



Territory land councils call on Commonwealth to hold the NT government to account for failing Aboriginal Territorians

The four Territory land councils are calling on the Federal Government to introduce real consequences for the NT government's failures against Closing the Gap targets.

This past week the Territory's four land councils came together to discuss a better future for our people. The councils met at Barunga, a place where our leaders first called for a national treaty 38 years ago.

This year we celebrate 50 years of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. A watershed piece of legislation. The first law to legally recognise Aboriginal peoples' deep and enduring relationship to country and provide a mechanism for our land to be returned to us.

The Land Rights Act has been integral in the fight for self-determination. Our traditions, languages and culture remain strong - 60,000 years and counting. But despite the recognition of land and sea rights we continue to face many of the same challenges that are steeped in structural racism.

"Almost half of the land mass in the Northern Territory and 85 per cent of our Territory coastlines are Aboriginal owned. We have our land and sea rights but our people are still fighting an endless battle for our very existence."

- Matthew Ryan, Northern Land Council Chair

We see it in public housing, which is overcrowded, poorly maintained, hot in summer and cold in winter. Conditions that would not be accepted anywhere else.

We see it in remote communities where the cost of living is 40% higher than in cities. Yet the Remote Area Allowance has not seen a meaningful increase in 25 years.

We see it in the incarceration of our people. The Northern Territory has the highest rate of imprisonment in the country, where over 95% of the prison population is Indigenous. The number has leapt by 26% under the Country Liberal Party. There is something seriously wrong in the Northern Territory.

We see it in the silence that meets our calls for independent investigations into police conduct and deaths in custody.

We see it in the cases of diphtheria and rheumatic heart disease sweeping our communities. In one of the richest countries on earth, the prevalence of preventable diseases reveals persistent political neglect.

"Like all Territorians we have hopes and dreams for our children. We want a good life on our traditional lands, yet despite years of advocacy, remote housing is poorly

maintained and poorly designed, education is failing our children, and the high cost of living makes us vulnerable to preventable diseases that are cutting our lives short.”

- Warren Williams, Central Land Council Chair

We see it in the decades of inquiries and royal commissions, which draw on the painful lived experience of Aboriginal people only to produce recommendations that sit on the shelf.

“We know the solutions. We need a government that listens to us and respects that we know what will work for our people and communities.”

- Austin Wonaeamirri, Tiwi Land Council Deputy Chair

We are standing together to call out the system that is failing our people over and over again. In the Territory, only two of the nineteen Closing the Gap targets are on track, the worst progress in the country. Politicians need to ask themselves if the policies that apply to Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory would be good enough for any other Australian.

“We are not asking for much, safe housing, healthy communities, a justice system we can trust. The basic rights that every person in Australia should enjoy.”

- Cherelle Wurrawilya, Anindilyakwa Land Council Chair

Our message is clear: the Federal Government must hold the NT government to account for failing to spend allocated federal monies in ways that tangibly improve Aboriginal lives.

We ask for real consequences for the NT government’s abysmal progress on Closing the Gap, including:

1. Withhold federal funds until there is evidence of significant improvement against priority reforms and targets; and
2. Prioritise directly funding Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations that have the trust of Aboriginal people and the capacity to deliver programs and services that support their people and communities.

The land councils will continue to fight against governments that fail us, that make decisions about us, without us.

All legislation, Federal and Territory must not disregard our rights, our knowledge, our contributions, and our dignity. The NT government must stop standing in the way of a better future for our people.

Photo:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/scbocntyazlhazq8zikks/AC0DeTWB4bB15pXQb4rNhfc>

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