

Local Decision Making Submission – CLP Opposition

Introduction

By the year 2021, it is estimated that the Northern Territory population will be approximately 251,727¹, of whom 79,318 (31.5%) will be Aboriginal.

This increase in population, particularly those who live in remote areas will present significant challenges if public policy does not adapt to a modern, inclusive approach to empowerment and decision making process that is inclusive to remote Territorians.

For too long, actions of various governments in the Northern Territory have effectively taken a “we know what’s best for you” approach to Aboriginal affairs. By not effectively engaging with communities and working primarily at a high level with Governments and Land Councils, communities and individuals have been left out which has led to a disconnect and substantial failure for remote Territorians to have their voices heard on issues that matter most to them.

The CLP Opposition is committed to empowering communities by establishing genuine partnerships that will ensure that real decision making is focused at the local level. This will include Land Councils and local community groups working in partnership with Government to identify and remove impediments so that programs and initiatives are developed and implemented from the ground up.

The CLP Opposition supports the empowerment of Aboriginal people to be part of decision-making processes to address issues like economic development, training & real jobs, employment, housing, health, education, local government, children & families, law & justice, sports & recreation, environment & water, and related issues.

The CLP Opposition views this inquiry as an opportune time to reset the relationship between Aboriginal Territorians, the Northern Territory Government and the broader community. The CLP Opposition has firmly based its policies on the principles of Empowerment, Self-determination, Partnerships, Support and Mentoring for Aboriginal people.

¹ NT Treasury 2019 Release <https://treasury.nt.gov.au/dtf/economic-group/population-projections/population-projections-preliminary-update-2017-release>

To achieve a balance between the rights of traditional owners and the aspirations of communities, the CLP Opposition is of the view that parties must be provided with the tools to help build capacity and strengthen local approaches to make informed decisions. These new processes must be strength-based and should take into consideration:

- Connection to country, land and history, culture and identity
- Resilience
- Leadership, roles and structures
- Safety
- Vitality

Remote Housing

Aboriginal people know what is best for their communities and should be empowered to decide on solutions that are best suited for their own communities, particularly relating to housing. The CLP Opposition has the view that actions for remote housing must be focused on ensuring that:

- An Aboriginal community-controlled peak housing body to advise and work collaboratively with the government to streamline Aboriginal housing policies including communities, homelands, outstations and town camps;
- Transparency is realised by having local community groups and leaders applicable to each community, at the table with Land Councils, NT and Commonwealth Governments;
- Community housing groups or associations to be formed to be intrinsically involved in the design and delivery of remote housing. They should assist in setting the design parameters of housing; not be told what will be built, with these entities able to oversight expenditures;
- Government works with communities to establish housing management models where tenancy management and maintenance can be performed locally, increasing services to tenants, reducing maintenance wait times and costs, and creating economic activity within communities;
- These Housing bodies will monitor and approve Housing procurement guidelines and targets so that increased local employment and enterprise outcomes are achieved;

- Government to work with Aboriginal peak organisations, leaders and communities to develop housing models to explore opportunities for the private sector, including local Indigenous owned and operated businesses to assist in increasing housing availability that should reduce waiting lists and overcrowding.

Health Services

The CLP Opposition supports Aboriginal community control and delivery of health services to communities and this model has proven to be successful. The social determinants of Aboriginal health are complex and we will take a holistic view of healthcare including the physical, social, spiritual, cultural and emotional health of Aboriginal people. The CLP Opposition's position is that Aboriginal-led health will:

- Build the capacity of communities to support local and regional solutions for health outcomes;
- Commit to funding programs that have proven to work, not just endless trials.
- Deliver training and professional development in communities for nurses and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners; and
- Conduct an audit of facilities including morgues in remote communities.

Environment and Water

The CLP Opposition understands the unique environment, culture and traditions of the Northern Territory, that they should be protected by the people who are the guardians for future generations and that our unique places are shared. The CLP Opposition supports actions that must include:

- Supporting Aboriginal rangers with training and enforcement and compliance powers to work in Territory parks and reserves as well as on country and increase the funding for the Aboriginal Ranger Grants program;
- Working with the Commonwealth Government to increase the numbers of Aboriginal rangers and their resources in Federal Parks;
- Protecting Aboriginal sacred sites and other sites of cultural significance while economic opportunities are pursued;
- Committing to water allocations based on science with input from traditional custodians.

Law & Justice

The CLP Opposition understands the concerns of Aboriginal Territorians in relation to the justice system.

The CLP Opposition has given in-principle support of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement and will work to implement its vision, principles and aims in consultation with Aboriginal Elders and stakeholders. As the Agreement's Vision states, Aboriginal Territorians deserve to live *'safe, fulfilling lives and to be treated fairly, respectfully and without discrimination'*.

The CLP remains concerned, however, that there is one piece of legislation that is not part of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement - the *Victims of Crimes Rights and Services Act*. We believe this needs to be considered due in most part to the high percentage of Aboriginal people who are victims in our community across the Territory.

The over-representation of Aboriginal people in NT prisons points to current and past policy failures. More offending leads to more arrests and higher incarcerations. This must be turned around and will only occur if we work together.

The CLP Opposition believes that actions on law & justice must include:

- Working with Aboriginal leaders, legal experts and the community to create a justice reform strategy that appropriately addresses offending and protects victims while holding offenders accountable for their actions.
- Establishing Law and Justice Committees across the Northern Territory
- Work with Aboriginal leaders to develop and establish a local community justice system where some action or consequence is applied from the first interaction with the justice system to prevent further escalation of offending.
- Community led programs to reduce imprisonment and reoffending rates, engage Aboriginal Elders and leadership in engaging the justice system and make the justice system more responsive to the need of Aboriginal Territorians.
- Development of diversionary programs that build capacity, confidence and connect with employment prospects in conjunction with Aboriginal Communities.

- Exploring justice reinvestment as a primary approach to criminal justice reform in conjunction with Aboriginal Communities.

Monitoring & Measuring

This government has made many announcements under the Local Decision Making umbrella, from Aboriginal-controlled health clinics to the Room to Breathe program and almost half a million dollars in grants for groups under the Remote Aboriginal Governance and Capacity Building program.

The CLP Opposition is interested to know the outcomes of the Local Decision Making multiagency partnership agreements, which have been signed. In particular:

- Is there a defined evaluation strategy in place?
- Are the LDM partnership agreements and implementation plans being monitored and measured?
- What are the measures being used to monitor the effectiveness of the LDM agreements?
- Do the measures align with Closing the Gap targets?
- Is the government getting regular reports from agencies on the progress of their LDM commitments?
- What feedback is being given to the residents these plans are affecting?

Conclusion

Overall it has been repeatedly stated in remote communities that there is a serious disconnect between government decision making and Aboriginal people and that this has been a major problem in the past. This disconnect leads to poor outcomes in policy and on the ground in communities which raises the question about whether the Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy has been effectively implemented and monitored across government.

Whilst this disconnect cannot be levelled squarely at the NT Government it has a significant role to play in creating and championing the communication through the various levels of local government and ensuring that the voices of all remote Territorians are heard.