

Owning homes is missing element

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GIVING indigenous people the right to own their own homes was listed as the missing element in the Queensland Government's plan to end alcoholism, violence, unemployment and poor health.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough yesterday demanded an urgent meeting with Premier Peter Beattie to offer him the commonwealth's sharpest minds to draw up plans to allow Aborigines private ownership on communal land.

Queensland agreed to have its own shared responsibility agreements with Aboriginal communities after Mr Beattie and Cape York mayors agreed on Monday that not enough was being done to address alcoholism, violence, unemployment and poor health.

After meeting with the 19 mayors for more than two hours, Mr Beattie said they would sign an agreement by the end of April setting out responsibilities, targets and anticipated milestones.

But Mr Brough said yesterday that land reform was the most crucial issue. "Until this critical issue is seriously addressed, there can only be incremental improvement in these communities," he said.

Mr Brough's call was backed by Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation executive director Gerhardt Pearson, who said the federal and state governments had to come together to reform the land system.

"What is required is commonwealth and state support for the entrepreneurs on the ground, for communities on the ground," he said.

"I think they need to get together and discuss economic development which includes tenure reform."

Mr Pearson attacked the Queensland Government and conservation groups for their plans to lock up Cape York's river systems from development under legislation introduced into parliament last Tuesday.

"I'm accusing the state Government of auctioning off Cape York for the green vote but I'm also getting sick and tired of the conservationists, particularly the Wilderness Society, running this absolute lie that they are in there trying to support a social justice return for Aboriginal people," he said.

Mr Beattie said he wanted the federal Government to be part of a new agreement with the state's indigenous communities, but not until much later in the process.

"When this is done at the end of April, we will then want to sit down with the commonwealth. And I say to Mr Brough today, we want you to be part of this," Mr Beattie said.

But Mr Brough said the issue of land tenure had to be discussed immediately, offering to clear his diary for Friday.

A spokesman for Mr Beattie last night said the Premier would be too busy to meet Mr Brough, and instead said he could meet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships Minister Warren Pitt.

Mr Brough said Mr Beattie's refusal was a "disappointment". "I thought he was serious about this," he said.

He said Queensland should look closely at the amendments to the Northern Territory Land Rights Act as a possible way forward.

"Land tenure is an issue that should be high on the Premier's agenda for tackling disadvantage in indigenous communities in Queensland and the Australian Government stands ready to assist," Mr Brough said.