



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**NATIVE TITLE AMENDMENT
BILL (NO. 1) 2010**

SPEECH

Thursday, 25 November 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Katter, Bob, MP

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Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (5.19 pm)—I had not seen the Native Title Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2010 so I had a look at it this morning and it seems the building of every house in Queensland will involve taking land off the local community. I am staggered by that. Why do you have to take land off the local community to build a house? I built 2,500 houses—don't pin me down on that—when I was minister in Queensland. I did not see the necessity to take any land off anyone. Why did I have to take land off somebody? Did those houses fall to pieces? No, our maintenance levels dropped dramatically. When the member for Throsby said they have created jobs for the people, he gave us the figure of 20 per cent.

Mr Stephen Jones—Thirty per cent.

Mr KATTER—You said 20 per cent, and the official figure of your government is 20 per cent. I know because I have battled over that figure on numerous occasions. Your former Prime Minister, Mr Rudd, in my presence and in the presence of the Mayor of Cairns and the Mayor of Yarrabah, made a commitment that the houses would be built by local Indigenous labour. So we had a commitment that they would be built by local Indigenous workers to a level of 30 per cent. I will tell you what the 20 per cent means—it means that we will be carrying the bricks and carrying the water and carrying lunch and doing the sweeping up afterwards, on \$40,000 a year, and the whitefella fly-ins will come in on \$80,000 a year and build the houses for us, because we are incompetent Murris; we are not capable of building our own houses. The problem for the government is that we built over 2,500 houses—again, do not quote me on the figures as I would have to check on them—with exclusively Indigenous local labour. If you think it was easy, it was not—it was pretty scary, as the minister, to take that decision. I took that decision on a number of houses, and they worked out well, so we took the same decision on a lot more, and then we did the whole program. So why does the government have to go back to 20 per cent? Why? Why can't you create jobs for the people there?

When I look back on it, the housing was the most remarkable success story I can think of. In my lifetime in politics I doubt whether there was a similar success story—and I had absolutely nothing to do with. I am not in a position to say that. I am sure that if the former federal minister Gerry Hand were here he would agree with me that neither of us had anything to do with that program in Queensland. Greg Wallace was twice on *60 Minutes*—it was the only follow-up program ever done on *60 Minutes*—because he got people to work for the dole, which we came to call the CDEP program.

Noel Pearson's brother, Gerhardt Pearson, was the CEO of the newly set up self-management communities, which were like local shire councils, although they had much more extensive powers than a council. Gerhardt rang me up and said, 'Why can't we use work for the dole labour to build the houses?' Of course, this was a brilliant idea. I rang Gerry Hand and he said, 'That's too smart for you; you wouldn't have thought up that one.' I said, 'No. It was a bloke called Gerhardt Pearson,' who was more prominent than his brother in those days. Gerhardt thought it up, and Gerry and I did it immediately. We were able to almost double the number of houses being built because we were able to get that money from work for the dole.

That was not the end of the story. Lester Rosendale recently passed away. The death of Lester was a very sad day for all of us. He was one of the finest citizens of North Queensland. One of the great pillars fell over when he died. Eric Law from Cherbourg was one of the dominant figures in First Australian affairs in Queensland over many years and he was effectively the head of the department in Queensland, with some 3,000 employees working for the department. I must use the word 'bludgeon' because Lester and Eric almost literally bludgeoned all of the councils to agree that all houses would be built by exclusively local Indigenous labour. I can tell you that despite me being the minister they did not consult with me. It was done independently of me. We let it roll and we ended up with some 2½ thousand houses being built by almost exclusively local Indigenous labour.

That still was not end of the story. Donald Fraser, who married a local girl in Doomadgee and is a First Australian himself, was the executive officer and occupied a sort of audit role at Doomadgee. He came up with the idea that we should build our own blocks for houses—bricks, if you like. I was very sceptical about that, but

he had worked in a block-making factory and said we could do it. So as an experiment we bought two block-making machines. They were \$80,000 each—I can remember the figure because I was very scared about the whole thing. They worked magnificently well and we ended up buying eight block-making machines and placing them strategically throughout Queensland.

I think we received \$45 million a year for housing in Queensland but this enabled us to almost treble the number of houses we had been putting out before all these First Australians made the decision to create this wonderful program. That enabled us to build 2½ thousand houses over a period of seven or eight years. This government purports to be very ambitious with their \$5,500 million for housing. We had a figure of about \$100 million if you adjust it for inflation, but this government is only going to built one-tenth of the number of houses we built.

What I am saying here is that today we are passing legislation which I will not vote for. To some degree, I feel I should have got to the opposition sooner on this bill. It would have been nice if the government had consulted with me before proceeding down this path, since I represent probably more First Australians than anyone else in this place. I will be certainly voting against this bill.

