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UNDERSTANDING THE ULURU STATEMENT: TAKING THE INVITATION TO THE PEOPLE THROUGH THE CLASSROOMS

THOMAS MAYOR

Thomas Mayor explains why teachers should be aware of the significance of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and outlines its history. In a thoughtful message to all public education teachers, he examines what we can do to spread the message about why an Indigenous voice in parliament must be enshrined in the Australian Constitution. . .

I have been a member of the trade union movement since I commenced my working life at the port of Darwin at seventeen years old. It is there on the wharves, through the Maritime Union of Australia, that I learnt of the value of using the leverage of unity. I have seen individual workers uniting to make change at the workplace level; I have seen ports and state branches uniting to make change at the state level; and I have seen trade unions themselves, united in very specific campaigns to make major, lasting, national change that is to the benefit of all workers.

The union movement has won many a battle for workers – from wharfies to teachers - and social justice for all. We have brought our society from one where workers were mere servants, punished for disobeying the master; we have come from a place where children were forced to labour in harsh conditions and First Nations people were slaves, to a society that now enjoys universal health care, weekends, various loadings, allowances and legislated rights. Each of these wins for the union movement and society were maligned by employers and right-wing politicians who warned of impending doom from our success. But their claims of Armageddon, should these changes happen, have been thoroughly proved as selfish fearmongering.

Workers and their communities have progressed so far because unions are organised at many levels, including at the highest political level since the establishment of the Australian Labor Party. The working class has progressed because we have built strong and unapologetically representative structures that can influence laws and policies and organise to hold employers and politicians to account.

We are always under attack because of this.

I was a 20-year-old wharfie when Prime Minister John Howard colluded with the National Farmers Federation to silence the voice of maritime workers. In the middle of the night in April 1998, Patricks Stevedores sent balaclava clad mercenaries on to wharves around the country to physically drag us from our workplaces, locking us out of our livelihoods. It was part of the Howard Government's grand plan to silence all workers by destroying their unions.

Howard failed to destroy the MUA. Because of our long-standing structure, discipline, financial resources and the leverage of unity that the union movement had, after several months of battle on the streets and in the courts, we victoriously marched back on to the wharves to work.

Where Howard failed though, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a collective, he succeeded. He attacked the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, a representative Voice for First Nations people. He used its flaws as a weapon, instead of dealing with its issues and building on its strengths. Since ATSIC was silenced, we have seen the Northern Territory Emergency Response, or Intervention, we have seen hundreds of millions of dollars misdirected away from the communities and services that are needed, and we have seen the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens widen. Divided, we suffer.

I have briefly described how unions have achieved great progress for workers and society in general because it is one of the ways I understand the significance of establishing a constitutionally enshrined First Nations

Voice to Parliament, as called for in the Uluru Statement from the Heart. It is also how I understand that at Uluru, the 250 delegates, from throughout the Australian continent, that shaped and endorsed the Uluru Statement, made the right decision, prioritising the Voice in our proposed sequence of change.

Before I go on, it is worth briefly recapping on how the Uluru Statement from the Heart came to be, and what has happened since.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is an unprecedented national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consensus that came from the rare opportunity – an opportunity only achieved through relentless advocacy – to conduct a well-resourced and intensive series of dialogues culminating in a national constitutional convention at Uluru. The Statement brings together the collective wisdom of over 200 years of struggle.

At that final convention in the heart of the nation, on 26 May 2017, we were 270 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from throughout this great continent and from many different First Nations. The difficulty, the hard work, the passion of the debate and the achievement on the third and final morning – the achievement of a national consensus – cannot be underestimated for its national significance.

The endorsement of the Uluru Statement was a political feat that should be recognised, celebrated and taught in schools.

The call for a constitutionally enshrined Voice was officially dismissed by Prime Minister Turnbull in October of 2017, misinforming the Australian public that the proposal was for a third chamber in parliament. But this dismissal has been turned around by the weight of numbers – by a majority of Australians who say that if they were to have the opportunity to answer the invitation to walk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in a referendum for a Voice, they would say YES.

To turn the dismissal around, a mountain of work has been done by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocates and our allies. A turn around that is even more remarkable because we have had few resources with which to campaign with; there has been no government support to educate people about the Uluru Statement and the reasons we gave for its proposals, nothing from which to even build a campaigning organisation. We were starting from scratch.

The Uluru Statement itself, the sacred canvas, 1.6 by 1.8 m imbued with Anangu Tjukurrpa and the 250 names of representatives, proved to be our most powerful campaign tool. The Maritime Union of Australia, at the request of Aunty Pat Anderson who led the dialogue process to Uluru, seconded me to take the canvas around the country to inspire a people's movement. For 18 months I hit the road and everywhere the Uluru Statement went, support multiplied. Another key moment was when Wiradjuri and Wailwan lawyer, Teela Reid, challenged Malcolm Turnbull on national television exposing his ignorance.

