

Hats off to Katter's grand plan

Noel Pearson

The Weekend Australian

May 7-8 2011

Bob Katter Jr is the greatest federal minister for Aboriginal affairs Australia never had. Had he not fallen out with the Nationals and had the Liberals better understood him, Aboriginal policy in the Howard years before Mal Brough might not have been such a wasteland if Katter had been given the brief.

Yes, I speak with a strong northern bias because south of the Tropic of Capricorn Katter is lost in translation. Katter fronting our indigenous brothers and sisters in the cities of the south with his big white stetson might have had its moments, nevertheless he understood what is needed in this policy zone better than anybody else in the parliament.

In fact the propositions he put to Julia Gillard in negotiations with the independents following the election last year, were more coherent than the federal government's own policies. He tried to get Gillard to agree to Tony Abbott's Wild Rivers override of the Queensland government, to move on private home ownership for Aboriginal families, and to mandate housing construction by local communities. Gillard refused him.

I first became aware of Katter in my youth when he was appointed minister by then Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen. Katter dragged Queensland out of its feudal past by defeating the powerful reign of the notorious director of Aboriginal affairs, Paddy Killoran. His ruthless control over Aboriginal affairs in Australia's most notorious province was legendary. I did my fair share of scrambling in the red dust for the boiled lollies he would scatter like chook feed at the school parade inspections, while on one of his grand tours of the kingdom.

It took Katter to break Killoran's grip on Bjelke-Petersen's obdurate and antiquated policy thinking.

There were three limbs to his approach. First, he pushed self-management of Aboriginal communities by elected councils. Second, he introduced laws granting inalienable freehold title to the Aboriginal reserves, to be held in trust by the councils. Third, he introduced laws to enable private ownership of lands by families through perpetual leases for home ownership, and term leases for enterprise development. Then he set about putting his program into action. He insisted Aboriginal people take up all jobs they could perform, from administration to roads and housing construction.

This larrikin and loquacious minister introduced a new optimism and energy into what was long a depressed scene.

He urged every community to develop teams of tradesmen and labourers to build their own housing, and to use local resources to the maximum extent possible. Instead of external contractors, local building teams did the job.

Some councils found with local labour and materials they could build three houses for the cost of two. Katter said: "Do it!"

Even before his laws passed parliament in 1985, he told councils to invite applications from families to take up private leases for home ownership and enterprises. He harassed the bureaucracies in Brisbane, and cajoled local leaders on his themes of enterprise, private ownership and self-reliance. He spoke as directly to Aboriginal people as Charlie Perkins used to: "Self-management means there's no sitting on backsides. You gotta do it yourselves. The government will support you, but no one is going to do this other than yourselves."

There were missing policy details and mistakes, and there was not enough money to make up for decades of neglected infrastructure. There was wrong thinking too, not least when it came to the grog. Like too many black and white people from the outback, Katter tried to ignore the truth that grog and Aboriginal culture just don't mix. But the main frame of Katter's policy was right.

With the Labor ascendancy after 1989, Katter's policies were consigned to the dustbin. Hundreds of home ownership leases were left in policy limbo. Hundreds more approved by councils and not processed by the Lands Department were left sitting in files. The Goss government legislated to stop any more leases being approved under Katter's landholding laws. Twenty-six years later this policy limbo remains. Even though the Bligh and Gillard governments - and the Howard government before it - announced policy support for home ownership, not one house on Queensland's Aboriginal communities has been privatised.

Last year I wrote about my older cousin who was one of thousands of hopeful families waiting for leasehold title deeds to be issued by the Lands Department. He built his own home and started a successful horticulture venture, when he became ill.

Subsequent to my column his condition was diagnosed as terminal. He faced the prospect of his life's work ending with nothing to leave his family. The rotten and useless government machinery that denied him and thousands of Aboriginal families the titles promised in law by Katter three decades ago, finally issued his leases. It was too late in the day, but I think he took some comfort from his widow and children at least finally having ownership of the things he worked hard for.

The problem with the present federal and Queensland governments' housing policy is that, unlike Katter, they do not understand why home ownership must be front and centre. They do not realise that we can build all of the public housing we like, but we will not move Aboriginal society forwards. They think it's a matter of bricks and mortar and hot water and plumbing. It's not the physical buildings, it's the sense of ownership and the building of families.

The policy mugs in the bureaucracies don't get it. Politicians announce billion-dollar housing programs with only perfunctory policy thinking. Those working in public housing are the worst. You sit in meetings and they have all the reasons in the world why home ownership can't happen.

The classic you hear everytime: "Home ownership is not for everybody. Tenancy is good too!" When I ask, "Who around this meeting table owns their own home?" every hand is sheepishly raised. The double standards of the welfare bureaucrats is just staggering.

I've seen this movie too many times before. It's called Groundhog Day.

In my one conversation with Rob Oakeshott urging his support for Katter's home ownership putsch last year he told me how his wife's grandfather had been the first indigenous person to own his own home in Queensland.

He told how this grandfather laid the foundations for family functioning that cascaded through the subsequent generations. I said, "Well I don't need to convince you of the importance of this issue."

Oakeshott and Katter should introduce legislation into the commonwealth parliament to mandate that the federal government turn the present public housing program into a home ownership program, and to require the first opportunity for housing construction to be undertaken by the Aboriginal communities themselves. Otherwise in years to come Australian taxpayers will wonder what return came out of the massive housing investment that followed Kevin Rudd's apology.

The answer will be: "We need more investment in welfare housing, because the old stock fell into disrepair, because the families living in them had no skin in the game."

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