

1. From the Chairman

Chairman's Report

Ten years have passed since Eddie Mabo's great High Court victory, which led directly to the *Native Title Act 1993* and the promise of a new era for Aboriginal people. It is worth reflecting that for all the claims and campaigns that have been fought since then to secure native title rights across Australia, it remains the case that the single most powerful piece of legislation protecting Aboriginal rights in this country is the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976*. We must continue to protect the integrity of the Act at all costs.

The historic 2001 election victory by the Northern Territory Labor Party was welcomed by many Indigenous people and organisations throughout the Territory, who saw it as offering the opportunity to make real progress towards implementing long-needed improvements in the lives of Aboriginal communities. For while we may have succeeded in

winning back much of our land throughout the 23 years of conservative rule, major areas of social policy such as health and education languished. Similarly, the lack of basic infrastructure in most remote communities has condemned too many Aboriginal people to Third World conditions.

Since the election, major initiatives have been announced to improve outcomes for Indigenous people in the areas of health and education, and a Parliamentary Steering Committee has been established to tackle substance abuse issues.

The Northern Land Council was invited to be part of the Government's economic summit and has been engaged in constructive dialogue over Land Rights Act reform and native title issues with Chief Minister Clare Martin. The level of goodwill can be gauged by the withdrawal of the NT Government's appeal against the Larrakia people's Kenbi land claim over the Cox Peninsula and the offer to hand back Black Rock Landing at McArthur River to the Yanyuwa people.

It is unfortunate that as our relationship with the NT Government has improved, our relationship with the Commonwealth has not kept pace. Despite Federal Parliament's rejection of the discredited Reeves Report in 1999 the Federal Government continues to pursue elements of the report's recommendations which would seriously erode traditional owners' rights.

The ongoing debate over the Reeves Report and subsequent proposals for amendment to the Land Rights Act has had the unfortunate effect of diverting NLC resources away from more productive endeavours, such as building independent economic futures for our communities. I hope that the NLC's new partnership with the NT Government over reforms to the Land Rights Act will change the dynamic and switch the focus on to making the existing Act more workable. This will allow us to get on with our core business – improving Aboriginal peoples' lives.



Galarrwuy Yunupingu, NLC Chairman

Since this time last year the NLC has been through its own regular cycle of renewal, with a new council formed following the September 2001 ballot. We have now had two meetings of the new Full Council – in October and in May – and once again I take this opportunity to welcome aboard all the new members. As a group we have already united on the need to protect our existing rights as we seek to enhance our ability to enjoy the benefits of our land and seas.

In finishing, it is with great sadness that I mourn the passing of a former deputy chair of the Council in January and of the legendary ‘Kakadu Man’ Big Bill Neidjie in May. Both men lived full and productive lives and their enormous contributions to the struggle for Aboriginal rights will be greatly missed.

The NLC was also shocked and saddened by the loss of a contractor and a traditional owner in a helicopter crash on 5 June. My heartfelt condolences go out to the two men’s families, along with those of the two other victims.

Despite these setbacks it has been another year of achievement for the NLC. As ever it is a great honour to chair such a dynamic and committed Council. I wish to thank the NLC’s hard-working staff for the dedication they have shown over the past 12 months, and I look forward to the challenges and opportunities of the coming year.