



**THE HON. MALCOLM TURNBULL MP  
PRIME MINISTER**

**TRANSCRIPT**

Wednesday, 24 May 2017

**Statement to Parliament on the 50th Anniversary of the 1967 Referendum and the 25th Anniversary  
of the Mabo Decision  
Parliament House, Canberra**

E&OE...

Mr Speaker.

Yanggu gulanyin ngalawiri, dhunayi, Ngunawal dhawra. Wanggaralijinyin mariny bulan bugarabang.

I acknowledge we are on the lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Australians come from nearly 200 countries, of all faiths, all cultures and all backgrounds.

And yet in a world where conflict and intolerance seem more intractable than ever, we live together in peace and harmony in the midst of extraordinary diversity.

Our nation has a bright future and much to celebrate.

However, Mr Speaker, we know that we have not always treated our First Australians with the respect that they deserve.

Truth is the first step towards healing.

And this week we honour those milestones that helped our nation chart a course towards reconciliation and healing - the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, 25 years since the Mabo High Court decision, and 20 years since the Bringing Them Home report.

Fifty years ago, laws and regulations controlled where our First Australians could and couldn't move and what they could and couldn't do - lives limited, lives demeaned, lives diminished.

Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were removed from their families and communities. We acknowledge that this removal separated children from their mothers and fathers, their families, their lands, their languages and cultures - cared for by their ancestors for over 50,000 years.

Indigenous Diggers, returned from war having defended our freedoms, our democracy and the rule of law, were denied the rights of citizenship for which they had so fiercely fought.

Fifty years ago our nation was given the opportunity to vote for change.

And, Mr Speaker, our nation did.

No member of this place authorised a 'no' case.

The Parliament and the community were united.

The Constitutional amendment was substantial, as it needed to be.

And the result defined our nation.

The 1967 Referendum had the highest 'Yes' vote of any Referendum before or since.

By working together as one, we voted as a nation to enable the Commonwealth to make laws relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and for our First Australians, who had always been here, to finally be counted in the official population.

As the Indigenous rights campaigner, the late Chicka Dixon told his daughter Rhonda, who is here today, 'The government counted everything. They counted the cattle, the cars, the TVs, but they didn't count us. It's like we were invisible'.

A campaign badge said 'Vote Yes for Aborigines' and the Referendum was known as 'the Aboriginal question'. But this was a question about our Australian values, and the nation voted yes for Aborigines and for Australians.

And so the campaign was fought on the platform of rights and freedoms. Indigenous people wanted and demanded to enjoy the full and equal rights of the citizenship they had been granted years earlier.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in many parts of the country could still not freely attend public swimming pools, sit in the classroom at a public school without fear of exclusion, or have a drink with their mates at the local pub. And fundamentally our First Australians could not shape their own identity.

And that discrimination and exclusion diminished us all as Australians.

It did not reflect the sacrifices and the contribution our First Australians made to our nation, or indeed the humanity of all of us, all our fellow Australians.

90.77 per cent of people recognised this injustice and voted for change.

This renewed confidence inspired our first Indigenous Parliamentarian to join the Liberal Party—Neville Bonner who entered the Senate in 1971.

Pat Dodson, Malarndirri McCarthy and Jacqui Lambie serve in the Senate today as Neville Bonner did.

And Ken Wyatt was the first Aboriginal man to be elected to this House, and Linda Burney the first woman.

Ken, the Minister for Ageing and Indigenous Health is the first Indigenous Minister in a Commonwealth Government.

The 1967 Referendum provided the constitutional basis for our native title legislation and heritage protection.

And in response to the historic Mabo High Court case, which overturned the doctrine of terra nullius, the Parliament passed the Native Title Act in 1993.

Today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights and interests in the land have been formally recognised in over 40 per cent of Australia's land mass.

The number of determinations under the Native Title Act now outweigh the number of claims currently registered.

The ownership and custodianship of the land has led to greater economic empowerment of communities across the country, the preservation of culture, and a network of Indigenous rangers who maintain our lands for our children and grandchildren.

And just as we could not foreshadow all the positive implications of these changes, great things can flow from amending the Constitution again.

We must not forget, Mr Speaker, that the road to the 1967 Referendum was neither short nor easy.

For more than 50 years before, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had fought to stop discrimination by governments.

There were many compromises along the way.

Building on the success of the '67 campaign, 50 years on, we now have the chance to take another step in our journey.

An important Indigenous designed and led discussion is occurring at Uluru today, as our nation considers further changes to the Constitution.

It is vitally important our First Australians consider and debate the models of recognition, free of political interference, and that the diversity of views and opinions within the Indigenous communities are discussed.

The next step in Constitutional recognition needs to be embraced by all Australians, but it needs first to be embraced by our First Australians if it is to be proposed at all.

I know I speak for the Leader of the Opposition when I say we both look forward to receiving the report from the Referendum Council.

The early campaigners who stood up for what was right, who fought to stop discrimination and whose contribution to the nation has been so remarkable should be recognised, remembered, well known.

As I was saying to some of you earlier this morning – you have written great bold chapters in our nation's history.

Campaigners like Worimi man Fred Maynard, who established Australia's first all-Aboriginal political organisation, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association in New South Wales in the early 1920s. Fred wanted the right for Aboriginal people to determine their own lives, control their own land, and for the New South Wales Government to close the Aborigines Protection Board.

Campaigners like William Cooper, a Yorta Yorta man from Victoria, who tried to petition King George V seeking Aboriginal representation in the Australian Parliament. The then Government said 'no good purpose' would come of sending the petition, and they didn't - a glimpse of the political powerlessness experienced by Aboriginal people in those days. I acknowledge the presence in the House today of William Cooper's great-grandson Kevin Russell.

