

Joe Morrison, CEO Northern Land Council
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Good afternoon, and welcome to those of you who are visitors to Darwin.

Firstly, I pay my respects to the Larrakia people, the Traditional Owners of the land on which we are gathered.

This conference addresses the projects, plans and opportunities that carry significant prospects for the economic expansion of the NT: the Territory's vision for the future.

I want to speak to you about the place of Indigenous people in that future: in planning for it, in developing it and ensuring we also enjoy the benefits from it.

And I want to throw out a challenge to you, to think differently about Indigenous people in this northern development space.

It is no longer acceptable, if indeed it ever was, to frame this discussion in terms of deficit and failure, and to view Indigenous people only through a social welfare lens.

As the head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Dr Martin Parkinson, noted in this year's Wentworth Lecture, no people in the history of humanity ever lifted themselves from poverty by the receipt of aid, so why would we expect economic, social and cultural health for Indigenous people to come solely through welfare?

Through the NT Land Rights Act, Indigenous Territorians have freehold tenure over more than 50% of the NT and 85% of the coastline. Native Title accounts

for almost a further 20% and this is set to rise covering the remainder of the NT.

That's a total area larger than NSW with tenure established.

Indigenous people make up 30% of the Territory's population, and more than 80% of the population actually living on the land, continuing to use our depth of knowledge and experience to take care of the globally recognised natural and cultural assets that the NT is renowned.

We are also the fastest growing and youngest sector of the Territory's population.

Indigenous people are not just a special interest group in the Territory's future. We are a primary stakeholder. And we come to the engagement on northern development as a genuine equity stakeholder with a commitment to inclusive and sustainable action.

We do not intend to engage on the basis of securing benefits from the development actions of others. We come with the intention of working with governments, industry and investors to drive development of the vast Indigenous estate, and to drive necessary structural reform to enable that development.

Structural reform is required because the current thinking leads to fundamentally unsound public policy that is reactive to others interests not that of Indigenous people.

I have said before that the White Paper on Developing Northern Australia does not address, in any form, the substance of an Indigenous position despite more than decades of informed Indigenous policy positions on northern development.

This not only ignores the rights of Indigenous people, it creates a risky and uncertain investment environment that threatens development planning.

As I outlined in my speech at the Developing the North Conference in Cairns in June of this year, excluding Indigenous people from the economy entrenches impoverishment and leads to resentment and disengagement, making all efforts to develop the region almost impossible.

In such an environment, development proposals that are formed without us and foisted upon us, are inevitably subject to fear and mistrust and suffer some level of opposition on the basis of environmental, social and cultural impact.

The inherent assumption evidenced in the policy framework that northern development equates to investment in mines and infrastructure, which is expected to transform the social environment via some form of trickle down economics, is a dangerous falsehood.

The NT Land Rights Act and the Native Title Act have secured tenure and rights across the Territory. This conversation is no longer about land rights. Now it is about securing the full range of benefits from that tenure – social, cultural and economic – and using this tenure to underpin investment certainty.

What is required is a policy framework of economic and social inclusion to unlock this potential. A framework that addresses the underlying fundamentals, to enable realistic objectives for northern development.

We have to think creatively and radically if we want to ensure a future for the Territory that is truly sustainable and benefits all Territorians.

I outlined what we, as Indigenous people, have identified as the economic fundamentals requiring reform in Cairns in June.

A key point is that Indigenous people have got to set the agenda for the commercial development of our estates, determining what development we want, rather than negotiating with third parties wanting access to our lands.

At the NLC we have taken up this baton.

A decade of practical research alongside the Central Land Council has delivered a comprehensive Economic Development Strategy to drive the Indigenous-led commercial development of our land and sea holdings.

The goal is to establish Indigenous-owned and controlled commercial activity using portions of Aboriginal freehold land and selected Native Title lands across the Northern Territory.

It is about creating regional economies across the Territory that support local livelihoods and contribute to the long-term productivity and resilience of the Territory.

The Strategy determines a strong framework for delivering a network of viable commercial developments across all industry sectors, building on the strengths and opportunities afforded by the vast NT Indigenous estate.

It addresses capital, tenure and investor security and encompasses proven models for Indigenous community planning and development.

This Strategy is now ready to be operationalized.

A critical requirement for our initiative is infrastructure such as bores, power and transport access, but there's currently no policy framework or funding source to construct this infrastructure on our lands.

So a key component of the Economic Development Strategy is the creation of an innovative capital investment mechanism to establish targeted

infrastructure development on Indigenous lands, enabling commercial development to proceed.

The mechanism was developed with advice from a prominent investment corporation and has undergone review from one of the big 4 banks. It is solid and provides a secure process for investment.

Worth upwards of \$70m in the first instance, it will develop an initial six commercial scale, turn-key farming enterprises on six selected parcels of Indigenous land across the Northern Territory.

We want to see government investment via concessional loans and the Aboriginals Benefit Account used to leverage private investment to underpin this foundation for commercial development.

