucrats licence to ignore any Indigenous voice, anywhere and under any circumstances;
- Governments are always right, even when not. The competency of self-reflection is not present.

4. Case studies

4.1. The Aboriginal Workforce Participation Strategy for the Murdi Paaki Region

The *Aboriginal Workforce Participation Strategy for the Murdi Paaki Region* sets out a regional approach to improving Aboriginal employment, education, skills development and economic participation. The central argument is that existing labour market and training arrangements have not adequately addressed the needs, aspirations and economic circumstances of Aboriginal communities across the Region. The strategy identifies a range of structural barriers, including a limited diversity of local career opportunities; shortages of skilled workers; inadequate access to locally delivered training; a mismatch between training offered, local skills shortages, and local labour market opportunities; weak coordination between government and service providers; and insufficient community control over workforce planning and economic development.

Recognising that the lifting of capacity and opportunity and development of the Regional economy go hand in hand, the Assembly's proposed response is to rebuild Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), strengthen education and vocational pathways, establish more effective partnerships, improve access to workforce data, and create more opportunities for Aboriginal employment and business ownership. A key principle underpinning the strategy is to "grow our own" — developing local people, organisations and businesses so that communities can build the capabilities needed to participate in and benefit from regional economic activity.

The strategy identifies several interconnected challenges:

- Limited employment opportunities: The regional labour market is relatively small, with a narrow range of career choices and limited diversity of employment pathways;
- Insufficient access to training: The centralisation of TAFE courses and limited access to formal education and training have constrained the development of local skills;
- Weak community control: Communities have had limited influence over labour market planning, programme design and implementation since the termination of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) programme;
- Erosion of community infrastructure: The loss of community assets and organisational capacity has reduced opportunities to develop the next generation of local leaders and managers;
- Fragmented service delivery: Government agencies, education providers and other services are not sufficiently coordinated to deliver integrated, long-term solutions;
- Barriers to participation: Aboriginal people continue to face barriers arising from dispossession, trauma, racism, life experiences, and literacy and numeracy challenges;
- Inadequate evidence and accountability: Workforce needs and opportunities are not sufficiently researched, policies do not always reflect regional priorities, and existing institutional arrangements can produce adverse outcomes;

The strategy argues that these challenges cannot be resolved through isolated training or employment programmes. These challenges require coordinated regional reform, community leadership and sustained investment in local capability.

The strategy is organised around six themes which are then translated into four broad areas of action:

- Community engagement, participation and leadership: Resource and support communities to co-design and implement training, employment and economic development initiatives, ensuring regional priorities shape decision-making;
- Regional VET and higher education pathways: Improve access to locally delivered vocational education and training (VET), secondary education and university pathways, raising qualification levels and strengthening human and social capital;
- Partnerships facilitating economic transition: Build genuine, values-aligned partnerships with governments, education providers, local councils and other organisations to support integrated regional economic development;
- Shared workforce data and derived knowledge: Secure access to region-specific education, training and employment data, and use evaluation and stakeholder feedback to guide implementation and assess progress;
- Rebuilding and sustaining organisations and community infrastructure: Empower and resource existing and new ACCOs to deliver community development, build local workforce capacity, acquire and manage assets necessary to support economic development on the ground, and create culturally safe learning and employment environments; and
- Meaningful economic participation: Broaden opportunities for employment, self-employment, entrepreneurship and Aboriginal-owned businesses, including participation in government procurement and regional supply chains.

The strategy's most important feature is its emphasis on building the regional institutions and capabilities needed to sustain Aboriginal workforce participation over the long term, rather than focusing exclusively on placing individuals into existing entry level jobs. The central message is that improving Aboriginal workforce participation in the Murdi Paaki region requires a coordinated, community-led approach that builds local skills, strengthens Aboriginal organisations and creates sustainable employment and enterprise opportunities. Success depends on translating the strategy's ambitions into funded actions, accountable partnerships,

measurable outcomes and sustained implementation yet the symposium held to launch the strategy failed to attract an audience from either the National Indigenous Australians Agency or the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, despite their having been invited months prior to the event. There has been no buy-in from agencies other than the NSW Department of Education to accept responsibility for the appalling statistics and contribute to improvement. As it was put to us by an eminent Aboriginal leader:

