

Self-Management and the Bureaucracy: The Example of Thursday Island

Sandra J Kehoe-Forutan
Gutteridge Haskins & Davey

Abstract

Self-management has brought enormous change to the Torres Strait, including somewhat paradoxically, an influx or expansion of Government agencies. New departments are replacing old structures and other are paying attention to the region for the first time. Thursday Island, the main administrative centre in the Torres Strait Islands, not only hosts these departments but others as well that are not the norm within self-managed indigenous communities in Queensland. This is because Thursday Island, and the Torres Strait Islands as a whole are in the unique position of being located near Australia's only international border. Consequently, Thursday Island hosts Commonwealth departments such as Immigration, Customs and the only outpost of Foreign Affairs located within Australia's territory.

The increase in the bureaucracy on Thursday Island complicates an already extraordinary administrative set-up. It also exacerbates many of the severe problems found on the Island such as housing and water shortages. The growth in the bureaucracy on Thursday Island is not lessening as more Government presence is required to deal with the evolving issues and conflicts arising in the Torres Strait, many at an international level. This, combined with a refusal by State and Commonwealth Governments to recognise the need to locate on Horn Island and thus decrease their impact on an overcrowded Thursday Island, frustrates the residents of this Island, leads to anti-public servant sentiments, which in turn, modifies any successful articulation between the two societies, Islander and European.

A large amount of the research that has occurred in the Torres Strait has concentrated on what is termed the Outer Islands – those islands that were traditionally inhabited (permanently or semi-permanently) and continue to be so and today are administered under the *Community Services (Torres Strait) Act*. In addition to the Outer Islands there is another group of islands in the Torres Strait referred to as the Prince of Wales group. These islands, Thursday, Horn, Hammond, Friday, Goode and Wednesday, amongst others, are found in close proximity to Prince of Wales Island. However, while Hammond Island is located only one kilometre from Thursday Island, its historical circumstances and administrative and economic status require that it be classified as an Outer Island.

Previously indigenous reserves tightly administered by the Queensland Government, the Outer Islands have achieved a measure of self-management with the land being transferred to indigenous communal control by Deeds of Grant in Trust (DOGIT). The inhabited islands in the Prince of Wales group, namely Thursday Island, Horn and Prince of Wales Islands, fall under the administration of the Torres Shire in which the conventional Australian land system prevails and there is an absence of traditional indigenous custom and decision-making, albeit this may be changing as Islanders reassert their identity over these islands. Originally inhabited by Torres Strait Islanders before European contact, Islanders were either forcibly removed from islands such as Prince of Wales Island and/or had to modify their usage of such islands as Horn and Friday due to the proximity of Europeans. Thursday Island known as T.I., was established in 1876 as the main administrative centre for the region. It continues in this role.

Local government processes in the Outer Islands are co-ordinated by the Island Co-ordinating Council (or ICC) which is based on Thursday Island. The Torres Strait is also administered from this Island. Even though the Torres Strait encompasses a large area (the entire Torres Strait region south to 11 degrees latitude), in actuality it is responsible for a relatively small jurisdiction: only a small area of Cape York as the Cape York communities are all former indigenous reserves that have acquired a self-managed status; the previously named inhabited islands in the Prince of Wales group; and, other uninhabited islands that are not the responsibility of the Federal or State Governments or the individual self-managed indigenous councils.

Located on Thursday Island is the community of Tamwoy which, in actuality, is a combination of four suburb areas. The community of Tamwoy has an anomalous status. It is one of the few remaining indigenous reserves in Queensland and therefore is administered by the State department responsible for indigenous affairs, currently known as the Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, but its local government functions are performed by the Torres Strait Council. Tamwoy is represented on the ICC statutorily and on the Torres Shire Council by arrangement. In fact, it did not become a member of the ICC until two years after self-management was initiated and its Council was not legalised until its incorporation in 1988. This Council, the Tamwoy Development Association, primarily administers housing that is being transferred to its control by the State.

Out of a population of approximately 2 600 (1986 Census) on Thursday Island, 70% are classified as Torres Strait Islanders. The number of Torres Strait Islanders residing

on T.I. comprises the largest Islander community in the Torres Strait. However, Islanders have only been permitted to live there since World War II. The centre for a marine boom in the last century which eventually became the base for Government administration, Thursday Island represents all that Islanders despise after a lifetime of paternalistic control. In addition to such adverse feelings towards this urban centre, T.I. has been perceived to contain an elastic community of temporary residents serving as a staging post for the urbanisation of Islanders before they enter the outside world. These perceptions, combined with economic decline, welfare dependency and the existence of numerous unco-ordinated Government agencies at all levels on T.I. has resulted in the inefficient administration and neglect of this Island from all sectors. Compounded with the problems of distance, isolation and physical constraints, T.I. was considered a stagnant urban centre with no stable identifiable community due to a huge migration outflow.

