



Northern Land Council

MEDIA RELEASE

NT Constitution: no statehood without one

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Northern Land Council Chairman Galarrwuy Yunupingu has called on the Northern Territory Government to enshrine Aboriginal rights in a new Constitution as part of its push for statehood – or risk another rejection at the ballot box from the Territory’s Aboriginal electorate.

In a speech delivered this afternoon on his behalf by NLC Deputy Chairman John Daly, Mr Yunupingu told the Indigenous Governance that proponents of statehood for the NT should have learnt from the failed 1998 plebiscite, which offered no safeguards for Aboriginal land ownership, laws and traditions.

“Aboriginal people have long been aware that the protection offered by legislation is only as secure as the government of the day,” he said. “We have long believed that the protection of our rights deserves a higher level of recognition and protection.”

“We are not opposed to statehood as such, but we would oppose any move to statehood which did not take account of our unique position as the traditional owners of much of the NT, and recognise our continuing systems of law and governance.”

Mr Yunupingu said the core principles of the Kalkaringi Statement, as endorsed by Aboriginal delegates to the Indigenous Constitutional Convention in Batchelor in December 1998, remained the template for constitutional recognition of Aboriginal rights.

He said constitutional fundamentals should include protection of land rights; recognition and protection of Aboriginal law and systems of governance; equality of access to government and community services; and protection of human and cultural rights, for instance rights to education, health, safety, use of language and religious practices.

“None of this is new – many of these concerns were contained in the Yirrkala tribes’ Bark Petition drawn up 40 years ago,” Mr Yunupingu said. “It is these ongoing ‘rights and duties’ to the land and sea, and to our own system of law, that a new NT constitution must recognise and protect.”

Mr Yunupingu congratulated the Martin Government for bringing in Freedom of Information legislation and for commencing an inquiry into an independent electoral commission for the NT.

“However, I consider that a constitution is the most appropriate vehicle for protecting rights, particularly Aboriginal rights,” he said. “The power of this will come from its recognition of both black and white laws, and its success will come from the leaders that promote a new relationship between our peoples.”

