

East Arnhem Regional Council Submission to the Select Committee on Opening Parliament to the People 30 November 2016

The East Arnhem Regional Council (EARC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee on Opening Parliament to the People. EARC Local Government Area (LGA) represents some of the most remote, isolated and disadvantaged communities in Australia. The EARC submission focuses on the Labor Party Policy Discussion Paper - *"Parliamentary Reform: Opening Parliament to the People"*

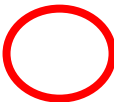
1. East Arnhem Regional Council LGA snapshot

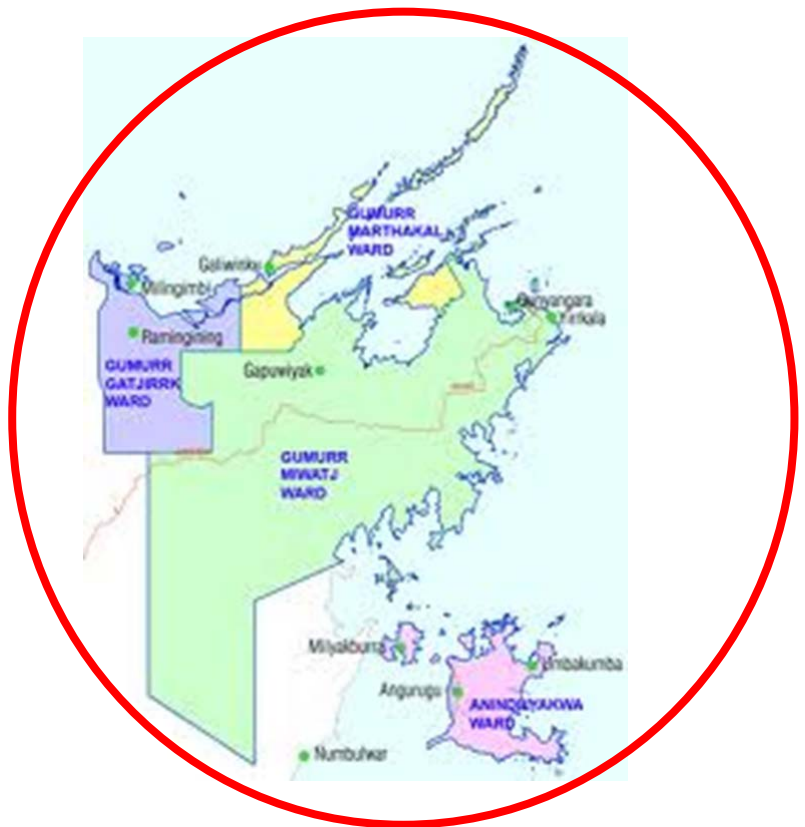
Area: 33,295 km² Population 10,590 Climate – tropical
Length of roads – 1,238km Expenditure - \$46M Number of staff – 300
Average Weekly Individual Income \$268

There are nine (9) communities Angurugu, Galiwin'ku, Gapuwiyak, Gunyangara, Milingimbi, Milyakburra, Ramingining, Umbakumba and Yirrkala with EARC Headquarters (HQ) located in the mining town of Nhulunbuy. Five of the nine communities are located on islands exacerbating the remoteness and service delivery challenges with figures quoted from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) based on the 2011 census. Anecdotally it is accepted, due to the mobility of residents and data collection issues, that the population exceeds the ABS figures and reported figures range between 12,000 and 14,000.

The population reflects an average 91.2% indigenous population (87% when mining towns outside of the LGA are included) and contains 7/20 Northern Territory Growth areas identified by the Northern Territory government and 6/15 Northern Territory Remote Service Delivery (RSD) sites nominated by the Commonwealth Government.



 East Arnhem Regional Council Local Government Area



Service Delivery

EARC delivers a range of services which are detailed in the EARC Annual Report 2013/2014 (www.eastarnhem.nt.gov.au) and include, but are not limited, to the following categories:-

Core Services

Those services that the Council is required to deliver to specified communities under the Local Government Act 2008.

- Cemetery Management
- Administration of Local Authorities, Advisory Boards and Management Committees
- Administration of Local Laws
- Local Emergency Management
- Maintenance and Upgrade of Council Controlled Parks, Reserves and Open Spaces
- Civic Cultural and Sporting Events
- Weed Control and Fire Hazard Reduction
- Library and Cultural Heritage
- Lighting for Public Safety including Street Lighting
- Companion Animal Welfare and Control
- Local Road Upgrade and Construction
- Local Road Maintenance
- Waste Management (including litter reduction)
- Traffic Management on Local Roads
- Training and Employment of Local People in Council Operations

Support Services

Those services that support the operations of the above service groups.

- Fleet and Plant Management
- Community Management
- Maintenance and Upgrade of Council Controlled Buildings, Facilities and Fixed Assets
- Information Technology and Communications
- Advocacy and Representation on Local and Regional Issues
- Financial Management
- Governance
- Public and Corporate Relations
- Customer Relationship Management

Agency Services

Those services that the Council has agreed to deliver on behalf of other Government Agencies on a fee for service basis.

