

The University of New South Wales
Centre for Ideas

2020 Gandhi Oration Address

By

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I acknowledge the Bidjgal people, traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today.

Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters:

Our beautiful country is burning.

Last month, I was preparing this talk, great expanses of our old and fragile home were on fire.

Whole towns were destroyed, lives lost, hundreds of homes incinerated.

Countless animals were killed by the flames.

Smoke blanketed our cities and suburbs.

This is unprecedented in the human habitation of this continent.

For 65,000 years or more, our First Nations cared for and sustainably regulated the diverse natural ecosystems of this place.

Looking after Country was our job.

We cherished the land, understanding that our health relies upon its health.

However, in less than two-hundred and fifty years of colonisation, our knowledge and practices, developed and refined over millennia, have been marginalised just as we have.

Our adaptability, creativity and wisdom has been ignored, sidelined or suppressed, or seen to be of no value.

Our ability to care for Country has been profoundly undermined.

The results are all around us.

Everywhere we look, we see the damage being done to the living systems that sustain life: by drought and fire exacerbated by the climate emergency, and by those industries that take from the land but give nothing back.

We see the increasing numbers of ever larger, ever fiercer bushfires.

We see the rivers run dry.

We see the oceans filled with rubbish and toxins.

We are in a crisis that poses an unparalleled threat to the sustainability of life in this land.

This crisis poses a threat to the environment, the economy, and our health.

It also poses a threat to the human rights of all Australians and our children and grandchildren.

How can we – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous alike – enjoy freedom, justice and peace if our land is burning?

But we First Nations have the knowledge that can help heal this country.

Our Indigenous knowledge could help halt and turn back the destruction we see.

As Murrandoo Yanner, a prominent man and activist from North Queensland said recently (quoted in an article by Alexis Wright in the New York Times)¹:

“The greatest thing we have to offer today is our humanity, because this is all we ever had.”

This evening I want to talk about how the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* provides a roadmap not just for healing past injustices, but also for creating a future where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge can be reintegrated into the life of the nation.

Let me take you back almost three years to May 2017, when several hundred Aboriginal delegates met at Uluru in the heart of this land.

We were there to consider proposals for Constitutional reform, proposals that genuinely recognise our place here as First Peoples.

This meeting, however significant, was not the first step: it followed an extensive process of Regional Dialogues around the country held over the year leading up to the Convention at Uluru.

These Regional Dialogues were the first time in Australia's history that we as First Nations sat down across the nation in a formal manner to deliberate on constitutional matters.

As such, they were a significant – if much belated – response to our exclusion from the process that led to the adoption of the Australian Constitution in 1901.

Participants in the Regional Dialogues and those at Uluru showed overwhelming consensus around three proposals.

First, for a constitutionally established representative body that would give First Nations a Voice directly to the Federal Parliament.

The establishment of a Makarrata Commission to supervise the making of Treaties with us.

At the same time, a process of local and regional Truth-telling which could form the basis for genuine reconciliation.

¹ Alexis Wright (2020) *Want to Stop Australia's Fires? Listen to Aboriginal People*, **New York Times**, 15 January 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/15/opinion/australia-fires-aboriginal-people.html>)

These three things – Voice – Treaty – Truth – were the key consensus demands that arose from the Dialogues, and were captured in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.

The delegates consciously addressed the *Uluru Statement* to the Australian people.

This was based on a faith that ordinary Australians of good will, if they heard our voice, would not turn away from us – just as they did not in the 1967 Referendum when over 90% of Australians voted 'yes' to change the constitution to ensure that, amongst other things, we were to be counted as Australians for the first time.

The immediate response from many of those in politics and the media to the Uluru Statement showed the wisdom of our Delegates in seeking to speak directly to the Australian people.

The carefully thought out and extensively debated proposals for truth telling and treaty making were attacked by many mainstream commentators as if the history of dispossession didn't happen.

The proposal to establish a Voice to the Federal Parliament was immediately and wrongly painted as an attempt to establish a third chamber of Parliament, and was dismissed out of hand by our then Prime Minister.

But the proposal to establish a Voice to Parliament through constitutional reform is not an attempt to set up a third house of Parliament.

And it is not an attempt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to gain something at the expense of non-Indigenous Australians.

Instead, it is something that could be of great benefit to all of us.

Of course, we believe that it would lead to better, more effective processes to address the intergenerational disadvantage that many of our communities suffer.

It would address the long-standing historical inequity by which we are effectively excluded from many of the forums in which decisions are made about our lives.

The Voice to Parliament would address this imbalance at a national level.

It would be of great symbolic and practical value to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

However, in addition, I believe that the Voice to Parliament could be a gift of great value to the Australian people as a whole.

It could be a place where we bring our stories and our knowledge to the symbolic centre of contemporary government.

And this country could really use our knowledge now, particularly when it comes to looking after the environment on which all of our lives and economy are based.

Our Indigenous knowledge could help halt and turn back the destruction we see.

The bushfires – well, if there's one thing us mob know about, it's fire: how to use it creatively to promote life and productivity, how to manage it, how to prevent it becoming destructive and harmful.

The rivers – we have always known how to manage them, how to take the water we need, but always leave enough for other living creatures.

The oceans and the reef – we have thousands of years' experience looking after them sustainably.

I'm not saying we have all the answers, but I can say that as First Nations people, we have accumulated 65,000 years or more of knowledge about how to care for this land.

The Voice to Parliament, enshrined in the Constitution, would be a permanent place in which to share that knowledge, and use it to help all people now living here, and to help prevent the kind of suffering we have seen in last few months.

This is the promise held out by the Delegates who gathered at Uluru, trusting in the decency and sense of justice of the Australian people.

But I want to contrast what the delegates asked for and what the current Government is offering.

The Government is setting up a process for establishing a voice to government through legislation.

But as we have seen so many times in the past, a body established by legislation can be just as easily abolished by legislation.

What the Delegates at Uluru asked for is different.

What the Uluru Statement asks for is a Voice to Parliament that is enshrined in the Constitution, because this will make it a permanent part of the life of the nation, and not subject to the whims of the government of the day.

What the Uluru statement asks for is real constitutional reform, not the status quo where our representative bodies can be dissolved at the stroke of a pen.

What the Statement asks for is a Constitutionally enshrined Voice also recognises us as sovereign peoples.

Because, we are Australia's First Peoples.

This is our place.

And we are not going anywhere.

So my main request of you here this evening is to support the Delegates who gathered at Uluru three years ago and support the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.

Support its call for a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament.

Accept it as a gift from our First Peoples to all Australians in the spirit of justice and reconciliation.

Thank you.