

Apology to Tasmanian Aboriginal People by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the Royal Society of Tasmania

Response from Michael Mansell

Monday, 15 February 2021

Well, what is there left to say? They were four very powerful speeches. And I suppose protocol to call you Governor Kate, but if you and I recall meeting in the Library in the later 1970s, neither of us thought we would be here today listening to this sort of stuff.

Of course we have to acknowledge that the catalyst for this event was the, Alan Mansell there, g'day Alan, the catalyst for this event of course was the decision by the, the request by the Aboriginal community and the agreement by TMAG to return the petroglyphs to the place from which they were taken and I think it was, because it was the catalyst for it, we should say a little bit about it. Over the years there's been that much ignorance about what the petroglyphs mean because most white people and Aboriginal people don't know exactly what each design means, but it doesn't take much to work out that a people who lived for thousands and thousands of years on this earth would note down like every society in the world the things that were important to the lifestyle and the events that took place in their lives, the significant events that they saw, whether they were in the sky, whether they were in a corroboree, whether they were of a great warrior whose name was no longer allowed to be used for so many generations, and that warrior's name was an emblem of an animal, that's in the rock carvings.

When there was some significant corroboree event from a tribal group next door or from a long way away and exchanges of gifts, that is in the rock carvings. And so, when people say 'well you know we don't know what they mean', we might not know, we might not know exactly what each circle or each line means, but we know the whole context for the markings that took place not just over a few thousand years but took place probably over many thousands of years, because the water rose, the scientists tell us 6000 years ago and would have covered up most of the carvings that exist down the West Coast and probably elsewhere. And so then what we are seeing today in 2021 are just the little bits that are across the top, and so it is important at least to acknowledge that those people, who over generations and generations and over thousands of years, carved into that rock events that they had seen or heard about and wanted to leave there for prosperity, were not intended to be cut away and taken away to white people's museums.

The people who carved them had never seen white people and they didn't expect that they'd be taken away, and I think it's absolutely significant that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery without any hesitation said 'okay, you want 'em, we'll give them back'. Thanks very much, that was an important gesture on the part of the museum to do it so quickly.

It is true that when institutions or representatives of society give apologies to sort of things that have happened that on many occasions people will disassociate themselves from things that have happened before current times, before the people who are now in authority in a particular institution had anything to do with it. And you can understand, we didn't take the land, we didn't cut up the people we know are dead. We are sorry about that, but you know we're sorry really about these things that we've done in more recent times. What I heard in those speeches was from Mary, ownership of all the things that the Royal Society did. From Brett responsibility for all of the things, not just of recent times that TMAG have been involved in. The summary by Governor Kate Warner pulled it together about all of the impact on Aboriginal people, not just on Aboriginal people, on white society too and in attitudes and the behaviour and the thoughts of a society and the people who were invaded and shoved and sidelined, and exiled to the Bass Strait Islands.

So I think it is important too for us to acknowledge that the institutions embraced very broadly all of the activities. They identified the issues we had complained about over the years. They have acknowledge the role of those activities and they've taken responsibility not only for acknowledging and identifying them but saying, we have to do it better. And that's an important part of any apology.

When we look at even more recent time in the 1900s, I'm still amazed that when Trukanini's remains were displayed in this museum why some of the people, just someone there, didn't go and talk to the people who were directly affected. The museum in those days in the 1930s could not have said we don't know any Aborigines in Tasmania, because they had the recording of Fanny Cochrane Smith here in the, in the museum itself. When in 1949 the QV, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, took its first collection of the petroglyphs from Preminghana, they must have known that truckloads of Aboriginal people, boatloads of Aboriginal people had been sent over from the islands under the Tasmanian Government's assimilation program and dumped, mostly in the slum housing in Invermay which was five minutes' walk from the QV Museum. Not a chance that they went and saw anybody.

So it brings us to the question of if the Apology is coming from the institutions, not just in this current generation, not just on behalf of this Board, not just on behalf of the staff, not just on behalf of the leadership now, but they own, embrace and take responsibility for all of the mistakes that have been made by those institutions way back until the time that they established themselves here in Tasmania.

To whom, then, is the Apology addressed? It can't be to me and it can't be to Rodney. It can't be to any individuals, but if the generations of mistakes are acknowledged and admitted and an apology is addressed, then those apologies are addressed to those people there at Wybalenna. They were the ones who lived with Trukanini and William Lanne. They were the ones who grew up with them, who knew them.

The next generation over there where you are Sarah with the sun glasses, the lady at the back is Lucy Beeton, Nancy Mansell, Jack Maynard the little fellow next to her, Phillip Thomas in front and Harry Beeton on the end. They wrote in 1883 a petition to the local newspaper in Launceston and among other things they said, we are under no obligation to the Government. Whatever land they have reserved for our use is a token of their honesty inasmuch as it has been given in lieu of that grand island Tasmania which they have taken from our ancestors. So they knew, and at the bottom of the letter of course, the newspaper saw fit to say, the newspaper editor captioned the letter with "we do not identify ourselves with the opinions of the correspondents". So how's that?

In 1911 your predecessor, Kate, I shouldn't call you that I suppose in protocol should I? Anyway you'll let me get away with it. Kate's predecessor when, after that letter and that petition and the missionaries' lobby on behalf of Aboriginal people from the islands for land rights, they believed that they were going to get the whole of Cape Barren, and the mutton bird islands and a range of other islands as a sanctuary against what was happening in the 1800s and an arrangement was made for the Governor to come to Cape Barren and – Rodney, can you hold that one up or one of you ladies – and in 1911 Aboriginal people from all around the islands came to Cape Barren to meet the Governor who was announcing the Cape Barren Reserve Act which was going to give Aboriginal people all of this land that they had been after, but again they were tricked. They were deceived. They got out of the intended, intended Land Rights for Aboriginal people, they were given blocks of land that they had to fence and they had to behave like white people otherwise they'd lose that land.

Any Aboriginal woman who married a white man wasn't allowed to stay on the reserve. Any Aboriginal person, and a lot of people in this photo were not mentioned in the Cape Barren Reserve Act and they were related to other people who were, were kicked off the island after dark, weren't allowed to stay with their people. So, the apology is also directed to them. Now where did those kids go? Another photo, I love this when I went to see Ray Groom in the 1990s, where's Greg Lehman, you remember Greg, we just couldn't get him to make a decision. I pulled out a map, look Ray which land and you did, did you? And when I talk about the museum in Launceston not knowing where Aboriginal people – most of these people in this image were moved off Cape Barren under the program of make 'em white people, get 'em off the islands, make them intermarry, put them in slum houses in Invermay and those people were completely ignored and were

confronted with all of the racial prejudice and the rampant discrimination in hotels, employment, police and just meeting white people.

So when I say the institutions who have given the apology today are not just talking about the current generation, on behalf of all of the generations of those institutions who were associated with those institutions they are taking responsibility for their actions and their attitudes and on their behalf making an apology.

In return, I stand here before you and say, on behalf of all of those people we readily accept, with pride, the apology that was given in the spirit within which it was stated.

Thank you.