



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ARCHERFIELD

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NATIVE TITLE (QUEENSLAND) STATE PROVISIONS AMENDMENT BILL (No. 2)

Ms STRUTHERS (Archerfield—ALP) (5.43 p.m.): The member for Tablelands has set me a hard act to follow. As I have been sitting here—and I say this somewhat patronisingly—I have realised that I used to think I was a bit naive, but the member for Tablelands takes the cake. It is important that he take heed of the fact that his 20 years studying politics and his five years in the Army have not enlightened him about the issues we are debating. I remind him and other members in the House that in the past two weeks the Queensland public has been shocked by the appalling violence that persists among many Aboriginal communities: drunken men raping children, bashing women and using star pickets to smash the life out of each other.

By any means, that violence is not unique to indigenous communities, but it appears much more intense and localised within specific communities. The Queensland public, including indigenous people, desperately wants the violence and the destruction of the Aboriginal culture to end. To find answers to that violence, we must first remember why the violence is so prevalent. It is prevalent because indigenous people in Australia have been stripped of their land and culture. Customary laws that controlled violence have been seriously diminished. Self-worth and spiritual connections to the land have been grossly undermined.

I worked for a couple of years in the Tanami Desert area in the Northern Territory on remote Aboriginal communities. I was appalled to see the damaging effects of people being herded like cattle. The member for Tablelands talked a lot about cattle. Those people were treated like cattle. They were moved up to the Tanami Desert area during the early part of this century, settled in areas which were unproductive and which had a poor water supply. We have to keep those circumstances foremost in our mind, because they are what these issues are about. We must recognise that although we cannot take history back, we can restore connections to the land; we can help to strengthen indigenous culture and pride. The Leader of the Opposition gave us a serve about our white guilt. As a result of my experiences in the Northern Territory, I would call it a "white awakening" or a "white compassion". That is foremost in my mind as we debate this Bill.

The critical debate we are having today about native title cannot be divorced from the current public debate about violence on indigenous communities. The two have been, and remain, intrinsically linked. Recognition of native title and the right for indigenous people to negotiate over traditional land is the key to restoring dignity and economic independence to a culture that has been devastated. I am also well aware that the economic development of our State requires continued mining and exploration. We need to generate work and wealth. The two, indigenous rights and mining interests, need not be as polarised as they are currently.

This Bill has emerged from genuine efforts by our Government to balance both interests. In common with other members, I pay tribute to the good work of our leader, Peter Beattie, and his team to pull together the diverse interests and to produce a fair and reasonable piece of legislation. Concessions and compromises have been made to meet the interests of all stakeholders in the native title debate. This year the right for indigenous people to negotiate over mining and pastoral leases has been significantly diminished in the legislative processes at both the State and Federal level. In this Bill, for instance, the right to negotiate at the mining exploration stage does not exist. As a minimum, we must have adherence to a code of conduct for exploration, rather than a free-for-all. Mining interests

have been well recognised in the development of this legislation. In spite of the concessions that have been made, the Queensland Mining Council and the coalition will not be happy until the right to negotiate on mining leases is totally removed from law. If the push to remove indigenous people from the negotiating table were to be successful, what would result? Mining interests might be satisfied, but at what cost? The result would be unfettered access to, and possible destruction of, traditional sites and culture; the further erosion of the status of, and respect we must have for indigenous people; and the further erosion of their culture and opportunities for economic development. That would mean more violence and more self-destruction among indigenous people.

We cannot continue down that path. We must enshrine the right to negotiate in law and establish an effective tribunal and related processes to enable negotiations to occur in a fair and timely manner. Every effort must be made to ensure that all parties negotiate in good faith. Economic development should not be unnecessarily stifled by endless litigation. Similarly, indigenous interests must be fairly acknowledged. White Australian culture is based on notions of mateship and a fair go. At times I think that that is more myth than reality. Many indigenous Australians get a helping hand in different forms, whether it be through the social wage or welfare payments or farmers and others receiving millions of dollars in industry assistance. There are not many people in Australia who do not reap some sort of benefit from the Government coffers. That point must be hammered home. It is not only indigenous people and people on benefits who receive a helping hand from the Government; it is a whole range of people. It is particularly important to acknowledge the millions of dollars poured into industry assistance. The things that really matter to indigenous people—land rights, economic independence and the restoration of dignity and respect—are being ripped away. The three-stage process that our Government has embarked on in relation to native title must be supported, not undermined. We must extinguish the violence, not native title rights.
