

Indigenous leader signs 99-year land lease to Govt

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Broadcast: 20/09/2007

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In a surprise move, one of the nation's most powerful Aboriginal leaders has given the Howard Government what it wants by agreeing to sign a 99 year lease over his traditional land in the Northern Territory. The deal follows a secret meeting between Galarrwuy Yunupingu and the Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough in Arnhem Land. The deal puts Yunupingu at loggerheads with other Aboriginal leaders but what does it mean for outback communities?

Transcript

KERRY O'BRIEN: For all the public support that's flowed to the Federal Government for its takeover of Northern Territory Aboriginal communities, the range of concerns sparked by the move have not abated either, as the Government operation has bedded in.

Nearly three months after it was announced, a number of Aboriginal organisations and rallies of public protest continue to decry the intervention.

One contentious aspect has been the Government's acquisition of five-year leases over communities in the cause of fighting child sexual abuse.

The Government has now won approval for its intervention from a previously high-profile critic, land rights champion and former Australian of the Year, Galarrwuy Yunupingu.

Most significantly, Mr Yunupingu has agreed to a 99-year lease to the Commonwealth, of parts of his traditional land in north-east Arnhem Land.

The deal follows a secret meeting last month involving Mr Yunupingu, Queensland Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson, and Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough.

Murray McLaughlin has been tracking the story.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: On Sunday, 12th of August at his outstation overlooking the Gulf of Carpentaria, Galarrwuy Yunupingu hosted the Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough. The secret meeting had been brokered by another Aboriginal leader from the Queensland side of the Gulf, Noel Pearson.

GALARRWUY YUNUPINGU: Mal Brough, has showed real leadership in a way that he visited north-east Arnhem Land. And Noel Pearson has been a really top mediator in this issue.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: That very weekend, Noel Pearson and in his regular *The Weekend Australian* paper column had urged a meeting like this to win legitimacy of the Government's takeover of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

Mr Pearson was mindful of the backlash against intervention which had been evident a week before at the annual Garma Culture Festival in east Arnhem Land.

The backlash had been led by Mr Yunupingu himself.

GALARRWUY YUNUPINGU (August 4, 2007): Worrying and sickening, the lowest level of anybody's form of policy.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: Yet, only a week later Galarrwuy Yunupingu had agreed to receive Noel Pearson on the very site where the Garma Festival was held. The two men met 17 years ago, during the Mabo negotiations, which led to the enactment of the first native title legislation.

This time Noel Pearson had just concluded a deal with the Federal Government for welfare reform and other interventions in his home country of Cape York.

NOEL PEARSON, CAPE YORK PARTNERSHIPS: Both the Cape York response and the Northern Territory response form part of the same legislation. But I also wanted to make the point that firstly I agreed with the need for us to tackle the safety and child protection and social order questions that were at the forefront of the emergency response.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: Witnesses say the talks that Saturday were strained at first, but by the end of the day Galarrwuy Yunupingu agreed that Mal Brough should join them for talks on Saturday.

NOEL PEARSON: I think it started from a low-base of mutual suspicion and trepidation, I think. Galarrwuy Yunupingu was naturally very upset with the unilateral nature of the intervention. And same with Brough. I think, I think that there was a great deal of wariness on the part of Brough.

MAL BROUGH, INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS MINISTER: I just explained to him what it was that we were trying to achieve and the practical measures we were introducing in the Territory, and then there was a long period of silence.

GALARRWUY YUNUPINGU: There had to be a negotiation and a serious dialogue, to bring about an arrangement in agreement to the middle ground if there was going to be a ongoing, service-delivery arrangement that he was proposing under the legislation.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: Two and a half weeks after the talks with Mal Brough the country's most senior public servant and other officials came to north-east Arnhem

Land to negotiate a special lease over parts of the town of Ski Beach on the Gove Peninsula. The town is on Mr Yunupingu's traditional land, one of more than 70 Aboriginal towns in the Northern Territory which the Commonwealth is acquiring by way of a 5-year lease under its emergency plan.

The new lease at Ski Beach would be for 99 years, mainly over residential areas and infrastructure facilities. In return, the Commonwealth Government has promised to upgrade services and to help future economic development.

GALARRWUY YUNUPINGU: The land owners are not going to develop it, simply because we don't have the resources and if Government is willing to deliver those services any way possible, is it a good idea to open the door, or close the door? I have simply opened it.

MAL BROUGH: It will be more than just home ownership and business ownership in the town centre, with 99-year leases back from the Federal Government. But it'll be for the first time the potential to be unleashed on traditional lands in a way in which the traditional owners control and demand the sort of, the things that are important to them, but also getting the sort of outcomes that they are also demanding.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: Galarrwuy Yunupingu briefed his fellow traditional owners in Arnhem Land yesterday about the proposed lease. Just how much Commonwealth money will now pour into their home town no one can say yet, but given Mr Yunupingu's standing as a traditional law man in the Top End and given the Federal Government's perception that his signing up to a 99-year lease is a public relations coup for its emergency actions in the Territory, the tiny settlement of Ski Beach is likely to become a showpiece of the intervention. Mr Yunupingu has more than repudiated his vehement misgivings of only six weeks ago about the intervention. He's now a cheer squad leader.

GALARRWUY YUNUPINGU: I welcome it with an open arm. To the day I die, and I die with a hope that this service to look after children and service for, in service-delivery system in a real way as Government responsible in power has to do. I welcome it.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: The Federal Government sees the Ski Beach deal as a turning point in its intervention. Certainly Galarrwuy Yunupingu is now Mal Brough's new champion.

MAL BROUGH: Here we have a person of great authority, almost a legend in the Territory, and for him to see that this Government is not about ripping away rights, will speak volumes to Indigenous people who say, "If it's good enough for Galarrwuy Yunupingu, it's good enough for us to consider, we can have faith".

KERRY O'BRIEN: And that story included footage shot by cameraman Lew Griffith. Murray McLaughlin with the report.