



# 2023 LOWITJA O'DONOGHUE ORATION



Featuring Guest Orator **The Hon Anthony Albanese MP**



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## Address by Hon Anthony Albanese MP

I begin by acknowledging the Kaurna people as the custodians of the lands and waters of the Adelaide region, on which we meet today. I pay respect to elders past, present and emerging.

It's an important beginning wherever we are on this great land, whichever Traditional Owners we have the privilege of acknowledging.

That such a courtesy has become part of the rhythm of Australian life is a good thing.

But it just that it is just a beginning.

This year, we can take the next step on our journey together as a nation and add even greater substance to that acknowledgement.

The referendum is our chance to add weight and meaning, cementing our pride in our nation, and making a real and lasting difference in the process.

Words are important, but we give them their truest meaning through our actions.

And there are few Australians who have shown that to us more clearly than Lowitja O'Donoghue.

To deliver the oration that bears her name gives rise to a rare sensation: simultaneously pride but also humility.

When I consider who has delivered this oration before, I am very conscious of the considerable company I am in.

Pat Anderson, Michael Kirby, Marcia Langton, Patrick Dodson, and Paul Keating, amongst others.

And last year, my dear friend Linda Burney, who came here just 10 days after the federal election, on the eve of being sworn in as the new Minister for Indigenous Australians – the first Indigenous woman to hold that position.

It was an election that doubled the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Labor caucus of the Government.

Each of the Lowitja O'Donoghue orators is a remarkable Australian whose contribution to the life of our nation has made our country a better one.

My thoughts right now are particularly with my dear friend and father of reconciliation, Senator Patrick Dodson.

After a lifetime of devoting himself to others, he's spending some time taking care of himself.

I'd like to express my gratitude to everyone who has made today possible: Reconciliation SA, The University of Adelaide, Flinders University, the Lowitja Institute – and the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation which was established last year on Lowitja's 90th birthday to honour her legacy and a lifetime of work.

And, of course, our host. It is only fitting that we have been brought together by the foundation named for Don Dunstan – a man of courage and vision who dared to make a difference.

We are here to honour one of the most extraordinary leaders our country has known.

Lowitja O'Donoghue.

Some see her as the rock that stands firm in the storm, sometimes even staring down the storm.

But I see her as one of the great rocks around which the river of our history has gently bent, persuaded to flow along a better course.

As our nation prepares to make a profound choice, who better to honour than the very woman who so powerfully embodies the spirit of the referendum that shows us the success of the next one is indeed possible.

That 1967 referendum was a crucial turning point in the Australian story.

It was a unifying moment, one that appealed to people's decency.

Pitched by Prime Minister Harold Holt as a sign of our growing maturity, it was a campaign that truly came to life in the community.

And amid the faces of Aboriginal children adorning the posters were slogans of powerful simplicity. Among them: "Right wrongs, write yes."

One of the babies on the posters was Gumbayngirr woman Janelle Marshall-Buchanan, who only became aware of her role when her grandmother gave her a lovingly preserved clipping from a newspaper. As she put it:

*"I'm proud of what my face has done for our people."*

There's a fitting symmetry to the fact that her photo was taken by Jerry Rind, a Czechoslovakian Jew who fled his homeland during World War II and spent time in an Italian refugee camp before making a fresh start in Australia.

Along the way, he got swept up in the Aboriginal Rights movement.

He'd found a brighter future for himself. And he wanted the same for the people who had been here for so many millennia.

And at the heart of it all was Lowitja, driven by her faith in the Australian people and their instinct for a fair go.

Never has there been a referendum like it, and Lowitja made sure she was in Canberra for the result. She hitchhiked from Adelaide and slept on a friend's floor.

Nearly 91 per cent of Australians of voting age took up that invitation to say yes.

It was about what was right. That's what resonated within us then. That's what precisely drives us still.

As Lowitja warned, the danger of the result is that it let us collectively pat ourselves on the back, content with the fiction that the journey was done, and equality had been achieved.

Yet, as she also reflects, the 1967 referendum was powerfully symbolic. It was a moment of national idealism.

In her words:

*"I do not disparage the symbolic ... As the 1967 referendum shows: the larger gestures may have to underpin other forms of progress."*

But as we look back, let's look ahead to something even brighter. In 1967, 90 per cent of Australians voted to remove a harmful, discriminatory relic.

In 2023, our generation can go one better.

Instead of removing a provision that no longer speaks for who we are, we can make a positive change that speaks for the future that we seek to build together.

