

SENATE ESTIMATES OPENING STATEMENT BY NORTHERN LAND COUNCIL CEO

- YUSEPH DEEN

SALUTATION

Today, I am joining you from the unceded lands of Turrbal and Yuggera people and pay honor to the ancestors of this country.

We have staff at our new NLC office in Berrimah, Darwin – on the lands of the Larrakia nation and senior staff in Canberra, in person.

I pay respect to the custodians of the lands we are all joining from and acknowledge that this land, as with the rest of this continent, always was and always will be Aboriginal Land.

INTRO

For the last fifty years, the Northern Land Council has fought hard for the rights and interests of Traditional Owners in the Top End. Land Rights were enshrined in law with the passing of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act in 1976 and this year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Act.

The Land Rights Act was a landmark milestone for Aboriginal rights in this country and has fundamentally changed the way our land and sea Country is respected, used and developed in the Northern Territory.

The Land Rights Act, now more than ever, is critical to Aboriginal people in the NT, enabling self-determination over Aboriginal Land and creating an environment to benefit economically, socially and culturally from land rights.

NLC staff work tirelessly to seek instructions from Traditional owners to bring their aspirations into reality. Our role is to make sure the right people are in attendance, the right voices are heard, and that decisions are made in line with the principles of free prior and informed consent. Our advocacy remit extends beyond land use agreements, supporting Traditional Owners, Native Title holders and our constituents to understand and exercise their legal rights and to self-manage their traditional lands and sea.

At present, our advocacy work is especially critical as we face increasing challenges from a hostile Territory government and a rising level of racism directed at our people.

NEW COUNCIL

A new full council came together in Jabiru in the first week of December last year.

Ninety-four positions on our new Council are filled, with half of these held by first-time members and 35% by women — a significant increase in female representation. Matthew Ryan from West Arnhem was re-elected as Chair of the NLC, and Lorraine Jones from Victoria River District is our new Deputy Chair.

The Executive Council has authorised a review of our strategic plan to ensure the priorities of the new Council, and in turn our constituents, are embedded into future pathways.

NT GOVERNMENT & TERRITORY ADMINISTRATOR

Our constituents face many challenges in the Northern Territory, one of these is the current CLP Territory government. This is a government that hides behind silence and closed doors, making decisions that target and undermine the rights of Aboriginal people.

The recent selection of NT Administrator, a man who has publicly mocked Aboriginal practices, culture and history; and the fast tracking of housing legislation that removes rights of Aboriginal tenants to procedural fairness, are just the latest two examples of this government's poor record working with Aboriginal people in the NT.

BORDER PATROL & RANGER PROGRAMS

We would like to thank the federal government, and acknowledge the Minister for Indigenous Australians and Member for Lingiari, for their continued support of ranger programs across the NLC region.

Towards the end of last year, the federal government announced an increase in funding for ranger programs. The additional funding will enable the NLC to support new ranger groups and develop pathways towards employment and engagement for women and youth.

The NLC also acknowledges the commitment from the Australian Government for increased funding for the Ghost Net debris initiative. Rangers do an outstanding job caring for land and sea country, and we welcome the continued funding from the Commonwealth.

Ranger programs, with their vast work areas and interconnected networks along the NT coastlines, are imminently capable. They are the first and only responders along the most remote parts of the northern coastline. Ranger programs continue to provide an important service to the nation, keeping our porous borders intact - they are a unique resource that remains under-utilized and under-resourced.

Like the Australian government, we would also like to keep our coastlines, communities, and country safe. We stand ready to partner with the government to improve the resourcing of our ranger groups.

SUMMING UP

The NLC is looking forward to the year ahead, with a new council, and with a renewed sense of purpose as our vision evolves to best serve Aboriginal people across our seven regions.

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