Chief Minister and Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Clare Martin, today expressed sorrow at the death of Mr W Rubuntja Pengarte AM.

“He was one of the grand old men of Central Australia and will be sorely missed by his family, fellow Arrernte and many other Territorians,” Ms Martin said.

“Mr Rubuntja was an important Central Australian leader in land rights, the protection of Sacred Sites and the Reconciliation process.

“He famously led a march in 1976 of over 1,000 Central Australian Aborigines in a march through Alice Springs which was critical in the framing of the Land Rights Act. He negotiated with a string of prime ministers and chief ministers over the years.

“As well, he was a fine painter, with works held in major private and public collections in Australia and overseas.

“One of his paintings was presented to the late Pope John Paul on his visit to Alice Springs in 1986; another was presented to Queen Elizabeth II in 2000.”

Mr W Rubuntja Pengarte was born in 1923 at Burts Creek, and at different times worked as a drover, brick maker, butcher and cook. He served as the deputy Chairman of the Interim Central Land Council in 1975, and as its chairman from 1976-1980 and from 1985-1988. He was a member of the first Sacred Sites Authority, which he chaired from 1983-1985, and served on its successor, the Areas Protection Authority 1989-1999. He was appointed to the National Reconciliation Council in 1991, and re-appointed in 1995. He also served on the Boards of the Tangentyere Council and Yipirinya School.

“Mr Rubuntja’s contribution to the Central Australian community was inestimable—reconciling, as he did, the interests of his Arrernte people with that of non-Indigenous interests in the town of Alice Springs.

“He served his people well—he served the Territory well.

“On behalf of the Northern Territory Government, I would like to extend my sincere condolences to his wife, Cynthia, and his many children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.”

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