




Speech By  
**Billy Gordon**

**MEMBER FOR COOK**

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### MAIDEN SPEECH

 **Mr GORDON** (Cook—Ind) (12.42 pm): It is with a huge sense of pride that I stand before you in this place today. I am humbled by the trust placed in me by the voters of the great electorate of Cook. As is the custom of my people, I wish to start by acknowledging the Aboriginal owners of this land, the Turrbal people. I acknowledge the tens of thousands of years that they have lived on this country, the care that they took of their land and the magnificent culture they practised in absolute harmony with their homeland. I acknowledge the suffering that resulted from the loss of their land, the violence of that loss and the pain and hardship that resulted from their dispossession. I acknowledge their survival and their resilience. Despite everything they endure, the Turrbal people continue to live on their country today, practice their culture and raise their children and grandchildren as proud members of the Turrbal nation.

I stand here today in the shoes of a great man and a great parliamentarian, the late Eric Deeral, a Guugu Yimithirr elder, mentor and fighter for his people and the first Aboriginal man to be elected to this parliament. When Mr Deeral was elected as member for Cook in 1974 I was just one year old, too young to know the historic nature of that achievement. As I stand here now I have a true sense of what he was feeling 41 years ago as he delivered his maiden speech. Like Mr Deeral, I stand tall and proud to speak of my commitment to the people of Cook. The year Mr Deeral was elected was only nine years after the repeal of the infamous Queensland Aboriginals Preservation and Protection Act. It is hard to imagine the strength that must have been required for an Aboriginal man to successfully fight an election campaign and win it in 1974. Mr Deeral is a beacon for me as I focus on the enormous responsibility and obligation now facing me as only the second Aboriginal man elected to this place.

It has been a most remarkable 17 weeks as a parliamentarian. I have been in politics long enough to know that the gibes, attacks and name-calling are often part of the theatrics of this place and no malice meant, but there have been claims and judgements cast that have painted a picture of a person that I am not. My story and my life does not make for the typical member of parliament. I have no doubt that my life has been vastly different from most of my colleagues here in this place. Indeed, I am most certainly an improbable politician. I am a Barbarrum man from the western tablelands of Far North Queensland. I was born at a time when my skin colour would determine the level of education I would receive, the employment opportunities that would be available to me and even the quality of health that I would enjoy. I was born to parents who were battlers. My father worked hard as a canecutter and on the railways and my mother was a hardworking nurse. Indeed, I was born working class.

Growing up we lived in railway freight wagons, sheds with just a curtain partition around the toilet and shower and even in an old green bus converted into a caravan. Like so many similar families, we followed my father around to wherever he could find work. I got involved in politics because I got frustrated with people, politicians and bureaucrats making important decisions about issues that impacted upon my family, my life and my community that had absolutely nothing in

common with my life, my family and my community. I say that my life was vastly different from most others in this place, but it is a life that is similar to many thousands of Australians for whom the wealth of this country seems to have passed by. Sadly, many of the hardships that I experienced in my life are also experienced by many of the voters of the great electorate of Cook.

My life experiences have shaped me and my view of the world. I have had blistered hands and an aching back from swinging a cane knife in cane fields in Far North Queensland. I have pulled pots of beer and listened to locals discuss life and bush politics in Normanton's famous purple pub. I have learnt true mateship from proudly serving as a member of the 51st Battalion Far North Queensland Regiment. I have worked as a builder's labourer, youth social worker, a cleaner and been a public servant. I have shared the vision and steps towards achieving a more united, reconciled Australia while working with Reconciliation Australia in Canberra. I have been inspired by young people who have dared to dream big and succeed while working with the Foundation for Young Australians. I have worked in education and most recently in the private sector for local regional airlines, Skytrans.

All through these varied life and work experiences I have been driven by the greatest influence in my life, my late grandfather. My grandfather, Jack Congoo, was what was known as a gun cutter in the sugarcane fields in and around the Innisfail district. In his later years he turned his hand to tin scratching, or tin mining, around the Irvinebank, Stannary Hills and Herberton regions. His spirit is ever present and with me now as I stand here delivering this speech. His voice rings loud, giving me strength, pride and a great sense of purpose. 'Billy', he once said, 'there are no shortcuts in life. "Good luck" is spelt "H-A-R-D-W-O-R-K".' But it was not just hard work that has brought me here; it was also hope and self-belief. It has been well publicised that I have made mistakes—a big mistake when I was a teenager. I chose to buy into the expectations society had of an Aboriginal boy. I caved in to peer pressure. I hung around with the wrong crowd. I made excuses. I wondered, 'Was this it? Was this my lot in life?'

