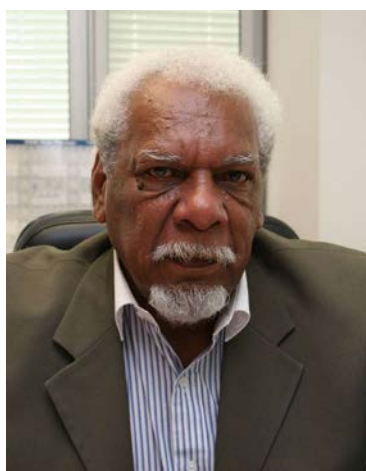


A tribute to Sol Bellear

## Memories of the Redfern Speech



Sol Bellear AM, the long-serving chairperson of the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern, a staunch advocate for land rights and a Bundjalung man from Mullumbimby, died on 30 November 2017. In a media statement, President Arthur Moses SC said:

‘We, as a nation, are diminished by the unexpected loss of this inspirational Australian. Sol dedicated his life to the betterment of Indigenous people. He fought tirelessly against injustice and inequality, which, sadly, continues to be a stain on our nation’s character. Sol Bellear enjoyed the respect and admiration of lawyers across New South Wales, young and old . . . In more recent times, he supported the Uluru Statement from the Heart.’

Sol had accepted an invitation to address a function in the Bar Common Room on 11 December 2017 to mark the 25th Anniversary of Paul Keating’s Redfern Park Speech. As a mark of respect to Sol’s family and friends, that function was held over until March 2018.

Sol’s friends at the NSW Aboriginal Land Council said he was looking forward to the Bar Association function and carefully prepared what he proposed to say. Sol agreed to be interviewed on site at Redfern Park, about Paul Keating’s speech. The following is a transcript of the last interview Sol ever did. His family has agreed to share it with *Bar News*. On behalf of our readers, we thank them.

**ALC** Sol Bellear, most people above a certain age know where they were when Paul Keating gave his Redfern speech. But you were actually right here. What do you remember of the day?

**Sol** Well, thwat’s it. People say that they remember where they were at the time. I was right there on stage with him, and along with Stan Grant. Stan Grant of course was the MC. The day itself was just something unbelievable. It was just like a gathering, a prime minister giving a speech. Yes, it was in Redfern; yes, it was about Aboriginal people. But then into the speech, it just erupted. I mean that speech would have to be one of the most brilliant speeches ever, ever in Australia, if not the southern hemisphere.

**ALC** You were given a look at the speech before Paul Keating delivered it. What did you think when you read it? Did you think it would have the same impact as it did when you were looking at it on the page?

**Sol** No. I went through it and I had a look at a lot of different speeches that prime ministers or ministers were going to make. Being with ATSIC at the time, they just sent them across as a matter of courtesy. I thought this is just another speech, another prime minister, another speech, another Aboriginal issue, another promise, another feel-good situation and that’s it. But Paul Keating, he’s an orator, one of the best Australia has ever

seen. The way that he delivered that on the day, it just broadened my whole horizon again about the Australian parliament and about non-Aboriginal people living in Australia.

**ALC** How did you come to be standing next to him on that day?

**Sol** Well, I gave a speech, the introductory speech before him. I was the deputy chair of ATSIC. It was the Year of the World’s Indigenous Peoples speech. That’s why I thought yes, feel-good, make us feel good for the day, if not a couple of days and that’s it. But I gave an introductory speech beforehand as the deputy chair of ATSIC and it just went from there.

**ALC** You spent some time with the prime minister before he gave this speech. How would you describe his mood on the day in the lead-up to that speech?

**Sol** It was funny, because we’d met up about half an hour or an hour beforehand and like you said, I’d read the speech a couple of weeks beforehand and a week again later on. But we caught up and he was in a very good mood. He was saying it was so important to him. He’d had quite a few wins with the Reconciliation Council. See, this was 1992. So in 1990, we had the National Aboriginal Health Strategy was launched and then we got into Reconciliation, and then we had the Mabo deci-

sion. So on Indigenous issues, particularly here in Australia, Paul Keating was buoyed. I mean he was getting ticks all over the place and he just really, really carried out what Aboriginal people wanted. He was so buoyant about the day; he really was. He thought this is another contribution I can make and hopefully have the rest of Australia come along with him.

