



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

TRANSCRIPT

Saturday, 27 May 2017

**Speech at the 50th Anniversary of the 1967 Referendum and 25th Anniversary of the Mabo Decision
Luncheon
Melbourne, Victoria**

E&OE...

PRIME MINISTER:

I acknowledge that we are here on the land of the Wurundjeri people whose country extends to the north of the Birrarung, and the Boonwurrung people whose country extends to the south.

I pay my deepest respects to them, and their elders past and present.

And I acknowledge the campaigners of the 1967 Referendum, including here today Uncle Syd Jackson and Mr Jason Oakley, and the plaintiffs in the great Mabo litigation, whose 25th anniversary we are commemorating this week as well.

I'm joined by my Parliamentary colleagues Nigel Scullion, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Ken Wyatt MP, the Minister for Indigenous Health. Ken has actually just left us and said he's got to go and meet with the AMA – but I think it'd be more entertaining here.

It is good to be joined by Bill Shorten, the Leader of the Opposition.

And of course, the AFL – thank you for the extraordinary leadership you show. 700 AFL players, Richard, I was told a moment ago, Richard and Gill – 82 Indigenous players out of 700. What a great achievement.

Tanya, thank you for your great speech and your great leadership. Justin Mohamed – CEO, Reconciliation Australia and Tom Calma - Co Chair. And so many dear friends and distinguished guests.

I want to thank for the Welcome to Country – Aunty Zeta and Aunty Carolyne. Thank you so much for welcoming us to your country.

And Aunty Pam – great speech and deadly shoes. Fantastic! So good.

And what an amazing performance from the Torres Strait, from the Eip Karem Beizam group, and of course the dancers and the singers, Shellie Morris and Dhapanbal Yunupingu. This is a great occasion.

Thank you all for joining us here today to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, the 25th anniversary of the Mabo decision, and the start of National Reconciliation Week 2017.

On this day exactly fifty years ago, millions of Australians had their names marked off on the electoral roll, stepped into a polling booth, just minutes later walked out, and united made history.

Their overwhelming support at the Referendum expanded Commonwealth powers to make laws relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and enabled all First Australians, who had always been here, as Chicka Dixon just reminded us to be counted as part of the official population.

1967 was a crucial point in Australia's reconciliation journey, where we consciously moved from exclusion to inclusion, from injustice and pain, towards healing, and where we recognised we were greater united than divided.

For our First Australians had not been treated with the respect they deserved, with the respect you deserved, with laws and regulations controlling, limiting and diminishing your lives.

Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, a number of whom are here today, who were removed from their families and communities because of the colour of their skin. We acknowledge that this removal separated children from their families, their lands, languages and cultures - cared for by their ancestors for more than 50,000 years.

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

For our nation's birth certificate, the Constitution, had declared a Federation from six separate colonies, but had excluded our First Australians - the very people who have cared for this land from time out of mind.

But to describe '67 as a sudden awakening of our nation to these injustices, minimizes the sacrifices of those families who had survived since European arrival and then contributed year upon year into seeking equality of opportunity.

This is a story of resilience. It is a story of survival. It is a story of persistence and courage.

Every step of the journey to 1967 was built on the last.

It was a campaign that took decades of relentless agitation and advocacy, setbacks and sacrifice, courage and resilience.

So in 2017 we stand on the shoulders of those giants.

And we are honoured to be joined here by some of the '67 campaigners and Mabo plaintiffs and their families.

They too stood on the shoulders of the giants that came before them.

In 1925 Worimi Fred Maynard established the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association with the slogan "One God, One People, One Destiny".

In 1938, Yorta Yorta man William Cooper, Bill Ferguson and Jack Patten organised the 'Day of Mourning' on Australia Day, as well as the indefatigable Margaret Tucker.

There were giants like Bill Onus, and Ngemba woman Pearl Gibbs.

With each step building on the last, Pastor Doug Nicholls succeeded Cooper as head of the Australian Aborigines League.

After a great career of football and politics Doug was the first Aboriginal person to be knighted, despite having been excluded from the change rooms by his team mates simply because of his Aboriginality.

It is fitting the Sir Doug Nicholls Round will be played at the 'G' today, to recognise, as we do every year, his contribution to football and the spirit of reconciliation which he embodied.

Here in Victoria, the roots of the referendum movement trace right back to the early 19th century, when activists William Barak and Simon Wonga, led the Kulin nation in their struggle for their land and their culture.

So many champions over so many years - each stream building into the river wide enough to embrace a nation and change its constitution.

Jessie Street, Bert Groves, Joyce Clague, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Chicka Dixon, Dulcie Flower, Shirley Peisley, Pastor Frank Roberts, Laurie Moffatt, Joe McGuinness.

