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MARNGARR COMMUNITY GOVERNMENT COUNCIL

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24th March 1999.

The Committee Secretary,
House of Representatives,
Standing Committee on Aboriginal & Torres Strait
Islander Affairs
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re. Reeves Report.

This letter is to advise that our community and families are very concerned about some of the matters raised in the Reeves Report.

Firstly, we disagree entirely with the proposition that the Permit system to enter our land be set aside. Such a proposition by Reeves indicates to us that his understanding of our culture is very limited. In our culture you have to obtain permission to enter other people's country; you cannot just go where you like. Indeed, I don't think it is much different in any culture; there has to be respect for other people's country. I am certain neither you nor any of your colleagues allow total uncontrolled access to anybody, to your private property; whether it be a small house block in Canberra, or a large cattle station. We are no different. Our land would be inundated by large numbers of people and it would be impossible to exercise any control over who they are or where they (are going). But their presence will be reflected in the loss of our privacy, the desecration of our special places, and the strain placed on our social fabric caused by increased availability of drugs and alcohol and the ongoing strained relationship that is certain to develop between communities and travelling public. The N.T. Trespass Act would do nothing to protect our interests. There are very few police in Arnhem Land; there are two Courts available, Darwin and Nhulunbuy. Regular and/or quick response from the Police or some other Authority is simply non-existent.

Secondly, we disagree that it is somehow better; that it is somehow more representative; that it is somehow more efficient; to do away with the two larger Land Councils in the Territory and replace them with a number of smaller Councils. Certainly it is a good way to take away our strong voice in matters that concern us. How do you become more efficient economically or administratively, by changing from one administration to many? How do you become

more representative by going from representing (say) 35,000 Aboriginal people (the two larger councils), to the proposed Reeves situation where each smaller new Council may represent perhaps a few hundred peoples

This is simply nonsense. To illustrate how silly this proposition is; if "centralisation" is such a bad thing, why is there such a strong push Australia wide to amalgamate Local Government Councils at this very moment? Local Government throughout Australia have been inefficient, unrepresentative and unresponsive. They have to merge to create a larger and better enterprise if they are to continue to exist. The N.T. Government has had no hesitation in seeking the merging of Local Government Councils, but takes the opposite tack with regard to the Land Councils. What makes the Land Councils any different? It's a matter of Principal, manipulated to suit the particular agenda of the N. T. Government. Aboriginal people as a whole owe much to the strong voice of the two larger Land Councils and we do not support any attempt to take it from us, regardless of the form that might be proposed. On the contrary, we strongly recommend the Land Councils should have substantial increased funding to allow them to continue to improve the services they deliver to us, their constituents.

Reeve's view about a Territory Council as a controlling body raises great concerns with us, particularly as we have seen first hand the problems caused by the N. T Government in other Aboriginal bodies such as the Uluru Board, and the current concerns at Kakadu. We do not trust them at all to act responsibly on our behalf. Historically, they have demonstrated clearly by their actions and by their words that they have their own agenda and it has very little to do with the needs and aspirations of the Indigenous people of the Northern Territory.

Both of our concerns expressed above are not complicated matters. They are really just common sense. If Reeves cannot distinguish matters of plain common sense than one can only wonder, and hope that people like yourselves, without prejudice, can make a clear and unbiased review of the matters he has raised.

Our future depends on you.

Yours sincerely

(Signed)

Mavis Yunupingu
Acting President