**ALC** When you listen to the audio of the speech all these years later, there's a point in the speech where it seems the crowd's mood shifts from jeering to cheering. Is that actually what happened when you were there?

**Sol** In the beginning, probably two paragraphs into Paul's speech, the crowd probably had the same feelings I had—oh yes, here is just another prime minister welcoming the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples. But then he started getting into some things, saying things, and he was very passionate, emotional perhaps. I just want to quote some of the things that got us going and the way the emotion that he put into this, where he said: 'And, as I say, the starting point might be to recognise the problem starts with us, non-Aboriginal Australians. It begins, I think, with an act of recognition, recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases, the alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice and our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask, how would I feel if this was done to us?' When he got to the part where he said 'we took the children from their mothers', that's when the crowd erupted. Aboriginal people, non-Aboriginal people, they just knew that this man is very, very genuine; this man as the prime minister and this man's government had made a very, very fair dinkum commitment. The rest of the speech when he talked about the treatment that British people have got, the Irish people that resettled here, the Greeks, the Italians, the Yugoslavs, all the migrants that had come to Australia, he said that we still haven't got that justice for the Aboriginal people that have been here for over 50,000 years. It was genuine, very, very genuine. I think today, 25 years later, he still has that genuine commitment and feeling for Aboriginal people. I think we've just got to look at Barangaroo. He was an architect behind all that, to make sure that it was named after Barangaroo.

**ALC** How was he after he gave the speech? Did he know that he'd made a real impact? Or did he just see it as another speech, move onto the next thing?

**Sol** I think Paul Keating, prime minister, or Paul Keating, citizen, he knows when he's given a great speech. He knows when he's got the public there along with him. All through that, he had to pause about ten times for the rest of the speech for the applause that he got. He was buoyed. We went down to the Town Hall for a reception there after the speech and he was just on cloud nine. Normally, he'd come up and say how did it go, like everybody else, or what did you think? He knew that he was on a winner and he knew. He was just on cloud nine for the rest of the day, and deservedly so.

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*I'm going to get a rock done, I'm going to have the speech printed on it and even in the dead of night, if I have to, I'll come and plant it here, right in the heart of Redfern Park.*

**ALC** Obviously they were very powerful and unflinching words that you just read out. But on the day, he stopped short of making an apology to Aboriginal people. Why do you think that was?

**Sol** I think that was the only disappointing thing for me in that speech. Right at the end, I was thinking now here comes an apology to Aboriginal people. I actually said to Stan Grant after everything had finished, 'I'm still waiting for that apology'. I think that he had to have cabinet approval. I think that there was a whole issue of things would have had to go through the Attorney-General, they would've been thinking about the compensation and all that sort of stuff. As we know, when Kevin Rudd gave the apology to the Stolen Generations, the so-called millions of dollars in compensation and lawsuits, it's just not going to happen. The people of the Stolen Generation, they just wanted that apology. We've seen the emotion at that, the tears and the hugs and the cheers that, yes, we were wrongly done by and we have received an apology.

**ALC** Some people might say when they look back on that speech that they were just words, that they weren't really followed by any actions and that nothing has changed. What do you think? Can words change a country, and did they change them in this case?

**Sol** Absolutely. We look around the world and see some of the top speeches that world leaders have given – they've changed countries, they've changed wars, they've changed the ideology of everything. These were not just words that Paul Keating spoke. This was putting the country on notice that we need to educate ourselves about Aboriginal people, about our history and about our past, all that sort of stuff. No, they weren't just words. Unfortunately, John Howard came in at the next election and a lot of those things, the Reconciliation movement and all that, Howard refused to let his ministers march across the Harbour Bridge and all that sort of stuff. So what Howard and even prime ministers after him, including the current prime minister, have taken those words that Paul Keating gave to Australia and put Australia on notice for, and threw them out. That's the pity. 25 years ago this happened, this speech and those beautiful words; now, we've gone backwards. Our infant mortality rate has gone through the roof. Our health, the gap has widened. We've got

more people incarcerated, particularly our young people and women, more are incarcerated. Land Rights issues have just about come to a halt. Just recently, we have a situation where people met at Uluru and put a clear message through that they wanted a voice in parliament. Without even sitting down and going through the thing properly, the current prime minister has just rejected it completely. That's really, really disgusting and I think Australian people know that they really want to get back in behind those words that Paul Keating brought up. The refugees in Australia are certainly behind us. We need to have our voice listened to. We need to revisit Paul Keating's words and his speech and say there's nothing bad going to happen here about this, let's embrace what Paul Keating said 25 years ago and let's march forward.

