



BARUNGA AGREEMENT: JOINT LAND COUNCILS AND NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT STATEMENT

The Northern Territory's four Land Councils and the Northern Territory Government have today signed an historic Memorandum of Understanding (the "Barunga Agreement"), paving the way for consultations to begin with Aboriginal people about a Treaty.

A joint meeting of the four Land Councils at Barunga this week voted to empower their Chairmen to sign the MOU.

"This is a momentous day in the history of the Territory, a chance to reset the relationship between the Territory's First Nations and the Government," Northern Land Council Chairman Samuel Bush-Blanansi said. "We've got big journey ahead of us. The MOU gives us high hopes about the future and I hope the Government stays true to spirit of the MOU."

Central Land Council Chairman Francis Jupurrurla Kelly said: "I hope a treaty will settle us down together and bring us self-determination. Today we bounced the ball but we don't want to stay the only players in this game. The next steps must be led by Aboriginal people across the Territory so that everyone can run with the ball and have their say."

Anindilyakwa Land Council Chairman Tony Wurramarrba said: "We celebrate the highly significant step that has been achieved today and will work with the Northern Territory Government and other Land Councils to continue the important work required to achieve the goal of a Northern Territory Treaty."

Tiwi Land Council Gibson Farmer Illortaminni said: "We've got to be careful and understand each other about what we want, because we don't want to have the same problems we've had in the past. The MoU is a good start, but we've got a long way to go. The Government needs to be honest and transparent."

Chief Minister Michael Gunner, who signed on behalf of the Government, said: "This is the first day of a new course for the Northern Territory. The MoU we have signed today commits us to a new path of lasting reconciliation that will heal the past and allow for a cooperative, unified future for all.

"A Territory where everyone understands our history, our role in a modern society and our united and joint future will be an important achievement for all Territorians."

The Territory Labor Government promised soon after the election in 2016 to advance a Treaty, and the MoU is the result of intensive discussions and negotiations between the Land Councils and the Government.

Significantly, the MoU was signed on the first day of the Barunga Sport and Cultural Festival – the 30th anniversary of the presentation of the Barunga Statement to Prime Minister Bob Hawke, who went on to promise a Treaty between the Commonwealth and Australia's Indigenous peoples, but has remained undelivered.

Under the terms of the MOU NT Government will appoint an independent Treaty Commissioner who will lead the consultations with Aboriginal people and organisations across the Territory, and develop a framework for Treaty negotiations. The Commissioner will be an Aboriginal person with strong connections to the Territory, and expressions of interest will be called for the position.

The Land Councils and the Northern Territory Government will make their extensive regional staffing networks available to the Treaty Commission to organise consultations in communities.

The MoU prescribes that all Territorians should ultimately benefit from any Treaty, which must provide for substantive outcomes. It's founded on the agreement that there has been "deep injustice done to Aboriginal people, including violent dispossession, the regression of their languages and cultures and the forcible removal of children from their families, which have left a legacy of trauma and loss that needs to be addressed and healed".

"The process will begin with an open slate. We will start with nothing on or off the table," Mr Gunner said.

The MoU acknowledges that there is a range of Aboriginal interests in the Territory, and that all Aboriginal people must have the opportunity to be fully engaged. It further acknowledges that non-Aboriginal people "need to be brought along in this process."

The document leaves open the possibility of multiple treaties, and lays out a timetable for the work of the Treaty Commissioner.