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LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION
SHADOW MINISTER FOR INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS AND ABORIGINAL
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS
MEMBER FOR MARIBYRNONG**

Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the 1967 Referendum and the
25th Anniversary of the Mabo Decision.

**CROWN CONFERENCE HALL
SATURDAY, 27 MAY 2017**

*****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

Good afternoon everybody.

I too, would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land upon which we meet,
I pay my respects to the traditional owners and indeed all elders past, present and
future.

The Prime Minister very graciously acknowledged a lot of the guests here so I won't go
through the same list but simply echo the Prime Ministers words but I do want to say
that as we celebrate anniversaries of half a century ago and a quarter of a century ago,
we should also always acknowledge that for over 500 centuries – this *is*,
was and *always will be*, Aboriginal land.

[APPLAUSE]

It would be remiss of me and perhaps even fool-hardy not to acknowledge, not only
Auntie Carol and Auntie Zeta but Auntie Pam and perhaps not prominent on her CV but

she and I would work together in a law firm -- and if you could guess, for anyone who knows Pam she was in charge of nearly everything.

But I have to say Pam, when you spoke about your father, you gave us all a gift, one of the great sadnesses when a parent passes is that you can't always reconstruct every conversation but what you did Pam, is when you described the folded chairs and the card table and the thermos and the sandwiches and the campaigning, what you did Pam, is you gave us the gift of an inkling of what it must have been like to have him as your father and what a strong man he was so thank you very much Pam.

I also should of course acknowledge the great campaigners of 67, the plaintiffs in Mabo and their proud families, although not all live with us, we are the beneficiaries of their legacy.

We are, I believe, more open and a more open and diverse country than we were 50 years ago.

More honest about our past, more confident about our future.

But this is not just because of the passage of time or mere good luck.

It's because of the people that we're acknowledging today, there is inspiration in someone's victory...there are lessons and one thing which I take from what we've heard today is that there's no such thing as passive progress.

Progress is always a struggle.

No-one gave the 67 campaigners *anything* – it was earned, it was fought for.

No-one gave Eddie Mabo and his fellow plaintiffs *anything* before he started and it wasn't just contesting the law, the fact that these Plaintiffs believe the Australian justice system which, to be fair and accurate, hadn't initially been the best friend of First

Australians in the previous two hundred years, the fact that they contested it took a great strength of character.

No-one gave the Stolen Generations anything and this week is the twentieth anniversary of the Bringing them Home report indeed, for the Stolen Generations their very existence was arrogantly dismissed.

The inquiry described the stolen generations as tantamount to genocide but you and the stolen generation faced Australia, to make us look at the reality of children taken away from their mothers, from their country, from their families and their culture.

It is very difficult to bring the hard truth of history home and – at long last – we did say Sorry.

And friends, as we celebrate I'm always conscious of that tension in politics and in life, how much do you talk about the good news and how much do you acknowledge the bad news, how much do you say and admire our progress and how much do we look at the journey we still have to go, it is that truth telling which I still think confronts us now.

We salute the outstanding accomplishments of our fellow Australians who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Australians. I think of artists and authors and film-makers, I think of fashion-designers, I think of scientists and lawyers and school-teachers, I think of sports men and women.

But we also know, as we admire the progress that real reconciliation demands of us all especially those of us privileged to be in positions of leadership, it demands truth-telling. Acknowledging that we have further to go, I believe, does not diminish what has been achieved, in fact it honours it and enhances previous struggle.

Tonight, a packed crowd will be at the Sir Doug Nicholls Round watching two great teams and like Shaun Burgoyne last night and Buddy Franklin, Shane Edwards will proudly wear the 67 number tonight.

It isn't a long way from when Doug Nicholls was driven from Carlton because of the colour of his skin, when All Australian Polly Farmer was the target of on field abuse each week.

When, my great friend Pat Dodson was playing for the Monivae Firsts in 1965 and 66, he describes himself as a Collingwood six-footer, he wasn't counted as an Australian, although he captained that team.

And just like Rugby League – AFL is different and I think better, because of generations of Aboriginal stars who have won their admirers with their brilliance and changed minds with their courage.

Nicky Winmar lifting up his jumper and showing the Victoria Park crowd where I once worked, that he was black and proud.

Michael Long who made his stand on Anzac Day 1995.

Adam Goodes – unshakeable in his dignity, unmoving in his strength...such a contrast to the cowards who booed him, hiding their prejudice in the crowd and so many other champions.

It's ironic now, I don't think anyone could imagine AFL without our Indigenous stars and I congratulate the leadership of successive leaders of the AFL including today Gillon McLachlan and Richard Goyder.

But even though we make this progress none of us can really pretend for one minute

can we? That racism has vanished from the game – or indeed from the country that we love.