In the Prime Minister's electorate of Wentworth, the grandchildren of the great Gurindji leader, Vincent Lingiari, engaged with voters to explain the bungling of the great opportunity the Uluru Statement provides – the opportunity to right the wrongs of the past in a way that the people who were wronged themselves had chosen.

At the Garma festival, the late John Christopherson, an Elder from Kakadu in Arnhem Land, spoke of the hope that the Uluru Statement gives this country, how there is nothing to lose, and 100,000 years of continuous culture to gain, by enshrining the Voices of First Nations people in the constitution.

Teachers across the nation have also taken action. Without waiting for education resources, many learnt about the Uluru Statement and proceeded to teach children who have taken the message in to their homes causing the adults in their lives to accept the invitation to walk with us.

A grass roots movement has increasingly made it loud and clear that we were not going to take no for an answer to the Uluru Statement.

In 2018, moved by this growing movement of people who had learnt about the Uluru Statement's call for a Voice, the government established the bi-partisan Joint

Select Committee into the Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Inevitably, the committee's final report recommended that the Voice is the most desired reform, and that a co-design process begin.

This year, the co-design groups, appointed by the Morrison Government, have consulted with the public. Over 5000 of the submissions from individuals and organisations, from all different backgrounds and from across the political spectrum, called for the Voice question to go to a referendum. The Voice co-design final report recommended that the Government should not ignore the strong support for a Voice referendum in Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia.

Polling since 2017 has indicated a continuous growth in the numbers of Australians who will vote yes in a Voice referendum. The latest polling by CT Group from August 2021, indicates 59% of voters would support a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice to Parliament in a referendum.

Polling done specifically on Indigenous people has also grown. Support is now at 80%. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who say they will vote yes, what compels them is that a voice is a unifying reform.

Which brings me to my call out to teachers to join the movement simply by teaching the Uluru Statement to children and their families.

The campaign for a constitutionally enshrined Voice is the most important campaign in our lifetimes. Whether we are advocating for the revitalising and preserving of First Nations languages, or truth-telling about this nation's history; whether we are trying to strengthen our land rights; reform the justice system; gain greater resources to teach Indigenous culture and languages; or simply have more homes built in our remote communities – all that we do depends on our ability to build leverage and use it in a way that moves the nation's ultimate decision makers in Canberra, and then to hold them to account if they fail or ignore us.

A constitutionally protected Voice precedes truth-telling in our priorities, firstly because truth-telling is happening. Great work is being done on truth telling including in schools. But truth-telling needs a representative Voice.

What is the truth of the past without the political power to use it for our future?

A constitutionally protected Voice precedes treaty, not exclusively – treaty talks are already happening in the states and Territories. A Voice must be established with urgency to support treaty making where First Nations have chosen to do so, because in a federal system, it is the Commonwealth we must reckon with more importantly than the states.

Finally, I reiterate these words: A constitutionally protected Voice.

We must constitutionally protect a Voice because governments like Howard's will always come along. As a union member, I know that when a collective of grass roots people make those in power uncomfortable, they will move to silence them.

ATSIC was one of many Voices we built to defy a government's mistreatment and cruelty, to bring our voices together in a chorus that was hard to ignore. It was silenced as were the Indigenous representative bodies that came before it. It is time to unite and build a structure of unity for First Nations that can never be silenced again.

I believe we can win a referendum to protect and empower our Voice.

And the movement toward success will be built in the classrooms and schools across Australia. The words of the Uluru Statement – how it covers pre-colonisation; our connection to Country; what sovereignty means to us; what the problems are and how they are unacceptable; how we can rectify them with recognition, a Voice, truth telling and a settlement – can be used in many creative ways that will engage children and young people. If teachers can imagine ways that will provide children and young people with the means to take home the invitation in the Uluru Statement, to the adults in their lives, our research shows that the adults in their lives are likely to decide to vote YES.

The movement starts with you.

Go to www.fromtheheart.com.au to find helpful resources.

About Thomas Mayor

Thomas Mayor is a Kaurareg Aboriginal and Kalkalgal, Erubamle Torres Strait Islander man. He is a union official with the MUA and is an advocate in the campaign for a constitutionally enshrined Voice – the key proposal in the Uluru Statement. Thomas is the author of four books published by Hardie Grant Publishing, and has articles and essays published in The Guardian, Griffith Review, The Saturday Paper, and Sydney Morning Herald.