The Council of Australian Governments meeting has just wrapped up with agreements on reducing green tape, regional infrastructure spending and tackling poor Indigenous school attendance, as well as a brief chat on progressing Statehood for the Northern Territory.

“This was the first COAG meeting with the new Prime Minister and it is refreshing to be working cooperatively with a Federal Government that is serious about the issues that matter to Territorians,” Chief Minister Adam Giles said.

Mr Giles raised the prospect of a future move towards Statehood for the Northern Territory during discussions. A more detailed proposal will be discussed at future COAG meetings.

“I now look forward to engaging in a conversation with the Territory community about this significant and important advancement in the development of the Northern Territory.”

Today, the Northern Territory and Federal Government also took the next step towards creating a one-stop-shop for environmental approvals by signing a new Memorandum of Understanding. It commits both governments to work towards formal agreements on streamlining environmental assessments and approvals over the coming months.

“The Territory is one of many governments worried that duplication of environmental assessment and approvals processes is holding back development of new projects and job creation,” Mr Giles said.

“The one-stop-shop is about doing Territory and Federal approvals processes concurrently instead of one after the other, reducing clearance timeframes for new projects.

“The Territory is pushing for a similar reform effort in relation to uniform national work health and safety arrangements, with an emphasis on deregulation and red tape reduction. This will be discussed at the next COAG meeting in 2014.”

COAG has also commissioned new work on how to best meet the country’s changing infrastructure needs.

“This work will look at options for increasing private sector investment in infrastructure projects and ways to prioritise projects that unlock economic growth potential in regional economies,” Mr Giles said.

“Both of these issues are crucial to enabling the development of Northern Australia and creating new jobs in the bush.”
Economic development of the North is dependent on the creation of a skilled, well-educated Territory workforce. To this end, COAG has agreed to a range of measures aimed at lifting poor Indigenous school attendance.

“The Territory looks forward to working with the Federal Government as it drives this school attendance effort,” Mr Giles said.

The new measures include:

- minimum school attendance benchmarks;
- publishing twice-yearly data on school attendance;
- a ‘no-excuses’ messaging campaign;
- support and compliance, such as truancy officers, to ensure children attend school; and
- conducting audits of attendance, including on-the-spot checks.

“For kids to be engaged in school, their parents need to be engaged in work. COAG today began discussions on the potential reintroduction of a broad-based Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) to provide work opportunities in communities,” Mr Giles said.

“The Territory Government supports COAG’s resolution on improving the law and order in remote communities and is willing to increase the Police presence in the few remaining communities that don’t have one.

“Our ability to deliver this increase presence is limited however, by GST changes under the former Federal Labor Government that resulted in a significant loss of funding for Indigenous programs.

“GST distribution should be calculated on Indigenous need, not population, so that we have the funding to invest in programs to turn Indigenous disadvantage around.”

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