




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 9 May 2023

PATH TO TREATY BILL

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (12.35 pm): That is very hard to follow, Cynthia. Well said. Congratulations. Path to Treaty should always foster reconciliation with Indigenous Queenslanders to each other and to the wider Queensland community. For treaties to work, this is essential. The path to treaty is going to be complex as it is not going to be a single treaty. It may involve hundreds of treaties between various First Nations peoples and between First Nations peoples and the state government. It will likely take some time and it may continue to require funding for it to achieve the successes that we all hope and pray for.

The Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry should encourage non-government organisations that were funded by government to provide medical, education and other services to cooperate with the process so that the whole story—negative and positive—of our shared history is told. Path to Treaty must be open and transparent so that all Queenslanders have an awareness of the implications for them. All Queenslanders must be treated with respect and, as such, provided details so they are informed about any changes that may have impacts on them. Queenslanders, I believe, will not tolerate secrecy or lack of transparency in the process.

Path to Treaty must operate with bipartisan agreement to ensure the best outcomes for Queenslanders. As has been said, over a long time policy has been dictated to First Nations people, and it is time we stopped telling First Nations people what is good for them and started to engage in self-determination conversations about the way forward. A better way forward is needed than the current political approaches we have seen over many decades. Path to Treaty must focus on practical measures that close the gap and deliver real outcomes for Indigenous Queenslanders and Queenslanders.

The committee heard overwhelming feedback that there are serious concerns about the naming of the proposed entity, and I note the minister's comments about not accepting that recommendation. It was pretty powerful to hear what First Nations people think about institutionalisation and the effects that had on them over a long period of time. I acknowledge the minister's feedback on that, but the institute naming issue was a very serious issue raised.

It was a unique privilege to work closely with the Interim Truth and Treaty Body over the eight weeks of the Path to Treaty Bill inquiry deliberations across the state. The committee was able to reflect on the work undertaken since 2019 on the pathway of the Tracks to Treaty commitments. The opposition members of the committee welcomed the attendance of the board at most of the 10 public forums that were held across the state. Their knowledge and their commitment to Path to Treaty and to First Nations people were of valuable assistance to the committee's inquiry, and we acknowledge them in the gallery today.

At all of the public hearings the community expressed a level of confusion. I think this is important to remember when we read the bill and the committee's report. We certainly heard of the ongoing work of the ITTB and ongoing references to the federal Voice to Parliament debate. Further adding to the confusion at our particular committee's inquiry were the regional community forums, which also had a Path to Treaty element. We did hear that there is a lot of confusion about what the treaty is all about.

I talked about the time frame for consideration of the bill—that something so historic and so important to all Queenslanders would be considered in an eight-week time frame. The submissions of the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action, the Local Government Association, the Mental Health Commission, YFS Legal, the Queensland University of Technology, the Indigenous Family Violence Legal Service, and ANTA and the Lawyers Alliance all expressed frustration about the time frame. This said to me that they wanted to be more involved in making sure we get this right. It was somewhat of a double-edged sword: while criticising the process, they showed a deep commitment to being engaged.

It has to be said that at the public forums frustration was expressed at the lack of notification about our committee's inquiry and the committee experienced poor attendance in Weipa, Longreach, Woorabinda and Inala. I think we did a lot of injustice to those communities by not having better communication. I also want to talk about the scepticism that I witnessed at the community forums. As a politician in the government system, the lack of knowledge about the bill certainly came through loud and clear. As I said, the federal Voice to Parliament was very topical and on a lot of people's minds. The confusion about how Queensland's treaty will interact with the federal Voice to Parliament, the lack of clear communication around these elements and the lack of consultation has resulted in many communities not knowing about the treaty unless explicitly involved in the process. It is important as we go forward that we have to take the whole of Queensland along on this issue.

I want to come back to the native title issue that was raised by the minister in his contribution. I want to reiterate that my observations of the public forums were that native title is a big issue for First Nations people. A lot of people feel disengaged and a lot of people feel aggrieved by the process of native title and I welcome the minister's comments about getting that right and taking it on as a real issue.

The committee received many comments and questions about the time frame for the bill. To be fair, we have been on this path since 2019—that is important—but we must ensure that this historic piece of legislation is very much respected as we continue on the process. At the committee hearings the committee heard from many different submitters around the future and effective inclusion of consultation. The issue will remain around the decentralised nature and geographical size of Queensland and ensuring that First Nations voices will be heard, including those who were displaced or are going to be displaced by this Path to Treaty process—that is, that people not necessarily living on country but living in other jurisdictions need to be consulted out of respect for the process.

I note that the recommendation has not been acknowledged, but it has been strongly recommended that the future institute consider how to effectively engage all over Queensland. There is merit in considering some sort of geographical representation, and this was talked about at length in our committee. It would build trust and effectiveness in those communities and there is merit for subcommittees to ensure that we consider North Queensland as a unique group of individuals as well as Western Queensland, Central Queensland and South-East Queensland. That is a strong recommendation and I hope that the institute can consider how we can effectively engage right across the state.

The report talks about the preamble and the Masig Statement. That is a strong recommendation and many Torres Strait Islanders felt quite strongly about this issue. Again I take on board the minister's comments in terms of the reflective nature of the Masig Statement at this late stage. There has been a lot of talk about the membership of the committee and the institute. I note that the minister is initially going to be involved strongly in that process and I am sure that as time goes on we will see strong First Nations people representing the whole state in the process and we look forward to that. I also welcome the recommendation that First Nations people with a criminal history be included and not excluded. All we ever wanted was the same rights for all Queenslanders such as there are for public servants. The bill initially set out to discriminate, in my opinion, in terms of people's incarceration issues being taken into consideration in order to be considered for this very important representation.

In closing I want to take the opportunity to thank all those who were involved with the committee's deliberations, in particular staff, the committee secretariat and Hansard. We all became quite efficient in helping to set up and pack up the Hansard recording equipment to make sure that we made our tight time frames getting on to planes, buses and trains all over the state. That is how we work together as a team. The Hansard reporters were very good and I thank everyone involved. It is important to

acknowledge the progress of the First Nations Treaty Institute and the truth-telling inquiry and we look forward to their development during the deliberations of this bill and, more importantly, once it passes so we can get on with the job.

This bill is an important step forward for a better future for all Queenslanders and improved relationships with Indigenous Australians. I acknowledge the feedback on the amendments. I hope that over time the institute can and will consider those amendments that were very well thought out and presented. I also pass on my best to the member for Mansfield and acknowledge those committee members who gave so much of their time and effort. It was quite a rushed inquiry but very important. Again, as a member of the opposition, I am very proud to be part of this historic moment today as we discuss a path to treaty.