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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Closing the Gap

SPEECH

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Speaker Albanese, Anthony, MP	Question No.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the Opposition) (11:33): I begin by acknowledging that we meet on the land of the Ngunawal and Ngambri people—land that was, is and always will be Aboriginal land—and I pay my respects to their elders, past, present and emerging. I recognise the many First Nations people in the galleries today, and I acknowledge my First Nations colleagues and fellow parliamentarians: the member for Barton, Linda Burney; Senators Patrick Dodson, Malarndirri McCarthy and Jacqui Lambie; and, of course, Minister Ken Wyatt, the first Aboriginal Minister for Indigenous Australians.

Since 2008 I've sat in this place on this day and I've listened to fine speeches from prime ministers and opposition leaders alike. Afterwards, so often I've heard members of the press gallery say that days like today show the parliament at its best. But if this day adds up to nothing but sentiment and speeches, if this occasion becomes merely a ceremonial renewal of good intentions and a promise to do better next time, that is so far short of parliament at its best and so far short of Australia at our best. In the end it is not the Prime Minister's voice or the opposition leader's voice that should be heard on this day on this issue; it is the voice of the First Australians. It is the voice of over 60,000 years of culture, story, community and kinship. It is the voice articulating the torment of our powerlessness, from the Uluru statement, that must be heard—over 60,000 years of love for this country, their country, our country, the continent that we share.

Enshrining the voice in our Constitution is a great and unifying mission, more than a century overdue. But that recognition is not the end of the road. It must be the clarion bell of a change from what has been. Enshrining the voice to parliament will be the work of one successful referendum, but listening to the voice, ensuring that the voice is heard in this House and the Senate, ensuring that the voice speaks in the design and delivery of policy, ensuring that the voice advocates the rights and interests of First Nations peoples, is a task of national political leadership.

The Coalition of Peaks has already spoken up and said clearly what government needs to do to improve services for our First Nations people. The three reform priorities that they have outlined are: formal partnerships between government and First Nations people on closing the gap; growing First Nations community-controlled services; and improving mainstream service delivery to First Nations people. Change begins with listening. The Closing the Gap statement to parliament commemorates the anniversary of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's historic apology to the Stolen Generations on behalf of this nation, as the first item of business in this chamber. That day, as Leader of the House of Representatives, remains my proudest day as a member of this parliament, and I know there are people across the chamber who feel exactly the same way. The nation came together in unity. Workplaces paused. Schools assembled. Crowds cheered. Tears were shed. And we were stronger for it.

It was clear that there was inequality and disparity that needed reconciliation, that there were key indicators showing the disadvantage resulting from more than two centuries of dispossession, discrimination, racism and sometimes violent oppression. This was an indictment upon us as a modern nation. There were many gaps, but some appeared more urgent than others. These indicators include life expectancy, child mortality, school attendance, reading and numeracy, employment, early childhood, and the attainment of year 12 or equivalent—practical measures with targets. It is tragic that after 12 years we aren't on track for five of these seven targets, including life expectancy, child mortality and employment. It is an indictment that, of all these targets, we're on track for only two. The problem was not that the targets were too ambitious; they were not. They were modest. And, in the spirit of Paul Keating's 1992 Redfern speech, I will say that the failure to meet the targets is our failure, not theirs.

The fact is that the two targets that are being met are welcome, particularly the finishing of year 12, as the Prime Minister has said. What that shows is that progress is possible, but the fact is that we can—and we must—do better. We speak of closing the gap, but the truth is that, on so many of these measures, there isn't a gap; there's a chasm. And it doesn't end there. Rates of First Nations people in custody are still way too high. First Nations adults are just two per cent of the population, but they make up 27 per cent of the prison population. Suicide,

particularly among young people, is still ripping families and communities apart. The number of children being put in out-of-home care is a national shame and is a consequence of policy failure by governments.

We want to work with the government, but we do expect some urgency, passion and diligence to be brought into this space. We cannot keep coming back here, year in, year out, wringing our hands. The new way forward has to be led by First Nations people in meaningful and mutually agreed partnerships. That way forward has been mapped out for us in the Uluru statement—a document of unadorned power to which Labor is fully committed. That way forward is voice, truth-telling and agreement-making. When the member for Hasluck was appointed Minister for Indigenous Australians, Labor welcomed it as the right decision, and we wish him well. Indeed, when I spoke at the Garma festival in East Arnhem Land last year, I expressed the hope that his colleagues would give him the support that he needed and deserved.

