



John Bowler MLA
MEMBER FOR EYRE



In reply please quote: 201102ExplorationWJonas
Your ref: bowlerinquiry280902

Mr William Jonas AM
Social Justice Commissioner
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
GPO Box 5218
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Mr Jonas

RE: INQUIRY INTO GREENFIELDS EXPLORATION IN WA

I write in response to your letter of September 25, 2001 (sic).

I am both surprised and disappointed at your response, particularly your criticism of my letter which concluded: "Again, thank you for your submission, which hopefully will get the drilling rigs, geologists and prospectors back in the bush".

In your letter you go on to say that this indicates a preference for mineral exploration over the human rights of indigenous interests. My stance is that there need be no conflict and that the interests of indigenous Australians and the mining industry can and should be of mutual benefit.

Firstly, why can't the drilling rigs be operated by Aboriginal workers? Secondly, why can't the geologists be Aboriginal and thirdly, why can't the prospectors be Aboriginal?

Some of my indigenous constituents are prospectors and many of them have complained about delays they have faced in getting through native title to obtain the necessary mineral tenement so they can resume work.

For you to dismiss the employment prospects within the mining sector indicates a mentality that is gaining less and less credence amongst Aboriginal leaders. Breaking the handout mentality that is endemic throughout my electorate will only come through worthwhile and sustainable employment. In my opinion the best chance for that to happen is in the mining industry.

In the past too few of the jobs in exploration and mining have gone to Aborigines but that should not always be the case. In fact, some mining companies have demonstrated a willingness to train and employ local indigenous people rather than operate on a costly fly-in fly-out basis.

As to my comments in the media following the High Court's Miriuwung Gajerrong decision, I stand behind what I have said.

Whilst I support native title, in reality it has not benefited the average Aboriginal in the Goldfields. In fact, it has been divisive, with some members of claimant groups receiving significant financial benefits whilst other claimants receive little or nothing. This has created mistrust and hatred where there was once friendship and unity.

There is no doubt that in time there will be some lasting benefits to the indigenous population, but once again I stress that that will probably come in association with the mining industry, so it is therefore of mutual interest that that industry be vibrant. If mining is in decline then there will be less wealth for all Australians – including Aboriginals – and even less employment prospects for those who live in the bush. My report does not try to circumvent native title, the recommendations only attempt to streamline the processes so all parties can benefit.

It is for those reasons that I do not believe attracting more exploration investment is inconsistent with Australia's human rights obligations. Any assertion to the opposite is poppycock. And to claim that government (both Commonwealth and State) would be precluded from acting on recommendations that may be contrary to some of Australia's human rights obligations is irrelevant and misleading.

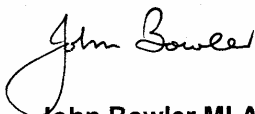
The basic human right is for people to have pride and self-esteem and that will only come through jobs. All the platitudes and international conventions in the world will count for nothing unless a person can support themselves and their family.

There is no doubt your approach to me is well meaning but I believe you are misguided into somehow thinking that mineral exploration and the human rights of Indigenous interests cannot co-exist. They can co-exist; in fact, they should co-exist.

I call on you to show leadership in this regard and stop treating industry – in this case the mining industry – as a threat to indigenous Australians. There is no 'them and us', we are all Australians and we all should have the same equal opportunity to prosper and grow.

I hope my report does lead to more drilling rigs, geologists and prospectors in the bush and I hope more and more of those jobs belong to Indigenous Australians.

Yours sincerely



**John Bowler MLA
MEMBER FOR EYRE**

20 November, 2002