

A former Townsville Bulletin sports editor who played a key role in the establishment of the North Queensland Cowboys has called for major changes at board level to get the struggling club back on track.

Doug Kingston, who floated the idea that North Queensland should have a Winfield Cup (now NRL) team in a story in the Townsville Bulletin back in 1989, called and chaired the first meeting, and worked on a voluntary basis to help get the team into the national competition, believes the current Cowboys board appears to have lost sight of the core reason the club was established.

"Unless major changes are made in the composition of the Cowboys board the club faces a bleak future," Kingston said.

"The secrecy surrounding the board of directors gives rise to suspicion that it is a closed shop, which has lost sight of the core reason the club was established.

"During the past few weeks I have tried, unsuccessfully, to find out just who is on the NQ Cowboys board. My quest to identify the current board members included numerous Google searches and an email to NQ Cowboys chairman, Lewis Ramsay, requesting details of board members and the procedure for appointment of board members. I also asked Mr Ramsay if any of the current board members were elected by a vote of club members.

"Mr Ramsay replied that these matters were 'confidential'.

Kingston then wrote back to Mr Ramsay saying: "In the absence of your advice to the contrary, I will assume that the Cowboys Leagues Club currently owns the North Queensland Cowboys football club/team, having acquired it in 2015 from News Limited. Directors are appointed by the Chairman and ratified by the other existing Directors. There is no opportunity for club members to vote to appoint even one Director."

To date he has not received a response.

Kingston said the reason for his interest in the composition of the NQ Cowboys board is what many see as poor recruitment and retention of players during the past few years.

"Between 1989 and 1992 I was heavily involved in the bid to get a North Queensland team into the Winfield Cup (now the NRL), so I can state with certainty that the reason for wanting our own NQ team was to give local juniors the chance to play the game at the highest level in their own backyard, instead of having to move south to join the Brisbane Broncos or other clubs," he said.

This was confirmed in 2014 by inaugural NQ Cowboys coach, Grant Bell. In a Foreword to the NQ Cowboys 20th Anniversary book, Bell wrote: "The Cowboys' purpose quite simply was to provide an opportunity for our best to have a chance to stay at home and play in front of family and friends. It was for a rugby league-mad community who just wanted to cheer on their own and for every youngster growing up to have a real path to their dream. Sure there was always going to be some imports but they weren't to take the opportunity from a local..."

The introduction to the 20th Anniversary book also stated: "The fundamental objective when men from Townsville, Cairns, Mackay, Mt Isa and the Burdekin first came together in 1989-90 has been achieved - the North Queensland Cowboys club

has become a pathway for aspiring footballers who no longer have to travel a third or more of the continent to follow their dreams."

Kingston said that in the early years it was necessary to recruit proven players from southern clubs as it was always going to take time for local talent to flow through.

"But in the past few years we have seen some of the game's best young players leave North Queensland to go to southern clubs," he said.

"Kaylyn Ponga (Newcastle), Viliame Kikau (Penrith) and Brandon Smith (Melbourne) are obvious examples of outstanding young players who have fallen through cracks in the NQ Cowboys recruitment and retention process.

"Some will argue that North Queensland produces so many good young players that you can't keep them all, but Ponga, Kikau and Smith had already established themselves as future NRL stars when they departed North Queensland for southern clubs. Keeping them should have been a priority, instead of recruiting older cast-offs from other clubs.

"The NQ Cowboys board appears to have lost sight of the reason the team was established, and it's not hard to see why," said Kingston.

"From what I've been able to find out, only one current board member has played at the top level of the game, and not one board member was elected by club members.

"Of course you need people with business acumen on a rugby league club board, but there must be a balance."

Kingston said it appeared the Cowboys board had evolved into a secretive, closed mates club in which you have to be "invited" to join the board and the time had come for a shake-up at the top.

"Assuming the club has 11 directors (I don't know this to be correct as it is apparently a closely guarded secret) at least four of those should be elected by club members and serve three-year terms before having to stand for re-election," he said.

"Another three positions should be reserved for people with high-level rugby league experience and the remaining four positions should be nominated by the chairman/board members to provide the expertise required at any given time e.g. finance, legal, business, community.

"For the sake of the future of the club I urge Cowboys chairman, Lewis Ramsay, to reflect on the reasons the club was established and adopt a more transparent, inclusive approach to the make-up of the board," he said.

Footnote: I personally have no interest in standing for a board position. Ten years ago I would have jumped at the chance as I felt I had something to contribute, but at age 73 and happily retired, just doing the shopping and picking up my grandchildren from school once a week is about as much as I can handle these days. My sole reason for airing these concerns is to ensure that the club not only survives, but also thrives.