
Call for action against 'charlatans' targeting Aboriginal communities

By Natasha Robinson and Meredith Griffiths
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Aboriginal leaders are calling for a crackdown on "charlatans" who for decades have preyed on Aboriginal communities and misappropriated enormous amounts of money meant for the nation's poorest people.

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples co-chair Jackie Huggins said "unscrupulous charlatans" were still being allowed to prey on Indigenous communities despite \$1 billion being spent each year by the Government in managing the massive Indigenous affairs budget.

"We all know that it is not right, and those people should face the full force of the law in terms of ripping off the most severely disadvantaged people in this country," Dr Huggins said.

The ABC's Four Corners program last night revealed that 44 Indigenous organisations and programs are being investigated by compliance officers at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet's Indigenous Affairs Group.

The department is also examining allegations of nepotism, conflicts of interest and broad failures of governance and accountability at several organisations.

In one case, former project manager Craig Dale allegedly invoiced the remote WA community of Warmun - which was devastated by flood - for \$3 million in work that was never carried out. Regulation of Indigenous organisations was overhauled in 2006 when Aboriginal organisations were required to comply with an Aboriginal-specific corporations act known as CATSI.

The statutory body that administers the CATSI Act is known as the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC).

The Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, Anthony Beven, declined to be interviewed but provided the ABC with a statement. "The registrar takes allegations of wrongdoing seriously and has a strong track record of taking action where there is evidence of wrongdoing," the statement said. "In the last six years the registrar has taken action in the courts against more than 140 corporations and individuals.

"If you or any person has any evidence of any wrongdoing by any person or corporation registered under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 please refer it to the registrar's office (ORIC)."

ORIC has launched more than 140 criminal prosecutions since 2011 and supported hundreds of Indigenous organisations to improve their governance.

Full details of the prosecution outcomes from the registrar's action are available on the website. But Dr Huggins said there was still an endemic problem with misuse of Indigenous funds.

"It's still not getting any better, in fact it's getting worse," Dr Huggins said.

"We are sick and tired of all the money that gets ripped out of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations."

Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion on Tuesday backed the regulator and said he was aware that it was operating under budgetary constraints.

Senator Scullion said a review of the ORIC and the CATSI Act was currently underway.

"Some elements of the CATSI Act may have to be amended to ensure we can ... get further transparency for organisations," Senator Scullion said.

"Of course everyone will be able to make a submission and that review will be public." But Senator Scullion said the investigations that were taking place into compliance at 44 Indigenous organisations would not be made public.