
Land Council boss calls on PM to replace Indigenous Affairs Minister

Reporter: Sara Everingham
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ELEANOR HALL: The CEO of the Northern Land Council, Joe Morrison, has called for Malcolm Turnbull to strip Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion of his portfolio if the Coalition wins the election.

Mr Morrison told a national native title conference in Darwin this morning that the Minister is driven by personal ideology and has punished critics and turned the portfolio into a shambles.

Joe Morrison also warned about the Minister's plans for the development of northern Australia.

In Darwin, Sara Everingham reports.

SARA EVERINGHAM: The CEO of the Northern Land Council, Joe Morrison, has been speaking about 40 years since the establishment of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in the Northern Territory.

He says, over the years, much has been achieved. But right now, he says, it's a bleak time in Indigenous Affairs. He says the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Nigel Scullion, has to go.

JOE MORRISON: I believe this Minister is not up to the job. And I would implore Malcolm Turnbull, if his Coalition government is returned on July the 2nd, to look among his caucus and find a new minister who has the interest of Indigenous people at heart and a commitment to work with the institutional architecture, not against it.

SARA EVERINGHAM: Since Nigel Scullion has been the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, there have been major changes in the administration and funding of Indigenous organisations.

Joe Morrison says the changes have resulted in more uncertainty for Indigenous groups and fewer services.

JOE MORRISON: This Minister takes our breath away. Where is the accountability? And where does the buck stop? Who's going to take the rap for the shambles that pervades the administration of Indigenous Affairs?

And woe betide anyone who dares question the dud policies affecting Indigenous Affairs that emanate from this Government in Canberra.

SARA EVERINGHAM: Relations between the Minister and the Northern Land Council, which is one of the most powerful Indigenous organisations in the country, appeared to be thawing last year.

But Joe Morrison says, at a recent full council meeting of the Northern Land Council, the Minister tried to drive a wedge between him and the rest of the council over its position on the Federal Government's Remote Jobs Program.

JOE MORRISON: And although his divide-and-rule tactic didn't go down well with the full council, it did send a chilling message, I believe. And that is: don't mess with the Minister or he's going to shoot the messenger.

SARA EVERINGHAM: Joe Morrison says, since Minister Scullion made his maiden speech in Parliament, he's shown a desire to change the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in the Northern Territory, which allows traditional owners to veto developments on their land.

And Joe Morrison fears the Minister's current push for northern development is a cover for an attack on land councils and land rights.

Joe Morrison says the Minister is using his discretion over a pool of money, made up of mining royalties, to fund smaller organisations that want to take on the roles of land councils.

JOE MORRISON: It's petty, meddling mentality fed by an ideological mindset against land rights and land councils, the NLC in particular.

It's beneath a Commonwealth Minister to be running agendas driven by personal ideology, personal antipathy and personal relationships, especially in a portfolio as sensitive and embracing as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

SARA EVERINGHAM: Mr. Morrison says he fears Indigenous people are being left out of northern development plans.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Gooda, doesn't want to be drawn on the criticism of Nigel Scullion. But he says things need to change.

MICK GOODA: We need a respectful relationship. Attacks on the Land Council: all it does is cement support for the land councils from our side.

So what we need is respectful relationships, where we can put everything on the table and we can discuss it.

SARA EVERINGHAM: The World Today has contacted the office of Minister Nigel Scullion for a response.

ELEANOR HALL: Sara Everingham in Darwin.