I also believed in myself. I did not want to let those who expected nothing more from someone like me to be right. I will not be defined by my worst moment. I did not want to be the typical black story: a juvenile troublemaker who ended up knowing too well the inside of a cell block, a courthouse or worse. American philanthropist Rick Warren once said that we are products of our past, but we do not have to be prisoners of it. Therefore, I chose not to be resigned to the same position in life.

In the year 2000, when I attended the Queen's Trust Forum for Young Indigenous Leaders at Banyo here in Brisbane, I was only 28 and it was a turning point in my life. I realised I was not going to be shackled to society's low expectations of someone like me. I knew that I had more to give than to take from this world. As years passed, my resolve became stronger that I could make a difference; that no matter how or where you are brought up you still have an opportunity to excel in life.

The great Australian union movement shared my hopes and dreams for my life and my vision for North Queensland. As sure as the sun will rise in the sky tomorrow, I will be a proud member of that great Australian people movement.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge my time as a member of the Australian Labor Party and how being a member of that party has contributed to my very presence in this House today. Across two elections, a federal election and a state election, rank and file members of the Labor Party have believed in me, bled for me and stood shoulder to shoulder with me in standing up for that very Australian ideal of a fair go. I thank those who rolled up their sleeves as I contested those two elections and helped me through to an honest hard-earned victory on 31 January this year. Whilst I am no longer a member of the Labor Party, I have a fundamental union with the Labor Party on issues of social justice, the rights of workers, the environment, and the rights and interests of First Australians. There will always be more that unites us than divides us.

I want to thank members of my campaign team and electoral staff who have seen me elected to this House. To Ken Schaumberg, my campaign manager: your inner strength, calm demeanour, patience and wisdom have been the backbone of my election to this House, Kenny, and I will never forget that. Stacey Mundraby and Lynette Creswell are my dedicated, loyal and hardworking electorate staff. I know they are watching this speech. I feel humbled and blessed that you have stood by my side in these troubled times.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the support and guidance of a number of key people in my political life: Dr Lesley Clark, the former member for Barron River; Senator Jan McLucas; former members for Mount Isa, Betty Kiernan and Tony McGrady; former mayor of Mount Isa Ron McCullough and former mayor of Cairns Val Schier; former members for Cook Jason O'Brien; former members for Leichhardt John Gayler and Jim Turnour; former member for Tablelands and current Mayor of Mareeba Shire Council, Tom Gilmore; Mayor of the Torres Shire Council, Pedro Stephen;

Mayor of the Douglas Shire Council, Julia Leu; my good mate and Northern Territory Chief Minister, Adam Giles; and former member for Townsville and former Speaker of this House, the Hon. Mike Reynolds.

Last, but definitely not least, I pay my respects to the first politician I ever had the privilege of meeting, a former member for Mourilyan, the late Andrew George Eaton, better known as Bill Eaton. Bill served in this House from 1980 to 1992 and was the minister for land management under the newly elected Wayne Goss Labor government. I recall visiting Bill's office in Innisfail's Centre Point Arcade with my grandfather Jack. I was 13 years old. The impression that Bill made on me was that of a humble man, a man of the people, genuine and sincere in his duty and steadfast in his support for working-class men and women. Today I stand here and salute Bill Eaton. Bill and I are products of the great sugarcane and rain township of Innisfail. If only he knew how much of an impression he made on me and how one day we would share a unique bond.

Those people believed in me and I believed in them. I believed that I could be an improbable politician. My grandfather once told me that, if you have the ability to do good things for people, you have a moral obligation to do so.

Cook is bigger than Victoria and it is geographically challenging with a diverse and expansive array of issues. In Mareeba primary producers are concerned about getting better prices for their produce and government definitely has a critical role in supporting that industry. I am committed to supporting primary producers in Mareeba and on the Tablelands. In Port Douglas tourism operators seek tourism infrastructure to support the industry's growth. In the Torres Strait there is a need for better primary healthcare access. On Cape York cattlemen, miners, environmentalists and Indigenous people strive for an uneasy coexistence.