Security is the key issue. The primary source of security that Traditional Owners currently have is leasing under section 19 of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act.

The financial sector has confirmed that section 19 leases are fungible and can be used as security. A conclusion supported by independent legal advice from a leading commercial law firm.

Commercialising a section 19 lease means that Indigenous landowners can become landlords, using their land assets to generate income without losing control over their management.

This is the basis for self-determination.

A Statement of Strategic Intent regarding the Strategy has been ratified by the Executives of both land councils, and the establishment of the capital investment mechanism is scheduled for the coming year, along with a new lead agency to coordinate and drive action on the ground.

The Strategy will be piloted over the next 5 years at six sites across the Territory each with stand-alone commercial scale horticulture developments.

During this time an opportunities and investment prospectus for the Indigenous estate will also be developed, containing investment-ready projects across all industry sectors. It will document the range of commercial activities that Indigenous landowners wish to pursue and provide the means for third parties to engage. This is something I have tasked myself during my employment at the NLC.

But realisation of the Strategy will depend on a fundamental resetting of the relationship and up-front investment by governments. We want to work together.

And the NTG is listening, supporting the Strategy at the highest levels. It is, in fact, a major project and should officially be recognised as such.

The Strategy will place Indigenous people in the driving seat of our own economic development and support us in the management of our lands and seas.

The driving seat is where we rightly belong, and we are inviting some fare paying passengers to come along for the ride.

But we are not sitting around waiting for this to happen.

We are already out on the ground doing the hands on work of supporting Aboriginal groups to plan for and achieve their development objectives, using their own income.

Right now at the NLC, we are 1 year into the establishment of a Community Planning and Development Program that has local control at its core.

The program is based on the CLC's successful evidence-based model and is already actively driving a major change in the way traditional owners and their communities across the Top End are using a significant amount of their income.

It's about supporting local people to drive their own community and economic development aspirations.

The NLC knows that economic independence cannot be separated from the social and cultural dimensions of people's lives.

The Central Land Council has been highly successful in the business of community development for more than a decade.

We are building on this success, using a set of principles and processes that build self-reliance, strengthen communities and promote good governance.

The program works through the leadership of local people, with support from the NLC ensuring people have the information they need to make sound decisions.

It assists people to plan the use of their own income streams for their own community and economic development projects. Projects that support and promote healthy, resilient and engaged people, strong in language, culture and connection to country, education and employment.

Already we have six Indigenous land owning groups signed up to the program, who in less than 12 months have committed over \$3 million of their private income to sustainable development initiatives.

This includes the Native Title Holders for Project Sea Dragon, a massive prawn farm who have negotiated an ILUA that they intend to leverage to achieve their own social, cultural and economic development objectives.

The Community Planning and Development model is innovative, and proven.

It draws on strengths to identify opportunities and plan for success. It relies on a detailed understanding of the complex operating environment and staff with the relationships and inter-cultural skills who can navigate this effectively. It tracks progress and responds flexibly to emerging situations, turning challenges into occasions for innovation and growth.

And excitingly, the model that was developed by the CLC is proving replicable here in the Top End.

Indigenous people can and are driving their own development, with support from their well-governed, capable Indigenous organisations, which are in it for the long-term.

Such initiatives are a critical dimension of the Territory's future and they should be supported and integrated into planning and practice.

We have called on the Territory and Commonwealth governments to work with Indigenous organisations to establish a comprehensive planning and implementation strategy focused on delivering economic, ecological, social and cultural benefits to Indigenous people in northern Australia.

But it is not just about improving Indigenous capacity in planning and development.

Without, as Dr Parkinson notes, the ability for government and industry to scrutinise themselves and the values and assumptions that inform their current practice, there can be no resetting of the relationship.

To develop the north, we need a multi-pronged approach, and success requires all of us working together in genuine commitment to forge new relationships and innovate.

Indigenous people have the knowledge from more than 60,000 years of living here and managing this place for sustainable and productive futures.

The wealth of the NT, its fisheries, its pristine lands and waters, is the direct and ongoing result of our careful and considered actions over time.

Our knowledge is networked and place-based. It is flexible and responsive and multi-layered. This is our place and we are the primary stakeholders in its future.

So I restate my challenge to you today to think differently about Indigenous people in the northern development space.

To think creatively and radically. To see the strengths and opportunities and to work with us to reset the relationship.

Reforming the approach will deliver more than just a reversing of intergenerational disadvantage. It will enable the Territory to draw on its unique strengths and features to co-create a dynamic and sustainable future for every Territorian.

This is a realisable vision and we have the means to achieve it.

The Economic Development Strategy, supported by our innovative Community Planning and Development Program, is ready to go.

It represents a major project underpinning the future of the Territory. It should be formally recognised by being granted Major Project status.

I invite to you to join us in a genuine commitment to advance it, and to have high expectations of us, because we have high expectations of you.

I'll leave you with those thoughts, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today.