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LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY
MEMBER FOR GRAYNDLER**

CLOSING THE GAP

**PARLIAMENT HOUSE
CANBERRA**

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

I begin by acknowledging that we meet on the land of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people – land that was, is and always will be Aboriginal land.

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

I recognise the many First Nations people in the galleries today.

And I acknowledge my First Nations colleagues and fellow parliamentarians:

The member for Barton, Linda Burney; senators Malarndirri McCarthy, Patrick Dodson and Jacqui Lambie; and of course, Minister Ken Wyatt.

Since 2008, I've sat in this place on this day and listened to fine speeches from Prime Ministers and Opposition Leaders alike.

And afterwards, so often, I've heard members of the press gallery say that days like today, show the Parliament at its best.

But, Mr Speaker, if this day adds up to nothing but sentiment and speeches...

... if this occasion becomes merely a ceremonial renewal of good intentions and a promise to do better next time ...

... that is so far short of Parliament at its best, so far short of Australia at its best.

Because in the end it is not the Prime Minister's voice or the Opposition Leader's voice that should be heard on this day, on this issue.

It is the voice of the First Australians.

It is the voice of over 60,000 years of culture, of story, of community, of kinship.

It is the voice articulating 'the torment of our powerlessness' from the Uluru Statement that must be heard.

Over 60,000 years of love for this country, their country, our country. The continent we share.

Enshrining the Voice in our Constitution is a great and unifying mission – more than a century overdue.

But that recognition is not the end of the road. It must be the clarion bell of a change from what has been.

Enshrining the Voice to Parliament will be the work of one successful referendum.

But listening to the Voice – ensuring the Voice is heard in this House and the Senate.

... ensuring the Voice speaks in the design and delivery of policy.

... ensuring the Voice advocates the rights and interests of First Nations peoples.

That is a task for national political leadership.

The Coalition of Peaks has already spoken up – and said clearly what Government needs to do to improve services for First Nations people. The three reform priorities are:

- Formal partnerships between government and First Nations people on closing the gap;
- Growing First Nations community-controlled services;
- Improving mainstream service delivery to First Nations people.

Change begins with listening.

The Closing the Gap statement to Parliament commemorates the anniversary of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's historic Apology to the Stolen Generations on behalf of this nation.

That day – as the first item of business in this chamber as Leader of the House – remains my proudest day as a member of Parliament.

The nation came together in unity. Workplaces paused. Schools assembled. Crowds cheered. Tears were shed. And we were stronger for it.

But it was clear there was inequality and disparity that needed reconciliation.

That there were key indicators showing the disadvantage resulting from more than two centuries of dispossession, discrimination, racism and, sometimes, violent oppression.

This was an indictment upon us as a modern nation. There were many gaps but some appeared more urgent than others.

These indicators include life expectancy, child mortality, school attendance, reading and numeracy, employment, early childhood education, and the attainment of Year 12 or equivalent.

Practical measures with targets.

After 12 years it is an indictment that we aren't on track for five of these seven targets, including life expectancy, child mortality and employment.

It is an indictment that of all these targets, we are on track for only two.

The problem was not that the targets were too ambitious.

The failure to meet these targets are our failure.

These two outcomes are welcome and show progress is possible, but we can and must do better.

We speak of closing the gap.

But the truth is this isn't a gap – it is a chasm.

And it doesn't end there.

Rates of First Nations people in custody are still way too high – First Nations adults are two per cent of the population but make up 27 per cent of the prison population

Suicide – particularly among young people – is still ripping families apart.

The numbers of children being put in out-of-home care is a national shame and is a consequence of policy failure by governments.

We want to work with the Government but we do expect some urgency, passion and diligence to be brought into this space.

We cannot keep coming back here, year in, year out, wringing our hands. The new way forward has to be led by First Nations people in meaningful and mutually agreed partnerships.

That way forward has been mapped out for us in the Uluru Statement, a document of unadorned power to which Labor is fully committed.

That way forward is Voice, Truth-telling and Agreement-making.

When the Member for Hasluck was appointed Minister for Indigenous Australians, Labor welcomed it as the right decision.

