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Senate votes to undermine Aboriginal land rights

In Canberra today, the Senate passed a new law that that could see Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory forced to hand over control of their land for 99 years.

The changes to the *Northern Territory Land Rights Act* give more power to the Minister at the expense of traditional owners and the Land Councils that serve them.

More than 28 thousand Australians signed an online petition organized by Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) and online campaigning organization, GetUp to oppose the changes.

The changes were also opposed by the Northern and Central Land Councils, traditional owners including Indigenous Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, organizations including Oxfam and Reconciliation Australia as well as Labor, the Democrats and Greens.

ANTaR National Director, Gary Highland said the Government ignored the wishes of all of these people when it refused to delay passage of the controversial elements of the Bill to allow for further consultation.

The new legislation has also resulted in a number of current land claims recommended for granting by the Aboriginal Land Commissioner automatically wiped out.

Earlier, ANTaR had argued in a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the legislation that Aboriginal people could be pressured into signing over their land to the Government for 99 years in return for basic services that their communities desperately need.

Of further concern, rent for leasing land will not be paid by the Government, but from mining royalty equivalents via the Aboriginal Benefits Account that was established for the benefit of Indigenous people, funded from mining activities on their land.

"This will result in a situation where in effect the savings of the landlord are used to pay the rent of the tenant," Mr Highland said.

"The changes ended 30 years of bipartisan support for what had been the high water mark of land rights in Australia," he said.

The Government maintains that any changes to leasing arrangements or land council functions will be voluntary. ANTaR said it will carefully monitor the implementation of the legislation and listen to Indigenous Territorians about its affect on them.

"We will expose any examples of changes that are not based on the free, prior and informed consent of traditional owners," Mr Highland said.

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