

CRIMINAL CODE AMENDMENT (GRAFFITI) BILL 2009

Second Reading

Resumed from an earlier stage of the sitting.

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [4.36 pm]: Before question time, and before cucumber sandwiches, I was drawing attention of members to the fact that, as other members on this side of the house have pointed out, there is not always a clear distinction between graffiti and the work done by graffiti artists. I am grateful to the house for letting me table an example of the work of the graffiti artist Banksy. I also note that some Australian examples of what some people call graffiti should be seen in a much wider context and have a much wider appreciation than some of the stuff that we might want to equate with vandalism. The opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000 was one of the great moments in Australia's history, which I am sure everybody in this house remembers well. I wonder what immediately comes into the minds of members when they think about the end of that opening ceremony, and how that was associated with graffiti. I wonder whether members remember what happened at the end of the fireworks display.

Hon Kate Doust: I didn't watch it.

Hon Adele Farina: I don't remember.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Hon Adele Farina does not remember, and Hon Kate Doust did not watch it. However, as soon as I say it, both members will say "Oh yes, of course!"

The PRESIDENT: Order! Would the member please address her comments through the Chair, and then it becomes a debate and not a conversation.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Thank you, Mr President, for reminding me about that. I am just trying to address the concerns of my comrades sitting around me here.

Honourable members will be interested to hear, as I am sure you will, Mr President, that that opening fireworks display was arranged by a very famous producer of these things, Ignatius Jones. He talked about the symbol that he used at the end of the fireworks display as being a fitting way to mark the new era. These are his words —

It's incredibly Sydney. It symbolised for me the madness, mystery and magic of the city.

He talks about bringing joy and meaning into people's lives with a quintessential message. One word came up across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, after all the fireworks had died down and everybody was getting ready for the anti-climax and thinking it was all over. All of a sudden, across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the word "Eternity" appeared. For something like 37 years in Sydney, the word "Eternity" appeared everywhere on pavements and walls. Then, in the year 2000, at the end of the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games, came that word. The "E" was written with a kind of flourish, the word went up the hill, and the tail of the "Y" came right down underneath the word. We are talking here about a piece of graffiti.

Hon Michael Mischin: He used to write that with chalk.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: That is not actually true. I am happy to share all this material with the member. If there is anything he wishes to look up afterwards, he can go to the Wesley Mission website, which is <http://www.wesleymission.org.au/publications/eternity/eternity.htm>, where he will find this piece called "Eternity at the Olympics". It is not true that the word was always written in chalk. I want to tell honourable members a little about this word. It is obvious from the interjections I am getting that this is news to some of them. Over a period of 37 years half a million instances of the word "eternity" appeared around Sydney as graffiti. It was done by a man named Arthur Stace. This is where it gets really interesting. In some ways Arthur Stace was the quintessential Australian hero in that he was a failure. He was born in Balmain in 1884 into a very poor family. His mother, father, two brothers and two sisters were alcoholics. He grew up in a brothel. His sisters operated the brothel. He grew up not only in poverty, but also with enormous depravation. He was made a ward of the state in 1896 at the age of 12. He was uneducated. He worked in the mines until the age of 14.

Point of Order

Hon MICHAEL MISCHIN: This is fascinating but it has absolutely nothing to do with the Criminal Code Amendment (Graffiti) Bill, which introduces one offence into the Criminal Code and amends the penalty to another.

The PRESIDENT: I was listening to the member very carefully. I presumed there was a story behind this gentleman and he became a significant artist or something. I must admit that I was looking forward to the use of the word "graffiti" in the member's speech. I would hope that the member comes to the point very quickly so that her point relating to the bill is obvious to all.

Debate Resumed

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Thank you very much, Mr President. I appreciate the fact that at least two people in this house, including you, are following my comments with great interest. For the benefit of all honourable members, I will make the connection between my account of Arthur Stace's life and the bill that is before us before too many more minutes have elapsed. Arthur Stace grew up as a very disadvantaged person. As I said, he went to work in the mines. He then became an alcoholic himself. He had a life of enormous depravation. His life descended to the point at which he was drinking methylated spirits at sixpence a bottle and living on handouts. Hon Michael Mischin will be pleased to know that this is the key point. In 1930 he attended a meeting at St Barnabas Church on Broadway in Sydney. It was there that he was metaphorically saved. He heard a message that he interpreted as being from a higher being and he became a regular churchgoer. One day he was at the Burton Street Baptist church in Darlinghurst. He heard the preacher the Reverend John Ridley speak. The preacher shouted, "I wish I could shout eternity through all the streets of Sydney." It was from that moment on in late 1930 that Arthur Stace started what became his life's mission, writing the word "eternity" all over Sydney. This man was barely able to write his own name. He died in 1967. The first half of his life was spent as a dropout, an illiterate and an alcoholic. The second half of his life was spent as a graffiti artist. There is the word, Mr President. That hardly fits with the characterisation of a graffitist as it has been described in this house during this debate.

Arthur Stace was called Mr Eternity. He only ever wrote the one word. This was his graffiti contribution. He became known as Mr Eternity. Nobody knew who was doing it; it was a great mystery. There were letters to the editor on an almost daily basis speculating about who it might be. There is an account on the website of another minister. One day this minister saw him writing the word "eternity" on the ground and he said, "Are you Mr Eternity?" Arthur replied, "Guilty, your honour." I am quoting from the website. Then he became known as Mr Eternity. This graffitist was known for one word, one word that became the icon of the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Sydney. That one word is now used by the Uniting Church, which runs the Wesley Mission, as an example of an artistic expression of a deeply spiritual principle. This section of the Wesley Mission website talks about the word "eternity" and there is a picture of fireworks at the top. It states —

What was the meaning of the single word that up to 4 billion people saw at the end of the Opening Ceremony of the Sydney Olympics? How can you use it to witness to people in Sydney during the Games?

That is just one example of how dangerous the path is that we are beginning to tread if we simply say that all graffiti is vandalism and all graffitists deserve to be punished for what they are doing. I get the feeling that it is time for me to draw my comments to an end.

Hon Ken Travers: Do you want an extension of time?

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I appreciate Hon Ken Travers saying that he will move for an extension of time, but I have covered the ground that I wanted to cover. I appreciate his offer but it is not one that I will accept.

Hon Simon O'Brien: Please proceed. We've gone through the pain barrier.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I am glad that Hon Simon O'Brien is riding this out with us all. I am very gratified to hear that.

I want to make one further comment. I have spoken about the political aspects of graffiti and I have spoken about the artistic aspects of graffiti. I want to conclude by noting that sometimes graffiti can be quite funny. I must admit that this is a bit of a philosopher's joke but I wanted to prove that even philosophers have a sense of humour. There is one very famous piece of graffiti that says, "God is dead, Nietzsche is dead and I'm not feeling too well myself." On that note, I am happy to hand the debate over to others.

Debate adjourned until a later stage of the sitting, on motion by **Hon Norman Moore (Leader of the House)**.

[Continued below.]