Keynote Address

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Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters

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

We are story-tellers.

As First Nations people, we have 65,000 years or more of kinship and cosmology and caring for this land.

Over these immeasurable periods of time we have adapted and thrived in all the diverse environments of this continent – from the tropical savannahs, to the rainforests, the woodlands, the desert, the cold country of the south.

How have our numerous diverse peoples made sense of the landscape, how have we survived and adapted for so long in so may places?

Simply, through story-telling.

Our tradition of responding to the world and understanding ourselves through story goes way back, and it continues today.

A vast network of interconnected stories knit our peoples together across the huge distances of this land.

We tell stories of creation, of the Country, of ourselves, our families, our neighbours.

We tell stories about the plants and animals we share the continent with, we tell stories about the stars, the moon, the sun, the seasons.

We tell stories to understand the deepest mysteries of life and existence.

We tell stories to understand our own experience.

We tell stories to make each other laugh, to comfort each other, to make sense of the day's events, and simply for the fun of it, to pass the time.

For many of us, we still find a story, a narrative to be the easiest way of getting across what we are trying to say.

And the great thing about our stories is that – like all good stories –they are not exclusive: you don't have to choose which one to believe.

For example, my story.

I am an Alyawarre woman, of Stolen Generations heritage.

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

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.

Here she was prepared for domestic work: to be a slave in other words

She was never taught to read or write.

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.

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

And for me, that story led out of Darwin.

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

It 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.

That's my story – or part of it! – and that's an important part of how I make sense of the world.

All of you have your own stories – the people and places you've come from, the things that have shaped who you are, the significant events, the way you see the world and your place in it.

Some of those stories will have some common points with my own.

The Stolen Generations experience, for example, I am sure is a shared part of many of the family stories in this room today.

There will also, of course, be significant differences in our stories – each one is unique!

But we don't have to say that because we have different stories, one of them must be true and the other false – we accept the great diversity and network of stories can live alongside each other, informing and enriching each other without denying each other.

That is what it means for me when I say we are story tellers.

I want contrast this rich tradition of narrative and storytelling with what we find in Australia today.

I think we have a profound failure as a nation share stories that make sense of our past, help us deal with the present and imagine a better future.

It seems to me that the national narrative – a shared pool of stories about Australia – is quite thin.

Captain Cook; the convicts; the Eureka Stockade; Gallipoli; the Kokoda Trail and we're about done!

This is strange because the stories of Australia – beginning with our own First Nations stories – are as rich and diverse as anywhere in the world.

As Noel Pearson has eloquently described it[1], there are three waves of people who contribute their stories to this place:

- our ancient First Peoples' (65,000 years or more),
- those people who came in 1788 and after, and
- the peoples who have come from out of Europe and Asia and who continue to try to come us today, often fleeing persecution and seeking a better life.

We have some great story tellers from all of these waves of peoples: writers, artists, poets, dancers, and song writers.

Yet comparatively few of these stories – particularly those from the first and the third groups – seem to get into the national consciousness.

The stories are out there – but they are kept behind closed doors, so to speak.

Part of the issue is that there seems to be an unwillingness by those in power to accept a diversity of narratives around these stories: to hear voices that contradict the official line.

The reaction to the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* is a good example of this.

In May 2017 several hundred Aboriginal delegates met at Uluru at the heart of the continent to consider proposals for Constitutional reform that genuinely recognises our place as First Peoples.

The Convention at Uluru followed an extensive process of Regional Dialogues around the country.

Participants in the Regional Dialogues and those at the Uluru Convention 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.

Second, for the establishment of a Makarrata Commission to supervise the making of Treaties with us.

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

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

Now, the Uluru Statement was in itself a major event in the story of this nation.

It arose from the Regional Dialogues which were unprecedented in Australia's history: never before have we as First Nations sat down across the nation in a formal manner to deliberate on constitutional matters.

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.

But in addition, the Uluru Statement's demands were fundamentally for the inclusion of our voices and our stories in the national narrative.

In particular, the third demand – a process of truth telling – was fundamental.

It demanded a shared, truthful understanding of our shared history, of how we have come to where we stand today.

The true story of colonisation must be told, must be heard, must be acknowledged.

Because, this is still not the case.

This is difficult and painful territory – for us as well as for mainstream Australia.

This experience has been analysed by Jill Stauffer in her 2015 book, *Ethical loneliness: the injustice of not being heard*[2]. She said in that book:

[quote]

> *Responding well to others, especially survivors of wrongdoing, may require that we open ourselves to hearing something other than what we expect or want to hear*

[unquote]

Hearing this history is necessary before we can come to some true reconciliation, some genuine healing for both sides.

Unfortunately, the response from many of those in power in Australia at the time showed that they were not open to hearing our voices, or our stories.

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 dismissed out of hand.

The carefully thought out and extensively debated proposals for truth telling and treaty making were similarly discarded by many mainstream commentators, as if the history of dispossession and the attacks on our continuing sovereignty didn't happen.

Our stories, our narrative seemed to be seen as an invention to make non-Aboriginal Australia feel guilty.

But the process of truth–telling is not about guilt.

Guilt is a debilitating emotion that stops us moving forward.

What the Uluru Statement demanded is about respect and acknowledgement of our stories, of their inclusion in the national narrative.

And of course, this is not just the story of our First Peoples – it is the story of all of us, of all of Australia, and we need to own it.

Then we can move forward together.

The proposal to establish a Voice to Parliament through a constitutional referendum is part and parcel of this process.

All too often we have been excluded from the key decisions that are made about our lives.

As Romlie Mokak, former CEO of The Lowitja Institute, said recently:

> *Power in the policy world sits with others, not with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It resides outside of the domain of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We must redress the power imbalance*[3]*.*

The Voice to Parliament would address this long-standing historical inequity.

It would led to better, more effective policies and programs, ones which worked with us rather than (as so often) against us.

However, in addition to these substantive benefits, establishing such a body has profound symbolic value.

Symbolically, it recognises the unique place of First Peoples in Australian history and in contemporary Australian society.

It formally acknowledges our place here.

We would no longer remain ignored, invisible, powerless and voiceless.

It would establish a significant national narrative about working together – about a genuine two-way conversation.

And it would also be a place where we could 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.

For tens of thousands of years, we have cared for and sustainably regulated the natural ecosystems of this continent.

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

However, colonisation has profoundly undermined our ability to care for Country.

Everywhere we look, we see the results in the increasing damage being done to the living systems that sustain life, through climate change and industries that take from the land but give nothing back.

We see increasing numbers of ever fiercer bushfires.

We see rivers run dry.

We see oceans increasingly filled with rubbish and toxins.

But we First Nations have the knowledge – transmitted over generations through our stories – that could help heal this country.

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 know 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.

But all too often, our Indigenous knowledges are ignored, marginalised.

So the Voice to Parliament could be also a place where we share those diverse knowledges, use them to help all of the people now living here.

It could be a gift of great value to the Australian people……

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

They consciously directed these words to all Australians, and I pass them on to you today so you can hear their voice.

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 aliened 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.

Endnotes

1 Noel Pearson 2017 'Declaration of Australia: three epic strands in a grand narrative'. *The Australian* 16 September 2017

2 Stauffer J (2015) *Ethical loneliness: the injustice of not being heard.* Columbia University Press, New York

3 Romlie Mokak, 'A Question of Value: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health' (Speech delivered at the 2016 Cranlana Programme Medicine & Society Oration, Melbourne, 10 August 2016).