

The Eddie Koiki Mabo Lecture 2015

Taking up space, taking our place

Leeanne Enoch MP

Let me begin of course by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we gather this evening and in doing so let me acknowledge the more than 3000 generations of the Bindal and the Wulgurukaba Peoples who have maintained cultural practices on this land.

And can I thank Aunty Gracelyn Smallwood for her warm welcome to country. It is this way of beginning that provides us with a strong base from which to share our stories with open hearts and strong spirits.

Let me also take this opportunity to acknowledge all our elders, from which ever culture you belong, those that have passed and those still with us leading us into the future.

Can I also take a moment to acknowledge a few special guests:

My parliamentary colleague, Aaron Harper, the Member for Thuringowa

And can I pay my respects to the Mabo family, and in particular Gail Mabo, daughter of Eddie Koiki Mabo.

And finally can I thank James Cook University for the invitation to address you this evening.

My name is Leeanne Enoch. I am a Nunukul-Nughi woman of the Quandamooka nation which takes in the waters and islands of Moreton Bay. For those who know the area which is just off the coast of Brisbane, I'm originally from North Stradbroke Island or as we refer to it – Minjeeribah. I also have ancestral ties into the far north of Queensland as my grandmother was a Kanju woman.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there was a state election earlier this year – not sure if you noticed. At that election, for the first time in Queensland's history two Aboriginal people were elected to our legislative assembly at the same time. It was the first time in over 40 years that our State Parliament would see an Aboriginal person sit in its chambers and the first time ever that an Aboriginal woman would take a place amongst its 89 seats. And as government was formed, it would also be the first time ever that an Aboriginal person would take a seat as a Minister in our state's Cabinet.

That is a lot to be excited about. It's a lot to feel hopeful about. But it also represents just how much there is

still to be done if seeing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our state parliament is to be regarded as normal or expected.

Friends, I'm very fortunate to be able to return home to North Stradbroke Island when I need to or when I'm called to - although not as frequently as I would like these days. Just last weekend many members of my family and I returned to the island where my father is buried to honour his life and to reveal his tombstone for the first time since his passing last year at the age of just 65. It was a great time for reflection not just on my father's life but also the many lessons he passed on for the next generations.

As I travelled on the water taxi to North Stradbroke Island to join my family, (it's only about a 20 min trip) the bay was calm and the boat was cutting through the water as though it was a kind of liquefied glass. And as I looked out over the bay I was drawn as I often am to the many beacons or channel markers that are positioned to guide the barges and water taxis and the various sea craft that travel the bay.

I remembered when I was younger my father telling me about the purpose of the beacons or back then the buoys in helping to direct and guide our journey. He shared with me that before these steel structures that there were natural markers that thousands of generations in our family before us had used to navigate across the bay to reach various destinations – some of these markers he shared were quite tangible and still visible today and others less tangible and more I guess about being in tune with the surroundings.

As I was staring out across the water and taking a moment from what has become an incredibly busy life I found myself thinking about the symbolism of these beacons or markers - both the tangible and the nontangible ones. I thought about the many beacons in my own life that have helped me stay true to my path and the beacons I now point out for my two teenage sons and for my nephews and nieces. I've always believed that when you're the first at something you have a responsibility to kick the far enough open that others can see a way through.

So I started thinking about the kinds of beacons and markers needed to move Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into their rightful place in Australia's political landscape. Some of these beacons of course have already been created by the courage and convictions of those that have gone before us. One of the significant beacons on this path, and the reason we're here this evening, Eddie Mabo, was a source of light that led the way into Australia's political institutions.

It is impossible to number every person or event that has helped light this path, but proudly, it was two Queenslanders that proved that Indigenous Australians in Parliament a reality. Neville Bonner served as a Liberal party Senator for Queensland from 1971 to 1983. When Uncle Neville Bonner was initially chosen by the Queensland Parliament to fill a casual vacancy in the Senate he became the first Indigenous Australian to

sit, not only in the Australian Parliament, but in any Parliament in Australia. He went on to win elections in his own right repeatedly creating a commanding beacon for so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the years that have followed.

Uncle Eric Deeral became the second Indigenous Australian to be elected to an Australian parliament and the first to be elected to a state or territory parliament. He was elected at the 1974 Queensland election in the north Queensland seat of Cook and served just one term as a member of the National party.

