



Speech by

Mr TIM MULHERIN

MEMBER FOR MACKAY

Hansard 25 August 1998

STATE FOCUS RECONCILIATION CONFERENCE

Mr MULHERIN (Mackay—ALP) (7.20 p.m.): Last weekend I had the privilege, along with my parliamentary colleagues the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, Judy Spence; the member for Townsville, Mike Reynolds; the member for Mirani, Ted Malone; and the member for Whitsunday, Harry Black to attend Australia's first State Focus Reconciliation Conference held in Mackay. The conference, which was hosted by the Mackay City Council, had as its theme "Working Together" and brought together Queenslanders who are working towards reconciliation across Government, business, industry, tourism and the wider community to share ideas and to look to the future.

In common with many Australians of my generation, I was taught a version of history at school that neglected to include the struggles and achievements of Australia's indigenous people. It was a history that failed to mention that Australia is home to the oldest living culture in the world. It also failed to tell the true story of how the first Australians were dispossessed of their land at the barrel of a gun, by poisons in bags of flour and by introduced disease and starvation. It did not say anything about the way that successive Governments completed this dispossession by forcibly removing Aboriginal people to isolated reserves and by deliberately and wilfully stealing children from their parents in an attempt to destroy indigenous cultures. It said nothing about the great achievements of Aboriginal people in the economic development of the nation, in the arts and in sport and in this country's defence in overseas wars. It was, as the anthropologist W. E. H. Stenner remarked in 1969, "the time of the great Australian silence".

But thankfully, things have well and truly changed and there is now far greater opportunity for everyone, young and old, to be better informed about our shared past. It was a great credit to the Mackay City Council and the organisers of this conference that some of the people most responsible for this change were persuaded to share their knowledge with us in Mackay last weekend. One of these was Professor Henry Reynolds. Henry, more than any other historian, has removed the collective blinkers from our eyes about the often tragic history of Aboriginal/European contact in Australia. He gave us an insight into how Aboriginal people creatively and courageously resisted the invasion of their country and provided the shocking figure that upwards of 20,000 people died in the defence of their land as a result of the use of European guns. He detailed how the now disproved racial ideas held by many Europeans helped them justify what Aborigines term "the killing times". Henry outlined the major contributions of Aboriginal people in assisting white settlement and building our nation. We learned that just as the sugar industry could not have developed without the labour of the South Sea Islanders so, too, the cattle industry depended on the efforts of Aboriginal stockmen and women and the sea industries depended on Torres Strait Islander men and women.

Another speaker, Dr Ros Kidd, opened the lid on the secretive and all-powerful ways in which successive Governments controlled all aspects of Aboriginal people's lives, including freedom of movement, place of residence, employment, savings, marriage and adoption. She pointed out that politicians were wrong to talk about the Aboriginal problem; it was the Government from all shades of politics that was the real problem. Her book, *The Way We Civilise*, should be required reading for all members of this Chamber and public servants so that we do not repeat the congenital failure described in her book.

I believe that it is vital that we pay far greater attention to the indigenous voices in our community than we do now so that we can learn from the past and look to the future. It is for this

reason that the contributions over the weekend of the many indigenous speakers were so important. Reconciliation is not about guilt or blame; it is simply acknowledging and taking responsibility for the past and working together for the future. Reconciliation is about listening to other people's perspectives on the past, then asking ourselves a simple question: how would I feel if this was done to me? As Dr Ros Kidd says at the end of her book—

"Ignorant of our historical heritage, we remain vulnerable to manipulation by those who have most to gain from truncated and distorted debate...if we are to give real substance to the rhetoric of reconciliation on the eve of the new millennium, then we must retrieve, explore, understand and accommodate the whole spectrum of experiences of all Australians."

The conference concluded with a commitment from delegates which stated—

"We, who have shared this conference experience together recognise this as the beginning of the reconciliation process and commit our time and energy to achieving the vision of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation...a united Australia which represents this land of ours, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all."

Finally, I would like to thank the Mayor of Mackay City, Councillor Julie Boyd and her council and all the speakers who shared their knowledge with the Mackay community and which will take the Mackay community one step further on the path to reconciliation.
