

20 February 2008

Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples

Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (4.25 p.m.)—It is with great pride that I rise to endorse this motion before the House. I do so with a sense of pride not only from being here as the new member for Lindsay, in my second week in the parliament, but also because I know that this is one of the most significant and momentous periods in the history of this House. What occurred last week—both on Tuesday, 12 February, and on Wednesday, 13 February—were, I think, some of the most significant events in this parliament's history.

I begin with the events of Tuesday, 12 February. That day will always be remembered by me as my first day sitting in this parliament. On that day I recall, and will continue to recall vividly, the welcome to country delivered by Matilda House-Williams. This was a significant act; it was significant for many reasons. For me one of the most significant aspects of this welcome to country was this: not only was this the first time that such a welcome to country had been delivered in this place but it had taken so long for this to occur. I am someone who has been an elected representative, as a councillor of Penrith City Council, for almost nine years. In that time I have been invited to many gatherings throughout my local community. As I have gone to those gatherings, increasingly over the years there has been a tendency to embrace the welcome to country as a means by which a gathering can be commenced. This is something that has been occurring gradually over that period, but I must say it has been commonplace throughout that eight to nine years that I have been in elected office. I think in years to come people will reflect upon what occurred on Tuesday, 12 February 2008, and they will wonder why it took so long for this great parliament of this nation, with our great democratic traditions, to embrace a welcome to country and to enmesh those democratic traditions with the heritage of our Indigenous people.

I turn to the motion itself. I believe it is something for which our nation has been waiting for many years for the leadership of this country to do. We know that over the last 11 years there has been a reluctance on the part of the previous government, in particular on the part of the previous Prime Minister, to do what this House has now done with a real sense of bipartisanship. It is important that we note that bipartisanship because it goes to the significance of what has occurred here. The apology that was moved in the House last week, on Wednesday, 13 February 2008, was an apology from this parliament, from not just the government but the representatives of the people of this great country.

As someone who brings a legal background to this place, I am all too aware of how the temptation for courts can sometimes be to intervene and to take this nation in a more progressive direction. In doing so, often they can lead out ahead of where the people are. They can lead out ahead of where community sentiment and community views have been able to reach. What I think is most significant about this apology is that it is not the courts that are leading from the front but the representative of the people—the parliament—that is. All of us who were present in the chamber and brought forward those many stories from our local communities helped to ensure that, as a nation, we were able to say sorry and to say sorry not just with a sense of reflecting upon what has occurred in our nation's history but also with a real, deep and abiding commitment to what can be achieved in the future.

I come here as the member for Lindsay, which is wholly situated within the boundaries of the Penrith City

Council. Penrith City Council has the third highest proportion of Indigenous Australians of all councils in New South Wales—third only to Blacktown, which is first, and Lake Macquarie, which is second. Having such a significant proportion of Indigenous people living within my community is something that I relish. I relish the opportunity to continue to engage with them on a whole range of issues that impact upon their lives and the broader life of our local community. And I take this opportunity today to acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners and custodians of the lands and waters of this country.

On Wednesday, 13 February 2008, there were many people inside the House who were able to witness the apology. But there were also many people right throughout this country who were deeply moved by what occurred and who were actively engaged in the process of the making of that apology. I know in my local community there were many local gatherings. But one in particular that I wish to reflect upon was the gathering at the Penrith City Council, where there were over 200 people gathered for this significant event.

One person who ordinarily would have been at the Penrith City Council but who was not there is a person I take great inspiration from—a person by the name of Maureen Silleri. Maureen is someone personally known to me and someone who was down here in Canberra on that day. She works for the Penrith City Council and is involved with specialist child care. She helps local Indigenous families access childcare services so that they may overcome some of the barriers that prevent them from entering the workforce. Maureen has put pen to paper and has given me the benefit of some of her reflections on some of the issues pertaining to the impact of the stolen generations. I wish to read into the record that short note from Maureen:

My Story—Maureen Silleri—

Maureen's family name was Clayton—

At the time my brothers and sisters [were] taken I was only two years old. We were a family of 9 children and they (the Welfare Board) came and removed 6 children. There were 4 sisters and 2 brothers. They (The Welfare Board) had said to my mum that she could not look after all these children; the Board never came near us for months. We had our extended family members to support my mum. Dad was a drover and away a lot and we did not go with out anything.

