



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**NATIVE TITLE AMENDMENT BILL 2009**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 12 May 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Katter, Bob, MP

**Source** House  
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**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr KATTER** (Kennedy) (5.52 pm)—I take the wisdom of my honourable Independent colleague who spoke before on the Native Title Amendment Bill 2009. There have been 81 outcomes in the last 12 months. There are 500 applications before the court and those 81 outcomes have cost \$11 million. In Queensland the government has designated that no action can be taken on any land—change of usage or ownership—without agreement from the native title holders. The House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs did a tour—we could probably call it the ‘closing the gap tour’—to investigate why First Australians—Torres Strait Islanders and people of Aboriginal decent—have 17 years less life expectancy than other Australians. Their incidence of diabetes and heart disease is 60 per cent higher than that of other Australians. This is not something for us as a nation to be proud of; it is something for us to be totally embarrassed by—not embarrassed; ‘ashamed’ should be the word chosen. In this ‘closing the gap’ tour it became obvious to us that a sedentary lifestyle is playing a part.

We toured the Torres Strait Islands, firstly, and then we did the Aboriginal communities. In the Torres Strait Islands much of the fishing has ceased and almost all the market gardening has ceased. That has happened in my lifetime. In fact, when I was a minister in the late 1980s, almost every time you went up there there was a feast and almost all of the fruits and vegetables were local market garden fruit and vegetables. In the last 20 years that has vanished. Joey Mosby was the long-serving chairman on one of the islands. I asked Joey why there were no market gardens now. He rather angrily replied by smashing his fist into his hand, saying, ‘AQIS has killed it.’ This is true, actually, insofar as their chickens and their pigs were removed by AQIS and they were a major source of protein for the people.

In the supermarkets it seems to me that about five to seven per cent of the shelf space is taken up with rice, which would not comprise 0.005 per cent in a normal supermarket. The dietary regime that the people up there have is very poor. Part of the reason is that the people have no money; they cannot afford to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. You may ask, ‘Why haven’t they got market gardens?’ Maybe some people are thinking, ‘Oh, well, they’re lazy.’ That thought may have passed through the minds of some of the committee as well.

Ask yourself the question why no Australians have market gardens. I do not know anyone on the mainland who has a market garden. Why should we expect Torres Strait Islanders to have market gardens? There is no doubt that the problems created by AQIS have created a fear in the people’s minds that the growing of any food up there will bring the wrath of the government and the whitefellas down upon them. You had to be there to see the vehemence of the reply by Mr Mosby to understand how strongly people feel about their right to produce their own food having been taken away from them.

I am not entirely white, I am certainly not pure merino and I come from Cloncurry. Whether I am one of the brothers or not, I am always accepted as one of the brothers. I am most certainly related to them—I can assure you of that. A lot of these people will open up to somebody like me. Their hatred of the whitefellas is really very vehement. The whitefellas have taken away their right to fish because they have to have a licence and they cannot get a licence to fish. They see all the whitefellas coming in and taking their fish away from them, and their crustaceans away from them in the Torres Strait, yet they do not have a licence. There were two or three licences issued to them but, of course, they cannot raise the money to buy a proper vessel. You would have to look down the gun barrell of maybe a million dollars—certainly half a million dollars—to operate in this way.

There is no doubting these people’s ability. In my day as a minister in Queensland, Richard Bowie, Ahmat and Joey Nonna set up the crayfishing freezer on Badu Island. In their second year of operation they turned over \$3.2 million. So do not think you are talking about slackers here. These people can perform and they do perform well in a very big and effective way. Richard’s brother William is married to the daughter of Bill Gunn, the Deputy Premier of Queensland. They opened a store up there and they have been very successful. So we are not talking here about people who are slouchers or lazy, but they have a sedentary lifestyle which has been effectively forced upon them by the whitefellas.

As far as poor diet goes, by the time the food gets up there—I worked it out—really it is double the price it would be on the mainland. If you have to survive on handout money, because your right to make a living has been taken away from you, and then that money buys only half as much food as it does for anyone else in Australia, is it any damn wonder that there is a 17-year gap between life expectancy for the whitefellas and the blackfellas in this country?