I am concerned that this process may end in disappointment. We have before us an opportunity for bipartisanship that we cannot afford to miss. Our international credibility is linked to our integrity with First Nations people. The minister and the Prime Minister have the opportunity to do something that they will be remembered for, and we will support them. However, as Linda Burney has put it, there is a danger that the Uluru statement will end up being remembered as a noble moment but not a turning point, and we cannot allow that to happen. At its most basic level, the denial of a constitutionally enshrined voice is a denial of the Australian instinct for a fair go. Despite all the tests it is put through, the instinct for a fair go remains one of the great defining points of our national character.

The voice is a modest request that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples be consulted about issues and policies that directly affect them: that's what it is. It is not a third chamber. It is not deliberative. It merely seeks to put a structure around what we as Australians would all regard as decency, courtesy and respect—that, where something is going to have an impact on someone else, we talk to them. That's what the voice is—nothing greater than that but also nothing less. It shouldn't be beyond our capacity to take the hand of friendship which has been reached out to us and is waiting to be shaken, because that is an act of extraordinary generosity, given the history of our great nation over the last 200-plus years.

Another element is truth. We must reflect on the truth told to us by Mabo, Wick, Timber Creek, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the *Bringing them home report* and countless other inquiries. The truth told by Prime Minister Keating in the Redfern speech was another powerful acknowledgement of the reality of our history. Until we truly acknowledge our history, we are shackled to its demons. Bit by bit, we are closing the gap between reality and the comforting fictions of colonisation and settlement—a modernity that we've created for ourselves. Embarking upon truth-telling will hopefully help us all towards liberation and the betterment of our nation.

We have been moving slowly beyond our erasure of Indigenous achievement. We are putting behind us what William Stanner called the 'cult of forgetfulness' and the 'great Australian silence'. Look at what Bruce Pascoe has done with *Dark Emu* and our place in this land. In this one extraordinary book, Bruce has unearthed the knowledge that we already had in our possession but chose to bury along the way. Ignorance feeds in darkness. Bruce has simply reminded us where the light switch is. With the flick of that switch a complex mosaic of ancient nations is suddenly laid out before us in light as bright as those early European explorers first saw it and recorded it.

The voice cannot be the end of the story but must be followed by truth telling and the telling of that truth must be entire. Through it we must come to grips with the realities of our colonial past that began with the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. Life could never be the same again. Not for those watching from the shore, the latest in this continent's unbroken line of generations stretching back over so many millennia, the world's oldest, continuing culture. How proud are we of that? Not for the new arrivals, representatives of what they thought of as the old world, sent here in fact to a world that was far older. As two worlds came together that day a series of collisions were set in train. And as a new society slowly and unsteadily rose to its feet a mosaic of ancient societies was brought to its knees. From that point, for our First Nations people it was a history shaped by brutality, a brutality sometimes borne of misunderstanding but more often it was not, a brutality that has echoed darkly through every generation that has followed. Embracing the truth isn't always easy. It is harder to remain wedded to the corrosive illusions of a history that is only part told.

The last documented massacre in Australia was the Coniston massacre in 1928. Its second-last survivor, Mr Japanangka, dancer, singer, craftsman artist, stockman, who lived for a century, only just died on 31 January.

May he rest in peace. Until we have told the truth and cast aside the sort of euphemistic language that will soften a massacre into a mere incident there can be no true reconciliation. A country that is not reconciled is not truly whole and until we are whole our true potential as a nation will continue to elude us.

The liberation of truth must be followed by agreement-making, which the Uluru statement expresses as a makarrata commission. Let that great Yolngu word 'makarrata' spread from East Arnhem Land and fill an entire continent. Let everyone feel what those four syllables hold. What does it mean? Conflict resolution, making peace after a dispute, justice, the path to national treaty—agreements that acknowledge the pre-existing rights of a people in a land where sovereignty was never ceded, and we have it within us to do it.

