

Inquiry into the relationship between the Central Land Council and Centrecorp Aboriginal Investment Corporation

Submission by Age journalists Ben Schneiders and Russell Skelton

As the two reporters indirectly mentioned as part of the Central Land Council's submission to this Senate inquiry we would like to correct the record on The Age's coverage of Centrecorp.

In its submission the Central Land Council claimed that mainstream media had "uncritically regurgitated" claims in the Alice Springs News about Centrecorp.

That comment was a clear reference to The Age which has done nearly all of reporting on Centrecorp in the last two years among major newspapers and media.

The basis for this claim appears to be a piece in the Alice Springs News on August 30, 2007, where it was claimed (wrongly) a "substantial" part of The Age's investigation came from reports already published in the Alice Springs News and lengthy conversations between Age reporters Russell Skelton and Ben Schneiders and Erwin Chlanda from the News.

At the time we ignored this report, despite it being wrong, as it seemed to be borne from the usual sort of intra-media sniping that occurs from time to time. But while we were aware of Mr Chlanda's reports and did speak to him we used none of this in our reports.

Instead we conducted more than two months of detailed and independent research trawling through ASIC records, doing Northern Territory Land Title searches, speaking to a wide range of local indigenous and business sources in the Northern Territory and elsewhere.

As a result, for the first time, The Age provided a detailed picture of Centrecorp's financial affairs and range of interests that was later confirmed by a Federal Government audit, released in March this year.

The Age's findings were fresh and significantly different to those in the Alice Springs News, many of which appear to be based on no documentary evidence.

The Age's investigation called into question whether Centrecorp was fulfilling its charitable charter of distributing profits for the benefit of Aboriginal people in central Australia.

We also note the Federal Government audit where Centrecorp was ordered to improve its financial transparency, fix compliance irregularities and move to prevent conflicts of interest.

"The absence of any form of public reporting by Centrecorp, which was established for the benefit of ... Aboriginal people demonstrates a lack of transparency," the auditors, from the Office of Evaluation and Audit, found.

We would also like to record the response from Centrecorp general manager Bob Kennedy at the time who said he accepted the recommendations and would make changes. "We recognise they will also help build public knowledge of our goals, strategies and achievements."

Since The Age's coverage Centrecorp has dramatically increased its donations from \$22,027 in 2003/04 to \$483,344 in 2007/08.