THE SENATE

ADJOURNMENT

Roe, Mr Paddy

SPEECH

Monday, 20 August 2001

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Senator RIDGEWAY (New South Wales—Deputy Leader of the Australian Democrats) (10.04 pm)—I would like to bring to the Senate's attention the passing of a great Australian who was a leader in his own community and someone who generously shared his great wisdom and understanding of our ancient country with all Australians. His name was Paddy Row, and he was a Nyikina lawman. He was born about 1912 on Roebuck Station, about 25 kilometres east of Broome in Western Australia. His mother worked on the property as a housekeeper in the homestead, and his natural father was a non-indigenous man.

This was around the time that non-indigenous Australians were establishing the vast pastoral companies that still exist today, making it a time of great upheaval and change for the Nyikina people. Not only did the pastoralists bring sheep and then, later, cattle; they also brought economic development and the ugly biproducts of racial intolerance, foreign diseases, alcohol and other substances that the communities had very little chance of adjusting to. Another of the changes that came about with this influx of pastoralists and others was the introduction of non-indigenous laws, which had a devastating effect on the social and cultural fabric of these remote indigenous communities that had lived for countless generations under their own laws and customs.

Policies of assimilation, including the Commonwealth's decision to separate indigenous children from their families and communities, reached Broome and Mr Roe's community. In an act of great defiance and courage, Mr Roe's tribal father challenged the authority of the police who were taking the children away to Beagle Bay Mission as well as the prejudice within the community at the time against part-Aboriginal children. Mr Roe told his story in this way:

When I was born on the station, that was a sheep station, I was born in the bush. So, when my mother brought me out after she was in hospital away from people, a lot of people saw I was a different colour, a lighter colour. My tribe didn't like to see me with that colour because I was the only one in the tribe with that colour. They were going to kill me. But my father, my full-blood father, he was a big man in the tribe, a big boss. My father made a big meeting with the people, my people, his people too, and he talked. 'This little boy, we all know he's got a different colour, but,' he said, 'we're going to leave him, let him grow because sooner or later there's going to be a lot more of this lighter people come up. So, this boy, we've got to leave him. He might come in handy to us.' And that's true, too. I did come in handy to them.

This decision and the firmness with which it was taken was to have a profound impact on Mr Roe's life. It meant that he grew up in two intersecting worlds and two very different cultures, but he was comfortable in both. On occasion, it also meant that he was able to bridge the divide and diffuse potentially volatile situations where ignorance had led to injustice and misunderstandings. One case in point was the story that Mr Roe told about an Aboriginal man who was jailed for seven years because his `girl' was 12 years old. What the welfare authorities did not know at the time was that the girl that they put in the convent for her own protection had been promised to this man and that under Aboriginal law they were already married. Mr Roe at the time challenged the authorities about their decision encouraging them to, in his words, `try and dig little bit more deep— you bin digging only white soil—try and find the black soil inside'. Eventually, the couple were reunited and the injustice repaired.

Looking back over Mr Roe's life experience and the legacies that he has passed on, I am struck by the fact that he did not have an education. He did not attend school at all; rather his schooling was from his elders. He once said:

I learned making spears and boomerangs and shields and what the old people used to make—everything that the old people used to make. That was my education. And I used to hunt. Of course, at that time I had to learn to hunt because we used to live off the land. No tea and sugar and flour and all these sorts of things ...

When I grew up in that country and got bigger, I came back to the station where my father and mother used to work.

Mr Roe worked his way up through the station, eventually being given responsibility for the running of this huge asset and responsible for a team of men. Mr Roe put it in his own words in this way:

I was very lucky, because I learned both sides. I learned European ways—I can run the station, sheep station, cattle station; on the European side, station jobs, that's my game, I was a station-hand. But on the other side, that's my people's side, I come in handy on their side too, because I can carry their culture.
After working for many years around the Kimberleys as a station hand and windmill contractor, Mr Roe settled with his family north of Broome in 1968 and established the Goolarabooloo community to protect the region’s indigenous culture. That led to the construction in 1987 of the Lurujarri—or coastal dunes—heritage trail to share the cultural importance of the landscape with non-indigenous people and to make sure that the developing tourism industry did not prevent the community from looking after their country in the proper way. As Mr Roe said:

We should all come together, European and Aboriginal people. Country man and Aboriginal man. Black and white—to look after the country.

