



Northern Land Council

Keynote Address

Northern Land Council Chairman, Wali Wunungmurra: Keynote Address, Indigenous Economic Development Conference, Garma Festival of Traditional Culture.

9 August 2008

I would like to thank the Yothu Yindi Foundation for the opportunity to speak to you today about economic development. I congratulate the Foundation for its ongoing work and this the 10th annual Garma Festival.

This morning I want to talk about economic development on Aboriginal land and how this can contribute to a more just society for Yolngu.

There is a saying that the best police force in the world is high employment. I think this is true. With real employment the prospects of a person and a family are greatly improved.

The challenge for us today is to convert our land ownership into economic opportunity – to create high employment among our people who currently experience Australia's highest unemployment. This is a great challenge. It is a challenge for Yolngu, for government and for our friends in the business world.

To move to a brighter future Yolngu people have to draw on our history of living with the land, drawing on its resources to sustain ourselves and our families. We have to release the economic potential of the land.

45 years ago, in 1963, I signed what is now a famous Bark Petition which was presented to the Australian Parliament. Our petition was a call for legal recognition of Yolngu society and land ownership. I have seen many changes since that time.

I have witnessed the development of the land rights movement, the homelands movement, the winning of much land, the assertion of Yolngu culture in the modern world. I have also witnessed the marginalisation of my people, their frustration and their suffering.

Throughout most of this time I have focussed my efforts on education, on Yolngu people developing the personal and professional skills to sustain themselves and their families. I see education as absolutely critical.

For the past 30 years, using the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, Yolngu have regained legal entitlement to much of the Northern Territory. With government and others we have established many outstations and seen our remote communities grow. It is true to say that for many years our focus, especially at the Land Council, was on getting our land

back under our control.

Much of this work continues. Only recently the High Court, in the Blue Mud Bay decision, has confirmed what we and many others presumed was the case for many years – that our land ownership rights extend to the intertidal areas between the high and low watermarks and in tidal rivers. So you see the struggle for land rights continues into the present time.

But today's challenge is about more than winning court cases about land, it is to convert our land ownership into economic prosperity, into real jobs that will carry our people and our culture into the future.

In the case of the Blue Mud Bay decision, over the next 12 months the NLC will negotiate the terms and conditions of permits for commercial and recreational fishermen over our tidal waters. We have committed to a win-win situation and we will achieve this. However, we must also achieve sustainable economic prosperity from the decision.

The granting of Aboriginal land is not an end in itself but a beginning; it is an opportunity to relieve the social disadvantage of Yolngu peoples. But how do we do this?

I believe we can achieve this via the processes under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act and via a partnership with government and with industry. First the Land Rights Act.

I want to tell you about some things the Northern Land Council has been doing to create real jobs and real wages. There are many opportunities for economic development on Aboriginal lands and waters. These include large projects, such as mines and major infrastructure developments like the Bonaparte Gas pipeline or the Adelaide to Darwin railway.

Most of the major projects – such as the gas pipelines, the railway, the mines and carbon abatement developments – are on Aboriginal land. This requires negotiation with Aboriginal people, either under the Land Rights Act or Native Title Act, to secure access to the land.

Large projects can be important drivers of Aboriginal economic development but they should not be seen as ends in themselves. They are simply another opportunity for Yolngu to gain real and sustainable jobs.

Not all the economic development on Aboriginal land is about big business. Since 1996 the NLC has run the very successful Caring for Country Program. This Program assists Aboriginal groups to undertake land and sea management activities.

Our Caring for Country Program is an economic development initiative that is focused on strengthening and building on traditional Aboriginal economies. It is creating opportunities for enterprise development, based on the sustainable use of wildlife – for example, crocodile egg collection and incubation, fish and turtles for the aquarium trade, and bush foods.

The involvement of traditional owners in these activities has improved the economic, social and cultural life of families and communities.