Mr Deputy Speaker Thomson, you might ask, ‘Who’s responsible for this?’ I will tell you who is responsible for this: the state government of Queensland and the people in this parliament. We are responsible for it. We have created this situation. Everyone down here beats their breast and tells us how wonderful the Native Title Act is, and I think I was described as a racist because I opposed it vehemently. I pointed out to the House at the time that 90 per cent of the mainland communities of First Australians do not come from that area, so what they were doing in Queensland was dispossessing 90 per cent of the communities, which people here would call Aboriginal communities. The people who live there have been dispossessed. Let me be very specific. Relatives of mine are on Palm Island, and it is almost exclusively Torres Strait Islander and Kalkadoon—from my country. Only 60 of the original tribe on Palm Island live there. That was the figure that I saw when I was minister. So the 60 have all the property rights and the other 3,000 have no property rights at all.

The land has never belonged to those whose daddies happened to be duke so and so or feudal baron so and so, or some other prominent person. The land belongs to those who till it. If you live in a house you have a right to own that house. You have a right to own some piece of territory. Heaven only knows—these people were the First Australians. Father Passi was an Anglican priest who actually carried this case but he was never given any credit whatsoever; he was a man of towering integrity. Eddie Mabo was exited from the case because he had not been up on the islands for some two or three decades. They said: ‘We own this land. We own it in private ownership. That block there belongs to the Passis, that block there belongs to the Salehs and that block there belongs to the Rices.’ That was the concept that they wanted approval for from the High Court of Australia and which, God bless them, they got approval for.

I have the very great honour of having two textbooks, which are still on the reading lists of most universities in Australia, devoted to the things that we did with land ownership in Queensland during those years. It is a very great honour to have two textbooks written about one’s career and what one did in that career. It is also a very great honour for me to tell the House that, during that period, two *60 Minutes* programs were done on me—one of which was highly flattering—and three were done on what we were doing then, including one that was a repeat, which has never been done before or since in the history of *60 Minutes*. I personally deserve none of that credit whatsoever because I did not make any of those decisions. But we did do one thing: we went out and asked the people what they wanted in terms of land ownership—at that stage, Mabo had not been decided. What we put before them was a continuation of government trust ownership, ownership by the shire councils that we were setting up in each of these communities, ownership by the land councils, ownership by the tribes—it was not called native title; it was called tribal ownership—or private ownership. Those were the options that were put to every one of the 28 communities in Queensland. The result was that 3,800 people voted for private ownership. They wanted to own their own houses. Surprise, surprise! Three people did not and they opposed it, so the result was 3,800 to three.

We instituted that legislation in Queensland, which was really a legislative Mabo decision, if you like. We legislated that people could come forward and make application to take up their houses, their farms and their businesses under private ownership. That is what the people asked for and that is what the people got. We made some mistakes in the set-up of the machinery, as have been made here and which we are discussing tonight.

With regard to Aboriginal land rights coming to you through who your daddy or your great-granddaddy was and not through your own energies and merit, I thought that in European history that was something decided by Napoleon Bonaparte in the early 1800s. For those of us of English descent, hundreds of thousands of our forebears died in many upheavals to deliver to us the right of private ownership, the right to freehold title.

If we do not go to private ownership, what we will have is people trying to run a cattle station, a fishing venture or a supermarket with a tribal council. A lot of shire councils in Queensland have attempted to run a cattle station or a supermarket or a hotel. In Winton the hotel went broke three times with the shire council running it, and the council’s members were all wealthy and successful men, I might add. But you do not run a business with a committee. It just does not work that way at all.

For example, in the Northern Territory cattle stations were taken up under Aboriginal ownership—First Australian ownership is the term I would like to use. There were 170,000 head of cattle on them. In an article in

the *Bulletin* magazine it was argued that allegedly there were only 20,000 or 30,000 head of cattle left. Of course that was going to happen. If you were to ask me why the Aboriginal communities are the way that they are, with very high levels of drunkenness, very high levels of alcoholism, if you like, and very high levels of dreadful social statistics, I would tell you: if I went to Sydney and told everyone who lives in Sydney that they were not able to own their own home, they were not able to own their own business, they were not able to own a title to any damn piece of real estate whatsoever, Sydney would not be batting much better than Lockhart River or Pormpuraaw!

Why can't the government simply do for the First Australians what every other government on earth has done? It was not in my electorate at the time, but I went in to Yarrabah to listen to Lloydie Fourmile, who was chairman at Yarrabah. He was banging the table and he said, 'The only place on earth that you can't own your own home is at Yarrabah.' They all looked at me, because all my legislation was completely overturned by the incoming socialist government, which was a dreadful mistake. They met a lot of good people there, but they just did not know what they were doing. I understand that we want to terminate at this stage. I seek leave to continue my remarks.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.

Sitting suspended from 6.09 pm to 7.30 pm