Jessie Street had an unwavering belief that the time was right to launch the campaign for the 1967 Referendum. Jessie said: "You can't get anywhere without a change in the Constitution and you can't get that without a referendum. You'll need a petition with 100,000 signatures. We'd better start on it at once". And together they did. We welcome Jessie's grandson, Andrew Mackay, and great grandson, Will Mackay, who are here today.

Joe McGinness brought state representative bodies together to speak with one respected voice to Government and the people of Australia. Joe is one of the great unsung leaders of our nation. Senator Pat Dodson has said that Joe was: "The inspiration to many...who have joined in the battle for justice. He

has provided wisdom and advice, guidance and correction, humour and hope.” We welcome his daughter Sandra McGinness, who is here with us today.

Sir Doug Nicholls was a founding member of the renamed Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, a coalition of church leaders, unionists and Indigenous activists.

Sir Doug’s daughter Aunty Pam Pedersen and granddaughter Diana Travis—who were both in the campaign, Diana as a teenager—are also here today.

These are just some of the many people who brought wisdom and leadership to ‘67’s cause.

So too did Jack and Jean Horner, Stan Davey, Shirley Andrews, Pearl Gibbs, Hannah and Emil Witton, whose daughter Heidi and granddaughter Keren Cox-Witton are with us today.

And, of course there was Faith Bandler who campaigned so hard—for 10 years—and who would help bring the Referendum home.

Faith’s vision was clear—to see Aboriginal people as ‘one people’ with all Australians.

Hers was a message, not of assimilation, but of unity - of black people and white people working together, equally valued. Faith did not want to be singled out - in her view the Referendum outcome was the result of good teamwork

We honour all those who stood together including those in the house with us today—Aunty Dulcie Flower, Aunty Shirley Peisley, Aunty Ruth Wallace, Uncle Bob Anderson, Uncle Gordon Briscoe, Dr Barrie Pittock and Uncle Alf Neal.

The Freedom Riders led by the young Charlie Perkins in 1965, brought racial discrimination into the minds of Australian households and appealed to a great Australian value - a fair go. Welcome Eileen Perkins, Charlie’s wife, his son Adam and three grandsons.

And on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June we will acknowledge a critical milestone in Indigenous land rights—the 25th anniversary of the historic Mabo High Court decision.

It was Eddie Mabo and the other plaintiffs, Father Dave Passi, Sam Passi, James Rice and Celuia Mapo Salee who’s perseverance brought about the High Court of Australia’s decision to recognise the native title rights of the Meriam people of the Murray Islands in the Torres Strait.

And they are all represented here today. I want to especially acknowledge the presence of Eddie Mabo’s wife, Aunty Bonita and their daughter Gail.

Eddie Koiki Mabo was an advocate of the 1967 Referendum, fighting for equal rights including education. But despite the success of the ‘67 campaign, in 1972 Eddie Mabo still had to get permission from the Queensland authorities to visit his dying father on Mer Island. That permission was denied. Six weeks later his father died.

Gail wrote: “My father never forgave the government authorities for this injustice. It fuelled his determination for recognition and equality in society”.

In 1982 the Mabo case began.

It was hard fought and it took its toll.

Eddie Koiki Mabo passed away on the 21st of January 1992, just months before the High Court recognised what he and his fellow plaintiffs had always known - that Mer Island belonged to the Meriam people and that Meriam customs, laws and cultures had existed for tens of thousands of years.

Mr Speaker, we were fortunate to have Eip Karem Beizam from Mer Island who performed a hymn in memory of that momentous time.

Thank you for your beautiful hymn, and for bringing the Meriam language into the parliament today.

Au Esau - thank you.

We have come a long way since the Referendum and the Mabo case, but we have not come far enough.

We have made gains in child health and infant mortality rates and in fighting chronic disease. Native title holders are unlocking their lands for cultural protection and economic empowerment.

More Indigenous students are enrolling in university than ever before, and around two-thirds are women. For Indigenous university graduates, there are no employment gaps with the rest of the Australian population.

But the gains are not enough.

I want to ensure that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are equally educated and equally empowered—that Australians are 'one people', as Faith Bandler and her fellow campaigners so desperately hoped and fought for.

That's why today, in furtherance of our programs and our policies and objectives we are announcing a \$138 million education package further to enable the economic and social inclusion for which the '67 campaigners fought.

As Sir Douglas Nicholls said: "All we want is to be able to think and do the same things as white people while still retaining our identity as a peoples".

For full inclusion in the economic and social life of the nation, we need our young Indigenous people to have a solid education, while keeping strong their identity.

Mr Speaker, today we reflect on the past and its impact on the present. We look forward with hope and optimism. We are joined today by 50 Indigenous Youth Parliamentarians who stand today on the shoulders of these giants.

I want to thank the '67 Referendum campaigners and thank the Mabo campaigners for the gift they gave our nation through their perseverance and dedication to their peoples and cultures.

And I thank all First Australians who preserve their ancient culture, work so hard to maintain and recover ancient languages.

Your culture defines who you are, it speaks to your country, your identity, your belonging.

And as we embrace in reconciliation your culture enriches us all.

For time out of mind, for more than 50,000 years your people and your culture have shaped and been shaped, cared for and been cared by, defined and been defined by this land, our land, Australia.

Your culture, our culture, is old and new, as dynamic as it is connected - on the highest tree top the new flower of the morning draws its being from deep and ancient roots.

Now it is up to us, together and united, to draw from the wisdom and the example of those we honour today and so inspired, bring new heights and brighter blooms to that tree of reconciliation which protects and enriches us all.

**[ENDS]**