This can be a moment of National unity.

An extraordinary opportunity for every Australian to be counted and heard – to own this change and be proud of it, and truly live the spirit of the fair go.

After the tumult of colonisation, we have lived through a silence, a long tide of denial gnawing away at the shores of our spirit.

And an entire people have been kept so long in the margins, surviving against the odds, surviving even against misguided good intentions.

Lowitja herself has spoken of the gratitude she was expected to show as a child for being removed from her family to be raised by missionaries.

We have to come to grips with the past because a country that does not acknowledge the full truth of its history is burdened by its unspoken weight.

But we learn. We acknowledge. And bit by bit, as we each admit each truth into our midst like a shaft of light, we are easing that burden.

Moments of truth that include the Freedom Rides, the 1967 referendum, Mabo, Wik, the Redfern Speech, the Apology to the Stolen Generations and the red sand that was captured in a photograph on that brightest of days, forever flowing from Gough Whitlam's hand into Vincent Lingiari's.

None stands as an answer in itself, but each step forward sees us narrowing the distance between reality and our perception of ourselves – and the people that we aspire to be.

We've always been at our best when we've looked to the future with excitement and hope – that's when we make progress.

And we are saying not just to each other but to the world that we are a mature nation coming to terms with our history, assured of our values, and shaping our own destiny.

We sometimes speak of ourselves as a young nation, but the truth is we are one of the world's oldest democracies.

Our continent is home to the world's oldest continuing culture, which we are at last coming to recognise as the great source of pride that it must be.

Even from a geological perspective, Australia is home to the oldest continental crust on Earth, with parts of Western Australia's Gascoyne region clocking in at 4.4 billion years old.

So perhaps it's only fitting that we are not a nation given to acting in haste.

Indeed, Pat Dodson spoke of a referendum when he gave this oration nearly a decade ago.

And that was already seven years after the then Prime Minister John Howard promised a referendum before the 2007 election on recognising Indigenous Australians in our Constitution.

Last Friday, it was the sixth anniversary of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which emerged from the First Nations National Constitutional Convention, whose delegates were all selected by their communities.

If you want to reach back a little further, it is nine decades since William Cooper – that great Yorta Yorta leader and trade unionist – began drawing up the petition that constituted the first call for something akin to a Voice to Parliament.

To those who keep saying now isn't the time, I ask: If not now, when?

This hasn't been rushed into. There have been no shortcuts. Nor is this something, contrary to some of the rhetoric I hear, that began in Canberra the reverse is the case.

This has been a grassroots movement, the culmination of years of discussion, consultation and patient, hard work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves.

And what shines so brightly at the very core of its gracious request is the desire to bring us all closer together as a people reconciled – and to lift our great nation even higher.

This will be about recognition of this continent's first people in the nation's birth certificate, providing a people what Marcia Langton and others have termed "a rightful place in the nation".

And the mechanism through which they have so patiently asked for that recognition is the Voice to Parliament, wrapped in the protection of the Constitution.

The Voice won't be a funding body. It won't run programs. It won't have a power of veto.

We know it from the Solicitor-General's opinion, we know it from former High Court judges. We know it from leading barristers. And we know it from constitutional academics, including Anne Twomey and George Williams.

It will be about consultation, an ongoing conversation. Fundamentally, it will be about listening.

A body that will be representative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and chosen by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

A body made up of representatives from every state and every territory.

Representatives from towns and remote communities and everywhere between.

Indigenous Australians who will provide advice – and that's what it will be, advice – on matters that affect them.

And because of it, governments will be more strongly equipped to make better decisions – co-ordinated, streamlined decisions – leading to better outcomes.

As the Solicitor General said in his advice on the words now before the Parliament, it will enhance our system of representative government.

When it's been tried on a smaller scale, it's clear that when decisions are made after listening to the people on the ground, the results are positive.

Look at the local Aboriginal, community-controlled medical services extending life expectancy, and improving the experience of people having to undergo dialysis or treatment for rheumatic heart disease.

Look at the Indigenous Ranger Programs that have tapped into a great well of wisdom, cutting feral animal numbers and boosting protection for our unique natural environment by employing local people to work on country.

And look at justice reinvestment programs that are reducing incarceration rates. If you want to see that in action, look at Bourke, where the community-led Maranguka Project is delivering results, including significant reductions in domestic violence, re-offending and juvenile charges, along with improved school retention.

Programs like these save money. The difference they make to people's lives, though, is beyond measure.

