

MEDIA STATEMENT

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Aboriginal communities need time

The WA government should take a 100-year view when considering the future of remote Aboriginal communities.

“Any decision as early as January 2009 to close communities would be disastrously premature,” said Chairperson Brian Wyatt.

“The consequences of an overnight relocation of large numbers of people from remote communities to regional centres, which are mostly unprepared for such impacts, would be calamitous for the towns, society at large and the lives of the individuals concerned.

“Let’s not forget that many indigenous communities function well. Plus, many exist so that the people can get away from their local towns that don’t want them there anyway.

“Instead, governments – state, territory and federal – should open a window of transition of up to 100 years for remote communities. This would provide time for new generations to equip themselves with the education and skills required for lives in the outside world and adjust to the pain that living away from one’s traditional country and culture can bring.

“It is overdue for Australian society to draw a deep breath and reflect on 200 years’ mismanagement of Aboriginal affairs. The clear message is that quick fixes devised without genuine consultation with indigenous people never work.

“During the period of transition, even small homeland communities would be entitled to expect quality ongoing services such as health, education and housing.

“As education standards rise and opportunities in the outside world open up, it is inevitable that the cost to taxpayers of communities would fall as many closed of their own accord.

“Government also needs to be more accommodating of Aboriginal people’s need to maintain strong links to their traditional country. Granting of native title or agreed settlement of claims, ownership of reserves and joint management of conservation reserves have all progressed too slowly thus far.

“Maintaining links to traditional country is vital for the well-being of indigenous people. The ability to go back to country must extend forever, way beyond a 100-year period of transition,” Mr Wyatt said.

The National Native Title Council is the voice of Australia’s native title representative bodies and service providers. Chairperson Brian Wyatt is also CEO of WA’s Goldfields Land and Sea Council.

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