Indeed, when I spoke at the Garma Festival in East Arnhem Land last year, I expressed the hope his colleagues would give him the support he needed and deserved.

I am concerned that this process may end in disappointment.

We have before us an opportunity for bipartisanship we cannot afford to miss. Our international credibility is linked to our integrity with First Nations People.

This Minister and this Prime Minister have the opportunity to do something they will be remembered for – and we will support them.

However, as Linda Burney has put it, there is a danger the Uluru Statement will end up remembered as a noble moment, but not as a turning point.

We cannot allow that to happen.

At its most basic level, the denial of a constitutionally enshrined Voice is a denial of the Australian instinct for a fair go.

Despite all the tests it is put through, the instinct for a fair go remains one of the great defining points of our national character.

The Voice is a modest request that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples be consulted about issues and policies that directly affect them.

That is what it is.

It is not a third chamber.

It is not deliberative.

It merely seeks to put a structure around what we would all regard as decency, as courtesy and as respect.

Another element is truth.

We must reflect on the truth told to us by Mabo, Wik, Timber Creek, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the Bringing Them Home report, and countless other inquiries.

Or the truth told by Prime Minister Paul Keating in the Redfern Speech in 1992, another powerful acknowledgment of the reality of our history.

And until we truly acknowledge our history, we are shackled to its demons.

Bit by bit, we are closing the gap between the comforting fictions of colonisation, settlement, and modernity that we have created for ourselves.

Embarking upon truth-telling hopefully will help us all towards liberation for the betterment of our Nation.

We have been moving slowly beyond our erasure of Indigenous achievement.

We are putting behind us what William Stanner called the cult of forgetfulness, the great

Australian silence.

Look at what Bruce Pascoe has done with *Dark Emu* and our place in this land.

In this one extraordinary book, Bruce has unearthed the knowledge that we already had in our possession – but chose to bury along the way.

Ignorance feeds in darkness; Bruce has simply reminded us where the light switch is.

And with the flick of that switch, a complex mosaic of ancient nations is suddenly laid out before us in light as bright as those early European explorers first saw it and recorded it.

The Voice cannot be the end of the story but must be followed by truth-telling. And the telling of that truth must be entire.

Through it, we must come to grips with the realities of our colonial past that began with the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788.

Life could never be the same again.

Not for those watching from the shore, the latest in this continent's unbroken line of generations stretching back over so many millennia – the world's oldest continuing culture.

Not for the new arrivals, representatives of what they thought of as the Old World, sent here to a world far older.

As two worlds came together that day, a series of collisions was set in train.

And as a new society slowly and unsteadily rose to its feet, a mosaic of ancient societies was brought to its knees.

From that point, for our First Nations people it was a history shaped by brutality.

A brutality sometimes born of misunderstanding, but more often it was not.

A brutality that has echoed darkly through every generation that has followed.

Embracing the truth isn't always easy. But it is harder to remain wedded to the corrosive illusions of a history that is only part told.

The last documented massacre in Australia was the Coniston Massacre in 1928.

Its second last survivor, Mr Japanangka – dancer, singer, craftsman artist, stockman who lived for a century – only just died on January 31. May he rest in peace.

Until we have told the truth and cast aside the sort of euphemistic language that will soften a massacre into a mere incident, there can be no true reconciliation.

A country that is not reconciled is not truly whole. And until we are whole, our true potential as a nation will continue to elude us.

The liberation of truth must be followed by agreement-making, which the Uluru Statement expresses as a Makaratta Commission.

Let that great Yolngu word – makaratta – spread from East Arnhem Land and fill an entire continent.

Let everyone feel what those four syllables hold:

Conflict resolution.

Making peace after a dispute.

Justice.

The path to national treaty.

Agreements that acknowledge the pre-existing rights of a people in a land where sovereignty was never ceded.

And we have it within us to do it.

In 1993, the Native Title Act established indigenous land use agreements. These are voluntary agreements between native title groups and other parties on the use and management of land and waters.

At present, there are 1311 Land Use Agreements that are registered by the National Native Title Tribunal and another 16 have been lodged.

All of them positive for Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

In 2016, Victoria began a process of devising a state-level treaty with the Aboriginal peoples of the state.