Since these men, there have been another 30 Indigenous Australians who have become members of parliament – none of which have been from Queensland until this year of course. We have seen the Liberal party's Ken Wyatt, become the first Aboriginal person elected to the House of Representatives in our Federal Parliament and the Australian Labor Party's Nova Peris become the first Aboriginal woman elected to the Federal Senate, Labor's Marion Scrymgour who became the first Aboriginal person to be appointed as a Minister in a state or territory legislative assembly and Labor's Linda Burney who was the first Aboriginal person to serve in the NSW Parliament

Just last week the Queensland Parliament supported the LNP's appointment of Joanna Lindgren to the Senate position made vacant by the resignation of an LNP Queensland Senator. Joanna is the great niece of Neville Bonner and is now the first Aboriginal woman to serve as a Queensland Senator. And of course we have numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mayors and Councillors across Queensland who represent the many issues facing some of our most remote communities.

These individuals have navigated the path but there is so much more that can be done to see greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in our political systems. There is an urgent need to get more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into Parliament, and to engage all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the political process.

Just like the beacons and markers that guide vessels in Moreton Bay, the ones that draw my attention on my trips home to the Island, I believe we need to deliberate and specific structures in place to ensure our journey continues. To see these changes happen, we will have to challenge things on a number of fronts.

Political parties

Political parties must take responsibility for putting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates into winnable seats, and providing them with the support and resources to win those seats and enter Parliament.

In September 2003 the then Queensland Government released the findings of a parliamentary inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples participation in Queensland's democratic processes, entitled

Hands on Parliament.

The aim of the report was to recommend achievable and workable strategies to increase the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all layers of democratic and political processes. The ultimate goal of Hands on Parliament however was to see indigenous Queenslanders enter the Queensland Parliament. The evaluation of that goal and the recommendations of the report more broadly were set to take place within three electoral cycles or nine years, whichever was the greater – a timeframe deemed at that point in the enquiry as having the right mix of urgency and realism.

It was of course 12 years after that report before we would see an Indigenous person elected to the Queensland Parliament

Hands on Parliament made 25 recommendations, the vast majority of which were focused on what the system needed to do to ensure greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation. The report reminded Political parties that they had a responsibility to ensure that Parliament reflects the diversity that exists in society and went on to recommend several actions including that political parties, and I quote, “should put in place mechanisms to identify suitable Indigenous candidates and assist those candidates’ preselection to seats where they have a strong likelihood of winning”

When I reflect on my own experience it’s clear that the recommendations from the Hands on Parliament report 12 years ago are still very much valid today. In fact there is still a great deal of work to be done to implement those recommendations and see them make a difference.

Friends I have been a member of the Labor Party for just over 10 years. As a newly- elected MP, and newly appointed Minister, I am acutely aware of the need for proper processes that reflect the expectations, needs and aspirations of the people I now represent in the seat of Algester, as well as the party I am a member of.

Let me tell you, it is no easy feat to navigate political party processes especially those related to a pre selection, which can be incredibly competitive especially when a seat is deemed winnable. However I was very fortunate. I had mentors who worked with me and advised me, who already knew where some of those less visible beacons were on the horizon, who understood the importance of diversity in our parliament and who were in fact contributors to the Hands on Parliament report. I was supported by other structures such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reference Committee within the Labor Party where Indigenous members of the party provide valuable input and direction to the party’s policy platform and to aspiring candidates.

These strategies were invaluable to me and I think remain important – and in actual fact I would recommend anyone interested in entering politics to start by getting a good mentor - but in line with the Hands on Parliament recommendations I think political parties can do much more than this.

In 1994 the Labor Party introduced an affirmative action policy, which encourages the preselection of women in winnable seats. It's a policy that has resulted in huge strides regarding increased representation of women, something clearly on display in the Palaszczuk Government where even though there are only 14 ministers in the Cabinet more than half of those (8 in total) are women – a very stark difference to the former LNP government in this state and our current Liberal National government at the federal level.

This is not about tokenism, this is about cut through, this is about recognising the urgency of seeing more Indigenous people in all political parties and in our parliament. We cannot sit on our hands for another twelve years while recommendations are developed and reviewed. We must act. I do think political parties should set minimum targets for the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates they pre-select into winnable seats. Political parties need to reflect the population of Queensland and they need to make deliberate choices about their candidates so that our parliament also reflects the broader community. We have taken that step with women; it is time that we did so with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this state, and nationally.

