



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

STATEMENTS ON INDULGENCE

National Sorry Day

SPEECH

Wednesday, 1 June 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Page 5677
Questioner
Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

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Mr ENTSCHE (Leichhardt—Chief Opposition Whip) (18:00): I rise today to lend my support to this motion and to express my sorrow for what has happened to our Indigenous population in the past. I think it is very befitting that we have the opportunity to continue to reflect on things that occurred in the past, but I think we should also use this opportunity to reflect on where we are today and where we hope to find ourselves in the future. I started to reflect on that, given that I have one of Australia's largest Indigenous populations in my electorate of Leichhardt. I have the home of the Torres Strait people, one of our two Indigenous populations. I also have a very significant, large and diverse Aboriginal population, particularly in Cape York, many of them still living in their own homelands. Sorry Day of course was very significant to these people, as it was to so many other Australians.

I look at Sorry Day and I hear other slogans, such as Closing the Gap, that reaffirm a commitment to our Indigenous people and I think to myself that, if we are going to use this sort of terminology and these sorts of slogans, we seriously have to start to evaluate the outcomes we have set so that it is not just a matter of using hollow words or of standing here in a suit in this place and expressing a particular view by repeating these slogans. We need to look seriously at what we have actually achieved.

I have been very specific and looked at my own electorate. I will start with Cape York. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure you are aware of the debate we have had on wild rivers in recent times. I was living in Cape York when Indigenous people began to recover some of their own country, to get back some of the cattle properties that they either were born on or had a close association with. It has taken a couple of decades, but they have achieved that. They are now one of the largest holders of pastoral leases in Cape York. They are very excited by this fact. A lot of hard work and effort has gone into achieving this. Then they come across governments beholden to rabid green movements who decide that they are going to take away the rights of these landholders and deny them the right of economic development. So there has been a campaign by the overwhelming majority of Cape York Indigenous people to get control of their own land. Unfortunately, governments are so beholden to the Greens and dependent on them for votes that they have walked away from the needs and aspirations of these Indigenous landholders. They are effectively taking away their right to do anything at all on their land.

Mr Craig Thomson interjecting—

Mr ENTSCHE: It is all right for these people in metropolitan areas who go up there for five minutes and blow their wind in Cape York—they have no understanding of the area. Most of the information they are provided with, as we see from the member for Dobell, would have been provided by the Wilderness Society. He would not have spoken to some of those landholders like Alan Creek, who recently got his country near Coen back, who are very concerned about the impact that that is going to have. The overwhelming majority of Indigenous leaders up there are vehemently opposed to what is occurring at the moment and what is being imposed on them.

I am sorry that they have to continue their battle with government and with bureaucracy as they attempt to have some say in what they can or cannot do on their own land. I am also sorry for the traditional owners and the landholders at the Sherga Air Force base, because this is where the government decided to put a detention centre, and they did not even have the courtesy to talk to these freehold landholders to seek their advice or approval to put a detention centre there. The traditional landholders found out about it in the media—the same as others—even though questions had been asked of the government and of the bureaucracy, and in each case no answers were given. As recently as last week, I got communiques from representatives of the traditional owners, who continue to express their frustration, disappointment and anger at the fact that the government and the bureaucracy continue to make decisions in relation to their land without any consultation whatsoever.

There are other issues that are having a significant impact on the lives of our Indigenous people, and we should be saying sorry for that. There is an organisation called EyeFlight which operates in Northern Australia under the Visiting Optometrists Scheme. Funding for this scheme has been provided in recognition of the fact that eye disease in our Indigenous population is six times more prevalent than in the mainstream population. You would

think that this is something we would get behind, support and fund to a point where we could guarantee that we would get outcomes. Two million dollars has been made available to this scheme to cover 32,000 patients per year. You can see that figure is not great in relation to the amount of money that is provided for a very significant service.

Recently, I was talking to the providers of EyeFlight, which operates through the Visiting Optometrists Scheme throughout the Torres Strait and the Northern Peninsula Area. They only go there twice a year. At the moment the organisation receives \$88,000 to do two flights per year into the area. At this stage, they are funding from their own resources a shortfall of over \$50,000. We are talking about an eye disease that is six times more prevalent in our Indigenous population, and for the sake of a relatively small sum of money we cannot even make sure they have the resources to provide appropriate treatment. I am sorry that we are not able to do that. I have written to the minister and I have asked that he reconsider that.

