



Introduction to Noel Pearson

Dean Parkin, National Museum of Australia

17 March 2021

Aunty Jude, I want to thank you for your very warm welcome to country, I pay my respects to you, your elders past and present, and I bring greetings from my people, the Quandamooka people from Minjerribah or North Stradbroke Island as you may know it, just off the coast of Brisbane.

Thank you Mat for the introduction.

As mentioned, my name is Dean Parkin and I am the Director of From the Heart, a campaign for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

I want to thank you all for attending tonight, particularly those who have travelled a long way to be here.

It is my role to introduce Guugu Yimithirr man Noel Pearson who many of you know well and Vicki Morta, a Ngadjon-jii woman, who will both speak about the importance of a constitutionally-enshrined Voice.

In the midst of the flurry of the campaign, I've been doing a lot of personal reflection recently.

I turned 40 last week and there's nothing like a birthday with a zero in it to consider one's own mortality.

Part of this is a normal human contemplation of one's own life and death.

But that does not explain the burning, prickling feeling I had when thinking about the next three to four decades of work ahead.

You see, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people think of time across generations – what we experience now is part of a continuum from what has gone before and what has yet to come.

We are connected to both past, present and future.

We are connected in a spiritual sense, and also in gritty, real-world politics.

The political and policy decisions of the past play out in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People today; the latest scorecard recording these impacts is the Closing the Gap strategy.

Closing the Gap doesn't tell the full story of the hopes and fears, the successes and failures, the optimism and cynicism that our ebb and flow through our families and communities.

However there is one story that cuts through to the core of our current challenge and justifies in plain terms why a Voice enshrined in the Constitution is our nation's most critical policy reform.

Among the announcements of the recently 'Refreshed' Closing the Gap strategy, a new target was set to reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults held in incarceration by at least 15 per cent by 2031.



If nothing changes and this target trajectory extends beyond 2031, the incarceration rate gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians does not close until 2093.

Look around at every single Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person here tonight.

Whether they are our established leaders, myself or the brilliant young people.

Statistically-speaking, not a single one of us will live to see equality on incarceration.

No matter how hard we try, no matter how much talent or grim determination we commit, the highest ambition our nation's democracy and bureaucracy can muster is to merely break-even in 72 years' time.

There is no policy area in our nation in greater need of disruption than Indigenous affairs.

So when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were finally asked, at the back-end of a decade-long process, what meaningful constitutional recognition meant to us, we delivered the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its call for a constitutionally-enshrined Voice.

We brushed constitutional symbolism aside and reached for a practical structural reform that has a real impact on lives.

Our democratic and bureaucratic institutions are passively settling in for the next seven decades; it is logical that we call for a Voice that has similar continuity and certainty.

Only a constitutionally-enshrined Voice can hold those institutions to account over the long-term.

Over the last few weeks, we have seen the anger and frustration of women across the country who have been ignored, silenced, discriminated against and abused.

It is a story that is so very familiar to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in our communities and for too long have sought inclusion, respect and representation.

They are more likely to be at the frontline of violence, sexual assault and the forced removal of children.

They have been advocating for decades for changes in their community, in policy and in law.

If nothing else, a constitutionally-enshrined Voice must elevate and centre these Voices that are far too often ignored.

Ensuring gender equity is essential but by itself is not enough.

There must be a level of accountability to ensure that when they speak, their voice is heard and acted upon so change actually happens.

Let me be clear – the current institutions are not used to this kind of accountability for outcomes.

Life will be decidedly less comfortable with our aunties at the table demanding better outcomes for themselves and their families.

As it should be.



I have already carried the Uluru Statement in a funeral procession to farewell of one of its signatories.

Every year that passes, every delay, excuse and faint-hearted half-measure means more of those signatories never seeing their vision realised.

The Reverend Dr Martin Luther King's cautionary words in that sweltering summer of 1963 perfectly capture the urgency of this very moment in our own history:

This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.

Yet there are those peddling gradualism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today by proposing to only legislate a Voice without first holding a referendum to enshrine it in the Constitution.

We are told to accept the realpolitik of change, as if the practical realities of our current condition are not staring us in the face, in our communities, on a daily basis.

We are told we must 'try' a legislated Voice before we earn enough credit to 'buy' it at a referendum at some vague point in the future.

Can anyone imagine such a patronizing condition being put on a proposal for a republic?

We are told of the fears of a failed referendum, about what that will do to our nation and the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within it.

In other words, in order to avoid failure, we are better off never trying in the first place.

This is a dismal argument that shrinks into its own self-defeatism.

It also assumes the worst of the Australian people; that they are incapable of finding it within their hearts and minds to support a Voice at a referendum.

Untroubled by a lack of evidence or expertise, the gradualists would have us walk away from a generational opportunity for reform based on nothing more than Denis Denuto's 'vibe of the thing'.

Our campaign research shows that as of June last year, only 17% would vote no in a referendum on a Voice.

56% would vote yes, with the remainder undecided.

The research also found those undecided voters were more likely to support a Voice once they were aware of it and understood it.

The government is currently seeking submissions on Voice co-design options to determine what Voice might look like and how it might operate.

Even though the question of constitutional enshrinement is not within the scope of this process, the vast majority of submissions from the people of Australia support a Voice that is enshrined in the Constitution.

Our call for a Voice is animating that fundamentally Australian idea of a fair-go.



The people know it is time for our nation to extend a fair go to Aboriginal and Torres Strait people through a historic referendum on a Voice.

We are not naive to the work needed to grow and consolidate that support but ours is a campaign of opportunity and possibility.

On this, as with so many other issues, the people are way ahead of the politics.

This is where an unspoken gap exists between Australians inspired by the Uluru Statement and the political and bureaucratic gradualists:

It is one of imagination.

Addressing the very real social and economic challenges is only part of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

At a deeper level, it imagines a future in which the fullness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity enriches our shared sense of nationhood.

In the midst of incredible uncertainty, more and more Australians from all walks of life can sense a great generational gift within their grasp:

A serious, practical reform that offers our best chance at Closing the Gap and a historic, unifying moment in our history.

It is a cause worth fighting for.

.....

I'd now like to invite my friend and collaborator, Noel Pearson, to the stage to give tonight's keynote speech.

Normally at this stage I would launch into a long list of Noel's accomplishments and leadership roles.

I would call out his powerful oratory and critical thinking that defines one of the great minds of our nation.

But I hope he doesn't mind me describing him as one of the great oikophiles.

It is better than it sounds, trust me.

Oikophilia is the love of one's home.

From education and welfare reform to land rights and a constitutionally-enshrined Voice, Noel's life work is rooted in his love for his Guugu Yimithirr people, the Cape York region and our nation.

Please welcome Mr Noel Pearson.

.....