

REFLECTION ON THE DAY OF MOURNING
HIGHFIELD ROAD UNITING CHURCH – JANUARY 2023

In 2017 two hundred and fifty Australian indigenous leaders gathered at Uluru for a four-day First Nations National Constitutional Convention. They gathered seeking consensus on the most meaningful and appropriate way to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the Australian Constitution – a Voice to Parliament. This gathering and its outcomes were unprecedented. The movement to this agreement and statement began with the initiative of Prime Minister John Howard in 2007 to hold a referendum to change the constitution to recognise the “special status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first peoples of our nation”.

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

The statement outlines the significant disadvantages and inequality aboriginal people suffer, and seeks a way in which aboriginal people can obtain a formal way by which they can have input to the deliberations of the Australian parliament at times when the development of laws will affect aboriginal people.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is *the torment of our powerlessness*.

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take *a rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle*. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

The beginning of the Gospel of Mark quotes the prophet Isaiah:

See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight”’,

The German Jesuit priest Father Alfred Delp who was imprisoned in 1944 for opposing the Nazi regime writes:

Woe to any age in which the voice crying in the wilderness can no longer be heard because the voices of everyday life drown it – or restrictions forbid it – or it is lost in the

hurry and turmoil of “progress” – or simply stifled by authority, misled by fear and cowardice.

The Statement from the Heart calls for truth-telling in order that all Australians can share a fair and truthful relationship. The American writer James Baldwin, author of *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, says:

Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.

That they must die out is, I think, a foregone conclusion. Were they as valuable commercially as short-horned cattle, or merino sheep, there would be no fear of their dying out. The fact is we have pretended but never really wished to save them from extermination.

Edward M. Curr, pastoralist and Squatter, 1877 Royal Commission on the Aborigines

The entrenched disdain for the aboriginal people of Australia was deep and existed at every level of society. The first Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia wrote in 1901:

I do not think that the doctrine of equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality. There is no racial equality. There is that basic inequality. These races are in comparison with white races – I think no one wants convincing of that fact – unequal and inferior.

No half-caste children should be allowed to remain in any native camp, but they should all be withdrawn and placed on stations. So far as practicable, this plan is now being adopted. In some cases, when the child is very young, it must of necessity be accompanied by its mother, but in other cases, even though it may seem cruel to separate the mother and child, it is better to do so, when the mother is living, as is usually the case, in a native camp.

Professor Walter Baldwin Spencer, Chief Protector of the NT, 1912

Children are removed from the evil influence of the aboriginal camp with its lack of moral training and its risk of serious organic infectious disease. They are properly fed, clothed and educated as white children, they are subjected to constant medical supervision and in receipt of domestic and vocational training.

Dr Cecil Cook, Chief Protector and Chief Medical Officer of the NT, 1924

‘They have not complied with the conditions on which the Lord of the whole earth granted to the first progenitors of our race this habitable world,’ wrote Rev. T. Atkins in 1859. The Aborigines of Tasmania, he said, had failed to subdue the earth.

John Harris, *One Blood*

[A] principle which was a philosophical justification for the colonization of the territory of the less civilised peoples; that the whole earth was open to the industry and enterprise of the human race, which had the duty and the right to develop the earth’s resources; the

more advanced peoples were therefore justified in dispossessing, if necessary, the less advanced.

Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd (the “Gove Land Rights Case”)

The Stolen Generation was dreamt up and instituted by many people who meant well:

No doubt the mothers would object and there would probably be an outcry from well-meaning people about depriving the mother of her child but the future of the children should I think outweigh all other considerations.

Mr SJ Mitchell, Acting Administrator of the Northern Territory, 12 September 1911

As soon as you showed any enterprise or initiative on an Aboriginal reserve, you were removed forcibly or induced to move off because it was ‘the right thing to do’. It cuts the head off the tribe. If you did not want to move off, you had to subject yourself to having your initiative suppressed.

Charles Perkins, A Bastard Like Me (writing about the 1960s)

I have great sympathy for Mrs Cubillo, for Mr Gunner [two members of the Stolen Generation] and for others who, like them, suffered so severely as a result of the actions of many men and women who thought of themselves as well-meaning and well-intentioned but who today would be characterised by many as badly misguided politicians and bureaucrats. Those people thought that they were acting in the best interests of the child. Subsequent events have shown that they were wrong.

Justice Maurice O’Loughlin, August 2000

If you insist on working with the poor, if this is your vocation, then at least work among the poor who can tell you to go to hell. It is incredibly unfair for you to impose yourselves on a village where you are so linguistically deaf and dumb that you don’t even understand what you are doing, or what people think of you. And it is profoundly damaging to yourselves when you define something that you want to do as “good,” a “sacrifice” and “help.”

