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**NATIONAL PRESS CLUB SPEECH**

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[Acknowledgement of welcome to country & honoured guests, and the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Apology]

There comes a time, in the life of every nation, when it must put right the injustices of the past. A time to say 'no more' to exclusion and prejudice. A time for us to be our better selves.

Such a moment beckons now. Ever louder grows the call. Across this great country of ours, in remote outposts and sprawling cities, the people of Australia are stirring.

A movement is growing.

A movement is growing to recognise the long and impressive first chapter of our national story, and banish the lingering stain of discrimination from our Constitution – including the section that still says the States can ban people from voting based on their race.

For by remaining silent about the long and impressive Indigenous history of this land, our Constitution is saying one of two things.

Either that this chapter didn't happen. Or that it is unimportant. We know both to be patently untrue.

Australia's history did not begin in 1901. Nor in 1788. It spans tens of thousands of years and more than 1500 generations. And it encompasses the oldest living cultures in human history.

Ours is a story of which all Australians can be proud. And it is a story in which all Australians can share.

History is calling us. It is urging us to finish the work of 1967, when more than 90 percent of Australians voted yes to remove from our highest legal document two pieces of discrimination against “the aboriginal race”.

We answered that call unequivocally, emphatically. We were not daunted by the fear of failure. We believed in each other. We believed that Australians would opt for inclusion over exclusion. And we did.

Now this generation has to complete the task.

We’re fortunate that the great ‘67 generation is with us yet, in spirit and body. They guide us still.

They are here in the legendary campaigners like Lowitja O'Donoghue and Shirley Peisley – who have dedicated their lives to each new struggle, and are an inspiration to each new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.

And they were present this morning, when young Aboriginal campaigners asked our political leaders to take up where their predecessors left off, and lead a new movement for change.

They are here today also in the leadership of Patrick Dodson, Mark Leibler and the other members of their expert panel, who gave a year of their lives to building the foundations for constitutional recognition. Australia owes them a great debt.

In the grand sweep of history, Australia has a remarkable chronicle. As other civilisations rose and fell across the

globe over tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples adapted and survived.

Our history reaches back to a distant time on the planet.

It stayed alive longer than that of the Romans, the Greeks, the Egyptians and the Assyrians.

It connects every one of us today – all Australians – with a span of human history almost unimaginable in length.

More than that, it is a uniquely Australian story. Elements of all the other cultures from which we draw our nation's multicultural mix are to be found, in origin or echo, elsewhere on the globe.

But the Indigenous cultures of this land are singularly Australian. That gives all of us a special responsibility to

our nation and the rest of the world to keep these cultures strong for future generations.

Our children and grandchildren should have the chance to learn from and be enriched by the first cultures of this land. Constitutional recognition would help to safeguard these cultures, not as a matter of law – but as a shared declaration about their importance to us all.

To understand the importance of this moment to our nation, perhaps it would help to ground it in the personal. I was conceived in Melbourne to a Welsh mother and Torres Strait Islander father. I was born in Adelaide. At three weeks of age, I was adopted into a deeply loving family with a white mother and an Aboriginal father. I grew up in Adelaide, where I still make my home today.

There are painful parts to my story. My own beautiful daughter is the only blood relative that I have ever known.

Mine is not an unusual or unique story among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

But I was blessed to be raised in a family that is a model for the kind of nation I want Australia to be. A family where race isn't a divide, but an enricher. A family that is proud of the many strands of its heritage, and particularly of our Indigenous heritage. A family that integrates the best of all of our traditions and cultures, and which has nurtured me to play a part in bringing about this big moment in the life of our nation.

Our goal is simple: to have a statement of recognition of Indigenous Australians placed in our Constitution, and to remove discrimination from it.

Some will dismiss this as symbolism, and say it won't change a thing; won't educate a single child; won't create

a single job and won't improve health, life expectancy and living standards.

That's not only beside the point; it's plain wrong. Symbolic statements not only have intrinsic worth, they remind us of duties and obligations to each other.

Who would dismiss the Gettysburg Address as a mere symbol? It changed America.

To those who say that a referendum to achieve this will never succeed, I say: look at history. Who believed we would make the important gains we have made in the past fifty years – restoring our rightful ownership of our lands and waters – before we dared to make them happen?

We do not over-claim about the impact of us doing this. But I know that if we don't do it, it will be harder to fix the other practical challenges before us.

We can – and should – do both at the same time. It's not a choice between having a Constitution that recognises us, or faster gains in closing the gap. One helps the other.

After all this time, our Constitution would be acknowledging a simple truth. That this continent was not empty when Europeans sailed up the east coast of Australia and planted their flag in the soil of the great southern land. Someone was here.

