



Speech by

# Robbie Katter

MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA

Hansard Wednesday, 30 May 2012

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## MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (5.30 pm): May I firstly make the House aware of the immense respect that I have for the role that has been entrusted to me by the people of the Mount Isa electorate. I extend that same respect to all other members within the House who have made the brave step of standing up for something they believe in and who have also worked hard to earn the trust of their own people. In our future dealings together I will always be mindful of the fact that politics is a competition of our ideas and all within this chamber will be working for what they believe is in the best interests of the state. I should also acknowledge the efforts of those other candidates for the seat of Mount Isa and my predecessors who should be considered at the very least strong contributors to their community. I also acknowledge my colleague Shane Knuth, who I am just old enough to have played footy with in younger days. He has shown immense courage to follow the hard road that he felt was the right thing to do.

I must thank those people who have played a strong part in my being here today and in my campaign: first and foremost my parents, Bob and Susie, and my sisters Eliza, Mary Jane, Caroline, Olivia; my brother-in-law Rob Nioa and his family Will, Tom and Kate and all the many cousins who formed part of my campaign army. There are many other courageous supporters and candidates of our Katter's Australian Party who also deserve my thanks for taking the hard road in pursuit of their beliefs. I must also acknowledge other key campaign members including George Tipping, Neil Byrne, Nellie Smethurst, Bob Wilson, Narelle Hine, Kim Cogan, Garth Power, Bob Prestley, Coral Grevsmuhl, Del George, Steve Malone, Warren Bethel, Wayne and Diane Reeves, Ernest Woodfield, Steve Borthwick, Dusty Penman and Bill Rutherford to name a few.

I was raised in the small western town of Charters Towers following three previous generations residing in Cloncurry. I was raised on a diet of rugby league and outdoor activity. I now live in the great city of Mount Isa at the heart of the north-west after being drawn to the great opportunities offered there for business and lifestyle. An important legacy from this upbringing was that of persevering against adversity. Our modest little local league side were constantly outnumbered and outgunned by the larger clubs at nearby Townsville. However, despite this we quite often prevailed. The path was hard but true and the rewards were always wholly gratifying. I expect the same from my life in politics. I was also influenced in my youth by the practicalities and straight talk prevalent growing up in a rural and regional area. In the culture I was raised in, if a feral pest entered your property or endangered your family you had the right to remove it.

I am forever grateful to my parents for making my siblings and I aware of the responsibility we have to always strive to apply a set of Christian values towards each other. I sincerely hope that my conduct in politics will reflect this. One of these values is that of giving back to the community. This has led to me being the fourth generation of our family to serve in government. Whilst I am proud of this record of service, I am probably more proud of a story recently told to me by a supporter off a property near Cloncurry, which I will paraphrase—

I appreciate what your family has done for the bush and reconciliation in the past. We have an elderly man of Aboriginal-Afghan descent working with us who will always vote Katter because of the kindness of your grandfather. When he was a young man dark-skinned people had to sit separately at the picture show in Cloncurry. Your grandfather put a stop to the segregation at the picture theatre.

I should add that our family owned that picture theatre. I am sure that removing the segregation was not a popular position to take at the time, but nonetheless this action was the right thing to do—an act of leadership of which I am very proud. My family also gave me an appreciation of how valuable the family unit is to provide support at critical points in your life. Inversely, it also provides an empathy for all those in society who lack that same support. I was also given a very rudimentary measure of good judgement to apply in politics by my father who borrowed it from his former leader—decisions can be boiled down to a single conclusion: will it either create a positive or negative outcome for your own patch. Your voting pattern should always reflect the positive outcome—a simple but reliable yardstick.

If there is one overriding ethos that I believe has been absent from government activity, certainly over the past 20 years, it is that government needs to preserve the individual's right to prosperity—the individual's right to prosper. This concept may manifest itself as the railway worker in Hughenden's right to a job; mine workers in Cloncurry and Mount Isa having the right to be based locally and not have to fly in, fly out from the coast; small businesses being provided a level playing field against larger retail giants and volumes of red tape; or farmers provided some support against their heavily subsidised overseas competitors. This is a very simple and acceptable concept that has been challenged by the destructive effects of economic rationalism which has ripped through almost every major industry in Queensland outside of mining. I hope that in my time in this House there will be a deviation from this misguided path that is destroying our once proud and strong broad industry base. I hope that the opportunity for prosperity is once again made accessible to those many people floating around the economy left helpless against the inequities of the free market.

One great father of the north-west region embodied the pursuit of prosperity. I speak of none other than Ernest Henry. Ernest Henry forged his own prosperity in the late 1800s under enormous adversity, being one of the very first pioneers of the area. He experienced a number of commercial failings, survived a spear through his chest by riding three days to assistance, all the while commuting to the nearest coastal facilities some 400 kilometres to the north and 900 kilometres to the east. In his life he singularly established three towns, four cattle stations and the first mining operations of the north west. One, I might add, was worked by the first Australians, the Kalkadoons, who were some of the first miners in the north west. His life set the tone for ambitious development and perseverance that drove the establishment of the great mines that exist in that region today. It should be noted that despite the many years that have passed since Ernest Henry first commenced his operations in the north west, we have barely scratched the surface of the potential from this wonderful region.

