
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS PEOPLES FROM ACROSS AUSTRALIA MAKE HISTORIC STATEMENT

by Pat Anderson

Coming from all points of the southern sky, over 250 Delegates gathered at the 2017 First Nations National Constitutional Convention and today made a historic statement from the heart in hopes of improving the lives of future generations. The conversation at Uluru built on six months of discussions held around the country where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples considered five options presented in the Referendum Council's discussion paper. When asked what constitutional recognition means to them, First Nations peoples told the Council they don't want recognition if it means a simple acknowledgement, but rather constitutional reform that makes a real difference in their communities.

At the Regional Dialogues consistent themes emerged and these reflected decades of calls for change. These were used to develop Guiding Principles (see below). A ruler was run across all options raised over the course of the Dialogues and three emerged as meeting all the Principles—these were truth-telling, treaty and a voice to Parliament. These became the focus of discussion at Uluru. Building on years of work and activism, this process gave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples the chance to have their say on constitutional reform and the model they would support moving forward. Established by both the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition, the Referendum Council were charged with seeking out the views of First Nations people from across the country and reporting back. Today in Uluru, the spiritual heart of Australia, Delegates—across section of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from around Australia—adopted the 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' with a standing ovation. Delegates agreed that sovereignty has never been ceded or extinguished.

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, Delegates believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through, while giving First Nations people more control over their destiny. Throughout the Convention and preceding Dialogues, Delegates have spoken passionately about the challenges and structural problems communities face including health, housing, high

rates of suicide, community closures, Indigenous Advancement Strategy, education, community development program, youth detention and adult incarceration. These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem.

The Statement calls for establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution and establishment of a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations that includes truth-telling about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's history. Delegations have nominated a working group to build on the momentum created by the Convention, to take up the roadmap laid down by the Uluru Statement and ensure its implementation following the Referendum Council's report to Government at the end of June. The Referendum Council's full report to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition was delivered on 30 June.

The Referendum Council would like to thank the Anangu people for allowing us to meet on their land.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Does not diminish Aboriginal sovereignty and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty.
2. Involves substantive, structural reform.
3. Advances self-determination and the standards established under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
4. Recognises the status and rights of First Nations.
5. Tells the truth of history.
6. Does not foreclose on future advancement.
7. Does not waste the opportunity of reform.
8. Provides a mechanism for First Nations agreement-making.
9. Has the support of First Nations.
10. Does not interfere with current and future legal arrangements.

About the Referendum Council the Referendum Council was jointly appointed by the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Leader of the Opposition, Bill Shorten on 7 December 2015. The Referendum Council's job is to advise the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition on progress and next steps towards constitutional reform. A discussion paper has been released that outlines the main questions for Australians to consider.

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