



# Northern Land Council

## MEDIA RELEASE

### **Ruddock claims: setting the record straight**

**by Norman Fry, NLC Chief Executive**

During a visit to Darwin today, Indigenous Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock raised questions regarding the funding of Northern Territory Land Councils and what sort of ‘value for money’ Aboriginal people have received from Land Councils over the past 25 years.

In terms of ‘value for money’, the first point to make is that the recently released Australian National Audit Office performance audit found that Land Councils provided “a key service” for traditional Aboriginal landowners. It found that Land Councils consulted extensively with traditional owners and that traditional owners and other Aboriginal people have a “direct influence” on the decision-making processes within the Land Councils.

This is what Land Councils were set up for: to represent the interests of traditional Aboriginal land owners under the Land Rights Act.

In the Top End, the NLC also plays a lead role in coordinating land management programs via an expanding network of Aboriginal Ranger groups. This role has been recognised by, among others, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, the Natural Heritage Trust and the World Wide Fund for Nature.

We are also active in supporting Aboriginal involvement in the pastoral, mining, tourism and construction industries - as witnessed by the successful agreements put in place to allow the construction of the Alice Springs to Darwin railway line.

Mr Ruddock claimed today that the Land Rights Act was one of the impediments to economic development in the Northern Territory. Yet Mr Ruddock is actively blocking moves to distribute funds from the \$68 million nest egg specifically put aside for this purpose under Section 64(4) of the Land Rights Act, and which has been building up in the Aboriginals Benefit Account (ABA) over the past five years.

Mr Ruddock says the reason he is blocking distribution is that he wants reforms to the way the Section 64(4) money is distributed. The Land Councils have responded with a detailed model based on regional councils developing fully-costed land management projects according to local needs and priorities. So far the Minister has not endorsed this model – despite receiving it over a year ago - and has not released one of his own.

Today Mr Ruddock said there could be “legal problems” with attaching conditions to ABA grants, and said this was now the reason for the delay in releasing ABA funds. But this legal advice is not new, and this does not explain why the Minister released some money last year and has since arbitrarily decided to fund some projects on an ad hoc basis.