In 1983, his first book was published—Gularabulu—which is the name given to a stretch of country on the coast of the West Kimberley where the sun goes down. It contains the stories of the indigenous communities from the Broome region and it is prefaced by the author’s note:

This is all public,

You know (it) is for everybody:

Children, women, anybody.

See, this is the thing they used to tell us:

Story, and we know.

Obviously he included non-indigenous people, thinking that ‘they might be able to see us better than before’ if they understood our stories. The book is particularly important because of the fact that it is perhaps the first time that an indigenous oral history has been presented in this form—as a narrative as it was expressed by the voice of the author without substantive editing and alterations. Reading some of the stories, you have a real sense of the poetry of the language and the lyricism that makes the spoken word so much more powerful than the printed. As one writer commented:

... it is a reading that is more like listening. ... And in listening you should also try to hear what he is saying: that things have always been the same, but that they are different now; that as long as his people can speak out clearly, their culture will live on.

Mr Roe had an expression for his desire to convey his culture to others—the stories and songs that are grounded in his country. He said, ‘We must make these things move.’ He explored a variety of new ways to ‘move’ his culture that spread it beyond his immediate community. He co-wrote a truly beautiful book with his friends Stephen Muecke, a fellow wordsmith, and Krim Benterrak, a French painter, and this book was entitled Reading the country. There are so many levels of beauty to this book—intellectually through the timeless wisdom it conveys, visually through the paintings that it contains, and physically as a result of the journey from the landscape and communities that it traverses. It was very much the ‘brainchild’ of Mr Roe and his fascination with the meaning of place—the centrality of his country to his identity as a Nyikina man. As Stephen Muecke wrote in the book:

Listening to Paddy Roe, one is astounded by the range of his knowledge of the country. What appears between the pages of this book is but a fraction of what he chose to tell us. Traditional secret material is absent; it is only circulated among his own people and is not for public consumption. His knowledge covers the areas we call history, botany, medicine, biology, meteorology, religion, sociology, politics ... I balked at the idea of trying to record everything he knows. ...

If one wanted to give some priority to any reading at all, it would have to be Paddy Roe’s because of the historical depth of his knowledge and the range of areas which it encompasses.

Despite the history of this one significant man in the Kimberleys who has contributed so much to his community, I think that he ought to be remembered as a person who contributed so much to the Australian nation. His life will be remembered far beyond his home country of Broome in Western Australia. I hope that his life experiences will go on teaching young Australians about how it is possible for cultures to coexist and adapt to change but still maintain their own integrity and power. This is a message that was borne out by Mr Roe’s life—it is his legacy—and it is a legacy that he has left for all Australians to think about in the context of their own lives and how each of us progresses the national journey towards true and lasting reconciliation.

I would like to finish with some words of advice from Mr Roe that were recorded in 1990 on the ABC. I think they have a very important message for young indigenous Australians and they give the rest of us an insight into the obstacles that make it increasingly difficult to pass on indigenous cultures to our children, so they have
a heritage for their children and a real sense of their own identity. I seek leave to incorporate the message in

Hansard.

Leave granted.

The message read as follows—

The interviewer asked Mr Roe whether young Aboriginal people were interested in learning about their culture. He replied,

“Yes, they like to know about the past, you know, from the olden times, but sometimes their friends come and, of course, they don't understand our ways. They might take them to pictures or basketball, or something else. We're losing our children; they don't take an interest. They think we're only telling them just a story.

Any laws they had, the old people, that was all given to me too, the law and that. When I came to be a man they gave me everything. My culture. Now I'm still doing it. I'm teaching the young fellas the culture, making boomerangs, corroborees, initiation ceremonies, all these sort of things. It's all culture belonging to my people and we can't chuck it away.”

Senator RIDGEWAY—I thank the Senate.