



JOINT MEDIA RELEASE

Territory government strips water rights, puts conflict, corruption and chaos above certainty

Traditional owners are united in calling out the Territory government's ill-conceived and rushed changes that move it ever closer to an anti-democratic regime pursuing development at any cost.

Giving away our precious water to foreign and interstate interests deprives our people of development opportunities today and robs all Territory children tomorrow.

This government cannot be trusted.

Its latest attack on water rights is a bill designed to rip Aboriginal water reserves out of Aboriginal hands.

These reserves are small portions of water set aside in water allocation plans for Aboriginal people to use for trade or economic development.

Combined with the imposition of an all-powerful, unelected Territory co-ordinator, the assault on sacred sites protection and the removal of Territorians' rights to seek merits review of government decisions, this proposal demolishes the integrity of the Territory government.

We had worked in good faith with the previous Labor government to make Aboriginal water reserves work for our people.

We had agreed a process with the NT Division of Water Resources for negotiating informed consent which was about to go to cabinet before last year's election.

As with all land council processes, it would have given certainty to developers that the right people have been consulted and guaranteed that approved projects won't land them in court.

Last week, and again without consultation with traditional owners, the Country Liberal Party government scrapped this in favour of another rushed bill that will create great uncertainty.

The bill removes traditional owners from decisions about the Aboriginal water reserves and hands that power to the Territory water controller.

This bureaucrat would decide who is an "eligible" Aboriginal person to apply for water in the reserve or whether "eligible" Aboriginal people have given consent.

It is completely unclear how he would do this.

What is clear is that the government aims to sideline the NT land councils that were set up with the sole mandate to support Aboriginal decision-making and which have a successful record of facilitating consensus and informed consent across groups that creates certainty.

Its proposed bill exposes developers to legal challenges and loss of their social license.

It undermines Aboriginal people's hard-won collective rights and decision-making practices, threatens community harmony and removes guardrails against exploitation and corruption.

The scrapping of the standard democratic process of third-party merits reviews has removed the right of any Territorian to check that government decision-making is of an acceptable standard.

Third-party merits reviews hold governments accountable to all citizens, not just wealthy investors.

Coupled with a lack of solid evidence about Territory water resources the government's latest bill ushers in chaos, conflict and increasing inequality.

Quotes from CLC and NLC chairs

"Instead of giving industry the confidence to invest in the Territory, the proposed changes will see traditional owners challenge dodgy decisions in court, development proposals embroiled in community conflict and investors fighting accusations of corruption," said CLC chair Warren Williams.

"By contrast, our council's consultation processes have true integrity and deliver the certainty industry needs."

"These changes are divisive. The NT Government is opening the floodgates for industry to exploit the Aboriginal Water Reserve for profits," said NLC chair Matthew Ryan.

"The constant attacks on Aboriginal self-determination are exhausting and insulting. They need to stop."

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