

Legislative Council Hansard – 12 March 2013

**NATIONAL INDIGENOUS CULTURAL INSTITUTION**

The Hon. WALT SECORD [6.45 p.m.]: I draw the attention of the House to the need to establish a national Indigenous cultural institution. I speak as an Australian of Canadian Indigenous descent whose father belongs to the Mohawk and Ojibway First Nations. As a proud and mature nation, Australia has an obligation to embrace, promote and preserve the vast Indigenous cultures of this great land. Australia has the unique privilege of being home to the oldest continuous culture in the world. Australian Indigenous art is the oldest ongoing visual tradition in the world, with rock carvings, body painting and ground designs dating back more than 30,000 years. I believe such a unique legacy demands a unique and prominent response on our cultural landscape.

Yet to the amazement of thousands of domestic and international visitors who gather to see Australia's unique Indigenous culture each year, there is no national centre to house any artistic representation of this culture. Now is the appropriate time to address that omission. Australia's Indigenous art and culture is not an artefact or an ethnographic interest. It is a thriving deep well of creative expression that is respected and admired internationally. It is the representation of ancestral forces in ritual contexts such as the rock paintings of the Kimberley region and the lyrical songs of Eastern Arnhem Land. In modern times, it has been employed to raise issues and assert rights to land and recognition such as the Yirrkala Bark Petitions.

It takes in the figurative landscapes of Albert Namatijira; the Papunya Tula art movement, including the internationally acclaimed Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri; *The First Supper* by Susan Dorothea White; the challenging 1978 painting *Judgement by His Peers* by Gordon Syron; the challenging of stereotypes in the evocative work of Tracey Moffatt; and the shell work of Esme Timbery. Australian Indigenous artists such as Vernon Ah Kee, Yvonne Koolmatie, Trevor Nickolls and Judy Watson have proudly represented Australia at many international art fairs, including the various Venice biennales. Closer to home, artists such as the Euraba Papermakers, Fiona Foley and Gordon Hookey have all been showcased into various biennales held in Sydney.

Indigenous culture is a vibrant, living and fluid affair and it is as rich as, or even richer than, any other culture. It is complex and is reflected in multiple mediums and languages. It now features in the collections of great cultural institutions on every continent such as Paris's Quai Branly museum and the Aboriginal Contemporary Art Museum in Utrecht in The Netherlands. The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Museum at the University of Virginia in the United States stages contemporary exhibitions and art residencies each year. A selection of etchings printed at the College of Fine Arts in Sydney will be exhibited there later this year. Therefore, I find it incomprehensible that we, as a mature nation, have no public institution of our own that is dedicated to showcasing the complex Indigenous cultures of this land.

In Canada, the Museum of Inuit Art preserves and explores the cultures of various Arctic regions, and the United States of America has the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. In Australia we find recognition of our Indigenous history and culture now writ large at almost any public gathering or indeed on many public buildings such as the Recognition Wall. I note that various State galleries and museums have substantial Indigenous collections. However, there is the need for a single national institution. I believe it is our duty to create an institution dedicated to the intricacies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. It would provide a new cultural voice to all Australians, whether or not they are Indigenous, by celebrating this unique and powerful aspect of our national identity. Sydney would be the appropriate site for such a national institution because it is the nation's oldest city and our only truly global city. I will go further and be so bold as to suggest that there is a perfect location in Sydney. The Barangaroo Delivery Authority has produced a cultural study exploring potential cultural uses of the northern part of the new foreshore site.

With access to our global central business district and a parkland setting on our iconic harbour, Barangaroo is the perfect setting for a great new addition to our cultural landscape. While many worthwhile ideas have been and will be submitted, I believe that this one should take precedence. I urge Premier Barry O'Farrell to seize this opportunity to create something great and new for the culture of New South Wales, just like when Premier J. J. Cahill commissioned the Sydney Opera House. J. J. Cahill did so because he foresaw how the opportunities it would provide could enrich our city. Premier Barry O'Farrell now has a chance, in this aspect at least, to be remembered as a premier of similarly great vision. The O'Farrell Government could now honour this culture by establishing a national Aboriginal cultural institution. It will not only help bind Indigenous Australians to their culture but also engage Australia as a whole in one of the world's greatest cultural legacies. I thank the House for its consideration.