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IRG Enhances Northern Australia's Indigenous Commitment

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The Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) has been revitalized to support economic and social advancement for First Nations communities, with new leadership appointed in July 2025. This article reviews the IRG's renewed mission, the Australian Labor Party's (ALP) role, and concerns about the government's emphasis on advisory structures versus practical results.

On 24 July 2025, the ALP announced the refreshed IRG, appointing Professor Martin Nakata, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at James Cook University, as chair. Nakata brings over 30

years of experience in Indigenous education and community engagement and now leads a diverse panel advising Ministers Madeleine King and Malarndirri McCarthy on the Northern Australia Action Plan (2024–2029). Established in 2017, the IRG's purpose is to advance Indigenous economic participation and align with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Minister King described the IRG as “crucial to delivering tangible outcomes,” particularly in sectors such as agriculture and mining.

However, critics caution that the ALP's refresh risks prioritizing symbolism over substantive change. Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians Jacinta Nampijinpa Price remarked that the government's reliance on advisory groups “risks diluting real progress for Indigenous communities.” The previous IRG term, chaired by Colin Saltmere until December 2024, produced reports on telecommunications and road infrastructure; yet, measurable improvements remain uncertain, according to the Department of Infrastructure. Conservative commentators have questioned whether the group's recommendations effectively translate into job creation or infrastructure development, especially given wider economic pressures.

The IRG's remit spans the Northern Territory and parts of Queensland and Western Australia, focusing on fostering Indigenous business growth and self-determination. Nakata's expertise is expected to guide the group toward practical solutions. Nevertheless, concerns persist regarding bureaucratic complexity and a lack of implementation. A 2023 Senate inquiry highlighted the frequent absence of follow-through in Indigenous economic programs, a point echoed by outgoing IRG member Tara Craigie, who advocated for “less talk, more results.”

As the IRG begins its new term, its effectiveness will depend on delivering measurable benefits rather than symbolic gestures, amid ongoing scrutiny of the ALP's commitment to genuine progress in Indigenous affairs.