> *"If we have a job, we can put a dollar in our pocket. If we can put a dollar in our pocket, we can put food on the table. If we put food on the table, we can look after our family. If we can look after our family, we can deal with the rest"*

yet critical initiatives such as promoted by the workforce strategy go ignored in preference to inappropriate programmes and bureaucratic stasis. In contrast, the Assembly has negotiated a partnership with the University of New England to deliver tertiary preparation programmes in the Region, to foster the ability of undergraduate students to undertake degree courses on Country with a variety of tailored supports, and to identify Aboriginal graduates living in the Region and offer support for them to develop their skills to work as academics in their own communities. In addition, the Assembly is working with the UNE Smart Regions Incubator to develop targeted programmes to foster business development, including among young people still at school. It is worth noting that, while NIAA and AANSW both chose not to have a presence at the launch of the Strategy, UNE sent its Deputy Vice Chancellor. From the Region's perspective, this requires a fully functional MPSL to be acting as the facilitator between the various parties but, as has been mentioned previously, a lack of investment in the organisation seriously jeopardises this initiative and the Region's drive to meet CtG targets.

4.2. The Murdi Paaki Remote Housing Strategy

Much of the demand for our services has been in delivering capital works projects, mainly Aboriginal social housing. We worked with remote and very remote communities as Project Manager under the guidance of private-sector Programme Managers during the highly productive ATSIC era to deliver new housing, housing repairs and maintenance and infrastructure improvements—including safe housing, clean water, sewerage, roads, street lighting, flood protection works and waste disposal and associated apprentice training initiatives—through the National Aboriginal Health Strategy Health Infrastructure Priority Projects scheme. Funding for these projects totalled over $20M (1996 prices), all under the governance of CWPs. The narration, *Community-led governance, history and experiences in the Murdi Paaki Region* located at https://mpra.com.au/uploads/images/mpll_Part%20A.pdf describes the delivery framework and factors which contributed to scheme success.

By 2016, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly was sufficiently exercised by the dire state of the Aboriginal social housing sector that it proposed in its Regional Plan 2016 a series of measures aimed at radical reform to ensure that Aboriginal households had access to safe housing, that assets were being properly managed and that a sustainable framework for addressing outstanding needs was established. The ensuing actions are described in our internal document, *Murdi Paaki Regional Housing and Business Consortium Project: An internal reflection on progress to reform of the Aboriginal social housing sector in the Murdi Paaki Region* which is attached. Burns Aldis has been part of the small team embedded within MPSL responsible for progressing the Region's obligations under a Ministerial Agreement negotiated by the Assembly with the NSW Government in 2018 under the OCHRE strategy.

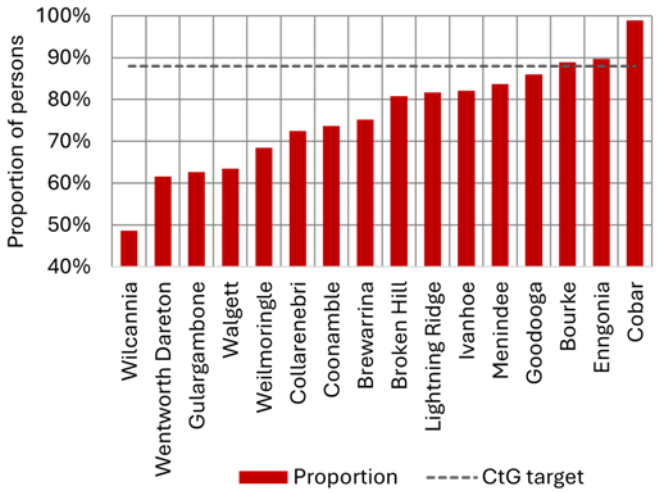
While the Strategy governance structure, the Regional Aboriginal Housing Leadership Assembly (RAHLA), is the ideal vehicle to guide the reform process, its focus on project delivery to date has come at the expense of any material policy reform or commitment to sustainable investment, realising a foreseen risk that, without an equitable approach to partnership and co-design, Governments would revert to business as usual. After the successful delivery of early priorities, the Assembly is now confronted with the prospect of being marginalised in policy setting and decision-making as it relates to its constituents for the reasons set out in the attached

