
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER

PEOPLES RECOGNITION BILL 2012:

SECOND READING SPEECH

Wednesday, 13 February 2013, House of Representatives

Mr Abbott (Warringah—Leader of the Opposition)

I rise to follow the fine speech of the Prime Minister and I really am pleased to have this chance to join with her in supporting this bill. Australia is a blessed country. Our climate, our land, our people, our institutions rightly make us the envy of the earth, except for one thing—we have never fully made peace with the First Australians. This is the stain on our soul that Prime Minister Keating so movingly evoked at Redfern 21 years ago. We have to acknowledge that pre-1788 this land was as Aboriginal then as it is Australian now. Until we have acknowledged that we will be an incomplete nation and a torn people. We only have to look across the Tasman to see how it could have been done so much better. Thanks to the Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand two peoples became one nation.

So our challenge is to do now in these times what should have been done 200 or 100 years ago to acknowledge Aboriginal people in our country's foundation document. In short, we need to atone for the omissions and for the hardness of heart of our forebears to enable us all to embrace the future as a united people.

Let us acknowledge that there have already been two big milestones on our national journey to healing: the 1967 referendum and the national apology, the fifth anniversary of which we mark today. So I want to acknowledge and honour all the people who have brought us thus far. I acknowledge Harold Holt and Gough Whitlam, who sponsored the 1967 referendum. I honour Kevin Rudd and Brendan Nelson, who together made the national apology. I acknowledge my predecessor as coalition leader, former Prime Minister John Howard, who first sought to acknowledge Indigenous people in the 1999 referendum bid. I particularly acknowledge and thank Pat Dodson, Mark Leibler and other members of the expert panel whose work began the process that today's bill takes forward. I also honour the Prime Minister. So often in this place we are antagonists but today on this matter we are partners and collaborators. Most of all, I honour the millions of Indigenous people, living and dead, who have loved this country yet maintained their identity and who now ask only that their existence be recognised and their contributions be acknowledged. I particularly honour their representative in this parliament, my friend and my colleague Ken Wyatt, the member for Hasluck.

There is much hard work to be done. It will, as the Prime Minister candidly admitted, be a challenge to find a form of recognition which satisfies reasonable people as being fair to all. It will not necessarily be straightforward to acknowledge the First Australians without creating new categories of discrimination, which we must avoid because no Australians should feel like strangers in their own country. I believe that we are equal to this task of completing our Constitution rather than changing it. The next parliament will, I trust, finish the work that this one has begun.

So much of what happens here passes people by; sometimes it even annoys them. May this be an occasion when the parliament lifts people's spirits and makes them feel more proud of our country and more conscious of our potential to more often be our best selves. As the Prime Minister said, we should not feel guilty about our past but we should be determined to rise above that which now makes us embarrassed. We have that chance; let us grasp it.