

## Pat Anderson AO (Chairperson, Lowitja Institute)

### Address to the Deakin University Summer School

8 February 2019

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Good morning students, guests and staff

I acknowledge and pay respects to the Wadawurrung people, traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we are standing today. I pay respects to their ancestors and Elders, past, present and emerging

I would like to thank Deakin University for inviting me to speak today, and to acknowledge in particular

- Professor Julie Owens, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Research
- Professor Jack Reynolds, Associate Dean in the Faculty of Arts and Education
- Associate Professor Andrea Gallant, HDR Coordinator
- Professor Tarquam McKenna, Professor of Indigenous Knowledges

I also acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff here today.

I also acknowledge all of you and the work that you do in your families and communities.

[introduce and show video here—

- this is not a professionally produced documentary
- it's a quick sweep of our proud history of advocacy
- it was used by the Referendum Council in its consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people around the country
- this was a deliberative process with an educational component
- it reminded all of us of our long of advocacy.]

I wanted to begin today by showing you the video on the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocacy from the nineteenth century onwards.

As a reminder from the philosopher George Santayana who famously said, “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

That does not mean, I think, that you have to formally study history.

But it does mean that we have a responsibility to know and accept in broad terms what our shared history looks like.

It is particularly important to remind ourselves of this at this time of year.

The end of January has just seen renewed public debate around the celebration of our Australian national identity on what we call Invasion Day.

And we have seen once more attempts to frame the debate in a way that excludes our shared history.

In a way that pretends our dispossession never happened.

And in a way that assumes that we First Nations should be happy to celebrate the beginning of that dispossession.

Such assumptions are based on an ignorance of our shared histories, or even an active denial of those histories.

That is why that short video is important in my opinion.

It shows a glimpse of how we have struggled to gain recognition for our rights.

This is a struggle that I have had the privilege of being part of for many years.

So in talking to you this morning, I would like to turn the focus from the broad sweep of history to my personal history, which is typical of so many of us, and how those two intersect.

To do that, I should start with my mother.

My mother was one of the Stolen Generations, taken as a young girl from her Alywarre family in the country north-east of Alice Springs in Central Australia, sometime in the early 1920s.

We were one of the lucky families because we always knew where we came from and where we belonged.

As a result of those policies to forcibly remove children, many of us are not so fortunate.

Like so many other Aboriginal children, she was taken a thousand miles from home and family, and grew up in the Kahlin compound, in Darwin on the north coast of the Northern Territory.

Here she was taught cooking, needlework and other kinds of domestic jobs.

She was never taught to read or write.

This was not part of the program.

Instead, she was being prepared for domestic work: a slave in other words.

This is what she, like the majority of her fellow inmates, ended up doing.

Despite the rhetoric about Aboriginal children being taken away to improve their chances in life, literacy was one skill that the administration clearly thought was of no use to a young Aboriginal woman.

When she was old enough, my mother was lined up by the Superintendent of Native Welfare with the other girls of the Compound, and non-Aboriginal women from the town would come and choose the ones they wanted to work for them as domestic servants in return for board and lodging.

My mother spent several years on a peanut farm cooking and cleaning and looking after the children, but also doing maintenance and even fencing and other jobs on the farm.

Conditions were unrelenting and tough.

Later, she met my father who was a Swedish merchant seaman who had ended up in the Territory.

They lived at Parap Camp on the outskirts of Darwin and it was there in the 1940s and 1950s that I and my sisters were born and grew up.

Parap Camp was home to many people rejected by the mainstream Darwin population of the time: Chinese, Japanese, Malays, Filipinos, Italian, Greeks and of course Aboriginal people.

Many of those families had a Stolen Generations heritage, having grown up like my mother, in Kahlin Compound.

In those post-War years, conditions on Parap Camp were harsh: few taps, open drains, and a toilet way down the back in the bush.

But despite the hardships, we all went to school, without fail.

And so, unlike my mother who was denied the opportunity, I began the process of getting an education.

Eventually I finished school, but although times were changing, it was still not easy for us Aboriginal young women growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in Darwin.

Despite the fact that we had received at least a basic education, the actual jobs available for me and my mates on Parap camp were still limited to two basic options.

First, we could go and get jobs as domestic servants with non-Aboriginal families in town, continuing in our mothers' and our older sisters' footsteps.

Or second, we could go and work at the hospital – as cleaners, kitchen-hands, cooks, or laundry-workers.

But, this was the 1960s and my generation of young women were the first ones to say – perhaps the first ones able to say – “actually, no, we don't want to do that!”

Not that we saw anything wrong with those domestic and manual jobs: far from it, because those jobs were part of the everyday lives of our friends, sisters, and mothers and those jobs brought in a regular income.

But we wanted other options.

I was lucky.

At some point in the early 1960s, the government in the Northern Territory decided that instead of “importing” young women from “down South” to be Darwin's secretaries and stenographers, why not train local women to do these jobs?

A very radical proposal for the times.

So a scheme was set up to train young local women for these jobs, and soon afterwards, I found myself learning shorthand and typing and other office skills.

