

WORKING PAPER · DRAFT · 7 OCTOBER 2026

Motor transport for the homelands

Planes, Roads, Automobiles: The Realities of Life on NE Arnhem Homelands

Part — Royalties and profits

Where Gove's money went^{*}

Royalties and profits from the Gove bauxite mine, 1970-2025

Peter Botsman

Honorary Fellow, University of Melbourne

workingpapers.com.au · isx.org.au

This is a draft paper that will be continually updated with new information as it comes to hand.

* The comparison with the United Arab Emirates draws on the author's family experience in Abu Dhabi. Many important insights in this paper also came from the author's friend and creative inspiration, Brigitte Ross, to whom he is forever grateful.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this paper contains images and names of people who have died.

Contents

1. The view from the ground.....	3
2. Two economies on one peninsula: incomes in Nhulunbuy and the Yolŋu communities.....	6
3. Country without consent: the bark petitions, Milirrpum and land rights.....	7
3.1 The bark petitions, 1963.....	7
3.2 Milirrpum v Nabalco, 1971.....	9
3.3 From Woodward to the Land Rights Act and the royalty-equivalent system.....	10
3.4 Mabo and Yunupingu.....	11
3.5 What this meant for the money.....	12
4. Two streams.....	12
5. The author's summary totals.....	12
6. Owners, not recipients: the United Arab Emirates comparison.....	13
6.1 The Bani Yas, their oil and their state.....	13
6.2 1971: sovereigns in Abu Dhabi, no title at Gove.....	14
6.3 Remote stations and pastoral properties.....	14
7. Royalties by era.....	14
7.1 Nabalco, 1970-2000.....	14
7.2 Alcan, 2001-07.....	15
7.3 Rio Tinto, refinery years, 2007 to May 2014.....	15
7.4 Rio Tinto, bauxite only, 2014-2025.....	15
8. Was Gove profitable? What the record shows.....	16
8.1 Nabalco: Swiss supply and Australian profits, 1972-2000.....	16
8.2 The 2001 sale: a market price for Gove.....	17
8.3 Alcan: expansion, 2001-07.....	18
8.4 Rio Tinto: losses and write-offs, 2007-14.....	18
8.5 Bauxite only, 2014-2025: an illustration.....	19
9. Who owned Gove, and where the profits went.....	19
9.1 The owners.....	19
9.2 Rio Tinto's shareholders.....	20
9.3 Dividends and buy-backs.....	21
9.4 Tax to the Commonwealth and royalties to the Territory.....	21
9.5 Reinvestment, losses and closure.....	21
9.6 Did the profits go to Europe?.....	21
10. If the land holders had owned Gove: an illustrative counterfactual.....	22
11. The Northern Territory: strong land rights, thin returns.....	23
11.1 Land rights and self-government.....	23
11.2 The Aboriginals Benefit Account and who controls it.....	24
11.3 The Intervention, the shires and the homelands.....	25
11.4 What the evidence shows about royalty money.....	25
11.5 The 2024 election and the Mulka by-election.....	26
12. What reached the homelands.....	26
12.1 Costs on the ground.....	26
12.2 A model: the Goulburn Murray Regional Prosperity Plan.....	27
12.3 Yolŋu enterprise and development: repeated attempts.....	29
13. Gove and resource rights elsewhere: supporting cases.....	32
13.1 Other regimes.....	32
13.2 Lessons for Gove and the homelands.....	33
13.3 Recognition, deservingness and international standing.....	33
14. Who got what, and who did not.....	34
15. Gaps.....	35
16. Conclusion.....	35
Notes.....	36
Bibliography.....	51

Summary. This paper starts from the ground, and with Mrs Phyllis Batumbil Burarrwaja (1956–2018), the Mata Mata leader who carried on her father Gatirri’s homeland with almost nothing. At Mata Mata, a Yolŋu homeland in North East Arnhem Land, there is no working vehicle and no rubbish collection, and a grocery run to Nhulunbuy is a 400-kilometre round trip. Across the Northern Territory’s homelands, the main program for municipal services and housing repairs has been cut by 38 per cent in real terms since 2016, most dwellings and their infrastructure are decades old, and resident schooling has been slow to come. In 2021 the median resident of Nhulunbuy, the mining town, received about five times the median income of Aboriginal residents of Yirrkala and the Laynhapuy homelands, whose medians were below the single unemployment payment. Yet the Yolŋu clans are the land holders of one of Australia’s longest-running mines. The Gove bauxite mine and alumina refinery have operated on their country since 1970–72 under three owners: Nabalco, Alcan and Rio Tinto. On the author’s estimate, about A\$1.1 billion to A\$1.2 billion in nominal dollars has reached Aboriginal people and organisations from Gove since 1970, less than half of it the Gove-area groups and none, on the published distribution, Marthakal or Mata Mata. Over the same period a 30 per cent share of Gove sold for A\$740 million in 2001, implying a value of about A\$2.5 billion for the whole, and Alcan reinvested US\$2.3 billion in an expansion later written off. The paper’s central comparison is with the United Arab Emirates. In 1971, the year Milirrpum v Nabalco held that the Yolŋu had no title the common law could recognise, the tribal leaders of Abu Dhabi and Dubai became the governments of sovereign states that owned their oil, and within a few years they controlled most of its production. An illustrative counterfactual, using only the paper’s own figures, asks what the Yolŋu clan leaders would have held had they owned the bauxite and the refinery as land holders. The paper also traces the royalty system, the owners, the Territory’s institutions, what has reached the homelands and Yolŋu efforts to build enterprises, and sets Gove beside other resource regimes.

This paper is a companion to Planes, Roads, Automobiles: The Realities of Life on NE Arnhem Homelands (Botsman 2026), the main paper of the set. It links to the Mata Mata Transport feature on isx.org.au (<https://www.isx.org.au/features/planes-roads-automobiles-bush-taxis>).

1. The view from the ground

This paper starts on the ground, and with the leader who held one homeland together. Mrs Phyllis Batumbil Burarrwaja (1956–2018) was the senior leader of Mata Mata, the Yolŋu homeland in North East Arnhem Land that her father, Gatirri Burarrwaja, and his family established around 1948. In 1964, when she was eight, she walked with her younger sisters and their father along the coast from Mata Mata towards Cape Wilberforce, learning the names and stories of the places on the way. At Elizabeth Bay Gatirri and two of his brothers died, and the girls were sent to school at Galiwin’ku on Elcho Island. More than fifty years later she retraced the walk with her sisters to pay respects at her father’s grave.¹ Her vision was that Mata Mata should be a place of deep, two-way learning, and her principle, as the homeland’s prospectus records it, was that those who lived on country were capable of making their own decisions.¹ In the author’s account she was a courageous leader who carried on with almost nothing but her father’s

legacy, a legacy built from the Methodist mission era.² Her struggle frames the argument of this paper. She was a land holder in the region that has hosted one of Australia's longest-running mines, and she spent her life keeping a homeland going at the margins of public provision. In the author's view her struggle is also evidence of strength, and the conclusion returns to what it shows about the endurance of Yolŋu manikay and culture.



Figure 1. Mrs Phyllis Batumbil Burarrwaja (1956–2018), senior leader of Mata Mata, telling the story of the Mata Mata school. Still from “Batumbil_Mata_Mata_School”, Mata Mata Heritage Films, undated. Mata Mata Productions; reproduced with the permission of the author.
<https://matamataproductions.vhx.tv/mata-mata-heritage-films-and-documentaries/videos/batumbil-mata-mata-school>. Not under an open licence.

Mata Mata is supported today by Marthakal Homelands and Resource Centre. When the author spent a week there in 2026, it had no working vehicle. A grocery run to Nhulunbuy is a 400-kilometre round trip. There is no garbage collection: the community sorts its cans, bottles and plastic and buries the rubbish in a large pit behind the settlement.³ The author's observation from the homelands he knows is broader. Large numbers of people share not one working vehicle, and there are no proper schools, infrastructure or rubbish services of the kind other Australian communities take for granted.⁴ At Mata Mata itself, Mrs Burarrwaja recorded how the school grew from home schooling to a school building. The note that accompanies her account says that, because of Territory Government policy, the building now stands empty, and children who want to attend school must move to a regional centre such as Nhulunbuy or Galiwin'ku.⁵

The wider record is consistent with that observation. Field counts have long found very few working vehicles in Arnhem Land communities: about sixty for some 800 people at Maningrida in the late 1980s, and one truck or four-wheel drive for up to thirty Kuninjku people in 2005.⁶ Without a vehicle, people fly or stay put. David, flying from Galiwin'ku to Mata Mata for a funeral in October 2026, paid about A\$850 for the charter and a further A\$200 to freight about A\$600 of groceries.⁷ The Commonwealth's Remote Air Services Subsidy Scheme carries passengers, medicines, educational materials and fresh food, typically weekly, to up to 276 remote communities, but to none in North East Arnhem Land.⁸ The Central Arnhem Road, the only road to Gove, has had about 25 kilometres of

new seal in the seven years of a A\$355 million upgrade, and no scheduled boat service runs along the homeland coast.^{9,10}

Public services on the homelands are thin and have been shrinking. The Territory's Homelands Program, which funds emergency housing repairs and municipal and essential services, including waste disposal, fell from A\$53.6 million in 2016 to A\$38.6 million in 2023, a real reduction of 38 per cent. Its evaluators described the Commonwealth's Homelands Housing and Infrastructure Program as the first significant Australian Government investment in Territory homelands for a decade. Regional plans record that most homeland dwellings, and the infrastructure that supports them, are decades old, and audits under the program found waste pits that needed cleaning or replacing. One public servant told the evaluators that "it's not defensible that homelands have people, 70 to 150 people, living on a homeland with really appalling infrastructure".¹¹ At Yilpara, a homeland on Blue Mud Bay, not a single house was built between 1997 and 2007 to relieve overcrowding. Government funding for new homeland community housing ceased altogether in 2008, and the school, served by visiting teachers three days a week, waited a long time for the full-time resident teachers the community wanted.¹²

These conditions sit beside one of Australia's longest-running mines. The Gove bauxite mine has operated on Yolŋu country since 1970, and the Yolŋu clans of North East Arnhem Land hold most of the region as inalienable freehold under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976.¹³ The question this paper asks follows directly: how can the land holders of one of Australia's longest-running mines live like this?

The answer offered here is that the conditions on the ground follow from the way ownership of Gove was settled and its revenue designed. The homelands can be compared with remote stations and pastoral properties, and section 6 does so briefly. Section 2 first sets out the income gap between the mining town of Nhulunbuy and the Yolŋu communities and homelands around it. The more telling comparison, and the centre of this paper, is with the United Arab Emirates, where tribal land holders came to own their oil and the companies that produced it. Section 10 then asks, as an illustration, what the Yolŋu clan leaders would have held had they owned the bauxite and the refinery in the same way.

The main paper of this set answers the claim that "forty billion dollars" is spent on Aboriginal people by counting what a homeland vehicle actually costs. This paper turns the same question toward Gove. It asks how much of the wealth produced by mining on Yolŋu country has returned to Aboriginal people and organisations, and where the rest went. The answer is necessarily partial. Nabalco never published accounts for Gove alone, and Alcan and Rio Tinto folded it into larger divisions.¹⁴ Every cumulative figure below is therefore either taken directly from a company, court, land council or government record, or is the author's estimate built from such records and labelled as such.

2. Two economies on one peninsula: incomes in Nhulunbuy and the Yolŋu communities

The conditions described in section 1 lie a short drive from a town whose incomes are far above the national figures. Nhulunbuy was built for the mine and refinery, and its incomes reflect mining wages. In the 2021 Census the median personal income of residents of the Nhulunbuy statistical area aged 15 and over was A\$1,506 a week, against A\$936 for the Northern Territory and A\$805 for Australia. The median household income was A\$2,799 a week, and 45 per cent of households received more than A\$3,000 a week.¹⁵ Full-time adult employees in the mining industry nationally earned average ordinary-time earnings of A\$2,674 a week in May 2021.¹⁶ The Census also records the gap in transport. Nhulunbuy dwellings had on average 1.8 registered motor vehicles each; dwellings in Yirrkala had 1.0, in Gunyangara 0.9, and in the East Arnhem locality, which covers the area outside the region's named towns and communities and takes in many of its homelands, 0.7.¹⁵

Median weekly personal income, people aged 15 and over (A\$, nominal)	2011	2016	2021
Nhulunbuy statistical area, all residents	1,267	1,300	1,506
Nhulunbuy – Gunyangara, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents	351	274	395
Yirrkala, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents	351	217	303
Laynhapuy – Gumatj Homelands, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents	280	191	282
Marthakal Homelands – Galiwin'ku, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents	249	228	328
Australia, all residents	577	662	805
For comparison: single unemployment payment, maximum basic rate at Census date (Newstart; JobSeeker in 2021)	237	264	310

Sources: ABS Census QuickStats for the areas shown; Department of Social Services, historical payment rates.^{15, 17} The gap is stark. In 2021 the median Nhulunbuy resident received about five times the median income of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents of Yirrkala and of the Laynhapuy – Gumatj homelands, communities whose land holders have lived beside the mine since 1970 (author's calculation). The groups are not alike. Nhulunbuy's residents are mostly non-Indigenous people of working age employed in the mine and the town, and about 11 per cent were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in 2021. The Yolŋu medians include young people and others with little or no income, and Census cash income omits the value of hunting, fishing and other customary production, which Altman's work on the hybrid economy shows to be significant on the homelands.^{15, 18} On the Census measure, however, median personal incomes in Yirrkala and the Laynhapuy – Gumatj homelands in 2021, A\$303 and A\$282 a week, were below the maximum basic rate of the single JobSeeker Payment, A\$310.40 a week. In 2016 all four Yolŋu areas in the table were below the single Newstart rate of A\$263.80 (author's comparison).¹⁷

The fall in 2016 coincides with a change in the institutions that had given many homeland residents paid work. From 1977 the Community Development Employment Projects scheme (CDEP) paid participants to work on local projects, with a top-up above their income support. At its peak in 2002–03 it employed some 35,200 Indigenous people, a quarter of all Indigenous employment, in 272 communities, and its participants were counted as employed. It was to be progressively replaced in the Territory from 2007 under the Intervention, and its remaining participants were moved into the Remote Jobs and Communities Program in 2012–13, whose participants were counted as unemployed or outside the labour force. On 1 July 2015 that program was replaced by the Community Development Program (CDP), a remote Work for the Dole scheme in which job seekers aged 18 to 49 had to undertake 25 hours of activity a week for 46 weeks a year to receive their payments. In 2015–16 CDP participants, about 5 per cent of the combined national caseload, generated 54 per cent of all non-compliance reports, financial penalties rose more than fourfold on the previous program, and withheld payments went to consolidated revenue. The Senate committee that examined the scheme in 2017 found that it had a negative impact on individuals, communities and providers.¹⁹ The Census figures do not isolate the effect of CDP, and the 2016 fall may also reflect other changes. CDP has since been replaced by the Remote Australia Employment Service, from November 2025, and by the Remote Jobs and Economic Development program, which funds jobs on award wages.²⁰

The result is two economies on one peninsula. One, built around the mine, has incomes well above the national figures and returns royalties, taxes and dividends to governments and shareholders elsewhere. The other, on the land holders' own country, lives on incomes at or below the basic unemployment payment, under employment programs designed in Canberra. Mrs Burarrwaja's Mata Mata, outside the Gove royalty distribution altogether, sits at the far end of that gradient (section 12.1).

3. Country without consent: the bark petitions, Milirrump and land rights

3.1 The bark petitions, 1963

In 1963 the Commonwealth excised land on the Gove Peninsula from the Arnhem Land Reserve for bauxite mining without consulting its owners. In July and August that year Yolŋu leaders at Yirrkala sent the House of Representatives petitions in Yolŋu matha and English, typed on paper pasted onto bark panels painted with the designs of the Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties. They asked Parliament to recognise their land and sacred places and to hear them before the mine proceeded.²¹ Clare Wright's history of the petitions, *Näku Dhäruk The Bark Petitions: How the People of Yirrkala Changed the Course of Australian Democracy* (Text Publishing, 2024), reconstructs that year month by month from Yolŋu oral testimony and from mission, family and government archives.²² It begins with the survey pegs that Yolŋu found across their Yirrkala garden in December 1962 and follows the meetings with the mining men, the petitions themselves and a second version thumb-printed by the elders. It ends with the visit of a parliamentary committee in October. Wright treats the petitions as "a record of legal intent and sovereign will", and her reviewer in *Inside Story* reads them as an act of statesmanship, an attempt at

diplomacy between two nations.²³ The book was named Book of the Year at the 2026 NSW Literary Awards.²⁴



Figure 2. Aerial view of Yirrkala Mission, 1 June 1964, the year after the bark petitions. Photographer not recorded. Roger Freeman Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0716/0113, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/720805>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.

The petitions produced a House of Representatives select committee, which took evidence at Yirrkala.²¹ They did not stop the mine. Swiss Aluminium and CSR formed Nabalco, and in 1968 the Commonwealth made the Gove agreement and the ordinance that set the royalty. The royalty was paid to the Commonwealth, with a share for Aboriginal people generally, rather than to the owners of the land.^{21, 25}



Figure 3. A parliamentary committee hearing on Yirrkala land rights in the old church building of Yirrkala Mission, 1 August 1963. The catalogue records Rev. Arthur Ellemore giving evidence and committee members Mr Bryant and Mr Beazley in the picture. Photographer not recorded. Kahlin Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0280/0012, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/313439>. Licensed CC BY 4.0; cropped at the right edge.



