



THE ULURU STATEMENT FROM THE HEART

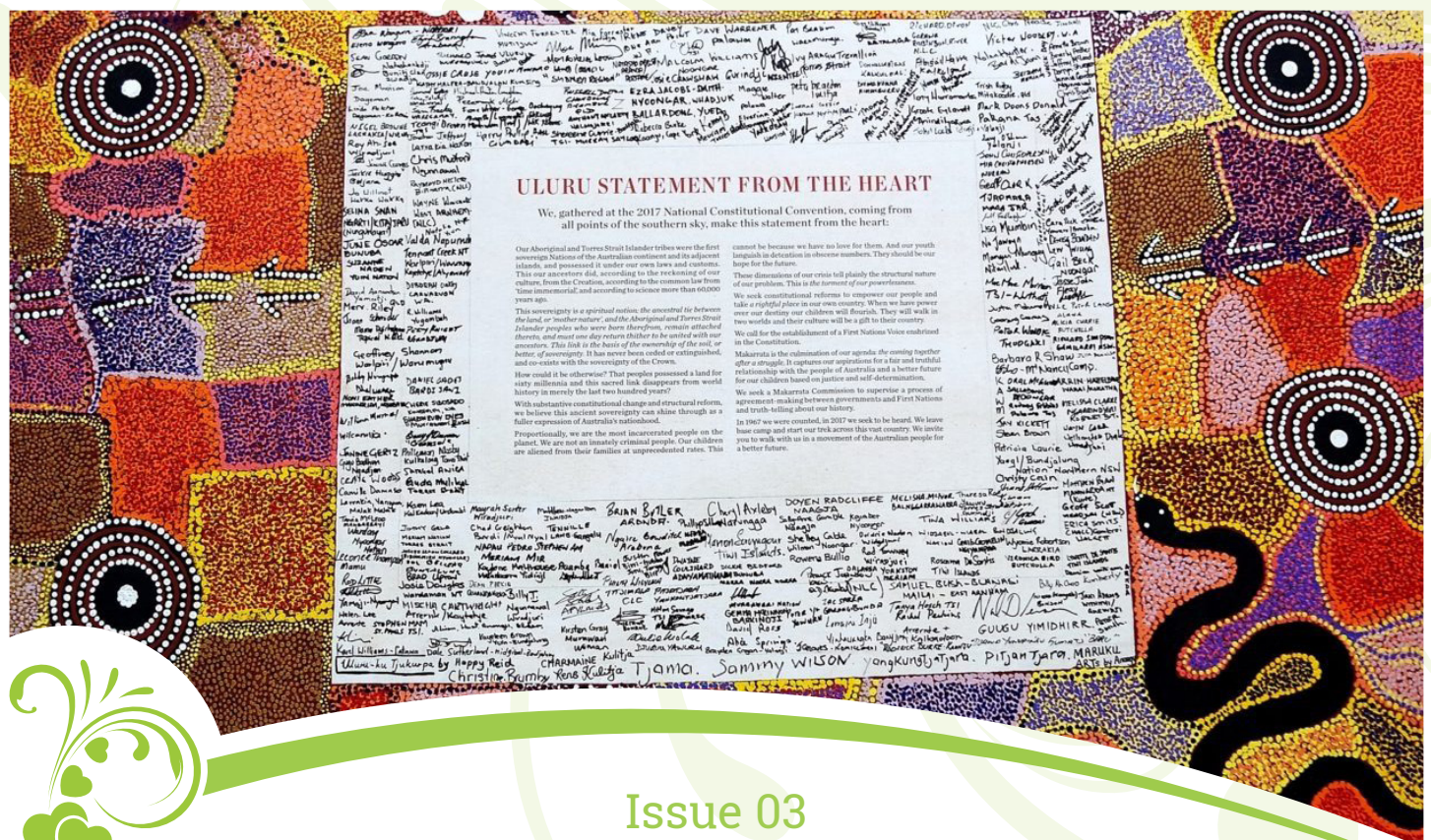
The Statement is the product of two years of work, issued in May 2017 on the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum

Read or listen to the words of the Statement with an open 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.

