




Speech By  
**Bart Mellish**

**MEMBER FOR ASPLEY**

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### **PATH TO TREATY BILL**

 **Mr MELLISH** (Aspley—ALP) (11.43 am): I rise to speak in support of the Path to Treaty Bill. I am very pleased to speak in the debate on this bill which, in your words, Madam Deputy Speaker Lui, represents an historic occasion. I absolutely agree. In speaking to this bill, I would like to acknowledge that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Queensland are made up of many individual communities and groups, each with their own traditions, culture and traditional knowledge, unique laws and languages. My part of the north side of Brisbane has a vibrant Indigenous community and a number of organisations that deliver important services every day in our community, particularly around Zillmere. Organisations like Boss Boxing and Strong Women Talking do fantastic work every day getting real outcomes. They deserve respect and acknowledgement of their ongoing contribution.

The two processes set up by this bill—establishing a Path to Treaty and setting up a truth-telling inquiry—will essentially further the difficult course of reconciliation in this country. The issues that will be brought up by these processes may be uncomfortable for some non-Indigenous Australians, but for me that is the point. If the treaty process was easy and straightforward, it would have been done by now. If genuine truth-telling was a simple process, it would have happened years ago. These need to be uncomfortable conversations for non-Indigenous Australians to have. Bear in mind that that is a fraction of the uncomfortable hardship that Indigenous Australians have been experiencing through intergenerational hardships and are still experiencing to this day.

There is an attitude in some sectors of society and politics that reconciliation is a process that happens naturally of its own accord over time and that parliaments should not impose reconciliation or even speed it up unnaturally. For me, the perfect example of why this is not a correct point of view is the story of John Koowarta, a Wik man from Aurukun. As the assistant community champion for Aurukun I had the absolute honour—a sad honour—of visiting his grave in Aurukun in your electorate, Madam Deputy Speaker Lui, with his widow, Martha. The government champion for Aurukun, the member for Bulimba, I know has a strong bond with Martha which is beautiful to see. This giant of the Indigenous rights movement, who passed away in 1991, is known as the Eddie Mabo of the mainland, and his legacy lives on. His headstone reads: 'Fondly remembered for fighting for land rights for his people. Sadly missed.' John Koowarta's story is the story of the glacially slow pace of reconciliation if it is left to its own devices. Unless we push it forward, reconciliation goes nowhere.

In 1974, Koowarta and a number of other stockmen planned to purchase the Archer River cattle station, which covered much of the Wik people's traditional homeland. The Bjelke-Petersen government did not approve of the sale, primarily because the then premier did not believe that Indigenous people should be able to acquire large areas of land. This was challenged in court through various courts, all the way up to the Supreme Court of Queensland, where a decision was eventually made in 1988 in favour of John Koowarta. That is some 14 years after the planned purchase was intended to go through. But then, of course, the Bjelke-Petersen government declared the land in question national park so that no-one could own it—an act described by many as an act of spite and prejudice. That is the pace of reconciliation if parliaments and governments do nothing to push it along or actively work against it.

As the saying goes, if nothing changes nothing changes. It is only through governments advancing the cause of reconciliation that real steps forward can occur. All day we can debate the merits or otherwise of particular programs and initiatives aimed to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but unless the fundamental relationship with Indigenous Australians changes for the better then progress will always be stop-start and we can never build up sufficient momentum.

At this point in our shared history we need more steps forward towards reducing the gap in education, health, literacy and incarceration outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. I congratulate the Premier on her leadership of this issue, the minister and our three proud First Nations MPs—the members for Algeester, Bundamba and Cook.

Eddie Mabo and native title recognition was a powerful step forward. John Koowarta and the land rights movement was a significant step forward. The national apology to the stolen generation was a powerful step forward. The Voice to Parliament will be a very positive step forward. Starting the path to treaty and truth-telling are very worthy steps forward that we can take from this parliament right now. I commend the bill to the House.