

REPLY TO THE APOLOGY TO THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY BY THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF TASMANIA AND THE TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

delivered by Mr Michael Mansell

The speakers I am to follow delivered four very powerful speeches. [Michael then acknowledges the protocol for addressing the Governor Kate Warner].

Of course, the catalyst for this event was the request by the Aboriginal community for the return the petroglyphs to the place from which they were taken, and agreement by TMAG to hand the petroglyphs over.

Over the years there has been much ignorance about what the petroglyphs mean. Most people ponder what exactly 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, all those things are in the rock carvings. When there was some significant corroboree event from a visiting tribal group or from a great distance where gifts were exchanged, and relationships made or cemented, are all in the rock carvings. And so when people say 'well we don't know what they mean', we might not know exactly what each circle or what each line means, but we know the overall context for the markings honoring many thousands of years.

The water rose, the scientists tell us, 6000 years ago. That being so, many records of ancient events are now underwater on the west coast and probably elsewhere. What we are seeing in 2021, is just the little bits that remain unconcealed. It is important to acknowledge those people who, over generations and generations over thousands of years, carved into rock, events that they had seen or heard about and wanted to leave there for prosperity. For whom were these records meant to be left to?

Those records 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. They could not have known that their sacred works would be taken away. It is absolutely significant that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, without any hesitation said 'okay' you want them back in their rightful place – we'll give them back. No prompting, no coercion, done in the best of faith. An important gesture on the part of the Museum to do it so quickly.

Many representatives of institutions apologise for actions their forebears did and leave it at that. And you can understand that. "We didn't take the land, we didn't cut

up the people when they were dead, we're sorry about that, but you know we're sorry really about these things that we've done in more recent times". But what I heard in those speeches was from Mary – ownership, of all the things that that the Royal Society did. From Brett – responsibility for all of the things, not just in recent times, that TMAG have been involved in. The succinct summary by the Governor Kate Warner – pulled it together, about the impact of things done on Aboriginal people, not just on Aboriginal people but also how those things diminished white society too. We heard about the attitudes and behavior of a society who were invaded, exiled to the Bass Strait islands and their descendants sidelined without rights or remedies.

So, I think it is important for we Aborigines to acknowledge that the institutions did not shy from the activities of their predecessors – they acknowledged the issues that we have complained about over the years. They have acknowledged the wrong of those activities and they have 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 at when *Truganina's* remains were displayed in this Museum, why some of the people – not a single soul thought to 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 Museum itself. When, in 1949, the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston took its first collection of the petroglyphs from Preminghana, they must have known that Aboriginal people had been 'forced' from the islands under the Tasmanian Government's assimilation program, and dumped mostly in the slum housing in Invermay, which was just five minutes' walk from the QV Museum. How blind can people be? Still, no one bothered to consult those Aboriginal people so nearby!

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 they established themselves here in Tasmania, To whom then is the apology addressed from TMAG, the Royal Society and the Governor on behalf of Tasmanian society? It cannot be to me, or any other individual. If the mistakes of generations gone are acknowledged and an apology given, then those apologies

are addressed to those people at Wybalenna whose images we see on the banner [Michael points to a banner held up by Aboriginal people]. They were the ones who lived with *Truganina* and William Lanny. They were the ones who grew up with them, who knew them. The next generation on the other banner over there [Michael points to another banner near Sarah Maynard] Lucy Beaton, Nancy Mansell, Jack Maynard, Philip Thomas in front and Harry Beaton on the end. They wrote the 1883 petition to the local newspaper in Launceston:

We are under no obligation to the Government. Whatever land they have reserved for our use, is a token of their honesty. In as much as it has been given in lieu of that grand island Tasmania, which they have taken from our ancestors.

They knew about morals, about right and wrong. Unsurprisingly, at the bottom of the letter the newspaper saw fit to add “we do not identify ourselves with the opinions of the correspondents”. So, how’s that!

In 1911, Gov. Warner’s predecessor visited Cape Barren as a forerunner to the Cape Barren Island Reserve Act 1912. Aboriginal people thought they were getting legislated land rights. They believed they were getting the whole of Cape Barren, the mutton bird islands and other islands, as a sanctuary against assimilation enforcement.

In 1911, Aboriginal people from all around the islands came to Cape Barren to meet the Governor believing he would be giving Cape Barren to Aboriginal people. They were deceived. Out of the 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 would lose any plots of land. Any Aboriginal woman who married a white man was not allowed to stay on the reserve. Some Aboriginal people, closely related to Aborigines on Cape Barren, were kicked off the island after dark, and were not allowed to stay with their people. So, I say the apology is also directed to them. Ray Groom took responsibility for dispossession in the 1990s by beginning the process of land return. Mr Groom’s gesture was to those people in the past but also to us, the contemporary Aboriginal people. It was an important act of recognition.

Those who have delivered the apologies today on behalf of their institutions also have made an important acknowledgement of the hurt to we Aborigines of today.

In return, I stand here before you and say “on behalf of all of those Aboriginal generations I have mentioned, we readily accept, with pride, the apologies given, in the spirit within which it was stated”.

Thank you.