The Freedom Riders, led by the young Charles Perkins.

Too many to name, these are just a few – but we honour them all today.

On a Monday night in May 1957, thousands of Sydneysiders converged on the Town Hall to watch a documentary that laid bare the harsh reality of life for remote Indigenous communities. It revealed a nation divided.

This was the night Faith Bandler and Pearl Gibbs launched their petition to demand a better deal for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Their campaign began with a couple of thousand signatures and ended just over 10 years later with 90.77 per cent of the population voting 'yes' for change.

The campaigners had an unswerving belief that every step would move us closer together as Australians.

So to everyone who, over decades, worked with and for the groups that built and grew the case for the referendum, today we say again thank you.

For the many hundreds of thousands of First Australians who felt the ground beneath them shift that day, who felt their horizons open up and their status as citizens at long last enshrine the rights it should - the 27th of May 1967 remains the turning point.

And it's why this week I announced a \$138 million education package to further enable the economic and social inclusion for which the '67 campaigners fought and for which our government is committed to continue and develop and grow. Every element of our policy is focused on that economic empowerment, the foundation of which as we know, and Syd and I were just discussing this a moment ago, is education.

'67 saw Australians come together in a moment of national unity to properly acknowledge the identity, the culture, the history, the citizenship of our First Australians.

This week we also celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the High Court's decision to uphold native title rights in the hard-won Mabo case.

The five plaintiffs were fighters for their spiritual and cultural survival - Eddie Mabo, Father Dave Passi, Sam Passi, James Rice and Celuia Mapo Salee.

Each step was built on the last, and importantly, because of the '67 change, the Commonwealth could create, could enact the Native Title Act.

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 outweighs the number of claims currently registered.

Now, this week has seen us look towards another step, with the Referendum Council's National Convention at Uluru.

As I know better than most, changing the Australian Constitution is not easy.

44 referendums, only 8 successes.

The last remotely controversial amendment to be approved was in 1946.

Indeed, history would indicate that to succeed not only must there be overwhelming support, but minimal, or at least tepid, opposition.

Fundamental to our Constitution is the supremacy of Parliament underneath the Constitution.

Our laws are made by the House of Representatives and the Senate - each democratically elected, with each member and senator representing both their constituency and above all their nation.

The campaigners of 67's success inspired Neville Bonner to join the Liberal Party and run for Parliament.

He brought his voice to the Senate in 1971 and now there are five First Australians in our Parliament including the first Aboriginal Minister - Ken Wyatt who was the first Aboriginal man to serve in the House of Representatives and across the aisle Linda Burney the first Aboriginal woman so to serve in the House of Representatives. And of course in the Senate Pat Dodson, Malarndirri McCarthy and Jacqui Lambie

We thank the delegates at Uluru for their work which will now be considered by the Referendum Council which will in turn advise the Opposition Leader and myself and through us the Parliament.

It is the Parliament's duty, and its alone, to propose changes to the Constitution.

But the Constitution cannot be changed by Parliament - only the Australian people can do that.

No political deal, no cross party compromise, no leaders' handshake can deliver constitutional change.

To do that a constitutionally conservative nation must be persuaded that the proposed amendments respect the fundamental values of the Constitution and will deliver precise changes, clearly understood, that benefit all Australians.

A Referendum will demand politicians to lead, and we will, but a successful campaign for Constitutional Recognition must ask Australians to acknowledge the humanity of their neighbour - their fellow Australian - and harness support for the proposal with as much resolute solidarity and unity as the campaigners of '67 did 50 years ago.

Today I believe all Australians acknowledge what we know is true - that prior to European settlement our First Australians spoke hundreds of languages, cared for this country, your song lines crossed the entire nation, your languages carried sacred knowledge, your stories of creation were passed on from generation to generation, and when Aboriginal people lost those songs, those languages, that knowledge, we all lost. We all lost.

But we also acknowledge that despite so much loss, much was saved and you are, we are restoring and recovering languages and cultures, and in doing so, reuniting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and all Australians, with the most ancient human cultures on earth.

Your contribution is not static or frozen in time and we've been reminded of that today. It is sewn into the fabric of our modern society and our modern economy, and as Prime Minister I will continue to acknowledge and do all I can to ensure that being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander means to be successful, to achieve, to have big dreams and high hopes, and to draw strength from your identity as an Indigenous person in this great country.

Charles Perkins said that 'If he wouldn't have done it, others would have.' Perhaps he was right. But to those who have championed rights and equality for First Australians over our history, and those who continue that work today, you have never taken progress for granted and for that we thank you.

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.

Thank you very much.

[ENDS]