

## **Mick Gooda says federal money had 'no visible' affect on Indigenous disadvantage**

*Associate secretary of Indigenous affairs Andrew Tongue concedes improvements are not happening quickly enough*



*Royal commissioner Mick Gooda says disadvantage is often in sectors where there isn't strong Indigenous involvement. Photograph: Alan Porritt/AAP*

**Helen Davidson**

26 June 2017

Vast amounts of federal money coming into the Northern Territory have not translated into an improvement of Indigenous disadvantage, Mick Gooda has said at the royal commission.

Gooda, one of the two royal commissioners leading the inquiry into the protection and detention of children in the NT, made the comments during questioning of a federal bureaucrat.

It follows testimony last week that the majority of NT intervention funding had been “squandered”.

“On one hand we’re being told communities and organisations can’t afford a worker but then on the other hand we’ve got a massive amount of money coming in here, and it’s fairly easy to say, for no visible significant improvement,” Gooda said.

Andrew Tongue, the associate secretary of Indigenous affairs at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, said there had been improvements in a number of indicators, such as health, but conceded they were not happening fast enough and not across all sectors such as child protection.

Gooda later said there was a strong network on community controlled health centres and the issues were often in sectors where there wasn't strong Indigenous involvement.

The commission also heard there was no single repository of information on how federal funds were spent in the NT.

The NT receives the highest proportion of GST revenue in the country, which is redistributed based on need. However there was little accountability in whether it was spent on that need, the commission heard.

"It flows from the commonwealth treasury to the NT treasury for the general purposes of the Northern Territory government," Tongue said. "The primary accountability is a political accountability."

Tongue said federal politicians would sometimes talk about any issues of misspending but there was "no formal mechanism of accountability around how the money is spent".

Similarly, the 2012 Stronger Futures national partnership agreement also lacked federal oversight.

Senior counsel assisting the commission Peter Callaghan SC asked Tongue if it was possible to check whether the 2012 agreement's individual outcomes were properly acted on.

Tongue said "with a bit of time", and "getting together with the NT government", they would be able to determine if specific requirements had been acted on but it required the NT government to provide the information to the commonwealth.

He said it was a "difficult call" on whether the NT government should be monitored more closely in national partnership agreements than other jurisdictions.

Tongue, who has been in the policy development and implementation role for two years, was also called to answer for the roll out of the Indigenous Advancements Strategy scheme, which sought to simplify 150 Indigenous programs into five "funding streams".

The scheme was highly criticised at the time for its chaotic and oversubscribed roll out, as well as the funding a number of non-Indigenous organisations, despite it being a lower proportion of funding than the previous system.

Tongue said sometimes the government struggled to find Indigenous service providers where they were needed but conceded the commonwealth effort to build the capacity of Indigenous community organisations had "ebbed" in recent times.

Commissioner Margaret White said it was “pretty stark” that, when she repeatedly spoke to non-Indigenous NGO service providers in remote communities, none could describe an “exit strategy”.

“There was not one that understood the notion they might actually be assisting the community to replicate” their service, she said.

Tongue said there was lot to learn from how Australia conducts its overseas aid program.

“There is an exit strategy, there is a community development approach, there is a different set of expectations,” he said. “Yes it is a big machine to turn around. I would argue we’ve started that, it’s not going as quickly as people would like us to.”

On Monday the commission began the second week of its final hearing, before it delivers its report in September. It has completed its hearings on youth detention and is now focusing on child protection.

Dozens of further witnesses are expected, including a second appearance by the former Northern Territory minister John Elferink.