



Referendum Council

MEDIA RELEASE

**ISSUED ON BEHALF OF THE REFERENDUM COUNCIL'S INDIGENOUS STEERING
COMMITTEE BY PAT ANDERSON**

STRICTLY EMBARGOED UNTIL 4 PM (ACST)/4.30 PM AEST

26 May 2017

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

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 – a cross 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. This is the *torment of our powerlessness*,” the Statement says.

“We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take *a rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.”

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.

“In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.”

The full Statement will now inform and be issued through the Council’s report to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition, which will be 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.

All submissions and comments are welcome and can be provided through www.referendumcouncil.org.au

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ULURU STATEMENT FROM THE HEART

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from ‘time immemorial’, and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is *a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty.* It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is *the torment of our powerlessness.*

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take *a rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle.* It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.