




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BONNEY

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PATH TO TREATY BILL

 **Mr O'CONNOR** (Bonney—LNP) (2.58 pm): It is an honour to be here in Cairns, to speak from this dispatch box, with this broken tipped spear in front of me, in support of this important piece of legislation. I acknowledge the minister's comments yesterday on this spear and its connection to Eric Deeral and his family. Of course, Eric Deeral was the first Aboriginal man elected to any state parliament in our nation and was proudly a member of the National Party when he was elected in 1974.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, some of whom I had the privilege of meeting just the other day—the Gimuy Walubara Yidinji at the Aboriginal tourism hub and the Yirrganydji at the beautiful Jack Barnes saltmarsh and mangroves near the airport. If any members have not been out to that wonderful conservation area, I highly recommend that they go. They are the tallest mangroves you will ever see. I am ashamed to admit that I did not believe mangroves could get that tall. They are absolutely stunning.

Back home on the Gold Coast, I am proud to represent part of the Kombumerri people's lands from the Yugambeh language group. I am proud that in my electorate their rich history lives on. In some of our suburbs' names we honour their language. Biggera Waters refers to the red ironbark trees that line the creek, and Coombabah means 'place of cobra worms' or 'home of the turtles'.

Today we are here to continue the process of redefining the relationship our state government has with our First Nations Queenslanders. We are here to unite Queenslanders as we go forward, to remove the unacceptable inequalities that exist between us. This bill will set up 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 from across our state to prepare for and then commence treaty negotiations with the Queensland government and a Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry to inquire into and report on the effects of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

What we are embarking on is significant. It has been nearly six years since the Uluru statement's simple but powerful call for voice, treaty, truth, but a First Nations treaty has yet to be finalised under a treaty process in any Australian state or territory and just two states—New South Wales and WA—have not engaged yet in a treaty process. South Australia became the first state to have a First Nations Voice to Parliament just recently and Victoria has a similar version of this representative body with its First Peoples' Assembly. I look forward to seeing the government's proposal for Queensland's local and regional voices.

Extensive statewide consultation was conducted by the Eminent Panel and Treaty Working Group in 2019 to answer the question of whether Queensland should seek a treaty or treaties with our First Nations peoples and how the process to finalise those should happen. That has led to the bill we are discussing today, and I want to thank the committee members for their excellent work on this legislation under very difficult circumstances. The opposition members in particular put in a thorough and considered statement of reservation. It was a shame that at the public hearings it was regularly raised that there was a lack of notice which led to poor attendance in many instances.

The Treaty Institute will be established as a statutory body, subject to the same obligations as other statutory entities established under Queensland legislation. The Treaty Institute will be a body corporate and may sue and be sued in its corporate name which is important because that means the institute will be able to perform its functions independently of government. The Treaty Institute council will be set up as the governing body of the Treaty Institute and it will be made up of 10 members to be appointed by the Governor in Council on the recommendation of the minister. Members must be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The council must give a report to the minister within six months before the end of the inaugural period and the minister must begin the Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry within three months after the commencement of this bill. The inquiry will run for a period of three years, which may be extended by the minister. Truth-telling sessions will be voluntary or by invitation and anyone can provide a submission or something that may help the inquiry in performing its functions. Importantly, if a government entity fails to provide materials requested by the inquiry, the inquiry may issue a production notice requiring the CEO of the entity to provide those materials.

On the topic of truth-telling, I want to highlight a book that I have read which had a profound impact on me. It is called *Conspiracy of Silence: Queensland's Frontier Killing Time* by Timothy Bottoms. He is a historian who, the blurb says, is Cairns based, so a shout-out to him as a local. This book completely changed my perspective on our state's history. It is a detailed, well researched account of the colonisation of Queensland, with the most horrific stories from the settlers themselves. It is difficult to read in parts—the unimaginable horrors of what happened on our frontier, the murderous, barbaric acts committed by the pastoralists and the native police. The story it tells is uncomfortable, but it is a more complete history of how our modern state was built than what many of us have been told, and we cannot shy away from this. We will never be able to heal if we do not paint and promote a more accurate picture of our past. There are far too many stories contained in it to share and far too many to say publicly because they are just so horrific in their nature, but they are all from reputable sources. There is one quote that I will repeat because it has stuck with me. The author says—

It is interesting to see as one reads about these incidents how often the massacre is prompted not by any killing of whites but simply by disturbing or killing cattle and sheep ... Aboriginals were killed for being there and being in the way.

Truth-telling is not about dividing people. None of us today are remotely responsible for what occurred. It is simply about better understanding where we have come from.

As someone who passionately serves as the shadow minister covering heritage protection and as a proud and active member of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland—I think one of the youngest members of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland—I would urge all members to do all they can to learn more about our past. With the facilitation of the Interim Truth and Treaty Body, work will be undertaken to establish the Treaty Institute and the inquiry. The final phase will see the development of the treaty-making framework by the institute. Treaty negotiations will begin in line with the treaty-making framework and subject to community and government readiness.

What I want to emphasise in my contribution is that we need to make sure that whatever this process leads to is practical and not just symbolic. Our state's Path to Treaty must focus on outcomes, especially those which close the gap and deliver real benefits for Indigenous Queenslanders. Labor has been in government for 28 of the past 33 years. It has had almost total policy control and responsibility over the issues impacting Indigenous Australians and yet the gap remains wide in many areas, including health and education. I want to highlight some of those disparities, those heartbreaking inequalities. They are what we must be focused on as this process progresses.

The most recent Queensland Closing the Gap annual report highlighted a shameful number of targets not on track to be met. The report shows just four of the 17 targets are on track. In health, the life expectancy gap in Queensland between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is currently 7.8 years for men and 6.7 years for women. The gap on this is not on track to be closed by 2031. The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census is not on track. Significant and sustained reductions in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero is not on track. Over the weekend I spent some time in Cooktown, and I want to acknowledge Trevor Meldrum and Uncle Eric. They told me that their biggest concern in that community is health, suicides in particular. Tragically, they have seen five young people from their mob take their lives in the last three weeks alone. Also, preventable deaths from diseases like rheumatic heart disease occur far too frequently. In education, we are seeing an ever-increasing failure to meet targets to close the gap. In every year level and in every target, Indigenous students are behind non-Indigenous students, with some gaps as big as 20 per cent.

In housing, increasing the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized—not overcrowded—housing by 2031 is not on track. Approximately 20 per cent of Indigenous Australians living in remote and regional communities in Queensland live in overcrowded

households. Again, I saw this over the weekend. Overcrowding contributes to the social issues that we see and to family breakdown. Mayor Ross Andrews of Yarrabah made a powerful presentation to shadow cabinet on Monday when he told us that overcrowding happens regularly in his community and that it leads to all of the negative social indicators that they do not want to see.

I acknowledge that I have spoken to this legislation as both someone whose family has come to this country—in my case, from Ireland and Wales—and as a member representing an electorate with a small Indigenous population. At the 2021 Census, my electorate had just a 2.3 per cent Indigenous population which is half the state average, but I have great respect for the views of members who come from electorates with high proportions of First Nations people and of those people themselves. What we are embarking on will not be easy, but the important thing is today by supporting this bill we are committing to better acknowledge the injustices our First Nations people have faced and to work towards a better future.