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## Aboriginal leadership urged to step down

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AUSTRALIA'S only indigenous federal politician has slammed ATSIC's leaders, branding them wasteful and out of touch.

In a scathing outburst, Democrats Senator Aden Ridgeway said the top rung of the Government-funded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was alienating large numbers of black Australians and should hand the reins to a younger team.

He called for a change to the rules governing ATSIC to rid the body of alleged conflicts of interest.

Senator Ridgeway's criticism, less than three weeks before the ATSIC elections, was echoed by Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action's Bob Weatherall, who said it was time for ATSIC "to get on with the bloody job".

Responding to fraud claims against ATSIC deputy "Sugar" Ray Robinson, Senator Ridgeway said commissioners should resign from other Aboriginal organisations once they were elected to ATSIC.

"It seems to me there is a conflict of interest in relation to a number of people on the commission and they should resign from that (other) position and clear the space for others to come forward," Senator Ridgeway said.

This was immediately rejected by Mr Robinson as discriminatory.

"People don't know what they're talking about when they say that," he said.

"The money (from ATSIC) goes to other bodies and if something comes up about your region, you're not allowed to sit in on the meetings, you've got to walk outside."

Mr Robinson is chairman of 15 Aboriginal corporations helped by ATSIC grants or loans. Senator Ridgeway said ATSIC's future aim should be to tell the Government how it should spend its money, not the other way around.

But while advocating more grassroots control, he also said there were too many indigenous organisations, which wasted needless money on administration costs.

Mr Weatherall said there was too much politicking and in-fighting at ATSIC.

"ATSIC needs to reassess its role and responsibilities," he said. "ATSIC needs to empower indigenous communities to take control."

Mr Weatherall also supported Aboriginal Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock being given new powers to sack elected ATSIC officials who abused their positions.

North Queensland ATSIC commissioner Jenny Pryor, who is standing against Mr Robinson for the deputy's job on October 19, disagreed with a blanket ban on commissioners holding other positions.

"But I don't think commissioners should be on a million and one boards, especially if there is a clear conflict of interest," Ms Pryor said.

Senator Ridgeway said ATSIC risked alienating future leaders unless they were given a chance at the top jobs.

He said there should be more young blood from the regional councils and on the national board to reflect the two-thirds of indigenous people under the age of 30.

Mr Robinson said indigenous voters would not elect people because they were young.

"They're going to elect the ones that are going to do the job and have a bit of intelligence," he said.

Mr Weatherall and Ms Pryor welcomed the push for young people as long as they also had the "expertise".