Years of legalised and institutionalised prejudice still cast a long shadow, paternalism and neglect are difficult habits hard to break.

So much of our historical narrative needs revisiting and discussion in order to reform and we see that shadow of inequality and diminished opportunity even now in housing, in education, in health, in family violence.

Think about in health, we still have too many of our First Australian Mothers losing babies, or dying in childbirth, we have even as we sit here looking at our progress, First Australians going blind because of a third-world disease

We see it in our justice system – where young Aboriginal men are more likely, at the age of 18 to go to jail than to go to university.

We see it right now in the unacceptable record numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders growing-up in out-of-home care: struggling at school during the day, battling trauma and disconnection at night.

As moving as this week of milestones has been, as magnificent as tonight's game will surely be – I believe the best way our generation can honour the previous generation is by living up to the example that we've heard about today.

That means tackling the nitty-gritty of practical disadvantage, it means finding common ground.

Yesterday, delegates from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations said:

"In 67 we were counted, in 2017, we seek to be heard"

It is a powerful message about unfinished business in our country.

On behalf of all Australians, I want to thank the attendees who gathered at Uluru, the hundreds of Aboriginal people who have taken part in 12 dialogues around the nation. And the thousands of people who have provided written submissions to the Referendum Council.

The Referendum Council now has the task of drawing on all of these contributions – and providing a set of recommendations to the Prime Minister, myself and indeed the whole parliament, at the end of June.

It is complex and important work: we owe the members time and those who participated the time and the space to finish their work.

And we owe them an open mind on the big questions - the form recognition takes, on treaties, on changes required to the constitution and on the best way to fulfil the legitimate and long-held aspiration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for a meaningful, equal place in our democratic system.

I've had a number of constructive conversations with our Prime Minister including indicating, as far as I am concerned a sincere desire for bipartisanship and a sincere desire to make progress on this issue.

It is important that we combine Government and Opposition to try to work cooperatively, I'm sure we will have further dialogue, both of us will need to think hard, talk to colleagues and the Referendum Council and broadly with the community.

I do not doubt the size of the mountain that we have to climb.

But for any Australian looking for inspiration, I would say 'look to our history'.

Look at the spirit of '67 or the legend of Eddie Mabo.

Look to the strength and the story of the Gurindji at Wave Hill.

Look to the brilliance of Doug Nicholls.

The lesson of Charlie Perkins and the Freedom Riders.

Look to the legacy of those Aboriginal service men and women who have served, fought and died for a country that up to that point didn't even count them in its census.

Look at: Faith Bandler or Pearl Gibbs or Chicka Dixon,

Joe McGinnis or Charlie Perkins and Jessie Street and many others.

And all those other heroes famous and perhaps not so famous who went door-to-door, shopping centre to shopping centre, signature by signature.

I said earlier that no one gave these warriors of change, anything.

Whatever they have won, they had earned but in fact they gave Australia a gift, 50 years ago.

They gave Australia a gift 25 years ago.

They gave us the gift of hope – they gave us the gift of imagination.

And it's now it is our test to measure up.

I am a student of history, I look back and I wonder, what were people thinking, what were the arguments and the tensions and the means, what was going through their minds and what was going through their hearts.

It is incredibly, I think, encouraging that back in 1967 the parliament was full of white men, many born at the turn of the 20th Century, they found common ground to support a Yes vote.

The government didn't fund a 'No' case in 1967.

If those men then, of a certain background and disposition could find the humility to admit that they were wrong, if they could find that wisdom within themselves to challenge their preconceptions and decide what was right...

If they could imagine then, in their circumstances a more equal time for Australia.

Then are we in this generation up to it now?

Surely we can imagine a reconciled Australia?

Surely we can imagine an Australia where the gap is actually closed, where justice is colour-blind?

Surely we can imagine an Australia where every Aboriginal child can grow up healthy, can get the best possible education, equal to every other child and to not have to be separated from their families.

Surely we can imagine now – and deliver now - a future:

Where Aboriginal mothers no longer live with the anxiety that their child could be taken from them.

Where the last stubborn stains of persistent racism are removed, forever – from our not only our hearts and our language but from our laws.

Surely we can deal honestly and decently with issues of reparations, recovery and re-connection where we are capable of having the important conversation about meaningful recognition, about treaties about post-constitutional settlement.

Surely we can imagine a set of circumstances just as there are Aboriginal AFL Champions that will one day have a Aboriginal Prime Minister or an Aboriginal President of our Republic.

But what is the most important, and I think the challenge for us is, for us in particular privilege who have some say in the debate of the day, is the road will be hard and it's going to require the best thought and the best cooperation.

What it's going to recognise is this, are we capable of imagining an Australia, where our first Australians are equal to all other Australians because I can already imagine that when our first Australians are equal to all other Australians then we are all better Australians.

Thank you very much.

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