

ABORIGINAL RECONCILIATION

Address by the Hon Gareth Evans QC MP, Deputy Leader of the Opposition, to the House of Representatives, Canberra, 27 May 1997.

Mr GARETH EVANS (Holt-Deputy Leader of the Opposition)(4.18 p.m.)-The passage of the 1967 referendum 30 years ago today was a defining moment in modern Australian history. It was certainly a defining moment for my generation. There was not much in the 1960s-the Vietnam War decade-that gave much hope to those of us coming of age then that the world was becoming a saner, more decent, more civilised place.

However, the referendum campaign, with its cross-party support, its massive affirmative outcome and the spirit that then prevailed that we were all doing something good and decent and overdue to recognise the humanity of our fellow indigenous Australians, did give us a beacon of hope about the future.

The campaign, as it took place up and down the country, brought many Australians face to face with Aboriginal Australians for the first time and began, in many instances, that

crucial process of stripping away the layer of gauze through which so many white Australians looked at their black neighbours and through which so many now still unhappily look at their Asian neighbours. Unless we start looking at each other as individual human beings, with individual human strengths and weaknesses, not as types or categories or stereotypes, we are never going to make much progress with reconciliation or, for that matter, engagement in the Asian region.

The referendum in 1967 gave hope to everyone in the country who cared about the plight of Aboriginal people, their dispossession, their annihilation in many instances, certainly their humiliation, their forced assimilation, their living conditions, the prejudice and the discrimination still existing against them, and their psychological despair. It gave everyone who despaired that the state governments of the day would ever do the right thing in response to all those hurts and humiliations a stimulus to start thinking, talking and planning about what the Commonwealth could now do on behalf of the whole nation. It made every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in this country stand up tall and proud and confident, as they had never been entitled to before, that the future would be different. But would the future be different?

Let me tell the House the story of just one black Australian whom I came to know very closely a few years after the referendum, because it is a story about that hope. It is also a story about the reality of the Aboriginal experience in this country as it was after the referendum and, frankly, as it continues to this day.

The young man's name was Brian Kamara Willis. He was born early in the 1950s somewhere in the Northern Territory-he never knew quite where-of an Aboriginal mother and a white father. He was, as the full bloods called him and as he called himself, a 'yella fella'. That in-between status haunted him all his life. He was, like so many of his generation and the generations before him, a stolen child. As a very young kid, he was snatched from the arms of his mother, taken to Adelaide to a childhood of institutions and foster homes, to an environment in which-for reasons that ought to be very understandable if we stop for a moment to think about them-he really never settled down.

But in his mid-teens the 1967 referendum was passed and, encouraged and stimulated by it, he went back to the Northern Territory, proud now of his Aboriginality, to try to rediscover his roots. When he did discover them he was shattered. He found his mother living out a desperately unhappy existence in fringe dwellers camps around Darwin. I cannot begin to describe the emotion with which Brian described to me the exhilaration of first finding his mother, and then the despair at the circumstances in which he found her.

He was a very bright and personable kid, but this knocked the stuffing out of him. He drifted into labouring and rouseabout, knockabout jobs around the towns and the bush in the territory, and he seemed to be eventually heading down a similar path. That was, at least, until in the early 1970s-with the Commonwealth, especially with the new government in 1972 now devoting major resources to Aboriginal policies and programs-he actually picked up a job as a field officer for the new Aboriginal Legal Service in Alice Springs, funded by the Commonwealth under its referendum powers.

He blossomed in a dozen different ways. His potential was recognised and it was nurtured by those around him, and he formed what would have before then seemed an absolutely unachievable and unreachable objective-the idea of himself becoming a lawyer. With the help of Aboriginal study grants he came to Melbourne to do his final year's school as university preparation. That is where I and my family came to know him, and we became very close friends.

A year or so later he was admitted to Melbourne University Law School, where I was then teaching, under a Commonwealth-again, post-referendum-disadvantaged students quota. And things for a while went very well. But eventually he began to be oppressed by the environment pressing in around him. Partly, it was physical-he and

his young family felt hemmed in by the city and longed for space; they were desperate to get out into a countryside without fences where he could feel again some attachment, some relationship, to the land. It was with this young man that I think I first really actually understood how much the land mattered to Aboriginal people: the sense of belonging, the spiritual attachment, the sense of despair at the dispossession.

The psychological pressure was also getting him down. Despite the change of atmosphere that was associated with the referendum, he and his family were still experiencing put-downs and humiliation. There was a constant sense that he did not really belong. He had to be constantly proving more about himself, about his abilities and about his character than anyone else had to.

So, in the event, he deferred the completion of his degree and went back to the Northern Territory.

His talents and his new education were such that he in fact became, in quite a short time, the Director of the Aboriginal Legal Service. He became an outspoken champion of his people in Central Australia, speaking and writing about a whole range of policy issues-and, in particular, speaking and writing in very fierce and moving terms about the lost souls of the stolen children. In a newspaper article in 1980 he spoke of his fellow victims in these terms:

They had no sense of where they could call their home, no sense of being wanted, all traces of their families had disappeared.

I must say that every human being has to have these basic elements: A sense of belonging to someone, some identifiable area you can call home.

Once you have got these essential things you know that love is there. They make life for a human being worth living.

So Brian Kamara Willis's life until then, although it had had its awful moments, was one of extraordinary achievement and brilliant promise, and nearly all of it was made possible by the 1967 referendum and by what followed from it.

But the story does not have a happy ending. In the end, Brian Kamara Willis just could not fight the pressures, shrug off the prejudices and sustain the struggle for long enough. One night in March 1980 he went to a political gathering-as he often did-and the people there remembered him getting very distressed at one stage during the evening and saying something like, 'The urban black, the part-Aboriginal, is the man in between. He has nothing.' He went home and, at the age of 26 or 27, in front of his wife and his two young children, he took up a shotgun and blew out his brains.

I spoke of all of this, about the destruction of a brilliant young life, in the Senate back in 1980 when it all happened. The memory of that young man and his family and what happened to them haunts me still.

The truth of the matter, Mr Deputy Speaker, is that for all the hopes that were raised by the 1967 referendum, all that has happened since, for all the years that have passed since, things are now not so very different. There are still justices unredressed and young lives being tragically wasted, and there is still a lack of understanding-by too many people in too many decision-making positions in this country-of the nature of the problem and what needs to be done.

How can we still be arguing now, in 1997, as we are today, whether the referendum was really designed to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? Does the government really want to stand up now and say that the referendum was to allow the passage of legislation to hurt and discriminate against our Aboriginal people?

How can we still be arguing now in 1997 about the need to focus not just on the so-called practical measures-important as they are-and not as well on the means to address to the extent now possible the deprivation of life and liberty and property and dignity which so many indigenous people have suffered through so much of our nation's history?

How can we still be arguing now, as we are today with this motion, whether or not we, as a parliament and as a nation, should apologise for what went wrong in the past? Mr Deputy Speaker, that we are arguing about these things on this commemoration day 30 years

after the referendum shows just how far we still have to go as a nation in recognising the reality of life as it still now is for so many of our indigenous people.

It shows how important it is on this day that we pass a motion in this parliament-amended in the way that we propose-which looks both backward to the hurts of the past and the achievements of 1967 in addressing them, and forward to what remains to be done; which states very clearly everything that has to be done and the Commonwealth's responsibility in doing it; which expresses some genuine affection and understanding about the humanity of our fellow indigenous Australians and some understanding of the enormity of the wrongs done to them; and which is expressed, Mr Deputy Speaker, in terms which all of us can not only endorse, but of which we can be proud.