

Let's debate the future
Robert Lee, Executive Director, Jawoyn Association
Indigenous Economic Development Forum, Darwin May 2005

I'm here today to say that as well as looking at the successes of the past, we should also be debating where we are going in the future.

The first point I would like to make is that there is nothing new under the sun in the debate about Indigenous Economic Development—at least for us mob.

A lot of non-Indigenous people—politicians, journalists and university professors—have suddenly woken up to the importance of Indigenous Economic Development. It's like in the old days of the white explorers—they think they have discovered something new.

Instead, all they are doing is finding something old—something we have been talking about for a long time. Now, I have nothing against Noel Pearson, but munanga talk about his ideas as if he is the first person in the world to talk about the importance of beating welfare dependence, and establishing economic independence.

They talk about his ideas as if Aboriginal people everywhere else are too dumb to have come up with these ideas a long time ago.

But Jawoyn old people were talking about this in the 1970s when they started off the Jawoyn land claim over Nitmiluk National Park.

The main reason for the claim, they said back then, was to take control over their country and their lives, and to build jobs and investment opportunities through tourism and land management.

Then, in 1989, at the return of Nitmiluk to the Jawoyn people through the lease of Nitmiluk, my late brother and I spoke to Katherine and Darwin business people. It was a first for us—but also a first for many of those business people. We challenged those business people to sit down with us—and work together to build an economic future for our people.

Some of them did—and over the following 15 years we have developed our business ventures in Nitmiluk. At the moment we are looking to go up to the next stage at Nitmiluk—again working in joint venture and leasing arrangements—to really expand on our base at Nitmiluk.

It's a major move ahead for the Jawoyn people—and there is major finance involved.

But I don't want to go too far into the history—many of you know about it or have read about it.

I'm wanting to talk today about the challenges of the future—and the changes I believe we need take on if all of us are to move up to the next stage.

The first thing I believe we must do is to make our communities stronger through economic development—not weaker.

As long as we see business enterprises as another form of welfare hand-outs, we will fail.

This idea of money-longa-finger cash hand outs to individuals through profits or royalties is not really different from the old days of munanga handing out rations of flour and tea. As long as you are good Jacky-Jackys, you will get your rations—or your royalty money.

Getting money for nothing for individuals like this is no different from sit down money

Business and economic development must be seen as a social, community good—and profits from our enterprises should be seen as advancing the clan or the nation, through building up our infrastructure, or re-investing in a larger economic base.

It is only through better infrastructure and a bigger economic base that we will be able to expand the jobs our people need—there is no other way.

This does not mean that individual hard work should not be rewarded through good wages and the chances of improving the lives of their families—quite the opposite. But the work has to be there—the jobs have to be there.

And that won't happen unless we invest in expanding the economic base of our people.

The second thing I want to talk about is that we need to be able to use our land for long term investment—not the hand to mouth way we are forced to do at the moment.

This means changes to the way we look at S.19 of the Land Rights Act.

Now, I know that some people in Canberra think that now is the chance to get rid of land rights in the Northern Territory. I am here to say that this would be the worst thing to do—it would destroy any chance we have of Indigenous people and non-Indigenous business people working together to expand the economic base in the way I mentioned before.

What we need is long term certainty through making the Land Rights Act work—not the sort of confusion and bitterness that would happen if the Act is destroyed.

And the key to making the Act work is—as I said—expanding the capacity of S.19 to allow for serious infrastructure improvement and long term development on our land.

In short, S.19 of the Act has to be given to the people, and not be left in the hands of the minister in Canberra. We must be allowed to use that section of the Act—the section that allows for long term leases over Aboriginal land—to get access to the kinds of serious capital we need to build our economy.

Let me give you an example.

If an Aboriginal clan—or community—wanted to set up a major commercial centre on their land, the only way to raise the millions of dollars it would need would be through government. And let's face it—the government hasn't got the kind of money that we need to improve all the infrastructure we need across all the communities and towns that need it.

And private money could not be put in, because they can't get long enough leases to ensure the project would pay off the investment.

Another example.

In the last ten years the Jawoyn have done a lot of work with Government to find out what is on our land—where the water is; where the good soils are for farming or forestry. We know what is there from Western science—but we cannot advertise the opportunities for investment because S.19 is too restrictive and too hard to use.

So we need to change S.19 to allow for long term investment—not just from private investment, but also from Aboriginal enterprise.

But it goes further than this, changes to S.19 can also achieve what the Land Rights Act has not been able to do over the last 29 years—look after the interests of the Traditional Owners of our towns and communities.

And that is the third thing I want to raise for debate.

At the moment, most of the 70 larger communities and towns on Aboriginal land have been there since before the days of the Land Rights Act. They are old missions, government settlements and cattle stations that were established on the lands of their Traditional Owners well before the idea of consultation and consent under the Land Rights Act were even thought of.

Some of these towns and communities have been there for over 100 years—even if they wanted to, the Traditional Owners cannot wipe them out.

Yet still they get nothing.

That's why S.19 should be changed to establish proper leases over towns and communities so that Traditional owners can benefit from the fact that the site of these places have taken over their traditional lands, and that they are now home to many other language and clan groups, as well as Europeans.

And it would have other benefits.

A proper head lease over communities and towns would also make it easier to attract investment and loan financing into these places.

For example, at the moment Aboriginal Territorians can get Government or private home ownership loans in any of the main towns and cities like Darwin or Alice Springs—but they can't get loans to buy homes in the bush. And this is during a period when we know that there is a shortfall of thousands of homes for Aboriginal people in the bush—and that overcrowding is a major cause of bad health for our people.

This is wrong, and it discriminates against our people.

S.19 must be changed to let us—on a voluntary basis—get proper head leases over our towns and communities.

The fourth and final thing we must debate is the way we get to move ahead for our people.

We need to think, as I said, beyond individuals getting money for nothing through things like royalties.

This also means starting to think regionally—and not just at the level of small communities.

We need to go back to the days when ceremony was talking—it was talking across whole regions—not just for one family or one clan.

We don't have ceremony just for one community—that's a whitefella way of thinking. We have ceremony for Dua or Yirritja people—for everyone across a lot of towns and communities.

Our traditional business was always across regions—and we have to go back to that way of operating for our new businesses.

This means getting away from worrying about your own little kingdom or castle—about your own power base.

We have done that in our area with the Sunrise Health Service and Nyirranggulung-Mardrulk-Ngadberre Regional Authority. We are thinking regionally—and acting regionally.

Friends, the future of Indigenous Territorians really is in our hands. I hope the ideas I have put forward today will really start discussions about the kinds of changes we need to take that future—for our kinds and grand kids.

Thank you

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