Put simply, the Uluru Statement is a call from Australia's First Peoples to be consulted about decisions that impact on their lives - in the spirit of the old maxim "nothing about us, without us". It is a call for the Government to commit to a First Nations Voice to the Parliament that is enshrined in the Australian Constitution and supported by all Australians voting 'Yes' at a referendum.

Why change is needed

Sir Henry Parkes drafted a Constitution that did not recognise the peoples who have lived in Australia for millennia. The only mention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution was of exclusion. Aboriginal people were seen as a "dying race" not expected to survive British settlement. Racism is entrenched in the Australian Constitution. We cannot move forward as a country until we honestly address the truth of our history, and this includes amending those elements of the Constitution that embody this racist past. For the first six decades of our democracy - until 1962 - Indigenous Australians could not vote federally, and were excluded even from being counted as citizens until the 1967 Referendum.



"The 1967 referendum deleted discriminatory references specific to Aboriginal people, but put nothing in their place. Torres Strait Islanders have never been referred to in the Constitution. As a result, rather than recognising Indigenous people, the referendum left a silence at the heart of the constitution." (Megan Davis and George Williams, Constitutional Law experts, UNSW, 2021)

Australia's First Nations Peoples are the custodians of the world's oldest continuous living cultures. Despite the dispossessions of history, they have survived. They have worked to restore land, language, aspects of culture, and to re-unite families with their children. This is an amazing human achievement that a reconciled nation could revere and celebrate. But Australia is not a reconciled nation. For over a century Australian Governments have too often implemented policies that have been imposed without adequate consultation with First Nations People, that have been short-term, and that have been regularly changed whenever the party of Government changes. This has meant that the aspirations and needs of First Nations people, their dreams and hopes for their lives, have been relegated to secondary importance to the views and policies of Governments. Our unreconciled nation now has an opportunity to change this. (Edmund Rice Centre, 2021)

Pope Francis has said: "In a systematic and organised way your people have been misunderstood and excluded from society...How worthwhile it would be for each of us to learn to say, 'forgive me, brothers and sisters?'" (2016)

He has called for the earth to be "a welcoming space in which no one would feel excluded and all of us could find a home." (2019) This, he said, requires "fraternity, determination, commitment, a thirst for justice...We want change, real change, structural change—you are the sowers of change." (2015)

The Pope has urged us all "to distance ourselves from a coloniser model, and also from the colonising ideologies of today, and to walk side by side in dialogue (and) in mutual respect." (2021)

Australia's Catholic bishops have endorsed the Uluru Statement from the Heart. In 2021 the Plenary Council's agenda called for the Church to "honour and acknowledge the deep spiritual relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to this country and commit ourselves to the ongoing journey of reconciliation." The bishops stressed that listening to the stories of First Nations Peoples, rather than a tendency to talk about them, is the model they seek to emulate.



Reflection, discussion and sharing:

- Begin any discussion or sharing by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which you gather. Share your knowledge of the First Peoples of your location. How are they recognised in your town or city?
- Is there a phrase, a sentence or an idea in the Statement that resonates with your heart, challenges or inspires you?
- The Statement is a request to be heard, an invitation to compassionately listen and also to speak together. What does it truly mean to have a 'voice'?
- The Indigenous leaders' call for constitutional recognition is presented directly as a means of addressing their torment of powerlessness. The cause of this powerlessness can often be a kind of sightlessness towards the cultural problems of what it is to be a First Nations person in the here-and-now of Australian life. What signs of this powerlessness are you aware of in the community that you live in?
- What does the Statement mean for us as Christians, as Religious, as people wanting to stand with First Nations People as we seek to be like Jesus in our communities and beyond?
- What does the Statement mean for us as members of the Chevalier family?
- In what ways does our charism call us to be inclusive and attentive to the needs of our First Nations sisters and brothers?
- How can we better celebrate and include the achievements of the First Nations People of this land?
- What action or commitment can you make as an individual or as a group to progress the conversation that has started today, to respond to the call for treaty, voice and truth in the spirit in which it was given?



Photo: Leonard J Matthews