T.I. is the "melting pot" of the various Islander communities and of the diverse external cultures introduced since colonisation – Europeans, South Pacific Islanders, Papua New Guineans and Asians being the most prevalent. Factionalism is perpetuated here between the various groups. Severe problems exist on the Island such as water, land and housing shortages, overcrowding, high unemployment, a lack of infrastructure, a high cost of living and overall poor service delivery.

The changes associated with self-management have had notable multiplier effects upon Thursday Island because it is the administrative centre. Self-management has created renewed interest in the Torres Strait from all sectors, private and public, and somewhat paradoxically, but consistent with experience elsewhere, has led to the expansion of some government agencies and the arrival of others. More public servants are required to reside on T.I. and an upgrading of services such as education is increasing the number of European teachers. Officials travel in and out for various lengths of time and tourism is the new trend, increasing the demand for hotel rooms and related facilities. Consequently, private interests are rapidly expanding to meet increased or new demands, generating a further round of income and employment multipliers. Unfortunately few employment opportunities are trickling down to, or being taken advantage of, by the Torres Strait Islanders.

The Torres Strait is a polyglot of agencies at all levels of Government, all with a multitude of functions and responsibilities. Thursday Island hosts those departments that are the norm within self-managed indigenous communities in Queensland, and local government authorities or organisations such as the Torres Shire Council, the ICC, the Tamwoy Development Association and the Port Kennedy Association formed to protect the interests of those residing outside the Tamwoy area on Thursday Island. In addition, Thursday Island is in the unique position of being located near Australia's only international border. Consequently it hosts Commonwealth departments such as Immigration, Customs and the only outpost of Foreign Affairs located within Australia's territory.

In 1987 fifteen Commonwealth departments and agencies were operating on Thursday Island. In addition the State maintained eleven departments. This is in contrast to the eight Commonwealth departments and one State department located there in 1979. There are also many other Government departments not physically located on Thursday Island whose personnel visit for varying lengths of time.

To complicate matters, numerous formal and informal organisations have been formed adding to an already long list of public and private agencies involved in Torres Strait affairs. As a result, the roles of most of these organisations either overlap or lack focus and infringe upon each other's ability to achieve concessions and goals.

Since 1987 the government presence has continued to increase, the most notable being the Federal Department of Defence. This is due to the re-emergence of the Torres Strait strategic importance. In addition, one of the results of the 1988 independence movement was a concerted government effort to direct resources to the region in an attempt to alleviate the severity of many of the problems focussed upon by the Islanders as grievances promoting the need for political action. This has consisted of, amongst other things, the placement of more staff in departments based on T.I., secondments of staff to the ICC, and funding for private consultants.

The results of a heavy bureaucracy on T.I. have been duplication; a lack of co-ordination between many agencies, some within the same level of Government; competition; and the creation of inaccessibility and confusion for the Islanders. For example, education initiatives come from the State Department of Education, the Commonwealth Department of Education and the Commonwealth Employment Service. Many could not comprehend how the State and Commonwealth Departments of Education could be abundantly staffed whereas the Department of Social Security had two overworked officers and the Commonwealth Employment Service was in a similar predicament, both unable to meet the prevalent social needs of the Islander population. Torres Strait Islanders are the first to recognise the value of education but the majority felt that the State Department of Education was doing an excellent job whereas an agency like the Commonwealth Employment Service was not being provided with the necessary resources needed for the chronic unemployment in the region and the large geographical area under its jurisdiction encompassing the Torres Strait Islands and the Northern Peninsula Area.

It has been suggested that an increase in the public service increases the dependency upon welfare services. It has yet to be seen as to whether this is the case on Thursday Island and within the Torres Strait.

While a large bureaucratic sector on T.I. has created difficulties, to the clients such an increase in agencies, even if poorly endowed with resources, is a great improvement on the former State system which presented them with only one agency to contend with, but which inadequately provided services in some sectors, and in others, none at all. Torres Strait Islanders viewed the entire process as the first step towards achieving the same level of services available to the rest of Australia.

The bureaucracy in the Torres Strait urgently requires some type of localised co-ordination and/or management structure. This problem is not exclusive to the Torres Strait region. An attempt at the local level at liaison and co-ordination between agencies is occurring, although somewhat modestly. The Commonwealth and the State Government Departments responsible for indigenous affairs, attempting to overcome previous rivalries, started to communicate and co-operate for the first time. The ICC and the Torres Shire Council are now at least aware of each others responsibilities, not necessarily an assumption that could have been made only a few

years ago and the communication lines are open between the two entities. Although these two organisations have many interests in common there is no formal or informal representation on each other's Councils nor are there any day-to-day administrative links between the two.