Elders in our communities play a vital role in guiding and encouraging us, bringing our awareness to the intangible beacons and makers on the horizon, the ones that emerge as the surroundings shift - and they advise accordingly. Inviting our Elders into pre selection processes may be one way to ensure Indigenous participation whilst at the same time providing the opportunity to discuss with aspiring candidates their understanding of Indigenous Australia and ultimately supporting a more informed parliament.

Community

But why is it even important to have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be part of mainstream political processes in our state, or even be members of our Parliament? As the challenges of the world become more and more complex, Indigenous Queenslanders must take the next step to be the masters of our own destiny. Today we are part of a globally connected world and our collective futures depend on our ability to work and lead in that space. Any political system where whole groups of the population do not fully participate ultimately limits their opportunity to influence and benefit from political and economic decisions.

We know that past legislation excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from participating in this country's adopted democratic and political processes and that policies have contributed to the creation of false economies in some of our communities. We know that all of that has created other interconnected social, emotional and spiritual challenges that we must face at the same time as we interact with the changing world. We know that because we experience it in all its various and unique forms. It's not something we read about or heard about, it's something that we often live.

There's no better example of the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples actively seeking to take up their place than the person we remember with tonight's lecture. It was here in Townsville, at JCU, where Eddie Mabo began the long journey towards land rights. He wasn't a politician, but it was an inherently political act. But what if he hadn't taken up the fight? Where would that issue be now? Would we still be waiting for someone else to step up? Who knows just how many other champions in our community have been missed, or how many other issues delayed, because the beacons guiding them forward have been hard to see, or even missing altogether.

Which is why the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our political systems is more important now than ever before. We cannot be absent from political and economic decision making, we must take up space and we must take our places if we are to ensure we are not left further behind. The political landscape must offer us something that is worth engaging with. It is incredibly important to ensure that our Parliaments are places of diversity where there are different perspectives, experiences and abilities. I've always believed that diversity is the seed of creativity and it is in the complexities of global challenges that creativity is a very precious commodity.

As Indigenous Australians the value of our experiences, our perceptions, our approaches has a crucial role to play in the abilities of our Governments to leverage diversity and form creative responses to the world. We have more to offer than many understand. We have more to offer than sometimes we even know. While the Hands on Parliament report focused predominantly on what changes the system needed to undertake, that is only part of the equation. We must also play our part

The Australian Electoral Commission initiated the Indigenous Electoral Participation Program in 2010 as part of their campaign to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage in electoral participation. According the Commission a significant number of Indigenous Australians are not enrolled to vote and many of those who are in enrolled do not vote or vote incorrectly. I know I have people in my own family who fall into those categories. In fact, during my campaign a cousin of mine that lives in my electorate helped out on the campaign and on election night when it was clear we had won he was so proud and so excited, jumping up and down and sharing in the celebrations. When someone asked him how it felt to have voted for your own cousin he said, "ahh no I'm not enrolled to vote". Let me tell you – he is definitely enrolled now.

The penny dropped for my cousin because he realised that his vote counts and that when you're engaged in the process you can see where your vote goes and that when there are enough people voting in a particular way you can change seats and you can change governments. With more than 180,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Queensland our collective vote can make a big difference and with that awareness we can understand our own power in the system. I think that's one practical thing we can take responsibility for right now. Making sure that people in our families, in our communities, in our workplaces

have embraced their right to vote. Something that is very important as we get closer to the referendum which will propose changes to Australia's constitution recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

As much as I would like to see more Indigenous people in the Australian Labor Party the fact that we are beginning to see representation across political parties is healthy. The more critical mass we build across the political spectrum the more chance we have to see our issues, our hopes and dreams represented in our parliament. We need to take up space in political parties so that we can take our place and contribute to the political debate.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen as I reflect on my own learnings in this journey to this point I think a great deal about those beacons or markers that my father taught me about- those that are easy to see and those that are more about the subtle invisible shifts in the environment.

There are challenges ahead as we build the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across all political parties, as we call on our communities to participate fully in the electoral process, as we raise expectations of political parties and their systems for engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people, and as we support more of our people onto the political frontline.

But we can meet these are challenges, make our space, and light the way.

Let us all be beacons for each other as we take up space and take our places in our political processes.