Mr Speaker, do you want to know the sense of frustration and rage in Queensland? For 20 years they have not been able to get a title deed on the 10 million-acre piece of land supposedly owned by the First Australians in Queensland. What the hell can you do with a piece of land if you cannot get a title deed to it? We come here today to honour and take into account native title. As the parliament of Australia, we are very sensitive on the issue of native title. Doesn't anyone in this government or the previous government understand what has happened with the 10 million acres in Queensland supposedly belonging to First Australians?

Let me take Yarrabah as an example. There are supposedly 200 people from the original native title holders at Yarrabah. There are 4,000 people in Yarrabah. Are you moving forward into the future or are you going to lock us into the past? Clearly you are going to lock us into the past. Things became so bad at Yarrabah as a result of the decisions taken in this place that there were injunctions to prevent any houses being built. The minority group there, who had been given this great power through the Native Title Act, decided that they were really going to fix up the rest of them there and told them all to leave. I do not hold that against those people. If the parliament of Australia says, 'You can own this land and kick everybody else off it because your great-great-granddaddy lived here,' you would be a fool not to.

Every community in Queensland on the mainland is occupied by people who, in the main, never came from that area. So what you did when you passed the Native Title Act here was to dispossess the vast bulk of the population of the people in Queensland who identify as First Australians and live in First Australian communities. Have you done anything in the 20 years since to fix it up? No, you have not.

After 20 years in Queensland, after the government fell there and the machinery for handing out title deeds to people was removed—and it was only there for seven years—can you imagine the cynicism and hatred of the First Australians towards the whitefella Australians? 'They give us the right to own land for seven short years and then they take it back off us again.' And it has been 20 years of fighting to get it back again. But under extreme pressure—and I think that I might have had a little bit to do with this, but then again I may be flattering myself—the Queensland government have deigned after 20 years to issue a title deed.

The title deed they issue is for a 99-year lease. So every other Australian gets a freehold title but we only get a 99-year lease. What are we, some sort of second-class citizen? We only get a 99-year lease. Why would we be given a 99-year lease? It is a flashing neon light to say: 'We can't really trust you with freehold title.'

That is not the end of it. The Queensland government has another little pernicious condition upon the issue of the title deeds: we have to give them \$22,000. We have to give them \$22,000 to buy our own land back, do we? I will tell you: there are not a lot of Murri people in Queensland who have \$22,000 available to take up a piece of land which in the first place is their own.

We look for leadership amongst communities that have had the great privilege of education, as many people in this place have had the privilege of education. To some degree it is a privilege. Most certainly for people of my age it would be looked at that way because most of us did not get to 12th grade. In Yarrabah, most of the people are well educated. It is a very sophisticated community, with probably some of the lower alcoholism rates of any community, black or white, in Australia. It is a very religious community. The Anglican Church probably has as high an attendance as in any town in Australia. Yarrabah is under the brilliant leadership of a family that

has given great leadership over the years when it has not been easy to lead—Percy Neal and his family and many others who are associated with them.

They have said to the government, ‘If we have to give you our land then we’ll go without the houses.’ What they are effectively saying is, ‘Better for us to live in a gunyah than to bend our knees to you so-and-sos.’ That is what they are saying. If the government is looking for a head-on collision, you will get it. And, if you are stupid enough to continue to take the advice from whoever the hell is giving this advice, whether it is the minister or some public servant, do not blame me for what you are going to cop very shortly and what you richly deserve.

As for your state government, let us just have a look at their record. Let us look at the number of children being stolen in Queensland—and I use the word ‘stolen’. They say ‘protection’; I say ‘stolen’, because I am young enough to remember the generation of stolen children, and I can tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we were told then that they were being protected. Well, there are 300 per cent more kids being ‘protected’ now than there were in the days of the stolen generation, so please excuse me for saying that things have improved!

We just had the last speaker stand up in this place, and I am going to get his speech and use it. I am going to hand it out, because what he said was: ‘We will manage your money for you. We will see that your children get fed for you, and we will build your houses for you.’ That is what he said. That is what this government is saying here, and I will be opposing it. If I am the Lone Ranger, all the more credit to me, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—I remind not only the member for Kennedy but other members of this chamber that, when they refer to ‘you’, the pronoun ‘you’ is referring to the person in the chair. It is a reflection on the chair. They should be referring to the organisation or the government or whoever it is that they are directing their remarks to. I do not use your speech, Member for Kennedy, in isolation, sitting in this chair; it is just a reminder generally to members—

Mr Katter—Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask to withdraw that and say that you would be one of the most remarkably kind, generous and intelligent people that have occupied that position.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I knew I should have given you the call again, Member for Kennedy! It is a season of goodwill. I thank the member for Kennedy. It does not reflect on you; it is many in this chamber.