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[Acknowledgement of welcome to country & honoured guests]

The stories we tell matter.

For it is in the stories of our culture and our history, the stories of who we are and what we can become, that a sense of the possible is born.

Over the last two hundred years, our society has told Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children a story as destructive as it was untrue.

It was the colonial fiction of a 'dying race'; a tale of disadvantage and limited potential.

And then we came to wonder how it was that such disadvantage became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

That myth is the direct historical cause of much of the Indigenous disadvantage that still exists today.

And that makes ending the myth the necessary starting point for ending Indigenous economic and social disadvantage.

So I put it to you directly: recognising the first Australians in our Constitution won't just put words on a page.

It will play a crucial role in closing the gap between Australians.

The truth, of course, is the opposite of the myth.

The truth is that every Indigenous child in this country is descended from some of the most resourceful and resilient people on the planet.

Australia's true founding story is not the failure of a dying race but a story of ingenuity, creativity, adaptation and survival.

It's a great, positive story from which every Australian can draw inspiration and pride.

To my mind, constitutional recognition goes to the heart of the story we tell about our nation.

It's a choice.

It's a choice about whether our story begins with dispossession and discrimination and decades of

exclusion, or whether it begins in the longest unbroken thread of human history.

It's a choice – it's a choice – about whether we leave intact the paragraphs of our highest legal document that give the nod to people being banned from voting based on their race – or whether we want fairness at the heart of our national charter.

And it's a choice – it's a choice – about whether we continue to live apart from one another, or whether we set off on the next chapter of our national story on a new footing of recognition and acknowledgement.

Almost every day, I see glimpses of a better future for our country.

It's my great privilege to head the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence in Redfern.

The place is, to borrow Paul Kelly's brilliant description of Yothu Yindi, a physical philosophy.

It is an investment in the next generation, which tells them the opposite to what our children have been told for so long.

We tell them it is their responsibility to excel.

We tell them they have every right to be safe and healthy and happy.

That they have every right to dream big.

That they can and should be proud of being descended from the world's oldest living cultures.

Constitutional recognition would do this on an even bigger scale.

It would help to instill a sense of pride in every Australian child – black or white – by telling them they stand on the shoulders of this history.

And in doing so, it would help to safeguard these uniquely Australian cultures for future generations to experience and be enriched by.

That's why I'm getting behind this campaign.

I'm proud to lend my voice to Recognise. And I'm proud to join a movement of more than 125,000 Australians who want to see our nation take this next step.

Because you know – and I know – that this is simply the right thing to do.

We can only contemplate success in this quest because of the leadership of so many others. In this room are many giants in our nation's story.

To understand why we need to seize this moment and this opportunity, recent history also helps.

Five years ago today, a Prime Minister stood in the Parliament.

He spoke truths as liberating as they were painful.

And I saw the relief on faces lined with grief.

The apology didn't give the Stolen Generations back their mothers.

It didn't take away the pain.

But it said, with the force of authority: this did happen.

It said: this was not your fault.

And it said: we are sorry.

That moment resonated deep into my own family history.

In many ways, we count ourselves among the lucky.

Yet we did not escape this harrowing chapter of  
Australia's story.

A century ago, my great-grandmother was a child of 13  
when she was taken from her family on the Brungle  
Mission near Tumut and sent to Sydney to work as a  
domestic servant.

She spent four years of her life working in servitude before she made it back to the mission.

Little wonder, then, that when she gave birth to her own child, she feared their fate.

So my great-grandmother, at the age of 20, and with my two-year-old grandmother on her hip, walked off the mission before her own children could be taken.

She got them all the way to Cootamundra.

And she built only the fourth house in the town at a time when it was effectively illegal for a black woman to own land or property.

Many years later my great-grandmother would recount the physical abuse she copped for daring these things, and

my grandmother would tell of men on horseback whipping her for having the temerity to go to school.

This, then, was the treatment of the first Australians in our own land.

My father was told bedtime stories by his grandmother in the language of our people, the Wiradjuri clans of western New South Wales.

So he kept that connection to part of his culture.

But the threat of removal still loomed over his generation.

He and his four siblings were dark enough to be at risk of being taken.

His family warned them to say they were anything other than Aboriginal – Lebanese, Greek, anything – if questioned about their identity.

The toughest of people would publicly dismiss the impact of that – being forced to deny who you are.

But privately, there can only be enormous sadness.

Still, my father didn't lose his connection to his mother and grandmother.

Despite the hardships and the terror, we focus on the resilience and sacrifice.

We focus on the extraordinary things these women did to protect their family and keep them safe in the harshest of circumstances, and the humour they found as they recounted even the most traumatic events.

The Apology was a watershed for Australia.

It was the day we faced the truth about a searing chapter of our history.

And that truth has helped to heal many.

There is still much pain.

So many family trees that will never be restored.

But I know people today who are mentally and physically healthier since that moment, and I have no doubt it is because of what Kevin Rudd did and said that day.

The Apology was recognition about one chapter of our history since 1901.

It spoke to all of us, black and white.

But it was a moment of acknowledgement of what a particular group of our fellow Australians had suffered.

To those taken from kin and country – and those left behind to yearn for them.

To my mind, constitutional recognition would have a similar power for the whole of the Indigenous community.

I only wish such a moment had come sooner, for the sake of those who needed to see it most.

The generations of our people that bore the brunt of the harshest policies, the greatest indignities, and had the most cause for despair.

You don't build a house on insecure foundations.

As any builder knows, the footings influence the structural soundness of an entire building.

It's the same with a nation.

When we put this right, by recognising our full history, we will make us a better nation.

A stronger nation.

And a wealthier nation.

A few years ago, Reconciliation Australia commissioned Access Economics to assess the economics of fixing disadvantage.

It discovered a profound and hard-headed business case for change.

It found that if Australia closed the gaps within a single generation, we could slash government spending on welfare and other payments by \$3.7 billion, we could boost government revenue by \$4.9 billion (\$1.9 billion of that in income tax), we could increase our overall economy by a staggering one percent of national wealth, and raise the living standards of **every single Australian**.

All of us would be paid a dividend in that shared prosperity.

Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution would help create the preconditions for bringing that shared prosperity story to life.

It would help to turn the page from a chapter of disadvantage to a chapter of success and self-reliance.

Some fear failure. They say that such a referendum will never pass.

But fear is a lessening place. It makes us smaller than we are – or can be.

And these people have been wrong before.

As more Australians understand how parts of our Constitution are constructed – with the continuing power to deny the vote from people based on race and a denial of our long history in this land – they won't stand for it.

They will want to fix it.

More than that, we want to move on from where we are now.

I think Australians want a fresh start.

We can't undo the inglorious parts of our history.

But we can do better from here on.

We want to be able to tell an even better story to our children and grandchildren.

A story about the day that Australia began a new chapter.

A story of fairness, respect and inclusion.

There's such a coda to my family's story already.

In the Cootamundra Town Hall, where once my great-grandmother was barred from being able to vote, a stained glass window now hangs.

It's a picture story. In it, she is telling bedtime stories to her grandchildren in the language of their ancestors.

The town that once excluded this amazing Aboriginal woman has now immortalised her remarkable story.

At long last, it has recognised her. And regards her story as a source of pride.

It's time our Constitution did too.