Our region was built on the efforts of people like Henry who were programmed to work hard and develop our great resources. This development must have been accompanied by an innate sense that much of the benefit would only be realised long after they had passed on. The other less celebrated but no less significant champions of development in our region were the workers, small owner operators and cattlemen—or sheep cockeys as they were back then—who chased their own prosperity in a harsh and uninviting climate. These people lived in unimaginable conditions to create the great cattle, rail and mining industries of Western Queensland. Whilst their individual feats seem nondescript, the sum total of their efforts was grand.

The opportunities for prosperity still thankfully exist in Queensland today. In fact, they are bountiful. Yet unfortunately they have been barricaded by governments that have demonstrated limited interest in any real outcomes towards development of these abundant resources. For example, our cattlemen are consistently hammered with increasingly onerous legislation and conditions over the use of their land; our rail lines have scarcely improved in capacity over the past 25 years despite enormous growth along our line; our miners are confronted with more and more legislation every day that has seen mining application approval times blow out from six months to seven years; our vast black soil plains watch every year as 6.57 million megalitres of water floods past them into the gulf when a meagre 6 per cent of the flow could turn these struggling cattle grazing towns into agricultural hubs just as Emerald and St George were transformed many years ago.

The minerals deposits in the North West and mid-west could easily yield huge economic benefit for Queensland if infrastructure, particularly access to the national electricity market, was provided to support investment in the same way other great mining regions in the state are. The corridor between Townsville and Mount Isa contains abundant energy resources, both fossil fuel and renewable resources, and has the productive capacity to generate lowest cost electricity to the benefit of this region, only requiring some leadership from the government. Regional infrastructure development would provide the opportunity for unemployed persons on the coast to enjoy conventional family lifestyles in established regional communities as opposed to the destructive lifestyle of fly-in fly-out. Our commercial fishermen are continually being banned from sustainable fishing areas and are seeing the demise of their industry.

In Queensland we are blessed with an abundance of untapped resources that have the ability to generate wealth in this state well beyond our lifetimes. This abundance of potential wealth brings with it a great burden of obligation and responsibility. Everyone in this place should lie in bed at night, deeply worried that our decisions may not deliver the prosperity our future generations deserve. The decisions we

make here are not about us or our success; they are about our ability to cement for all Queenslanders a right to prosperity.

Historically, Queenslanders have heavily endorsed the development of those resources across a broad industry base. In fact, very few—including many in this place—do not appreciate the contributions that decisions taken 20 years ago have made to our quality of life today. For example, Queensland's coal industry is not purely a result of enthusiastic mining companies; it is a result of a government passionate to build a great state economy, working productively with the miners for the benefit of the state. The Queensland sugar industry is not purely a result of the coastal fertile regions; it is a result of a government investing in infrastructure to support the farmers willing to work the cane fields.

Over the past 20 years development has been characterised by the demise of the small owner/operator and a narrowing of our industry base. We have made a seismic shift from being a fertile ground for the owner/operator, over a broad industry base, to an economy critically relying on the mining industry. I do not accept that this is a demonstration of the most efficient allocation of resources and that we should only participate in those industries in which we have a competitive advantage today. We delude ourselves into thinking that the source of short-term economic returns—the easy option—is our competitive advantage. In Australia, and specifically Queensland, we have a natural competitive advantage in agriculture, tourism, mining, minerals processing and, significantly, energy and electricity generation, which can support almost every other industrial pursuit.

As we all know, markets turn and industries fluctuate. Good governments have always recognised this and have preserved a broad industry base, just as a prudent investor diversifies his share portfolio. However, this requires industry support, and successive governments wearing different colours, at both state and federal levels, have demonised the concept of industry support. If industry support moves us away from being a one-dimensional economy dominated by larger foreign interests, I shall remain demonised.

I make these comments with the utmost regard for our great mining industry, which gave birth to our state and has nurtured its economy for all the years since. This is simply a distress signal on behalf of our other major industries, including agriculture, mineral processing and manufacturing, which are all in states of rapid decline. The industries that fall outside of mining deserve the right to prosper and, at the very least, our governments should be preserving that right. To take a recently reported industry in decline, the Aussie tomato growers and canneries will never be able to compete with the heavily subsidised Italian tomato producers, nor will our commercial fishermen in Karumba, in the gulf, be able to compete with the cheaper and inferior quality fish coming out of Asia, unless we in this place are willing to play a role that only government can and that so many other governments around the world do. Those hard workers provide meaningful wealth-creating employment activities that will not be easily re-created magically somewhere else in the state, yet we refuse to work with them to help them compete.

