




Speech by
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard Tuesday, 29 May 2012

MOTION: MUNGKAN KANDJU NATIONAL PARK

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (5.51 pm): I rise to support the motion, moved by the Leader of the Opposition, recognising the handing back of the Mungkan Kandju National Park to its traditional owners. To the Wik people, the Koowarta family, the NGOs and others who fought long and hard to secure this outcome, I say congratulations. This motion carries with it significant lessons for Queenslanders and for those of us privileged enough to be sent to this parliament to represent them.

It should be noted that the words in the opposition's motion were actually drawn from the Premier's media statement about the handover. So those government MPs who vote against the opposition's wording are actually voting against the words of their leader in supporting the amendment. I table that media statement.

Tabled paper: Ministerial media statement, dated 22 May 2012, by the Premier, Hon. Campbell Newman, titled 'Historic handover of Cape York Park' [\[189\]](#).

Over the past week or so I have spent time talking with some people who were there at the time, who watched and observed as events unfolded in the late 1970s. Some were former public servants; others were residents of Cape York. While most did not want to have their names put on record, all agreed that it was a dark, suppressive and shameful period in Queensland's history which was endemic of the way the state dealt with Aboriginal people and their connection to the land.

They recalled the battle fought by John Koowarta—a strong man and strong leader who was bloody-minded about getting his country back. They also remembered the plight of Eddie Holroyd. But unlike Koowarta, the Bjelke-Petersen government responded to Holroyd in a much more positive way when the then Aboriginal affairs minister, Bob Katter Jr, gave him a lease over the majority of the Pormpuraaw DOGIT to run cattle.

Although his actions were deliberate, John Koowarta became somewhat of an accidental hero. He was a leader in the cape, whether he liked it or not. What made him stand out was that his motivation was connection to country rather than the purpose of economics.

At the time there were some people in the Commonwealth Public Service who were particularly supportive of John Koowarta, including department of Aboriginal affairs state manager Warren Smith. Smith was very much onside with Koowarta's ambition but did not think those up the food chain in Canberra would take to it based solely on that ambition. Mindful of his own internal agency politics, I am told, he thought it was best to advance John Koowarta's case on more of an economic footing rather than connection to country. But Koowarta's ambition was clear. It was about connection to country, his country.

Many still talk about the anger that came out of the Aboriginal community because of that action which essentially outed Bjelke-Petersen as someone who would leave no stone unturned to ensure that denial of land justice occurred and was implemented. Whatever John Koowarta wanted, Joh played card after card after card to stop him from getting it. As soon as he complied with one prerequisite, they would invent another one. Prior to that, there was a lot of hiding behind pieces of legislation and the economic

debate. These acts by the government caused local people's blood to boil and have provided motivation and kept people focused for the past few decades.

John Koowarta was all about returning to country and asserting authority and the right to make decisions on his country. Returning to country is an affirmation of who you are and where you are from, and it is incredibly important and grounding for people who have not had the opportunity to do that for a very long time. No matter how late this land handover was in coming, it is one of the few genuine examples of where that has been the motivator from start to finish. And it still is today. That spirit, that connectivity, has never been broken. Understanding the nuances and the obligation people feel to look after their country exceeds anything government can come up with in legislation.

True to the reasons John Koowarta pushed for so hard for so long, the Mungkan Kandju handover was more about hearts and minds than economics. It was a recognition of correcting past wrongs. And while the business opportunities might not be enormous, no doubt local people will be front and centre looking at some interpretive cultural tourism, recreational sports fishing around the Archer, developing the grey nomad market, and linking up with and expanding on the Moreton Telegraph Station with a series of registered and serviced campsites from Weipa down to Aurukun. Yes, there are constraints of trade because you are dealing around national park estate, but there are a range of things that could be possible for fairly minimal investment, and I would like to see a framework that outlines what the specific advantages for those traditional owners might be.

In recognising the significance of this handover, we must also draw on the lessons of history and recommit to the principles that should guide future policy and legislative action—commitment to the independence of judicial bodies, empowerment of those without institutionalised power, and support wherever possible for those who are willing to build stronger and more resilient communities. I am proud that I was part of a government that did the hard yards to work with Cape York communities, to negotiate with a common purpose, and I am proud to be part of a parliament that can recognise these important developments.

When I was minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partnerships I was present at the handover and a party to the signing over to traditional owners of more than 544,000 hectares of Lakeland National Park last year, so I know how special the ceremony last week must have been for the Premier and his ministers. Generosity of spirit is one of the best things about Aboriginal people. When they shake hands and forgive, they mean it. The Mungkan Kandju handover was sealed with a handshake. Now it is time to move forward together.