In Port Adelaide, work is underway through Tiraapendi Wodli, which means "protecting home" in Kurna.

That's what is needed. Projects tailored to local needs and developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Better outcomes. Good advice that, in the simplest analysis, lets us do things better.

We aspire to reach high for the symbolic ideal. But the ideal lacks meaning unless we commit to the concrete practical actions that will actually improve people's lives. This referendum gives us the tools to do both.

A change that inspires hope about a better future, and then has the means to make that better future real, substantive, and tangible.

Constitutional recognition is the "what". The Voice to Parliament and government is the "how".

Amid the fog of fiction and misunderstanding these past few months, it's important to spell it out again.

This isn't about politics. This isn't about politicians.

This is about people.

People striving to make themselves heard across our great nation.

In the regions and beyond in the remotest corners of our vast and beautiful continent.

All those voices rising across Australia like the headwaters of a thousand creeks and rivers joining into a mighty and wonderful current that will converge around each one of us as we step into the booth on referendum day.

Amid it all, there's another echo of 1967 – the Voice to Parliament is supported by well over 80 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We get chances for change at regular intervals. A federal election every three years, a state or territory election every four.

But this referendum is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.



We are fortunate to be here in this moment in history, where we have within our hands the chance to make a positive change that will last for generations.

A change that will outlast us.

An enhancement of our democracy and, as Noel Pearson puts it, yes an act of faith and love.

An act that, for most of us, will have no material effect on our day-to-day lives – except, crucially, how we feel about ourselves – and how we see ourselves as Australians.

For some, though, it stands to lift up their very lives.

We will vote yes because the only alternative available to us is more of the same. The Closing the Gap report makes clear that more of the same is simply unacceptable.

It falls each year like the harshest drumbeat.

Gaps in education, in employment and education opportunities, in rates of family violence and incarceration, and amid it all, the blunt truth of a 10-year difference in average life expectancy.

As the old saying goes, if ain't broke don't fix it.

Well, it is broken.

The status quo is a chasm between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. And that is something that surely, in 2023, we cannot settle for.

We've given it a solid go for more than 120 years, a political holding pattern in which, as Tom Calma put it:

*"Policies are too often made for First Nations people, rather than with us."*

None of these are the fault of one government – this is something that lies at the feet of governments of all political persuasions.

The problems are intergenerational, but what is now so tantalisingly within our reach is the chance for an intergenerational solution.

None of us has anything to lose. But we have something wonderful and so very real to gain.

And in the end, it will lift all of us.

After the 1967 referendum, we woke up as a better nation. Not because anyone believed that the referendum was going to magically solve every problem, but because we had – together as a nation – done what was right.

And because we had looked to the future – in hope, in fairness, and with an abiding faith in our better selves.

Once again, we have a chance to act not just with our heads, but with our hearts as well in unison.

Who do we want to be when we wake up the morning after this referendum?

I believe we will rise with a stronger sense of ourselves.

A great nation that has dared to become even greater – not just to ourselves but to the world.

And I firmly believe that we will. Not because I am innately an optimist, but because of who we have shown ourselves to be.

That instinct for fairness – the great Australian instinct for the fair go that defines us – remains fundamental to our identity.

Yes, there are scare campaigns. But what those campaigns have in common is that they underestimate Australians so radically.

Claims have been made that the Voice to Parliament could even have an effect on parking tickets.

It's only a matter of time before they tell us that the Voice will fade the curtains.

And, gallingly, we have No case proponents saying this will put race in the Constitution – knowing full well, I would hope, that race has been in the Constitution since Federation – including in section 51(26), "the race power", which allows the Parliament to make special laws based on race.

These arguments are also galling because, unlike some existing provisions in the Constitution, the Voice amendment does not refer to race at all.

As the text of the amendment makes clear, Australians will be asked to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia – not as a race.

And this is why former Chief Justice of the High Court Robert French welcomed the Voice amendment as providing, to quote him, "a significant shift away from the existing race based legislative power that the Commonwealth has with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people".

This great lie will sit at the centre of the No campaign and needs to be called out.

Australians won't succumb to their appeals to fear and their even more ludicrous invitations to jump at our own shadows.

That's because Australians have a healthy scepticism of doomsayers, a scepticism kept in good health by memories of all the predictions offered by the Chicken Littles of the past.

Remember how the sky was going to fall in after the Apology?

Please enjoy the sky as you head back out today. It's still safely in place, as rainy as it is.

If the sky's clear tonight, you could look up and find the Southern Cross – and, if you're far enough from streetlights or in the wonderful remote parts of Australia, the Dark Emu.