document. It is only through accepting joint authority, investing in community governance, and enabling deliberative policy co-design that the RAHLA could continue as a sustainable model for shared decision-making, consistent with broader commitments to formal partnerships and collaborative governance envisaged by OCHRE and the Ministerial Agreement.

Later developments have seen the MPSL personnel commitment to the strategic work of the RAHLA largely defunded, and control of the Asset Preservation Project for which an amount of $84.6M is allocated, be entirely taken by AHO to deliver using its transactional model with sub-optimal value-add. The agency has safeguarded its own position by including its internal administration costs with the capital works element of the project while investment in the community's contribution is greatly diminished. These costs, and the costs being expended on repairs and maintenance are not being disclosed, we understand, to community.

The community-led, fully considered, evidence-based and innovative Regional initiative for sector reform set on Country has been usurped by the NSW Government and co-opted for its own benefit without explanation or justification. The concept of shared decision-making with governments through formal partnership evaporated as the Region witnesses yet again redirection of strategy focus and associated investment which occurred with the disbursement by the NSW Government of Australian Government NPARIH funding. It is no wonder that communities such as Wilcannia and Dareton/Wentworth are aggrieved by the status quo. There is no evidence of any attempt to secure funding, under the Housing Australia Future Fund, for example, to address the obvious need for new supply identified by the Regional Housing and Environmental Health Plan or the Murdi Paaki Aboriginal Housing and Environmental Health Strategy Business Case nor to address accessibility limitations for over eighty households. Figure 1 illustrates the magnitude of the task which, as a result of prior neglect, is monumental. The Region produced the fine grain evidence to demonstrate need for itself through face-to-face contact with 40% of Aboriginal households; it is not information that is available to governments.

Figure 1: Status against Closing the Gap SE Outcome Area 9a



Given all the qualitative and quantitative evidence and substantiation of market failure, it would be reasonable to have assumed that the NSW Government would have acknowledged the need to do things differently and establish a Regional Housing Authority to drive transformation of Aboriginal social housing governance, policy, management and administration in the Region. Commensurate funding could be quarantined and disbursed in accordance with need, as evidenced through the Housing and Environmental Health Plans. Human capital within the Authority would have the ability to progress evidence-based requests for investment guided by Regional priorities. Instead of such a systemic response, the NSW Government's allocative decision-making is perplexing and perverse. MPRA is left wondering why, for example, there is such a strong commitment to funding new builds in Cobar which already satisfies the CtG target for appropriate housing while Wilcannia languishes. Had the established community-led structures been adequately resourced, and had the Assembly's documented aspirations for a strong and equal policy role for MPSL been met, funding commitments and related strategic decision-making might be making a tangible impact on closing the gap.

5. Remarks in conclusion

This submission has focussed on two key areas of Regional strategy which touch on a number of CtG Priority Reforms and Socio-Economic targets. In our opinion and experience, the level of achievement is sub-optimal and the prospect for improvement bleak without a radical overhaul of the Aboriginal policy-setting regime and relationships between governments and Aboriginal communities as represented by their chosen peak institutions. This may even need to extend to revision of the bureaucratic structures responsible for Aboriginal affairs to create greater opportunity for local and regional autonomy. We have been around long enough to remember the hope and excitement generated by the agreement by COAG to the *National Commitment to Improved Outcomes in the Delivery of Programs and Servies for Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islanders* in 1992. Thirty-four years on, having experienced the documented failures associated with policy initiatives such as Local Decision Making, the only observation we can offer is that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The recommendations for progress are documented in the multitude of Strategic Plans and Action Plans produced by the Assembly and CWPs and are available to reset the service landscape.

We thank the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to contribute to the review and trust our input is informative and found to be of value.