Figure 4. Patrol Officer Bill Gray, an ASOPA trainee, with Roy Marika and Mungurrawuy, elders of the Gove Peninsula, during the sacred site survey of the mining land (catalogued as "Roy Manka"). Undated; photographer not recorded. Harry Giese Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0351/0070, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/314243>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.

3.2 Milirrpum v Nabalco, 1971

In December 1968 Yolŋu plaintiffs led by Milirrpum Marika sued Nabalco and the Commonwealth in the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory, in the first native title litigation in Australia.²¹ Justice Blackburn gave judgment on 27 April 1971. He accepted the evidence of Yolŋu law in terms often quoted since. It showed "a subtle and elaborate

system highly adapted to the country in which the people led their lives, which provided a stable order of society”, and “if ever a system could be called ‘a government of laws, and not of men’, it is that shown in the evidence before me”.²⁶ He nonetheless held that Australia was a settled colony under the doctrine of *Cooper v Stuart*, the reasoning later associated with *terra nullius*. He found that communal native title “does not form, and has never formed, part of the law of any part of Australia”. The plaintiffs’ relationship to their land, however real, was not in his view a proprietary interest that the common law could protect.^{26, 27} The mine and refinery went ahead, and Prime Minister McMahon opened the alumina plant on 1 July 1972.²⁸



Figure 5. Aerial view of the Nabalco plant site, Gove, 26 February 1970. Photographer not recorded. T. N. Renton Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0142/0020, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/750758>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.

3.3 From Woodward to the Land Rights Act and the royalty-equivalent system

The judgment turned Aboriginal claims from the courts to the legislature.²⁷ In December 1972 the new Whitlam Government appointed Justice Edward Woodward, who had been counsel for the Yolngu in Milirrpum, to inquire into how land rights should be recognised in the Northern Territory.²⁹ His reports of 1973 and 1974 shaped the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. The Act returned the Arnhem Land Reserve to its Traditional Owners, except the land under the Nabalco lease.²¹ It also put in statute the arrangement that still governs Gove’s money. The royalty is paid to government, and since self-government in 1978 to the Territory. The Commonwealth pays an equal amount from its own revenue into what is now the Aboriginals Benefit Account, and 30 per cent of that goes to the Aboriginal people of the affected area.³⁰ Gove thus produced the system without being fully part of it. Because the mine pre-dated the Act, its owners never had to obtain consent, and the Gove clans received no negotiated payment from the operators until the 2011 Gove Traditional Owners Agreement, forty years after Milirrpum.³¹



Figure 6. Justice Woodward, counsel for the Yolngu plaintiffs in Milirrpum and later Aboriginal Land Rights Commissioner. Undated; photographer not recorded. ABC TV Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0416/0003, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/745496>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.



Figure 7. Justice Woodward at an Aboriginal land rights hearing at Yirrkala; the catalogue records Frank Purcell and Roy Marika also in the picture. Undated; photographer not recorded. ABC TV Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0416/0082, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/310674>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.

3.4 Mabo and Yunupingu

Twenty-one years after *Milirrpum*, the High Court in *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* rejected the settled-colony reasoning on which *Blackburn* had relied and recognised native title at common law. The Native Title Act 1993 followed.³² The Gove story has since returned to the High Court. In *Commonwealth of Australia v Yunupingu* (2025) the Court held that the Commonwealth's power to make laws for the territories is subject to the guarantee of just terms, and that the extinguishment of native title by Commonwealth acts before 1994 could be an acquisition of property. The Gumatj claim for compensation over the Gove

Peninsula grants and leases returns to the Federal Court, where no amount has yet been set.³³

3.5 What this meant for the money

The legal history explains the financial history that follows. Because Yolŋu ownership was not recognised in 1963–71, the minerals were the Crown’s and the leases were the Commonwealth’s to grant. The owners of the land had no equity, no royalty in their own right and no part in the negotiations over the price of alumina, the share of profits or the size of the plant. What reached them came through a statutory formula designed in Canberra and, much later, through an agreement negotiated four decades after mining began.

4. Two streams

The money moves in two streams. The royalty itself goes to government: about A\$0.92 billion to A\$0.98 billion from 1970 to 2025 on the author’s estimate. Before 1978 it was paid to the Commonwealth; since self-government the Northern Territory Government has kept it.^{34, 35} Under the Land Rights Act the Commonwealth then pays an equal amount from its own budget into the Aboriginals Benefit Account. Thirty per cent of that goes to the affected local groups, and the rest funds land councils and grants across the Territory.^{35, 36}

There were no negotiated payments to Traditional Owners under Nabalco (1970–2000) or Alcan (2001–07). The first came with the 2011 Gove Traditional Owners Agreement with Rio Tinto Alcan, reported at about A\$15 million to A\$18 million a year and paid mainly to the Gumatj and Rirratjingu clans. The amounts are confidential. The author’s estimate is about A\$220 million to A\$260 million in Agreement payments to the end of 2025.³¹

5. The author’s summary totals

Where it went, 1970–2025 (author’s estimate, nominal)	Amount
Gove-area groups (Gumatj, Rirratjingu, Galpu, Laynhapuy homelands): the local 30 per cent of royalty equivalents plus the 2011 Agreement payments	about A\$0.49 to A\$0.56 billion
Land councils and Territory-wide grants, from the rest of the Aboriginals Benefit Account money	about A\$0.65 to A\$0.69 billion
Total to Aboriginal people and organisations	about A\$1.1 to A\$1.2 billion
For comparison: royalties kept by government (the Commonwealth to 1978, then the Northern Territory)	about A\$0.92 to A\$0.98 billion

About A\$1.1 billion to A\$1.2 billion has thus gone to Aboriginal people and organisations from Gove since 1970, and less than half of it reached the Gove-area groups. The Territory-wide figure is an upper bound, because some Account money is invested, spent

on administration or withheld as tax.³⁵ Most of the money is recent. About two-thirds of all Gove royalty money was paid in the eleven years of bauxite-only mining from 2015 to 2025, and the 2025 royalty alone was about A\$125 million on the author's conversion.³⁴ All figures are nominal; in today's money the early royalties would be worth several times their face value.

6. Owners, not recipients: the United Arab Emirates comparison

The totals in section 5 describe recipients. The comparison that best shows what the Australian system withheld from the Yolngu is with a place where tribal land holders became owners. A common Australian assumption holds that Indigenous or tribal peoples cannot manage resource wealth. The record of the United Arab Emirates does not support it. There the original tribal owners of the territory came to control the oil and the companies that produced it, and built a state, universities and national wealth. At Gove the land holders held neither the minerals nor the companies, and the wealth went elsewhere. On this evidence the difference lies in ownership and law, not capacity. Other regimes, discussed more briefly in section 13, point the same way.

6.1 The Bani Yas, their oil and their state

The ruling families of the two largest emirates come from the region's own tribal peoples. The Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi and the Al Maktoum of Dubai belong to the Bani Yas, a confederation of Bedouin and coastal tribal groups centred on the Liwa oasis and the Abu Dhabi coast. Its people combined date gardens, camels, fishing and the pearl banks, on which men of the Liwa spent up to 130 days a year. The Al Bu Falah, from whom the Al Nahyan come, wintered with their camels in the desert and went pearling in summer. In 1833 about 800 people of the Al Bu Falasah section seceded from Abu Dhabi to Dubai under Maktum bin Buti, the founder of the Al Maktoum dynasty.³⁷ Abu Dhabi's first oil concession was granted in 1939 to a company owned by the international majors, while the sheikhdoms were under British protection. When Britain withdrew in 1971 and the federation was formed, the emirates became sovereign. Abu Dhabi created ADNOC that year, took 25 per cent of the main concessions in 1973 and 60 per cent in 1974, and established the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority in 1976.^{38, 39} The federal constitution declares each emirate's natural resources to be its public property.⁴⁰

The wealth is held by the emirates and their ruling families and shared with citizens through the state: housing loans and grants, residential land, public employment and education.⁴¹ The Higher Colleges of Technology were established by federal law in 1988 under Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, with Sheikh Nahayan Mabarak Al Nahayan as founding Chancellor, to educate Emiratis for professional and technical careers.⁴² The author's father served as vice-chancellor of the Higher Colleges in Abu Dhabi and worked for Sheikh Nahyan, whom he liked a great deal. In the family's recollection, the Colleges were a deliberate conversion of oil revenue into national capability.⁴³ Two qualifications keep the comparison accurate. The benefits go to citizens, who were an estimated 14 per cent of residents in 2020, while the migrant majority has very limited access to citizenship.⁴⁴ And the system is a monarchy, not a democracy: benefit is distributed by rulers and the state, not through anything like Australian Indigenous land rights.

6.2 1971: sovereigns in Abu Dhabi, no title at Gove

Why did this happen there and not at Gove? In 1971 the tribal leadership of Abu Dhabi became the government of a sovereign state, with title to the subsoil and the power to renegotiate concessions. In the same year the Yolŋu, whose law Blackburn J had just described as “a government of laws”, were held to have no title the common law could recognise. Australian law vested the minerals in the Crown, and the Yolŋu owners had no state, no title and no part in the negotiations.²⁶ The contrast extends to infrastructure. In the Gulf, resource wealth built national roads, ports, housing and universities. Around Gove, the same decades left the homelands without sealed access, scheduled transport or a coastal service.^{9, 10}

The contrast is one of position as much as of money. A royalty recipient takes a share of output on terms set by others. An owner sets the terms, takes the profit in good years, bears the losses in bad ones and decides when and how to save. In Abu Dhabi the concession royalty was a stage on the way to ownership, and within three years of statehood the emirate held a majority of its main concessions.³⁸ At Gove the Yolŋu never moved beyond a statutory share of a royalty paid to government and, after 2011, a confidential negotiated payment.³¹

6.3 Remote stations and pastoral properties

It can be argued that the homelands are like remote stations and pastoral properties: small settlements far from towns, where families accept distance from services as the price of living on the land. The comparison is instructive, but it cuts against the way the homelands have been treated. The pastoral districts have long been served by public and subsidised systems built for remoteness: the subsidised air mail that Connellan Airways began in 1939, a company many of whose shares came to be held by station people and staff; the Royal Flying Doctor Service; and the School of the Air, whose first lessons were broadcast over the Flying Doctor radio network in 1951. The Remote Air Services Subsidy Scheme that succeeded the mail plane still serves up to 276 remote communities, but none in North East Arnhem Land. Pastoral lessees, moreover, hold their land under leases from the Crown, while the Yolŋu hold theirs as inalienable freehold under the strongest land rights statute in the country.^{8, 13} The station comparison shows that remoteness can be, and has been, served. The UAE comparison is more telling because it reaches the cause rather than the symptom. The difference between the Gulf and Gove is not distance or capacity but who owned the resource beneath the land.

7. Royalties by era

7.1 Nabalco, 1970–2000

The 1968 Ordinance set royalties at 20 cents a ton of bauxite treated locally and 30 cents a ton exported, with lower rates when the operation’s profit per ton of alumina was low. Royalties were about A\$550,000 a year at first, and a 10 per cent share for Yirrkala was backdated to March 1970.²⁵ Nabalco told a House committee in 1999 that it had paid A\$90 million since mining began, about A\$9 million a year after the 1993 review. The local 30 per cent was about A\$2.7 million a year, split Gumatj 65 per cent, Rirratjingu 20

per cent and Laynhapuy 15 per cent.³⁵ No negotiated Traditional Owner agreement existed.



Figure 8. Officials in front of a light aircraft at Gove before discussions with Nabalco about mining rights and royalties. The catalogue names, among others, David Griffin, general manager of Nabalco; the Administrator, Roger Dean; the Director of Mines, Col Adams; Ted Egan, patrol officer; and Harry Giese, Director of Welfare. Undated; photographer not recorded. Harry Giese Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0351/0196, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/314005>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.

7.2 Alcan, 2001–07

The 1968 royalty regime continued. The Territory's Gove royalty receipts for these years have not been published; the author's estimate of A\$9 million to A\$15 million a year is bracketed by the published levels before and after.³⁴ No negotiated Traditional Owner payments were made.

7.3 Rio Tinto, refinery years, 2007 to May 2014

Rio Tinto reported A\$76 million in Gove royalties to the Territory over the five years to 2012; amounts for 2013 and 2014 have not been published.³⁴ The 2011 Gove Traditional Owners Agreement was the first negotiated recognition of Traditional Owners in the operation's history. It brought a 42-year lease to 2053 and payments reported at A\$15 million to A\$18 million a year. The Northern Land Council's split of Agreement money (Gumatj 72.61 per cent, Rirratjingu 26.87 per cent and Galpu 0.49 per cent) was litigated in 2014–16.³¹

7.4 Rio Tinto, bauxite only, 2014–2025

Rio Tinto's published Gove royalties to the Territory rose from US\$29.6 million in 2015 to US\$80.4 million in 2025.³⁴ In 2023–24 the Northern Land Council received A\$18.19 million of Gove section 64(3) royalty equivalents and divided them Gumatj A\$11.94 million, Rirratjingu A\$3.56 million and Laynhapuy Homelands A\$2.67 million.³⁶ Rio Tinto

also reports spending of about A\$94 million a year with local Indigenous businesses, which is procurement, not royalty. Mining is expected to end in 2029.^{14, 45}

8. Was Gove profitable? What the record shows

Profitability can be estimated only where owners or courts published figures that bear on Gove itself. This section uses those figures era by era, shows the working, and says where nothing can be said.

8.1 Nabalco: Swiss supply and Australian profits, 1972–2000

The joint venture was built to supply aluminium smelters, not to report profits. David Lee's archival history shows that Swiss Aluminium provided most of the capital and "took as its reward low-cost bauxite and alumina for aluminium smelters in Europe rather than profit". In 1968 the agreed alumina price was A\$51 a ton. The Interior Minister, Peter Nixon, wrote to Nabalco that this was lower than the Commonwealth had expected, in Lee's words "diverting a substantial amount of the profits from the development of the bauxite from Australia". The Commonwealth accepted the price to secure the larger plant and allowed bauxite exports in favour of the Australian partners. That partner, Gove Alumina, in Lee's words "was able to earn good profits from bauxite and alumina exports".⁴⁶

The only published earnings figure for any part of Gove comes from the end of this era. CSR reported earnings before interest and tax (EBIT) of A\$67 million from its Gove alumina and bauxite interest for the ten months to January 2001.⁴⁷ Annualised, that is about A\$80 million a year. Scaled from a 30 per cent interest to the whole operation, it would be about A\$270 million a year (author's calculation). That scaling probably overstates the whole, because the Australian partner held the bauxite-export profits and 2000 was a strong year for alumina prices. The royalty was then about A\$9 million a year.³⁵



Figure 9. The Gove alumina refinery under construction, 29 January 1971. Photograph: M. Willmott. Northern Territory Government Photographer Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0095/0046, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/721531>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.



Figure 10. MV Stove Vulcan taking on bauxite at Gove, June 1971, the second trial shipment from the Gove project. Photographer not recorded; the print carries the Nabalco logo. Northern Outlook Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0391/0002, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/747189>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.

8.2 The 2001 sale: a market price for Gove

In January 2001 CSR sold its 70 per cent of Gove Aluminium Ltd, the holder of the Australian 30 per cent of Gove, to Alcan for US\$275 million, and Gove Aluminium bought back AMP Life's 30 per cent for US\$117.9 million. The total of US\$392.9 million was

A\$740.1 million.⁴⁸ CSR booked a substantial profit on the sale.⁴⁷ Scaled to 100 per cent, the price implies a market value for the whole operation of roughly A\$2.5 billion at the start of 2001 (author's calculation, ignoring any premium for control). This is the only market valuation of Gove on the public record. By the author's estimate, it was about twenty-five times the roughly A\$0.1 billion that had reached Aboriginal people as royalty equivalents by 2000.

8.3 Alcan: expansion, 2001-07

Alcan reported export revenue of about A\$560 million a year in 2004. It committed to the G3 expansion, whose cost rose from US\$1.5 billion to US\$2.3 billion by 2007.⁴⁹ Alcan published no Gove-only profit, so its earnings from Gove cannot be determined. Its spending shows, however, where much of the operation's cash and borrowing went: back into the plant.



Figure 11. Aerial view of the Gove alumina refinery and bauxite facilities, catalogued as the Alcan refinery. Undated. Photograph: Bert Wiedemann. Northern Territory Government Photographer Slide Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0730/1264, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/1023291>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.

8.4 Rio Tinto: losses and write-offs, 2007-14

The expanded refinery never reached its 3.8 million tonne design capacity. In 2011 Rio Tinto placed Gove in Pacific Aluminium, the unit it formed to hold aluminium assets intended for sale.⁵⁰ By 2013 the refinery was losing about US\$30 million a month. In November Rio announced its suspension, and it wrote off the refinery's plant and equipment in full, a pre-tax impairment of US\$790 million. The refinery closed on 28 May 2014.⁵¹ Gove also sat inside Rio's much larger aluminium write-downs of 2012, about US\$10 billion to US\$11 billion, which arose largely from the US\$38 billion Alcan purchase; Gove's share of these was not disclosed.⁵⁰ On the published evidence, the refinery made losses in its last years and much of the capital invested in G3 was lost.

