

Uluru Statement of the Heart

The **Statement** was the culmination of intensive 6-month dialogues between December 2016 and May 2017 in 13 regions around Australia with one hundred invited participants each.

The ***Uluru Statement from the Heart*** was released on 26 May 2017 by delegates to the **First Nations National Constitutional Convention**, held over four days near [Uluru](#) in [Central Australia](#).

The Convention was held after the 16-member **Referendum Council**, appointed in 2015, had travelled around the country and met with over 1,200 people. The statement was issued after the Convention, and calls for a "First Nations Voice" in the Australian Constitution and a **Makarrata Commission** to supervise a process of "agreement-making" and [truth-telling](#) between the [Australian Government](#) and [Aboriginal](#) and [Torres Strait Islander](#) peoples. (*Makarrata* is a [Yolngu](#) word approximating the meaning of "[treaty](#)".)

The statement references the [second part of the 1967 referendum](#), which (after passing) brought about changes to the [Constitution of Australia](#) to include [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander](#) people in population counts, and gave the [Federal Government](#) the power to make laws for Indigenous Australians in the states.

The *Uluru Statement* was awarded the 2021 [Sydney Peace Prize](#).

Background

The 16-member Referendum Council^[3] was jointly appointed by the [Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull](#), and [Leader of the Opposition, Bill Shorten](#), on 7 December 2015. The Council was to advise the government on steps towards a [referendum](#) to recognise [Aboriginal](#) and [Torres Strait Islander peoples](#) in the [Australian Constitution](#).^{[4][5]} It built on extensive work by the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians and the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.^[6] The Council was made up of Indigenous and non-Indigenous community leaders and co-chaired by [Patrick Dodson](#),^[7] and Mark Leibler [AC](#).^[8] Dodson resigned from the Council on 2 March 2016 after being endorsed by the [Australian Labor Party](#) for a vacant [Western Australian Senate](#) seat,^[7] and was replaced by serving Council member [Pat Anderson AO](#).^{[9][10]}

In October 2016, the Council released the "Discussion Paper on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples" to guide discussion.^[11] In the group's "Final Report", it was noted that matters outside the discussion papers' key themes were out of scope for the final recommendations.^[12] These themes were:

- "Statement of acknowledgement"
- "A [federal power to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples](#)"
- "A constitutional prohibition against [racial discrimination](#)"
- "An [Indigenous voice](#)"
- "Deleting [section 25](#)"

Over a six-month period, the Council travelled to 12 different locations around Australia and met with over 1,200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives. The meetings resulted in a consensus document on constitutional recognition, the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.^[5]

The First Nations National Constitutional Convention met over four days from 23 to 26 May 2017.^[13] Council member [Megan Davis](#) gave the first public reading of the statement at the conclusion of the 2017 First Nations National Constitutional Convention at [Uluru](#).^[5]

The convention was adopted by the 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates.^{[14][15]}

Note on Makarrata

Makarrata is a [Yolngu](#) word "describing a process of conflict resolution, peacemaking and justice",^[17] or "a coming together after a struggle", and delegates said that it "captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia", and the Makarrata Commission would "supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations".^[18]

The following are the words of the Uluru Statement of 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 aliened 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.

