**DR MARISA PATERSON MLA SPEECH**

**23/11 2022**

**Uluru Statement from the Heart**

Start

**INTRO**

Thank you, Madame Speaker.

I would like to start this speech be reading some words from local Ngunnawal Elder, Aunty Violet Sheridan.

“My community and First Nations people across Australia have been fighting our whole lives for the recognition and respect of the spiritual and physical relationship between our people and land we stand on. Enshrining a First Nations Voice in the Constitution and coming together for truth-telling is vitally important to empower my people and return the power over our own destiny that we lost with colonisation. To achieve this important goal, we need to walk together towards a future that empowers the voices of our First Nations communities and comes together over the truth of our history.”

Firstly, today I would like to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Peoples are the Traditional Owners of this country, and the pay my respect to their ongoing spiritual and cultural connections and honour their custodianship and care for country. I would also like to acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the room today and extend my respects to them. Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

Here in Australia, statistics are published in regarding our First Nations peoples and communities that paint a picture of disadvantage, of systemic and institutional discrimination, the intergenerational impacts of colonisation and historical injustice.

The latest data in the Closing the Gap Data repository, last updated in June, continues to highlight significant discrepancies between white Australians and First Nations peoples, particularly in the areas of life expectancy, childhood mortality, school attainment and employment. In some areas, we are going backwards. More work is required to close the gap in such discrepancies that continue to cause serious harm to our Indigenous community.

This gap cannot and will not be closed without Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people leading this work, making the decisions about issues that affect their lives, about what is important and how to go about it.

We know in the ACT we have a long way to go, we have the highest youth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rate in the country. According to the [Report on Government Services (RoGS)](https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2021/community-services/youth-justice) - the proportion of prisoners who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in the ACT has doubled over the last ten years. The ACT also has Australia’s highest rate of recidivism for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, with 91% of detainees having experienced prior imprisonment.

The list goes on, and the data collected represents only part of the picture to the ongoing injustices faced by our Indigenous community.

The path to justice is one I know we as a government are deeply committed to, and one we as the Labor party, have always championed.

I commend the work of colleagues in this Assembly, including Minister Stephen-Smith and the work in her portfolio responsibility including the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement and Impact Statement, as well as actions toward Treaty.

**The Voice – introduction**

Many advocates over the years have used a simple phrase ‘nothing about us, without us’, meaning that no policy decision should be made about any group in society without them being at the table.

You simply cannot make a practical difference in Indigenous communities without having the people it impacts, driving the change.

Enshrining the Voice to Parliament in the Constitution will ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are always a part of conversations that affect them.

It is a first but very important step, and it is essential that we in the ACT put our full support behind the referendum.

**The Uluru Dialogues**

The Voice referendum didn’t come from nowhere.

It has taken decades of activism and fighting for equality, led by Australia’s Aboriginal peoples.

It took until 2015 for the federal Australian government to begin working on a dialogue to work towards a referendum to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution through the Referendum Council.

Then in May 2017, over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates from Indigenous nations across the country met for the First Nations National Constitutional Convention.

It was during this convention that the Uluru Statement from the Heart was written and on May 26, delegates signed the statement.

The process aimed to address the historical exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from the original processes which led to the drafting of Australia’s Constitution.

There are three recommendations that have come from this: Voice, Treaty, Truth.

**Voice to Parliament**

The first recommendation from the Uluru Statement from the Heart is “the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution”.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been leading the way in developing a Voice, and a substantial amount of work has been done to date to get us to this moment.

In October, Minister Burney met with more than 60 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at Parliament House to start to consider the process towards enshrining the Voice in the Constitution.

These people make up the Referendum Working Group and the Referendum Engagement Group, they represent a broad range of communities, cultures, and expertise.

This Working Group discussed a set of key design principles for the Voice drawn from work already done.

The principles identify the Voice as a body that:

* 1. provides independent advice to the Parliament and Government
	2. is chosen by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people based on the wishes of local communities
	3. is representative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
	4. is empowering, community led, inclusive, respectful, culturally informed and gender balanced, and includes youth
	5. is accountable and transparent
	6. works alongside existing organisations and traditional structures.
	7. not have a program delivery function
	8. not have a veto power[[1]](#footnote-2).

One of the core topics of the engagement group’s first meeting, was what more needs be done to ensure all Australians understand the Voice, and how to best build support in communities.

