



## Palm Island case study

*Cameron Forbes*

Residents of Palm Island, a former black penal colony, are looking to Queensland's land rights legislation with a mixture of hope and suspicion. Cameron Forbes, in the third of a series, talks to the Islanders.

Reprinted from *The Age*, 20 March 1984.

**PLEASE NOTE:** This paper is not an official publication of the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) and, as such, ideas or sentiments contained in it may not reflect QSA views or policy. The views expressed in this paper are entirely the author's own.

On 16 December last year, the sun did not pause in its course over Brisbane. Nor did birds fall stunned from the Queensland sky.

This was remarkable, for on that day, Bob Katter, the Minister for Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, stood in State Parliament and used with approval the phrase "Aboriginal land rights" when introducing legislation.

Mr Katter promised Aboriginal people and Islanders living on reserves "perpetual title absolutely inalienable unless the Parliament wants to decide otherwise".

It is not recorded what Queensland's Premier, Mr Bjelke-Petersen, was doing or thinking at this time — Mr Bjelke-Petersen who had accused the Federal Government of fostering apartheid by granting land rights in the Northern Territory, who had said the push for land rights was being promoted by foreign forces trying to create a nation within a nation, and who was fervently integrationist, if not assimilationist, telling his European constituency that Aboriginal people should be Queenslanders "just like you and me".

On the reserves, for decades places of crushing and often ruthless paternalism, there is a stirring of hope that the new legislation to be passed this year may match Aboriginal aspirations. There is also doubt and suspicion. They remember Marpoon and the forcible removal of the people to make way for bauxite mining. They remember Aurukun and the contemptuous ease with which Mr Bjelke-Petersen defeated the Fraser Government's attempt to help the community to self-management.



Saturday on Palm Island, the big day. There's a rugby league legend at work. Vern Daisy, lean and hungry, the way a lock forward should be, has come home.

At 20, he left the closed world of this Aboriginal settlement. Now, at 36, when most players are on the sidelines, reminiscing about great tries and cunning stiff-arm tackles, he is player-coach of the Palm Island Barracudas.

Five times he led his Mt Isa club to victory in north Queensland's Foley Shield. He played for north Queensland. "Should have played for Queensland", some onlookers say. "Politics." Others mutter about "a discipline problem".

But he's back — running what they call Foster's Fever out of the A grade squad, sizing up the forward pack, imported from Cherbourg settlement in Mr Bjelke-Petersen's electorate. He's back partly for the money of course. The Barracudas have raised \$85 000 for the season.

The Barracudas are an important manifestation of Palm Island's pride and of the resilience of the people. For Palm Islanders, there is an irony about 1988 and the 200th birthday of the arrival of the First Fleet: Palm Island's own first fleet docked in 1918. It was the former white penal colony's black penal colony, a dumping ground for troublemakers and a place of special punishment: Aboriginal people were sent there after they had served sentences in conventional jails.

It was nearly impossible to escape from and, in 1946, anthropologist Dr Donald Thompson described it as the Queensland Government's Devil Island.

It was also a place of exile for the remnants of Queensland tribes which had resisted or inconvenienced cattle-men, timber cutters and gold seekers.

A Catholic Priest, Dr Thomas Bancroft, wrote in 1933:

Some of the natives long to return to their own country. One poor chap, a Diamantina native from Julia Creek, said to me: "I don't like the smell of the grass here". We tried to induce the Home Secretary to allow him to return but there was a delay and he died of a broken heart.

Along with the dispossessed and the punished, there was an influx of Torres Strait Islanders who sailed south searching for "light-skinned women" and often stayed.

Palm Island was the prime example of the paternalism of the Queensland Government. The superintendent was near supreme ruler, with an iron control over daily life, including "habits of orderliness or cleanliness" and "dancing or other native practices" (which required written permission). Bells rang for curfews, housing was doled out, children and unmarried girls were segregated in dormitories.

And, at the whim of the superintendent, people could be detained or banished to a distant settlement. Monty Prior was. He is back on the Island now for a visit, relieving as lay preacher among the Catholic Community. At 16, he was set ashore on the mainland at Lucinda. He had refused to call a young white boy *master*:

... just a little fellow, like this one here [pointing to an Aboriginal boy of about 10] he called me by name so I called him his. I was told to come back and call him *master*. I wouldn't. They put me ashore with



nothing. I had to fend for myself. You couldn't come back until you got the message. I didn't come back for 30 years.

Bill Congo was.

