

# Acknowledgment of Country and Comments on the Uluru Statement from the Heart

Harry Mithen's presentation at MHCC's Aboriginal Sunday Service, 22 Jan 2023

## Acknowledgment of Country

We join with people at many other churches, synagogues together with people gathered in parks or public places, on the sands of beaches or in the hills and bush — wherever they are on this Aboriginal Sunday we join with them as one people — to pay our respects and gratitude to elders and families of our Aboriginal forebears — past and present — for all they've done for thousands of years in this country to help make it a good home. We acknowledge the hurt they have suffered unjustly — we know the reasons — and we promise & pledge our help to emerging families and especially our young brothers & sisters in need.

### 1. Introduction

On this Aboriginal Sunday, let's reflect on what surely has been the most-recently spoken-about public issue throughout Australia — amongst our political leaders, the press, newspapers and current affairs. For the past 3 years the biggest headlines have been about Covid and the economic injuries Covid has brought in its wake...but for over 50 years (i.e. since 1967) there've been very few headlines about Aboriginal Sunday nor indeed about Aboriginals in general—except for their wonderful exploits in the football world or their less-than wonderful exploits with jails, family violence, stealing, drugs abuse, suicide etc. Then in May 2017 a gathering called the National Constitutional Convention brought together over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders who met at the foot of Uluru in Central Australia on the lands of the Anangu people. This gathering had long been supported in a bi-partisan agreement (especially by leaders Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott to come up with a Plan of Action acceptable to all parties....and was preceded for many years by homework and hard work by Select Committees, sub-committees led by and participated in by parliamentarians, legal experts — it's recorded that a minimum of 1200 selected, elected and approved representatives from so many Indigenous regions were heard and listened to in the preparational reports. After four days in the shadow of Uluru, the majority resolved, in the 'Uluru Statement from the Heart', to call for the establishment of a 'First Nations Voice' in the *Australian Constitution* and a 'Makarrata Commission' to supervise a process of 'agreement-making' and 'truth-telling' and increased open-ness between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. And here it is for us to hear...

(cont...)



## 2. ULURU STATEMENT FROM THE HEART (bold & italics are my emphasis)

***We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this Statement from the Heart:***

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 200 years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood.

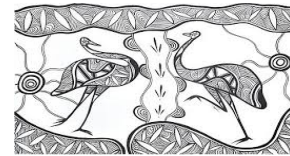
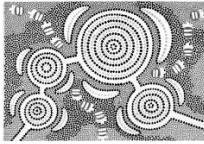
Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

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.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future



### 3. Reflections ( for us) from leaders who've spoken up:

#### (a) Prime Minister

Eight months ago on May 21<sup>st</sup> 2022 , just minutes after Australians elected him new P.M., Anthony Albanese had this to say:

**“ On behalf of the Australian Labor Party I commit to the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full, and promise a Referendum on the Voice in our first term of Government.....we seek Constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country...”**

Not much doubt about his intentions—he said it was a matter of a simple Yes or No for Australian voters, and not just a final set of words but rather something to give our conversations shape and direction... He sounds Passionate !

#### (b) Minister for Indigenous Australians ( Linda Burney)

**“The Albanese Government is planning for the Indigenous Voice to Parliament Referendum as early as August this year 2023...”**

#### (c) Federal Senator Pat Dodson ( WA Senator)

Senator Dodson is known as the 'Father of Reconciliation' for his decades of work as an Aboriginal rights campaigner and chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation...” What he said on Election Day in May last year:

**“There’s a lot at stake when you vote today - including the Uluru Statement from the Heart and a referendum on a First Nations Voice to Parliament. The Uluru Statement is a generous invitation to walk together toward a better future. It’s time. Make your vote count.**

#### (d) The Fred Hollows Foundation CEO Ian Wishart

Representing the Fred Hollows Foundation & a big number of Business groups

**“After generations of silence, the tide is finally changing and now is the time for businesses and organisations to unite in solidarity to support the Uluru Statement...time to give a Voice back to our people who have created one of the oldest cultures ( spirituality, lifestyle) in our World....Fred Hollows would be proud to know we are Allies to the First Nations people and helping them to be heard...”**

#### (e) Australian organisations unite to support Uluru Statement from the Heart

Fourteen of Australia’s leading organisations have united for National Reconciliation Week to support the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The ‘Response to the Uluru Statement’ was developed by the participating organisations including:

BHP, Curtin University, Herbert Smith Freehills, IAG, KPMG, Lendlease, National Rugby League, PwC Australia, PwC’s Indigenous Consulting, Qantas, Richmond

Football Club, Rio Tinto, Swinburne University of Technology and Woodside, in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders within and connected to the organisations. The response supports the call for a referendum to enable constitutional reform and encourages others to join in the national dialogue.