In her personal capacity, Paula McGrady, Deputy Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body highlighted that “We have to start somewhere, and the Uluru Statement from the Heart, speaks truth with good intentions. I believe this will evolve into something much stronger with our future generations at the helm. We are giving them a step up now to show that we are working on creating a place for them at the table, that is rightly there for them and us, that hopes to improve on all outcomes of disadvantage.

 Our future depends on decisions being made now. It’s so important that we educate the wider Australia and try to share the vulnerability we are all giving up, in support of understanding more about each other.”

In 2006 – I moved to remote Aboriginal community in Arnhem land, called Maningrida. Moving out there was the first time I had ever been to a community. Leaving the multicultural vibrant hub of Darwin, out past the mango farms, along the Arhnem Highway – Last stop at Jabaru, before crossing the croc infested Cahills crossing to Arnhem Land, Aboriginal land – where at that time you needed a permit to enter. Many hours along heavily corrugated dirt roads (roads that don’t even appear on Google maps) to a township on the very north coast of Australia. The heat, the red dust, the dogs, the burnt out cars, the wildness – all striking and eye opening to a ‘Balanda’, a white-fella, like me from down south. But most striking was this is Aboriginal land, Aboriginal controlled community coporations and health co-porations, art centres. I was the visitor.

I was still living in Maningrida when the Northern Territory Emergency intervention was implemented. I spoke about this experience in my inaugural speech about the impact the intervention had on me and my understanding of the impact of policy and political decisions. The Northern Territory Emergency Intervention should never have happened. Like most policy in Australian Indigenous affairs, it should never have happened. The retoritic is that historical policy was made with good intentions, it wasn’t - it was made with white people intentions. This is why I am passionate about enshrining First Nations voice in our federal parliament.

**States and Territories**

A central part of success of the Voice referendum is the importance of support from state and territory governments. Our support here in the ACT , of our parliament and our people, will be key to get a majority yes vote from the Australian public and enshrine an Voice to Parliament.

This means we must start our work now, and campaign alongside our local Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander community and platform their voices.

Here in the ACT, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (ATSIEB) representative body was established to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the ACT to have a strong democratically elected voice.

It consists of 7 people representing the interests and aspirations of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

It provides direct advice to the ACT Government with the ambition of improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans, a step towards true reconciliation. They are also the ACT jurisdictional member on the [Joint Council on Closing the Gap](https://coalitionofpeaks.org.au/).

It is important for us to support ways for First Nations people to come together with all levels of government to have a say on what matters most to them - including practical action to Close the Gap.

We must continue to consider ways to strengthen these connections as we continue to move forward in partnership.

**Makaratta**

As part of the Government’s commitment to implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full, the Government will establish an independent Makarrata Commission to oversee a national process for agreement-making and truth-telling. This goes to the Treaty and Truth aspects of the Uluru Statement from the heart.

The Uluru Statement says:

*“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.”*

This will be the first small step to establishing a national truth-telling body.

This will not be quick, nor easy.

The groundwork is incredibly important, and something we in the ACT are committed to.

I commend the Ngunnawal Council and Aunty Violet for their work in leading the Truth Telling Process in the ACT.

We know that these conversations in the ACT, and across all States and Territories’ will be considered as part of any decisions the federal Government makes regarding the design and functions of the Makarrata Commission.

**Conclusion**

The path to reconciliation and recognition requires us to work together.

With the help of everyone in this place, we can harness the goodwill of the ACT people.

Mobilising our networks will be key in spreading support for the Voice and the referendum.

We must do all we can to realise a change that not only empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but will improve both the ACT and our country as a whole.

Paula McGrady commented “It will be an empowered voice for our future leaders, created from the unity to Strengthen and Truth Recording to permanently enshrine for our future forevermore. There has to be permanent recognition of the beautiful people and culture we are and history that we want, to safely, and honestly bare and share together as an understood, heard, and united Nation.”

So, today Madam Speaker, I propose we welcome the invitation from the Uluru Statement and walk together on a path towards a referendum to enshrine the Voice , and lay a foundation in history.

I would like to finish by quoting from the Uluru Statement:

*“Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people.*

*Our children are aliened 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.*

*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.”*

We have a chance to build a better future for all of us.

And I hope the answer is “Yes”.

Thank you, Madame Speaker.

Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land

**ENDS.**

1. From Minister Burney’s speech 21 October 2022 <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/burney/2022/2022-evatt-lecture-university-sydney> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)