HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION (TARGETED ASSISTANCE) AMENDMENT (2008 BUDGET MEASURES) BILL 2008

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 4 June 2008

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr MARLES (Corio) (1.51 pm)—I rise to speak in support of the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment (2008 Budget Measures) Bill 2008. This bill seeks to amend the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000. It does this through two very important appropriations aimed at assisting our Indigenous population. It is very much part of the Rudd government’s commitment to closing the gap in the social, economic and health indicators between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. As a part of the federal budget, the government has provided $1.2 billion over the next five years towards closing the gap. It includes 37 separate measures which were contained in the budget.

We believe that, in implementing these very practical approaches, it is very important that we adopt a ground-up approach, that we work and consult with the Indigenous communities themselves and that we find solutions through that process. That is exactly what this bill will do.

The starting point of the framework of action by the Rudd government in this term was the apology made to the stolen generations on 13 February this year. That apology was quite simply a momentous occasion in our country’s history. It acknowledged the wrongs that were committed in relation to the stolen generations. It acknowledged on the part of non-Indigenous Australia that it was wrong to have a program of forced removal of Indigenous children from their parents, a program which ultimately had at its core an agenda of trying to bring about an end to Aboriginal culture in this country.

Whilst that is the pre-eminent example of the wrongs that have been committed towards our Indigenous people since European settlement, it is only one of those wrongs and it is representative of the larger history of this country which, with some notable exceptions, has by and large been very sad and difficult in relation to our Indigenous population. But the fact that we have had a sad and difficult history with respect to our Indigenous population does not condemn this country to a sad and difficult future. It does not condemn us at all. The apology was so important because it represented the gateway from that sad and difficult past to a much brighter and greater future in our Indigenous relations. That ultimately is why the apology was such an important act. It represented a turning point in this country in our Indigenous affairs, but it also represented a turning point in the reconciliation of our own identity as a country.

Soon after the apology was made in this place, we in Geelong held our own apology to those in the Indigenous community within our region. Within our region, it was in its own way a very powerful, emotional and significant event. It was, for the first time, an opportunity for all three tiers of government within the Geelong region, local, state and federal—the City of Greater Geelong, the state of Victoria and the Commonwealth of Australia—to make their apology to the Indigenous community in the region. That was important for a few reasons. Firstly, it allowed all of those in Geelong, non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians, to participate in an extraordinary national event. It also allowed us to highlight Geelong’s peculiar history in relation to Indigenous affairs.

In many ways, Geelong is a centre of the stolen generation in this country. Geelong had five orphanages in its history, which was the largest number of orphanages in any city outside a capital city. That means that there are a number of people in Geelong who grew up in institutional care, which is something that I have spoken about previously in this place. It was to these orphanages that representatives of the stolen generation were taken when they were removed from their parents. The consequence of that is that there is a large number of the stolen generation who now live in our region. Whilst this was an opportunity to make our own apology to the Wathaurong people—the Indigenous people of the Geelong region—by virtue of the process of the stolen generation there are in fact representatives of a number of peoples in our Indigenous community who live in Geelong and it was important to be able to make our apology to them. It was also very important for them to participate in the apology and to hear it themselves.

Geelong has another peculiar history in relation to this country’s Indigenous affairs. Geelong is the country of the Wathaurong. It is also the country of William Buckley. Between William Buckley and the Wathaurong, it is arguable, we had the first act of reconciliation in this country. William Buckley was a convict in that first
failed attempt to establish a penal colony in Port Phillip Bay. He escaped from that colony, which was very short lived. He was in a very desperate situation and on the point of death when he was ultimately taken in by the Wathaurong people. In that, we had the first act of reconciliation in this country. That was a very important act, as is this bill in committing a significant amount of money for targeted assistance for education for Indigenous Australians. With that, I commend the bill to the House.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Message from the Governor-General recommending appropriation announced.