

## 2. From the Chief Executive

### CEO's Report

Aboriginal representative bodies such as the Northern Land Council have always had to deal with the suspicion – sometimes muted, sometimes loud – that their funds are being somehow “misspent”. That is why I welcome the current audit by the Australian National Audit Office of the Land Councils and the Aboriginal Benefits Account (ABA).

We are confident that, when the ANAO eventually delivers its report to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock, it will demonstrate how well we do our job with the limited resources at our disposal. We also see the audit as an opportunity not only to improve our own procedures but to make the case for more resources to support our ever-expanding responsibilities.

The audit began in April this year and the NLC is hoping that the final report will be available by the end of this calendar year. We then look forward to implementing constructive change where relevant and appropriate.

In other areas, constructive change has already begun. In response to Minister Ruddock's request for an overhaul to the way ABA money is distributed under Section 64 (4) of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976*, the NLC has developed an innovative program designed to funnel a substantial amount of its ABA allocation to a raft of new land and sea management projects. We are currently waiting on the Minister to sign off on the proposed process, which would give Regional Councils a significant role in determining priorities and funding for their regions.

The NLC is also pressing forward with a new focus on capacity-building. As the land claims era draws to a close it is clear that the next major challenge for Aboriginal land owners is to manage their resources to protect their interests and create an economic base. To do this, Aboriginal organisations and traditional owners need to develop their capacity for decision-making, management and governance.

The past year has witnessed a steady stream of achievements in this regard. Under an agreement with ADrail, the developer of the Alice Springs to Darwin railway, the NLC has secured significant employment and training opportunities for Indigenous people living along the rail corridor. With the construction phase just halfway complete, the NLC has already filled most of the jobs stipulated in its agreement with ADrail. Similarly, the numbers of Indigenous people enrolled in fully-accredited training courses are on track to surpass agreed targets.

Importantly, when the rail project finishes, there will be a solid core of Aboriginal people with the necessary skills to participate in other looming opportunities in the Top End such as gas pipeline and mining projects.



Norman Fry, NLC Chief Executive Officer

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On the back of the railway project the NLC has developed a database logging the training and employment history of many hundreds of Indigenous people. I believe that this will come to be seen by employers throughout the Territory – and further afield – as a key resource in their hiring decisions.

This focus on capacity building has wider implications for the NLC. We have put in place plans for a structural reorganisation to meet the new challenges, with our new Deputy Chief Executive Officer John Berto taking on direct responsibility for implementing the organisation's three-year Capacity Building Strategy.

Meanwhile the number of ranger groups continues to grow across the Top End under the guidance of the NLC's hard-working Caring for Country unit. There are now in excess of 20 ranger groups working to manage large tracts of remote country and keep them clear of weeds and animal pests. Under collaborative arrangements with the Department of Immigration and the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, ranger groups are also contributing to the nation's border security and ongoing efforts to keep out disease.

In the policy area a new seas/saltwater team has been established to better meet the opportunities offered by traditional owners' extensive marine and fisheries resources. Commercial deals, such as that entered into between Arafura Pearls and traditional owners in the Elizabeth Bay area of eastern Arnhem Land, are clear examples of the benefits which could flow to our people through greater control of sea country.

Perhaps the greatest advertisement over the past year for what the NLC can achieve is the agreement brokered in December between Darwin's Larrakia people and the NT Government to allow further housing development in the Palmerston area. In return for withdrawing their Rosebery/Bellamack native title claim, the Larrakia have received employment and training guarantees and have won the right to their own development project. This reached fruition on 28 June when the newly-created Larrakia Development Corporation announced financing for the first stage of an eventual three-stage, \$24 million development of the new suburb of Darla.

I remain confident that 2002/03 will see the successful completion of a number of other agreements, including an Indigenous Land Use Agreement over the Defence Department's Bradshaw weapons testing range in the Victoria River District and a mining agreement for the rich Brown's mineral resource near Batchelor.

The nature of the NLC's work and the arduous struggles it engages in means it fosters a workplace like few others – a workplace having more in common with a family than the depersonalised entity so beloved of economic rationalists. Thus the blow of losing an NLC representative and a traditional owner in 5 June's helicopter crash was felt so hard throughout the organisation. If there was a reason to be thankful, it was that another NLC representative managed a miraculous escape from the wrecked helicopter with relatively minor injuries.

I was immensely proud of my staff in the way they rallied around the families of the victims, providing emotional support during a period of great distress and helping organise fitting tributes. Our thoughts are with both their families and those of the other victims of the crash, an Epic Energy employee and a Laynhapuy Aviation pilot.

The coming year is sure to bring many new challenges to the organisation but, under the leadership of the Chairman and Full Council, I am confident we will continue to fulfil our duty to our people with the same commitment and drive as ever.