

John Ah Kit: leader and tireless advocate for Aboriginal rights dies aged 69

Family of Jawoyn leader and first Aboriginal minister in the Northern Territory parliament says his life 'should be the focus of celebration'

Lorena Allam

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John Ah Kit, who has died aged 69, will be remembered for 'his great sense of humour, his love of country and his love of friends and family'. Photograph: Mark Rogers/AAP

Tributes are flowing for the esteemed Jawoyn leader John Ah Kit, the first Aboriginal minister in the Northern Territory parliament and a lifetime advocate for the rights of Aboriginal people, who has died aged 69.

Ah Kit's family made the announcement on Sunday evening.

"He was a brother, cousin, husband, father, uncle and grandfather to us, of course, but also had those connections for many other people and friends around the Territory and the Australian nation, as a leader and advocate for Aboriginal people, their countries and their rights," the family said in a statement.

"His achievements were many, and we will hear stories of these in the coming days and weeks.

"But what we should remember above all is his great sense of humour, his love of country and his love of friends and family."

Labor senator Patrick Dodson said he had lost a great mate.

“Jak was a larger than life character with a wicked sense of humour. At his heart he was totally committed to his family and his belief in justice for First Nations people. They have lost a tireless advocate, and he will be much missed,” Dodson said.

Ah Kit was director of the powerful Northern Land Council from 1984 to 1990 and was executive director of the Jawoyn Association from 1991 to 1995, before his election to the NT parliament. He served in five different ministerial portfolios, the first Aboriginal person to do so in the Northern Territory.

In 1991, Ah Kit was instrumental in the Jawoyn traditional owners’ battle to prevent gold, palladium and platinum mining at Coronation Hill, a sacred site to the Jawoyn people, who believed it to be the resting place of the creator being Bula.

Jawoyn referred to the whole area as “sickness country”. Their opponents said Bula was a total invention, and those opponents were many, including ministers in the Hawke Labor government.

Ah Kit was tireless in his advocacy for the Jawoyn traditional beliefs, and he had a supporter in then prime minister Bob Hawke, who eventually intervened to prevent mining at the site, a stance he later said cost him the prime ministership.

“As his family members we are, of course, in mourning. But we are also aware that this is a life that should be the focus of celebration and commemoration,” the family said.

“We will let people know what plans we have to celebrate his life as arrangements are made.”