Mr. Whitlam Returns to Wattie Creek

The Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Whitlam, today visited Aboriginal leaders at Wattie Creek, Northern Territory, on the first anniversary of the handing over of leasehold land rights to the Gurindji people by the Labor Government.

A year ago Mr. Whitlam visited Wattie Creek to present to the Gurindji elders a lease conferring on them rights to their ancient tribal lands.

Today he returned to the site of last year’s ceremony with Senator J. Keeffe, Opposition Spokesman on Aboriginal Affairs, and Mr. Les Johnson, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Labor Government in 1975.

Mr. Whitlam said it was tragic and ironic that the anniversary coincided with savage cuts in Aboriginal funds in the Fraser Budget. "The Fraser Government's record on Aboriginal affairs is one of almost unbelievable dishonest, heartlessness and broken promises," he said.

"Despite election promises that Aboriginal budgets would not be cut the Government has taken $33 million from Aboriginal programs and is destroying many worthwhile Aboriginal enterprises."

The Australian people had shown overwhelmingly in the referendum in 1967 that they wanted the Federal Government to be responsible for Aboriginal welfare. The Fraser Government was defying this clear instruction with a systematic and callous contempt for Aboriginal people.

Mr. Whitlam warned that the future of land rights was also in jeopardy under the Fraser Government.

He said the Prime Minister, Mr. Fraser, has promised a delegation of Aboriginals from the Northern Territory in March that the government would retain control of land rights legislation. The bill introduced by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr. Vine in June, clearly abrogated this commitment.

"Northern Territory Law will not be excluded or modified in its application to Aboriginal land, effectively passing control of the legislation to the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly," Mr. Whitlam said.

"The Labor Government's commitment to the Gurindji people, symbolic of a commitment to all Aboriginal people, is also to be abrogated."
"A year ago the Gurindji people were given lease-hold title to their land and a firm assurance that this title would become freehold, following passage of land rights legislation."

"The Gurindji will not receive automatic freehold title to their land when the legislation before the Parliament is enacted."

WATTIE CREEK
30 August 1976