**ALC** Sol, we're just sitting close to the site of what was one of the most famous speeches, if not the most famous speech in Australian history. But you'd never know that if you're actually here at Redfern Park. Why do you think that is? Why isn't there any marker for the speech?

**Sol** No. Redfern is the place where modern Aboriginal ideology from the '60s and the '70s, our first Aboriginal legal services, first Aboriginal medical services, children's services, and so it goes, this was the civil rights movement and the human rights movement that happened for Aboriginal people, all begin here in Redfern on the follow-on from the 1967 Referendum. So we were then counted as citizens in 1967. A group of young people came into Redfern and said we're taking this forward to the next level. It was the end of the human rights in South Africa, the anti-Apartheid movement, the anti-Vietnam War, civil rights movement was coming to an end over in the US. More Australian people looked at what was happening overseas and marched for people overseas, and yet things that were happening to Aboriginal people here in Australia were worse than what was happening in some of the countries overseas. So we had to take up the fight, and we did. Keating then came in with this and put the words into action, or put our action into words. Now, come '96 onwards, everything just stopped.

**ALC** But there's no plaque, there's no memorial, there's nothing to actually signify that this speech was given at this place. Do you think that's a bit strange?

**Sol** No. I've been fighting for last 25 years now. I've written to Sydney City Council on the 10th anniversary, the 15th anniversary and the 20th anniversary – didn't even get any recogni-

tion of my correspondence to them. And yes, I'm going to get a rock done, I'm going to have the speech printed on it and even in the dead of night, if I have to, I'll come and plant it here, right in the heart of Redfern Park.

**ALC** So there should be a memorial to the speech here in Redfern?

**Sol** There has got to be a memorial to this area. People have got to know, particularly now the gentrification is happening in Redfern, that this is an Aboriginal stronghold, not just for people of New South Wales, but for Aboriginal people right throughout Australia. All of Aboriginal Australia recognises the contribution that the Aboriginal people of Redfern have made for human rights for Aboriginal people.

**ALC** So finally, Sol, how would you summarise the impact of Paul Keating's Redfern speech?

**Sol** Paul Keating's speech was the most significant speech, prime minister or not, has ever made to Aboriginal people in Australia, and not just to Aboriginal people, but to all of Australia. There was no guilt in it. There were no words there to make people guilty. I think on the day, the non-Aboriginal people in the audience applauded and knew that. We need to have that plaque. We've got plaques, we've got statues for people that invaded our country, for people that shot up other people's countries and all that. Yet one of the most important speeches in Australia's history, there is not one bit of recognition by plaque or anything else to recognise that.

**ALC** Do you think there should be some recognition given to what happened on that day in this place? And if so, how?

**Sol** When we look around this park, we look around all parks all over Australia, we look at cenotaphs all around. We've got statues for people that invaded this country, we've got statues and we've got all these other things for people that invaded this country, invaded other countries, memorials and everything. Yet one of the most significant speeches ever made to all of Australia by a prime minister on behalf of Aboriginal people, there is nothing to recognise it, nothing to bring forward. Here we are, 25 years on from that magnificent speech, and there is not one plaque, not one bit of recognition that could again change this country's thinking towards the world's oldest living people.

**ALC** Thanks very much.

**Sol** Thank you.

It begins, I think, with that act of recognition.

Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing.

We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life.

We brought the diseases. The alcohol.

We committed the murders.

We took the children from their mothers.

We practised discrimination and exclusion.

It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us.

With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds.

We failed to ask - how would I feel if this were done to me?

As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us.