

Biographic details: John Ah Kit, MLA for Arnhem

Minister for Community Development

Minister for Housing

Minister for Local Government

Minister for Sport and Recreation

Minister for Regional Development

Minister assisting the Chief Minister on Indigenous Affairs.

John Ah Kit has been involved in local, regional and Territory politics for a quarter of a century. His retirement from parliamentary politics, after a decade in the Legislative Assembly, marks a milestone in his life. He retires as Australia's most senior Aboriginal politician.

He was born 22 July 1950 at Alice Springs, and moved to Darwin in 1954 where he lived with his family—ultimately 12 brothers and sisters—initially at the old Parap Camp. Parap Camp comprised a series of steel framed tin sheds left over from World War II on the site of present day Stuart Park, and was home to many of the Aboriginal families so prominent in Darwin today. Only one of the old Parap Camp buildings survives—the Christodolou store.

John went to school at Darwin Primary, and then Parap Primary after it opened. It was during this time he formed networks of friendships with the kids he grew up with—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Filipino, Malay, Greek, Italian, Chinese and Anglo—that were so much part of multicultural Darwin of the time, though of course it long pre-dated such terminology. They are networks which, nevertheless, sustain the unique community of Darwin to this day.

As a kid he was called Johnny—it was much later in life that he has become known by his father's name, Jack, a well known wharfie and life time Labor supporter. His mother Stella, was taken from the streets of Tennant Creek and sent to Croker Island under the then-government policy of removing Aboriginal children from their families—resulting in what was later known as the Stolen Generation.

Jack's grandfather—Jimmy—arrived in Australia at the turn of the last century on a sampan from Hong Kong, and with others “foot walked” to Camooweal, where he established a market garden. He married a Waanyi woman—resisting government attempts to remove their children under that same policy of assimilation.

For a child growing up in Darwin in those days, it was a far cry from the white picket fence and mortgage belt of southern towns and cities—though the family scored a housing commission place in Rapid Creek, something he has remarked on

as housing minister. He remembers weekends of sport, swimming at Rapid Creek, fishing on the harbour and goose hunting down Howard Springs way.

After a year or so at Darwin High, John left school at 13 to work on cattle stations as a young ringer—at Douglas and Litchfield stations and Elizabeth Downs, as well as the famous Elsey station down Mataranka way. It was a pretty rough life, but one he remembers well, and a time in which he grew to respect the life of a station hand, the importance of horses and hard work—and a love of the bush.

Back in Darwin by 1967, Jack worked as a labourer—but mostly worked as a truckie, including work on the wharf and delivering to places like Quong's bakery. Sport was a big thing through this period, especially basketball, AFL and Rugby League. In 1973 he represented the Territory at the Indigenous Australian Rules Championships at Werribee, Victoria, and in the same year was narrowly beaten by the multiple Australian Billiards, Snooker and Pools Champion, Eddie Charlton in a pool game in Darwin.

As for so many other Territorians, Cyclone Tracy brought huge changes: luckily his family escaped loss of life. After working in the early days of reconstruction, Jack moved back to Alice Springs where he continued work as a truckie, but also worked for the old department of Transport and Works. Old hands such as Gregory Dick—who now runs the Aileron roadhouse—remembers him as a delivery driver to the old Stuart Highway Emporium supermarket.

He cheerfully acknowledges that during his late teens and early twenties he was a bit of a “tearaway”—and indeed a “mug lair”. He similarly accepts that it was a few of the old time Territory coppers around Darwin that set him on the straight and narrow!

Again sport was part of his life in Alice Springs. In 1975 he played and coached the Wests Football Club to a Rugby League Premiership (and 19 years later the honour to present the premiership shield to his beloved Westies—this time as sports minister).

But it was around this time he awakened politically—and was particularly inspired by listening to the words of the late Kwementyaye Perkins who would speak in Alice Springs at NAIDOC and other events. He would march—and get a fair bit of ribbing from his mates—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. It was at this point he realised he needed some formal education and qualifications—so enrolled in 1977 at the old Aboriginal Task Force at the then-South Australian Institute of Technology. He gained a Certificate in Community Development in that year, and an Associate Diploma in Social Work the following year.

