




Speech By
Melissa McMahon

MEMBER FOR MACALISTER

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PATH TO TREATY BILL

 **Mrs McMAHON** (Macalister—ALP) (5.06 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Path to Treaty Bill 2023. It is fantastic to be here in Cairns in Far North Queensland and be able to speak about such a momentous bill. In doing so, I acknowledge the traditional owners, the custodians of the lands on which we are all meeting here today and also the traditional owners and custodians of the land which I represent, the Yugambah people of South-East Queensland.

I would like to acknowledge that this bill is neither the start of such a momentous journey nor is it a culmination. I acknowledge that the journey we are on is not the work of administrators and bureaucrats but a range of voices of communities and elders. Before Path to Treaty, there were tracks to treaty. There was a Treaty Advancement Committee, the Eminent Panel and the Treaty Working Group. Before that, there were decades, if not a century, of agitating for treaty and representation: the second bark petition and the Barunga Statement in 1988, the *Two hundred years later* report in 1983, the National Aboriginal Conference in 1979, the first bark petitions in 1963 and William Cooper's petitions to King George in the 1930s.

The twin objectives of the bill are critical to setting up a treaty process in Queensland for success: the establishment of the framework that will prepare Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders for treaty negotiations and the Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry that will inquire into and report on the effects of the colonisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is the inquiry process that I wish to focus on here today.

Many of us here of a certain age or older will remember a very specific course of study in Australian history. We memorised dates and names—1770 and 1788 were the dates and James Cook and Matthew Flinders were the names. We learnt of the names of explorers like Sturt, Leichhardt and Oxley and even the ill-fated Burke and Wills got a good mention. We studied Federation and we learnt about the significance of rail gauges.

The history of Australia's First Nations people was largely absent in school. It was certainly studied in the anthropological sense; we learnt what a boomerang, a humpy or a corroboree was and we heard of some of the Dreamtime stories, the mythologies, but not the history before imperial colonisation. Our textbooks never mentioned the over 50,000 years of inhabitation of these lands. Any student of history will tell you that history is written by the victors, the strongest, but history and truth do not always coexist in the same space. It is time for Queenslanders to hear the truth in order to gain an understanding of history as it happened, not necessarily history as it was written.

The truth-telling inquiry this state is about to embark on is not going to be an easy one. There are many uncomfortable truths to be unearthed. A collective and simultaneously uniquely personal trauma will play out over the next few years. This truth-telling is not just an excuse to revisit and open old wounds, to re-litigate stories to inflict guilt; it is a necessary step to address the intergenerational trauma that those untreated, unrecognised and largely unrecorded wounds have caused. To understand that history is to understand today.

It is not lost on me that we have a cohort of Queenslanders, thankfully a relatively small one, who do not recognise this history in Queensland and who fail to connect that past with the current systemic disadvantage of First Nations people. We have all heard them—the ones who feel there is some magical gravy train of welfare based on the colour of a person's skin. This is what happens when you not only are perhaps devoid of a knowledge of history and its implications but also deliberately fail to see and acknowledge it. It is either that or they are simply devoid of humanity. It is no coincidence that this cohort are generally also of a certain age, one in which the school curriculum was silent on certain aspects of our history.

Treaty must be built on truth, and it must be a truth that is publicly acknowledged. The truth-telling process will be cathartic, if not a painful chapter in this journey we are all on. As a student of history I look forward to truths being voiced and records being corrected. Where history is recorded on page and feted by scholars, the truth is found most often in the silences and in the quiet places. I look forward to those who have been silent finally being heard. I heard an interesting quote from a Buddhist scholar who commented that to communicate the truths of history is an act of hope for the future. In going through these dialogues and in going through this inquiry, I acknowledge the pain that many communities, individuals and families will feel, but I also know that it will be an act of hope for the future. I commend the bill to the House.