

**Speech at the Ceremony to mark the handback of
Biamanga and Gulaga National Parks
to the Aboriginal owners**

**The Honourable R J Debus MP
Attorney General
Minister for the Arts
Minister for the Environment**

**Tilba Tilba Sports Ground,
Tilba Tilba**

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Check against delivery

It is a great pleasure to be here this morning at this most important ceremony.

First let me acknowledge that we are standing on Yuin lands and I wish to pay my respects to the Yuin elders.

I would also especially like to warmly thank Mary Duroux and Lionel Mongta for their generous welcome to Country, and to acknowledge the presence of so many Aboriginal Elders and community members from the area.

I acknowledge the presence of my current and former Parliamentary colleagues:

- the NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Milton Orkopoulos,
- the Member for Monaro, Steve Whan,
- the Member for Bega, Andrew Constance,
- Tim Moore, the former Minister for the Environment, and
- Colin Markham, the former Parliamentary Secretary for Aboriginal Affairs

I also acknowledge the presence of:

- Councillor Neil Mumme, Mayor of the Eurobodalla Council,
- Councillor Tony Allen, Mayor of the Bega Valley Council,
- Ms Lisa Corbyn, the Director General of the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation, and

- Mr Steve Wright, from the Office of the Registrar

The place where we meet today is significant in Australia's history for many reasons.

The Mountain behind us was the first place named by Captain James Cook on the Australian continent. He sailed by on 22 January 1770 and named it Mount Dromedary.

That was less than 240 years ago. A fraction of time when compared to the 50,000 years that Aboriginal people have lived on this continent.

And in that speck of time, those colonists, and too many of those who followed in their footsteps, did great injustice to Aboriginal people.

They spread the diseases, often fatally; they took away many of their children, often forcibly; and they dispossessed them of their land, often violently.

These past wrongs must be acknowledged. They must, where possible, be remedied.

And in acknowledging those past wrongs we do not, as is often wrongly claimed, spread division in the community.

Many of those who came as colonists came from situations of great poverty and inequality. Some, as we know, came in convict chains. They struggled and died to carve a living from this harsh continent, from a land that they did not understand as the Aboriginal people did. It was a tragic clash of cultures.

It is a measure of our nation's strength that we can meet today to overcome one of those old mistakes.

We acknowledge the injustice, and we seek healing and growth together.

That is why today's ceremony is so important.

For as far back as the mind can reach, the Yuin people possessed and worshiped these mountains, these creeks and trees.

Long before Babylon was built, or the great pyramid, Gulaga and Biamanga had their present names, and people related to people here this morning saw them as heartland, as mother, as blessed home, and gave them reverence.

I am reliably informed that, in times long since passed, Aboriginal people living across this vast continent knew something of these places - in much the same way that Aboriginal people all knew of Uluru.

It has been a long coming back since the dispossession for the children of this honoured place, to their campsites, their artworks, their grinding grooves, their ceremonial rings and shell middens.

Once again unburdened by other views of the world, they can look on Biamanga and Gulaga with ancient, knowing, recognising eyes.

Twenty seven years after Cook sailed past these shores, survivors of a shipwreck walked through here from Gippsland on their way to Sydney, recording a first encounter.

Soon after, the whalers and sealers came. And soon after that, came the dispossession.

And then in the 1970s, the logging began. It was the protests over this by the Yuin people – by men like Gubbo Ted Thomas, Jack Campbell and Percy Mumbler – that heightened white awareness to the significance of these lands to the first human possessors of them.

The pressure for the protection of Aboriginal heritage on Mumbulla Mountain continued. Mervyn Penrith wrote to Neville Wran, the then Premier. His letter was accompanied by a petition signed by a large number of south coast Aboriginal people.

Wran listened, and he acted.

And so in the 1980s, Biamanga was forever protected as an Aboriginal Place. In 1994, it became a National Park and in 1997 a larger National Park. And finally, in 2001, I was pleased to enlarge it once again to reach its present size.

There was a similar campaign to save Gulaga, where we meet today. On 23 June 1988, Ann Thomas addressed a meeting of 140 local people at Central Tilba and spoke about the significance of Gulaga to the Aboriginal people. The meeting offered its unanimous support for the protection of the whole mountain.

The campaign to stop logging on Gulaga gained momentum and received widespread support. The campaign was successful, and logging was halted in December 1988.

Today's generation of Aboriginal people have honoured their forebears by persevering with their campaign to have Biamanga and Gulaga protected for all time.

Now it is part of the conservation estate of NSW *and* a declared place of great cultural significance to Aboriginal people.

But the words 'cultural significance' are only one way of saying – I think a poor way of saying – a much more enormous thing.

To stand where one's ancestors stood, to drink where they drank, and fished, and hunted, and feasted, and to see again with new eyes the views they saw in days far back, to partake again of memory in this way, to know your home again, and Gulaga, your mother, is an experience beyond words and beyond all modes of telling, and singing, and recalling to people like myself, the strangers who do not know.

It is that experience, however, we invoke today, in these lands we now commemorate and give back to the people with whom they belong.

We are well met in this honoured place, to which we now wish, in the meagre English words we have, a good bright morning of renewal, and homecoming, and repossession.

Let me close by quoting the words of Guboo Ted Thomas, whose involvement in the long campaign I mentioned earlier. While addressing a Parliamentary Committee inquiring into the future of these lands, he said:

“Why we are interested in this land ... is that they are sacred sites, they are part of us. You have your cathedrals in Sydney where you worship. It is the same for Aboriginal people ... We do not want to lose our culture. We are trying to restore all our sacred sites. We want to retain where we worship. This is what we are looking at.”

Well, here in Tilba Tilba on this day, I say on behalf of the NSW Government that the Yuin people *will* retain the lands where they worship.

The historic injustice is now corrected.

Thank you.