8.5 Bauxite only, 2014–2025: an illustration

Rio Tinto publishes revenue and underlying earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation (EBITDA) for its bauxite business as a whole, which includes Weipa and its interests in Brazil and Guinea, but not for Gove. Gove supplied 20 to 22 per cent of Rio's bauxite in 2019–2025. The table asks what Gove would have earned if it had matched the average revenue per tonne and margin of Rio's whole bauxite business.⁵² It illustrates scale and is not an estimate of Gove's profit, because Gove's own costs, grades and prices are not published.

2019–2025 (US\$ million)	Rio Tinto bauxite business	Gove at its share of production (illustration)	Gove royalty to the NT (published)
Revenue	18,729	about 4,000	—
Underlying EBITDA	6,984	about 1,490 (about A\$2.2 billion)	309 (about A\$456 million)
EBITDA margin	26–48 per cent a year	as for Rio	royalty about 6–10 per cent of illustrative revenue

On this illustration Gove would have generated around US\$1.5 billion in EBITDA over seven years, roughly five times the royalties it paid. The royalty also changed character during the period. It was about US\$2.70 to US\$3.20 a tonne in 2019–2023, US\$3.95 in 2024 and US\$6.32 in 2025, with output almost flat. The published reports do not say whether the basis or rate of the royalty changed (author's calculations).^{34, 52}

9. Who owned Gove, and where the profits went

9.1 The owners

Period	Owner	Domicile and ownership	How the owner took its return
1964–68	Nabalco, proposed as 50 per cent Swiss Aluminium and 50 per cent an Australian group (CSR, AMP, MLC, Peko-Wallsend, Commercial Banking Co., Elder Smith Goldsborough Mort, Mount Morgan)	Switzerland; Australia	Feasibility stage
1968–2000	Gove joint venture, managed by Nabalco: Swiss Aluminium (Alusuisse) 70 per cent of the refinery; Gove Alumina, later Gove Aluminium Ltd (by 2001 CSR 70 per cent, AMP 30 per cent), 30 per cent	Zurich; Sydney	Alusuisse: low-cost alumina and bauxite for its European smelters. Australian partner: profits on exports

Oct 2000–Jan 2001	Alcan 70 per cent (through its takeover of the Alusuisse Group); Gove Aluminium Ltd 30 per cent	Montreal; Sydney	Alusuisse shareholders paid in Alcan shares
2001–Oct 2007	Alcan 100 per cent	Montreal; listed in Toronto and New York	Reinvested in G3 (US\$2.3 billion)
Oct 2007–	Rio Tinto 100 per cent (RTA Gove Pty Ltd)	Dual-listed: Rio Tinto plc (London) and Rio Tinto Limited (Australia)	Alumina until 2014; bauxite exports since

Sources: Lee (2014); Alcan Form 10-K filings; the High Court’s stamp duty judgment; Rio Tinto Form 20-F 2025.^{48, 53, 54, 55, 56} Alcan took over the Alusuisse Group by share exchange on 17 October 2000, so Alusuisse’s shareholders became Alcan shareholders. In 2007 Alcan’s shareholders were paid out in cash when Rio Tinto bought the company for about US\$38 billion, near the top of the market. The later write-downs fell on Rio Tinto’s shareholders.^{50, 54}

9.2 Rio Tinto’s shareholders

Rio Tinto is a dual-listed company with two parent companies, Rio Tinto plc in London and Rio Tinto Limited in Australia, whose shareholders share in the group on equal terms. At the end of 2025 there were 1,256 million plc shares and 371 million Limited shares, so about 77 per cent of the group’s shares were plc shares and 23 per cent Limited shares (author’s calculation).⁵⁶ The largest single holder is Shining Prospect, a subsidiary of the Chinese state-owned Aluminium Corporation of China (Chinalco). It holds over 14 per cent of plc, which its 2018 notice put at 10.32 per cent of the voting power of the whole group. The other substantial holders are global fund managers: BlackRock (about 7 per cent of each company), Capital Group, State Street (10.8 per cent of Limited), JP Morgan and Vanguard (6.5 per cent of Limited).⁵⁶ The largest registered holders of Limited are custodial nominees holding for unnamed clients: HSBC, Citicorp and J. P. Morgan together hold about 58 per cent. Named Australian institutions, among them the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation’s account, Argo and the Australian Foundation Investment Company, each hold under 1 per cent.⁵⁶ Rio Tinto does not publish the split of its beneficial owners between Australia and other countries, so the foreign share cannot be stated. The register shows that the group is owned mainly through London-listed shares and global institutions, with a minority Australian-listed component.

The author once accompanied Noel Pearson to a meeting in London with Leigh Clifford, a Melbourne-trained mining engineer who had run Rio Tinto’s Australian arm and its global energy group before serving as the group’s chief executive from 2000 to 2007. The author recalls him as the company’s chairman, but the published record gives his title as chief executive. The author’s impression was that the company’s strategy was to feign ignorance, as if Aboriginal Australia and land rights issues did not really exist, and he found the meeting underwhelming.⁵⁷ The published record of company policy reads differently. In March 1995 CRA’s chief executive, Leon Davis, publicly welcomed the

Native Title Act as the basis for operations “in active partnership with Aboriginal people”, and in 1996 Rio Tinto adopted an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy that made negotiated agreements, not litigation, its preferred approach to land access, with advice from Indigenous leaders including Noel Pearson.⁵⁸ That policy did not reach back to Gove, where, as section 7 shows, the first negotiated agreement came only in 2011.

9.3 Dividends and buy-backs

Rio Tinto paid equity dividends of US\$68.5 billion over 2018–2025 and bought back US\$7.1 billion of its own shares in 2018–2020. Its stated policy is to pay out 40 to 60 per cent of underlying earnings on average through the cycle.⁵⁹ Gove’s contribution to those payouts cannot be determined. On the illustration in section 8.5, Gove’s bauxite was of the order of 1 to 2 per cent of group revenue.

9.4 Tax to the Commonwealth and royalties to the Territory

Company tax is the largest public claim on mining profits, and it is the least visible for Gove. Rio Tinto’s project-level reports attribute corporate income tax to Gove of US\$13.4 million in 2015, none in 2017–2024 and US\$6.6 million in 2025, and Rio notes that project amounts include transfers within its Australian tax group.⁶⁰ The Australian Taxation Office’s transparency reports do not list RTA Gove Pty Ltd separately. Its income falls inside the consolidated group of Rio Tinto Ltd, which reported tax payable of A\$5.24 billion on total income of A\$48.1 billion in 2024–25.⁶¹ The figures that can be attributed to Gove are therefore lopsided. Over 2017–2025 the Territory received about US\$389 million in Gove royalties, while company tax attributed to Gove appears only in 2025, at US\$6.6 million. Rio’s Australian tax is large, about US\$3.6 billion in 2025, but it cannot be traced to Gove.⁶⁰ An earlier attempt by the Territory to tax the 2001 sale also failed, when the High Court held in 2009 that Alcan was not liable for the stamp duty.⁴⁸

9.5 Reinvestment, losses and closure

Three further claims on Gove’s cash flows are on the record. The first was reinvestment: US\$2.3 billion for G3 under Alcan.⁴⁹ The second was loss: refinery losses of about US\$360 million a year by 2013, the US\$790 million write-off and an undisclosed share of Rio’s aluminium impairments.^{50, 51} The third is closure. Rio raised the Gove refinery closure provision by US\$402 million in 2016, and by further undisclosed amounts in 2015, 2020 and 2021. The Territory holds A\$974 million in security for Gove Operations, about the same as all the royalties paid on Gove in 55 years. Demolition is due to finish in 2027 and mine rehabilitation around 2040.⁴⁵ The security is a guarantee, not money spent, but its size shows how much of the operation’s value is now owed back to the country from which it was taken.

9.6 Did the profits go to Europe?

The author has long suspected that a fair share of Gove’s wealth went to Europe. The evidence supports that view for the Nabalco era. For 28 years the majority owner was Swiss, and it took its return not as Australian profit but as cheap alumina and bauxite for its European smelters, at a price the Commonwealth’s own minister regarded as diverting profit from Australia.⁴⁶ The Australian minority partner, CSR with AMP, also profited, through export sales and the A\$740 million sale in 2001.^{47, 48} Under Alcan the

owner was Canadian. Under Rio Tinto the group is owned mainly through its London-listed company, by global institutions and Chinalco. The refinery years were loss-making, however, so it cannot be shown that Gove sent large profits to London after 2007. What can be said is that the economic return from Gove accrued overwhelmingly to companies and shareholders outside the Northern Territory, much of it outside Australia, and that the main public return within Australia was the Territory's royalty.

10. If the land holders had owned Gove: an illustrative counterfactual

This section is an illustration, not an estimate. It asks what the paper's own figures imply if the Yolŋu clan leaders, as the land holders, had owned the bauxite and the alumina refinery in the way the Bani Yas ruling families of Abu Dhabi came to control their emirate's oil and, through ADNOC, most of its production. It uses no figures beyond those already set out in sections 5, 8 and 9. It does not adjust for inflation, and it makes no assumption about how Yolŋu owners would have managed the operation, financed it or shared its proceeds among clans and homelands.⁶²

The first measure is the value of the asset. The only market price for Gove is the 2001 sale, which implies a value of about A\$2.5 billion for the whole operation. Owners of all of Gove would have held an asset of that value at the start of 2001. That is about twenty-five times the roughly A\$0.1 billion that had reached Aboriginal people as royalty equivalents by 2000, and about twice the A\$1.1 billion to A\$1.2 billion that has reached them from Gove in 55 years.^{48, 62}

The second measure is earnings. At the end of the Nabalco era the royalty was about A\$9 million a year. CSR's published Gove earnings, scaled to the whole operation, suggest about A\$270 million a year before interest and tax. That figure probably overstates the whole, but it is some thirty times the royalty. In the bauxite-only years, the illustration in section 8.5 puts Gove's EBITDA at about A\$2.2 billion over 2019–2025, about A\$310 million a year and about five times the royalty of about A\$456 million. On that illustration, seven years of operating earnings would have exceeded everything Aboriginal people have received from Gove since 1970. EBITDA is struck before tax, depreciation, capital spending and closure provisions, so an owner's cash return would have been lower.^{47, 52, 62}

Ownership would also have brought the costs and the losses. An owner would have had to fund or borrow for the US\$2.3 billion G3 expansion, absorb refinery losses of about US\$30 million a month by 2013 and the US\$790 million write-off of the plant, and stand behind the closure obligations for which the Territory now holds A\$974 million in security.^{45, 49, 51} The counterfactual therefore does not claim that Yolŋu owners would have been richer in every year, or that they would have made the same investment decisions as Alcan and Rio Tinto. It claims a difference of position. An owner decides on price, investment, saving and closure, takes the profits in good years and holds the asset. A royalty recipient takes a share of output on terms set by others, whatever the result, and decides nothing.

The rulers of Abu Dhabi used that position to take majority participation in their oil within three years of statehood and to found a sovereign investment fund within five.^{38, 39} Measured against the paper's own figures, the gap between the two positions at Gove is large. As royalty recipients, Aboriginal people have received about A\$1.1 billion to A\$1.2 billion from Gove in 55 years, less than half of it the Gove-area groups. As owners, on the same figures, the land holders would have held an asset valued at about A\$2.5 billion in 2001 and, in good periods, operating earnings of the order of A\$270 million to A\$310 million a year. They would also have held the decisions about how that money was invested in the homelands and saved for the end of mining in 2029.⁶²

11. The Northern Territory: strong land rights, thin returns

Gove lies in the jurisdiction with the strongest Aboriginal land rights in Australia. That makes the thinness of the return on the ground harder, not easier, to explain. This section traces the Territory's land rights and self-government since 1976, the institutions through which royalty money passes, the policy changes that have reshaped the homelands since 2007, the evidence on how royalty money has been used, and the political shift since 2024.

11.1 Land rights and self-government

The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 remains the strongest land rights statute in the country. It grants inalienable freehold title, held by Aboriginal land trusts for the Traditional Owners. It requires their consent before exploration licences are granted on their land, subject to a national interest override, and it established land councils to represent them. About half the Territory's land mass is now Aboriginal land under the Act. Since the High Court's Blue Mud Bay decision of 2008, a case brought from north-east Arnhem Land, Traditional Owners have also controlled access to the intertidal zone along about 85 per cent of the Territory's coastline.¹³ The Act did not, however, give owners the minerals or the royalty. Those remained with government. Two years later, on 1 July 1978, the Northern Territory (Self-Government) Act 1978 made the Territory self-governing. The Commonwealth retained its rights over uranium, but the royalty on other minerals, including Gove bauxite, passed to the Territory.^{35, 63} The arrangement has lasted ever since. The Territory government receives the royalty, the Commonwealth pays an equal amount into the Aboriginals Benefit Account, and the land councils, created and funded under Commonwealth law, deal with the Territory as a separate power.³⁰

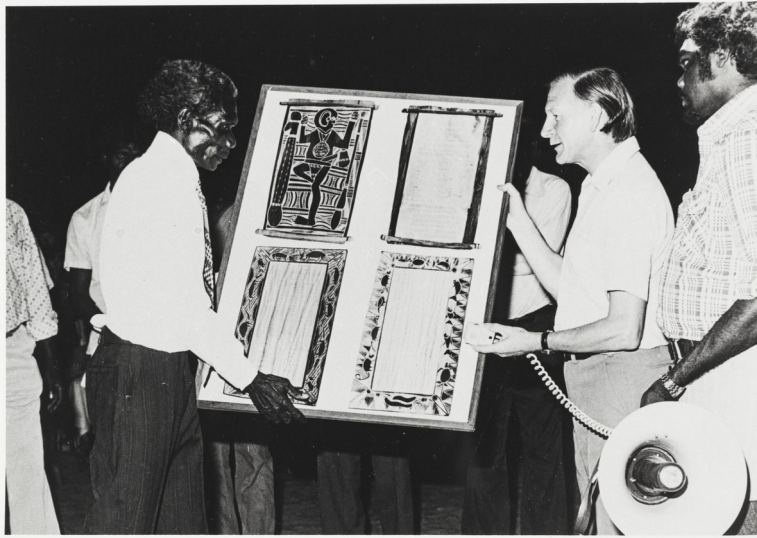


Figure 12. Presentation of land title to the Yirrkala Council by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Ian Viner, Yirrkala, 6 September 1978; the catalogue names Roy Marika (left) and Gatjil Djerrkura (right). Photographer not recorded. Northern Territory Government Photographer Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0095/0018, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/890816>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.



Figure 13. Opening of the Ranger uranium mine, Kakadu National Park area, 11 June 1979. Photographer not recorded. Northern Territory Government Photographer Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0095/0258, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/720296>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.

11.2 The Aboriginals Benefit Account and who controls it

For almost all of its history the Account has been controlled by Commonwealth ministers, advised by an Aboriginal committee but not directed by one. Proposals to place it under an Aboriginal-controlled body date back at least to Altman's review of 1985.⁶⁴ In 2003 the Australian National Audit Office found that the Account's financial plan had no clear objective, that its investments had no performance indicators, and that discretionary

grants to Aboriginal people were rarely made because they could not carry conditions, while supplementary payments to land councils were used more often than intended.⁶⁵ Change came with the Economic Empowerment amendments of 2021. After a Senate committee inquiry, Parliament created the Northern Territory Aboriginal Investment Corporation, now Aboriginal Investment NT, with a board majority elected by the land councils. It provided for A\$680 million of the Account's balance of about A\$1.3 billion to be transferred to the Corporation over three years, and abolished the Account's advisory committee.^{64, 66} Aboriginal Investment NT now manages new grants. The National Indigenous Australians Agency continues to manage grants approved before 2023 and the ABA Homelands Project, which closed on 31 December 2024.⁶⁷

The transfer is real but partial. At 30 June 2025 the Account still held about A\$802 million in term deposits, which remain under the Minister's control, together with the future flow of royalty equivalents.⁶⁷ Aboriginal Investment NT has placed A\$500 million of its money in a future fund to preserve it. It caps community grants at about A\$10 million a year, and it made about A\$15 million in grants in 2025. Its chief executive has said that the flow of royalties is drying up as major mines prepare to close.⁶⁸ Altman argues that the new body has no guaranteed share of future royalty equivalents while the Minister controls the larger balance.⁶⁹ Nearly fifty years after the Act, Aboriginal control of the money it generates thus covers less than half of the accumulated balance, and none of the future inflow is guaranteed to it.

11.3 The Intervention, the shires and the homelands

From 2007 the direction of policy turned against local Aboriginal control. On 21 June 2007, after the Little Children are Sacred report, the Howard Government announced the Northern Territory National Emergency Response, legislated in August. In 73 prescribed communities it imposed alcohol restrictions and income management, took compulsory five-year leases over townships and changed the permit system, and it suspended the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 for those measures.⁷⁰ The Territory's Local Government Act 2008 then abolished the elected Aboriginal community councils and, from 1 July 2008, replaced them with eight large shires.⁷¹ In May 2009 the Territory's Working Future policy settled the position of the homelands. It named twenty Territory Growth Towns as service hubs and stated that the Territory would not fund new outstations. Outstation housing on Aboriginal land was to be treated as private housing, and under a 2007 agreement the Commonwealth would no longer fund it.⁷² These decisions bear directly on places such as Mata Mata. Royalty equivalents from Gove continued to flow through the Account and the land council throughout this period, yet the public housing, local government and service models on which homelands depended were withdrawn or centralised.

