

**Submission to the Australia 2020 Summit on
Options for the Future of Indigenous Australia**
by Mark Drummond, 8 April 2008

**A New Fairer System of Government Hosting Strengthened Local Governments can
Provide Justice, Empowerment and Opportunity for Indigenous Australians**

Australia's federal system of government unfairly favours some sub-populations of Australians over others, and no group has suffered from such unfairness more than our First Nation peoples.

Australia's indigenous population of approximately half a million is around the same as that of Tasmania, but whereas the Constitution provides Tasmania with its own State government, the immense financial benefits of Statehood, 12 Senate seats, and more than its fair share of members of the Federal House of Representatives, all as a "special deal" because of its prior status as a British penal colony, indigenous Australians have been neglected entirely by our system of government. If our Constitution granted indigenous Australia 12 Senators and a State government, and left Tasmania to fend for itself without constitutional recognition and parliamentary representation since 1901, significant numbers of Australian politicians might well be calling now for Commonwealth intervention to save Tasmanians from severe economic and social difficulties as has happened with Aboriginal communities in recent times.

Indigenous Australians have been chronically neglected by the Commonwealth and State-Territory levels of government alike, and by the incessant buck-passing and blame-shifting between these highest levels of government, and would be vastly better empowered, and vastly more justly treated, if (1) a robust national bill of rights and responsibilities was established, (2) Commonwealth, State and Territory governments amalgamated to form a single national government, and (3) local government was constitutional recognised and significantly strengthened financially and generally (noting that local governments in Australia account for just 7% of total government spending in Australia, compared to about 18% in Canada and 25% in both the US and UK). A bill of rights and national and local governments thus strengthened would far better respect the scales of human organisation of greatest relevance to indigenous Australians, and Australians generally, including the scales of individual people, households and families, tribes, substantive local and regional communities, the country-continent, and the globe.

It has proven impossible for indigenous individuals and communities to gain fair democratic empowerment and representation in political entities with populations and land areas as large as our gigantic mainland States and Australia as a whole (noting that NSW has one-third of Australia's population and WA one-third of its land area), because of the dominance of political parties and "insider connections" at Commonwealth and State-Territory levels of government. The "participation costs" and "entry barriers" standing in the way of democratic empowerment and representation are generally much smaller, however, for local governments, the vast majority of which serve populations less than 50,000.

By winning democratically elected positions in strengthened local governments, without any hint of favouritism, indigenous Australians could gain democratic empowerment and autonomy, social and economic security, peace of mind – and improved health outcomes, such that indigenous welfare interventions and politically divisive debates over the legitimacy of such interventions would become largely unnecessary.