

Bonanza boom for some

By Paul Murray

IN ITS desperation to secure the Burrup Peninsula for more petrochemical industries, the State Government has created a group of divided Aboriginal communities in the Pilbara and an unjust process for sharing the money due to them for selling their native title rights.

Huge sums of cash are flowing from the Burrup and Maitland Industrial Estates agreement between the Gallop Government and the Aboriginal groups in 2003.

But present indications are that the benefits are being controlled by a few families while hundreds stand to get very little.

The reality conflicts with the Labor Government's promise that the wealth would be shared equally for Aboriginals in the Roebourne and Karratha areas.

The history of this dispute starts in 1994, shortly after native title became available under the Keating government's new laws, when the first land rights claim in the Pilbara was filed jointly by the Roebourne-based Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi people.

Two years later, an overlapping claim was filed in the name of the Mardudhunera and Yaburara people, a small group of families, some of who live in Wickham.

In 1998, another overlapping claim was lodged by the so-called Wong-goo-tt-oo, a breakaway group of several families from the Ngarluma, some from South Hedland.

One area in common for these claims was the Burrup Peninsula, home of WA's North-West Shelf gas plant and the huge iron ore port of Dampier.

But before the native title claims were determined, the Government threatened to compulsorily acquire the Aboriginal rights, offering big cash payments and land deals and some say in protecting rock art in the northern Burrup.

"The new Labor Government was naturally keen to demonstrate its ability to attract big investment to the region, and the pressure to conclude a native title agreement quickly was intense," native title solicitor Frances Flanagan said.

When the native title claims were settled in 2003, none of the claimants was successful over the Burrup Peninsula.

Only the Ngarluma-Yindjibarndi claim succeeded on mainland areas.