There is unacceptably high youth unemployment. I have been unemployed in my life and I know how hard it is to get by without a job. My time as the member for Cook will be spent fighting for jobs and services in this region. I will work hard to find ways to reduce the high cost of living for my constituents. In an electorate containing some of the country's most impoverished people and communities, it is a cruel irony that the cost of basics such as food, fuel, transport and power are so high. For the people of Cape York and particularly the Torres Strait, the cost of air travel, which is often the only option, is enormous. I have worked in the local aviation industry and I will work hard to use my connections in that industry and the remote communities to find a sustainable solution to this problem.

I want to ensure that infrastructure projects such as the upgrade to the Peninsula Developmental Road go ahead and are funded properly. I want to work to ensure that important resource projects such as Rio Tinto's South of Embley Project go ahead with the best environmental and cultural protections and contributions possible.

At the same time, as someone who lives in and represents an electorate with some of the world's most significant and beautiful natural ecosystems, I am very committed to the protection of those environments. The Wet Tropics, which included Australia's largest surviving rainforest and the magnificent Great Barrier Reef, is under threat from a variety of sources and I welcome the government's commitment of \$100 million for the protection of the reef. Many of the island homelands of the Torres Strait are threatened with saltwater inundation and are in urgent need of sea walls to protect them from king tides and other threats from changing weather. I will work with the leaders in those communities and at all levels of government to address the issue as a matter of urgency.

I will work hard to represent the diverse industries of coffee, sugar, maize, peanuts, vegetables, tea, tropical fruits and aquaculture. Tourism brings great social and economic benefits to the region. I will work with operators, big and small, to support this crucial industry. I will serve the families in Far North Queensland. My utter commitment to improving the quality of life of those families is driven by my own experiences and that of my parents, who battled to keep food on the table and a roof over our heads. I will be driven not by ideology but by a passion for justice tempered by a pragmatism to do what it takes to make change.

As a parliamentarian in this place, I will work with all those who share a passion for Far North Queensland, regardless of who they are and what political party they support. I reiterate my deep gratitude to the people of Cook for the trust they have bestowed in me. I will work hard for them and ensure that I am worthy of the honour they have given me.

As I come to the end of my speech, I want to mention my immediate family: my mother and father, my brothers and sisters. My older sister, Kerrie, is a hospital liaison officer at Townsville Hospital, my younger sister, Megan, is a firefighter in Ingham and my younger brother is a trade assistant in Goodna. I love them all dearly and I am proud of them, as I know they are proud of me as I stand here today.

I want to mention my five wonderful children. I love them more than anything else in this world and my concern for their future is the reason I am here today. My driving motivation is a desire for their lives to be different from mine. For them I want a Queensland and an Australia where all people have the opportunity to meet their full potential. For them I want a world where poverty, racism and oppression are no longer the things that define so many lives.

To my beautiful partner, Melanie: you have stood by me in these difficult times. I feel so blessed that you are the last person I see when I close my eyes at night and the first person I see when I open them again in the morning.

Finally, I will read a poem from the late great Oodgeroo of the Noonuccal people and great aunt to the member for Algester, Leeanne Enoch. I read this in tribute to my grandfather, whose wisdom and love helped shape me into the man I am today; into the politician I am today. It is titled *A Song of Hope*—

Look up, my people,  
The dawn is breaking  
The world is waking  
To a bright new day  
When none defame us  
No restriction tame us  
Nor colour shame us  
Nor sneer dismay.

Now brood no more  
On the years behind you  
The hope assigned you  
Shall the past replace  
When a juster justice  
Grown wise and stronger  
Points the bone no longer  
At a darker race.

So long we waited  
Bound and frustrated  
Till hate be hated  
And caste deposed  
Now light shall guide us  
No goal denied us  
And all doors open  
That long were closed.

See plain the promise  
Dark freedom-lover!  
Night's nearly over  
And though long the climb  
New rights will greet us  
New mateship meet us  
And joy complete us  
In our new Dream Time.

To our fathers' fathers  
The pain, the sorrow;  
To our children's children  
The glad tomorrow.