11.4 What the evidence shows about royalty money

The research on how royalty money is used is long-standing but thin on outcomes. Altman and Levitus showed in 1999 that of Woodward's formula, 40 per cent to land councils, 30 per cent to areas affected and 30 per cent for Territory Aboriginal people generally, only the 30 per cent to areas affected had survived unchanged. Supplementary funding for land councils had come at the expense of general grants to Aboriginal people.⁷³ The local

share is paid to royalty associations, of which there were more than fifty by 1999. Altman and Smith found that these associations act as brokers between two economic systems, distributing cash, investing and delivering services, and argued for monitoring, strategic planning and investment that protects income for future members.⁷⁴ Audits have concentrated on governance rather than results. The 2003 audit of the Account is noted above. In 2023 the Audit Office found the Northern Land Council's governance largely effective, but identified weaknesses in record-keeping, transparency, risk and fraud control and performance reporting.^{65, 75} At Gove the public record ends at the point of distribution. The Northern Land Council reports how much of the local 30 per cent each corporation receives.³⁶ Neither the land council nor the Account reports how the recipient corporations spend it, or how much reaches people living on the homelands. That gap, rather than any single misuse, is the most consistent finding: the money reaches organisations, and what happens next is not publicly accounted for.

11.5 The 2024 election and the Mulka by-election

At the Territory election of 24 August 2024 the Country Liberal Party under Lia Finocchiaro won 17 of the 25 seats, up from eight, and Labor, in government since 2016, fell from fourteen seats to four. Independents won three seats and the Greens one. The CLP's first-preference vote rose by 17.6 points to 48.9 per cent, and Finocchiaro became the first woman to lead the CLP into government.⁷⁶ Mulka, the electorate that includes Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala, the Gove mine and Mata Mata, went against the trend. Its independent member, Yingiya Mark Guyula, a Yolŋu leader who had held the seat and its predecessor Nhulunbuy since 2016, was re-elected with 75.2 per cent of the vote against the CLP.⁷⁶

On 19 August 2026 Guyula resigned. He said the government had introduced "too many laws that are dehumanising, oppressing and destroying our communities and our people", and also cited his health and a wish to make way for new energy. At the by-election on 12 September 2026 the CLP did not field a candidate. Labor's Yiwarr McGrath, a Yolŋu registered nurse from Elcho Island and the 2021 Northern Territory Young Australian of the Year, defeated the only other candidate, the independent Andrew Blamey, with about 77 per cent of the vote on a turnout of 38 per cent. The result returned the seat to Labor, which had held it as Nhulunbuy from 1980 to 2016.⁷⁷ The by-election does not change the balance of the Assembly. In the author's reading, however, it shows that the electorate containing one of Australia's longest-running mines, and many of the homelands this set of papers describes, is represented by a Yolŋu member in opposition to a government with a large majority. That is the political setting in which decisions about the Account, homeland funding and Gove's closure will now be made.

12. What reached the homelands

12.1 Costs on the ground

Set against these flows, the money that reaches the homelands is small and narrowly channelled. The whole Laynhapuy Homelands share of Gove royalty equivalents in 2023–24 was A\$2.67 million.³⁶ Marthakal and Mata Mata lie outside the Gove distribution

altogether: on the published split they receive nothing, and Mata Mata has received no negotiated payment.^{31, 36} The companion papers show what this means on the ground. A homeland vehicle costs about A\$10,000 to A\$11,000 a year to buy on Arnhem Land vehicle lives, and supporters put running costs at about A\$5,000 every two months. One vehicle for each of the nearly 1,000 homeland communities would cost about A\$10 million to A\$11 million a year to buy (author's calculation).⁷⁸ The cost of travel without a vehicle, by charter plane, by an unfinished road or by a boat service that does not exist, is set out in section 1.^{7, 9, 10}

The royalty corporations do return part of this money to people in need. In the author's experience, Aboriginal organisations such as the Gumatj and Rirratjingu corporations provide needed funds for funerals, some funding for generators and other services, on a needs basis.⁷⁹ Their published material is consistent with that account. Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation's rule book states its primary objective as relieving the "poverty, destitution, misfortune, disadvantage, distress, dispossession and suffering" of its members, and its Social Program supports people undergoing medical treatment, whitegoods for the sick and elderly, culture and ceremonies, family visits to terminally ill relatives and "miscellaneous whole of community needs". A separate Funeral Fund assists members "in relation to funerals and other ceremonies", and eligible members receive fortnightly charitable payments.⁸⁰ In 2019–20 the Funeral Fund supported 27 family funerals with A\$103,517, alongside about A\$1.08 million in family charitable payments.⁸¹ Gumatj Corporation describes reinvesting the value of its enterprises in housing, education, training, local employment and community services, including youth, school nutrition and women's and men's programs.⁸² This support is real and valued. It is, however, distributed case by case according to need, mainly to the members of the royalty-receiving clans, rather than as planned investment in homeland housing, power and transport. It eases hardship; it cannot substitute for the infrastructure that governments have not built.

The irony is plain. The country around Gove has produced billions of dollars in mineral wealth: a market value of about A\$2.5 billion in 2001, a US\$2.3 billion expansion and, on the illustration above, around A\$2.2 billion in bauxite earnings in seven recent years. Yet the homelands around it are served by roads, housing, power and transport that are funded late and at the lowest cost government can find. The royalty that the Territory received from Gove in 2025 alone, about A\$125 million, exceeds the A\$120 million committed to the joint homeland housing and infrastructure program from 2024.^{9, 34} The point is not that royalties should be hypothecated. It is that homeland infrastructure has been treated as an afterthought in a region whose resources have financed infrastructure elsewhere.

12.2 A model: the Goulburn Murray Regional Prosperity Plan

A different way of planning Aboriginal prosperity has been developed in northern Victoria. The Goulburn Murray Regional Prosperity Plan, also called the Goulburn Murray Regional Prosperity and Productivity Plan, was prepared by the Kaiela Institute, the Yorta Yorta-led policy institute in Shepparton, with KPMG. Its Project Control Group, co-chaired by the Institute's chair Paul Briggs and David McKenzie, a director of Goulburn-

Murray Water, drew members from the University of Melbourne, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, Victorian Government departments, local councils and regional business committees. Work began in September 2020 and the Plan was launched on 15 July 2021.^{83, 84} Briggs is a Yorta Yorta leader who grew up at Cummeragunja on the Murray. He founded the Rumbalara Football Netball Club and helped to establish the First Nations Australian Credit Union, and in 2024 he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia for service to the Indigenous community and to social welfare through economic inclusion and reconciliation.⁸⁵

The Plan is a fifteen-year, whole-of-region strategy built on a rights claim rather than a welfare one. Its first objective is to recognise “Yorta Yorta people’s right to an economy and a future state of productivity post-dispossession”. The others are to set a regional trajectory to parity, to activate the First Nations economy through direct investment in enterprise, and to build “regional accountability” by defining outcomes in “specific and measurable” terms. Its vision is an additional A\$150 million a year in gross regional product and about 460 jobs by 2036, figures drawn from a 2018 Deloitte Access Economics study of what economic parity would be worth to the region.⁸³ Six strategic themes, ranging from home ownership and intergenerational wealth to enterprise, skills and culture, are each tied to indicators and to ten of the national Closing the Gap targets, with progress reported in bi-annual score cards. The Plan is to be Aboriginal-led and is overseen by a regional Implementation Committee. Major local institutions, including Greater Shepparton City Council, Goulburn-Murray Water, the food processor SPC and the University of Melbourne, have signed a Statement of Intent as Plan Champions. In doing so they acknowledge the history of dispossession and a shared responsibility to restore a thriving First Nations economy.⁸³ The investment model since developed with KPMG would establish an independent investment fund, with re-investment linked to stage-gated gains in regional productivity and avoided government costs, on the “earn-back” principle of the United Kingdom’s City Deals. Updated estimates put the return at A\$180 million a year and more than 500 jobs by 2036.⁸⁶ This paper does not assess the Plan’s results to date.

The Goulburn Murray is a region of towns, irrigation and food processing, not a remote mining province, and the Plan is not a royalty scheme. What it offers is a method. It starts from an Aboriginal right to an economy, sets whole-of-region targets with dates, names the institutions responsible and links investment to measured returns. One would expect such a model to suit north-east Arnhem Land at least as well as Shepparton. North-east Arnhem Land has what the Goulburn Murray lacks: Aboriginal ownership of most of the land, a large mineral revenue stream and a mine closure to plan for. Gove’s money has been handled in the opposite way. The royalty goes to the Territory with no regional plan attached. The Account’s equivalents are divided by formula among the land councils, three local corporations and Territory-wide grants. The 2011 Agreement payments are confidential, and Aboriginal Investment NT allocates its share through capped, application-based grants across the whole Territory.^{31, 34, 36, 67, 68} None of these channels sets targets for the homelands, measures what reaches them or plans the investment of the money in their roads, housing, transport and enterprises. The idea of a regional Aboriginal development agenda is not foreign to the region. North-east Arnhem Land and

the Goulburn Murray were both among the eight founding regions of Empowered Communities, the Indigenous-led reform initiative whose regional leaders, named in its 2015 design report, included Briggs and Noel Pearson.⁸⁷ The sources consulted for this paper, however, show no plan of the Goulburn Murray kind that directs Gove royalties, Account capital or Aboriginal Investment NT funds into the homelands. With the last bauxite due to be mined in 2029, the author considers that such a plan, Aboriginal-led and with targets for the homelands, is the obvious use for the royalty revenue and Account capital that remain.⁴⁵

12.3 Yolŋu enterprise and development: repeated attempts

The absence of a regional plan does not reflect an absence of Yolŋu initiative. Yolŋu leaders around Gove have tried, repeatedly and over five decades, to turn the presence of the mine and their ownership of the surrounding country into enterprises, jobs and services under their own control.

Wesley Lanhupuy, whose name also appears in the record as Laynhapuy, was director of the Northern Land Council before he became, in 1983, the first Yolŋu member of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly. He held Arnhem for Labor until 1995. In a 1982 paper he set out the Yolŋu position that land and its resources cannot be separated and are owned and cared for by interrelated clans, the premise on which Yolŋu claims to a share in resource development rest. A contemporary study of the uranium negotiations in the Alligator Rivers region identified him as one of the bicultural Aboriginal leaders mediating between traditional owners and mining companies.⁸⁸ Gatjil Djerrkura, a senior Wangurri man from Yirrkala, built a business alongside the mine itself. As general manager of Yirrkala Business Enterprises, an Aboriginal-owned company, he supplied earthmoving equipment and environmental earthworks to Nabalco and maintained the parks and gardens of Nhulunbuy and Yirrkala. Senator Aden Ridgeway later recalled the company as operating independently and providing employment and training to local people.⁸⁹ Djerrkura went on to chair the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commercial Development Corporation, which became Indigenous Business Australia in 2001, and to serve as a director of the Henry Walker mining group and the Indigenous Land Corporation. He chaired ATSIC from December 1996 to December 1999.^{89, 90} Shortly before his death in 2004 he described the abolition of ATSIC as done “in the classic imperial fashion, without negotiation, without understanding and with little empathy”.⁸⁹



Figure 14. Investiture at Yirrkala for Mrs Liyapidiny Marika, 19 November 1982. From left, as catalogued: Wandjuk Marika OBE; Commodore E. E. Johnston AM OBE, Administrator; Roy Marika MBE; Mrs Liyapidiny Marika OAM; Miss Joyce Ross MBE. Photographer not recorded. Northern Territory Government Photographer Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0136/0152, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/330811>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.

Galarrwuy Yunupingu, the Gumatj leader who chaired the Northern Land Council for 24 years, made enterprise the centre of his later work. As founding chairman of Gumatj Corporation he set up a cattle station, a timber mill and a nursery, and established the Gulkula bauxite mine.⁹¹ The Gumatj association was first incorporated in 1979 to generate employment for its people and was at first reliant on mining royalties. The corporate regulator has since reported its businesses as including the mine, a mining training centre, the timber mill, a cattle farm, municipal services and construction, employing more than 70 Yolŋu.⁹² The timber enterprise has a long history: a Gumatj sawmill operated on the Dhupuma plateau from 1972 to 1979, and in 2017 the mill at Gunyangara, cutting timber salvaged ahead of Rio Tinto's clearing, employed up to 16 local people and was building houses for cyclone-damaged Galiwin'ku under a government contract. In the same year Gumatj secured a township lease over Gunyangara under its own control, the first of its kind.^{92, 93} Gulkula began mining in April 2017 and exported its first bauxite to China that November, making it the first wholly Aboriginal-owned and operated bauxite mine. It obtained Aluminium Stewardship Initiative certification in 2020.⁹² Yunupingu was nonetheless clear about what had held his people back. In his 2016 essay "Rom Watangu" he wrote that the arrival of welfare on the homelands "killed off this whole idea of self-management", that "there was no development agenda and there was no employment", and that the Community Development Employment Projects scheme had a destructive impact in East Arnhem Land.⁹⁴



Figure 15. Galarrwuy Yunupingu, then Chairman of the Northern Land Council, 1977. Photographer not recorded. ABC TV Collection, Library & Archives NT, PictureNT PH0416/0004, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/312999>. Licensed CC BY 4.0.



Figure 16. Galarrwuy Yunupingu, December 1978. Photograph: Bert Wiedemann. Library & Archives NT, <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/717312>, via Wikimedia Commons, "File:Galarrwuy James Yunupingu.jpg". Licensed CC BY-SA 4.0, as stated on Wikimedia Commons.

Land and sea management has been another Yolŋu initiative. Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation was established in 1992 by the Yolŋu owners of the Gove Peninsula estates to manage visitors and country around the mining town. Its owners declined a joint-management national park at Cape Arnhem, and in 2000 the Dhimurru Indigenous Protected Area was dedicated, the first in the Territory and the first in Australia to include sea country. It is funded partly from permit fees paid by Nhulunbuy residents and visitors and partly by government and other contributors, including the mine's owner.⁹⁵ The Laynhapuy Homelands Association, incorporated in 1984 to serve the homelands separately from the Yirrkala council, shows the limits of this path. By 2006 it served nearly twenty homelands, ran the Yirrkala Rangers and a break-even air charter service, and earned discretionary income from civil works, kava wholesaling and a small share of

Gove royalty equivalents. Yet 87 per cent of its income came from government grants. Its kava trade ended when importation was banned in June 2007. In 2005–06, under new CDEP rules, it was told to create a business and move fifteen people into other employment within twelve months, without coherent government support, and was then judged to have performed poorly.⁹⁶ Laynhapuy and its rangers continue to pursue tourism and bush-products enterprises on the homelands.⁹⁶

The record therefore shows not a lack of Yolŋu enterprise but a recurring set of obstacles. The first is finance. Yolŋu organisations have had no equity in the mine, their discretionary income has been small, and the Laynhapuy homelands received only a small share of royalty equivalents while depending on grants for almost everything else.^{36, 96} The second is the royalty structure itself. The statutory share follows the mining lease, so the capacity to build enterprises has been concentrated in the clans whose land is mined, while homelands outside the Gove area receive nothing.³⁶ The third is government policy, which has repeatedly changed the ground beneath these organisations: the arrival of welfare and CDEP, the 2005–06 CDEP rules, the kava ban, the abolition of ATSIC, the Intervention, the shires and the Working Future policy.^{70, 71, 72, 89, 94, 96} What Yolŋu leaders have lacked is not ideas or will, but the capital, stable policy and regional plan of the kind described in section 12.2.

13. Gove and resource rights elsewhere: supporting cases

The UAE comparison in section 6 is the paper’s central one. Other regimes support it more briefly. None is a template for Gove, and the paper notes what each does and does not show.

13.1 Other regimes

- Alaska. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act 1971 settled aboriginal claims with about 44 million acres and US\$962.5 million, vested in Native regional and village corporations. Each regional corporation must share 70 per cent of its timber and subsurface revenues with the others, so that regions without minerals also benefit.⁹⁷ Separately, the Alaska Permanent Fund, created by constitutional amendment in 1976, saves at least a quarter of state mineral royalties, and has paid an equal dividend to every eligible resident since 1982. That dividend is a benefit of residence, not an Indigenous one.⁹⁸
- Canada. Modern treaties give Inuit and First Nations title, royalty shares and a legal right to negotiated benefits. Under the Nunavut Agreement (1993) Inuit own large areas, some with subsurface title. They receive 50 per cent of the first \$2 million of government resource royalty each year and 5 per cent of the rest, paid to the Nunavut Trust with an annual statement of how it was calculated. An Inuit Impact and Benefit Agreement is required for major projects.⁹⁹ The royalty share is modest, but consent, disclosure and benefit agreements are guaranteed in a constitutionally protected treaty.
- Botswana. In 1967 the tribal leaders agreed with President Seretse Khama, himself the hereditary chief of the Bamangwato, to surrender mineral rights in the tribal areas to the state so that the wealth could be shared among all districts. Debswana,

the partnership with De Beers, was formed in 1969 with a 15 per cent government stake, raised to 50 per cent in 1975.¹⁰⁰ The case shows tribal leaders converting mineral wealth into national development through statehood.

