



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**BILLS**

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander  
Peoples Recognition Bill 2012**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 11 February 2013**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

---

## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 11 February 2013  
**Page** 798  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Husic, Ed, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr HUSIC** (Chifley—Government Whip) (16:01): I am delighted to continue my contribution to this important bill which, as I said last week, is only an interim step towards recognition of Australia's Indigenous peoples in the Constitution. Before debate was interrupted, I was indicating to the chamber that, while ultimately it will be the voice of Australian people who give constitutional recognition to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, this bill will help raise awareness more broadly in the community of the issue and will also commence a conversation among us all. It remains the resolve of the government to pursue meaningful change to the Constitution that echoes the hopes and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The bill provides a mechanism for all Australians to become familiar with the possible wording for a constitutional statement that could be included in a future referendum.

I have seen countless times in our area the positive effect that recognition has on people through, for instance, the many award presentations held in the electorate each year, simply acknowledging the good deeds and efforts of individuals and groups. It provides an enormous sense of satisfaction and empowers them to continue to do their work. Imagine how empowering it would be were we to take this to a higher level, the most paramount level, and that is to have existence recognised within the heart of Australia's constitution. This is the sort of effect that the High Court's Mabo decision had on Indigenous people across the country when the court overturned a long-held legal view that this land had not been inhabited prior to European settlement. Overturning the principle of terra nullius acknowledged for the first time in law, for the first time since Captain Cook landed on these shores, that there were people here long before Europeans. It also validated their sense of being, their sense of belonging to the land, their sacred places and stories, and the struggles of all those who came before them. The Mabo decision itself opened the door for everything that has occurred since regarding Indigenous recognition.

It is absolutely important and appropriate to recognise the landmark speech made by former Prime Minister Paul Keating at Redfern Park in December 1992. There he publicly acknowledged to Indigenous Australians that European settlers were responsible for the enormous difficulties that Aboriginal communities continued to face. I quote Mr Keating directly:

We committed the murders.

We took the children from their mothers.

We practiced discrimination and exclusion.

It was our ignorance and our prejudice ...

These were important words and should not be viewed simply in the sense of blame but, rather, recognition of past ills and to enable a situation where we can repair our relations and move the country forward. In a similar way, who can forget the tears of joy and relief displayed when former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd gave the formal apology on behalf the parliament and previous governments for the wrongs that had been inflicted on Indigenous Australians under the previous policy of removing children from their families.

This week marks the fifth anniversary of this significant act of reconciliation, for which Indigenous people in the Chifley electorate continue to be enormously thankful. I hasten to add that the Chifley electorate has one of the largest urban Aboriginal populations in the country, and that many Aboriginal people in our electorate are either members of the stolen generation or their direct descendants. Five years after the apology to the stolen generations, people will again gather in Mount Druitt this week to commemorate this significant national event. Long before 'reconciliation' was a commonplace term in our day-to-day vernacular, members of the community, whom I am proud to represent, started gathering each year in Mount Druitt to celebrate Aboriginal culture and to march together as one for reconciliation. Fifteen years later, the Mount Druitt reconciliation march continues to be an important event in the social justice calendar in the Chifley electorate. This event continues to be well attended and is also recognised as part of the ongoing festivities within the Blacktown City Council area.

At this point, I want to note that these types of events do not occur on their own and that within the context of the discussion that we are having in this place it is important to recognise the central figures who drive the work of the Mount Druitt and Districts Reconciliation Group—in particular, Marguerite Tobin, President; Pat Smith, Secretary; Maureen Berger, Vice President; and Debra Robertson, Treasurer. Their work has helped provide a platform to bring people together across our area, and they should be deeply thanked for this.

I also want to make reference at this point to something else which I was enormously proud to be associated with and which I also think has great relevance to this discussion. Last year, as a member of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, I was involved in the inquiry into Indigenous languages in Australia. I was very enthusiastically supportive of the establishment of the inquiry for a number of reasons, which I will touch upon shortly. I note that in its report titled *Our Land and our Languages*, the committee recommended that the government support constitutional changes to include the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. The two issues of recognition are inextricably linked. The recommendation of constitutional recognition of Indigenous languages is an acknowledgment of the fact that, post Mabo, Australia should no longer be considered a monolingual nation. The committee found that at the time of colonisation there were an estimated 250 Australian Indigenous languages being used and that today we report with great regret that only 18 languages are spoken by significant numbers of people across all age groups.

The committee's report found that Indigenous language is inseparable from culture and a person's capacity to learn, making it a significant barrier to closing the gap on educational performance. As someone who grew up in a household where we learned English as a second language, I can testify to the powerful impact that language has on a sense of identity and a sense of being—and this is particularly so with Indigenous language and the role that it plays in day-to-day existence. I know how important having access to language is. It is a bridge between generations and in forming an important bond with culture. It should not be underestimated.

I cannot stress enough the effort that has been undertaken in the preparation of this report and then to bring those recommendations to life. I can testify with my own eyes and ears—hearing and seeing—what is being done in our area. It is great to see the amount of work that is being undertaken to keep Indigenous languages alive and to teach these languages to young people from within cultures. In particular I note Hebersham Public School and the work that it is doing with its Koori Play and Chat program. This program is designed to teach younger Indigenous Australians the importance of their own language and it does so within the educational context. In the future, how exciting it will be when students from all cultures are able to study and master one or more of our own Indigenous languages. What greater recognition of Indigenous culture could there be?

The simple answer to that is that there is no greater recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than the single most important document to our nation—the Australian Constitution. As I indicated earlier, the Constitution sets out rules for the conduct of the Commonwealth of Australia. But, importantly, as a document it helps define who we are and what we value. Also within this document, the truest recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders must and should occur.