

Speech for Minister for Aboriginal Affairs

Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Aboriginal Land Rights Act

22 April 2008

I would like to show my respect, and acknowledge the Gadigal people, members of one of the 29 clans which make up the Eora Nation who are the traditional custodians of this land.

I would also like to extend that respect to the many Aboriginal Elders past and present and other Aboriginal people here today.

It is a great pleasure to be here for such an historic moment. This is the third time in our history that Aboriginal Elders have met in this place. The first time was for the First Black Parliament in June 1997, which had a second sitting in June 1998.

NSW is the only State with a democratically elected structure to represent the interest of its land councils. This structure is protected through the provisions of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983*.

This is a very significant year for Aboriginal representation.

I am particularly pleased to be standing here with an elected NSW Aboriginal Land Council.

It is fitting that we are in this place to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983*.

Land in the State of New South Wales was traditionally owned and occupied by Aboriginal people.

This land is of immense spiritual, social, cultural and economic importance.

It was in this place that the decision was announced to establish a Select Committee, made up of the main political parties in NSW, and helped by an Aboriginal Taskforce, set up to maintain close contact with Aboriginal communities during its inquiry into several issues of key significance for Aboriginal people in NSW.

The Select Committee examined key issues and advised Parliament on:

- The causes of the socio-economic disadvantages of Aboriginal people particularly in the areas of housing, health, education, employment, welfare and culture;
- The effectiveness of the Commonwealth/State arrangements in Aboriginal Affairs; and
- Land rights for Aboriginal people in NSW.

Rightly, emphasis was placed on the development of land in NSW, which was being undertaken without regard for its significance to the Aboriginal people.

The committee's findings represented a departure from the 'assimilationist' approaches of previous Governments, and formed the basis for establishment of a land rights system.

The Committee emphasised that granting land rights was of paramount importance to Aboriginal people in NSW, and should be regarded as 'an act of elementary justice' for past actions designed to destroy Aboriginal societies and be accompanied by recompense for removal from their lands.

The committee's recommendations would eventually provide funding for the NSW Aboriginal Land Council and would be enshrined in the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act*.

The *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* was born of a desire for both sides of politics to acknowledge the traditional ownership of land in NSW by Aboriginal people, and its spiritual, cultural and economic importance for Aboriginal people.

The *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* has needed amendment to keep pace by providing for Aboriginal ownership of crown lands, the provision of Aboriginal housing and social benefits to communities working with their Aboriginal land councils.

During the community consultations for the amendments that the NSW Government enacted in 2006 and commenced in 2007 many people acknowledged that the land rights Act had led to greater recognition and acknowledgement of Aboriginal people and issues.

Through the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act*, land councils have acquired wealth and power on behalf of Aboriginal people at local, regional and state levels.

The *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* created an important political and organisational structure for Aboriginal communities in NSW in their pursuit of self-determination and self-management.

While the acquisition of land has remained a strong focus of land councils, the needs and aspirations of many communities are being addressed through the development of businesses, better housing and infrastructure, and significant employment and training opportunities. Land councils have become lobbyists for Aboriginal people within communities and with government at all levels.

Land councils have gone from strength to strength because they have the support of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act*. We have seen an increase in the

size and value of assets held by Aboriginal people and the potential economic development it will bring to communities.

I commend the initiative of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council in using the recent amendments to the Act to broaden the scope of work it undertakes to improve the wellbeing of its members. The NSW Aboriginal Land Council Education Endowment Fund is a key example of this. The multi million dollar self funding education endowment fund will have a significant impact on improving employment opportunities for Aboriginal people at all levels- primary, secondary and tertiary.

Land councils in NSW control more than 80,000 hectares of land with a value of more than \$2 billion.

The NSW Government is currently consulting the NSW Aboriginal Land Council on amendments to the land dealings provisions of the Land Rights Act to unlock the potential of these land holdings in order to deliver tangible benefits to Aboriginal communities.

The new land dealings regime will be a strong complement to the landmark amendments to land council corporate governance that the NSW Government commenced in July 2007. It will take the Land Rights Act forward into a new era of more effective governance and asset management backed by a more representative structure of governance as well.

So, in a range of ways, the NSW Government's amendments to the Aboriginal Land Rights Act are broadening opportunities for improving the lives of Aboriginal people in NSW.

However, NSW Government recognises that there is still a long way to go and will continue to work with Aboriginal people to address the unacceptable levels of disadvantage in this state.

The recently announced partnership between NSWALC and the Government to secure recurrent investment over a minimum of 25 years for the ongoing monitoring and maintenance of water and sewerage systems in more than 60 discrete Aboriginal communities across NSW is a key example of what can be achieved through working in partnership.

It represents a combined investment of more than \$200M in today's dollars. It also represents an acknowledgement by Government that the Land Council system, and the NSWALC in particular, is a strong and vital partner in improving conditions in Aboriginal communities across NSW.

It is only by working in partnership that we will meet the commitments made by the Premier in his Australia Day speech when he acknowledged that "a third World nation festers within our own borders condemning and shaming us all" and therefore the NSW Government will commit itself to "making significant and substantial inroads into Indigenous disadvantage in the remaining three years of the parliamentary term."

I look forward to the NSW Aboriginal Land Council continuing to be a key partner in this journey for the next twenty five years.

Thank you.