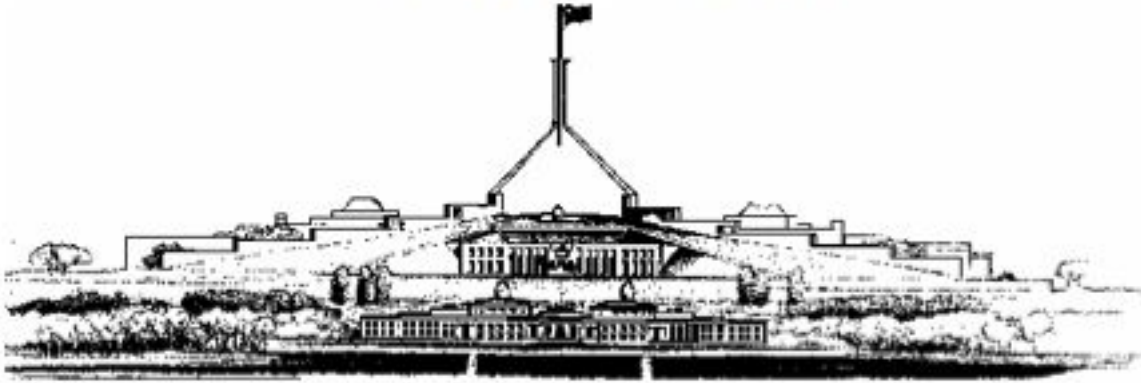




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

**APOLOGY TO AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS
PEOPLES**

SPEECH

Wednesday, 13 February 2008

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Senator BOYCE (Queensland) (5.19 pm)—I certainly want to add my voice to those who are saying sorry today as individuals and recognise that as state and federal governments we have much to be sorry for to the Indigenous peoples of Australia—not just to those who were forcibly removed as children from their families but to everyone who has been affected adversely by white settlement in Australia since 1788. There can be no disputing what happened.

But I have felt uneasy, I suppose, over the last few days. I have felt a sense that to not see everything that was being done as perfect and complete and covering every part of the issue was to be seen almost as curmudgeonly—that it was mean-spirited not to agree with the whole process as it was and every little facet of that process. The article this morning in the *Age* by Mr Tony Wright crystallised for me what I was finding wrong with this whole process. It is that in many ways we are not telling the full story. Much was made yesterday of the Indigenous welcome to parliament, which was a fabulous initiative. It was in fact recommended in a 2001 joint standing committee report chaired by a former Liberal member of the House of Representatives, Gary Nairn. One of the recommendations that that committee made was that there should be an Indigenous welcome at the opening of every parliament. Coincidentally, this committee also recommended that the current Australian of the Year, whoever that might be, might speak at such an opening on behalf of the Australian people and that the opening of parliament be held in the Great Hall to enable more people to come along. I think these are both initiatives that we should consider in the future.

But much was made at the ceremony yesterday of the treatment of Mr Jim Clements, also known as ‘King Billy’, a Wiradjuri man who arrived, after walking many miles barefoot, in a battered old suit and with his dogs. It was commented on that he was actually told to clear off by the police. Mr Wright’s article in the *Age* this morning points out that that was not the full story. In fact, when that happened, a good group of the crowd said, ‘No. Stand your ground; you stay here.’ A prominent member of the clergy who was there on the same occasion said, ‘This man—Mr Clements—’has more right to be here than the rest of us.’ People apparently threw coins at King Billy; I presume that was as a gesture of charity. It is probably cringe-worthy now but it was not then. He ended

up standing on the steps for the opening of parliament in 1927 and being amongst the VIPs who met the Duke and Duchess of Kent the next day. That is the full story of the treatment of Mr Clements. I think that we do ourselves a disservice if we are so keen to paint a black, dark picture of the treatment of people and not to also see that there are good people—and always have been good people—who will fight and continue to fight for the rights of, particularly, Indigenous people, whose situation is currently not a good one.

In looking at this issue and preparing my thoughts on it, I went back to the motion of reconciliation that was passed by this parliament in August 1999. It says:

That this House:

- (a) reaffirms its wholehearted commitment to the cause of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians as an important national priority for Australians;
- (b) recognising the achievements of the Australian nation commits to work together to strengthen the bonds that unite us, to respect and appreciate our differences and to build a fair and prosperous future in which we can all share;
- (c) reaffirms the central importance of practical measures leading to practical results that address the profound economic and social disadvantage which continues to be experienced by many indigenous Australians;
- (d) recognises the importance of understanding the shared history of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and the need to acknowledge openly the wrongs and injustices of Australia’s past;
- (e) acknowledges that the mistreatment of many indigenous Australians over a significant period represents the most blemished chapter in our international history;
- (f) expresses its deep and sincere regret that indigenous Australians suffered injustices under the practices of past generations, and for the hurt and trauma that many indigenous people contin-

ue to feel as a consequence of those practices;
and

- (g) believes that we, having achieved so much as a nation, can now move forward together for the benefit of all Australians.

You may note that, apart from the word ‘sorry’, this motion covers every aspect of the motion that we have agreed to today. It covers current disadvantage. It fully acknowledges past wrongs and injustices, and the hurt and trauma that those injustices caused and still cause, and it highlights the need for practical and radical improvement of the way we help Indigenous people in Australia. To me, that 1999 statement is part of telling the full story of our journey towards a true reconciliation and of moving forward.

I would also mention that much has been made of people of Indigenous background and their involvement in this parliament. There have been far too few, but one that I would like to honour today is the late Senator Neville Bonner, a Junggera man who was the first senator of Aboriginal background to serve in this parliament. He was a Liberal senator from my own state who taught our party and our people a lot about how to go about assisting people of Indigenous background.

I would also like to talk about the fact that there has been an improvement—there has been change. If you look at figures from the *Medical Journal of Australia* published last year, the life expectancy for Indigenous women has increased from 65 to 67.9 years in the past 10 years. This is nowhere near good enough—we must close the gap—but there has been change and there have been improvements. There are actions and there are policies designed to put some practical background behind what we have done to date in this area. On that basis I would like definitely to add my voice to the view that, yes, we must say ‘sorry’ and, yes, we must add a practical aspect to that by supporting the moves that are currently going on in the Northern Territory to assist people to come to a situation where they can go on themselves.