



**Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee  
Additional Estimates 2023-24**

Central Land Council appearance: Friday 16 February 2024

**Opening statement, Central Land Council CEO – Les Turner**

**16 February 2024**

The Senate Committee will likely recall that the land councils have sadly reflected on the loss of senior leaders from across the Northern Territory every time that we meet. On behalf of the CLC, we acknowledge the devastating loss of the late Chair of the Northern Land Council, Dr Bush-Blanasi. He left a legacy of advancing the exercise of land and sea rights by traditional owners, and advocating for meaningful Aboriginal participation and decision-making in policy matters that affect us. We also mourn the passing of Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue, and acknowledge her significant contributions to enhancing justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Lowitja played a crucial role in laying the foundations for the Native Title Act, and devoted her life to advocating for improvements to the health and well-being of our people.

We are thinking of both their family and friends.

Our people lose our community leaders and advocates too early in their lives. Impacting families and kin. In addition to the personal loss of family and friends, our communities suffer the loss of yet another role model, another mentor teaching the next generation, lost opportunities to pass on cultural knowledge, and a collective loss of community capacity. Undermining our ability to flourish.

Sadly, we received reminders through loss regularly. It reminds us daily that there is still significant collaborative work to be done to close the life expectancy gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other people in Australia.

I would like to draw the Committee's attention to analysis recently presented by Dr Francis Markham from the ANU. While Indigenous income poverty rates are decreasing - to a small degree - across most parts of the country, they are escalating significantly in remote communities in the NT. Poverty rates in our region are more than 50 per cent, and in some cases higher. They have increased 10.8 percentage points over the decade from 2011.

These poverty rates are evidence of serious policy failure. In the context of national discussions on the cost of living crisis, they deserve a spotlight. Income poverty rates are in fact likely to underestimate the extent of poverty in our region, when we consider that the costs of essential goods are estimated by Dr Markham to be around 39% higher in remote communities than in major urban centres.

The lack of local jobs for local people in our communities directly contributes to the poverty levels in our communities. Almost a decade since the CDP program was imposed on our communities, the employment gap in the NT is widening. We are the only jurisdiction where this is the case.

That is why we continue to call for the abolition of this program that has not created real jobs for our people, and called for a fundamentally new approach: focused on job creation and strengthening Aboriginal community-controlled organisations that are the backbones of our communities. We welcome the government's announcement this week of substantial investment towards a new remote jobs program and look forward to working together on its design and implementation in the CLC region.



The CLC remains focused on fulfilling its important statutory functions in protecting and advancing Aboriginal peoples' rights and interests, and delivering positive outcomes from this work. Our work is foregrounded in traditional owner rights, we are driven by consultation and acting on the instructions of the people we represent. We remain steadfast in supporting our people to exercise their cultural rights and to enjoy a better quality of life. This means that as an organisation, we invest our time in maintaining strong governance and innovating to support Aboriginal people to engage with and participate in the CLC's activities – whether that is through employment, fit-for-purpose capacity building, active decision-making, or on-country exercise of traditional owner rights.

We know for our living culture to continue to thrive we need to have fair and equitable investment in our communities, and we will continue to collaborate towards this.