



Biography of First Indigenous State Member

Eric Deeral
(National Party)
Member for Cook

07.12.1974 - 12.11.1977

Eric Deeral was the first Aboriginal person to be elected to an Australian state parliament, representing the seat of Cook in the Queensland Parliament from 1974 to 1977.

Born at Hope Vale Lutheran Mission in 1932, Eric Deeral was evacuated to Woorabinda during World War II, where he was educated at the Woorabinda Central School. He left school at the age of 13 and held down various jobs as a labourer, bush worker and stockman.

Eric continued to educate himself and, in 1957, became the Chairman of the Hope Vale Mission Community Council and then a liaison officer with the Queensland Aboriginal Affairs Department. In 1973, he was appointed as a consultant to the Queensland Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

In the 1974 election - 10 years after his Elders and the Elders of the surrounding Cape York and Torres Strait communities had met at Palm Island and selected him to stand as a candidate for parliament - he defeated six other candidates to win the state electorate of Cook, representing the National Party.

In parliament, Deeral raised issues facing Aboriginal Australians, but made it clear he represented all members of his electorate. He sought improved roads for the far north to allow tourism and other industries to develop. He also ensured improvements were made to schools and medical treatment access. He pointed

out that he considered himself an *Australian from Queensland*, as the Deerals had lived in the Cook electorate for over 20,000 years.

After losing his seat in the 1977 election, he continued to work closely with the community. He was the first chairperson of the Aboriginal Coordination Council established in 1985 to advise the government on the wellbeing of Aboriginal people living on communities. He was a representative of the Queensland Coordination



Eric Deeral



Council in 1988, and, in the same year, was a delegate to the World Heritage Organisation which met in Paris. He became the Chairman of the Legislation Review Committee that examined Queensland legislation and its impact on Aboriginal land rights during the early 1990s.

In 1995, he directed a project on the positive role Elders could play in reducing the number of Aboriginal people in Queensland prisons and youth detention centres. From 1998 to 2003, he was a member of the Wet Tropics Management Authority Board. Deeral was also instrumental in establishing the Cooktown Museum.

In July 2002, Eric Deeral was appointed interim chair of the Aboriginal body, known as Yalanji Ang-Narra Yimidihiir Peoples Council, formed in response to the Fitzgerald Cape York Justice Study. More recently, he was involved in the

2003 *Hands on Parliament* inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation in Queensland's system of democracy.

On 18 June 2012, the Speaker of the Queensland Parliament, Hon. Fiona Simpson, MP formally acknowledged Mr Deeral's service at a ceremony held on his land in Hope Vale. At this ceremony, the Speaker also sought permission from Mr Deeral to rename the Parliament's annual Indigenous Youth Parliament event in his honour, to which Mr Deeral graciously agreed.

The Inaugural Eric Deeral Indigenous Youth Parliament was then held at Parliament House on 28 June 2012. Mr Deeral was a special guest at this event which provided young Indigenous leaders a forum to speak on matters of importance and debate a Youth Bill on education issues.

Eric Deeral passed away on 5 September 2012 in Hope Vale, Queensland at the age of 80.