

Tabled: Northern Land Council

The NLC supports the Commonwealth program of assistance to NT communities. This has been a natural result of decades of neglect by both the NT and Commonwealth Governments of both political persuasions. While the current focus is on the failures of the present NT Government, we should not forget the 25 lost years of CLP control of the Territory.

One simple fact to ponder is that the provision of secondary schools outside Darwin is still extremely limited.

However, we continue to question the need for the totality of this package of legislation. In fact, we doubt that most members of the Lower House had any idea of the detail of the amendments which they voted for this week.

MP's used to be legislators; now they appear to vote for press releases.

The Land Rights Act was passed by this Parliament on a bi-partisan basis in 1976. It marks the high point of indigenous affairs in this country. Since then our people in the Top End have been through a long land claims process which is now largely completed. Our focus now is on economic development—we are turning our land assets into investments, businesses and jobs which will eventually replace welfare. This is a lengthy and challenging task for us, requiring a new approach to how we live and work together.

But the cattle stations, timber works, aquaculture projects, feral animal harvesting, CO2 abatement programmes, mining operations, railways, pipelines, gas and major infrastructure facilities throughout the Territory are proof of progress.

The NLC also took the initiative of engaging directly with the Commonwealth to assist in resolving the national problem of safe storage of low level nuclear waste.

The Land Rights Act has been our great strength. It had defined our economic progress. This strength has been denied other indigenous communities in Western Australia and Queensland. That has caused those communities to seek other solutions to the problems caused by welfare dependence, solutions which seem to us to cost the taxpayer a lot of money in various experiments much hyped by the media.

We have been ahead of that game for a few decades because we have the Land Rights Act. We don't wish to be compared with communities outside the NT or to have their solutions visited upon us. We don't have a public relations outfit which tells you about our successful communities. We don't do weekly columns in national newspapers moaning about our failures. We are just getting on with it—slowly but surely.

The Commonwealth policy package includes some changes to the Land Rights Act. We don't support these, particularly the removal of permits and compulsory acquisition. We don't think they are necessary for the current task. We question the right of a Government at the end of this Parliament to trifle carelessly with this iconic legislation when you have never campaigned on the matter or had a serious dialogue about it. We also address that point to the Labor Party.

But we are realists. We take the long view, as always.

We would like to think beyond the current short term politics to the next decade. We seek some assurances from both major Parties that the essential strengths of the Land Rights Act are still valued by sensible people who can see the progress which it has caused. We hope that this tendency to trifle needlessly with the Act is temporary. We invite both Parties to study the history of this matter and understand how this Act was born and the contributions of some great people who brought it about. These were people who knew the Top End and understood its potential.

We would like to assume as well that Senators who vote on this matter next week will have some idea of the detail of what they are doing and we commend the efforts of this Committee in that regard.