

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

Address by Rodney Gibbins

Monday, 15 February 2021

Good afternoon. I would like to acknowledge all members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community who are here today, and to pay respect to all of our old people who have passed before us. And I think that's important as this day is as much about our old people as it is about us.

We have heard that the TMAG and Royal Society – sorry I'm going back.

This is a momentous day for the Aboriginal community, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the Royal Society of Tasmania.

As we have heard today the TMAG and the Royal Society have offered apologies to the Aboriginal community for past actions that have shown no regard for our culture and spirituality, and which, in turn contributed to our disadvantage and trauma.

I believe it is up to all of us to consider these apologies with open hearts and minds.

Over the years, the Tasmanian Aboriginal community has had its issues not only with TMAG but with various Tasmanian Governments and their broader institutions.

There was a reluctance on the part of Government and its institutions to rethink and remake old ill-informed attitudes towards the Aboriginal community. These views have profoundly contributed and continued disadvantage of the Aboriginal community and have impacted on our rights, aspirations and identity.

These actions and attitudes are long standing.

For example, as discussed before, the return of the remains of Trukanini who died in 1876. Her wish to be buried beyond the mountains was ignored. Trukanini's

greatest fear was to suffer the same fate as William Lanne, upon his death in 1869, whose remains were fought over and then mutilated by William Crowther of the Royal College of Surgeons and George Stockell, a member of the Royal Society of Tasmania.

Trukanini was buried on the grounds of the former Female Factory in South Hobart only to be dug up 2 years later, by members of the Royal Society and have her skeleton placed on display in the TMAG for over 40 years.

Even though the Aboriginal community campaigned to have her returned it was the Government who decided the timing of her return to us. It decided she would be cremated at Cornelian Bay on the 100th anniversary of her death. There were no members of the Aboriginal community present and her ashes were then scattered in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel by a small number of Aborigines present.

Again, there was the reluctance of the museum and the government to hand over the Aboriginal human remains removed from Putalina the so-called Crowther collection – to the Aboriginal community.

That was combined with the hesitation of the TMAG to change the old diorama which was a 3D representation of a family group at camp in front of the stolen Petroglyph from Preminghana. A display that was naive and inappropriate and didn't recognise a continued Aboriginal Sovereignty over this land. This persisted in the 1960s to the late 1990s.

At the same time changes were happening in the Aboriginal community. There was a growing political and social movement within the Aboriginal community that demanded recognition, acceptance and autonomy.

The community built its political knowledge and skills and after launching effective campaigns, using the media and influencing public opinion the views and attitudes of Government and its institutions along with those of the broader community began to change.

I believe this has been one of our greatest achievements.

Our political skills and ability to influence attitudinal change have had significant outcomes. In 1985 this led to the Crowther collection of Aboriginal remains consisting of 33 skulls 3 skeletons being released to the Aboriginal community under its terms and control. This led to one of the largest gathering of Aborigines at Putalina to welcome our old people home with our own spiritual and ceremonial practices that set their spirits free at last.

But these winds of change were also influencing TMAG. There were new people with new ideas. Pat Sabine, who is here today with us, a former director of the TMAG during the 1990s, brought with her a genuine concern about how Aborigines were portrayed and represented in the museum. She consistently advocated for the development of a more contemporary and honest portrayal of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community.

Through her persistence, a trainee Tasmanian Aboriginal curator position was created and Tony Brown was selected to take up that position and, after successfully completing a degree at the University of Tasmania, became the museum's first full-time Aboriginal Curator of Indigenous Cultures in 1997.

Perhaps, for the first time TMAG began to support and learn about reconciliation, and truth telling about Aboriginal experiences past and present. It deepened and made a more genuine partnership with the Aboriginal community.

These changes progressed under the future leadership of Bill Bleathman, which saw Zoe Rimmer successfully complete a degree at the University of Tasmania. Zoe is now TMAG's Senior Indigenous Cultures Curator after the retirement of Tony. He doesn't like to use the word retirement he's just moved on.

During this time a new display was being developed, the much visited and applauded Aboriginal gallery, *ningina tunapri*. It offered for the first time a comprehensive account of Aboriginal history with a vast array of Aboriginal Cultural expression.

The Gallery was shaped by the Aboriginal community – and it reflects the thoughts and aspirations of that community. Community consultations were undertaken around the state to ensure relevant and critical issues of interest to the Aboriginal community were included.

ningina tunapri means to give knowledge and understanding. The guiding principle of the project is to provide a learning experience.

One aim is to prompt non-Aborigines to rethink their attitudes, their actions and their impacts on the Aboriginal community.

Another exhibition was developed to complement *ningina tunapri*. This was the *parrawa parrawa* exhibition about the conflict between Tasmanian Aborigines and the Colonial invaders. I believe one of the first type of these exhibitions to be developed anywhere in Australia.

It was a difficult story to tell one of violence and dispossession. It gave visitors an experience of conflict, particularly from the Aboriginal perspective, which has

been rarely told. It was an explicit story of invasion characterised by conflict over the use and control of land and its resources.

But it has been our experience in Tasmania that it has been a personal commitment by political and bureaucratic leaders that has delivered crucial advances in Aboriginal Affairs.

I acknowledge the leadership of former Premier Ray Groom and I must say on a personal note one of the most honourable men that I've ever had the privilege to know who in the mid 1990s introduced land rights legislation to Parliament. He consulted exhaustively and believe me it was exhaustive, right across the State and when the Legislation was presented to Parliament it faced no opposition.

Then Jim Bacon and Paul Lennon Labor Governments were equally effective in broad consultations that led to the hand back of Wybalenna, Cape Barren, and the Parliamentary apology to the Stolen generation.

Today the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery should be complimented for steady progress it has made in its outlook and support for the Aboriginal Community's aspirations leading up to today's apology.

The representation of Aboriginal people is now characterised by respect and engagement with the Community. Today's apology is not only an acknowledgement of past wrongs but a pledge to equal and respectful partnerships in the future.

Of course, there is always room for improvements. And we must closely guard these advances that we have fought so hard to achieve within TMAG, and within our political process and across the state, because there is always the winds of change they have a habit of retreating.

I fear that since Will Hodgman's 2016 ill-informed Australia Day speech the current Liberal Government is eroding the advances made by the Aboriginal community and it is eating away at Aboriginal influence and knowledge by limiting the number of consultations with Aborigines and some non-Aborigines to a select few, severely reducing broad Aboriginal consultations.

I think this is more about meeting the personal desires and ambitions of the few rather than meeting with the broad Aboriginal community and understanding their needs and aspirations.

The cost of these actions are being paid for by the rest of the Aboriginal community through living with inequitable, and even discriminatory decisions being by the Tasmanian Government.

These actions fly in the face of the advances made by previous governments and their institutions, such as TMAG, over the past years in developing strong consultative relationships with the Aboriginal community.

Today I recognise the humility shown by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the Royal Society of Tasmania to offer their apologies. I thank them for their promise of a consultative relationship with the Aboriginal community into the future.

Our story – the story of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community – has been one of struggle and denial. Despite the many obstacles put in front of us we have survived and prospered. We will continue our quest for equality, justice and recognition. Today marks a significant step in that quest.

Thank you.