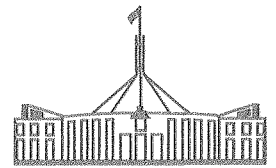




PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HON BOB KATTER MP

Federal Member for Kennedy



25 February 2011

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Economics
PO Box 6021, Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

RE: Inquiry into Indigenous economic development in Queensland and review of the Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010

Dear Secretary,

Queensland's Wild Rivers Act (2005) is among the more recent assaults on First Australians' capacity for self-determination; another footnote in what has been a tragic history of successive governments' oppression of indigenous people.

It is without doubt widely acknowledged that the ability to make use of land is imperative to both the economic and social development of North Qld's remote indigenous communities, where the rivers are their lifeblood.

If there is no water, then there can be no economic go-forward. The people can't have a town, a roadhouse, a cattle station, a house, a home. All need access to that water and it is going to be owned by the Crown in Brisbane, 3000km away, and not be allowed to be used in the future. 'The Crown' residing in Brisbane now owns all the water not already allocated. "You've owned it for 40,000 years, but we, 'The Crown' in Qld, now have taken ownership and control, and there will be no go-forward in this area."

And who lives in this area? Sixty to seventy per cent of the people are of First Australian or significant First Australian descent. They have successfully owned and run one of the four or five biggest station properties in Australia, Delta Downs, and through they or their descendants own one-third to one-half of the cattle in the Gulf of Carpentaria and Cape York Peninsula.

On my own station St Francis, we - by mainly putting pumps in the river and kilometres of polypipe to seven troughs - took our carrying capacity from 1500 cattle to more than 3000 cattle. If we could have secured a water licence for 300 acres of our 250,000 acre property, we could have doubled yet again our beef production.

These opportunities will be stopped forever. No jobs, no economic development, no prosperity, no future. These people will be forced off their land where they are king, on to land where whitefella is king, and where they don't get much of a fair go.

The State Government sold these First Australians up the river in a crude bid to buy the green vote with the Wild Rivers legislation, which is among a plethora of increasingly stringent environmental regulations that are strangling the property rights of rural and remote residents across North Qld and beyond.

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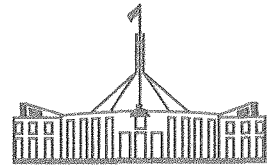
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A similar inquiry by a Senate committee reported in June 2010 "a vast amount of evidence arguing that the Queensland Act adversely affects economic opportunities in Cape York Peninsula" – such evidence amply corroborated in hearings already conducted by this House of Representatives committee.

Quite apart from the burning question of stopping the crushing of all economic development, the Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010 is a small step toward restoring First Australians' control over their land and future in that it provides them leverage, to negotiate for economic and social opportunities, by requiring indigenous consent prior to a Wild Rivers area being declared.

But the crux of the problem in First Australians' desire for self-determination through economic and social development is the absence of property rights over land they supposedly own.

When I was a Qld Government Minister in the 1980s, we provided for legal rights to First Australians enjoyed by the rest of the nation - access to freehold land title, a mechanism by which they could own their own land, residences and enterprises.

The 30,000 people living in community areas took the jobs of building community houses away from non-indigenous contractors and gave it to community residents, combining it with a remarkably successful work-for-the-dole program. Subsequent governments reversed all of these decisions of the people, and such mechanisms of the machinery for handing out title deeds were removed during the years that followed. Hundreds of indigenous families would now, a quarter of a century later, have owned their own homes and used them as collateral to get into small business cattle farming and contracting.

In the time since, state and federal governments have abrogated their responsibility to rectify this striking inequality on land ownership. Instead, paternalism has prevailed, as evidenced by holding communities to ransom over the building of desperately-needed houses by, after 20 years, at long last deciding to issue their title deeds - but only after payment of \$35,000 (to take up their own land!)

Governments are still saying to indigenous people: "We will manage your money for you; we will build your houses for you; we will decide what is best for you." The time for First Australians to be given the key to unlocking their own future is well overdue, and the Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010 is to be commended as one small step toward that.

Sincerely yours,

Hon Bob Katter MP
Federal Member for Kennedy

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