That same year, South Australia's Labor Government also began making moves towards a treaty.

The ACT has been in an agreement with the Ngunnawal people for co-management of Namadgi National Park since 1999.

When he was elected Chief Minister of the Northern Territory in 2016, Michael Gunner declared that his Government would "drive public discussions on a treaty" between the Territory and Aboriginal peoples. He has appointed that great Australian, Mick Dodson, as Treaty Commissioner.

And Queensland took an important step forward just last weekend with the tabling of the Path to Treaty report, outlining recommendations from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the state.

It all brings us back to makaratta.

On top of everything else, those four syllables hold within them the hope of self-determination.

We will never close the gap until self-determination is at the heart of what we do.

It has been a great improvement to hear Governments talk about working with First Nations people not just for them.

But this must be a starting point, not the conclusion.

First Nations people and organisations under their control should be the ones setting the agenda for how services are delivered, defining the targets and taking the lead in delivering services.

The current process with the Peaks is a historic opportunity. The Government needs to make the most of it and follow it up with real investment in services – including health and housing.

I want to acknowledge the role played by the Coalition of Peaks, led by Pat Turner.

We need to listen to the concerns of First Nations people, not least about the punitive and unfair CDP program that has caused such hurt in communities across the north.

Before last year's election, Labor promised to abolish it and develop a new program with First Nations people.

A program that might have some of the same features as the old CDEP, such as proper wages and wages top up with unexpended funds being reinvested into the local communities.

A program run by local community organisations.

At Garma I called for the Government to adopt this approach and make it bipartisan. This, in my view, would be consistent with what First Nations People having been calling for.

We need to enable First Nations people to play their responsible role in their own destinies.

As we have seen among First Nations people in New Zealand, North America and Scandinavia – self-determination is at the heart of closing the gaps between indigenous

and non-indigenous citizens.

We see it here, too.

Let me mention just a few practical examples:

The Glen Centre, a leading drug and alcohol treatment facility on the Central Coast of NSW. I acknowledge Health Minister Greg Hunt's role in making this possible;

The Arnhem Land Progress Association, which employs a large proportion of Aboriginal people and creates jobs across northern Australia;

Waminda, which delivers culturally appropriate services for women and their children on the NSW South Coast;

The Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, which provides social, emotional, cultural and physical health services in Central Australia, improving the lives of Aboriginal people in the process;

The Ceduna Koonibba Aboriginal Health Service, the success of which is underlined by the fact that 40 per cent of the people who come through its doors are not Aboriginal;

The Durri Aboriginal Medical Service in Kempsey on the NSW North Coast;

And in Torres Strait, Mura Kosker Sorority is working to make families stronger and keep children safe.

Self-determination isn't just a theory.

We see it every day in the successful approaches delivered by Aboriginal community-controlled health, housing, child support, legal and family violence prevention services across the nation.

We see it in this amazing new generation of young Indigenous doctors, lawyers, managers and community developers graduating from university and fanning out across the country

to serve their people.

We have so much potential if only we can summon the courage to take our next steps forward.

To Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples I say you have been patient – patient beyond any ordinary level of comprehension.

Your tenacity and your patience has been tested. Your generosity has been humbling

As a nation we are tantalisingly close to the cusp of something new.

Not the reinvention of Australia but the realisation of a greater one.

An Australia that draws into its heart the generosity to heal and be healed, to honour and be honoured, to find courage to begin the process of truth-telling and National Treaty-making.

An Australia that is closing every one of the gaps, every one of the chasms that divide and belittle us all.

When we consider all our achievements as a nation, we can be confident that these challenges are not beyond us.

Let us take them up and let our modern nation stand whole, proud and reconciled alongside this continent's many ancient ones.

As that great Yolngu man Galarrwuy Yunupingu put it: "At Uluru we started a fire, a fire we hope burns bright for Australia."

It is the one fire we hope will never go out.

Let us come together, as a Parliament, and stoke its flame.

I am an optimist. I believe we can get support for a Voice to Parliament.

It used to be said we would never get an Apology.

We did.

And we are all the stronger for it.

A Voice to Parliament would make our nation stronger.

ENDS

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