

Gas deposits a Lottery for Indigenous Benefits

Leading West Australian Aboriginal MP Ben Wyatt has called for greater empowerment of Indigenous communities in self-determination and governance at the December national Indigenous Business, Enterprise and Corporations Conference, hosted by The University of Western Australia.

Wyatt, WA's Shadow Treasurer and Shadow Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Native Title and Cost of Living said government policy had for too long been based on palliative economics – a defeatist attitude “premised on Aboriginal culture dying.”

“No longer is it acceptable to view regional poverty from the social welfare perspective,” Wyatt told more than 300 delegates at the conference. “This is what Norwegian economist Professor Erik Reinert calls ‘palliative economics’, a phrase that is as unpalatable as is the inevitable end it portends.”

Wyatt said palliative economics must be replaced by building relationships between Indigenous communities and industry.

In his speech titled, ‘Western Australian strategies to achieve Indigenous empowerment’, Wyatt said regional empowerment was vital.

“Aboriginal people cannot be empowered if they are not willing to prioritise the one key to empowerment – education,” Wyatt said.

“If we do not accept that a school in a regional or remote part of Western Australia must perform at mainstream standards, then what is the point of that school? How are we providing Indigenous empowerment with such expectations?”

“We cannot deliver a standard of education lower than what we expect in Perth and then expect ‘mainstream’ jobs to flow. We are, effectively, giving governmental endorsement to a ‘palliative education’ system.”

Wyatt said while the WA Government’s \$6.5 B Royalties for Regions funding scheme had bipartisan support in State Parliament, it was imperative to ensure the program avoided becoming “the spending narrative of a Perth-based Minister”.

“While Royalties for Regions has delivered some outstanding results for regional Western Australia, issues of governance, sustainability and decentralisation remain ignored,” Wyatt said.

Wyatt said WA’s Ord Final Agreement between the State Government and Miriuwung Gajerrong Traditional Owners to develop 65,000 hectares of land for Australia’s biggest irrigation farming scheme in WA’s far north presented an important opportunity for Aboriginal communities to achieve empowerment.

“We may well see a comprehensive settlement leading to empowerment,” he said. “The moral obligations of ‘corporate social responsibility’ mean that Aboriginal people have been able to negotiate impressive outcomes with the corporate world. Yet the benefits still remain unclear, the money trail often murky and the obvious benefits seem nothing more than those services that Government should otherwise already be providing.”



MP Ben Wyatt.

Wyatt defended Native Title rights, saying “property rights, however weak, give Aboriginal people a bargaining position”.

“It is not for those miners who seek such access to Country to decide the moral virtue of their claims,” he said.

However, Wyatt said mineral deposits were too often a lottery. The fact that Indigenous communities in the Kimberley would receive benefits if a gas processing plant is built onshore but not if it is built offshore – despite the same gas fields being exploited – was “somewhat absurd”.

The Premier’s Office told *PNR* that the \$1.5 B benefits package negotiated between the State Government and Woodside with the Goolarabooloo Jabirr Jabirr registered native title claimants and traditional owners across the Kimberley includes a detailed package of employment opportunities, a land swap, funding and benefits such as housing and education and training.

This was negotiated on the basis of recognising Native Title rights at the Browse LNG Precinct site near James Price Point and the environmental benefits basing all Browse gas processing at a single onshore location.

If the gas field – which is 300 km off the coast – were developed offshore, the agreements that underpin this package will not be relevant, so there will be very little in it for indigenous communities in the Kimberley.

APPEA and Woodside declined to comment. ■