If we are going to make commitments to programs like the Visiting Optometrists Scheme then we need to acknowledge the fact that we have a very significant problem with eye disease. Surely to goodness, the measure of the success of this program is to reduce that six to one figure to something significantly less than that. Even if it takes additional resources, I believe that it is absolutely appropriate that we do this. There are other issues in the Torres Strait that I would like to raise as well. For example, there are renal units that have been mothballed for many years. There is a high incidence of diabetes throughout our Indigenous population. When I was the member some years ago, I was able to secure funding to build renal units in Weipa, Bamaga and Cooktown to accommodate the need that was there. Unfortunately, after they were built the state government saw fit to close those units down because they did not want to provide the nursing staff necessary to assist. They have relocated families that are reliant on this into Cairns, and some of them have been living in Cairns for up to six years. Lency Stephens is one such person. She has been living in a cheap motel in Cairns for six years while waiting for the perfectly functional renal unit in Bamaga to get a nursing sister there to assist with her dialysis. Late last year Queensland Health committed to reopening the unit by Christmas and the family arranged to go back there. It is now the beginning of June and unfortunately they are no closer to opening that unit. I find that very disappointing, and I think we should be saying sorry to the Cape York communities for not finding the resources to open that unit.

If you go to the hospital on Thursday Island you could describe it as Third World at best. There are some serious infectious diseases in the Torres Strait. In the last 12 months there were outbreaks in our northern neighbour Papua New Guinea, which is only a couple of kilometres away from the islands of Saibai and Boigu. We have seen cholera, encephalitis, tuberculosis and malaria, and yet we do not even have an isolation ward in the Thursday Island hospital to protect our local residents. I think we should be saying sorry about that as well. We should be saying sorry for the fact that a hospital that was built to last 10 years has been there for 13 years and is starting to fall down around their ankles. There is not even appropriate accommodation for the nursing staff to provide necessary services. I think we should be not only saying sorry but also providing the resources to ensure that the health of our Indigenous people, particularly of those in the NPA and Torres Strait community, is protected.

Another good example up there which we need to say sorry for is in relation to how we deal with those who are deceased. In the clinics it has built right throughout the Torres Strait Islands, Queensland Health has provided rooms that can be used as temporary mortuaries. Unfortunately, through budget restraints, it has not been able to equip them with the necessary refrigeration to make them work. So for a whole series of islands across the Torres Strait there is only one functional mortuary, which is on Darnley Island. There is another standalone one on Badu Island which does not meet any of the standards and is not likely to remain open. This means that any deceased person from any of the outer islands has to be brought back to Thursday Island to be prepared for burial and taken back. For these low-income families it costs \$12,500 to \$13,000 to have their deceased loved one ferried back to Thursday Island for preparation. The Thursday Island mortuary is in the process of being closed down and they are going to replace it with a refrigerated shipping container. Quite frankly, I do not think this is the sort of respect that we should be showing for those loved ones who have passed away in these areas. I believe this is another area where, rather than saying sorry, I would suggest very strongly that we do something to make sure that this is addressed. Another thing we should be apologising for is the fact that we have taken away the Navy presence from up there. They have pulled out the immigration boats and the Customs boats and they have recently pulled out the Navy boats and actually taken the Navy people away. We are a seafaring people, and this is one of the only international borders, and they have shut this facility down, leaving our borders up there totally exposed. This is another area where we should be not only saying sorry but looking at recommissioning it.

I could go on. There are a lot of issues which I believe that, rather than saying sorry, we should be looking to fix. Some \$22 million is needed to repair the seawalls in the outer islands of the Torres Strait. I was up there just before Christmas. It was gut-wrenching to walk with the community down to their cemetery and find that half of it had been washed out into the ocean. It is a \$22 million project to do the seawalls on six islands. It is very doable, and the proposal has been around for a long time, but the only solution we have had so far is \$400,000 to continue to measure the tidal surge. That does not help the families of those whose tombstones and deceased relatives have already washed out to sea. I think this is an absolute disgrace and needs to be addressed.

So if we are going to start talking about sorry—and it is something I absolutely believe in and am totally committed to—we need to match it with action rather than just words. I say sorry for all of the things that we have not done that are impacting on the lives of Indigenous people today. This is only a very small example of what is out there. By all means let us have a National Sorry Day and be sorry for the past, but what about our treatment of Indigenous people and what we are doing today and tomorrow? Rather than rhetoric, let us measure our real commitment to our Indigenous people by actions and outcomes.