



Speech by

Hon. Liddy Clark

MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD

Hansard Thursday, 13 May 2004

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Aboriginal Councils, Auditor-General's Report

Hon. E.A. CLARK (Clayfield—ALP) (Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy) (10.16 a.m.): Yesterday the Auditor-General of Queensland tabled the results of the audits of Queensland's Aboriginal councils for the 2002-03 financial year. This report is, in some respects, disappointing, but it does include some heartening news. It also shows the importance of the Beattie government's moves to make Aboriginal councils more transparent and accountable by bringing these councils under the Local Government Act.

The Auditor-General's report included eight unqualified audit opinions. That is the best overall result since the 1998-99 year. The councils of Injinoo, Kowanyama, Wujal Wujal, Umagico, Napranum, Yarrabah, New Mapoon and Mapoon all received an unqualified audit. That is the first time in many years the Umagico and Napranum councils had received an unqualified audit opinion, and the result shows the councils have reached a level of sound governance and financial accountability. Unfortunately, the report also showed six councils received qualified audit opinions. Two of these—Cherbourg and Palm Island—were found to be of particular concern.

The state government has acted on Palm Island Council problems since the 2002-03 financial year. In October last year, the government announced the Legislative Assembly had ratified legislation to dissolve the Palm Island Aboriginal Council and appointed an administrator to restore services to the island and to address deficiencies in the council's financial affairs. The state government has since appointed a financial controller to work with the new Palm Island Council to ensure significant accountability improvements are maintained. The government has also been in discussions with Cherbourg Aboriginal Council about a range of issues, including the ongoing business of council. I am advised that representatives from the Department of Local Government and Planning will also visit Cherbourg on 18 May regarding council issues. In addition, the state government is implementing a councillor training program to provide financial management and leadership training to councillors and senior council staff. The program makes financial management skills necessary for efficient administration of grant funding a priority.

This report does not, of course, describe an ideal situation, but it does represent an improvement in remote Aboriginal communities. The Beattie government is ensuring accountability in these communities will be boosted through its commitment to a better system of community governance. The current legislation covering Aboriginal councils, the Community Services (Aborigines) Act 1984, is outdated and needs to be updated. Our proposed new laws will bring Aboriginal councils under the same framework as all other local governments. These laws have followed extensive community consultation after the release of a green paper for discussion and feedback in March last year. The laws, to be phased in to allow councils plenty of time to plan and prepare, are about strengthening councils in Aboriginal communities by providing them with the tools for strong and accountable community governance. The laws will ensure residents of Aboriginal communities have the same standards of local government as residents in other parts of Queensland. This will be achieved by converting Aboriginal councils into shire councils and

granting them the powers and duties that go with that status. There will be further consultation with Aboriginal communities about the new laws, and there will a communication strategy to assist with this shift.