
Irish President acknowledges role of Irish in persecution of Aboriginal people



• *Irish President Michael Higgins. (AAP)*

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The President of Ireland has admitted to Australian politicians and dignitaries the role his nation played in the atrocities committed against Aboriginal people during colonisation.

By

Nakari Thorpe
NITV News
19 OCT 2017

Irish President Michael Higgins has delivered an honest analysis of Australia's history of colonisation, acknowledging the role Irish settlers played in the injustices against Australia's First Peoples.

In a landmark address to the Western Australian parliament, President Higgins acknowledged that injustices were inflicted upon First Nations peoples by Irish immigrants.

"If we are to be truly unblinking in our gaze, we must acknowledge that while most Irish emigrants experienced some measure, often a large measure, of prejudice and injustice, there were some among the number who inflicted injustice too," he said.



Indigenous Labor MP Linda Burney said it was refreshing to hear such honesty from a head of state.

"To hear the President of Ireland, of another country, acknowledge the colonial history and what that meant for Aboriginal people was incredibly heartwarming and enormously honest," she told NITV News.

Mr Higgins continued his frank words throughout his stay, the first time in almost twenty years an Irish head of state has visited Australia.

During an address to federal politicians and dignitaries in Canberra, Mr Higgins highlighted Irish people's responsibility and role in the persecution of Aboriginal people.

Ms Burney said the acknowledgement made her stand taller as an Aboriginal person.

"I felt incredibly grateful and touched that the President of Ireland had the understanding, compassion and capacity for truth-telling, to actually say that in this Parliament," she said.

"To acknowledge the story of Irish settlers and Aboriginal people did have its issues and its dreadfulness, and that was, for me as a person, ... a really important thing for a head of state to say."

On his first day in the capital, President Higgins was delighted to meet with Ms Burney, Australia's first Indigenous woman to be elected to the House of Representatives.

The Wiradjuri woman says Mr Higgins and wife Sabina were fully aware of the meaning of her historic appointment.

"They clearly understood the significance of that and really found joy in it," she added.

Ms Burney says the President also made mention of the Myall Creek Massacre, which involved the killing of up to 30 unarmed Aboriginal people by Europeans in 1838 in northern New South Wales.



"He reminded us that ... the magistrate in the case of the Myall Creek Massacre was actually an Irishman, and that was the first time in Australian history that non-Aboriginal men who carried out the killing were found guilty in a court of law," she said.

During his landmark address to the Parliament of Western Australia, the first by a foreign head of state, President Higgins spoke of the history of Irish migration, including his own family's journey to Australia. Five of his grandfather's seven family members migrated down under, and he noted the contribution his fellow countrymen had to the country.

Today there are more than 90,000 Irish-born people living in Australia, with more than two million recording their ancestry as Irish.

But Mr Higgins also made a point of acknowledging that some of the Irish settlers during the colonial period carried out acts of cruelty against Aboriginal people.

The people responsible for crimes against Aboriginal communities “had to include, we must recognise, some who were Irish in Australia too,” he said.

According to the Irish Times, Mr Higgins described the 1992 speech by former Australian prime minister Paul Keating acknowledging crime against Aboriginal people as “an emancipatory act in the ethics of memory.”