The welfare believed that they were doing the right thing—however both my parents worked and as the children were getting ready for school they (the Board) came and just took the children, my two brothers and I were not taken as we were being minded by Nan and Pop because our parents were at work.

I believe that my parents never recovered from our family being torn apart, people are under the assumption that only one child in one family were taken but I can tell you that we were a family of 9 children and the board took 6 children.

I was in about sixth class ... and I came home from school and there was a young girl sitting on a chair and all I could remember thinking was how much she looked like my mum. Mum said to me to say Hi to your sister. So I was thinking that I had to get to know them all over again. All 6 of my brothers and sisters started to return home to us at different times, and in the end we all were reunited.

Last week I was fortunate enough to be in Canberra at Parliament House and hear the apology from the PM—it was a monumental event which one of my sisters (that was taken) was in the House of Rep ... but it was more significant when my family all came together on the grass area to celebrate the day when an apology was made to my Aboriginal people—a day we thought would never happen.

Maybe now those that were taken can now be at peace with this acknowledgment of the treatment of stolen generation, hopefully this can encourage them to move forward.

Upon reading this statement, I could not help but reflect upon some of my own personal family experiences. I am one of five children, my father was one of five children, my mother was one of 10 children and her mother was one of 11 children. I know that it can be a handful for parents to look after families of this size. But I also know that many families have been able to do it—and to do it well. I also know that, in the case of Maureen Silleri, there was no suggestion that her parents were unable to do that job as well as my grandmother, my mother and my great-grandmother were able to do it.

The sad reality of the stolen generations is that many people were taken away from their families for no other reason than that they were Aborigines. This is the harsh and uncomfortable reality that we need to confront and that we are confronting as part of this motion of apology that the parliament has moved for the nation. I should say that, whilst words are important—and I think it was significant that the Prime Minister referred to the unfinished business of reconciliation as being a 'stain on the soul of the nation'; I think it is significant that we try to wash away that stain—I think it is also significant to note that, with all of the words in the world and all of the tears shed, irrespective of how significant those outpourings of emotion may be, all those things on their own will not be sufficient for us to achieve what I think we all have reached consensus on: closing the gap between the lack of opportunities that Indigenous Australians face and the opportunities that non-Indigenous Australians currently enjoy.

The most often cited expression of that gap is the 17-year gap between life expectancy of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Seventy-five per cent of males and 65 per cent of female Indigenous Australians die before the age of 65 compared to 26 and 16 per cent respectively in the non-Indigenous population. Ultimately, the success of each and every one of us as legislators and parliamentarians will be measured not merely in the small but significant step that we have taken in moving this motion of apology; the real judgement will be passed on whether we collectively can achieve inroads in these very important measures. That will be the real test for us all.

But I say that while also understanding and knowing how significant the giving of an apology was. In giving an apology, we as a parliament, on behalf of this nation, have moved away one of the important stumbling blocks towards reconciliation. In doing so, we show the respect that Indigenous Australians deserve and that the past mistreatment they have been subjected to demands.

When I saw all of the people throughout this building, throughout Canberra and throughout Australia shedding tears last week on Wednesday, 13 February, it struck me that, regardless of how significant any debate over the subtleties of language could possibly be, deep down beneath the semantics of saying sorry or just simply being regretful there was much suffering and much hurt that had extended to many people. It impacted on many families and Maureen Silleri's family was but one affected by this great stain on our nation's soul.

David Bradbury MP

Federal Member for Lindsay



It is not only significant; I think moving this motion of apology is going to prove to be one of the most significant things that this parliament has done. It is a great source of personal pride to me that I have been able to participate in this debate and to add my voice to the chorus of voices in this place that have said that it is time for us to move on. But, before doing so, we need to confront the realities of what has occurred. We need to say sorry and we need to move on with mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.