I was born in November 1929. When you were a kid, you didn't worry much about what happened here. But later on, I learnt that you could work, but work for nothing, you may as well say nothing — for tea, sugar, flour and rice. The way that fellow ruled the place, it was like an army camp ... the bells and the jail. We just knocked off work, in 1957. A few of us organised it. Not the hospital, not anything like that. They brought the police in. We weren't charged. We were just sent away ... Fred Dolan, Albie Geia ... they kicked a lot off. All the families, all the poor little ones. I was just married then. They took us down to Cherbourg or to Woorabinda, us men handcuffed. I worked here and there. I didn't come back until 1974.

Now, in 1984, Mr Katter is talking about land rights, the people are talking about being their own boss, the community council is talking about waving farewell to the overlords of the Department of Aboriginal and Island Advancement.

Mr Katter says new Queensland legislation “will give to the Aboriginal and Islander residents rights of occupation and land management for themselves and their children that are complete and beyond interference except by special act of Parliament”.

The young National Party Minister is generally liked and respected by Aborigines. He grew up mixing with them and played alongside them in rugby league teams. But Aboriginal Affairs has long been the domain of the DAIA director, Mr Pat Killoran, the arch-paternalist.

There are two theories: one that Mr Killoran is giving the reformist Mr Katter enough rope for Mr Bjelke-Petersen to hang him; the other that the reign of Mr Killoran, who was ingloriously thrashed by his Labor opponent in a predominantly black North Queensland seat during last year's National Party triumph, is himself on the way out.

The main source of advice for Aboriginal people and Islanders during the framing of the legislation which will determine their future is a Jesuit barrister, Frank Brennan. It is a united front of Queensland churches, rather than Federal Governments, which has championed the black cause.

In a series of consultation documents, Mr Brennan seems to give guarded approval to the proposal for deeds of grant in trust, the Queensland Government's suggested form of tenure, but points out that the people do not know what legal rights they will have to hunt, fish, forage and use timber and quarry materials; they do not know what control or share they will have in any mining operations on their land, or what the role of DAIA managers, police and community councils will be.

Nor do they know what the boundaries of the lands will be.

The people on Palm Island worry about all these things. Most of all, they worry, with great cause, about Mr Bjelke-Petersen's attitudes.

Frank Brennan's documents, balanced even in tone, are being interpreted as urging acceptance of whatever formula Queensland proposes as, first of all, a vast improvement on the present and, secondly, something which may be mended by application of overriding Federal legislation.



As Mr Bjelke-Petersen is at present leading the Commonwealth at least 3-0 in confrontations over Aborigines, a sympathetic Federal attitude is not a great source of comfort.

The Palm Island community certainly needs support at this time. Its leaders' assertiveness is heavily edged with tentativeness, which is not surprising given the decades of authoritarian rule, the breaking down of the traditional socialisation processes and the establishing of what Professor Charles Rowley, author of a definitive trilogy on the white impact, has described as "the universal social syndrome of the managed camp".

For a long time, welfare efforts were, according to Professor Rowley, little more than something akin to animal husbandry.

Rachel Cummins, a member of the Palm Island Council — a body with limited powers — is aware of the social problems caused by generations of paternalism: "Some of our kids have got the idea that we're not much good for anything, that they can't and needn't do anything."

There are parents on the Island [who], aware of the lack of job opportunities and fearing that the managed-camp syndrome will linger, want their children to leave. Moira Clarke, who teaches Torres Strait Island dancing to plaintive songs about absent men hunting dugong, says: "There's nothing here. I want them to go to school, just come back for holidays."

Rachel Cummings, who has young children, puts conditions on their return to Palm Island: I don't want them to go to school and I don't want them to lose the free ways. I would like them to come back only when they are capable of helping their own people, of having input.

She does think Palm Islanders are different, moulded by the past.

Bjelke-Petersen or any other white person might have a concept of how life should be ... their own little one-acre block. That's all right in suburbia but it doesn't work on the reserves and the fringe camps. We are Aboriginal people and we have been treated differently, despite all the good intentions. We're saying: You came over here. You took possession of the land. We never did give up the right to it. But, OK, you're here now. You've built all your towns. All we want out of it is the giving back of the reserve land and any land the people have claim to and let us live our own lives on it without interference. That way we're not hurting you and you're not hurting us. We'll grow oysters, cut timber, have tourists — but keep them on Fantome Island (another island in the Great Palm Group).

After dispossession and decades of repression, this does not seem much for Palm Islanders and other Queensland Aboriginal people to ask. The question is whether the Bjelke-Petersen Government is ready to give it to them freely and with good faith.

