




Speech By  
**Dr Christian Rowan**

**MEMBER FOR MOGGILL**

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### **PATH TO TREATY BILL**

 **Dr ROWAN** (Moggill—LNP) (5.50 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Path to Treaty Bill 2023. At the outset, I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we gather and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I also wish to begin by acknowledging the importance and historical significance of this debate and the unique opportunity that we, as elected representatives, are afforded this week by having the Queensland parliament sit here in Cairns.

The foundation of my contribution to this debate comes from my personal and professional experiences of working to advance the economic, health, educational and social outcomes of First Nations people. That includes my tenure as a former medical superintendent of various remote and regional Queensland hospitals and work in various rural and Indigenous communities, including in the Northern Territory, to address in many instances complex social and health matters as well as other issues that exist in those communities. It was a pleasure to also be the shadow minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partnerships during the 56th Parliament of Queensland. Those experiences and more have provided an important opportunity to listen to the stories of Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and appreciate the significance of acknowledging their history and recognising the various and varied economic, social and health impacts that are felt to this day.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the incredibly important work undertaken by the Institute for Urban Indigenous Health, a not-for-profit community controlled health service that delivers a comprehensive range of health and family wellbeing services as well as employment pathways for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Queensland. I also wish to acknowledge the work undertaken by Associate Professor Noel Hayman and the Inala Indigenous Health Service that he established in 1995. As Queensland's first Indigenous doctor, Associate Professor Hayman has dedicated his life to improving Indigenous health outcomes, contributing to health policy and enhancing the life expectancy for Indigenous Australians. In 2011 he was recognised as the Queensland Australian of the Year. Dr Hayman is widely acknowledged as one of our country's leading Indigenous health experts and advocates. Certainly he is an outstanding role model for Queenslanders, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, across our state.

On such important matters as a path to treaty, as with all matters that pertain to Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is incumbent on the Queensland state government to seek a way forward that unites rather than divides. Indeed, as the deputy chair of the Community Support and Services Committee, the member for Burnett, clearly articulated in the relevant parliamentary committee report—

The Path to Treaty should always foster the reconciliation of Indigenous Queenslanders to each other and Indigenous Queenslanders to the wider Queensland community so that we can all grow together.

To grow together with practical measures that deliver real outcomes for Indigenous Queenslanders must be at the centre of what this Queensland state government seeks to achieve. Before I expand further on this, I wish to turn to the specific measures contained within the legislation.

On 22 February 2023, the Premier of Queensland introduced the Path to Treaty Bill 2023 with two key objectives: firstly, to establish a First Nations Treaty Institute to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to develop and provide a framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to prepare for and then commence treaty negotiations with the Queensland government; and secondly, 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 Path to Treaty Bill is the latest in a series of steps the Queensland state government has undertaken as a part of its efforts to implement a so-called reframed relationship following the 2019 signing of the state Labor government's joint statement of commitment as a part of the then Tracks to Treaty process. With the establishment of the Eminent Panel and Treaty Working Group, from October to December 2019 consultations were held in 24 communities leading to the publishing, in February 2020, of eight recommendations, including those pertaining to truth-telling and healing, a Path to Treaty overview, the First Nations Treaty Institute, community understanding and engagement, implementing the Path to Treaty Act and transparency.

Following the introduction of the Path to Treaty Bill 2023, the legislation was referred to the Queensland parliament's Community Support and Services Committee for further consultation and examination. The Community Support and Services Committee conducted 10 public forums across Queensland, with 39 written submissions received. Following feedback from stakeholders, the committee extended the date for the lodgement of submissions. I note from the committee's report that, during the inquiry process, concerns were raised in relation to the time frames that were allotted for consultation, the brief lodgement period for submissions and additional calls for wider consultation in regional areas. It must also be acknowledged that at most of the public forums participants expressed their frustration at the lack of notification of the committee's inquiry and the committee's attendance.

I also wish to note the confusion that was expressed by the community and stakeholders in relation to the concurrent discussions concerning the federal government's Voice to Parliament and the Queensland's state government's Path to Treaty legislation and how those separate processes were related, if at all.

Since these processes first began in 2019, I have consistently maintained that the Tracks to Treaty and Path to Treaty processes had to be conducted openly, carefully and diligently by the Queensland state Labor government given the varied and important measures that were continuing to be pursued at a federal level under various federal governments. It would appear that such openness and diligence have been lacking in some respects. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in consideration of Path to Treaty, a number of submitters specifically raised the importance of communication, education and public awareness.

Earlier in my contribution I spoke of the importance of ensuring that all Queenslanders, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, can grow together with practical measures that deliver real outcomes for Indigenous Queenslanders. If the current state Labor government wishes to truly deal openly and transparently with our state's history then it is important to also acknowledge Queensland's more recent history. For the overwhelming majority of the past 25 years, various Queensland state Labor governments have been responsible for implementing policy pertaining to Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Despite this, the gap on First Nations outcomes continues to remain shockingly wide in many important areas, particularly in health, education and housing.

Of the 11 targets where data was available according to the 2022 *Queensland Closing the Gap snapshot report*, seven targets were found to still be not on track. That includes closing the gap in life expectancy within a generation by 2031. Also not on track is the target to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census to 55 per cent by 2031. As the Liberal National Party shadow minister for education, I am also deeply concerned by the ever-increasing gap in the educational outcomes of Queensland's First Nations students and the failure of the Palaszczuk state Labor government to address the growing disparity with respect to Indigenous student results and school attendance.

As the state Labor government's own state budget papers revealed last year, on every measure and target in reading, writing and numeracy, Queensland's Indigenous students were significantly behind their peers across all year levels, including years 3, 5, 7 and 9. More concerning is the fact that the outcomes achieved by Indigenous students were significantly behind their non-Indigenous peers, with some gaps as high as 20 percentage points. Last year's annual report for the Department of Education also revealed that the Labor state government is failing when it comes to student engagement and retention in relation to Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander state school students. In fact, since 2017 school attendance for First Nations students has continued to fall from 84.8 per cent in 2017 to 80.3 per cent in 2021, and rates of attendance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander state school students has also consistently been behind all Queensland state school students.

To deliver true reconciliation and true healing, the Queensland government must provide more than just words and signed statements of intent. These real issues affecting Indigenous Queenslanders and Indigenous communities cannot wait any longer. They must receive immediate attention and practical action from the Queensland state government.

As I conclude my contribution, I wish to again reiterate the importance of acknowledging the challenges and struggles of our past in a manner that is done objectively, carefully and diligently, with full transparency and accountability, so that we can continue to work towards a brighter, shared future. Acknowledging our past is not just a matter of historical record. It also helps to frame the present, and future, of our state of Queensland.

Finally, I wish to thank all stakeholders who contributed to the Community Support and Services Committee's consideration of this legislation including those who took the time to participate in the 10 public hearings, as well as all committee members—the chair, the member for Mansfield, the deputy chair, as well as the Liberal National Party's member for Burnett and the member for Oodgeroo and those members who served from the Labor government.