In 1993 the Native Title Act established Indigenous Land Use Agreements. These are voluntary agreements between native title groups and other parties on the use and management of land and waters—controversial at the time, people will recall. At present there are 1,311 land use agreements that are registered by the National Native Title Tribunal and another 16 have been lodged—all of them positive for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

In 2016 Victoria began a process of devising a state level treaty with the Aboriginal peoples of the state. That same year South Australia's Labor government also began making moves towards a treaty. The ACT has been in an agreement with the Ngunawal people for co-management of Namadgi National Park since 1999. When elected Chief Minister of the Northern Territory in 2016 Michael Gunner declared that his government would 'drive public discussions on a treaty between the Territory and Aboriginal peoples'. He has appointed that great Australian Mick Dodson as Treaty Commissioner. Queensland took an important step forward just last weekend, with the tabling of the path to treaty report, outlining recommendations from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the state.

It all brings us back to makarrata. On top of everything else, those four syllables hold within them the hope of self-determination, not top-down but bottom-up change. We will never close the gap until self-determination is at the heart of what we do. There's been a great improvement: to hear governments talk about working with First Nations people not just for them. We heard that again with the Prime Minister's address today. But this must be a starting point, not the conclusion.

First Nations people and organisations under their control should be the ones setting the agenda for how services are delivered, defining the targets and taking the lead in delivering services. The current process with the peaks is a historic opportunity. The government needs to make the most of it and follow up with real investment in services, including in health and in housing. I want to acknowledge the role played by the Coalition of Peaks, led by Pat Turner, who is here with us on the floor of the chamber today.

We need to listen to the concerns of First Nations people, not least about the punitive and unfair CDP program that has caused such hurt in communities across the north. Before last year's election, Labor promised to abolish it and develop a new program with First Nations people—a program that might have some of the same features as the old CDEP, such as proper wages and wages top-up with unexpended funds being reinvested into the local communities; a program run by local community organisations. At Garma, I called for the government to adopt this approach and make it bipartisan. This, in my view, would be consistent with what First Nations people have been calling for and would be perfectly consistent with the elements of the Prime Minister's address here this morning.

We need to enable First Nations people to play their responsible role in their own destinies. We've seen among First Nations people in New Zealand, North America and Scandinavia that self-determination is at the heart of closing the gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous citizens. We see it here too. Let me mention just a few practical examples: The Glen centre, a leading drug and alcohol treatment facility on the Central Coast, and I acknowledge the health minister Greg Hunt's role in making this possible; The Arnhem Land Progress Association, which employs a large proportion of Aboriginal people and creates jobs right across northern Australia; Waminda, which delivers culturally appropriate services for women and their children on the New South Wales South Coast; the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, which provides social, emotional, cultural and physical health services in Central Australia, improving the lives of Aboriginal people in the process; the Ceduna Koonibba Aboriginal Health Service, the success of which is underlined by the fact that 40 per cent of the people who come through the doors now are non-Aboriginal; the Durri Aboriginal Medical Service in

Kempsey on the New South Wales North Coast; and, in Torres Strait, Mura Kosker Sorority is working to make families stronger and keep children safe.

Self-determination isn't just a theory. We can see it in practice. We can see it in terms of its success. And when you have successes to point towards, it encourages the overcoming of the areas where we do need to do better. We see it every day in the successful approaches delivered by Aboriginal community controlled health, housing, child support, legal and family violence prevention services across the nation. We see it in this amazing new generation of young Indigenous doctors, lawyers, managers and community developers, graduating from university and TAFE colleges and fanning out across the country to serve their people.

We have so much potential, if only we can summon the courage to take our next steps forward. To Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, I say: you have been patient, patient beyond any ordinary level of comprehension. Your tenacity and your patience have been tested and your generosity has been truly humbling. As a nation we are tantalisingly close to the cusp of something new—not the reinvention of Australia but the realisation of a greater one, an Australia that draws into its heart the generosity to heal and be healed, to honour and be honoured, to find courage to begin the process of truth-telling and national treaty-making, an Australia that is closing every one of the gaps, every one of the chasms that divide and belittle us all.

When we consider all of our achievements as a nation we should be confident that these challenges are not beyond us. Let us take them up and let our modern nation stand whole, proud and reconciled alongside this continent's many ancient ones. As that great Yolngu man, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, put it:

... at Uluru we started a fire, a fire that we hope burns bright for Australia.

Given recent months, can I say this: it is the one fire that we hope will never go out. Let us come together as a parliament and stoke its flame. I am an optimist. I believe that we can get support for a voice to parliament. It used to be said that we would never get an apology. We did get an apology and we are all the stronger for it. A voice to parliament would make our nation even stronger.