

# The Sydney Morning Herald

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## **Burney tells of the hard road, the power of grace;**

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They don't often sing songs from the public gallery in the nation's Parliament; speakers don't usually wear kangaroo-skin cloaks, and politicians from opposing sides don't normally hug, shed a tear and pledge to work together.

All this and more happened on Wednesday afternoon, when Linda Burney, the first Aboriginal woman to be elected to the House of Representatives, delivered her first speech as the Labor MP for the NSW seat of Barton.

The kangaroo-skin cloak she wore told the story of a "freshwater kid from the Riverina", whose first 10 years were spent in a time when the number of sheep in the country was counted, but not the number of Aboriginal people.

Ms Burney did not meet her Wiradjuri father until she was 28. It was only then that she realised she had 10 siblings who had grown up 40 minutes' drive away. "I hope I don't disappoint you," were Nonni Ingram's first words to the daughter he did not see grow up.

The cloak was made by Ms Burney's Wiradjuri sister, Lynette Riley, who "sang her in" from the public gallery with a song in language of welcome and celebration. The cloak featured her clan totem, the goanna, and her personal totem, the white cockatoo.

"You see," Ms Burney explained, "I was born at a time when a white woman having an Aboriginal baby was shocking - and doubly so if that woman was not married. I was raised by two very brave people who no doubt were made to pay for their bravery and generosity, my great aunt Letitia Laing and her brother Billy."

Her foster parents were of Scottish heritage and elderly, and Ms Burney confessed that she often wondered "where my life would be now" had they not stepped in.

She also recalled being a 13-year-old Aboriginal girl in a school classroom, struggling with her identity and being taught that her ancestors were "the closest thing to Stone Age".

She also told how she returned to her old home town of Whitton in 2010 to be confronted by a man who told her the day she was born "was one of the darkest days this town has ever seen".

"Well, here's to you, mate," is her reply to him now.

The occasion was all the more poignant because Ms Burney had experienced one of the most remarkable moments of her life when she sat in the public gallery in 2008 and witnessed the apology delivered by Kevin Rudd.

As the speeches concluded that day, Ms Burney saw two women stand and hand the then prime minister an empty coolamon, the vessel for carrying babies.

"It is the most gracious and generous thing I have ever seen," she recalled, before holding up her own coolomon as a reminder of that moment and of the "power we exercise in this building today, and that it must be for the good of all, it must be gracious".

One measure of the success of her first term in the Parliament, she said, would be whether the nation's first people were recognised in the Constitution. One indicator of the potential was the response of Ken Wyatt, an Aboriginal man of Noongar, Yamitji and Wongi heritage who represents the Liberal Party and crossed the chamber when her speech was done.

"It's going to be so good to serve with you," he said during a emotional, congratulatory embrace.