




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

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ADJOURNMENT

Palm Island, 60th Anniversary of 1957 Strike

 **Mr STEWART** (Townsville—ALP) (8.50 pm): I rise this evening to talk about the Palm Island commemorations of the 60th anniversary of Strike '57. I was joined by the Deputy Premier, the Hon. Jackie Trad, and Minister Assisting the Premier on North Queensland, the Hon. Coralee O'Rourke, at the Perfumed Gardens in Townsville on Friday last week where the Palm Island and Townsville communities came together to commemorate 60 years since the famous strike of 1957.

The strike of 1957 was a significant event in Queensland's history and even more so for the history of Palm Island. Palm Island was once renowned for its harsh administration and strict jail-like conditions, and was commonly referred to as 'Punishment Island'. In 1957, seven Palm Island men led a strike against the discriminatory treatment of Indigenous people after a petition to the superintendent demanding improved wages, health, housing and working conditions was ignored. Although poor conditions were the main cause of the strike, the trigger was the superintendent's decision to deport local Albie Geia, who had allegedly disobeyed an overseer. Geia refused to leave the island, united the community and declared the strike on 10 June 1957.

At the commemoration ceremony we heard stories from the then children of the 'magnificent seven', as they are referred to by the people of Palm Island. Those children recounted the days and the events of that strike, and it is evident from hearing those stories from men and women who are now in their 60s and 70s that the day of the police raids is forever emblazoned in their minds.

Police arrived during the night from Townsville on a barge five days after the strike started. At daybreak raids were conducted on the homes of the seven strike leaders. They were chained and put in shackles, and their wives and children who stood strong beside them endured the same treatment. The seven families were led to the police barge with machine guns trained on them. In their last act of defiance, the chained men began to sing loud and with pride. As punishment, the seven men were all split up and sent to various Aboriginal communities with their families and were banished from the island for life. This decision was of course overturned but it was several decades later.

I would almost bet that most members in this House would never have heard of strike '57 before, but those men stood up for the rights of Indigenous people, and consequently more people chose to follow in their footsteps to fight for Indigenous rights—men like Eddie Mabo, who used the story of the Palm Island strike to motivate him in his battle against wrong. I guarantee we all know that story. We celebrated the 25th year anniversary of that decision the week previous.