- Norway. Since 1990 Norway has saved its petroleum revenue in what is now the Government Pension Fund Global, with the first transfer in 1996. It is the leading example of saving a finite resource for after it runs out.¹⁰¹
- The Navajo Nation. As a federally recognised tribal lessor, the Navajo Nation leased coal under the Indian Mineral Leasing Act, with periodic royalty re-openers, and coal income made up about a fifth of its general fund. When the Navajo Generating Station and Kayenta mine closed in 2019, Navajo spending was cut by about 23 per cent; the neighbouring Hopi depended on coal for about 85 per cent of their budget.¹⁰² Ownership brought revenue, but without enough saving it left the nations exposed at closure, the position Gove faces in 2029.
- Australia after Mabo. Since 1992–93 native title holders have had a right to negotiate over new mining. The minerals still belong to the Crown, royalties still go to the states and the Territory, and agreements depend on bargaining power. Rio Tinto's destruction of the Juukan Gorge rock shelters in 2020 led a parliamentary committee to find that heritage protection had failed.^{32, 103}

13.2 Lessons for Gove and the homelands

Four lessons follow. First, ownership and consent determine who benefits. Where owners held title and took part in negotiations, as in the Gulf, Botswana, Alaska and Nunavut, they shaped the terms. At Gove the owners were excluded in 1963–71, and the first negotiated payments came in 2011. Second, mineral revenue can be shared beyond the mine site, as Alaska's 70 per cent rule and Botswana's district principle share it. Homelands outside the Gove area, such as Mata Mata, receive nothing from Gove. Third, a finite resource calls for saving. With mining due to end in 2029, the Norwegian, Alaskan and Abu Dhabi funds, and the Navajo experience, are directly relevant. Fourth, disclosure matters. Nunavut's royalty share is reported to the Inuit trust every year, whereas Gove's Agreement payments remain confidential. Gove's own recent history shows that the capacity is there: the Gumatj clan's Gulkula Mining Company has mined and exported bauxite since 2017.^{92, 104}

13.3 Recognition, deservingness and international standing

In the author's reading, the 2023 referendum on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament showed that most Australians do not think Aboriginal Australians should have special rights or recognition. The proposal was rejected by 60.06 per cent of voters nationally and by a majority in every state.¹⁰⁵ The reasons for the No vote are debated, and the result should not be made to carry more than it can. The largest post-referendum study found that No voters most often cited a fear of dividing the country, and that many respondents regarded rights held by some Australians and not others as unfair. The same study found that most respondents supported recognition in principle, and a say for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in matters affecting them, while rejecting the model put to them.¹⁰⁶

Whether Aboriginal Australians are thought more or less deserving than other citizens does not, however, settle the question this paper raises. On the comparative evidence, Australia treats its First Nations and homeland peoples poorly by international standards. Canada's Constitution Act 1982 recognises and affirms existing aboriginal and treaty rights, and modern treaties such as the Nunavut Agreement carry constitutional protection, a share of resource royalties and a right to impact and benefit agreements.^{99, 107} In New Zealand the Treaty of Waitangi of 1840 is treated as a founding document of the state, and since 1975 the Waitangi Tribunal has inquired into Crown breaches of its principles.¹⁰⁸ Norway recognised the Sámi in its Constitution in 1988 and has had an elected Sámi Parliament since 1989; Finland and Sweden also recognise the Sámi in their constitutions.¹⁰⁹ Alaska settled Native claims in 1971 with land, money and a shared stake in subsurface revenue.⁹⁷ By contrast, the Australian Constitution does not mention Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There is no national treaty, the first statewide treaty being Victoria's of 2025, and Australia has ratified neither of the International Labour Organization's conventions on indigenous and tribal peoples.^{109, 110}

The outcome evidence points the same way. After her visit in 2017, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, reported that Australian government policies did not duly respect the rights to self-determination and effective participation. She found that they contributed to the failure to meet targets in health, education and employment, and fuelled "escalating and critical" rates of incarceration and child removal.¹¹¹ Eight years later the Productivity Commission found only four of the nineteen Closing the Gap targets on track, with outcomes worsening for incarceration, children in out-of-home care and suicide.¹¹² None of this means that the comparator countries have resolved these questions. Canada, New Zealand and the Nordic states have their own disputes and gaps, and the Gulf example concerns citizens rather than indigenous minorities. The narrower point is that comparable countries have given their first peoples some combination of formal recognition, treaties, representative institutions and a legal share of resource revenue, and Australia has done less of each. At Gove the result is the record traced in this paper. The minerals were taken without consent, the first negotiated payment came forty years after Milirrpum, and the homelands around one of the country's longest-running mines still lack basic roads and transport.

14. Who got what, and who did not

- The companies and their shareholders received the operating return: Alusuisse in cheap alumina and bauxite; CSR and AMP in export profits and a A\$740 million sale; Alcan's shareholders in Rio's cash price of about US\$38 billion; and Rio Tinto's owners in bauxite earnings since 2014, after heavy losses on the refinery.
- Governments received the statutory royalty, the Commonwealth until 1978 and the Northern Territory since: about A\$0.92 billion to A\$0.98 billion in total. Company tax attributable to Gove is small and only partly visible.
- Aboriginal people across the Territory received the Aboriginals Benefit Account's 70 per cent share of royalty equivalents, used for land councils, administration and grants. The Account does not publish a cumulative total for Gove.

- The affected-area clans and Laynhapuy received 30 per cent of royalty equivalents and, from 2011, the Agreement payments. Corporations such as Gumatj and Rirratjingu use part of these funds for funerals, charitable payments and other support on a needs basis (section 12.1).
- Marthakal and Mata Mata do not appear in the published Gove royalty distribution, and the sources consulted show no other Account or royalty path to them.
- Workers and the town received company-built infrastructure and employment, which peaked at about 1,400 refinery staff before the 2014 closure. Indigenous employment by year has not been published.

15. Gaps

Several matters cannot be settled from the public record. No owner has published a lifetime revenue or profit figure for Gove. Gove's own accounts under Nabalco and Alusuisse, and its earnings under Alcan and Rio, are not disclosed, and the illustration in section 8.5 rests on Rio's whole bauxite business. Also unknown are the royalties for 2001-07 and 2013-14, year-by-year production for 1972-2007, the reason for the 2024-25 rise in the royalty per tonne, the confidential Agreement payments, company tax attributable to Gove in most years, the Gove share of Rio's closure spending and the split of Rio Tinto's beneficial owners by country. Gumatj Corporation's financial statements were not located. The estimates here should therefore be read as a floor on what can be documented, not as a closed ledger.¹⁴

16. Conclusion

This paper began on the ground, with Mrs Burarrwaja's struggle to keep her father's homeland going: a homeland without a working vehicle or a rubbish service, homelands whose housing and infrastructure are decades old and whose main service program has been cut by more than a third in real terms, and a region that the subsidised air service and any scheduled boat pass by, and Yolŋu incomes at or below the unemployment payment a short drive from a mining town whose incomes are far above the national figures. Those homelands belong to the Yolŋu clans whose country carries one of Australia's longest-running mines. Gove began without the consent of its owners, and its money has flowed accordingly. The minerals were the Crown's and the leases the Commonwealth's. The returns went to shareholders in Zurich, Sydney, Montreal, London and beyond, and the royalties to the Territory. Aboriginal people received a statutory share designed in Canberra and, after 2011, a confidential negotiated payment, about A\$1.1 billion to A\$1.2 billion in all, while homelands such as Mata Mata received nothing.

The United Arab Emirates explains the difference better than any argument about remoteness or capacity. In 1971, the year Milirrpum held that the Yolŋu had no title the common law could recognise, the tribal leaders of Abu Dhabi became the government of a sovereign state that owned its oil. Within five years they held most of its production and had founded a sovereign fund. Had the Yolŋu clan leaders owned the bauxite and the refinery in the same way, on this paper's own figures they would have held an asset worth about A\$2.5 billion in 2001 and, in good years, earnings of hundreds of millions of

dollars a year, together with the losses, the liabilities and the decisions. They held instead a share of a royalty. As mining at Gove ends in 2029, the questions this set of papers asks on the ground, about cars, roads, planes and boats, are questions about ownership as much as about money. They ask where Gove's wealth went, and whether what remains, the royalty, the Account's capital and the funds of Aboriginal Investment NT, will be planned and invested in the homelands under Yolŋu control.

There is another way to read the struggle with which this paper began. That Mrs Burarrwanga and other homeland leaders had to struggle at all is, in one sense, a positive. In the author's view it shows that Yolŋu manikay (song), and the culture it carries, proved in a way more powerful than the most powerful governments and companies in the world. Half a century of mining under three multinational owners, and successive policies made in Canberra and Darwin, did not displace them, and the Yolŋu have survived with their cultural foundations intact. It must also be said, with sorrow, that too many of the leaders who carried that struggle have passed away, Mrs Burarrwanga among them, before the questions this paper asks could be answered. The paper is offered in their memory, and in the hope that what remains of Gove's wealth will be put to work on the foundations they kept.

Notes

1. Mata Mata Productions, "Dhukarr Yäkthun (Remaking the Pathway)", 31 min, a film by Brigitte Ross with Batumbil Burarrwanga, Doris Yelthun Dhambing Burarrwanga and Daisy Gunygula Burarrwanga, programme notes, matamataproductions.vhx.tv, seen 8 October 2026 ("In loving memory of Batumbil Burarrwanga 1 Feb 1956 – 19th December 2018"; the 1964 walk with her father Gatiirri from Mata Mata towards Elizabeth Bay and Cape Wilberforce; the deaths of Gatiirri and two of his brothers at Elizabeth Bay; schooling at Galiwin'ku; the walk retraced with her sisters), and channel description (her vision that Mata Mata be "a place of deep learning"). Botsman, Peter (2024), "Dhaŋu dhuka (Making the way)", workingpapers.com.au, 1 July 2024 (dates the re-created walk to September 2016; the film notes give 2017). Botsman, Peter (2019), "Eulogy for Mrs. P.B. Burarrwanga", workingpapers.com.au, 23 September 2019. Botsman (2019), Mata Mata Creative Trust prospectus, p. 3 (her principle that those who lived on country were capable of making their own decisions). ISX, "Batumbil Burarrwanga" campaign page (senior leader of Mata Mata; two-way learning). Her given name appears as "Phyllis Batumbil" in the 1997 film *Nhanapinya Rakaranhami* (How we talk to one another), by James Djikula, excerpted on the Mata Mata Productions site.
2. Peter Botsman, personal communication, October 2026 (Mrs Burarrwanga as a courageous homeland leader who carried on with almost nothing but her father Gatiirri's legacy, built from the Methodist mission era).
3. Peter Botsman, personal communication, October 2026, and email to Peter Garrett, 3 October 2026 (firsthand account of a week at Mata Mata: no cars operating; a 400 km round trip to Nhulunbuy; no garbage collection, with cans, bottles and plastic sorted and the rubbish buried in a large pit behind the settlement), as reported in Botsman, Peter (2026), *Planes, Roads, Automobiles: The Realities of Life on NE Arnhem Homelands*, summary and section on Mata Mata. On the founding of Mata Mata by Gatiirri Burarrwanga and family around 1948 and the support of Marthakal Homelands and Resource Centre, Botsman (2019), Mata Mata Creative Trust prospectus, pp. 6–8, as cited in the same paper.

4. Peter Botsman, personal communication, October 2026 (the author's observation that large numbers of people on the homelands he knows share not one working vehicle, and that there are no proper schools, infrastructure or rubbish services). The observation is the author's; it is not a count.
5. Mata Mata Productions, "Batumbil Mata Mata School", 6 min, programme note, matamataproductions.vhx.tv, seen 8 October 2026 (Mrs Burarrwaja's account of how the school developed from home schooling to the present building; "currently because of Northern Territory Government policy the school is empty and children who want to attend school must move to a regional town or centre such as Nhulunbuy, Galiwinku or another centre"). The note is undated.
6. Gerrard, G. (1989), "Everyone will be Jealous for that Mutika", Mankind (about sixty working vehicles for about 800 people at Maningrida in the late 1980s, and one Aboriginal-owned car for every forty-four Aboriginal people); Altman, Jon and Melinda Hinkson (2005), Maningrida region vehicle counts (one truck or four-wheel drive for up to thirty Kuninjku people); both as cited in Botsman (2026), Planes, Roads, Automobiles.
7. Botsman, Peter (2026), "Planes", companion paper (interview with David at Mata Mata, October 2026: about \$850 for the charter from Galiwin'ku and a further \$200 to freight about \$600 of groceries).
8. Botsman, Peter (2026), "Planes", companion paper, citing Department of Infrastructure, Remote Air Services Subsidy (RASS) Scheme guidelines, infrastructure.gov.au, seen 7 October 2026 (a regular, typically weekly, air service carrying passengers, educational materials, medicines, fresh food and other urgent supplies to up to 276 remote communities; no North East Arnhem Land community on the current list), and on the Royal Flying Doctor Service, the School of the Air (first lessons broadcast in 1951 over the Flying Doctor radio network) and the subsidised Connellan air mail from 1939, many of whose shares were held by station people and staff. Pastoral Land Act 1992 (NT) (pastoral land in the Territory is held under pastoral leases granted by the Crown).
9. Botsman, Peter (2026), "Roads: The Central Arnhem Highway", companion paper (A\$355m upgrade, A\$280m Australian Government and A\$75m Territory; about 25 km of new seal by October 2026 against a 2019 promise to seal about half the road; Territory maintenance "on average over \$2 million per annum"; the joint Homeland Housing and Infrastructure Program of \$100m from 2022 and \$120m from 2024).
10. Botsman, Peter (2026), "Boats", companion paper (no scheduled coastal service to the homelands; a subsidised service from Galiwin'ku along the coast to Nhulunbuy proposed but not costed; the Auriga barge service to Wadeye ended in September 2025).
11. Grealy, Liam (2025), Homeland Housing and Infrastructure Program Monitoring and Evaluation Project – Final Report, Menzies School of Health Research, September 2025: executive summary (the program is "the first significant investment from the Australian Government into Northern Territory (NT) homelands for a decade", A\$100 million over two years and A\$120 million over three years); on the Homeland Program, about A\$40 million a year, reduced from A\$53.6 million in 2016 to A\$38.6 million in 2023, "a real reduction across that period of 38 per cent", citing Aboriginal Housing NT (2023); municipal and essential services including waste disposal; regional plans recording that "most dwellings on homelands are decades old, as is the supporting infrastructure"; an audit identifying "the need to clean existing waste pits and build new ones"; and an interviewed public servant (S1).

12. Morphy, Frances and Howard Morphy (2016), “Thwarted aspirations: The political economy of a Yolngu outstation, 1972 to the present”, in Nicolas Peterson and Fred Myers (eds), *Experiments in Self-Determination: Histories of the Outstation Movement in Australia*, Canberra: ANU Press, chapter 15 (at Yilpara, “in the period from 1997 to 2007, not a single house was built to address the significant overcrowding in the community”; government funding “for new homelands community housing ceased altogether in 2008”; schooling by visiting teachers three days a week, and “the desire for full-time residential teachers ... was also slow to be satisfied”).
13. Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Cth), Parts II and IV (inalienable freehold title held by Aboriginal Land Trusts; land councils; Traditional Owners’ consent required for exploration licences on Aboriginal land, subject to a national interest override); Northern Land Council, “About us”, nlc.org.au, and Annual Report 2023–24, Part 1, “History” (about 50 per cent of the Territory’s land mass held under the Act; after the Blue Mud Bay decision, exclusive access rights to the intertidal zone along about 85 per cent of the Territory coastline); *Northern Territory v Arnhem Land Aboriginal Land Trust* (2008) 236 CLR 24.
14. Author’s research notes on Gove mine economics, closure costs and the Nhulunbuy operations, compiled October 2026 from Rio Tinto annual reports and Form 20-F filings 2008–2025, Rio Tinto tax and payments-to-governments reports, Nabalco (1999) and Northern Land Council annual reports. No owner has published a lifetime revenue or profit figure for Gove.
15. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, QuickStats, abs.gov.au, seen 8 October 2026: Nhulunbuy SA2 (702041064), all persons, 2011, 2016 and 2021; Nhulunbuy (SAL70208), Yirrkala (SAL70299), Gunyangara (SAL70118) and East Arnhem (SAL70086), all persons, 2021; and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people QuickStats for the Indigenous Areas Nhulunbuy – Gunyangara (IARE706005), Yirrkala (IARE706008), Laynhapuy – Gumatj Homelands (IARE706003) and Marthakal Homelands – Galiwinku (IARE706004), 2011, 2016 and 2021. Medians are of weekly total personal income of people aged 15 years and over who stated their income, in nominal dollars; Indigenous Area boundaries may differ slightly between Censuses. Census nights were 9 August 2011, 9 August 2016 and 10 August 2021.
16. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Average Weekly Earnings, Australia, May 2021, industry table (mining, full-time adult average weekly ordinary time earnings, original series, persons: A\$2,674.30).
17. Department of Social Services, Social Security Guide, 5.2.1.20, “Single unemployment & sickness benefit – November 1984 to present date”, Table 5 (single, over 21: A\$237.45 a week from 20 March 2011; A\$263.80 a week from 20 March 2016; A\$620.80 a fortnight, or A\$310.40 a week, from 1 April 2021), guides.dss.gov.au, last reviewed 21 September 2026. The rates are maximum basic rates and exclude supplements.
18. Altman, J. C. (2001), *Sustainable Development Options on Aboriginal Land: The Hybrid Economy in the Twenty-First Century*, CAEPR Discussion Paper 226, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.
19. Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee (2017), *Appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation and evaluation of the Community Development Program (CDP)*, Canberra, December 2017, chapter 2, paras 2.2–2.4, 2.12–2.13, 2.19, 2.24, 2.27, 2.45, 2.54 and 2.67.