It was in Adelaide he met Gail Canendo, a Torres Strait Islander woman from Yarrabah in north Queensland, who has become his life partner.

On returning to the Territory, Jack was first employed by the YMCA as a sport and recreation officer at Milikapiti on the Tiwi Islands, a period he has recounted at a reunion of YMCA sports officers in 2004—noting that he was the only former YMCA rec officer to become a sports minister.

Later in 1978 he became a District Officer with the Department of Social Security in Katherine, responsible for delivery of DSS services across the region. During this time he became President of Katherine's Kalano Community Association—but just as importantly reinforced connections with Aboriginal towns and communities, and families and leaders, across a large swathe of the Top End.

In 1981 Jack began training for the role of coordinator for the Kalano Community Association, a position he achieved in 1982. It was a period of considerable political tension in Katherine, with the Jawoyn Land Claim over Nitmiluk and intensifying attacks on land rights by the then-CLP government and the mining and pastoral industries. During this period, shots were fired over the heads of claimants, and there were street demonstrations led by groups such as “Rights for Whites”. The Kalano Association gave active support to the Jawoyn claimants.

In 1983 Jack was elected to the Northern Land Council as a representative for Katherine township, and was also elected as a member of the NLC executive.

In 1984 he was appointed Director of the Northern Land Council, a position he held until 1990 when he resigned to unsuccessfully contest the seat of Goyder for the Labor Party.

During his tenure, Jack continued the consolidation of the NLC, commenced by his predecessor Wesley Lanhupuy. During this period, the NLC engaged in its most active period of land claims under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*—as well as resisting major attacks on the Act federally and locally. In conjunction with the Central Land Council, the NLC successfully opposed federal Labor proposals to reduce traditional owners rights (1985); as well as Territory government attempts to reduce custodians rights over sacred sites (1989). Over the period 1987-1990, Jack and the NLC played a central role in defending Jawoyn interests against mining proposals over Guratba (Coronation Hill). He also oversaw the hand back of Nitmiluk National Park in 1989.

In 1991 he was appointed Executive Director of the Katherine-based Jawoyn Association, holding the position until August 1995 when he resigned to successfully contest the October by-election for the seat of Arnhem left vacant by the resignation of Wesley Lanhupuy.

During the period Jack worked at the Jawoyn Association, the organisation successfully engaged in major joint venture arrangements at Nitmiluk National Park which are the inspiration for current legislation governing the resolution of Land Rights and Native Title claims through joint management regimes across the Northern Territory.

In 1993, Jack—along with the Jawoyn Association’s then-chairman Robert Lee, and senior traditional owners—negotiated Australia’s first post-Mabo native title agreement over mining at the Mt Todd gold mine. This was achieved in advance of federal legislation, and had the support of then CLP Chief Minister, Marshall Perron. Among other things, the agreement resolved significant land claims, as well as increasing the size of Nitmiluk National Park by around 50 per cent.

During this period, Jack also served on the first Katherine regional council of ATSIC.

Jack followed in the footsteps of his seat of Arnhem predecessor, Wesley Lanhupuy, as both director of the NLC, and—at Wesley’s suggestion—a Labor candidate and ultimately an elected member of parliament at a by election in October 1995. Re-elected in 1997, Jack became a member of the first Territory Labor Government, which won power in August 2001. He was appointed the Territory’s first Aboriginal government minister. On his appointment as a minister, he declined the title “Honourable”—preferring to be known as “just Jack”.

When elected to parliament, John Ah Kit became the ninth Indigenous parliamentarian in Australian history—a number that has nearly doubled in the last decade, including three others in the Northern Territory—not to mention another Aboriginal minister in Marion Scrymgour

Jack’s retirement from parliamentary politics is the closing of a chapter rather than a book—he intends to remain in public service. He is particularly interested in working with the sporting community, as well as in areas of regional development.

And of course, getting in a bit of goose hunting and fishing—and maybe getting around to writing his memoirs.