Tamwoy since its inception in the 1950s has not been considered worthy of attention by either Government agencies nor Islanders themselves. The Outer Islanders saw Tamwoy as being better off because it had the amenities and services of Thursday Island. Government saw Tamwoy as an unidentifiable, unstable community structure. It was associated with being non-Islander due to its location on Thursday Island. The mix of population on this Island reduces a sense of Islander identity and promotes factionalism even amongst Islanders themselves. Tamwoy's lack of political experience and its continued dominance by administrators, even in local matters, decreased its competitiveness with the Outer Island Councils for funds, services and resources.

Research by this author suggests the existence of a strong Islander community structure on Thursday Island. The refusal to acknowledge that a legitimate Islander community existed on T.I. was most inappropriate for the substantial number who had been born and raised on this Island without ever residing on an Outer Island. The neglect of Tamwoy, caught in a policy vacuum, continues into the self-management period. It is not undergoing the changes associated with DOGIT or self-management. Its leaders have had to struggle to gain the responsibility of landlord over a small portion of Tamwoy's housing stock.

Self-management has led to a change in perceptions regarding T.I., as its value as a point of articulation between the two societies, European and Islander, is recognised. The Islander community, many identifying with Thursday Island as "home", is slowly asserting its presence and consequently negotiations are occurring with the State in an attempt to normalise Tamwoy's status.

Only 315 hectares in area Thursday Island can be described as a small island. T.I. labours under severe physical as well as economic constraints in developing services and infrastructure. This is aggravated by the fact that approximately 89% of the Island is reserved for Commonwealth purposes (primarily defence), for local government water supply purposes, ecclesiastical purposes and for Queensland administrative, educational, residential and indigenous reserves.

While tourism and the increase of public servants injects new life into T.I.'s economy resulting in new investment and a face lift to the town's facade, the competition for land uses is also increasing.

The critical accommodation shortage on Thursday Island is not a new problem. Since the welfare system was introduced in the region in the 1970s, government departments have either been buying homes or land for homes or offices. Consequently, previous tenants have been displaced, less homes and land are available for local residents and the high prices paid by the public sector have escalated land and housing values on the Island. This trend has increased since the self-management process began.

A prevalence of sub-standard housing severe overcrowding, high density rates, high rental charges, and the related social problems resulting from the poor housing

conditions has manifested itself into a genuine resentment of the public sector which continues to build "good" housing and buy more land.

This paper cannot adequately describe the conditions many Torres Strait Islanders were and continue to live under – many of a primitive nature and not of their own making. Slum landlords are common and Tamwoy's housing stock has been neglected for the past thirty-five years. While the Shire Council is trying to regulate sub-standard housing and the State Government is attempting to rectify the housing problems in Tamwoy, elsewhere on T.I., landlords prefer to knock down dwellings and sell off the land at a high price, usually to a government department. Reliable housing stock for Torres Strait Islanders on Thursday Island, as a whole, is decreasing.

Aggravating the situation is a failure of government to recognise its contribution to the critical housing problem on the Island and its refusal to utilise Horn Island as an alternative. Horn Island is accepted by all sectors as a potential suburb to Thursday Island easing the numerous pressures on this main administrative centre. When the Department of Defence decided to locate housing and a depot on T.I., another Commonwealth Department, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (now ATSIC), strongly advised against it. The Defence Department's position was that military facilities needed to be located on T.I. to be close to administrative services and that personnel would "settle better" on the Island (*Torres News*, 01/12/1987:40). Residents of Horn and Thursday Islands criticised the Defence Department for displacing tenants with a depot that could have been located on vacant Commonwealth land: for building on T.I. where there is a water supply problem; for ignoring the feelings of the locals; for insensitivity by not assisting with problems on T.I. by locating on Horn Island; and, for locating military facilities in the centre of town (*Torres News*, 01/12/1987, (letters to the Editor), 05/02/1988, 10-16/11/1989).

Residents of Thursday Island question why they should have to move to Horn Island which lacks infrastructure and facilities when new public servants are easily able to live on Thursday Island. The Torres Shire, with a limited rateable base, does not have the resources to provide the necessary services on Horn Island. It was hoped that the State and Federal Governments would initiate the basic infrastructural requirements by locating there. Their refusal to do so, combined with the increase in the public sector in the Torres Strait which will continue as issues become more complex, many at an international level, and more officials, consultants and scientists are required, will only exacerbate the smouldering anti-European sentiments developing on Thursday Island. This in turn, will modify any successful articulation between the two societies, Islander and European, negating the original purpose of a public sector presence.