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# North Queensland's powerful trio will shake up the state

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Man in the middle: former Labor MP turned independent Billy Gordon (centre) is now one of three crucial cross-bench MPs in the Queensland parliament. Dan Peled/AAP

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Three north Queensland MPs representing just 3% of the state's population will wield huge power in Queensland's parliament, which resumes on Tuesday for the first full sitting week since the January 31 state election.

In the weeks since [quitting the Labor Party](#) – after Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk [advised him to resign](#) – new independent Billy Gordon has said he has been “[forming an alliance](#)” with the two Katter's Australian Party (KAP) MPs, [Rob Katter](#) and [Shane Knuth](#).

Gordon's resignation left the Labor government with just 43 MPs in the 89-seat parliament, up against the Liberal Nationals' 42 – though Palaszczuk can also count

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## Disclosure statement

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on the support of independent Speaker Peter Wellington.

That gives Gordon, Katter and Knuth – who represent the [neighbouring](#) north Queensland seats of Cook, Mt Isa and Dalrymple – an unprecedented opportunity to trade their votes for a better deal for their regions, on everything from jobs to major infrastructure.

## New northern allies

In a vast state governed from the south-east capital of Brisbane, north Queenslanders have historically struggled to have their concerns heard and taken seriously – so much so that federal MP Bob Katter and others have long pushed for north Queensland to [become its own state](#).

But the new parliament could see the north gain greater influence. Gordon, Katter and Knuth all represent sprawling regional electorates in north Queensland. These jointly cover around half of the state's land area, although they only have about 140,600 constituents (or about 3% of [Queenslanders](#)) between them.

Quitting Labor last month, [Gordon said](#) that:

*I will sit on the cross benches with members of Katter's Australian Party, and will play a constructive role in allowing the Palaszczuk government to govern with confidence, while at all times ensuring that I represent my constituents.*

[More recently](#), Gordon has said his expulsion from the ALP over his choice [not to disclose information](#) about his [past](#) had given him “a tremendous amount of freedom to have a look at things differently”. In other words, Labor shouldn't take Gordon's vote for granted.

Gordon is facing domestic violence allegations, which are being [investigated by the police](#). The MP [has denied](#) those allegations.

If those allegations lead to charges being laid and a successful prosecution, it [may](#) spell the end of his political career.

But, in the meantime, Gordon will take his seat on the cross-benches as the state's first [independent](#) Indigenous MP, representing [Cook](#), Queensland's northernmost seat. Cook stretches from just inland of Cairns, taking in coastal communities such as Mossman, Port Douglas and Cooktown, north to the islands of

the Torres Strait.

Rob Katter represents the north-west seat of [Mt Isa](#). It's an electorate [bigger than Victoria and Tasmania combined](#), reaching all the way from the Gulf of Carpentaria down to Birdsville and the South Australian border. Sitting alongside Katter will be former LNP MP Knuth, who represents the inland electorate of [Dalrymple](#), centred on Charters Towers.



New seats of power? Billy Gordon's seat of Cook, in far north Queensland, borders the KAP-held seats of Mt Isa and Dalrymple. Queensland Electoral Commission

So as parliament resumes and the cross-bench trio get their first chance to work together, what are their key demands likely to include?

## Key issues to watch

Given the finely balanced numbers in parliament, both the Labor government and the LNP opposition will be looking to see how best to work with the north Queensland trio.

One of the first tests for all three will no doubt be whether the both major parties treat them with respect – something that the KAP considered was [lacking under the previous government](#) – and as legitimate political voices.

Key areas that the trio will likely demand greater action on include:

- Unemployment, especially youth unemployment, which [Gordon has pointed out](#) is at 22% in regional far north Queensland.
- Increased spending on major infrastructure for the north, such as the Hann Highway [inland freight route](#) to cut travel times south from Cairns, and the [Peninsula Development Road](#).
- More open processes for major project approvals in the region, particularly in the mining industry.
- Greater equity in the allocation of human services, such as spending on hospitals.
- Better access to natural resources including [water allocation](#), energy and reform

of vegetation management laws.

- Greater investment in infrastructure and services for Indigenous communities, especially remote communities in the far north, along with more focus on enabling economic opportunities. Many people in the south may not know it, but there are deep connections between the Katter family and Indigenous communities across the north, with Bob Katter senior having once been Queensland's minister for Aboriginal affairs in the Bjelke-Petersen years.

## Placing regional concerns at the heart of policy

Perhaps the biggest challenge for both the Labor government and the LNP in dealing with the three north Queensland MPs will be the need for greater recognition of how centrally applied [neo-liberal](#) policies can affect regional and remote communities differently to those living in big cities.

It's easy for people in the southeast of Queensland or other parts of Australia to ridicule the policies of regionalist parties like the KAP. Yet regional MPs have often had good reason to challenge policies imposed from Brisbane or Canberra under successive governments, which, when not managed well, can have devastating impacts in regions like north Queensland.

For example, industry de-regulation, market reforms, business and environmental regulation, competitive tendering and grants allocation all have the potential to deliver state-scale efficiencies. But what may make economic sense at the state level can unfortunately have major impacts on particular local communities and enterprises, such as farms and factories. That's why there should also be careful local, or "place-based", strategies to minimise impacts and to facilitate new opportunities.

With continued pressures on the state budget and the essential need for Queensland to participate in the global and national economy, protectionism and isolationism could never again become the dominant forces within the state's political system.

But that doesn't mean that remote and regional concerns should not be heeded. And with regional MPs holding such crucial votes in this Queensland parliament, we can expect to hear far more about those regional concerns between now and the next state election.

- [indigenous affairs](#) [Queensland](#) [remote indigenous community](#) [Regional development](#)  
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