- Community Safety

- Aged and Disability Service
- Children and Family Services
- Youth, Sport and Recreation
- Community Media

Commercial Services

Those services that the Council is striving to undertake on a full commercial basis with the intention of using profits from commercial activities to improve services to the community.

- Mechanical Workshops
- Fuel Distribution Services
- Post Office Agency
- Visitor Accommodation
- Local Commercial Opportunities

Distribution of wealth within the LGA

EARC also believes that the foundation institution of our democracy is the Parliament and community members need to have a strong and effective understanding of its functions and operations. Community residents rely on many other services and agencies outside of EARC such as Education, Health, Retail Stores, electrical generation, water and sewage to name the most critical and the NT Parliament impacts on the delivery of these services.

It is believed that with a stronger understanding of the functions of Parliament community members will have a more positive and confident understanding of decisions being made by the Parliament that have a direct impact on their day to day lives. A more open parliamentary process will give an opportunity for our community members to feel included and to participate in some way in the process and reduce the impression of exclusion.

At the time of the 2011 Census, the East Arnhem Regional (at that time Shire) Council was identified as a region of comparative disadvantage, measured by the ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) which measures people's access to material and social resources, and their ability to participate in society. East Arnhem Shire (sic) scores a 1 Decile (worst) ranking in all four of the indicators - Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage, Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage, Index of Economic Resources and Index of Education and Occupation – and scores:

- 2nd most disadvantaged in the Northern Territory and 8th across the Nation for the Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage

- The most disadvantaged in the Northern Territory in the Index of Economic Resources and 2nd most disadvantaged in the Northern Territory in Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage and 6th across the Nation for both these indexes.
- In the Index of Education and Occupation the East Arnhem Regional Council is ranked 3rd most disadvantaged in the Northern Territory and 20th across the Nation.

This geographic ranking is representative of a whole population rather than singular statistics that focus on income/expenditure.¹ This SEIFA ranking reflects local knowledge that identifies EARC populations as:

- many households with low income and few households with high incomes
- low educational attainment across the community with many people with no qualifications, and with low numbers of people in non-professional, non-managerial roles in the community
- a large number of dwellings needing multiple bedrooms to house families/groups in the community
- high levels of unemployment and single parent families receiving benefits

Based on 2010 estimations, only 7% of the resident population of 10,590 (see previous note) earns a wage or salary despite more than 66% of this population being of working age². While only 1.6% of the resident population is employed in the mining sector, the high income levels of individuals working with these enterprises, and in the government sector, artificially inflates average income and taxation statistics, creating a false view of community wealth.

(Current ABS Estimates of Personal Income for Small Areas, (released Oct 2013) shows average income in the mining towns of Alyangula (Groote Eylandt) to be \$75,484 (growth of 4.8% from 2005-6) and Nhulunbuy as \$64,839 (growth of 2.4% from 2005-6)³ demonstrating the disparity.) There is a significant FIFO population in these communities that results in very little benefit to the EARC local communities– the bulk of disposable income is not expended

¹ ABS downloaded doc 8/01/2015:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2033.0.55.0012011?OpenDocument> 2033.0.55.001 lga population distributions

² ABS downloaded doc 8/01/2015:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@nrp.nsf/Latestproducts/LGA71300Economy12007-2011?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=LGA71300&issue=2007-2011> Table 2

³ ABS downloaded doc 8/01/2015:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/6524.0.55.002Main+Features12005-06%20to%202010-11#Anchor11>

⁴ 4102.0 - Australian Social Trends, April 2013 – Towns of the Mining Boom, ABS,

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features10April+2013#p3>

within the LGA, meaning that inflated wage /salary figures have a double negative impact on the broader community

Despite this, recent trend research by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) does not identify either of the mining towns in the EARC area as boom towns⁴ which infers that the two mining lease operators are not planning any significant operational growth in the immediate future.

Employment within the Council area is primarily in local and state/commonwealth government employment (or in government sponsored employment) equating to more than 50% of employed persons. The next most significant employment sectors are retail (6.5%) and construction (5.7%).⁵

Of the balance of the population, another 706 persons earned an income from their own unincorporated business, investment, superannuation or other income. More than 50% of businesses in the LGA are non-employing businesses and create an income for the owner alone.⁶ Tax concessions provide little impact on the broader community when the majority of persons resident within the LGA are low-income earners.

The cost of accessing goods and services varies greatly during the year and is an added impost especially to low-income earners – the majority of which are in isolated communities without access to competitive suppliers. Most of the Council's road network is in poor condition, and impassable in the wet season, meaning that isolated communities have no way to offset seasonally adjusted charges for goods and services.

