

Parliamentary Speech

YIOOKGEN DHAN LIWIK-AL INTAK-KONGI NGANYINU NGARGUNIN TWARN DREAMS OF OUR ANCESTORS HOPES FOR OUR FUTURE

We would like to pay our respects to our Ancestors, Elders past and present, Aboriginal community present here today, and acknowledge all members of Parliament as well as the general public. To everyone present we say *Womin jeka Wurundjeri balluk yearmenn koondee biik*, Welcome to our Country.

Today we gather proudly, on this historic occasion, not only for us, the Woi-wurrung people, but for all Victorian Aboriginal clans and the State of Victoria.

Today a Bill comes before the House to protect and recognize the uniqueness of the Birrarung. In our language, Woi wurrung, this Bill is called, "*Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn*", which means "*Keep the Birrarung alive*".

The Birrarung has been central to our cultural, spiritual, social and economic wellbeing since the Dreaming. Our Ancestors and the Birrarung shaped one another - living in balance together for countless generations. The State now recognises something that we, as the First People have always known, that the Birrarung is one integrated living entity.

When passed, this Bill will guarantee that the Birrarung will be protected by law and benefit from the custodianship of a body known as the Birrarung Council. As the First Nations people, our place in this new governance structure is also enshrined into law. Through this process the State has recognised the Woi-wurrung as the First People of the Birrarung. The journey to achieving this type of structural inclusion, has been hard won. It commenced from the moment of first contact and was the "*Yiookgen Dhan Liwik-al*" - the dream of our Ancestors.

By the early 1840's, as the devastating consequences of settlement became apparent, our *Ngurungaeta*, brothers Billibellary and Bebejan, requested land for the Woi-wurrung from the Aboriginal Protector. They wanted to settle permanently along the Birrarung. They were unsuccessful, but a seed was sewn.

Later, their sons, also *Ngurungaeta*, Simon Wonga and William Barak petitioned *this Parliament* for land ownership and economic freedom. In 1863, their advocacy resulted in the establishment of Coranderrk Mission Station on the banks of the Birrarung near what is now Healesville. Sadly, the introduction of the 1886 "Half-Caste Act", passed into law by *this Parliament*, led to the ultimate destruction of Coranderrk and other missions. This Act is understood to have been in response to the 1881 Parliamentary Coranderrk Inquiry which marked *the only occasion* in the history of nineteenth century Victoria when an official commission was appointed to address Aboriginal peoples' calls for land and self-determination.

It is on their shoulders, and that of countless others that we stand here today to walk along a shared path of recognition, rights, repatriation and reconciliation.

We would like to acknowledge the State for the inclusion of our language in the preamble to this Bill. This is a first in this State's history. It is also an important achievement for our community. As a direct consequence of European settlement, Woi wurrung has been dormant for generations. This is recognition of language revival.

These are clearly milestones to be proud of, in a year that is already rich in milestones and anniversaries for Aboriginal Australia. There is a sense of change. A sense that we understand our shared past and are more committed to moving forward together, in unity. We hope that further partnerships can enable First Nations from across Victoria to truly affect the decisions and policies which impact their Country.

To you who share in the Country of the Birrarung, and the life it gives to all of us: we share with you our obligation to keep it thriving. *Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn* - keep the Birrarung alive.

Thursday, 22 June 2017

Yarra river protection (*Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn*) bill