

**SPEECH BY NLC CEO NORMAN FRY AT SIGNING OF
BRADSHAW ILUA 16 JULY 2003**

To begin with, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of Bradshaw Station – the Jamundjung, Nungali/Ngaliwurru, Murinkura, Murinpatha and Wardaman people.

They have been part of this land since the dawn of time and their lives remain inextricably linked to their ancestral home through their stories and songlines.

It is my fervent hope that the Indigenous Land Use Agreement we are signing here today will strengthen those links while at the same time providing opportunities for traditional owners and their descendants to secure economic independence.

We are honoured today by the presence of many senior politicians from both sides of politics, by senior departmental officers and by top-ranking military personnel.

I especially wish to welcome the Federal Minister of Defence, Senator Robert Hill and the Deputy Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, the Honourable Syd Stirling.

When European explorer Lieutenant John Lort Stokes entered these lands in 1839 he was impressed by the first Aboriginal people he encountered, two men who approached his party fearlessly and unarmed.

This is what he wrote: “The condition and appearance of the two who made themselves visible indicated their residence in a country fitted to supply abundantly all natural wants.”

Much has changed in this country since then but the essentials have remained the same. The country is still beautiful, it is still bountiful and the Aboriginal people who live here are still proud and fearless.

It was that spirit which allowed them to maintain their cultural traditions through the long era of pastoral occupation of their lands, and some of the elders gathered here today – I'll mention Joe Lewis and Jerry Jones but I'm sure there are others – retain fond memories of their working lives on Bradshaw Station.

For while the work was hard and the living conditions were often harsh, ceremonies were still performed and culture remained intact.

Unfortunately, from the 1970s Aboriginal participation in the pastoral industry went into steep decline and as a result many Aboriginal people lost access to their country because of exclusion by pastoralists.

This development caused many problems for Aboriginal people and lies at the heart of the social problems we hear so much of today.

Now, here at Bradshaw, we have a fresh opportunity to support Aboriginal cultural traditions in partnership with the Department of Defence.

The negotiations to secure today's agreement have been long and at times difficult but they have been worth the effort, for traditional owners and Defence personnel have built a positive working relationship in dealing with a variety of cross-cultural issues.

I am confident that this relationship will provide a solid base for the agreement's implementation over the coming decades, and will open yet another chapter in the proud history of engagement between the military and Australia's Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous people have made an important contribution to Australia's defence over the past century, no more so than in the Top End where Aborigines were recruited in large numbers during World War II and were employed in the construction of vital Defence infrastructure such as airstrips.

This contribution continues with Aboriginal reservists providing key remote area surveillance capabilities as members of the Army's burgeoning Norforce units.

Today is undoubtedly an historic occasion. The Commonwealth has never entered into an agreement of this scale before. An entire generation of Aboriginal people in this area will at last have meaningful training and employment opportunities.

This agreement shows what can be achieved when government is prepared to sit down with Aboriginal people and talk to them as equals. I congratulate all those who played their part in making this agreement a reality.

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