



**NATSILS**

**NATIONAL ABORIGINAL & TORRES  
STRAIT ISLANDER LEGAL SERVICES**

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

6 September 2013

### **Coalition signals 20 per cent funding cut to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services**

Hidden amongst the Coalition's costings announcement yesterday was a funding cut of \$42m to the Indigenous Policy Reform Program\*, the program which provides funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) across Australia.

NATSILS Chairperson, Shane Duffy, said that while NATSILS are seeking clarification from the Coalition as to the full detail of the indicated cuts, if such a move is solely targeted at ATSILS funding it would be highly disappointing given the Coalition's stated commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the fact that such a cut would represent an almost 20 per cent reduction in funding for ATSILS and would signal a significant backwards step to 2008 funding levels..

"Given that Tony Abbot has positioned himself as the Prime Minister for Indigenous Australia, its not a good look to start off by slashing the program that provides funding to culturally competent legal assistance services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples," Mr Duffy said.

"given that our peoples are 15 times more likely to be incarcerated and that the rates of incarceration have risen by 50 per cent in the past 10 years compared to only 5 per cent for the rest of the population, access to culturally competent legal assistance services is a critical issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples."

Mr Duffy said that potential cuts to legal assistance services would be short-sighted.

"The cost-effectiveness of such a funding cut is highly questionable as it is well recognised that cuts to legal assistance services only increase the pressure on the justice system and passes on the cost burden to other parts of the system," Mr Duffy said.

"services such as ATSILS actually save the justice system a significant amount of money".

Mr Duffy said that in some areas of Australia, ATSILS are the only legal assistance service available and if funding is cut, the justice system in these areas will simply grind to a halt.

"If ATSILS are forced to cut services people will be left to face court without any advice or representation, something which is meant to be a basic right protected in Australia," Mr Duffy said.

"having individuals attend court without representation will clog already heavy court lists, cause catastrophic interruptions to the justice system and arguably increase the likelihood of people going to jail and the perpetuation of the cycle of over-incarceration."

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\*See page 6, point 9.3 of the Coalition's costings outline at <http://lpaweb-static.s3.amazonaws.com/2013%2009%2005%20TABLE.pdf>