Ivan Illich, To Hell With Good Intentions

As a Christian and civilised people, it was not easy for the British settlers to acknowledge what they had done. Australian anthropologist William Stanner was fascinated by the other very common 19th century belief ... that in the birth of the Australian nation no sin had been committed. Rather than admit complicity in the destruction of aboriginal society and consequent remorse, it was far easier for Australians either to avert their gaze or to claim, as had the Reverend G.A. Wood, ‘that the cause of the extinction lies in the savage himself and ought not to be attributed to the white man.’

Robert Manne

It has seemed to me for some years that two aspects of the aboriginal struggle have been under-valued. One is their continued will to survive, the other their continued effort to come to terms with us. There are many, perhaps too many, theories about our troubles

with the Aborigines. We can spare a moment to consider their theory about their troubles with us.

William Stanner, *After the Dreaming*, 1968

Benny Mabo said to his son, Eddie:

We have to fight for black and white. - let's fight for black and white. His son asked, but why are we fighting for whitefellas? And Mabo said, because they are blindfolded; we need to open their eyes and let them realise that we were in this country before them.

Apmereyanhe, our language-Land, is like a root or tie to us. It holds all of us. The only way that we can translate into English how we see our relationship with the Land is with the words 'hold' and 'connect'. The roots of the country and its people are twined together. We are part of the Land. The Land is us, and we are the Land. That's how we hold our land.

And it's really important for our kids to know why we want our Land to live on, to go back to. Because we've got a strong tie to it. It's like a big twirl of string that holds us in there with our families. That's where all our culture, and our names, our skin names come from. That's why we hold a big treasure of Land for us. And we have a special name for that tie or string, it's called *utyerre*.

Margaret Kemarre Turner OAM *Iwenhe Tyerrtye* – what it means to be an Aboriginal Person

What Aboriginal people ask is that the modern world now makes the sacrifices necessary to give us a real future. To relax its grip on us. To let us breathe, to let us be free of the determined control exerted on us to make us like you. And you should take that a step further and recognise us for who we are, and not who you want us to be. Let us be who we are – Aboriginal people in a modern world – and be proud of us. Acknowledge that we have survived the worst that the past had thrown at us, and we are here with our songs, our ceremonies, our land, our language and our people – our full identity. What a gift this is that we can give you, if you choose to accept us in a meaningful way.

***Galarrwuy Yunupingu Rom Watangu: The Law of the land, Final Report of the Referendum Council* 2017**

Today, it seems to me increasingly the point at which we, as a people, invaders of the ancient land and intruders upon its culture, are challenged to come to terms with our actual situation as distinct from the one we would like to imagine for ourselves. Por that, of course, we have to be prepared to see through our illusions and let them go.

We need to be able to stand in the truth, to have a way of describing ourselves and the world which actually fits,

Veronica Brady, *Caught in the Draught*

As we reflect on the legacy of these views, the words of Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, remind us of our own Christian affirmations of the communion of saints and aboriginal people's continued relationship with those who have gone before them:

Death does not end relationships between human persons and between human persons and God; and this may be sobering news as well as joyful, sobering especially for an empire with blood on its hands.

Archbishop Rowan Williams, 2004

The reason that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are calling for treaty is because we are seeking a real recognition of what has happened – not mere symbolism. Treaty is about acknowledging that there has been a battle – that there have been serious consequences – it is about saying that the people of today's Australia recognise that the prosperity this nation enjoys relative to the rest of the world, is built upon a land that was taken forcibly from its rightful possessors.

The Reverend Daryl McCullough, Secretary of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Commission.

Galarrwuy Yunupingu a Gumatj clan leader and Yothu Yindi Foundation chairman explains:

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Statement from the Heart

The principles of makarrata have guided Yolngu people in North East Arnhem Land through difficult disputes for centuries and they are useful as a guide to the current challenge.

First, the disputing parties must be brought together. Then, each party, led by their elders, must speak carefully and calmly about the dispute. They must put the facts on the table and air their grievances. If a person speaks wildly, or out of turn, he or she is sent away and shall not be included any further in the process. Those who come for vengeance, or for other purposes, will also be sent away, for they can only disrupt the process.

Makarrata the map to Reconciliation, July 2017

The Statement from the Heart reads:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the

Creation, according to the common law from ‘time immemorial’, and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

A Prayer for Reconciliation by Bishop Arthur and Mrs Colleen Malcolm (Bishop Arthur is a Life Member of NATSIAC)

Source of all quoted material – A Voice in the Wilderness: Listening to the Statement from the Heart, Celia Kemp, Anglican Board of Mission, 2019