If your vision is for the commercial fishermen and the tomato farmers to give up their skilled occupations to drive dump trucks for foreign owned mining companies, you may well pay homage to the mantra that we should only participate in industries that we can most easily extract returns from today. The industries that we are competitive in represent a small part of the broad industry base that is continually eroding due to the economic rationalist policies plaguing this state. I believe in the alternative approach of supporting those industries, at least to the extent that they are competing with distorted world markets. At the very least, those people should be given the right to prosperity, bearing in mind that their idea of prosperity is often being able to pay the bills and feed the family.

Industry support may manifest itself in many forms, including government investment and strategic infrastructure. We should be creating and replicating Queensland's great infrastructure projects, not selling them off. I belong to a region that is creating a gross regional value added contribution of \$15 billion to the economy, mostly by transport along an antiquated rail line that is currently working beyond capacity. For decades, the work gangs and service levels have diminished due to declining investment and, therefore, so has the quality of the track. Last year, multiple derailments occurred on the track. Given that there are 33 mining projects in the region of the north-west minerals province and only 12 working mines at present, it is unsatisfactory for all Queenslanders to be denied wealth-generating activities and jobs from the region due to the reluctance of government to engage in investment in this valuable infrastructure. Some would say that investment should be the role of the private sector and not a burden for taxpayers. That approach seems quite rational; however, it fails at the most critical test—that is, it has not delivered a single outcome. Throughout its lifetime, the line has yielded phenomenal revenue to the state and will continue to do so. If it is currently denying further mining development in the region, surely even the most rudimentary analysis would suggest that that investment is worthwhile undertaking.

Infrastructure Australia specifically identified the corridor between Townsville and Mount Isa as one of the most productive regions in the country. That corridor contains well-known mineral, energy and agricultural resources. One of the greatest opportunities for Queensland to invest in great infrastructure

projects resides in the connection of the north-west minerals province to the national electricity grid. This is a gift to Queensland that will just keep giving. After 100 years of mining activity in the regions, it is difficult to understand why the national electricity grid should not extend beyond the Townsville City Council footprint. The resource-rich regions should not be denied nationally competitive and high volumes of energy. That should be performed by coupling with renewable energy initiatives, including thermal, wind and ethanol. This project already has a \$335 million commitment, which will not be there forever, from the federal government and only requires some leadership from our own state government.

Amongst other significant opportunities available to our state to develop industry is the irrigation of the mid-west, the gulf and Gilbert River areas of North-West Queensland. Those arable lands have significant river systems that can offer many existing pastoral holdings immediately realisable potential for irrigated farming development, with very limited capital expenditure required from government—just the legislative flexibility to take a very small fraction of the water passing by each year and some relatively insignificant clearing activity. The small number of already established farmers in the region have demonstrated that the practice will be more viable once the number of new farms increases to provide economies of scale. I strongly commend the new Minister for Agriculture for following through with his government's support of this agricultural endeavour. The irrigation of those areas will provide the lifeline needed for many of our smaller remote towns and will enhance the requirement for the proposed abattoir in the region.

I use this opportunity to alert the House to significant threats that I feel will impact on the prosperity of the region that I represent. The existing proposed increases in leasehold land rents over pastoral holdings will decimate the industry and must be revoked. Fly-in fly-out is the most destructive force in our mining communities and it has never threatened our communities more than it does now. Our vision for the future of Australia should never include communities dominated by mining camps that, unabated, will grow as our stable and rich mining communities degenerate. Locally based workforces provide volunteers for sport and community groups, family members help staff our shops, and local workers and operators always contribute more to their communities.

Housing and infrastructure investment from all local stakeholders, including our government, is required to capture any real benefit from the mining boom. The best mechanism for this is royalties for the regions. If you want to pay back the debt in Queensland, stop neglecting the goose that continues to lay the golden egg. If we invest back into the productive areas of Queensland, the entire state will prosper and reap the rewards. There should be an appropriate return of the Royalties to the Regions from which they are yielded.

Local government autonomy has risen as an issue, and elected local members should again wield some executive powers. Again I commend the new government for its intention to act on this. There are threats to smaller retailers. With the dominance of major retailers continuing to kill off our farmers and small operators, I will continue to resist the push for seven-day trading in our regions and the continuing encroachment of the giant retailers on the markets.

In relation to title deeds to first Australians, those people need to be given the right to advance themselves economically, which is the same right afforded to every other Australian. Mining lease application times for sustainable parts of the industry must be reduced. If we are to continue to attract any investment in this industry, some balance needs to be regained in terms of the onerous and ineffective sections of the legislation.

In closing, I wish to say that I am proud to be a member of a party whose overarching principle empowers its members of parliament to vote in the interests of each of their electorates first and foremost and in accordance with our published core values and principles. Despite being a small band in parliament, I am mindful that at least 280,000 Queenslanders believe strongly in what we are saying and that they are after representation that creates opportunity for their members to speak out for their electorates, despite the times that it will conflict with a party position. This will only ever deliver the best outcome to Queenslanders.

I leave you with the words of Teddy Roosevelt, who said—

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood ... if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly. So that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.