And after I finished my training, I got a job in the Northern Territory Administration as a secretary at, if I remember correctly, £12 per fortnight.

And for me, that was the road that eventually lead out of Darwin.

Through these skills coupled with the basic education I had received, I escaped from the necessity of manual work, and that opened up for me other possibilities and pathways.

I became part of the Aboriginal movement for health and justice and self-determination – my education gave me the privilege to play my part as a paid worker in that movement.

It also led to me getting a Bachelor of Arts with a Literature major from the University of Western Australia in the late 1970s.

I am the third Aboriginal graduate from that university despite it being opened in the 1930s.

My path led from the Northern Territory to Tasmania to Western Australia to Melbourne and then to Geneva, Europe, Asia, New York and New Mexico – and eventually back to Australia.

So when people talk about the importance of education, it is easy to dismiss it as another platitude.

But I can speak from my own experience about how profoundly important it is.

My mother, removed from her family, was deliberately denied an education and suffered all of her life from that profound injustice.

I would not like you to think, though, listening to this story that somehow education in itself solved all the issues we were facing as Aboriginal people, far from it.

As you will have seen in the video, at that time I was completing my formal education, Aboriginal people were still denied many essential human rights.

The subsequent path of my life was deeply intertwined with the struggle to realise those rights, as it was for all Aboriginal people of my generation.

The video you have just watched summed up some of the important events we lived through:

- the 1967 Referendum;
- the 1992 Mabo decision that overturned the lie of 'terra nullius';
- the *Bringing Them Home Report* on the Stolen Generation in 1997; and
- the 2008 Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples by the Australian Government.

That struggle for social justice continues today in our communities.

In particular, during the last two years we saw the work done on Constitutional Reform, and the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, which I shall return to in a minute. I co-chaired that process.

And a common theme across all these steps forward is that none of the positive events in our history came without a struggle.

Nothing has ever been handed to us on a plate.

Any gains and achievements have come about through our advocacy.

We have a long history of advocacy and struggle as you have seen from the video we have just watched.

Take the 1967 referendum.

Over 90% of Australians voted 'yes' to change the constitution to ensure, amongst other things, that we were to be counted as Australians for the first time.

This event is rightly looked on with pride as one of the high points in the relationship between our First Nations and non-Indigenous Australia.

What we mustn't forget though is that the Referendum's success came on the back of years of protest and activism for our rights as First Peoples.

This included events such as the Gurindji walk-off at Wave Hill, the Freedom Rides, and the long campaigns of FCAATSI, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

And nor must we forget that, the very act of having a Referendum was opposed by many of those in power for years before 1967.

If you look in detail at those other events, you will see the same pattern.

First, that the achievements were built on a foundation of activism and struggle by First Nations people, communities and organisations.

Second that they were often vocally opposed by significant parts of Government and the media.

And third despite this opposition, there were always non-Aboriginal people who were prepared to stand alongside us, to support us in our campaigns for a more just relationship between black and white Australia.

Those non-Indigenous people came from all walks of life, were inspired by numerous different ideologies or beliefs, were born here or came from all other parts of the world.

Yet their commitment to social justice, their willingness to support us, has always been important to us.

So, I would draw two lessons from these histories, the collective history and my own personal story.

First: the importance of education.

Formal education is the important first step but I also mean developing an attitude of learning throughout our lives.

Education is a fundamental human right, but like many other rights it has been – and continues to be – denied to many.

Those of us lucky enough to have been given the fundamentals of a good education should recognise the precious nature of the gift – and the responsibility that this gift places upon us.

The second lesson is: the importance of making social justice a part of our lives.

My career since the 1960s has been as a part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander movement for social justice.

In many ways, since those days on Parap Camp, it has been my life.

But it doesn't have to be your life, as long as it is part of your life.

This means joining or supporting organisations that are seeking positive change and justice in the world.

It means thinking critically for oneself.

It means questioning those dominant voices who are always telling us that change isn't necessary, or isn't desirable, or isn't possible.

It means speaking up against injustice and discrimination when we see it.

For all of us, the work to ensure a fair and respectful relationship between this country's First Nations and those who came after, continues.

We can all be part of that work.

In particular, the most important development in recent years has been the movement for Constitutional Recognition.

This culminated in a National Constitutional Convention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at Uluru in May 2017.

That convention adopted a statement, the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.

It sums up where we see ourselves standing now, and what we believe needs to be done to move forward for social justice.

As Professor Megan Davis recently said, “the Uluru statement from the Heart was tactically issued to the Australian people, not Australian politicians. It is the people who can unlock the Australian Constitution for Aboriginal people, as they did in 1967, and the descendants of the ancient polities can unlock what is sorely lacking in this country, a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood.”

I would now like to leave you with the words from the gathered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates at Uluru.

The delegates at Uluru consciously directed these words to the Australian public, as I’ve already said, and I pass them on to you today so you can hear their voice.

This is our gift to you, the Australian people.

### ***Uluru Statement from the Heart***

*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 60 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.*

Thank you.