

## *OPENING STATEMENT - CHAIR*

### **Introduction:**

- Good morning Senators, my name is Matthew Ryan, and I am honored to address you today as the newly appointed Chairman of the Northern Land Council (NLC).
- Joining me is Mrs. Jessie Schaecken, our newly appointed interim CEO. This is our first appearance before this Committee.
- Also attending as witnesses, are a number of our General Managers, Mr Dominic Gomez, Mr Irfan Bhat, Mr Jonathan McLeod and Mr David Astalosh.
- We look forward to addressing your questions.

### **Tribute and Leadership Change:**

- I would like to begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, the late Dr. Bush-Blanasi, whose leadership and dedication to the NLC have left an enduring legacy. His passing in November 2023 was a significant loss to the NLC community.
- The NLC has recently undergone significant leadership changes. We express our gratitude to our former CEO, Mr. Joe Martin-Jard, for his service and welcome Mrs. Jessie Schaecken as our interim CEO.
- Mrs. Schaecken brings a wealth of experience in local government and good governance, aligning with our values of respect, consultation, and social justice.

- The NLC will shortly be undertaking a formal process to engage a permanent CEO.

### **NLC Priorities and Advocacy:**

- I want to assure the Senate and the public that despite these changes, the governance and management of the NLC remain robust.
- The recent ANAO report highlighted that our governance arrangements are largely effective, and we have embraced its findings to further strengthen our organisation.
- We are proud to be a more efficient and accountable entity, better positioned to serve our Aboriginal membership and constituents.
- This commitment to excellence in governance, along with close engagement of the NLC membership, will be my focus areas going forward.
- The NLC remains steadfast in its mission to support Aboriginal people in the Top End of the Northern Territory to acquire and manage their traditional lands. We will continue to strive for economic, and cultural benefits flow to our communities.

### **High Court Decision (Gunlom)**

- I want to take the opportunity to acknowledge the recent High Court decision affirming the protection of sacred sites in the Northern Territory.

- This ruling against the use of Crown immunity to avoid penalties for damaging sacred sites is a significant victory for the Jawoyn Traditional Owners and for all Aboriginal people.
- This decision underscores the importance of preserving our cultural heritage and the need for robust legal protections for sacred sites.
- We urge the Commonwealth Government to adopt greater protections for sacred sites across all states and territories.
- I want to make it clear to this Committee, and to the Government, that the NLC remains steadfast in our commitment to protecting sacred sites on our lands. We will tirelessly seek justice for our members whenever these sites are threatened or damaged, including when this damage is done by Government Departments or agencies.

### **Commonwealth Budget Announcements:**

- We welcome the Commonwealth and NT Governments' joint \$4 billion investment in remote housing, aimed at addressing overcrowding in the Northern Territory. This is a crucial step towards improving living conditions and supporting community health and education.
- It is essential that this investment includes meaningful involvement of Aboriginal businesses and ensures culturally appropriate and high-quality housing solutions. The interconnected nature of

housing, employment, and education cannot be overstated, and we are ready to work with governments to achieve these goals.

- Additionally, we are pleased that the Budget confirms the rollout of the new Remote Jobs and Economic Development Program as well as several new water projects in the NT.
- While these are positive steps, closing the gap in employment and access to essential services requires more substantial and ongoing investments directed by Aboriginal people.
- We urge the NT and Commonwealth governments to maintain a strong pace in delivering infrastructure and housing, along with creating local jobs.

**Conclusion:**

- In closing, the NLC continues to advocate for the protection and recognition of Aboriginal land rights. Our work is vital in maintaining the cultural and spiritual connection of Aboriginal people to their land, which is fundamental to our identity and well-being.
- I reaffirm our commitment to serving the Aboriginal people of the Top End with integrity and dedication.
- We look forward to working collaboratively with this Committee and all levels of government to advance the rights and well-being of our regions.
- Thank you for your time, and we are ready to answer any questions you may have.