

Uluru Statement from the Heart Discussion Guide

The *Statement from the Heart* was made at Uluru on 26 May 2017. It called for a First Nation's Voice to Parliament and a Makarrata Commission. The Statement was written to the people of Australia. The guiding questions which appear below are based on the resource "Upholding the Big Ideas – Options for Discussion" produced by the PM Glynn Institute at the Australian Catholic University. The strategic committee that guided the writing of the resources was made up of Professor Megan Davis, Sean Gordon and Noel Pearson.¹ These resources are best read in their entirety. This guide draws on some of the themes presented as a stimulus for discussion. This guide briefly touches on the first two themes from "Upholding the Big Ideas". Further discussions could be built upon this initial conversation.

The language used in the text below is taken from the source documents as printed. In your discussions you may wish to begin by agreeing on common terms or language which can best be used to progress your conversation in a positive way.

1. Begin the conversation by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which you gather. If Traditional Owners are part of your gathering they could conduct a Welcome to Country. Share your knowledge of the First Peoples of your location. How are they recognised in your town or city? **How would you hear the voices of First Nations people locally? Is there a recognised group or community structure that you could engage with? If there is such a body, what could you do to support this voice being heard more clearly in your location?**
2. **With an open heart listen to the words of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.**

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.

3. Is there a phrase, or a sentence or an idea in the statement that resonates, challenges or inspires you? Share this with the group.

4. Sharing the Australian achievement.

“Australia is a good country. Something remarkable has been achieved here, and not simply by happy accident. There is prosperity, stability, safety and security, a wide compass of political, economic and personal freedom, opportunities in abundance for ourselves and our children, a record of building on hard work and success to extend the fruits of that success to more and more people. It has been made possible by the creative energies of some diverse and powerful cultures, by some particularly strong and effective institutions—including a Constitution which works well—and by a spirit of decency and generosity which is captured in the idea of a “fair go”. Quite rightly, most Australians are proud of this achievement.

The place of Indigenous peoples in the Australian achievement remains significantly underappreciated. Geoffrey Blainey observed in 1993 that at the time of European settlement “the Aborigines probably enjoyed a very high standard of living”. “They were a highly successful society in the economic sphere” and “the typical Aborigines in 1788 had a more varied and more secure diet than the typical Europeans”. European settlers encountered a culture “startlingly different” to their own, with “countless economic and social differences, and an amazing variety of languages”. Unsurprisingly, there was incomprehension on both sides. There was goodwill and co-operation, but as Blainey says, there was also “frequent contempt” for Indigenous culture, and sometimes for “the colour of their skin”. That this has changed so radically over the last two hundred years, and particularly over the last half century, is also part of the Australian achievement.

Paul Kelly has commented that “for most, Australia’s purpose is to create a nation that works for its people and gives them a decent life”. We have had astonishing success in bringing this about, but Indigenous peoples remain unequal sharers in this achievement. Some of the worst disadvantage and deprivation in our country is borne by Indigenous communities, and not always in remote areas. There have been many efforts made by generations of non-Indigenous people to address this problem, beginning with Governor Arthur Phillip. As one of

his more recent successors, Dame Marie Bashir, observes, he was determined “to ensure the fair treatment of the Aboriginal people—he actively fostered harmonious relations with them”. Although some of these efforts are now seen as misplaced or misconceived or worse, they often involved good people who were genuinely concerned and who believed, by their lights and the lights of their time, that what they were doing might help. Racism was indisputably part of the story at different times and places, but as Jeremy Sammut has argued, what needs explaining in Australian history is not the continuity of racism, but how the society of the White Australia Policy became a successful multi-racial society by gradually “extending the ‘fair go’ ethos on a colour-blind basis to all comers regardless of origins”.

Indigenous Australians are the first to whom this extension of the fair go is owed, because unlike the British and the Irish who gave Australia the institutions and the patterns of commerce and civility which made a modern society possible, and unlike the migrants from across the world who have immeasurably enriched the country before and especially after the Second World War, it was the First Peoples who received all these comers, often at immense cost to themselves and their cultures. It is Indigenous Australians who have the most ancient connection to this land, and have suffered the most losses, while the nation built its prosperity. This connection and history is unique to them and makes them unique among Australia’s minorities. The Indigenous peoples are the unrecognised and omitted parties to the historical compact which created 21st-century Australia. In justice to history and to Indigenous peoples, their place in the Australian achievement merits particular recognition.