There are many different successful local businesses that are based on our ownership of land, including the commercial use of wildlife, native plants for food and products, cultural and ecological tourism operations, safari hunting, aquaculture, pet-meat operations, and management of country for other agencies – for example, defence, Northern Territory government, and private land holders.

Many of these enterprises are small. They are not always commercially viable when considered in isolation. However, when pursued as part of a broader program, such as a ranger program, they can be financially sustainable.

One of the primary functions of the NLC is to negotiate on behalf of traditional Aboriginal owners with people interested in using Aboriginal land or land under claim. Under section 19 of the Land Rights Act, the NLC may direct a land trust to enter into an agreement or grant an interest in land to a third party.

However, the NLC is not the decision-making body. Before giving such a direction, the NLC must ensure that the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land understand the agreement and have given their informed consent to the agreement.

In the 2006-2007 financial year, the NLC finalised over 100 agreements. In the same year, over \$9 million in income from land use agreements was distributed by the NLC to traditional owners in the NLC region.

More could be done, however, if our communities were properly resourced. Economic growth is underpinned by adequate infrastructure.

Yolngu in remote and very remote areas of the Northern Territory do not have the infrastructure to support business development in our communities and homelands.

You can't run a business without a reliable power supply, without well maintained roads, airstrips, barge landings and without effective telecommunications. Much of this infrastructure is the responsibility of government and it is to government that we look for its improvement.

I also want to talk about partnership - with both government and with industry. Yesterday I announced that the NLC was committed to the national jobs plan announced by the Mr Andrew Forrest of Fortescue Metals and supported by the Australian Government.

We decided to support this initiative because finally the corporate world is willing to work with us and with government to create real jobs for Yolngu. Many people and companies have been working toward this for many years. Rio Tinto, for example, has made great headway in employing Aboriginal people in their mining operations.

But we are not just talking about mining here. We are now talking about a target of 50,000 jobs in two years across Australia in many different industries. This is a great challenge.

The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, has said that there is a need for a strong and close partnership with Indigenous people in order for this plan to succeed. I agree with him and this is why the Northern Land Council is willing to join with Mr Andrew Forrest, other

employers and with the Government to develop a blueprint for the national jobs plan.

I understand that Mr Forrest is in Beijing right now, at the Olympic Games. On his return to Australia I hope to meet with him and to discuss the details of this plan and what the Northern Land Council can bring to the table. We have much to contribute. We have the knowledge of our people, of their training needs and problems. We have the expertise, the experience and the know-how to ensure that this national jobs plan, in the Northern Territory at least, will succeed.

It is important to ask, 'How did we get to this point?' Why are Yolngu not job-ready? Why don't Yolngu take up employment opportunities? The answer is, in part, that the education system has failed Yolngu. Yolngu are not given the tools necessary to enter the workforce.

Also, the Land Councils have not been adequately funded to provide and to coordinate the training necessary to get Yolngu into real jobs. The fact is that Aboriginal Australia has been neglected for too long, has been under-funded for too long and only seen as a problem for 'mainstream Australia'. Hopefully we will address these problems of underspending on education and training as we move into the future.

I look forward to working with the business community and with government to realise our shared vision for Aboriginal employment across the NLC region and Australia.

At the end of the day my message to you is that in order for us to realise economic development and real jobs from our country, Yolngu must be involved in a real and meaningful way.

Finally, I often ask my senior staff at the NLC, 'Are we there yet?' While I normally refer to the many meetings, places, documents and strategies that we discuss at the Land Council, I also ask myself whether Yolngu people are there yet. I wonder when our struggles will end. I wonder how long we will be arguing for our country, struggling for proper Constitutional recognition, struggling to lift up our families to prosperity.

I want to see a time; after all that I have seen when we can rest on our achievements, when we are safe in the knowledge that our land is our land and that it sustains us.

Achieving that peace of mind means, among many other things, unlocking the economic potential of our land and creating real and sustainable jobs. We can only do this in partnership.

Thank you.