All the participating organisations actively promote and support reconciliation and are among a small group of organisations that have an Elevate Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP).

The RAP program provides a framework for organisations to support the national reconciliation movement. There are four tiers of RAPs with Elevate being the highest level of endorsement, recognising organisations that are taking a leadership role in advancing national reconciliation. Currently, 24 organisations have an Elevate RAP out of more than 1,000 RAPs.

Karen Mundine, CEO of Reconciliation Australia, which is the organisation behind Reconciliation Action Plans, welcomes the collective effort.

**“RAP organisations understand the important role that the wider Australian community has to play in progressing national reconciliation,” Ms Mundine said.**

**“Our research shows that an overwhelming majority of Australians support the aspirations within the Uluru Statement from the Heart....”**

#### **(f) Dean Parkin from the Quandamooka people of Qld**

- has been a long-time member of the Referendum and Reconciliation Council-
- he's the Referendum Campaign Manager, an author and advocate for Constitutional Change –
- he has spoken to and more importantly listened to hundreds and hundreds maybe thousands of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders in regional areas throughout Australia and has taken a vital role in helping to draft the Statement from the Heart.

Of all speakers and authors I've heard and read since being inspired by this new Government's real enthusiasm about the Statement from the Heart—it is Dean Parkin whom I have most to thank & appreciate for his wisdom, his ability to inspire and his open straightforwardness in saying there is much to be done, and this Uluru campaign is a god-given Invitation---not to politicians, but to ALL vote-able Australians---an Invitation to help make Australia whole again - more whole. There is divided opinion, there are risks, there are possible complications. But let's remember: if the Vote result is NO , people like Dean Parkin, Megan Davis, Noel Pearson and Auntie Mary will keep on plotting, planning and fight for more Truth Telling and Justice in Australia.

#### **(g) Father Frank Brennan, a Jesuit Catholic Priest.**

Son of Judge Gerard Brennan, the High Court Judge who wrote the lead judgment on the Mabo decision which overturned the long-held doctrine that Australia was terra nullius ( no man's land) and replaced it with the title of Native Title which protected Aboriginal people's claims to owning land. His son Fr. Frank Brennan is both a lawyer and priest—much

respected for his realistic views of church, the world, justice in the world --- but like Dean Parkin keeps reminding—in this case—Catholics and any spiritual flock : It's Up To Us All !

#### 4. Who is NOT in favour of the Uluru Statement— and think seriously about voting NO ?

##### (a) Malcolm Turnbull ( the P.M. in 2017 )

The Statement was presented to Parliament in June 2017 and then rejected by the Turnbull Government, in October 2017, arguing it would effectively create a Third chamber of Parliament. They also ruled out a Referendum, saying they feared it wouldn't win.

##### (b) The Nationals Party have already said NO

... even before the Referendum statement has been worded !

##### (c) Some people we all know...

- \* Some who love Aust. Constitution & always vote NO to any change
- \* Some still remember & cherish what we oldies learnt in Yr4 ( All Savages)
- \* Some from churches who are Clean-Keepers & shoo homeless people away
- \* Some live in Northbridge/Kalgoorlie & have DEFINITE ideas re Aborigine Life
- \* Some whose Spirits have never/rarely been MOVED by history of Colonialization, UK Takeover, Terra Nullius, Massacres, Stolen Children, Suicide
- \* Some who have NO IDEA of our UK/Aust. Injustices to them over 250 years
- \* Many who think that in recent times our First people have been SPOILED with far too many handouts...
- \* Some who didn't really like P.M.'s Redfern Speech: Lest We Forget:

The speech was delivered by Keating on 10 December 1992, just over a year into his term as Prime Minister of Australia, to a crowd of predominantly Indigenous people gathered at Redfern Park, in Redfern, Sydney. It was given to launch the International Year for the World's Indigenous People (1993).

Keating was the first Australian prime minister to publicly acknowledge to Indigenous Australians that European settlers were responsible for the difficulties Australian Aboriginal communities continued to face: "**It was we who did the dispossessing**", he said. "**We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases and the alcohol.**" He went on: "**We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We who practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine that these things could be done to us**".

The speech has become known as the "Redfern speech", and is now regarded by many as one of the greatest Australian speeches.

**So, while we listen to and pay respect to those who have different ideas and aspirations to the would-be YES voters, let's remember a big message from today....Yes and Yes again....MUCH has to be done by many for enough Australians to accept the Statement from the Heart.**