These two cosmic formations are so central to our shared story.

They touch each other in the sky, and as the Milky Way gently wheels above us, the Southern Cross looks as though it's being supported by the Emu, or vice versa.

Every night, we are joined.

But there's another story in that.

Turn your eyes to the five stars of the Southern Cross and find the one that twinkles most softly.

It is the one star of the Southern Cross that isn't on New Zealand's flag, but is crucial on ours.

Several years ago, the International Astronomers Union formally recognised that star as Ginan, the name given to it by the Wardaman people in the Northern Territory.

To the Wardaman, it represents a red dilly bag filled with special songs of knowledge.

How many navigators over how many centuries have used Ginan to find their way, across the land, across the sea, and across time through the endless dance of the seasons.

We are ready to let the wisdom of our Indigenous leaders guide us once more.

I keep a copy of the Uluru Statement from the Heart on the wall of my office in Parliament House. What a masterpiece of spare eloquence it is.

As Premier Malinauskas said, if you haven't looked at it please do. It is quite extraordinary.

Something that my friend and mentor Tom Uren taught me through the example of his own extraordinary life was that there can be such strength in gentleness, and that one doesn't preclude the other.

When I look up at those words on my wall, that is what I see. Such gentleness, yet such power.

I want to turn once again to the invitation that it extends to every single Australian in love and grace and patience. Specifically these lines:

*"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."*

Together.

That is not rhetoric. That is an embrace.

It's an embrace that we've seen taken up across political lines, by every state and territory government, by every major political party.

We've seen politicians like Julian Leeser, Bridget Archer and Andrew Gee taking a stand on principle over the Voice. My colleague, the Liberal Premier of Tasmania supports it.

And I would like to again express my gratitude to Ken Wyatt, the former Minister, for all that he did during his time as the first Indigenous Minister for Indigenous Australians.

We've seen the embrace taken up in city and country.

Across civil society.

Across the business and working world, from BHP and Rio Tinto to Qantas to NAB. From the ACTU to the Business Council of Australia. From Deloitte and KPMG to the Law Council of Australia. The list goes on.

Across the spectrum of faith, including the Anglican Church of Australia, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the Australian National Imams Council, the Hindu Council of Australia, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, and the National Sikh Council of Australia.

Across the sporting world, just like what occurred in 1967, including the AFL, the NRL, the Australian Olympic Committee, Netball Australia, Football Australia and Rugby Australia.

In the words of Rugby Australia:

*"The Voice is not about division. Its about union."*

It appeals to our best selves.

There is no step that can, on its own, get us to our destination. We keep taking steps.

And we keep walking.

We've lost some of the giants who urged us on in that journey, but we keep going.

Recently, we mourned the passing of the great Yunupingu. Even in grief, it was impossible not to be lifted by the power of his words:

*"At Uluru we started a fire, a fire we hope burns bright for Australia."*

At Garma last year, after I announced the details of the referendum, he asked me, "Are you serious this time? Because we have been let down so many times before." I replied: "Yes, we're going to do it."

Before he took his final leave of us to go walk in another place, I told him I was confident we would get there. And this brought him some comfort, his family tell me, in his final days.

So friends let's get out there and get this done. Let's make this change.

The passage of the Constitution Alteration Bill will be the final parliamentary step needed to establish the referendum. And then this extraordinary journey that began far from parliament as a grassroots movement will return back to the people.

And it will be the people who decide.

One person, one vote.

So go talk with people.

Your friends, your family, your sporting organisations. People on the side of the PNC, in the pubs, in your work place.

The success of this referendum will depend on millions of conversations, reassuring Australians of all backgrounds and faiths and beliefs.

As Lowitja O'Donoghue knows, as the spirit of '67 shows, it's going to come down to shoe leather and door knocking and phone calls and the hard yards of mobilising and organising and patiently explaining the transformational opportunity that we have as a nation.

Now here we are on the cusp of the moment Lowitja envisioned so long ago when she said this to us:

*"Australia has an opportunity, rarely given twice, to redefine itself as a nation."*

So let us not content ourselves with modest change. Let us not fill our hearts with the empty warmth of the merely symbolic.

Let us write the beginning of a better chapter, a chapter in which we turn hope into reality. A reality driven by the removal, as the Uluru Statement says, of the "torment of powerlessness".

A reality in which the Uluru Statement's invitation to "walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future" is, at last, accepted.

Together we can do just that. And together we will.