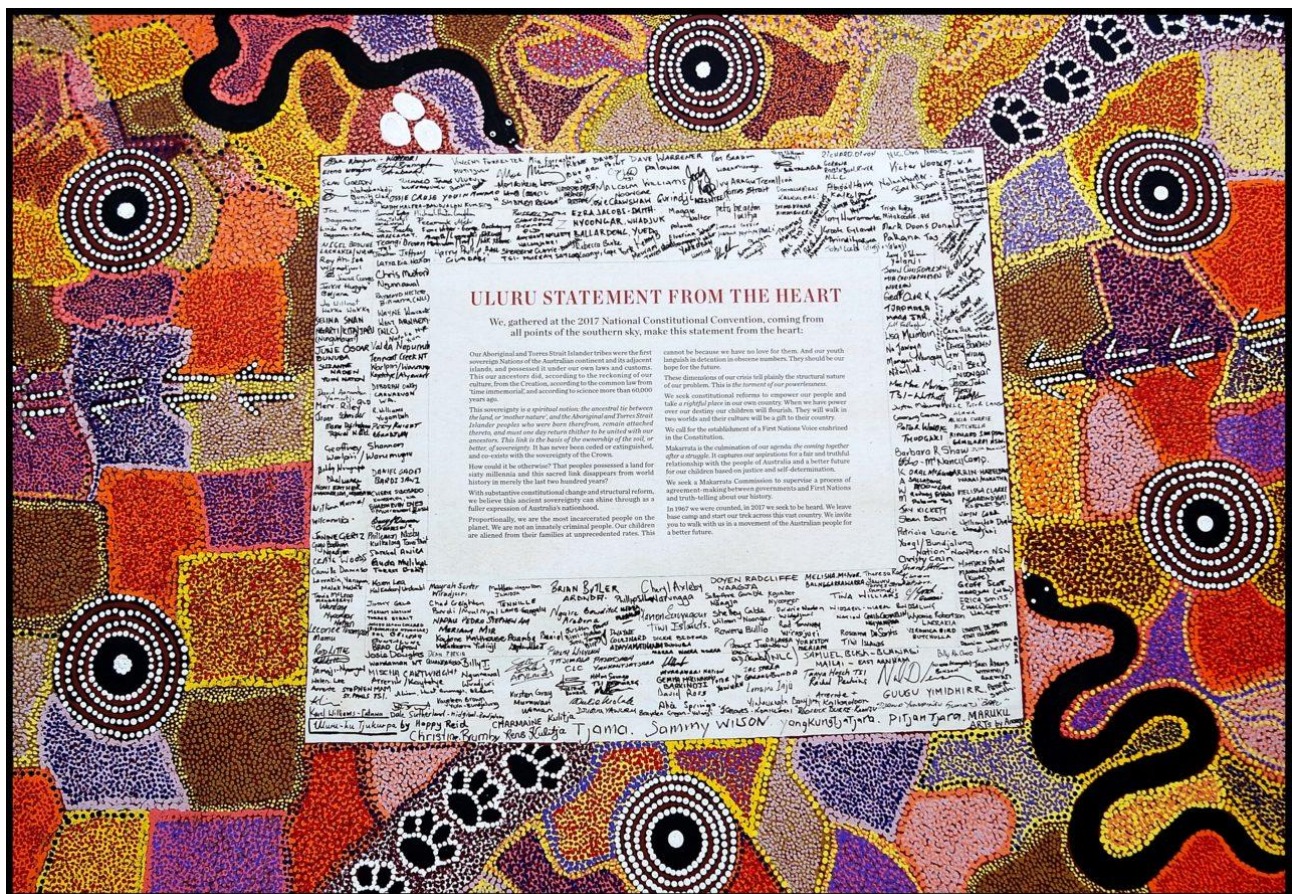
We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny, our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

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 or a better future.



Artwork

In keeping with the tradition of the [Yirrkala bark petitions](#) and the Barunga statement, the Uluru Statement was made in the form of a work of art. The statement is placed in the centre which is where the power resides. Surrounding the statement are signatures of over 250 delegates who attended the conference and reached consensus. 100 first nations are represented in the statement by signatories who included the name of their nation.^[5]

The artwork tells the story of two [Tjukurpa](#) creation stories of the traditional owners of [Uluru](#), the [Anangu people](#). One tells how the Uluru landscape was shaped by a fight to the death at the Mutitjulu Rockhole between Kuniya, the [woma python](#) with eggs from the north east, at the top left, and Liru, the poisonous snake from the south west, at the bottom left. The other tells the story of the [Mala people](#), represented by the [Rufous hare-wallaby](#) who, while holding a ceremony at the top of Uluru, became involved in a dispute with men who came from the west. The men left and created [Kurpany](#), the devil dingo, represented by the dog prints.^[5]

The Final Report of the Referendum Council

The *Final Report of the Referendum Council* contains the following recommendations:^[19]

1. That a referendum be held to provide in the Australian Constitution for a representative body that gives [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Nations a Voice to the Commonwealth Parliament](#). One of the specific functions of such a body, to be set out in legislation outside the Constitution, should include the function of monitoring the use of the heads of power in [section 51 \(xxvi\)](#) and [section 122](#). The body will recognise the status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first peoples of Australia.

2. That an extra-constitutional Declaration of Recognition be enacted by legislation passed by all Australian Parliaments, ideally on the same day, to articulate a symbolic statement of recognition to unify Australians.

The Final Report also notes that there are other matters of great importance to Australia's Indigenous peoples that can be more appropriately addressed outside the Constitution, realising the difficulties involved in Constitutional amendments, and recognising the principle of [parliamentary supremacy](#). being: a statement of recognition; the establishment of a Makarrata Commission; a process to facilitate [truth telling](#).^[19]

Presentation of *Final Report* and *Uluru Statement* to government

The *Final Report of the Referendum Council* was published on 30 June 2017, and sent to the Prime Minister, [Malcolm Turnbull](#), and the leader of the opposition, [Bill Shorten](#). It included the *Uluru Statement* as a preface, and the essay *Rom Watangu – The Law Of The Land* by [Galarrwuy Yunupingu](#),^[19] in which he describes [Rom watangu](#) as the overarching law of the land, which is "lasting and alive... my backbone".^[20]

The official painted and signed canvas artwork of the Statement was presented to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition on 5 August 2017, at the [Garma Festival](#) in north-east [Arnhem Land](#) in the Northern Territory.^[21] The Statement was also on display alongside musician [John Butler](#) at the [Woodford Folk Festival](#) in Queensland.^[22]

Initial government response

On 26 October 2017 Prime Minister Turnbull issued a joint statement with the [Attorney-General](#), [George Brandis](#), and the [Indigenous Affairs Minister](#), [Nigel Scullion](#), rejecting the statement.^[23] The statement said "The government does not believe such a radical change to our Constitution's representative institutions has any realistic prospect of being supported by a majority of Australians in a majority of states".^{[24][25][26]}