20. National Indigenous Australians Agency, “Remote jobs”, niaa.gov.au, viewed 6 October 2026 (the Remote Australia Employment Service from 1 November 2025; the Remote Jobs and Economic Development program, aiming for 6,000 jobs by 2030 with award wages, superannuation and leave).
21. National Museum of Australia, “Yirrkala bark petitions”, *Defining Moments*, seen October 2026 (the petitions led to a House of Representatives select committee, which visited Yirrkala; Nabalco formed by Swiss Aluminium and CSR; the Yolŋu took action in the Northern Territory Supreme Court in 1968; the Land Rights Act returned the Arnhem Land Reserve to Traditional Owners except the land under the Nabalco lease).
22. Wright, Clare (2024), *Näku Dhäruk The Bark Petitions: How the People of Yirrkala Changed the Course of Australian Democracy*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 640 pp. This paper draws on the publisher’s description and on the published review and award citations below, not on a full reading of the text.
23. Quartly, Marian (2024), “Bark diplomacy”, *Inside Story*, 22 November 2024 (review of Wright 2024, quoting Wright’s description of the petitions as “a record of legal intent and sovereign will” and summarising her account of 1963, from the survey pegs of December 1962 to the parliamentary committee’s visit to Yirrkala in October).
24. State Library of New South Wales, “Book of the Year: 2026 winner, Näku Dhäruk The Bark Petitions”; ABC News, “Clare Wright wins top prize at NSW Literary Awards for ‘powerful’ history book Näku Dhäruk The Bark Petitions”, 18 May 2026 (Book of the Year and the Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-fiction).
25. Mining (Gove Peninsula Nabalco Agreement) Ordinance 1968 (NT), schedule (royalty of 20 cents a ton of bauxite treated locally and 30 cents a ton exported, with lower rates when the operation’s profit per ton of alumina fell below set thresholds, and periodic reviews); Prime Minister McMahon, speech at the opening of the Gove alumina plant, 1 July 1972 (royalty of about A\$550,000 a year at first; 10 per cent to Yirrkala backdated to 31 March 1970, first payment A\$21,488).
26. *Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd* (1971) 17 FLR 141 (Blackburn J, Supreme Court of the Northern Territory, 27 April 1971), at 244–245 (the doctrine of communal native title “does not form, and has never formed, part of the law of any part of Australia”) and 267 (“a subtle and elaborate system highly adapted to the country in which the people led their lives, which provided a stable order of society”; “If ever a system could be called ‘a government of laws, and not of men’, it is that shown in the evidence before me”).
27. French, Robert (2002), “The common law of native title in Australia”, *Federal Judicial Scholarship* [2002] FedJSchol 10 (Blackburn J applied the settled-colony doctrine of *Cooper v Stuart* (1889) 14 App Cas 286, held that there was no common law doctrine of native title, and would also have found that the plaintiffs’ relationship to the land was not proprietary). Parliamentary Library (2023), “An unsettling decision: a legal and social history of native title and the Mabo decision”, Research Paper 2022–23 (the decision led Aboriginal people to seek legislated redress, culminating in the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976).
28. Lee, David (2014), “The Development of Bauxite at Gove, 1955–1975”, *Journal of Australasian Mining History* 12; Prime Minister McMahon, speech at the opening of the Gove alumina plant, 1 July 1972.

29. Prime Minister Whitlam, “Aboriginal Land Rights”, press statement, December 1972 (appointment of Mr Justice Woodward); Aboriginal Land Rights Commission, First Report (July 1973) and Second Report (April 1974). On Woodward’s earlier role as counsel for the Yolŋu plaintiffs: House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (1999), *Unlocking the Future*, chapter 2.
30. Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Cth), s 64 (amounts equal to mining royalties paid from Commonwealth revenue into the Aboriginals Benefit Account and distributed, including 30 per cent to Aboriginal people of the affected areas under s 64(3)). The Account’s predecessors were the Aborigines Benefits Trust Fund (from 1952) and the Aboriginals Benefit Trust Account.
31. Prime Minister Gillard and the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, “Historic Gove agreement to deliver long term benefits for North-East Arnhem Land,” media release, 8 June 2011. Agreements, Treaties and Negotiated Settlements database, Gove Traditional Owners Agreement (agreement 5599): A\$15–18m a year “depending on the price of bauxite”. The payments are confidential. The author’s estimate assumes the range held in every year from June 2011 to December 2025, giving about A\$218–262m. The 72.61/26.87/0.49 per cent split is from *Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation v Northern Land Council* [2015] FCA 36.
32. *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* (1992) 175 CLR 1; Native Title Act 1993 (Cth); Parliamentary Library (2023), as above.
33. Commonwealth of Australia v Yunupingu [2025] HCA 6 (12 March 2025); Parliamentary Library, “‘Just terms’, native title and the territories: Commonwealth of Australia v Yunupingu”, FlagPost, 2025 (the claim returns to the Federal Court and compensation is not yet determined).
34. Rio Tinto, Taxes Paid reports for 2015 and 2016, and reports on payments to governments for 2017–2025 (project “Gove – Australia”): royalties to the Northern Territory of US\$29.6m (2015), US\$34.0m (2016, Rio’s Northern Territory total), US\$36.7m (2017), US\$43.5m (2018), US\$38.6m (2019), US\$38.2m (2020), US\$37.6m (2021), US\$31.1m (2022), US\$32.5m (2023), US\$50.3m (2024) and US\$80.4m (2025). Converted at approximate calendar-year average exchange rates (A\$1 = US\$0.645 to US\$0.767), these give about A\$647m over 2015–2025 and A\$124.7m in 2025 (author’s calculation). Rio Tinto, release of 2013: A\$76m in royalties paid to the Northern Territory Government over the previous five years. Royalties for the Alcan years (2001–07) and for 2013–14 are not published and are estimated by the author.
35. Nabalco (1999), submission on behalf of Swiss Aluminium Australia Ltd and Gove Aluminium Ltd to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (inquiry into the Reeves Review), 26 February 1999: A\$90m in royalties paid to the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments since commencement, averaging about A\$9m a year since the 1993 review, of which the local 30 per cent was about A\$2.7m a year. The Commonwealth’s equal payment into the Aboriginals Benefit Account is made under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 and is not deducted from the Territory’s royalty. The Territory-wide share is an upper bound, because some Account money is invested or spent on administration and withholding tax is deducted.
36. Northern Land Council, Annual Report 2023–24, Note 20, Royalty assets held in trust: A\$18.19m of Gove section 64(3) royalty equivalents received in 2023–24 (A\$13.19m in 2022–23), distributed Gumatj A\$11.94m, Rirratjingu A\$3.56m and Laynhapuy Homelands A\$2.67m. The split of Gumatj 65 per cent, Rirratjingu 20 per cent and Laynhapuy 15 per cent was

confirmed by NLC resolution C122/4878 of 7 December 2020; Nabalco (1999) reported the same proportions.

37. Heard-Bey, Frauke, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* (London: Longman, 1982, and later editions), pp. 238–239 (in 1833 about 800 people of the Al Bu Falasah subsection of the Bani Yas seceded from Abu Dhabi and settled in Dubai under Ubaid bin Said and Maktum bin Buti, who established the Al Maktum dynasty); “The Bani Yas Tribe”, sheikhmohammed.co.ae, archived 14 March 2006 (the Al Nahyan come from the Al Bu Falah subsection, originally centred in the Liwa oasis, whose members, quoting Heard-Bey, “spent the winter with their camels in the desert, and many of them went pearling during the summer”); Heard-Bey, Frauke (1979), “Development Anomalies in the Bedouin Oases of al-Liwa”, *Emirates Natural History Group Bulletin* 8 (the Bani Yas “a confederation of tribal Bedouin groups”; pearling boats “owned and manned by people who at other times in the year cultivated their date gardens in the Liwa or who owned camels”; up to 130 days a year on the pearl banks).
38. *Oil & Gas Journal*, “Abu Dhabi (U.A.E.)”; MEED, “Abu Dhabi National Oil Company” (ADNOC formed in 1971; it acquired 25 per cent of the Abu Dhabi Petroleum Company and Abu Dhabi Marine Areas concessions in 1973 and 60 per cent in 1974). The first onshore concession was granted in 1939 to Petroleum Development (Trucial Coast) Ltd, an affiliate of the Iraq Petroleum Company, which was owned by the international oil majors.
39. Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, “An Introduction to ADIA” (established in 1976 to invest funds on behalf of the Government of Abu Dhabi).
40. Constitution of the United Arab Emirates, Article 23 (the natural resources and wealth in each Emirate are the public property of that Emirate), official English translation.
41. UAE Government portal (u.ae), “Housing” (Sheikh Zayed Housing Programme, established 1999, providing housing loans and grants to citizens; Abu Dhabi Housing Authority; Mohammed bin Rashid Housing Establishment, providing plots, houses and loans to Dubai nationals).
42. Higher Colleges of Technology, “About HCT” and Fact Book 2018–19 (established in 1988 under Federal Law No. 2 issued by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan; Sheikh Nahayan Mabarak Al Nahayan appointed its first Chancellor).
43. Peter Botsman, personal communication (family recollection), October 2026. The published sources consulted for this paper do not name the author’s father or record his title. The author recalls the institution as the Higher Colleges in Abu Dhabi and the role as vice-chancellor; the Sheikh Nahyan for whom he worked is most likely Sheikh Nahayan Mabarak Al Nahayan, the Colleges’ founding Chancellor.
44. Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population programme (GLMM), “GCC: Total population and percentage of nationals and non-nationals in GCC countries (national statistics, mid-2020)” (UAE: an estimated 1.27 million Emiratis, 13.7 per cent of 9.29 million residents; the UAE does not publish population by nationality) and “Explaining the ‘Demographic Imbalance’ in the Gulf States” (very limited naturalisation).
45. Rio Tinto, Annual Report 2016, note 2 (increase of US\$402m pre-tax, US\$282m post-tax, in the Gove refinery closure provision); Rio Tinto, Form 20-F 2015, 2020 and 2021 (further Gove-related increases, amounts not separately disclosed); Northern Territory Government, list of mining securities held (A\$974,231,600 for DML 0035, “Gove Operations”, operator RTA Gove

Pty Ltd); Rio Tinto, Gove transition fact sheet, 2026 (refinery demolition to finish in 2027, last bauxite in 2029, mine rehabilitation to about 2040).

46. Lee (2014) (Swiss Aluminium “provided most of the capital for the development and took as its reward low-cost bauxite and alumina for aluminium smelters in Europe rather than profit”; its Australian partner Gove Alumina “was able to earn good profits from bauxite and alumina exports”; the Interior Minister, Peter Nixon, wrote to Nabalco on 28 May 1968 that the alumina price of A\$51 a metric ton was lower than the Commonwealth anticipated, in Lee’s words “diverting a substantial amount of the profits from the development of the bauxite from Australia”; the Commonwealth accepted the deal, including bauxite exports in favour of the Australian partners).
47. CSR Limited, Preliminary Final Report, ASX release, 21 May 2001 (EBIT from the Gove alumina and bauxite interest of A\$67m for the ten months to January 2001, when it was sold to Alcan; a net abnormal profit after tax of A\$129m reflecting the profit on the sale of that interest, partly offset by other items). The annualised and whole-operation figures are the author’s calculations.
48. Alcan (NT) Alumina Pty Ltd v Commissioner of Territory Revenue [2009] HCA 41, paras 19–20 (on 30 January 2001 CSR sold 70 per cent of Gove Aluminium Ltd to Alcan for US\$275m and Gove Aluminium bought back AMP Life’s 30 per cent for US\$117.9m, a total of US\$392.9m, or A\$740.1m after adjustments; the Court held that Alcan was not liable for the Territory’s stamp duty). Alcan Inc., Form 10-K for 2000 (US\$362m plus up to US\$30m).
49. Sydney Morning Herald, “Alcan to pour \$1.8bn into Gove refinery”, 11 September 2004 (export revenue of A\$560m a year, projected A\$980m after the expansion); Baystreet, “Alcan Inc.”, 22 January 2007 (G3 cost revised to US\$2.3bn); Rio Tinto, Form 20-F 2008 (completion of G3, “currently US\$2.3 billion”).
50. Rio Tinto, Annual Reports 2011–2013 (Gove placed in Pacific Aluminium, the business unit formed in 2011 to hold aluminium assets intended for divestment; aluminium impairments in 2012 of about US\$10–11bn, arising largely from the Alcan acquisition of 2007 for about US\$38bn). Gove’s share of these group impairments was not disclosed.
51. Rio Tinto, release of 29 November 2013 (suspension of alumina production at Gove); Sydney Morning Herald, 4 December 2013 (chief executive Sam Walsh: losses of about US\$30m a month); Rio Tinto, full-year results 2013 and Annual Report 2014 (pre-tax impairment of US\$790m, a full write-off of the refinery’s property, plant and equipment; refinery closed on 28 May 2014).
52. Rio Tinto, Form 20-F for 2020, 2022 and 2025, “Financial information by business unit” (Bauxite segmental revenue, US\$m: 2019 2,490; 2020 2,302; 2021 2,203; 2022 2,396; 2023 2,390; 2024 3,061; 2025 3,887; underlying EBITDA: 1,045; 943; 619; 618; 662; 1,250; 1,847) and “Metals and minerals production” (Gove bauxite, kt: 12,201; 12,299; 11,763; 11,510; 11,566; 12,721; 12,729; Rio Tinto total bauxite: 55,105; 56,131; 54,326; 54,618; 54,619; 58,653; 62,400). The illustration is the author’s calculation: each year’s Bauxite revenue and EBITDA multiplied by Gove’s share of production (20.4–22.1 per cent), then summed. It assumes that Gove earned the average revenue per tonne and margin of Rio’s whole bauxite business, which is not known. Some figures are restated in later reports.
53. Lee (2014) (Nabalco proposed as a company split equally between Swiss and Australian interests, the Australian companies being CSR, AMP, MLC, Peko-Wallsend Investments, the

- Commercial Banking Company, Elder Smith Goldsborough Mort and Mount Morgan Ltd; the 1968 Heads of Agreement replaced the single company with a joint venture of two companies as tenants in common, with a reduced Australian stake).
54. Alcan Aluminium Ltd, Form 10-K for 2000, and press release of 18 October 2000 (combination with Alusuisse Group Ltd completed 17 October 2000 by exchange of 17.1 Alcan shares for each Algroup share; Algroup valued at US\$5.6bn including debt); Alcan Inc., Form 10-K for 2002 (Algroup renamed Alcan Holdings Switzerland Ltd).
 55. Alcan Inc., Form 10-K for 2000 and 2001 (Gove 100 per cent owned from January 2001). Alcan was headquartered in Montreal and listed in Toronto and New York.
 56. Rio Tinto, Form 20-F 2025, cover page and “Shareholder information” (Rio Tinto plc 1,256,010,314 ordinary shares; Rio Tinto Limited 371,216,214; substantial holders of Rio Tinto plc: Shining Prospect Pte Ltd, 182,550,329 shares, 14.02 per cent by its 2018 notice, which gave it voting power of 10.32 per cent in the Rio Tinto Group, described in 2025 as a subsidiary of Chinalco holding “over 14%”; BlackRock 7.1 per cent of plc by its April 2025 Schedule 13G amendment; Capital Group 4.13 per cent; JPMorgan Nominees Australia 4.01 per cent; substantial holders of Rio Tinto Limited: State Street 10.80 per cent, JP Morgan Chase 7.13 per cent, BlackRock 7.01 per cent and Vanguard 6.51 per cent; the 20 largest registered holders of Rio Tinto Limited, led by HSBC Custody Nominees 25.46 per cent, Citicorp Nominees 17.61 per cent and J. P. Morgan Nominees Australia 15.14 per cent, and including the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation account 0.71 per cent, Argo Investments 0.63 per cent and Australian Foundation Investment Company 0.56 per cent). The plc and Limited shares of the total are the author’s calculation.
 57. Peter Botsman, personal recollection, October 2026. On Clifford: Rio Tinto plc, “Rio Tinto chairman and chief executive”, release of 30 October 2003, exhibit 99.5 to Form 6-K (Clifford joined the group in 1970 after engineering degrees at the University of Melbourne; mining director in London from 1994; managing director of Rio Tinto Limited in Melbourne from 1996; chief executive of the global Energy group from 1999; chief executive of Rio Tinto from April 2000); University of Melbourne, honorary doctorate citation, “Mr Leigh Clifford AO” (chief executive 2000 to 2007); UK Companies House, officer appointments (director of Rio Tinto plc, 18 May 1994 to 30 April 2007). The published sources consulted do not record the meeting.
 58. Grundy, Peter (1995), “Native Title — Whose Responsibility?”, *Aboriginal Law Bulletin* 3(77), p. 13, quoting Leon Davis, chief executive of CRA, address to the Securities Institute of Australia, 20 March 1995; Rio Tinto, *Why Agreements Matter* (with the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, University of Queensland, c. 2016) (the first Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, 1996, making agreement-making rather than litigation the preferred approach to land access; advisers engaged in 1995 included Marcia Langton and Noel Pearson; the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation, A\$1.1m a year).
 59. Rio Tinto, Form 20-F for 2020, 2022 and 2025, consolidated cash flow statements (equity dividends paid to owners of Rio Tinto, US\$m: 2018 5,356; 2019 10,334; 2020 6,132; 2021 15,357; 2022 11,727; 2023 6,470; 2024 7,025; 2025 6,145; own shares purchased: 2018 5,386; 2019 1,552; 2020 208), and statement of returns policy (40 to 60 per cent of underlying earnings on average through the cycle). Totals are the author’s calculation.
 60. Rio Tinto, *Report on Payments to Governments for the year ended 31 December 2025*, notice of 27 May 2026 (US\$9.9bn in taxes and royalties; Australian Taxation Office US\$3,587m; Northern Territory Revenue Office US\$86.9m, being Gove royalties of US\$80.4m and fees of

US\$6.4m; tax attributed to the Gove project US\$6.6m, with Note D: the project amount “includes payments / refunds between entities within tax groups where final payments to government are paid by the head / representative entity”). Reports for 2017–2024 attribute royalties and fees but no corporate income tax to Gove. Rio Tinto, Taxes Paid in 2015 (Gove corporate income tax US\$13.4m; royalties US\$29.6m; total taxes borne US\$69.7m).