Recognition does not just go one way. It is reciprocal. Recognition for Indigenous people completes a virtuous circle of recognition, whereby each of the three great generative forces of our country recognises the rightful place that the others hold in our shared past, present and future, and receives recognition of its own rightful place in return. In 2007, John Howard spoke of “recognising that while ever our Indigenous citizens are left out or marginalised or feel their identity is challenged we are all diminished. . . . that their long struggle for a fair place in the country is our struggle too”. Recognition is not about division or separatism. It is about completing the compact that has been left unfinished for too long, and bringing the country together so that our First Peoples can become more equal sharers in the Australian achievement. “

What parts of this Australian achievement do you most appreciate? How can we better celebrate and include the achievements of the First Nations Peoples of this land?

5. The torment of powerlessness

“The starting point is listening to what Indigenous people themselves tell us about their situation and how they envisage a way forward. At Uluru, in May 2017, representatives of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples declared, “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.” Their statement then draws on a phrase coined by W. E. H. Stanner when it declares: “These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness.”

The Indigenous leaders’ call for constitutional recognition is presented directly as a means of addressing their torment of 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.”

In the Mabo Lecture at the National Native Title Conference on 6 June 2017, June Oscar reflected on what happened at Uluru the previous week. She explained, “So many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have given their support to this process because they are tired of their powerlessness; because they seek to have a greater say on matters that affect their daily lives, so that our children might thrive. We have an opportunity to begin to address that powerlessness, to render ourselves visible amongst a national population that engulfs us. If we are so committed to Closing the Gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and our fellow Australians, then I do not know how we cannot honour the calls for a process that allow us to do that.”

Decades ago, this powerlessness was identified by Stanner, a pre-eminent anthropologist of his age. He writes in the language of the era of “Durmugam, a Nangiomeri” and evokes the image of a Nangiomeri man from the Daly River whom he clearly admired: “an Aboriginal of striking physique and superb carriage”. Stanner witnessed Durmugam engage in tribal warfare in 1932 with “savage, vital splendour”. He introduces us to the idea of the torment of powerlessness in relating Durmugam’s story.

Stanner writes that, “To the older generations of Australians it seemed an impossible idea that there could be anything in the Aborigines or in their tradition to admire. The contempt has perhaps almost gone. In its place one finds, surprisingly widely, both interest and solicitude. But old contempt and new solicitude have a common element: a kind of sightlessness towards the cultural problems of what it is to be a blackfellow in the here-and-now of Australian life. For this reason hundreds of natives have gone through, and will go through, the torment of powerlessness which Durmugam suffered.” Although the circumstances of the Indigenous leaders at Uluru are strikingly different from those of Durmugam, they still feel compelled to call out the sightlessness that results in their feeling tormented by a sense of powerlessness in so many aspects of their daily lives.

If we are to appreciate fully the ways in which Uluru’s big ideas can help Indigenous Australians to overcome the torment of their powerlessness then we must pause to listen and understand. In *A Rightful Place*, Megan Davis observes that there is an ethical dimension to the torment of powerlessness. It lies in the sense of isolation that comes from the feeling that one is never heard; a feeling of being “abandoned by humanity” that others have dubbed “ethical loneliness”. Professor Davis reminds us that “thinking ethically about reform for the First Nations requires thinking about the truth of our history, and this can be emotionally and psychologically hard. It can be easier to close our ears. But the Uluru Statement issues this moral challenge to all Australians: hear our voices, and pause to listen and understand.”

What signs of this powerlessness are you aware of in the community that you live in? How could you work to address the issue of “sightlessness” in your own community?

- 6. Finally what action or commitment can you make as an individual or as a group to progress the conversation that has started today?**

ⁱ <https://www.pmglynn.acu.edu.au/news/upholding-the-big-ideas-launch>