20% (1,190 people) of the workforce age-eligible pool of 6,081 people receive the Newstart Allowance – 76% who have been on income support in excess of one year. This indicates that there are few opportunities for these people to move into employment – for whatever reason. 409 people were in receipt of a Parenting Payment (Single) and 239 received a Youth Allowance. Figures for Pensions are not available.⁷

⁵ ABS downloaded doc 8/01/2015:
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@nrp.nsf/Latestproducts/LGA71300Economy12007-2011?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=LGA71300&issue=2007-2011> Table 3

⁶ ABS downloaded doc 8/01/2015:
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@nrp.nsf/Latestproducts/LGA71300Economy12007-2011?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=LGA71300&issue=2007-2011> Table 1

⁷ ABS downloaded doc 8/01/2015:
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@nrp.nsf/Latestproducts/LGA71300Economy12007-2011?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=LGA71300&issue=2007-2011> Table 2

It is hoped that the above gives some clarity regarding the significant levels of disadvantage that exists within EARC's Local Government Area and the need for greater understanding and inclusion of our community members in the parliamentary process.

2. Reforming Parliamentary Practice

***“Would an independent Speaker improve the operation of the Legislative Assembly” and
“Are the current roles and responsibilities of the Speaker effective in ensuring a robust but respectful parliamentary culture?”***

It is believed that the Committee will be in a better position in determining the most appropriate reforms in this area bearing in mind the maintenance of impartiality and a “robust but respectful parliamentary culture”.

“Is the practise of Dorothy Dixers – questions from Government Members to Ministers conducive to the primary function of Question Time which is to enable scrutiny of Government decisions and performance?”

As there is an opportunity for Government, Opposition and Crossbench to ask questions of the Minister concerned the practice should be maintained. However, the Speaker should be in a position to ensure that Question Time is effective and maintains relevance to the matter under debate.

“Are the current rules around the specificity of questions and the relevance of answers during Question Time appropriate or could they be improved?”

As indicated above it would appear that there could be an improvement in ensuring relevance is maintained during Question Time and the Speaker has the power to ensure that this is maintained.

***c. Questions and Answers that matter to the community
Do the current rules governing Question Time encourage an appropriate focus on the issues that affect the day to day life of Territorians?***

As indicated in the beginning of this submission it is identified that the EARC LGA has a high level of disadvantage and an “electorate focussed Question Time” at least once per sitting would allow electorate “specific” issues to be debated particularly those issues that impact either positively or negatively on this level of disadvantage. Education in particular (but not only limited to this) to address the significant differences as identified in the 2016 “closing the Gap” report.

***d. A Chief Minister's Question Time
Would introducing a Chief Minister's question time once per each Sitting session to allow questions directly to the Chief Minister improve the***

accountability and scrutiny of Government?

The introduction of a Chief Minister's question time should seriously be considered and particularly related to the Departments and portfolios under his direct control.

3. Opening up Parliament to the People

EARC supports Labor's belief that "one of the reasons the community is increasingly alienated from parliament and the political process is that the lack of relevance Parliament has to their everyday lives". As indicated previously EARC's remote and isolated environment exacerbates this alienation and increases the feeling and sense of disempowerment.

EARC supports Labor's recommendations to:-

- "a. a root and branch examination of the standing orders to modernise them with a view to increasing transparency and openness and making Parliament more accessible to Territorians.
- b. The setting aside of an allocated time in each Parliamentary sitting week for representatives of different groups to present their case to Parliament. For example the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory, the Council of Ageing, the Chamber of Commerce, Unions NT, and the Youth Roundtable.
- c. The opportunity for members of the community to determine what is debated and considered by the Parliament. This could include the ability for petitions with a certain threshold of signatures by eligible NT voters to be debated in the Legislative Assembly with the opportunity for the lead petitioner to address the Parliament.
- d. That Parliament be upgraded to allow presentations to include modern technology
- e. Ministerial statements, which could also be able to use modern technology in their presentation, will be accompanied by an opportunity for questioning of the Ministers delivering the Statement and their Chief Executives and senior Departmental representatives".

4. Improving Transparency and Openness

EARC also supports:-

- "a. That all Members of the Legislative Assembly Declaration of Interests are

online and available for scrutiny”.

b. Changes to the Estimates Committee process that reflects “splitting the two week hearing into separate one week blocks. The first week would allow for Opposition and Independent MLAs to scrutinise the proposed expenditure and outputs identified in Government Budget Papers. The second week, to be held in October/ November, would scrutinise the actual budget expenditure and policy performance of agencies as part of the Parliament’s deliberation of Departmental Annual Reports”. Also the Estimates Committee to focus on “estimates”, expenditure and actuals and not use this process for political strategy.

Conclusion

The EARC submission supports Labor’s position in “Opening Parliament to the People” not just for EARC but also for community residents within the Local Government Area. An open and more transparent Parliament which incorporates community inclusion will only benefit our communities and reduce the levels of disadvantage in a timely and efficient manner.