

Lighting fires for the future

John Ah Kit, Minister for Community Development

Indigenous Economic Development Forum, Darwin 25 May 2005

Acknowledgements to Larrakia welcome to country

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, welcome to this—the Territory's second Indigenous Economic Development Forum.

I will be brief—and to the point.

The origin and purpose of this Forum is simple.

Two years ago, our Government, in conjunction with Indigenous leaders and peak organisations—along with key non-Indigenous business leaders—commenced along the path of the most difficult and critical task that faces the Northern Territory today—and in the foreseeable future.

That difficult and critical task is to re-invent the economic and social future for Indigenous Territorians.

As John Taylor pointed out a couple of years ago—and this is a passage I have quoted a number of times:

...the Northern Territory has a serious economic development problem—around one fifth of its resident adult population, representing the majority of its Indigenous population, remains overly-dependent on welfare, structurally detached from the labour market and ill-equipped to engage in it.

I would go further than John Taylor, and describe it as a *chronic* economic development problem.

Everyone in the Northern Territory—not just the people here today—lives with the consequences of this economic development problem. No community—anywhere—can avoid the social and economic costs of continued inaction, in which 30 per cent of its population is condemned to languish on the fringes of the economy, and on the fringes of our towns and cities.

This Forum is about overcoming economic alienation, and seeking real world solutions.

It is about learning—in part—from the mistakes of the past. In greater part, it is about learning from past and present successes.

It is about learning from each other, and networking with each other.

It is about the nitty gritty of Indigenous economic development—not pie in the sky theories, or sitting in ideological straight jackets.

We must move ahead with evidence-based solutions—and with rigorous research.

Research and real world evidence—in fact—is what has marked the work of the my department and the Indigenous Economic Development Task Force, which has met five times since the last Forum—and whose work we will see shortly with the launch by our Chief Minister Clare Martin of the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy.

The work of the Task Force—and I sincerely thank them for their work—is about the nitty gritty of Indigenous Economic Development.

The work of re-inventing our economic and social future is **not** about facile and mindless formulae.

I'll be honest—whenever I hear these so-called solutions—I metaphorically feel like reaching for my shotgun.

You know the lines.

“If only we replaced welfare payments with food vouchers, everything in the garden would be lovely.”

Or “if only we kicked out the Long Grassers and sent them out Bush, our anti-social behaviour problems would be solved.”

Or, “if only Blackfellas would go out and get a job, we'd get them off welfare.”

You know the lines, and I don't have to go on any more about them.

They are simply unbelievable.

None of these simple-minded lines do anything to move Indigenous economic development ahead.

They do nothing to create jobs.

They do nothing to improve health or education outcomes.

They do nothing to overcome the ravages of substance abuse.

They do nothing to overcome chronic overcrowding in housing.

They do nothing to provide infrastructure on our towns and communities.

I don't apologise, here, for sounding like a politician—even though I am about to be an ex-politician.

No one here should be under any illusions about the 27 years that preceded the Martin government.

It was a period in which the previous regime were custodians of neglect and decay in our communities—I repeat—custodians of neglect and decay.

It was a period in which literacy levels collapsed, and during which not a single Indigenous student graduated from secondary studies from any of our remote towns and communities.

It was a period in which skill levels declined, and employment levels went south.

It was a period in which opportunities for economic development were squandered—if not obstructed and opposed.

And in the four years since then, there has not been a single sensible idea put forward by them in Opposition about Indigenous economic development.

In Opposition, they have not asked a single sensible question about the future of Indigenous economic development; they have not sought a single briefing.

They have treated the entire issue with contempt, ignorance and the kinds of simple-minded clichés I have mentioned.

This Forum—and the work of the Task Force—is something that should have occurred many years ago.

In the next two days—as I have said—we will learn about the real world solutions that are being tested and pursued throughout the Territory.

None of us here pretend that we can achieve overnight successes across the Territory, but the main areas of discussion—

horticulture and bush foods; arts and the media; mining and construction; tourism and parks; retail services; natural resource management; pastoral and aquaculture—

are all areas in which Indigenous Territorians and their partners in non-Indigenous enterprise, are kicking goals.

The most important outcome of the next two days will be directions from this Forum on how we should move ahead.

I am particularly interested in how people feel about the usefulness of these Forums and whether, as the Task Force has discussed, we are now at the stage of capacity and business-readiness for the next Forum to take the form of an Indigenous Expo.

Such an Expo would demonstrate our business acumen and initiative to the world, and show where we can concertedly build the partnerships and relationships we need to move ahead.

Finally, as you are aware, I will be retiring at the next election—but I want to make something perfectly clear.

Just because I am taking a bit of time out to do a bit of fishing and goose hunting, my passion for the issue of the advancement of our people will remain undiminished.

Three years ago in parliament, I said that the camp fires of my people—around which we can talk about family, our past experiences and our future hopes—was my light on the hill—my inspiration.

I tell you today, we must keep those camp fires burning—and indeed light more camp fires—for the future of our children and grandchildren.

Thank you.