

Dr Chris Burns: Statement to the Stella Maris Inquiry

My name is Christopher Bruce Burns, I was born on the 12th August 1949. I have been in the Territory on and off for approximately 35 years.

I have attached my CV to this statement, detailing my work for the YMCA in Maningrida, my research activities at the Menzies School of Health Research, Darwin and my work for the National Heart Foundation, Darwin.

In 2001, I was elected to the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory in the first ever Labor government with Clare Martin as Leader. In 2002 I became a Minister and from that time until my retirement in 2012 held a broad range of portfolio areas including: Lands, Planning and Environment; Heritage; Attorney General; Police Minister; Health Minister; Education Minister; Employment Minister and many others. I have always endeavoured to discharge my duties as a Minister honestly and diligently through hard work and attention to detail.

Before proceeding further, I feel it is important for me to declare two matters to this Inquiry. The first is that I became a Board member of Stella Maris somewhere around 2000-2001, and my further recollection is that I resigned sometime in 2002. I hope my experience and recollections as a Board member, albeit for a short period, may be of assistance to the Inquiry.

My second declaration is that I have been a unionist for much of my working life. I am proud of that association. I learnt about the value of unionism from my grandmother who was widowed after World War I and worked in the garment industry to support her family. She told me that the union was the only thing that stood between her and complete exploitation. Whilst there has been disgraceful and unforgiveable conduct by some individuals and unions in recent times, I maintain a strong belief in the importance of unions standing up for working men and women. I believe the people in Unions NT are good, decent people who uphold that principle.

In terms of my tenure on the Board of Stella Maris, I was invited to join after spending a number of years as a volunteer and committee member of St Vincent de Paul, Ozanam House, in Stuart Park which provided food and accommodation support to homeless people in inner Darwin. Many of the members of St Vincent de Paul were also the mainstays of the Stella Maris Board.

I think they were also seeking my support for the challenges they faced. Because of work pressures I resigned from both committees somewhere around 2002, but continued to volunteer at Ozanam House and received regular news about Stella Maris. The Stella Maris Board was part of the Apostolate of the Sea and like St Vincent de Paul is a Catholic organisation.

In the public mind “Stella Maris” is probably associated with the infrastructure – primarily the heritage listed railway house which became the initial sea-farers hostel in the late 1970s and to a lesser extent the land and other buildings also on Lot 5260 namely the offices, the bar/restaurant area and other accommodation.

I believe that this whole site, especially the railway house, should be viewed as part of the larger precinct which once surrounded it; namely the railway yards, bond store/sorting shed and the connections to the wharf. This is essential to understanding the history, including the union history, dating back to the early and mid-1900s.

As a Board Member, the extent of union involvement at Stella Maris quickly became apparent to me. There were discussions about the finances and the difficult future faced by the organisation. I became aware of the past substantial support received from the International Transport Federation, an international union organisation which assists seafarers as part of its mission. Mr Les Fern who was the Treasurer of Stella Maris and Ozanam House and other members often said that without ITF funding, Stella Maris would have folded. In his submission to this Inquiry, Les affirms this and estimates the ITF funding for various works on the site. That funding, of at least \$300,000, was substantial. He also mentions substantial support over many years from Mr Brian Manning, a veteran of the NT Union movement.

The presence of Mr Jamey Robertson at Board meetings was also explained to me by other members as recognition of the long support and involvement of Unions in Stella Maris. Jamey was a long-term, senior member of Unions NT. In his submission he mentions the role of local unions helping to secure ITF Funding.

When I attended the site for Board meetings and functions, there was always a strong Union presence, particularly Waterside workers. It was there and at other functions where the oral history was recounted - that the site or surrounding area was a staging place for railway men and wharfies from the area when they also marched up to the Administrators residence to demand the sacking of Gilruth in 1918. There is also reliable documentary evidence about historic action in the 1930s for basic worker's rights at the Sorting Shed, adjacent to the Railway House.

The so called “Darwin Rebellion” against Gilruth has been ranked second to the Eureka Stockade as a significant political event in Australian history and was crucial in the Territory's struggle for self-government. This is an important part of Territory history where it is well documented that Unions took the lead.

One thing I have learnt as a researcher in the Territory is the importance of oral history. It should not be easily dismissed. Where possible, it should also be cross-referenced with written history.

Furthermore, I believe the history of the struggle by workers in the railway precinct for justice and equality in the Territory is sometimes disregarded by some historians in favour of a narrow view of the physical infrastructure. What is the North Australian Railway and what remains of it, without acknowledging the struggles for justice and equality of the men who built and operated it! I would welcome the opportunity to examine these historical matters further when I give evidence.

I turn now to the issue of the Cabinet decision in relation to this matter and my knowledge of the processes surrounding it. There has been a lot of political comment around this decision especially in the current Parliament – some of it completely over the top. Some of these comments insinuate corruption and make comparisons with Eddie Obeid. I say emphatically that I believe there has been no corruption, no unlawful or illegal behavior in reaching our decision as a Cabinet. None of these decisions are individual decisions. I also believe that no individual stood to personally benefit from this decision.

Cabinets, governments and Departments are bound by the Law, in this case the Crown Lands Act, and cannot act in contravention of the Law. When acting within the Law, I believe that Cabinets can make decisions that may not necessarily conform with Departmental advice or processes – as long as those processes are not part of statutory requirements.

There are political ramifications of many decisions and Governments bear electoral responsibility for those actions.

This decision also needs to be seen in context, not isolation. As a former Lands Minister I am aware of a large number of non-government organisations holding similar leases on government land for little or no rent. These include sporting and religious organisations, private schools, ethnic organisations, clubs and a myriad of other organisations. Some of them have cash flows, through poker machines, bars, other significant fundraising activities, letting out their facilities for events or, in some cases, as government offices. This ensures their sustainability apart from government grants. These leases are a way by which government can support various activities in the community. Is it now being suggested that any non-government organisation with a cash flow be charged full market rent?

From my own experience, expressions of interest are not always sought for such land. For instance, when I was Lands Minister, a Bhuddist Society

requested appropriate land along Batten Road for community purposes. They were granted that land without calling for expressions of interest and against strong Departmental resistance.

Similarly, under the current government, I understand the Essington private school has been granted a peppercorn lease over the adjoining land and large multistory building owned by government and formerly occupied by the Northern Territory Open Education Centre. I do not oppose the basis of that decision. However, it appears there was no expression of interest process for this valuable site in Nightcliff, nor any specific public consultation.

Lastly, my knowledge of the Unions NT proposal for Stella Maris stretches back a number of years. I recall it being raised in my regular quarterly meetings with the Unions as Employment Minister. Mr Terry Lawler from Unions NT also approached me on a number of occasions over a couple of years on this and other issues at Rapid Creek Markets. I attended these markets nearly every Sunday between 7am and 12 noon for over 12 years, and my door was open to anyone who wished to raise any issues with me. As you are aware Terry developed the original Stella Maris proposal for Unions NT.

In summary Mr Commissioner, I support the decision and I am prepared to detail my reasons for doing so. I welcome the opportunity to give evidence to this inquiry.