




Speech By
Aaron Harper

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

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PATH TO TREATY BILL

 **Mr HARPER** (Thuringowa—ALP) (12.19 pm): I rise to proudly speak on the Path to Treaty Bill 2023. I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of these lands on which we meet today in Cairns and pay my respects to elders both past and present. I also acknowledge all of the students here in the public gallery because today you will witness history making in the Queensland parliament. You, and about a dozen speakers, will be part of that when this bill is voted on.

This bill provides an opportunity for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to set a way forward, to right the wrongs of the past and move together as one in our state of Queensland. First, there must be truth-telling. Path to Treaty is our opportunity to overturn the wrongs of the past which were, as the chair of the Community Support and Services Committee and the member for Mansfield quite correctly said in her foreword—

... the horribly misguided iterations of the Aboriginals Protection and Sale of Opium Act of 1897. This Act advocated the displacement of Aboriginal peoples to reserves, regulated their employment and perpetrated the most draconian form of social engineering—unleashing a state-sanctioned process of dispossession, brutality and violence.

For those who know Palm Island and its actual history, it was called 'Punishment Island', where people from missions were sent in its early days.

I take this opportunity to thank and acknowledge all members of that committee for their work, particularly the chair, the member for Mansfield, who cannot be here today. I also acknowledge those who made submissions or came to the many public briefings, as we saw in my home town of Townsville—a good turnout of local elders who shared some of their own deeply personal stories to the committee.

Many in this House know that I am born a proud New Zealander. I am a direct descendant of the Ngai Tahu, proud Maori people who are the principal iwi, or tribe, of the South Island. All of my iwi know the importance of treaty. The Waitangi Treaty was signed in 1840. That is 183 years ago, so we have a significant amount of work to do in this country and it starts with this bill in this House in our proud state of Queensland. It starts with our Path to Treaty.

The Waitangi Treaty did not come easily. There was much conflict. In fact, the New Zealand Wars that followed from 1845 to 1873 had many casualties along the way on both sides. This, our Queensland Path to Treaty, must start with the acknowledgement of Queensland's own past, and that means truth-telling has to occur before healing and walking together on this our path to treaty.

The bill's objectives are to establish a First Nations Treaty Institute to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to develop and provide a framework for them to prepare for and commence treaty negotiations with the Queensland government and, importantly, to establish a Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry to inquire into and report on the effects of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The core principles underpinning the bill are self-determination; free, prior and informed consent; and respecting and protecting Aboriginal law, Aboriginal tradition, Torres Strait Islander law and ailan kastom. A big esso to the member for Cook, who was in the chair earlier.

A treaty is a signed, negotiated agreement that accepts our history and opens the door to a shared future. Treaties signed between governments and First Nations people have occurred around the world to provide recognition that First Nations peoples are the original owners of this land and endured injustices as a result of colonisation. Treaties have been used throughout the world as an accepted means of acknowledging past injustices, resolving differences and creating a foundation for reconciliation. Treaty provides an exciting opportunity to create a unified identity for all Queenslanders—one that recognises and protects the rights of First Nations peoples, their cultures and way of life.

Informed by statewide consultations in 2019, three major themes emerged that inform the work we are doing today to become treaty ready: one was inclusion, two was reconciliation and three was being treaty ready. To move forward we must acknowledge the past and I must take this opportunity to thank, commend and acknowledge the work of the Eminent Panel and the Treaty Working Group, which was established in 2019 and, in large, has underpinned the work we are doing today.

The foundation for a respectful and mutually beneficial relationship between Aboriginal peoples, Torres Strait Islander peoples and the Queensland community generally is to provide for processes and opportunities to hear the voices of those peoples to start this process. Whilst this has been an opportunity to talk on a piece of history-making legislation, I have had to shorten it a little bit. To conclude, I want to echo the words of the Premier. She said—

This is our chance to do what we should have done two centuries ago—to make a treaty or treaties with Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There are rare moments in time—perhaps just once in a generation or even once in several generations—where we have an opportunity to be true agents of change. Queensland's Path to Treaty is such a moment. It is a moment which will define our humanity and our sense of fairness and will be a legacy we leave to our children.

As we stand together in this place, we are indeed making history. I commend the bill to the House.