

FRIDAY 18 NOVEMBER 2005

## **More info needed on mixed bag of Land Rights reforms**

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) has reacted cautiously to the NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act reforms announced today by Indigenous Affairs Minister, Senator Amanda Vanstone.

ANTaR National Director, Dr David Cooper said more information was needed to determine the impact of a number of the changes and the organisation still had grave concerns about an earlier series of amendments relating to leasing arrangements for community lands.

“On the surface of it, some of these changes are likely to be supported by Aboriginal people. The transfer of 13 national parks and reserves to Aboriginal land is particularly welcome as is the Government’s acceptance of the Land Councils’ proposals with respect to exploration and mining,” he said.

However, Dr Cooper said serious questions remained over a number of the other changes which have the potential to over-ride the wishes of Traditional Owners. In particular:

- **Changing funding arrangements to Land Councils.** “The removal of the statutory guarantee of funding opens the possibility of limiting the capacity and effectiveness of Land Councils to represent Traditional Owners. The Government’s record in nobbling Native Title Representative Bodies through under-funding of these bodies doesn’t inspire confidence,” Dr Cooper said.
- **Delegating powers from Land Councils.** “The informed consent of Traditional Owners could be over-ridden by the Minister in delegating Land Council powers to non-Land Council bodies,” Dr Cooper said.
- **Provisions for establishing new Land Councils.** “In many areas of the Territory there are significant numbers of Aboriginal residents who are not the traditional owners of that area. Only requiring a 55 per cent majority vote to establish a Land Council may result in the wishes of traditional owners being overridden. The informed consent of traditional owners as well as community consent should be sought before new Land Councils are established,” Dr Cooper said.

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- **Changing the make up of the Aboriginal Benefits Account Advisory Committee.** “Adding to the professional expertise of the Committee is positive. But this shouldn’t be used as a justification to weaken Aboriginal representation on the Committee,” Dr Cooper said.

Dr Cooper said today’s changes should also be seen in the context of the earlier series of amendments announced by the Minister last month relating to the leasing of township areas.

“ANTaR has grave concerns about the earlier amendments because they have the potential to reduce Aboriginal control of their community lands and sideline their engagement with development.” he said.

Dr Cooper said the earlier changes would cut traditional owners out of the development process that would increase the value of their land.

“The changes would encourage the very problem the Government says it wants to address – passivity. The Government wants to turn Aboriginal people into mere rent collectors rather than developers of their communities,” Dr Cooper said.

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