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Let us work the land, say blacks

Picture: CATHRYN TREMAIN



Jacqueline Henderson and Lindsay Ridgeway pick tomatoes on Aboriginal land near Newcastle. Eight months ago it was unused Crown land.

By LINDSAY MURDOCH,
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Tucked deep in the policy speech of Mr Wai Murray, who hopes to become the Deputy Premier of New South Wales, were a few lines that threaten the livelihood of some of the state's newest entrepreneurs.

The National Party policy read: "Aboriginal land rights as applied under state and federal legislation have been an expensive and depressing failure ... In government, we will abolish land rights in New South Wales.

"The \$24 million annually which is now paid into Aboriginal land councils will be withdrawn. So, too, will the reserves presently held by the land councils."

The policy, supported by the Liberal leader, Mr Greiner, has angered NSW black leaders, who claim that it will ruin enterprises

developed by Aboriginal communities.

Mr Tiga Bayles, chairman of the NSW Land Council, said: "It is a direct return to the handout system for Aborigines. We don't want handouts. All we are asking for is an opportunity to become economically independent."

Mr Murray said a coalition government would direct land councils' funds into areas of need for Aborigines, such as housing, health and education, and more teachers, nurses, doctors and aides. He denied that he was advocating a return to the handout mentality.

"If there is a need, then that need will be met," he said. "The money will reach its target and will be accounted for. Many Aborigines will benefit, and not just a privileged few as at present."

State funding of 129 land councils in NSW has helped Aborigines develop sheep stations, shops, motels, office blocks and tourist venues. The NSW Land Council claims that most of the projects could be economically independent of Government funding within five or 10 years.

At Tanilba Bay, near Newcastle, the Aboriginal flag flies at the gate of a neat, 73-hectare market garden growing tomatoes, beans, cucumbers and corn. The chairman of the local land council, Mr Jeff Bradford, said: "Eight months ago, this was unused Crown land ... Now it is employing Aboriginal people."

The council was granted the land under the NSW Land Rights Act, with \$40,000 to buy equipment and put up fences. "We

cleared the scrub, did all the planting and built a shed," Mr Bradford said. "The money didn't go far but it was enough to get us started. We take \$100 a day from sales at the gate, and the rest of the produce we sell at market."

Under the coalition policy, the land council at Tanilba Bay would lose funding of about \$60,000 a year. Mr Bradford said that with the market garden and other prospects, including an oyster bed and leasing of other land granted under the Land Rights Act, the council had an excellent chance of becoming economically independent.

"It was something we were all working towards. The Aboriginal people here want to work ... to make a success of these enterprises. Now we all could be out of work after 19 March."