

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

Dear Sir/Madam

**Inquiry into the Reeves Report on the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory)  
Act**

Thankyou for the opportunity to comment on the Reeves Report. While there are many issues to be considered I here briefly address only two of the recommendations - the proposed system and roles of Regional Land Councils; and the proposed functions of the Northern Territory Aboriginal Council. My comments focus primarily on issues concerning which I have, in the course of over 20 years of research experience in the Northern Territory, accumulated considerable experience. These issues - land management and planning – must be realistically addressed if the stated goals of social and economic advancement for the Territory’s indigenous people are to be achieved.

As the Reeves report highlights many Aboriginal people are concerned about the lack of close contact between staff and representatives of the two major land councils and their constituents. Given the physical nature of their areas and the complex array of problems arising from decades of dispossession and dislocation this is inevitable. Comments on the fact that the two smaller land councils appear to operate with greater efficiency, greater accountability to their constituents and with less dissension are to be expected. They serve relatively homogenous regions, both in a cultural and a physical sense. Efforts to decentralise the operations of the larger land councils have, to my personal knowledge, made a very positive contribution to addressing these problems. The report, in recommending that the two large Land Councils be abolished and replaced with a proposed new structure of 18 Regional Land Councils (RLC), clearly takes this issue of scale on board. However it does not, in my view, adequately address the issue of how all the operations of the RLCs will effectively integrate with the operations of the proposed Northern Territory Aboriginal Council (NTAC). Nor does it comment directly on the loss of expertise, organisational networks, and indigenous empowerment that will result from the dismemberment of the NLC and CLC. These attributes are not created quickly and it is likely that there would be a considerable time-lag before NTAC is able to fill the gap. I fully accept that the system may now require some innovative restructuring. But I plead for this to be carried out in a positive, well-planned framework that best meets the contemporary needs expressed by indigenous Territorians, and does not ‘throw the baby out with the bath-water’.

The issue of indigenous land management and planning exemplifies this particular issue. Effective support for this vital function requires, for reasons of economy of scale, some centralisation. Particular innovations adopted by both land councils – Caring for Country strategy (Northern Land Council) and the Land Assessment and Planning unit (Central Land Council) – could well be lost if these bodies are disbanded. The Reeves report rightly stresses that land management and planning, at a local level, should become a responsibility of the Regional Land Councils. But there are no comments on the resources, both human and technical, that would be required nor on how these needs could be addressed on the ground. Effective land management and planning at RLC level will require the support of expert staff, both indigenous and non-indigenous, and access to technical equipment including GIS mapping. These needs are currently provided for through units such as those mentioned above; and will be most effectively provided if, to a significant extent, they are centralised. I therefore consider that it is important that this function be retained and supported, either through the existing structure if the proposed disbanding of the large land councils does not proceed or as an explicit component of the proposed Northern Territory Aboriginal Council (NTAC). As the work of the CLCs Land Assessment and Planning Unit clearly shows, relying on equivalent support from mainstream government land management agencies is unlikely to be wholly appropriate because it is doubtful that specific Aboriginal needs and priorities will be adequately recognised. Effective collaboration between staff of the CLC unit, land management scientists and Aboriginal participants at the local community level is essential and this will best be achieved through specific units such as those already existing in Darwin and Alice Springs.

Secondly, comments in the Reeves report on support for social and economic advancement appear to focus almost exclusively on resolution of conflicts that may arise through overlapping demands on land and resources (eg tourism, mining, human settlement etc). I feel that the establishment of mechanisms to deal with broader issues of how these demands can be amalgamated into a coherent community based structure also needs to be spelled out. This is essentially a planning issue. Effective planning in such an holistic framework will have to operate on different levels. At the local or regional level it should be a prime role of communities or RLCs, and should be fostered in ways that give members of the group as much control and ownership over the process as possible. But again access to other resources, including expertise, will probably be required and these would best be provided at a broader level such as already exists in the two large land councils. Again, if the new structure is accepted, this would have to be one of NTACs functions.

Yours sincerely

Dr Elspeth Young  
Director of Studies

Graduate Studies in Environmental Management and Development  
NCDS  
ANU ACT 2000  
15/3/99