

Torres Strait Regional Authority Chairperson, Joseph Elu: Post-election Media Conference

JE (Jenny Enossa 4MW)

MR (Mark Roy, Torres News)

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Chairperson: Eso Jenny I'd just like to say thank you to the board members who elected me to this position – we held the elections this morning and out of that process they've voted for a chairperson, deputy chairperson Aven Noah from Mer and Willie Lui from Warraber was elected alternate deputy.

JE: Is it ok to ask at this time about the article written back in October edition of Torres News just the small headline where you speak open quote we need to revert to the principles on which the TSRA was formed – is this the direction that the new board will be taking?

Chairperson: Well what the quote came out of was that the TSRA was formed in 1994 out of the ATSIC Act and it was separated from ATSIC in a sense that it became a functional arm of the Commonwealth within the Torres Strait region though it had more responsibilities conferred on it under that act than ATSIC had. You know we have the capability of having more functions conferred on us by the Prime Minister or the Minister which means we could run Customs out of the TSRA, we could run AQIS out of TSRA and all of these other government functions that are currently being operated in the Torres Strait, but it never went to that. When ATSIC was closed down the TSRA no longer stood alone it was shifted to become part of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) so it is the FaHCSIA hierarchy now takes TSRA budget papers up to government and puts in a budget for operations for us whereas in the past TSRA stood alone with ATSIC so the principles are still there in the act. The act hasn't been changed although the functions have changed and I'll be talking to Ministers and members of Parliament about it. There's no reasons why TSRA can't get back to where TSRA and ATSIC stood with government.

JE: The topic bilong autonomy has been floating around but nothing much in the way of move forward has been done in terms of the greater autonomy for the region – would that be one of the priorities for the board?

Chairperson: Autonomy is a very big word and you say autonomy and there is a very wide spectrum of what that word means – now in just one sense if you say we want an autonomous region then you say to yourself if we've got 70 per cent unemployment or we've got 70 per cent dependant on welfare in this area do we need to go to a territorial status of autonomy. That is the question you ask yourself or do we fix that unemployment sphere first and that is also moving towards autonomy. If we can drop that unemployment to 40 per cent and 60 per cent of people employed that is an autonomous move. I'd just like to bring people's minds back to Papua New Guinea in 1975 – the reason the government gave Papua New Guinea independence was that there would have been four million people all under welfare payments in Australia if they hadn't because of it being a territory of Australia at the time. So hence the question – if we want territorial governance style of autonomy

then there is a question asked of how much money are we generating in Torres Strait – whether we fix that side of it first – whether we get industry and people working and then when and if we do want territory status or a more territorial sort of autonomous region we go to government and we do not ask for it we take it.

JE: That was the question I was asking out of the article written up in the Torres News of the eighth of October so what is the priority for the new board now that Yupella been elected?

Chairperson: Well my personal belief is that like I said in the article my life has been spent on developing businesses like my community of Seisa where I first started. I became Chairman of Seisia in 1987 and started to create businesses to create employment so that we do not ask government for money to do something. We put our money on the table and ask government to help us to do something but our money is there first and that is what I want to bring into Torres Strait or TSRA.

I worked with IBA for 12 years in Canberra to start businesses for Indigenous communities and for people in the regions and that is where I think our future lies in making people generate their own money so that in communities on the islands and in the region as a whole that there is a generation of income that is our own. It is not coming from anywhere else so as soon as we do that we get a – a Gross Domestic Product (GDP). We should get *Torres News* to do a survey of how much money is coming here from government and how much is coming from private enterprise and I think you'll see a big imbalance and we need to fix that. I think that is where I will put the next four years of my term so as Chair, I aim to change that balance.

MR: Do you think the changes to the ATSI land act that are designed to give more freehold housing land to Torres Strait islanders will change the economic balance in the Torres Strait – will it give the home owner equity to develop business opportunities?

Chairperson: Thanks for that question – that's a very difficult question. To have value on any property there has to be a market – the real estate value is only how much a buyer is prepared to give to a seller. Until we get that established, land in the Torres Strait will be very cheap so right now in most parts of Australia the value of the land actually dictates how much the property is worth. It is not the value of the house on it. Unfortunately in our situation the value of the house would far outweigh the value of the land it sits on so it's a very commercial question you ask. We have got to create a market here. My belief is that a housing market could eventuate over time but I think it's the commercial side of our islands that needs to progress with freezers on islands or other shops and things that we need to do so the commercial real estate should happen first so that when industry comes in people then have the money to put into their houses or the land they sit on. I think that when you look at 21st century capitalist countries the value is in the GDP that is generated out there by private enterprise. It is not within government coffers or how much the government gives their social activities but that is the imbalance I was talking about before that the money coming into Torres Strait is coming out of government sourced programs.

MR: You've got a strong reputation for developing tourism on the Northern Peninsula Area – do you think there is much scope to develop a greater GDP through promoting tourism through the Torres Strait?

Chairperson: Yes, the short answer is yes because those are the only two really industries I think we should be introducing to the Torres Strait – environmentally friendly tourism and sustainable fishing. Now if you look at those two and if you combine those two to say we'll get fishermen up here and we'll have leisure fishing here in the Torres Strait there's a big market for that. At the same time how do we do it. Do we build lodges or retreats on these islands or do we do it by floating and if you cast your mind back to what happened in the Bahamas – the Bahamas have no infrastructure on land, all their development came from cruise shipping. The ships turn up, people get off, money is spent, people get on the infrastructure moves away and the islands are left as pristine as they ever were. The tourists that comes up the Cape are a bit different – the four wheel drivers. They don't like leaving their cars alone and going to some island so we will have to create a different market. But right now I flew in yesterday and there was a tourist boat sitting in the harbour but where do those people spend their money – that's what *Torres News* needs to do an investigation on – how do they spend their money and where?

MR: The other question raised about fishing is the High Court is going to hear an appeal under the Native Title act. How is that going to affect fishing and the communities in the Torres Strait- is there a potential for more income if that goes ahead. The second part of that question I suppose is how does the TSRA function as a rep body for traditional owners here – is there a conflict between being an arm of government and a rep body for traditional owners?

Chairperson: The question of native title over sea has proven that people get the native sea rights then they want to turn that into commercial activity and it is their right to do so. I believe it has been done very well in New Zealand where the New Zealand government has given the Maori people their rights over sea produce – the fish in the sea and they have turned that into very good economic outcomes for the Maori people. If we do that here in the Torres Strait then I believe we can make good money out of it. The other thing is that with the Native Title office it is true that the TSRA is a native title rep body for the Torres Strait region but our job as TSRA is to get native title for the people on the ground. As soon as they do that the PBCs go away and do their own business. The TSRA does not get funding to support native title bodies after they have already got their claims so I don't think there is a conflict of interest there. Until we get monies to fund our native title rep bodies, our native title PBCs, then we'll have a conflict of interest I think but not necessarily so because all of the land around the Torres Strait has been granted native title or most of it except the inner islands.

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