61. Australian Taxation Office, Corporate Tax Transparency: Report of Entity Tax Information, 2013–14 to 2024–25 (data.gov.au). RTA Gove Pty Ltd does not appear as a separate entity. Rio Tinto Ltd reported total income of A\$48.06bn, taxable income of A\$18.77bn and tax payable of A\$5.24bn for 2024–25. Gove Aluminium Finance Ltd, which also appears, is the former CSR company that holds an interest in the Tomago aluminium smelter in New South Wales, not the Gove mine.
62. Author’s calculations from figures given in sections 5, 8 and 9 of this paper and the sources cited there: the implied 2001 value of about A\$2.5 billion (section 8.2); CSR’s Gove EBIT scaled to about A\$270 million a year, probably an overstatement (section 8.1); the illustrative bauxite EBITDA of about A\$2.2 billion over 2019–2025, or about A\$310 million a year, against royalties of about A\$456 million (section 8.5); and the A\$1.1 billion to A\$1.2 billion paid to Aboriginal people since 1970 (section 5). The counterfactual is illustrative and is not an estimate of what Yolŋu owners would have earned.
63. Northern Territory (Self-Government) Act 1978 (Cth) (self-government from 1 July 1978; the Commonwealth retained its rights over uranium and other prescribed substances); Nabalco (1999), as above (royalties paid to the Commonwealth and then the Northern Territory governments).
64. Altman, J.C. (1985), Report on the Review of the Aboriginals Benefit Trust Account (and Related Financial Matters) in the Northern Territory Land Rights Legislation, Canberra: AGPS; Parliamentary Library, Bills Digest, Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Amendment (Economic Empowerment) Bill 2021 (history of proposals for an Aboriginal-controlled body; the Bill to transfer A\$680m of the Account’s balance of about A\$1.3bn over three years to a new Northern Territory Aboriginal Investment Corporation with a board majority elected by the land councils; the ABA Advisory Committee to be abolished; the remaining balance and future inflows to stay under ministerial control).
65. Australian National Audit Office (2003), Northern Territory Land Councils and the Aboriginals Benefit Account, Audit Report No. 28 2002–03 (no clear objective for the Account’s financial plan or rationale for its minimum equity; no performance indicators for its investments; discretionary grants under s 64(4) rarely made because they could not carry conditions; supplementary administrative payments to land councils under s 64(7) used more often than intended).
66. Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee (2021), Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Amendment (Economic Empowerment) Bill 2021, report, 25 November 2021.
67. National Indigenous Australians Agency, “Aboriginals Benefit Account (ABA) grant funding”, niaa.gov.au, seen October 2026 (new grants managed by Aboriginal Investment NT, formerly the Northern Territory Aboriginal Investment Corporation; the NIAA continues to manage grants approved before 2023 and the ABA Homelands Project, which closed on 31 December 2024); Aboriginal Investment NT, “FAQs”, aboriginalinvestment.org.au; National Indigenous

Australians Agency, Annual Report 2024–25, financial statements (Aboriginals Benefit Account term deposits of about A\$802.4m at 30 June 2025).

68. ABC News, “NT Indigenous mining royalty fund AINT’s investment strategy questioned”, 14 April 2026 (control of A\$680m given to AINT about two years earlier; A\$500m placed in a future fund; community grants capped at about A\$10m a year and business grants of about A\$3m; A\$15m in grants in the previous year; chief executive Nigel Browne: the flow of mining royalties is drying up as major mines prepare to close; Jon Altman: the Commonwealth still holds a further A\$800m in the Account).
69. Altman, Jon (2026), “Guest Post: Jon Altman on AINT and the ABA”, A Walking Shadow (blog), April 2026, refragabledelusions.blogspot.com (AINT has no guaranteed share of future royalty equivalents, while the Minister controls the Account’s larger balance of about A\$800m).
70. Wild, Rex, and Patricia Anderson (2007), Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle “Little Children are Sacred”: Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, Darwin: Northern Territory Government; Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007 (Cth) and related Acts of August 2007; Australian Human Rights Commission (2007), Social Justice Report 2007, chapter 3 (the measures announced on 21 June 2007, applying to 73 prescribed communities, including alcohol restrictions, income management, compulsory five-year leases over townships, changes to the permit system and the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 in respect of the measures).
71. Local Government Act 2008 (NT); Australian Human Rights Commission (2009), Social Justice Report 2009, chapter 4 (from 1 July 2008 the elected Aboriginal community government councils were abolished and replaced by eight large shires).
72. Northern Territory Government (2009), Working Future: Outstations/Homelands Policy, Headline Policy Statement, 20 May 2009 (no funding for new outstations; outstation housing on Aboriginal land treated as private housing; under a memorandum of understanding of September 2007 the Commonwealth would not fund outstation housing; services to be delivered from hub towns; twenty Territory Growth Towns); Kerins, Sean (2009), “The First-Ever Northern Territory Homelands/Outstations Policy”, Indigenous Law Bulletin 7(14): 7; Amnesty International (2011), The Land Holds Us: Aboriginal Peoples’ Right to Traditional Homelands in the Northern Territory (about 500 homelands; 21 growth towns).
73. Altman, J.C., and R.I. Levitus (1999), The Allocation and Management of Royalties under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act: Options for Reform, CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 191, Canberra: ANU, summary (of Woodward’s 40/30/30 formula only the 30 per cent to areas affected had survived unchanged; supplementary funding of land councils had operated at the expense of general grants to Territory Aboriginal people).
74. Altman, J.C., and D.E. Smith (1999), The Ngurratjuta Aboriginal Corporation: A Model for Understanding Northern Territory Royalty Associations, CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 185, Canberra: ANU (more than 50 royalty associations; their role in receiving, managing and distributing money as brokers between two economic systems; the need for monitoring, strategic planning and investment strategies that protect income for future members).
75. Australian National Audit Office (2023), Governance of the Northern Land Council, Auditor-General Report No. 1 2023–24, 15 August 2023 (arrangements largely effective, with

weaknesses in delegations, record-keeping, transparency, risk and fraud control and performance reporting; eleven recommendations, all accepted).

76. Northern Territory Electoral Commission, 2024 Legislative Assembly General Election, result summary; Green, Antony, ABC News, Northern Territory Election 2024 results pages (election of 24 August 2024: Country Liberal Party 17 of 25 seats, up nine; Labor 4, down ten; independents 3; Greens 1; CLP first-preference vote 48.9 per cent, up 17.6 points; in Mulka, Yingiya Mark Guyula, independent, 2,299 votes or 75.2 per cent against 758 for the CLP candidate). Lia Finocchiaro became the first woman to lead the CLP to government in the Territory.
77. Atta, Grace, Kylie Stevenson and Jane Bardon, "NT politician Yingiya Guyula resigns, labelling CLP government 'dehumanising, oppressing'", ABC News, 19 August 2026 (resignation citing "too many laws that are dehumanising, oppressing and destroying our communities and our people", his health and the wish to make space for someone with new energy; Guyula held Nhulunbuy, later Mulka, from 2016); Garrick, Matt, and Jack Hislop, "Yiwarr McGrath preselected for Territory Labor to contest Mulka by-election", ABC News, 25 August 2026 (a Yolŋu registered nurse living on Elcho Island; 2021 Northern Territory Young Australian of the Year); Walsh, Christopher, "CLP skips Mulka by-election, Labor puts up registered nurse to run against surprise independent", NT Independent, 27 August 2026; Hislop, Jack, and Matt Garrick, "Northern Territory Labor's Yiwarr McGrath wins Mulka by-election against independent Andrew Blamey", ABC News, September 2026. Counts reported on election night differed slightly from later ones. The figures used here, compiled from the Northern Territory Electoral Commission's results in Wikipedia, "2026 Mulka by-election", seen October 2026, are McGrath 1,960 votes (77.3 per cent) and Blamey 574 (22.7 per cent), with 2,606 votes cast of 6,863 enrolled, a turnout of 38.0 per cent; results were due to be declared on 28 September 2026. The Electoral Commission's own pages could not be retrieved for this paper. The seat, as Nhulunbuy, was held by Labor from 1980 to 2016.
78. Botsman, Peter (2026), Planes, Roads, Automobiles: The Realities of Life on NE Arnhem Homelands (purchase about \$10,000 to \$11,000 a year per vehicle on Arnhem Land vehicle lives; the ISX contribution page puts a whole car at \$22,000 and two months' running costs at \$5,000; nearly 1,000 homeland communities nationally). The national figure is the author's calculation.
79. Peter Botsman, personal communication, October 2026 (Aboriginal organisations such as Gumatj and Rirratjingu provide needed funds for funerals, some funding for generators and other services, on a needs basis).
80. Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation, "Social Program", rirratjingu.com/our-community/social-program/, seen 8 October 2026 (quoting the RAC Rule Book's primary objective; Social Program support areas; the Funeral Fund, guided by a Funeral Fund policy and managed by a committee; the Charitable Payments Program, fortnightly payments to full members aged 25 and over, and to members aged 18 to 25 who are employed or studying; the RAC Infrastructure Fund).
81. Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation, Annual Report 2019-2020, "Spotlights", p. 18 (Funeral Fund support to families A\$103,517; 27 family funerals supported; family charitable payments A\$1.08 million; Social Program support for the medical and terminally ill A\$11,814, whitegoods A\$9,769 and community A\$9,500), <https://rirratjingu.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Annual-Report-201920-Final->

[Proof.pdf](#). The Social Program and Funeral Fund were introduced from 2018 (Annual Report 2017–2018; Annual Report 2020–2021).

82. Gumatj Corporation, “Our impact” and “Careers”, gumatj.com.au, seen 8 October 2026 (value from mining, civil works, construction, retail, property and development “reinvested into the people and places that make our work possible”, supporting housing, education, training, local employment and community services; Gumatj Impact programs including Township Leasing, Living Strong, Community Voice, Women’s Space and Men’s Space, financial literacy, the School Nutrition Program, Education Services and Youth Services).
83. Kaiela Institute (2021), *Goulburn Murray Regional Prosperity Plan: Summary Report*, Shepparton, April 2021, prepared with KPMG (foreword by Paul Briggs and David McKenzie, Project Control Group co-chairs; partners acknowledged include the University of Melbourne, KPMG, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, the Victorian Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, Department of Premier and Cabinet and Regional Development Victoria, Greater Shepparton City Council, Moira and Strathbogie shires, and the committees for Greater Shepparton and Echuca Moama; work began in September 2020; a fifteen-year plan with a vision of an additional A\$150m a year in gross regional product and about 460 jobs by 2036; five objectives, beginning with a “rights-based platform that recognises Yorta Yorta people’s right to an economy and a future state of productivity post-dispossession” and ending with “regional accountability” defined in “specific and measurable” terms; six strategic themes aligned to ten Closing the Gap targets; bi-annual score cards; an Implementation Committee and the principle of “being Aboriginal-led”; Plan Champions signing a Statement of Intent: AgBioEn, the committees for Echuca Moama and Greater Shepparton, Goulburn-Murray Water, Greater Shepparton City Council, SPC and the University of Melbourne; a recommended feasibility study of a re-investment model based on gross regional product). The Plan cites Deloitte Access Economics (2018), *Closing the Indigenous Gap in the Goulburn Murray Region* (economic parity equal to 468 jobs and A\$150m a year in additional revenue, with a net present value of A\$578.3m).
84. Kaiela Institute, “Current projects”, kaielainstitute.org.au, seen October 2026 (the Goulburn Murray Regional Prosperity and Productivity Plan launched on 15 July 2021, designed “in the region, by the region, for the region”).
85. Kaiela Institute, “Executive Chairman”, kaielainstitute.org.au (Paul Briggs, a Yorta Yorta man who grew up at Cummeragunja; founding president of the Rumbalara Football Netball Club from 1988; his leadership saw the establishment of the First Nations Australian Credit Union); La Trobe University, “Highest honour for champion of lifelong leadership”, news release, 2025 (Executive Chair of the Kaiela Institute; OAM 2003 and Officer of the Order of Australia 2024); Governor-General, Order of Australia honours list, 2024 (AO “for distinguished service to the Indigenous community, to social welfare through economic inclusion and reconciliation, and to sporting organisations”).
86. Raffin, Luke, Anna Leonedas and Jack Crane (2025), “The Goulburn-Murray Regional Prosperity Plan and What It Means for First Nations Parity”, Boston Consulting Group, 20 March 2025 (updated forward estimates by Deloitte Access Economics and KPMG of A\$180m a year in gross regional product and more than 500 full-time jobs by 2036; 56 initiatives; an investment model developed with KPMG establishing an independent Investment Fund, with re-investment linked to stage-gated improvements in regional productivity and avoided costs, adapting the “earn-back” principle of the United Kingdom’s City Deals).

87. Empowered Communities (2015), *Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples Design Report*, Wunan Foundation (eight founding regions, including Goulburn-Murray and North-east Arnhem Land; regional leaders including Paul Briggs for Goulburn-Murray and Noel Pearson for Cape York); Empowered Communities, "Our regions", empoweredcommunities.org.au, seen October 2026 (now ten regions).
88. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, *Aboriginal Biographical Index and catalogue*, "Lanhupuy, Wesley, 1952-1995" (alternative spellings including Laynhapuy; "first Yolngu member of Parliament", Northern Territory Legislative Assembly); Lanhupuy, Wesley (1982), "Aboriginal perspectives of the land and its resources", in R.M. Berndt (ed.), *Aboriginal Sites, Rights and Resource Development*, Perth: University of Western Australia Press for the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, pp. 53-57 (no separation between land and resources; ownership and responsibility held by interrelated clans); Henderson, Annette E. (1983), "Aborigines and the mining industry in the Alligator Rivers region: divergent views of reality and their implications", thesis, University of Queensland (Lanhupuy among the bicultural Aboriginal mediators in Northern Land Council mining negotiations); Green, Antony, "Arnhem", 2005 Northern Territory Election, ABC, and Wikipedia, "Wes Lanhupuy", citing Loveday and Jaensch, *A Landslide Election: The NT 1983* (Labor member for Arnhem from 1983 until his resignation in 1995; director of the Northern Land Council before entering politics). The first Aboriginal member of the Assembly was Hyacinth Tungutalum, Country Liberal Party member for Tiwi from 1974, and the first Aboriginal Labor member Neville Perkins, member for MacDonnell from 1977: Australian Electoral Commission, "Electoral milestones for Indigenous Australians".
89. Hancock, David, "Outback business gets in the black", *Australian Financial Review*, 17 January 1994 (Gatjil Djerrkura, general manager of Yirrkala Business Enterprise, an Aboriginal-owned enterprise supplying earthmoving equipment to Nabalco, providing environmental earthworks for waste management and maintaining parks and gardens in Nhulunbuy and Yirrkala); obituary, "Djerrkura: Aboriginal leader", May 2004, reproduced in the Foley collection, kooriweb.org (born 30 June 1949, died at Nhulunbuy on 26 May 2004; senior man of the Wangurri; former chairman of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commercial Development Corporation and former director of the Henry Walker mining group; Senator Aden Ridgeway on Djerrkura "leading the charge for economic development in northeast Arnhem Land through his leadership of Yirrkala Business Enterprises, which operated independently, providing employment and training to local people"; Djerrkura on the abolition of ATSIC as done "in the classic imperial fashion, without negotiation, without understanding and with little empathy").
90. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, media release on the death of Gatjil Djerrkura, reported in *The Guardian* (Communist Party of Australia), No. 1185, June 2004 (chairman of ATSIC from December 1996 to December 1999; director of the Indigenous Land Corporation); ATSIC, media release on his resignation as a Commissioner (his role in Indigenous business development programs as chair of the Commercial Development Corporation); Indigenous Business Australia, *Annual Report 2003-04* (the Commercial Development Corporation, established in 1990, renamed Indigenous Business Australia in 2001).
91. Obituaries Australia, "Yunupingu (1948-2023)", from the *Canberra Times*, 3 April 2023 (born 30 June 1948 at Gunyangara; "set up a local cattle station, a timber mill and a nursery in Arnhem Land, and established the first Aboriginal-owned and operated mine in the country, the Gumatj-owned Gulkula Bauxite Mine"); ABC News, "Tributes flow for Indigenous land rights activist and Gumatj clan leader Yunupingu", 3 April 2023 (chair of the Northern Land Council

in eight terms over 24 years, 1977–80 and 1983–2004; Gumatj Corporation statement: “our founder and inaugural chairman”, with “a vision of self-determination for Yolngu people through employment and business development”).

92. Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, “Looking up (dhupuma)”, oric.gov.au (Gumatj first incorporated in 1979 to advance the interests of and generate employment for the Gumatj people, and as Gumatj Aboriginal Corporation since 2008; “in the early days, the corporation was reliant on mining royalties”; business interests including the bauxite mine opened in December 2017, a mining training centre, a timber mill, a cattle farm, municipal services and construction; over 70 Yolngu employed); Gulkula Mining Company, “Timeline of Dhupma Plateau”, gulkula.com (Gumatj sawmill operating on the plateau 1972–79; exploration lease 2012–15; mining lease 2014; mining from April 2017; first export shipment to China in November 2017; Aluminium Stewardship Initiative certification January 2020); Gumatj Corporation, “About us” and “Our history”, gumatj.com.au; Barnes, R., S. Holcombe, K. Helms, D. Yunupingu and D. Mununggirritj (2024), *Gulkula Mining: Indigenous Landowners in Control. A Collaborative Case Study with Gumatj Corp*, Brisbane: Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, University of Queensland (research seed-funded by Rio Tinto).
93. Dias, Avani, “Remote Aboriginal community in the NT finding new ways to create local jobs”, ABC News, 17 May 2017 (Gunyangara timber mill milling timber salvaged ahead of Rio Tinto’s clearing; up to 16 local people employed; contracted by government to build houses for the cyclone-damaged community of Galiwin’ku; a new township lease under Gumatj control, the first of its kind, so that Gumatj no longer needed Northern Land Council approval for developments on their land; Djawa Yunupingu and Balupalu Yunupingu calling for government contracts and training support).
94. Yunupingu, Galarwuy (2016), “Rom Watangu”, *The Monthly*, July 2016.
95. Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, “Only Yolngu make decisions for this land”, oric.gov.au (Dhimurru formed in 1992; the Dhimurru Indigenous Protected Area dedicated in 2000, the first in the Northern Territory and the first to include sea country; about half a million hectares); Centre for Indigenous Policy Research, ANU, “People on Country: Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation” (incorporated in 1992 by the Yolngu owners of the Gove Peninsula estates; access permit system with the Northern Land Council; costs met from permit fees and contributions from government and non-government bodies including Rio Tinto Alcan Gove; Yolngu owners declined a joint-management national park at Cape Arnhem in the 1990s).
96. Morphy, Frances (2008), “Whose governance, for whose good? The Laynhapuy Homelands Association and the neo-assimilationist turn in Indigenous policy”, in J. Hunt, D. Smith, S. Garling and W. Sanders (eds), *Contested Governance: Culture, Power and Institutions in Indigenous Australia*, CAEPR Research Monograph No. 29, Canberra: ANU E Press (incorporated in 1984, separately from the Dhanbul Association; resource centre for nearly 20 homelands; in 2006 some 87 per cent of income from government grants and a quarter from CDEP; Yirralka Rangers, over 40 on CDEP wages, in the Laynhapuy IPA established in 2006; discretionary income from kava wholesaling until importation was banned in June 2007, civil works and a small share of Gove royalty equivalents; the break-even Layhna Air charter service; in 2005–06 told to create one business and move 15 people off CDEP within twelve months, then judged to have performed “poorly”); Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation, “Yirralka Rangers”, laynhapuy.com.au, seen October 2026 (women-led bush products, tourism and other homeland enterprises).

97. Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act 1971, 43 U.S.C. ch. 33 (about 44 million acres and US\$962.5 million; regional and village corporations; s 7(i), 43 U.S.C. § 1606(i), requiring each regional corporation to share 70 per cent of its timber and subsurface resource revenues among all the regional corporations).
98. Alaska Constitution, Article IX, section 15 (at least 25 per cent of mineral lease rentals, royalties and related receipts to a permanent fund, adopted by amendment in 1976); Alaska Department of Revenue, Permanent Fund Dividend Division, “Historical timeline” (first dividend of US\$1,000 in 1982, after *Zobel v Williams*, 457 U.S. 55 (1982)).
99. Nunavut Agreement (1993), Article 19 (Inuit Owned Lands, some including title to the subsurface), Article 25 (Inuit entitled each year to 50 per cent of the first \$2m of resource royalty received by Government and 5 per cent of any additional royalty, paid quarterly to the Nunavut Trust with an annual statement of the basis of calculation) and Article 26 (Inuit Impact and Benefit Agreements for major development projects), Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated text.
100. Botswana Daily News, “Debswana” feature (in 1967 tribal leaders signed an agreement with President Seretse Khama surrendering mineral rights in the tribal areas to the Government, so that mineral wealth could be shared among all districts); International Institute for Sustainable Development, Downstream Linkages: Botswana case study (Debswana formed in 1969 with a 15 per cent government stake, increased to 50 per cent in 1975); Journal of the Southern African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy 119(2) (2019), “Jwaneng — the untold story of the discovery of the world’s richest diamond mine” (the 1975 renegotiation to a 50/50 partnership, citing Masire 2006).
101. Norges Bank Investment Management, “The history” (Government Petroleum Fund established in 1990; first capital transfer in 1996; renamed Government Pension Fund Global in 2006).
102. US Bureau of Reclamation, Synopsis of NGS and Kayenta Mine documents (Navajo and Hopi coal leases approved under the Indian Mineral Leasing Act, 25 U.S.C. § 396a, with royalty re-openers); Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (2019), Imminent Public Budget Crisis Confronts Hopi-Navajo Tribes with Coal Economy Collapse (Navajo Nation spending to fall from US\$172m to US\$132m, about 23 per cent, after closure; Hopi about 85 per cent dependent); NBC News, “Coal Mining in Navajo Nation” (lease payments and coal royalties about one-fifth of the Navajo general fund).
103. Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia (2021), A Way Forward: Final Report into the Destruction of Indigenous Heritage Sites at Juukan Gorge (Canberra: Parliament of Australia).
104. Gulkula Mining Company, “Mining”, gulkula.com (wholly owned by the Gumatj clan; Dhupuma bauxite mine about 22 km south of Nhulunbuy); author’s research notes (Gulkula bauxite shipped through Rio Tinto’s wharf from 2018).
105. Australian Electoral Commission, “Writ for the 2023 referendum returned today”, 6 November 2023, and AEC Tally Room, 2023 Referendum, national results (Yes 6,286,894 or 39.94 per cent; No 9,452,792 or 60.06 per cent; No majorities in all six states, from 54.15 per cent in Victoria to 68.21 per cent in Queensland; the Australian Capital Territory voted Yes and the Northern Territory No, 60.30 per cent).
106. Biddle, Nicholas, and Ian McAllister et al. (2023), Detailed Analysis of the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum and Related Social and Political Attitudes, ANU Centre for Social

Research and Methods (survey of more than 4,200 Australians: 66.1 per cent of No voters said concern about dividing the country was very important to their vote; many respondents regarded special rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians as unfair; 87 per cent supported First Nations people having a voice or say over matters affecting them; 61.7 per cent would definitely or probably have voted Yes to recognition alone, against 12.5 per cent No); ANU media releases, “Voters rejected Voice due to fears of division” and “Vast majority of voters still think First Nations Australians should have a voice”, November 2023.

107. Constitution Act 1982 (Canada), s 35(1) (“The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed”) and s 35(3) (treaty rights include rights acquired by way of land claims agreements).
108. Treaty of Waitangi 1840; Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975 (New Zealand), establishing the Waitangi Tribunal to inquire into claims that Crown actions breach the principles of the Treaty.
109. Act on the Sami Parliament and other Sami legal matters (Sami Act) 1987 (Norway), in force 24 February 1989; Parliamentary Library (2024), Indigenous and Minority Representation Worldwide, Research Paper 2023–24 (Sámi Parliament opened 9 October 1989; Sámi recognised in the Norwegian Constitution in 1988; Norway ratified ILO Convention 169 in 1990; Australia has ratified neither ILO Convention 107 nor 169); Saami Council, submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2025 (constitutional recognition of the Sámi in Norway, now article 108; in Finland since 1995; in Sweden since 2011).
110. Australian Human Rights Commission, “About constitutional recognition” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not mentioned in the Constitution); Statewide Treaty Act 2025 (Vic), No. 45 of 2025, assented to 13 November 2025, described by the Victorian Government as Australia’s first statewide treaty; Parliamentary Library (2024), as above (ILO Conventions not ratified).
111. United Nations Human Rights Council (2017), Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples on her visit to Australia (Victoria Tauli-Corpuz), A/HRC/36/46/Add.2, 8 August 2017, summary (visit of 20 March to 3 April 2017; government policies “do not duly respect the rights to self-determination and effective participation; contribute to the failure to deliver on the targets in the areas of health, education and employment; and fuel the escalating and critical incarceration and child removal rates”).
112. Productivity Commission (2025), Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report, July 2025 (progress assessable for 15 of 19 targets; four on track: preschool enrolment, employment, and land and sea subject to legal rights and interests; six improving but not on track, including life expectancy and Year 12 attainment; worsening outcomes for incarceration, children in out-of-home care and suicide); Minister for Indigenous Australians, “Closing the Gap Data Report”, media release, 31 July 2025.

Bibliography

Alcan (NT) Alumina Pty Ltd v Commissioner of Territory Revenue [2009] HCA 41.

Alcan Aluminium Ltd / Alcan Inc. (2001–2003). Annual reports on Form 10-K for 2000, 2001 and 2002. US Securities and Exchange Commission, EDGAR.

Altman, J.C. (1985). Report on the Review of the Aboriginals Benefit Trust Account (and Related Financial Matters) in the Northern Territory Land Rights Legislation. Canberra: AGPS.

Altman, J.C. (2001). Sustainable Development Options on Aboriginal Land: The Hybrid Economy in the Twenty-First Century. CAEPR Discussion Paper 226. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

Altman, J.C., and D.E. Smith (1999). The Ngurratjuta Aboriginal Corporation: A Model for Understanding Northern Territory Royalty Associations. CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 185. Canberra: ANU.

Altman, J.C., and R.I. Levitus (1999). The Allocation and Management of Royalties under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act: Options for Reform. CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 191. Canberra: ANU.

Altman, Jon (2026). "Guest Post: Jon Altman on AINT and the ABA." A Walking Shadow (blog), April 2026.

Amnesty International (2011). The Land Holds Us: Aboriginal Peoples' Right to Traditional Homelands in the Northern Territory. Sydney: Amnesty International Australia.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011, 2016, 2021). Census of Population and Housing, QuickStats: Nhulunbuy SA2; Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala, Gunyangara and East Arnhem (suburbs and localities); Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander QuickStats for the Indigenous Areas Nhulunbuy – Gunyangara, Yirrkala, Laynhapuy – Gumatj Homelands and Marthakal Homelands – Galiwinku.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats>

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021). Average Weekly Earnings, Australia, May 2021. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/earnings-and-working-conditions/average-weekly-earnings-australia/may-2021>

Australian Electoral Commission (2023). 2023 Referendum: national results. Tally Room.

Australian Human Rights Commission (2007). Social Justice Report 2007. Sydney: AHRC.

Australian Human Rights Commission (2009). Social Justice Report 2009. Sydney: AHRC.

Australian National Audit Office (2003). Northern Territory Land Councils and the Aboriginals Benefit Account. Audit Report No. 28 2002-03. Canberra: ANAO.

Australian National Audit Office (2023). Governance of the Northern Land Council. Auditor-General Report No. 1 2023-24. Canberra: ANAO.

Australian Taxation Office (2015–2026). Corporate Tax Transparency: Report of Entity Tax Information, 2013–14 to 2024–25. data.gov.au.

Barnes, R., S. Holcombe, K. Helms, D. Yunupingu and D. Mununggirritj (2024). Gulkula Mining: Indigenous Landowners in Control. A Collaborative Case Study with Gumatj Corp. Brisbane: Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, University of Queensland.

Berndt, R.M. (ed.) (1982). Aboriginal Sites, Rights and Resource Development. Perth: University of Western Australia Press for the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.

Biddle, Nicholas, Ian McAllister et al. (2023). Detailed Analysis of the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum and Related Social and Political Attitudes. Canberra: ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods.

Botsman, Peter (2026). Planes, Roads, Automobiles: The Realities of Life on NE Arnhem Homelands, with companion papers “Planes”, “Roads: The Central Arnhem Highway” and “Boats”. Working Papers, October 2026.

Commonwealth of Australia v Yunupingu [2025] HCA 6.

CSR Limited (2001). Preliminary Final Report, ASX release, 21 May 2001.

Department of Social Services (2026). Social Security Guide, 5.2.1.20: Single unemployment & sickness benefit, November 1984 to present date.
<https://guides.dss.gov.au/social-security-guide/5/2/1/20>

Empowered Communities (2015). Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples Design Report. Wunan Foundation.

French, Robert (2002). “The common law of native title in Australia.” [2002] FedJSchol 10.

Gillard, Julia, and Minister for Indigenous Affairs (2011). “Historic Gove agreement to deliver long term benefits for North-East Arnhem Land.” Media release, 8 June 2011.
<https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-17904>

Greal, Liam (2025). Homelands Housing and Infrastructure Program Monitoring and Evaluation Project – Final Report. Darwin: Menzies School of Health Research, September 2025.

Grundy, Peter (1995). “Native Title — Whose Responsibility?” Aboriginal Law Bulletin 3(77): 13.

Gumatj Corporation (2026). “Our impact.” <https://gumatj.com.au/impact>

Heard-Bey, Frauke (1982). From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates. London: Longman.

Henderson, Annette E. (1983). Aborigines and the Mining Industry in the Alligator Rivers Region: Divergent Views of Reality and Their Implications. Thesis, University of Queensland.

Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (2019). Imminent Public Budget Crisis Confronts Hopi-Navajo Tribes with Coal Economy Collapse.

Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia (2021). A Way Forward: Final Report into the Destruction of Indigenous Heritage Sites at Juukan Gorge. Canberra: Parliament of Australia.

Kaiela Institute (2021). Goulburn Murray Regional Prosperity Plan: Summary Report. Shepparton: Kaiela Institute, with KPMG.

Kerins, Sean (2009). "The First-Ever Northern Territory Homelands/Outstations Policy." Indigenous Law Bulletin 7(14): 7.

Lee, David (2014). "The Development of Bauxite at Gove, 1955-1975." Journal of Australasian Mining History 12.

Mabo v Queensland (No 2) (1992) 175 CLR 1.

Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd (1971) 17 FLR 141.

Morphy, Frances (2008). "Whose governance, for whose good? The Laynhapuy Homelands Association and the neo-assimilationist turn in Indigenous policy." In J. Hunt, D. Smith, S. Garling and W. Sanders (eds), Contested Governance: Culture, Power and Institutions in Indigenous Australia. CAEPR Research Monograph No. 29. Canberra: ANU E Press.

Morphy, Frances and Howard Morphy (2016). "Thwarted aspirations: The political economy of a Yolngu outstation, 1972 to the present." In Nicolas Peterson and Fred Myers (eds), Experiments in Self-Determination: Histories of the Outstation Movement in Australia. Canberra: ANU Press, chapter 15.

Nabalco (1999). Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, inquiry into the Reeves Review, 26 February 1999.

National Indigenous Australians Agency (2025). Annual Report 2024-25. Canberra: NIAA.

National Museum of Australia. "Yirrkala bark petitions." Defining Moments.
<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/yirrkala-bark-petitions>

Northern Land Council (2024). Annual Report 2023-24.

Northern Territory Electoral Commission (2024). 2024 Legislative Assembly General Election: result summary. Darwin: NTEC.

Northern Territory Government (2009). Working Future: Outstations/Homelands Policy. Headline Policy Statement, 20 May 2009. Darwin.

Northern Territory v Arnhem Land Aboriginal Land Trust (2008) 236 CLR 24.

Nunavut Agreement (1993). Agreement between the Inuit of the Nunavut Settlement Area and Her Majesty the Queen in right of Canada.

Parliamentary Library (2021). Bills Digest: Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Amendment (Economic Empowerment) Bill 2021. Canberra: Parliament of Australia.

Parliamentary Library (2023). "An unsettling decision: a legal and social history of native title and the Mabo decision." Research Paper 2022-23. Canberra: Parliament of Australia.

Productivity Commission (2025). Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report, July 2025.

Quartly, Marian (2024). "Bark diplomacy." Inside Story, 22 November 2024.
<https://insidestory.org.au/bark-diplomacy/>

Raffin, Luke, Anna Leonedas and Jack Crane (2025). "The Goulburn-Murray Regional Prosperity Plan and What It Means for First Nations Parity." Boston Consulting Group, 20 March 2025.

Rio Tinto (2009–2026). Annual reports and Form 20-F, 2008–2025; Taxes Paid reports for 2015 and 2016; reports on payments to governments for 2017–2025.

Rio Tinto (c. 2016). Why Agreements Matter. With the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, University of Queensland.

Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation (2020). Annual Report 2019–2020. Yirrkala.
<https://rirratjingu.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Annual-Report-201920-Final-Proof.pdf>

Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation (2026). "Social Program." <https://rirratjingu.com/our-community/social-program/>

Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee (2021). Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Amendment (Economic Empowerment) Bill 2021. Report, 25 November 2021. Canberra: Parliament of Australia.

Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee (2017). Appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation and evaluation of the Community Development Program (CDP). Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance_and_Public_Administration/CDP/Report

United Nations Human Rights Council (2017). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples on her visit to Australia. A/HRC/36/46/Add.2.

Wild, Rex, and Patricia Anderson (2007). Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle "Little Children are Sacred": Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the

Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse. Darwin: Northern Territory Government.

Wright, Clare (2024). *Näku Dhäruk The Bark Petitions: How the People of Yirrkala Changed the Course of Australian Democracy*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.

Yunupingu, Galarrwuy (2016). "Rom Watangu." *The Monthly*, July 2016.

Personal communications, research notes and the remaining sources cited in the notes are not listed. Unpublished estimates in the text and notes are the author's and are labelled as such.