

## **A way forward for Aborigines**

By Noel Pearson

*The Australian*

8 December, 2010

Home ownership moves a step closer in Queensland's remote areas.

YESTERDAY the Queensland government released a landmark policy paper setting out a roadmap for home ownership on Aboriginal-owned lands. Giving Aboriginal families who reside on communally owned lands the ability to own their own homes has been sitting in the too-hard policy basket for decades. I can recall Aboriginal community representatives pressing for home ownership in the 1970s.

And yet almost everyone who lives on Aboriginal-owned lands in my state are tenants. Except for the isolated individuals who have built their own homes, everyone is a renter.

There are two pressing needs in housing policy in such communities. First, the families must have "skin in the game" in order for housing to be sustainable. Proper maintenance and care of housing, and pride and wellbeing, stems primarily from home ownership and is absent or weak in the case of tenancy. Second, the cost of construction, especially in remote areas, must be brought down, because current costs are just too expensive.

Indigenous home ownership is a silent success story in the Australian mainstream. The home loan programs originally established under the former Aboriginal Development Commission and then the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission have enabled thousands of indigenous families to own their own homes.

Helen and Mark Hughes from the Centre for Independent Studies have pointed out that in the country towns, regional centres and capital cities, the rate of indigenous home ownership is in fact 68 per cent. This is comparable to the overall Australian rate of 7 per cent.

The low indigenous home ownership rate of 36 per cent recorded by the Productivity Commission in its *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* reports, is actually the product of a failure to distinguish the situation in the mainstream from the unique situation on communally held lands where the home ownership rate is near to zero.

Of all of the indicators of development in a society, it is hard to overlook home ownership as foundational. Homes are the largest asset that families accrue and successful home ownership is an important indicator of family capability and wellbeing. Most small businesses (more than 80 per cent) are established via security taken against the family home.

Home ownership will be a fundamental measure of development for those Aboriginal families that live on communal lands.

When Bob Katter Jr was minister for Aboriginal affairs in the Bjelke-Petersen government in the 1980s, he laid down the policy direction for Queensland's communities to emerge from a state of affairs that was the closest thing to communism that has ever existed in this country.

Working with Aboriginal leaders, Katter's policy was to enable individual families to obtain private land titles within communally held lands, and to move to home ownership. The trustees of these former reserve lands approved leases for residential and enterprise purposes, and the Lands Department started the process of surveying and granting title deeds.

The process came to an end with the change of government, and it has been stalled for 25 years. Someone made the observation that if the Katter policy had been followed, hundreds of Aboriginal and Islander families would have paid off their housing loans by now. Instead a quarter of a century has passed while these communities have remained in a state of affairs that had ended in eastern Europe with the collapse of the Berlin Wall by the end of the 1980s.

One of the features of life in a communist zone such as my home town is that the normal forces of supply and demand do not apply. There is a strong demand for housing, but it does not result in supply. There is a strong demand for services such as coffee shops and food outlets – try getting lunch when you're in one of these communities –but there is no supply.

The only cases where the relationship between supply and demand works are the black markets of sly grog and illicit drugs.

Premier Anna Bligh took the indigenous reform agenda by the horns, and took action to update the

Katter blueprint. In 2007 she enacted legislation to enable Aboriginal families to obtain 99-year leases for the purpose of private home ownership and to facilitate private enterprise.

We have been engaged in bitter dispute with the Premier over the impact of Wild Rivers legislation, but the truth is that Bligh has done more to progress our indigenous reform agenda than any of her predecessors.

Bligh legislated to form the Family Responsibilities Commission as the basis of our welfare reforms in Cape York, and has been unequivocal in her government's commitment to the reform program.

After reviewing the performance of the alcohol management plans implemented by former premier Peter Beattie, Bligh took the principled stand and took liquor licences away from Aboriginal shire councils. The impact of her stand on grog has been profoundly for the good.

Bligh supported the establishment of the Cape York Academy which is achieving a breakthrough in primary school reform in the communities of Aurukun and Coen. These two schools are outstanding examples of what public education can achieve if reforms are backed by governments.

The tragedy of our disputation over wild rivers is that it has overshadowed the role that Anna Bligh has played in advancing indigenous reform. The home ownership agenda that has now been announced is evidence that Bligh not only gets reform, she actually sets about putting it into practice.

*Noel Pearson is the director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.*