



**Sharon Grierson MP
Federal Member for Newcastle**

**Adjournment Debate
24 May 2007**

INDIGENOUS ANNIVERSARIES

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (12.50 pm)—I rise to speak on the eve of two important anniversaries for our nation's Indigenous people: the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum and the 10th anniversary of the *Bringing them Home* report. Firstly, I acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, the traditional owners of this land where the Australian parliament now meets, and I regret the absence of any formal acknowledgement in the everyday proceedings of this parliament. I would also like to offer my condolences to Warren Mundine and his extended family for their recent loss of his father, Roy Mundine.

Forty years ago, on 27 May 1967, a referendum was held to remove two negative references to Aboriginal Australians from the Constitution, opening the way for greater Commonwealth involvement in Indigenous Affairs. With a 90.77 per cent yes vote, this was the most successful referendum in Australian history. But the 1967 referendum is part of a much longer story of activists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, working to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians. There were always Indigenous people who fought against discrimination and the loss of their land, and I would like to draw the attention of the House to the work of Dr John Maynard, the Chair of Aboriginal Studies and head of the Wollotuka School of Aboriginal Studies at the University of Newcastle.

Dr Maynard's traditional roots lie with the Worimi people of Port Stephens, just north of Newcastle. His PhD thesis, 'Fred Maynard and the Awakening of Aboriginal Political Consciousness and Activism in Twentieth Century Australia', traces the life of his grandfather, Fred Maynard. Having witnessed the mass revocation of Aboriginal reserve lands across the state and the rapid escalation of the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, Fred Maynard founded the Australian Aborigines Progressive Association in 1924. Many of the 1924 demands of the AAPA still resonate today, and are still unmet.

Coinciding with the rise of Aboriginal political voices was the mobilisation of a growing number of white philanthropic, humanitarian and Christian reformists. The AAPA had two such supporters in Elizabeth McKenzie Hatton and a Newcastle newspaper editor, John J Moloney, who actively supported the AAPA and gave concerted media coverage to the new Aboriginal leadership. Fred Maynard and the AAPA paved the way for future Aboriginal activists and movements, like William Cooper, who formed the Australian Aborigines League and held the first Day of Mourning on Australia Day 1938; and Faith Bandler, who throughout her life campaigned for Aboriginal and Islander rights through

the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship and later the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

After decades of this campaigning, Australians voted a resounding yes in 1967, believing that they were giving Indigenous Australians a 'fairer go' in their own country. The referendum was billed as a watershed 'changing forever the social and political relationship between Aborigines and non-Aborigines'. The passage of the referendum raised Indigenous expectations that the Commonwealth would act to improve their situation. But on the eve of the 40th anniversary of the yes vote, there seems little to celebrate. Even the most cursory glance at any one of the social and economic indicators for Indigenous Australians would attest to the ongoing failure of successive federal governments to live up to expectations.

There have of course been significant achievements. Who can forget Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pouring a handful of sand through Vincent Lingiari's hands at the handing back of the Gurindji's traditional lands in 1975 or Eddie Mabo's victory in the High Court in 1992 which finally overturned the fiction of terra nullius and laid the legal framework for native title? And who could fail to be moved by the personal pain and loss of the stolen generations who recorded their stories in the *Bringing them Home* report, which revealed the devastating extent of forced removal policies that went on for 150 years into the early 1980s? But 10 years after that report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was tabled in this parliament, the Prime Minister of this nation still cannot say 'Sorry'. Hundreds and thousands of Australians have signed Sorry Books and attended Sorry Day events and 1.5 million Australians walked in support of the stolen generations and reconciliation, but our Prime Minister and his government remain silent. After 10 years, just two of the 52 recommendations in that report have been fully implemented. The National Sorry Day Committee has this year called for a campaign of action to bring about the justice and equity still denied to the stolen generations and members of their families and communities.

Mr Keenan interjecting—

Ms GRIERSON—I say to the member opposite: find compassion, not arrogance; it does you no credit. The Howard government has an appalling track record in Indigenous affairs. It is reconciliation and empowerment that are needed, not paternalistic benevolence. It is time to renew the spirit of hope and humanity in this nation.

In the brief time I have left, I'd like to note that I have just received from Mark Vaile, the Deputy Prime Minister, an announcement of funding to Yarnteen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation for its Indigenous Creative Enterprise Centre. I register my support for this organisation, which does a wonderful job for Indigenous people in the Newcastle and Hunter region.