That fact was for so long dismissed or denied as a matter of early colonial law that it became ingrained in our federation's founding document. Not only was it resolutely silent on the prior presence in this land of the first Australians – it actively discriminated against us.

For the first six decades of our federal democracy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could not vote. We were not even counted as citizens until 1967.

For much of last century, under State laws, the generations before us were forced onto reserves and lived under the close scrutiny and regulation of missionaries or protection boards. Many laboured for rations, not wages – essentially as slave labour – even as they helped to build the great early wealth of this new nation. In just one example, half of the Queensland pastoral workforce in the 1880s was Aboriginal, at a time when the pastoral industry was one of the country's great wealth generators.

In our not so distant past, as the nation saw during the Freedom Rides, Aboriginal people were denied entry to swimming pools, clubs and cafes. Movies theatres had iron bars to separate the seats along racial lines. And Aboriginal men who had fought for our country in wartime

were not even counted as citizens. Many of them ended up in unmarked graves.

Fast-forward forty years, and much has changed. Laws have been repealed. Attitudes have shifted. An Apology was made to generations of stolen children. And there is new resolve to tackle the disadvantage and dysfunction that has gripped our communities.

But there is another important piece of the puzzle of repair. It goes to the heart of our founding document, and the relationships it sets up between us. For as long as it remains silent on our existence, on those 40,000 plus years of history before federation, it is impossible for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to feel that Australia understands itself. That it acknowledges a crucial part of itself.

The 67 referendum campaigner Shirley Peisley puts it this way: “Aboriginal people have missed out on so much because they were excluded – they were not included – in parts of our history. How can you feel like a citizen if you’re not written up in the Constitution as being here?”

Today we have witnessed a milestone on the road to recognition. The Parliament has passed an Act of Recognition. We have heard leaders from right across the political spectrum declare their support for a Constitution that reflects such recognition. And they have charted a course for the next two years – **or less** – to take us towards that moment when the Australian people, at a referendum, can be the ones to enshrine that recognition.

We now have a joint select committee of the Parliament, drawn from the diversity of its own ranks, whose task it is now to refine the model, build a secure multi-party

consensus, and build public support – in respectful partnership with Indigenous people.

All of us, now, need to pick up the pace to make this happen.

Everyone from Barnaby Joyce to Tony Abbott to Julia Gillard to Christine Milne has signalled their support for constitutional recognition.

It's been 112 years already. Talk about overdue.

So why should we wait any longer?

Let's bring it on.

We know there will be small groups of people on the far left and far right who oppose this for their own reasons.

But the great majority of Australians in the middle support this great goal of constitutional recognition.

Let's think about the choice that would be before us on referendum day.

Who, given a choice between leaving discrimination in our Constitution and taking it out, would opt to leave it in?

And who, given a choice between denying our history or writing it in, would opt to keep us airbrushed out?

Some may fear the Act is the end of the road. It is not. It is just the beginning.

No-one should doubt the resolve of Australians of great heart on this.

And that is why today, we announce that we will journey the length and breadth of this country over the next year, taking our message and movement to ever more communities. The Journey to Recognition, as it will be known, will take this quest beyond the Parliament and into the hands of the people.

The Parliament must still do its part, finding a way through to a consensus on a model. But in the meantime, we the people will urge them along, prodding, persuading, and lifting the eyes of the nation above the horizon.

We will travel through homelands and heartlands, in each new place joining more Australians to this great cause.

And you, too, can be a part of it, helping to bring about a great moment for our country, by signing up at [recognise.org.au](http://recognise.org.au).

The echoes of history – and the call of the future – will be embedded in our quest.

The man taking the first step will be Michael Long, who once walked all the way to Canberra to bring the plight of Indigenous Australians to the attention of Prime Minister John Howard. And just as they did when Michael first walked, we will sound the call for Australians everywhere to join us on the journey.

Our journey will take us through the heart of this great nation, through red sand and spinifex. We will travel on The Ghan to Alice and on bikes to the great north. To our left along the Stuart Highway will be the lands of the Gurindji – made famous by the Wave Hill walkoff, and immortalised forever in our national story on the day that Gough Whitlam poured sand into the hand of its rightful owner, Vincent Lingiari.

And we will journey to the lands of the mighty clans of Arnhem Land, to join them in celebration of our peoples and cultures at the Garma Festival.

For it was from this part of the country that a powerful cry came in 2008. It was a call for recognition, so our nation could move forward with “one heart, one mind, one voice”.

The voices of the Yolgnu and Bininj rose above the white noise of political debate to urge Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to work towards the day our Constitution recognised the first peoples of the land.

Well, we heard that call. Loud and clear.

And we raise our voices with theirs.

It's time to count us in.

It's time to put this right.

It's time to make our Constitution even more Australian.