Community response

Objections

While not objecting to the content of the statement, [Anangu](#) elders Alison Hunt and Donald Fraser asked that the Reconciliation Council remove the word "Uluru" from the title, saying it was included without proper consultation. A representative of the Working Group said she was aware of the request and that the group was prepared to respect it, but that it is "not unusual" for statements to be named after the meeting place from where it was made.^[27] The original issues over the use of the name however have been settled, with Anangu [traditional owners](#) and Chair of the [Central Land Council](#) Sammy Wilson having given their blessing to use the name as part of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and its message to the Australian people.^[28]

[Lidia Thorpe](#) and several other delegates walked out of the convention and refused to sign the final document, due to the absence of the suggestion of a treaty. Thorpe believes that the "Uluru process was hijacked by Aboriginal corporations and establishment appointments and did not reflect the aspirations of ordinary Indigenous people".^[29] These objections have however been questioned.^[30] The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* does include treaty negotiations as one of its key reforms of a constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice to Parliament, and a Makarrata Commission to oversee agreement-making and truth-telling (treaty being part of this process).^[31]

Support

Support for the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* has continued to grow since 2017. The Uluru Dialogue, the group that continues the work of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, is supported by prominent

individuals, ordinary Australians from all walks of life, and a range of organisations from football clubs, medical and historical associations, through to banks and corporations such as [Rio Tinto](#) and [Qantas](#).^[32]

In his 2019 induction speech to the [Logies Hall of Fame](#), Journalist [Kerry O'Brien](#) voiced his support for the Uluru statement from the heart by calling on the [Australian Parliament](#), during the current term, to "make a genuine effort to understand and support what is embodied in the Uluru Statement From the Heart". He added "the Uluru statement represents no threat to a single individual in any corner of this country, and certainly no threat to the integrity of Parliament. And if you're told that, don't you believe it. On the contrary, it will add much to the integrity of our nation".^[33]

In May 2019, 22 leaders in the Australian finance sector called for all Australians to embrace the Uluru Statement from the heart. [Investment banker](#) and [philanthropist](#), [John Wylie](#) wrote in [the Weekend Australian](#) "We believe that accepting the call in the Uluru Statement for constitutional recognition will be a foundation stone of a modern Australia that's a spiritually generous country truly at peace with itself and its history".^[34]

The [Cape York Institute](#) established the "From the Heart" education project in early 2020.^[35] The aim of the project is to increase awareness and understanding of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament, and to show that it is a fair and practical reform.^[36]

Research commissioned by From the Heart and conducted by the [C|T Group](#) in June 2020 shows that a majority of Australians support a constitutionally-enshrined Voice to Parliament, and that this support has increased 7 percent in three months, from 49 percent in March to 56 percent in June 2020. There were 2000 participants in the survey, who were asked, "If a referendum were held today, how would you vote on the proposal to change the Constitution to set up a new body comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that gives advice to federal parliament on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues?". Only 17 percent said they would vote no, down 3 percent since March 2020.^{[37][38]}

In November 2020, [SBS Radio](#) announced that their journalists have translated the Statement into more than 60 languages, and there are plans for it to be translated and recorded in more than 12 [Indigenous languages](#).^{[39][40]}

Government follow-up

The Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples was appointed in March 2018, co-chaired by Senator [Patrick Dodson](#) and [Julian Leeser](#) MP and comprising six [Lower House](#) and four [Upper House](#) representatives. It presented its final report on 29 November 2018. There were four recommendations in the report: ^[41]

1. In order to achieve a design for The Voice that best suits the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Committee recommends that the Australian Government initiate a process of co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
2. The Committee recommends that, following a process of co-design, the Australian Government consider, in a deliberate and timely manner, legislative, executive and constitutional options to establish The Voice.
3. The Committee recommends that the Australian Government support the process of [truth-telling](#).
4. The Committee also recommends that the Australian Government consider the establishment, in Canberra, of a National Resting Place, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remains which could be a place of commemoration, healing and reflection.

The first recommendation, that of creating an [Indigenous voice to government](#) via "co-design process", was set in train by the establishment of the Senior Advisory Group (SAG), announced by Minister for Indigenous

Australians [Ken Wyatt](#) in October 2019. The Senior Advisory Group is co-chaired by Professor [Tom Calma AO](#), Chancellor of the [University of Canberra](#), and Professor Dr [Marcia Langton](#), Associate Provost at the [University of Melbourne](#), and comprises a total of 20 leaders and experts from across the country.^[42] The government also said it would run a referendum during its present term about recognising Indigenous people in the constitution "should a consensus be reached and should it be likely to succeed".^[43] By March 2020 (around the beginning of the [COVID-19 pandemic in Australia](#)), the two other groups, National and Local and Regional, had been set up and had met at least once.^{[44] [45]}

In May 2021, South Australian Premier [Steven Marshall](#) announced his Government's intention to create the nation's first Indigenous Voice to parliament.^[46] The proposal comprises a 13-member advisory committee of Indigenous Australians to be appointed and elected prior to the end of 2021.^[47]