

Senate committee looks after its own

A recent Senate inquiry into Government expenditure on Indigenous affairs and social services in the Northern Territory has wound up, rather predictably given the Labor majority of its committee members, concluding that nothing is seriously amiss in the Territory's spending of Commonwealth grants.

"Revenue distributed to the States and Territories through the Grants Commission process is provided as untied funding," the final report said. "It is available to the States and Territories to expend in accordance with their own policies and priorities."

And while "historically, service provision has been poor, that there are significant backlogs in infrastructure provision and that these problems have been compounded by governance failures at all levels", COAG and the NT Governments own "Closing the Gap" initiative would substantially address these "somewhat intractable problems".

Earlier this year CLC Director David Ross supported a suggestion by the Country Liberals' leader Terry Mills that the Northern Territory Government's spending on Aboriginal affairs be investigated.

"Since self government in 1978, successive governments have deliberately mismanaged funding provided by the Commonwealth for Aboriginal affairs," Mr Ross said.

"This disgraceful rotting of the system has perpetuated problems being felt in Aboriginal communities and wider society.

"A failure to spend money that's supposed to be used to educate people

and improve their health leaves you with unemployed, unhealthy people,"

Mr Ross appeared at the Senate Inquiry and told the committee that in his view, underspending is clear to see.

"I think the evidence in the real world is out there. There is a catchcry today of 'closing the gap', but education has not got any better since that report came out.

"Health problems have got worse. Housing has got worse," he said.

The CLC's submission to the inquiry said that the 2005 study in Thamurrurr by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research was the best example of a specific detailed study which made significant findings:

"When measured against the standard of compensating for low socioeconomic status, Thamurrurr was underfunded at the rate of \$4 million per annum or \$1,944 per person.

"In relation to education, on a per capita basis, only 47c was spent on children of compulsory school age in Thamurrurr for every \$1 spent on the average Territorian.

"This is strong evidence that CGC funding allocated on the basis of disadvantage is being misspent."

The CLC's submission also accused the NT Government's 2006-07 Indigenous Expenditure Review of being riddled with systematic errors.

"The CLC is astounded that the NT would produce such a report as a cynical deflection from its mis-spending and...is precisely why CLC Director David Ross called for a Royal Commission into the NT Government's expenditure in Aboriginal affairs in August 2008."

Partnership boosts early learning and child care in Warlpiri communities



Above l-r: WETT committee members Markirdi Rose, Fiona Gibson, Maisie Kitson, Barbara Martin, World Vision CEO Tim Costello and CLC Director David Ross

A partnership between the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust (WETT), the Central Land Council and World Vision Australia will boost the care and education of children in the Tanami region over the next three years.

WETT was set up in 2004 by the Kurra Aboriginal Corporation to utilise a portion of mining royalties to fund education and training programs in the Warlpiri region.

Now WETT, World Vision Australia and the CLC have launched the Early Childhood Care and Development program, which will focus on five key areas – life skills development and parenting support, resource development, capacity building, governance and promoting best practice.

The program aims to improve the health and well-being of children aged 0-5 years by building a foundation for children to reach their social, intellectual, spiritual and physical needs through the support of parents and carers and better early childhood services.

It will see local Aboriginal community members trained as childcare workers, the development of educational toys and other resources and the provision

of governance training.

An initial \$600,000 of royalty money from The Granites Callie agreement, negotiated with Newmont Asia Pacific, has been provided to fund the partnership by the WETT Trustee, the Kurra Aboriginal Corporation.

Following a successful first year of the program, a further \$1 million in WETT funding is likely to follow over the next two years.

World Vision Australia is funding a project manager to oversee the program with the Federal Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs funding a project facilitator to carry out on-the-ground work.

WETT is just one of several innovative projects being implemented by the CLC's Community Development unit to generate sustainable development in Central Australian communities.

CLC director David Ross praised the participants in the partnership and especially the Warlpiri people for again committing their own money to provide services that are desperately needed in these remote areas.

"Warlpiri traditional owners in the Tanami region are taking the lead and putting their royalty money into long-lasting

benefits for the whole region rather than personal gain," Mr Ross said.

"Often the projects they are funding are things that people in other parts of the country are provided with by government.

"However, forming a partnership with World Vision Australia and attracting Government funding is a smart move towards ensuring the long-term sustainability of the program.

WETT Committee Member Markirdi Napaljarri Rose said Warlpiri people are really excited about the early childhood program.

"It gives our children a good chance to learn and grow strong from when they are babies right through until school," she said.

"It's also a good support for parents and an opportunity for Warlpiri people to get training and employment."

Already a number of projects have begun including nutrition, cooking and food information sessions with women at Nyirripi, a playgroup at Willowra staffed by local women and supported by World Vision Australia, a playgroup and crèche in Nyirripi and an education program highlighting the positive role men play in children's lives.